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Black & Blonde
by Jennifer Kaplan

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Black & Blonde is a whimsical typeface intended for use as running text in fantasy novels. It has rather low contrast typical of text fonts, as well as its own special flair. With the exception of curved legs or bottoms, like in the lowercase 'n', the top of the typeface is always soft and the bottom is very sharp. It was named for this very trait, referencing two of my own novel characters with 'soft' and 'sharp' personalities. And of course, one of them has blonde hair and the other has black.

Hn

FINITE

Jennifer Kaplan

Chapter One

There is darkness lurking beyond the main streets, shadows that crawl along the gutter amongst the filth and garbage of society. In this town run by business and slave labor, nothing ever changes. Crime rages, people die, no one cares. They have forgotten the History, and thus forgotten themselves. These people have become a human embodiment of the beasts they once despised; there is no hope. It is not like this everywhere, however, only here where greed has fattened man's belly and wallet, here at the end of the world in a town called Equinox.

It is a peculiar sort of town with a peculiar sort of layout. The inner city is made up of dark black wrought iron buildings, at least three or four stories in height. Slate and cobblestone streets allow for movement and trading. They are lined with neat little rows of gaslight lamps that flicker and dance like the whores in the windows. The gutters run heavy with the piss and sludge of dirty industries and bedchamber pots. It is a place of contempt, with snobbish sort of people wrapped up in their own veils of arrogance and egotism; there is no room for kindness. Beyond the graceful pleasantries of these parasitic people, there lies a vein of superiority that shows clear in their hardened gaze. Each of them knows too well the truth of it all.

The truth is what lay beyond the inner city; it is where the lamps stop and the false pleasantries end. It is a place so real that it almost could not be true. Humans had survived so much, simply to end up as dogs in a slum? It was a terrible fate. The outer city consisted of rows upon shabby rows of

cardboard shacks, all in different states of decay. Some of its citizens had squandered enough for corrugated metal roofing, some found straw, and others had leaky newspapers and sticks; it was a sorry existence. There was no arrogance, or superiority, for the residents had none. They had no need of false appearances when honesty was the best medicine for their kind. The residents had honesty enough to share their food and talk about their jobs, and be a friendly sort of people. True, they didn't have much, but the majority of them could appreciate what they had.

The adults could, anyway.

Most of the teenagers were hoodlums, and ruffians, looking for trouble and walking the streets of the inner city, trying to make a quick buck. They formed a gang of sorts, and picked on all who opposed them, saying it was their right to benefit off the change of the rich. Amongst one of the smaller and more varied gangs called the Blue Ravens, there was a loud and voracious youth who knew everything of hardships and of adventure. He was the so-called leader, a short lad no older than sixteen with jet-black hair that fell to his shoulders and steel blue eyes that brightened even the darkest rooms. His mother had named him Marsilius, but his pals all called him Mari; he liked it that way. He liked it more than the extravagant name his mother had given him; after all, she was dead now, and as far as his father was concerned it was entirely his fault.

It was a memory he wasn't allowed to forget, a mistake he had never made but had taken all blame for. It made him tough, resilient, and quickly respected. After all, even though he was scrawny, nobody would question all the bruises that covered his arms, or the scar across his face. His quiet demeanor did not, in fact, offset these beliefs; rather, they enhanced the mystery and suspicion surrounding his existence. He was an attractive and aspiring figure to the youths of Equinox, albeit a negative one. And so it was, that one this particular day, he and his gang found themselves loitering around the curbside of a popular shopping avenue.

There wasn't any harm in the act; simply that their existence unsettled the townspeople. The women, in their fine frocks, looked upon the youths with a bit of disdain, and that almost nervous look of the mouse as it skirts quietly around a lazy cat. If given a chance, every so often, one of the members would lean forward a little and tilt his head ever so slightly in the direction of one of the female onlookers, and she would always give a little peep and scurry off, as if insulted. This effect continued to produce a series of chuckles from the gang for a little while, as they awaited the day's orders. One of the youngest members was shifting from foot to foot uneasily throughout the hooting ordeals, and finally he piped up in a small and excited voice: "M-Mari! What are we doing today? We gonna steal from that stinky ole Baron down the street?"

The gang made the act of adjusting themselves, shifting ever so slightly to look at their leader, and yet not moving anything but their eyes, which

were all bright and expectant, and yes, just a little bit gleaming. And their great and proud leader, who had been leaning up against the stone facade of the nearest building, turned his bright steel blue eyes upon them and shook his head very slowly. He'd had another beating this morning, a small fact he kept forgetting to mention to his crew, and his head wasn't really in the mood for their shenanigans. And yet, they were his friends. He was their leader, and so, finally, albeit with a bit of reluctance, he pushed himself off the wall, shoved his hands into the pockets of his grayed out torn trousers, and sauntered over to the middle of his crew.

"We accosted the Baron last week, Xan," Mari replied quietly. It was impossible to tell that things that would come out of his mouth, especially words like 'accosted'. Nobody in the Blue Ravens knew words like that. And nobody was quite sure how Marsilius knew words like that, and furthermore, since they didn't know what it actually meant they couldn't really oppose with what he was saying. The truth, Mari thought to himself, knowing exactly what all of them were thinking, was something he'd never dare to say aloud.

The truth was that, even in this decrepit run down shithole of a town, they had things like libraries. They were tall and beautiful gothic buildings with wrought iron woven into the varied cobblestone of the walls. While it was generally for the rich Inners, it made claims that it was open to everyone, on the premise that perhaps some of the Outers would want to educate themselves and therein be permitted to make something of themselves. It was a haughty notion; the idea that without money one could never make anything of one's self. It was definitely the sort of idea that the Inners would come up with. And despite his opposition to the idea in question, he made full use of his rights to come and go from the library as he pleased. Besides, the less time he spent at home the better. His father was always drunk in the evenings, and didn't take kindly to all the complaints he'd received about Mari's daily deeds.

Xander's face turned ever so slightly sour, but he continued on with his silence, knowing that their gracious leader took his time with their plans. That was what made the Blue Ravens more successful than all the other ruffians; it wasn't that they were necessarily stronger, or smarter, it was that they had well thought out plans that always succeeded. They knew their limits and it gave them a sense of familiarity and bonding. They could trust each other to respond to their own strengths and weaknesses. For instance, Xan was quiet, perfectly stealthy and the best little pick-pocket in the whole damned city.

Today would be different however; today, Marsilius was not so in-tune with his own mind, and so his formulated plan would be less perfect than usual. His mouth began to move without quite connecting the stratagem of the day ahead. He listed off an array of scenarios that might deter them from the crime at hand, and then each individual's assignment as

well as the overall goal. It was never just the base of stealing something, or disrupting an event, it was the message it would said to the Inners, who thought they were so fabulous, what with their poshness and everything. That was the part the Ravens loved the most, despite the fact that it was an overused speech Mari gave merely out of habit.

Recently, there had been a campaign by the reigning governor which allowed the Inners to volunteer at a sort-of soup kitchen to help feed the Outers, so that they would perhaps have one less thing to worry about and assist in making a contribution to society. Not only that, but their main goal was to get the Outers to praise and rejoice in the governor's reign, and so, vote him back in the next quarter. Marsilius didn't really understand all the complicated and pompous politics behind it, but he was sure it was more pretend than the games he had played when he was young; and so, with that in mind, he wouldn't take a mockery like this lying down. It was clearly just a joke and ploy to fool the simple-minded. And simple-minded the Blue Ravens were not.

The plan was simple: they would carefully play their way into the kitchen, as if looking for food, and then take a huge vat of whatever happened to be on the stove at the time, and dump it on the nearest politician-backed snob that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It seemed straightforward enough, the repercussions minimal, and the statement most likely to be blown off by the higher ups, but that was okay. The ripple effect didn't work quite like that, and the more small ripples they started, the more likely it was that one of them would create a big ripple.

In retrospect, it should have been obvious that the assault of an official of the government would not be taken lightly. It should have been obvious that there were darker things at work, and that while the public political figures were goof balls, the people running the joint were the real deal, and would not tolerate such insubordination of the youth uprising. All of these things should have been obvious, especially to Marsilius, who usually thought things through better than this. Instead, they were not, and the plan went off without a hitch. Normally, this would end with a raucous party at one of the member's abodes; tonight it would end only in snarling tears, trails of blood, and purple bruises.

Upon arriving at the appointed destination, the boys set about loitering around, looking like the slum dogs they were. After a little bit of inspecting, one by one, in separate instances, they stood on line for their prepared bowls of the daily slop. It was all monotonous and uniform mush, exactly the way food for the poor was supposed to be. Xander looked up and caught the eyes of all the other Blue Ravens, 'This is what they think is good to feed us Outers?' The same thought rippled throughout their minds, as if part of the collective unconscious. Marsilius' eyes were ever

so much more bright than they had been on the streets, the dull steel blue now sparkling bright like the sun's reflection upon a watery surface.

They played their parts perfectly, each the epitome of a downtrodden rat from the slums. Each individual member of the Blue Ravens sat huddled precariously around their bowls of mush, looking forlornly around at the situation in which they found themselves. Tonight, the overseeing nobility was none other than the optimistic assistant to the mayor; an important young woman with a prudish taut look and a haughty sense of self not quite on par with royalty but still rather close. She was outlandish at best, and rumor had it that she had put in some overtime in the boss' bedroom to get where she was. A woman no better than a simple toy or plaything, paid for in full and allowed to step on whatever she wished, the perfect candidate for the humiliation.

A few minutes before their loitering could begin to look suspicious, little Xan stood up and brought his bowl back to the distributor with eyes round as saucers. In the smallest and most polite voice he could muster he spoke up: "Oh sir, I'm so grateful for this food. I really just wouldn't feel right iffen I couldn't bring some help to you. Could me and my lads help in the kitchen, just for a little? I'd feel ever so thankful!" His high chirping voice was not lost to the assistant, who looked over at him from her pedestal in the corner. The distributor, too, found himself looking back at her as if wondering what his place on the matter was. The woman gave a curt nod to the distributor who nodded to the boy, who called over his pals, who took over the kitchen, cleaning and trying their very best to remain anything but a general nuisance.

Finally, the end of the night was upon them, when they needed to dispose of any of the remaining daily grub. The assistant, who had been pleased with their work and felt that she saw reform in her city, had come closer during the course of the evening. She was now standing right behind them, unable to hear them as they whispered amongst themselves. The little one who had spoken up before looked at her with a crooked grin. His teeth were yellowed and all askew and so her return grin was more like a polite grimace. It was time. Marsilius and another of the bigger lads, Thomas, grabbed the largest pot of glop and walked up behind the assistant with it. In the most polite voice he could muster, Thomas called out to her, "Excuse me, miss, but we're not quite sure what to do with this?"

Quick as a wink, before she could respond, the two boys dumped the still hot mush over the official's head, and while she screamed in agony, Marsilius' grin was widely splayed across his face from ear-to-ear. It was only when they were laughing about it later, that they realized what a mistake that had been. Had they chosen anyone but this official, they would not have ended up in so much trouble. This particular official was one of the newest elected for primary law enforcement of Equinox, in

other words, the chief of police.

It became clear that she was chosen for a reason, because the glop barely fazed her, boiling or not, and without even so much as a sound of disgrace, she wiped her mouth clean and blew a whistle that was clear and sharp. The Blue Ravens all gave each other a look and spread out like a shooting star in all different directions. Thomas ended up tripping over the tables by the door, and couldn't scramble to his feet before he was hauled up by a gruff cop. He struggled to no avail. Without even being told, or seeing, Mari knew that the other lads didn't make it much further, and Xander had sunk to the floor with a fearful look on his face. Mari's own face darkened as he hovered near Xan, prepared to defend the youngin', but absolutely not prepared to be taken in. Not by this bitch. Not by anyone!

But it was a setup, a trap. The Chief's face, despite being covered in vomit-like mush, was stern but not unhappy. In fact, the scariest part, was that she too was grinning, right back at Mari's feral face. That was when the leader's heart sunk in his chest; he led his gang into a trap. How? It didn't matter now. What mattered was getting out and remaining together, to continue the havoc for another day! Except, that wasn't going to happen. The Blue Ravens would be disbanded, arrested, taken care of. As for Marsilius, he couldn't feel anything anymore, and as his will began to die out he let his arms fall limp at his side in surrender. At this, the others too gave up; their faces flushed red in fury.

Later, they would try and explain. They would say it was a joke, a side effect of their maltreatment as citizens. Only one would tell the truth: little Xander, the bravest of all. Shaking, he told the authorities what the Blue Ravens stood for and that none of the Outers appreciated pity from the Inners. It didn't matter if they were hated, because at least they were together, at least they understood the value of being a team. The Inners didn't understand anything but saving their own classy skins, and nothing about that was appealing. Sadly, being as they truly didn't care, this was when they broke Xander's heart. They told him that none of his other 'friends' had stood up for him, not even Marsilius. Now this was mostly true, except that Marsilius hadn't said a word to anyone yet, so he hadn't condemned or saved anyone really. Still, Xan was defeated and slumped his small shoulders together, trying to hide the tears. As the conversation came to an end, the Chief gave a small sigh, "Do you have any parents, Xander?"

He shook his head.

"How would you like if I adopted you? I can prove that not all the Inners are how you think we are."

Xander looked up, eyes wide and tried to calculate the implications of this. Was it a trick? It'd make the Chief look better, wouldn't it, if she

adopted one of the little Outer rebels that ‘accosted’ her? Knowing this didn’t change that deep desire he had to have real parents, and to stop running around and worrying day-to-day. So at last, he answered: “If you’re using me for political gain, I shouldn’t like it at all.”

It was then that the Chief threw her head back and let out a huge laugh: “You’re too young to think things like that. I don’t think you should be hanging out with that gang anymore, to say the very least. You can’t trust everyone Xan, but you need to decide that for yourself. Not let them decide it for you. I will give you time to think about it, but I promise you that I have only the best intentions.”

After that night, it was clear that the Blue Ravens had disbanded and Marsilius had left them. They were told he’d been spotted amidst the Inners, and that his father had died. It was easier to not know the truth, at least without it he retained some dignity as the former leader of the Blue Ravens. Not to mention, some of their adventures would at least still be told to the youngest of the Outers as bedtime stories. The truth didn’t make a very good story but when life never ends, truth is one of the few things you can trust to stay the same.

The truth is that after his interrogation he was escorted home by a man referred to simply as the Baron. It was suspicious enough for a nobleman to be interested in the livelihood of a whelp like Mari. But even more suspicious yet was that he had a job offer for the lad. The conversation has long since been forgotten, but snippets remain, and the general idea was that the boy could command attention and had leadership potential. Marsilius had scoffed at this and said he didn’t want help or pity from an Inner, while the Baron shook his head with a slow knowing smile: “If you want things to change so desperately, but reject every offer of help, you will be left alone with the destruction. It is not that we ‘Inners’ look down upon you, but that you look down on yourselves and hate us for it, when you never gave us a chance to prove our sincerity.”

That left the youth speechless, and he continued to be so as the clattering automobile pulled up alongside the little wooden shack he called home. He gave the Baron a curt nod goodbye and fell to his feet out of the metal carriage. In silence he watched the contraption putter off into the late evening, lamplights flickering and flames waving their luxurious goodbyes. Then he was lost to the smog of Equinox City and Marsilius turned away. He looked towards the shack that loomed over him with a sense of foreboding; he was in trouble, and he knew it. Though it was late, there was still a soft glow coming from the doorway and cracks in the paneling. This was the only time when Mari’s eyes grew dull with dread, the only time that he couldn’t stand tall, and the truth for his unusually silent nature. He padded towards the doorway, as if the steps were to be

his last, and opened it unceremoniously.

“Where have you been?” came a sharp voice from the dark corners of the two-room shack.

Mari looked around slowly and saw his father sitting on the farthest edge of the light with the cool orange colors playing tricks to the shadows that lay there. He had no response, and remained quiet.

His father went on, as he'd known he would: “An officer stopped by before to say there'd been some trouble and they were in custody of you for a few hours.” He paused, rising from his chair in the corner and took a step towards his son, “They should've just bloody kept you, you useless ingrate.”

Typical response, but Mari would not rise to the bait; he never did: “Did you have any luck with a job today?”

“Don't change the subject, and nobody asked you to keep tabs on me. I'm your father, you'll do as I say!”

“Of course Dad,” the boy replied warily, before letting his guard slip, “So you went to visit Mom's grave today?”

Oops. Marsilius knew better, and on any other day, he'd have never allowed himself to bring up Mom, but today he was tired and not thinking clearly. And it wasn't one of his dad's better days. He braced himself for what he knew was coming, and couldn't help but averting his eyes. Four loud thumps brought his father before him, overshadowing him and backlit by the gentle gas lamp behind him. But his father stopped before the blow was struck, which prompted Mari to turn and face him. What the youth saw would remain in his memory for the rest of his life.

Hovering over him was the darkened figure of his father, ragged and crazed holding a gleaming knife in his hand, with a simple sad look on his face. Tears began streaming down his cheeks and his mellow features turned extreme as a grin cut his face from ear to ear. Underneath his breath were the mutterings, the pleas, the whispers of insanity: “Your mother... she should be here. You killed her. My beloved Careena. You wretch... you fool! I can't do this without her... what good are you! You have her eyes. You filth. Filth.”

“Dad?” Marsilius said cautiously, fear resonating in his eyes, watching the curved blade rise above his head.

“I. Don't. Want. To. Be. Your. Dad,” each word shook the man at his core, and his grip on the knife adjusted as he waved it back and forth over his head. He began advancing on Mari, pointing the edge right at him. The two moved in a sort of dance until the boy hit the corner and sunk to the floor, unsure of what to do or how to react; his dad's fits had never been so bad. Marsilius' eyes darted around looking for something, anything that would halt the advance of his father. There was nothing and so he did the only thing he could think of: he thrust out his leg in an attempt to knock his father down and away.

Surprise, surprise! It worked.
Only too well.

In moments, the tables had turned and the youth had his fingers in a death grip around the wooden handle of the kitchen blade. His father was face down on the uneven floor boards, but quickly pushing himself back up with a glare that would have stopped even the most confident of people. He crawled towards the boy, his shadowy form looming closer and closer, blocking out all the light from his vision. Marsilius shut his eyes tight and when he heard the heavy staggered breaths close to his ear he panicked and arms shot out, knife in hand. Later, he would say he didn't know what happened, but at that moment, when he opened his eyes, he knew all too well. Blood gurgled on his father's lips and a stain blossomed out like a flood on the filthy undershirt. The boy's cloud blue eyes turned stormy grey and went blank as his hands released the blade, lodged dutifully into his father's heart.

It was everywhere. Blood. Staining his entire world and turning it red, a color he would hate forevermore. It seeped into the cheap and porous wood turning it into an almost beautiful cherry color that would never wash out. There were darker spots where it had splashed in droplets and stained lotus blossoms onto the floor. Mari's mouth opened and closed several times, unable to utter anything. No words or ideas poured from his mouth this time. There was no solution for the situation in which he found himself, but he knew that the more he sat here staring, the harder it became to breathe. His vision swarmed in front of him as he used the wall to push up from the floor. He didn't remember getting to the door, or collapsing outside, or even gasping for fresh air amidst the rundown dumps of the outer city. The only thing he remembered was the oddity of a single cold salty streak of tears running down his cheek. He had never cried in his life, and yet here he was, crying now.

Marsilius was too awestruck to really cry though, and so in truth it was only a singular tear, but it was the first he had ever shed, and he hoped it would be the last. Finally, when he had gotten enough air, he curled up and retched on the ground. His body continued to heave even after all the food had left it. After what seemed like an eternity, a hand fell on his shoulder and he looked up startled.

Standing before him, big and gallant, was the Baron: "Do you need some help, young Marsilius?"

Chapter Two

It had been three months already, and even as the young Marsilius looked at himself in the mirror, he didn't feel any different. He certainly looked different, what with all the nice clothing the Baron had bought him. He wore a nice shirt and cravat now, even had a decent pair of shoes. But this didn't make him feel any differently. He ran his hands through his now finely gelled hair, and with a slight snarl of exasperation mussed it all up again. They had cut it short just recently as he wasn't pleased at all.

RAP! RAP! RAP!

Startled, Mari turned to face the door where the butler stood.

"Young Master it is time for your lessons."

As if mechanized, the reply was instantaneous, "Yes Alford."

With that, another day as the Baron's new son began. The youth who once spent his days romping around the city and checking out library books now spent the day in his own personal library, and his old friends did not really seem to be his friends after all. It was lonely but not as lonely as other things could be. He became to see that living life like this was a

necessity. The Baron, despite the Blue Raven's claim, actually cared for him. It wasn't all media propaganda, but try explaining that to the others. In fact, in return for all the studying he did, the Baron often helped his friends out, whether they knew or not. Mari himself wasn't even supposed to know, but kids will be kids, and eavesdropping was a hard habit to break.

When the lessons ended at last, he retired to his room with a few books for personal reading. It had become a habit he enjoyed to wind down and relax after plowing his mind full of new things that every 'Young Master' needed to know. He could forget for a few more hours that anyone needed him for anything, or that he had once lived a life so harsh that no one seemed to want to talk about it. However, today he was not fated to get this time of peace. There was a small plinking sounded that resonated with some consistency every couple of minutes. Plagued, Mari looked up from his book and listened attentively. After a second or so, his head jerked to look at the window where a small rock had been flung repeatedly marking it up. There was a confused sense of curiosity that filled him, and a sort of fear that maybe the inevitable was finally happening: his 'friends' had come to make fun of him for being an Inner now.

As he threw the window open, the next rock narrowly missed his cheek. The youth jut his head out into the open air, looking a little bit in awe as the sun set to his right. It was then that he heard a familiar voice: Xander. Turning his gaze downward, fearful, he saw that it was not the Blue Ravens but simply Xander who did not seem angry. Quite the opposite actually. Xan seemed positively overjoyed and was waving at him with a carefree extravagance he had never seen in the younger.

"Mari! Mari! It's me! It's Xan!"

"I can see that," Mari called down gently, a faint smile playing across his lips. The other's happiness was almost contagious. "What is it? Has something happened?"

Xander grinned broadly and shook his head, "No I've come to see you! Isn't it okay?"

"Is there a reason you didn't use the front door?"

At this, the youth flushed bright red with embarrassment and looked down at his feet. "Aw shoot," he muttered in a barely audible voice, "The Chief told me I oughtn't greet ya like this, but I guess I forgot. Is it really okay for me to come on up?"

Xander was still Xander, no matter the circumstances. Marsilius made a gesture for him to come around back through the kitchens and then shut the window, heading to meet up with his old friend and follower. His fellow ruffian was standing in the open doorway, cowering by the cook when Marsilius finally arrived. He cleared his throat and the cook turned in confusion, "Oh! Young Master! I was just trying to..."

"That's my guest," Mari said shortly, interrupting the other.

The cook had the grace to look embarrassed before backing away to his continue his work for the evening whilst Mari went to greet his friend. "Sorry, come in."

Leading the other boy through the winding corridors of his new home, they arrived at his room with its grand oak door, which he swung in without pretense. He gestured for the other to sit at the table he had off

to one side, before he himself sat down. Almost like clockwork, right before the younger could speak, the butler Alford poked his head in, "I heard you had a guest, Young Master. Shall I bring tea?"

"Yes, thank you Alford," replied Marsilius carelessly.

Xander was rather stunned and closed his mouth again. After a few moments he finally spoke again: "Even for an Inner, this is pretty swanky Mari."

"I'm aware," he said sighing.

"Chief Mara said I couldn't come visit till I'd learned manners. So I learned real hard until I could come see you."

Oddly enough, it hadn't occurred to Marsilius that his old friends would want to visit him for anything else but trouble. The idea of simply hanging out and chatting with any of them was completely over his head, and so he had simply assumed Xan had come here needing some or another. Perhaps the other did still need something in addition to simply wanting to be friends? Before he could ask, Alford came back bearing a tray of oolong tea with various cakes and snacks. It was definitely far more extravagant than anything he'd been used to in the past. Wasn't it strange that now this was his norm? Still, despite everything, sometimes it was nice for things to be this simple.

The two young men sat and talked for a while about all sorts of things. Marsilius listened mostly for a long time, interjecting here or there. Xan told him about how the Police Chief from that day, which seemed so long ago now, was named Marianne von Stoffelt. Marianne, who demanded to be called Mara amidst friends and family, had adopted Xander and was making good on her promises. He wasn't any kind of political hostage either. Mari found himself almost jealous at this, seeing as he was rather the opposite. Even with all the good intentions, he was still portrayed as showing the 'big bad Baron' as a kindly man that adopted orphaned Outers. Even with all the education he'd been receiving, Mari couldn't quite understand how the media had come to such a conclusion.

"M-Mari, are ya listenin'?" Xander chimed, for his friend had begun to zone out.

"Sorry," the other said, snapping to attention.

"It's aight, ya got a lot on yer mind now, huh?"

"I suppose."

"There's somethin' I need to tell ya, before I leave," Xander said suddenly. And it was almost as if the dawn had come because it had to be this way. There was always something, Mari thought to himself. Still, Xan had been good to him before and now and he couldn't refuse to listen. Silence encouraged the other and he continued: "There's talk goin' 'round that yer new Papa is a bad man. He's done deals with bad people, Mari. Chief Mara says he deals with the Dusks. I ain't never heard of the Dusks, but she makes it sound real awful. Just be careful, 'kay?"

And with that, the younger took his leave, letting Marsilius contemplate what he'd meant by that final statement. The word 'Dusk' sounded familiar, as if he'd read it in a textbook somewhere. Quickly, he went and pulled all of the texts together and began to leaf through them. It wasn't long before he'd found his answer in a history book:

During the times before the Eternity Era, the world was on the brink of a great war. Without the help of the vampire mediators, the Severance would never have happened and the world would have fallen into great turmoil. Today, however, the vampires are viewed with scorn and are referred to in polite company only as 'Dusks'.

So the term was actually some kind of slang. While not intended, it seems that the word had taken on a negative connotation over time, as there was no text of the vampires referring to themselves thusly. However, Mari didn't seem to own many vampire texts at all to begin with. Weren't they their own race of people? Surely they had societies like his own where creativity occurred. Yet, aside from the history books and some newspaper clippings, Mari could find almost no mention of this mysterious race. It began to seem like some huge occult legend, and he was prepared to toss the idea aside before his curiosity demanded an investigation.

Still, his friend had been so insistent. He couldn't rid himself of the idea quite yet. Finally, after a long hour of deliberation, the young Marsilius decided that he would speak to the Baron about it directly. The elder man kept very few secrets from Mari and was always willing to talk to him. At this hour he would be finishing up his work in the study and preparing to have dinner, ready to retire for the rest of the evening. It was a rather taxing job to be in a charge of Equinox's largest pharmaceutical company.

The corridors were dimmer in this section of the manor, and as Mari got closer to the Baron's office he saw the glowing light from the doorframe. It was cracked open ever so slightly and he could hear voices coming from it. Who would be visiting at this hour? Peeking into the room silently, he saw the Baron standing at his desk looking rather distraught. Sitting calmly across from him in one of the overstuffed armchairs was a rather handsome young man. His hands were placed delicately in his lap and he held himself with certain airs. It was unusual for anyone to be here at this hour, and especially to be causing the normally quiet Baron such unrest. Instead of abandoning his hopes for questions to be answered tonight, Mari remained by the door, hiding himself behind the other so that he might listen but not see.

"I understand your demands but they are impossible to meet at this time," came the voice of the Baron.

"You do not really have a choice, von Grahtz." This other voice belonged to the handsome man in the armchair. Despite how pleasant it was, there was something frighteningly harsh about it. Almost as if you really could not refuse him anything he asked.

"Don't play your tricks with me."

"You are the one who pledged to help everyone, be they human or underworlder. Why are you refusing to help us now? We, too, are part of your treaty. We also get sick. If you do not give us the medicine for this pox, many of us will not survive."

"I understand, but I am under a lot of pressure to cease my negotiations with you, sir. I have been doing this out of kindness, but there is no profit. I cannot convince the others to continue funding a dead end." The Baron sounded helpless as he said this.

"Then we will remind them to whom they owe their safety and the happiness of their little kingdom here in Equinox," replied the other shortly.

"That isn't necessary. Couldn't we come to a kinder agreement of sorts? Perhaps more underworld workers at a lower pay grade may convince them..."

'Surely,' Mari thought as he listened in, 'The Baron would not use such underhanded tactics.'

"Perhaps we should continue such negotiations when you haven't eavesdroppers at your door."

"Hm?"

Startled, Mari held his breath, wondering how the man had known he'd been there. There was the sound of heavy footsteps and then the door was thrown open by the Baron. Light flooded his eyes and as Marsilius adjusted, he bowed his head as the Baron looked down at him. It was the first appalled look Mari had ever seen from him, and he could not say he was proud. The handsome man had turned to watch and smiled slightly at the scene. "If you'd like to join in the conversation, I do not think it would be a problem."

Mari sucked in his breath: the man had fangs that glimmered in his mouth. Before anyone could say another word, he turned and fled down the hallway. As he turned a corner, fear finally caught a hold of him and he sunk to his knees, shaking. It was true! True! The Baron was dealing with the Dusks!

Back in the study, the Baron stood in the doorway looking dumbfounded and forlorn, almost as if he wished he could follow the youth and explain things. He sighed, closed the door all the way and turned back to the other in the room with him. "I apologize, that was my son Marsilius."

“Your adopted son?”

“Yes. I adopted him a little over three months ago. He’s a bright lad who had nothing but hardships in the past. He’s not very familiar with the big picture yet, however.”

“He’s very unique, to have such black hair,” commented the man in an offhand manner and then thrust forward with former negotiations, “Perhaps we might make a deal after all.”

“Oh?” replied the Baron hopefully; too distracted to take notice of how the vampire was grinning. Their muffled voices drifted softly into the hall until just before dawn the next day.