

“All of you, welcome to the Mason Stronghold,”

She holds out her hand and one of her lackeys plop a stack of papers in it. She approaches us, gingerly flipping through it until she stops in front of Jordan.

“This should be easy, I think I can get all your names right easily. Some of you, I remember.” Her gaze rises, and she stares Jordan down. “Jordan, you have my condolences on your parents and your friend.”

“My parents?”

“Oh, so they never told you. Your parents died in the prison they were thrown in, a few months after being taken there. The guards made sure they would never see you again.” Jordan’s gaze lowers and he clenches his eyes closed, cursing lowly. Nikita touches his shoulder, squeezing it.

“You’ll have time to morn, I promise you that. But while you’re here, how about we help you out? We know who can help you finish your transition.” This perks him up, his eyes searching hers for any trace of lie. She straightens up with a gentle smile that looked almost deadly. “And if that’s not enough then we might know where your friend is being held.” Jordan looks downright ecstatic now, his parent’s death pushed to the back of his mind.

She walks over to Reese, instant recognition flashing across her face. “Reese.”

“How do you know me? I’ve never met you.”

“Yes, but your parents couldn’t shut up about you during our meetings, and you’re a spitting image of your beautiful mother. We’re hoping you know where they have gone.” Reese deflates.

“I was hoping you did.” For the first time that I’ve seen her, Nikita looks upset.

“We don’t, but we will help you find out. And while you’re here, why not work on that telepathy of yours? We have mutants who can train you.” Reese mirrors Jordan in her cheerfulness. A child who had just been granted a piece of their favorite candy.

[[I wonder what they’ll say to me.]]

They might remember me, of course I was younger last time they saw me, but they knew Reese simply because of her parents. They actually saw my face, sat at my table, and spoke and shook my hand.

[[We need to get out of here.]]

I cared little for the game they were playing, and more about how we were going to get out of here. My eyes scan the entire room again, again finding no clear exit. The obvious exits were blocked by guards who looked ready for one of us to try something.

[[I know her game.]]

She has enough information on each of us to make it seem like they're the good guys, that working with them will be beneficial. Perhaps it will, but I doubt it. If not that, then they at least could play the 'you owe us now,' game.

Nikita stops at Chelsea, the two glaring at one another. Well, Chelsea was glaring, Nikita's blank face was an exact replica of Trenton's, no trace of any type of emotion.

"Chelsea Brentwood," is all she gets out before Chelsea cuts her off.

"Don't even try it. Nothing you say will make me want to join your side."

"I'm offended that you would even think I want someone as weak as you on //my// side," Nikita begins, truly looking taken back. She cocks her head to the side and grins wickedly, "your parents had the right idea, kicking you out and making you disappear off the face of the earth. Your brother is doing a much better job at upholding the name. He's actually putting a decent dent in the villain population. Dear, how many has the Brentwood boy captured just this month?"

"Nine, I believe, all on his own."

Chelsea shakes in anger, fighting back tears that she refuses to shed. She opens her mouth, but no words come out. Her shock matches ours and I'm led to believe that one of the mutants in the room did it. Nikita laughs darkly, moving onto Ezekiel.

<<if \$ezemmi >= 5>>\

"Ezekiel, oh aren't you a long way from home?" Ezekiel shrinks back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Timmi stiffen, ready to come to his defense.

<<else>>\

"Ezekiel, oh aren't you a long way from home." Ezekiel shrinks back.

<</if>>\

"I'd rather sleep outside than be in here," he murmurs but the hatred in his tone is still plenty clear.

"Trust me, we can arrange that. The only reason a pathetic mutant like you is standing in my house is because you were lucky enough to be associated with the right people. Neutrals aren't allowed under this roof."

*if ESecret = true

I sigh deeply, cursing. One look at Ezekiel's face said it all, he was horrified at what she knew. The others stiffen, all gazing over at him in confusion.

“He’s not a Neutral, he uses his powers,” Reese states, surprising me when she comes to his defense.

*if ESecret = false

We all stiffen, gazing over at him in confusion.

“He’s not a Neutral, he uses his powers,” Reese states, surprising me when she comes to his defense.

“Yes, but his mother is a Neutral and her son was to be one too.”

“I ran away because I didn’t want to be one!” Ezekiel shouts, “stop acting like you have dirt on me when you don’t.”

“Oh, but we have your location, and can easily contact your mother.” This seems to shut him up and rattle him. Anything he was going to say disappears, never to be spoken. “And don’t take the lack of information on you as a good thing, it only means you’re pathetic and small, compared to the grand scheme of fate.” Nikita grins and moves on, Leto the next one in line.

“Leto Hachiro.”

“Nothing you say will make me hate you less or like you more, so just move on,” Leto growls, and for a minute, I believe him.

Nikita laughs joyfully, “oh, I sincerely doubt that. You forget that I’ve broken spirits wilder than yours, Timmi is my child. You’re an interesting case, no past worth mentioning, true. But it’s your powers that interest us. The first Class B blood manipulator. Blood manipulation is a powerful ability already, and your predecessor could only dream of holding what you can. But you’re two steps away from being Neutral.” Nikita bends down so that she was directly in front of Leto, the two on the same eye level.

“We’re going to break you.” No one says anything, silence sets in as she moves away from Leto and he thinks over her words, fear evident in his eyes. She goes to Kalypso who visibly shakes. She wraps her arms around herself and refuses to meet Nikita’s gaze.

“You’re lucky we have use for you Kalypso,” Nikita starts, and the entire group stiffens. Regardless of our thoughts on her, everyone looks ready to come to Kalypso’s defense.

[[Including me.]]

Everyone here could defend themselves, no problem, even Kalypso. But the problem wasn’t that Kalypso couldn’t fight, she just chose not to. That and out of all of us, Kalypso is probably the least deserving of anyone’s wrath.

[[Not me.]]

It was about time Kalypso toughened up, especially with all the things we face. Either she defended herself or she wasn't worth keeping around.

Nikita feels the shift and she almost looks impressed by everyone's reaction.

"But we have use for you," she begins, her eyes meeting everyone's, as if telling them to calm down. "Your hacking skills are so impressive, we hardly know anything about you. You have a strong alliance with my daughter. Fall back on that alliance and stick beside her and we'll have no problem."

Nikita had gone down the entire line, leaving only the twins and me. I doubt she had to persuade her own kids, especially after everything I've seen. They already knew the drill probably, and no amount of persuasion was going to help. Which meant, it was my turn. She stops in front of me and allows her eyes to take me in, a friendly smile appearing.

"\${name} Dianzo, it is an absolute pleasure to meet you again. Last we saw you, you were so young, so interested in your powers and your potential. I wonder, does that spark still exist?"

[[“It's gotten stronger.”]]

"I wouldn't call it a spark, it's grown since then," I say, telling myself to calm down. My voice doesn't break but my body was shivering, the intensity in her gaze alone, not to mention everyone else staring at me, was frightening. Like, her presence by itself, was enough to make me squirm and wish to disappear.

"Oh, that is what I like to hear," she says joyously.

[[“I ... wouldn't know.”]]

"I ... I don't really know anymore," I say honestly. I tell myself to calm down. My voice feeling like it was going to break, and my body shivering profusely. The intensity in her gaze alone, not to mention everyone else staring at me, was frightening. Like, her presence by itself, was enough to make me squirm and wish to disappear.

"Hmm, well that just won't do. But we can get it back and nurture it into something so much greater."

[[Don't answer her.]]

I don't answer her for two reasons. One, I had no respect for her, and she didn't run me, if I wished to stay silent, then I would. And secondly, because I feared that my voice would break if I did try. The intensity in her gaze alone, not to mention everyone else staring at me, was frightening. Like, her presence by itself, was enough to make me squirm and wish to disappear.

“I see,” she says, tapping her chin and grinning, though this one is less friendly, “we can break you as well.”

“\$name, you have such potential. It would be such a waste on all of us if you wasted it. Don’t be an idiot and waste it, okay?” I don’t agree or disagree, not that she cared as her attention turned towards the twins.

“Now, as for you two.”

“What?” Timmi asks, finding her voice and her bravery, “you’re going to read us? Call us pathetic? Tell us that our parents are horrible beings who deserve to be wiped off of this planet like the stain they are? We already know one of those are beyond true.” The amount of venom in Timmi’s words would rival that of a cobra, and yet Nikita only laughs.

“Ah, Timmi, how I missed that mouth of yours. How did I ever survive all these years without it?” She turns on her heel, her back to Timmi. “Ask, and you shall receive my child.” I wrinkle my brow in confusion, seeing that Timmi hadn’t asked anything and her previous words hadn’t foretold a question.

“We duel,” Timmi spits and I watch as a smile spreads across Nikita’s face, but a frown on her father’s.

“Trenton, you agree to this?” he asks. Trenton visibly stiffens as the spotlight moves to him, his eyes moving from his father to his mother, to Timmi who doesn’t look his way. Pure fear shows in his eyes, his body shaking similarly to how mine was a moment ago.

“Yes,” he squeaks out, hardly saying it above a whisper.

“Hmm, well then it shall be done,” his father finally says, looking at the rest of us, “we’ll allow you to choose two people to fight with you, or no one.”

<<if \$trenton >=50>>\

Trenton’s gaze immediately goes to me, and he silently asks the question.

[[Accept.]]

I nod my head, accepting the invitation, getting a mixed reception from Trenton.

“I choose, \$name.”

“And you, Timmi?” Nikita questions, her eyes flickering over to me for a quick second, before being put back on her children.

[[Deny the invitation.]]

I shake my head; I wanted no part in this. With his invitation denied, Trenton stands straighter and glances back at his parents.

“I choose no one.”

“And you, Timmi?” Nikita questions.

<<elseif \$timmi >=50>>\

<<if \$trentonchoice>>\

Timmi looks at the others, probably trying to see if anyone was game. But before I can see if anyone was giving her the nod of approval, she clears her throat and shakes her head.

“Fine,” her mother says and rises to her feet, snapping her fingers and suddenly everyone begins to move at once, “you have two hours to prepare, you know where to meet us. Until then, they will show the rest of your team to the guest wing. Make yourself comfortable and do adhere to the rules of my house.”

<<else>>\

Timmi looks over at me, silently asking the question.

[[Accept.]]

I nod my head, accepting the invitation, getting a mixed reception from Timmi.

“I choose, \$name.”

“Fine,” her mother says and rises to her feet, snapping her fingers and suddenly everyone begins to move at once, “you have two hours to prepare, you know where to meet us. Until then, they will show the rest of your team to the guest wing. Make yourself comfortable and do adhere to the rules of my house.”

[[Deny the invitation.]]

I shake my head; I wanted no part in this. With her invitation denied, Timmi glances back at her parents.

“I choose no one.”

“Fine,” her mother says and rises to her feet, snapping her fingers and suddenly everyone begins to move at once, “you have two hours to prepare, you know where to meet us. Until then, they will show the rest of your team to the guest wing. Make yourself comfortable and do adhere to the rules of my house.”