

*Context for the ST: Patricia DeMontfort (Malkavian PC) and Paul Viersan (Ventrue NPC darling) became acquainted via a cat-and-mouse game approximately a year prior to this event. The details of the "game" aren't relevant beyond the fact that it was the sort of thing that jaded, bored vampires do to amuse themselves. It ended in a de-facto draw and left the participants dissatisfied. This is what happened afterwards.*

"No limits, this time?" Paul asked.

Patricia nodded. "No. First one to walk away loses."

"And what does the winner get. Satisfaction again?"

"If you like." She shrugged.

"No," Paul decided. "Not this time."

"A major boon, then." She shrugged again. Apparently the stakes weren't important to her. Paul decided to *make* them important.

"Winner gets whatever they want from the loser, short of their life."

Patricia looked suspicious. "Or enthrallment. I'm not going through that again."

"So you think you might lose?"

She frowned. "It seems I might."

Paul smiled. "You wouldn't have admitted that before."

"I said I was in a rut. I didn't say I had fossilized completely."

"And I'm the only person who can push you out of your complacency?"

"You're the only person I can trust to try." She admitted.

"I'm flattered." He meant it.

"And interested?"

"Absolutely."

"Alright. Tomorrow night, then?"

"Why not now?"

Patricia bit her lip. "You've already got something in mind?"

Paul nodded. The idea had occurred to him since their last association and he was pleased to have an opportunity to try it so soon - relatively speaking.

Patricia knew that she was cornered and decided to give in gracefully. "Okay, shoot."

"I want you to be Michael Worthington for me."

Patricia's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

"Assume your sire's visage, his persona." Paul smiled at Patricia's surprise. "*Roleplay* him, as it were. It shouldn't be too difficult, right?" They both knew that the dregs of his soul and not a few memories still existed within Patricia's mind. It was a risk of diablerie.

Wondering what Paul could want, but doubting that there was anything new he could learn - not after those few strange weeks in London - Patricia did as he asked. She took a deep breath and changed her face.

Paul saw a man in his mid-thirties, average height, athletic build. His oval face had a slightly feline aspect conferred by a pointed chin and wide-set green eyes. Not-quite-tidy brown hair fell across a wide forehead.

Paul noticed the clothes - blue jeans, a black tee-shirt, sneakers - and wondered if that had been a conscious choice of Patricia's.

"Now what?" 'Michael' asked, visibly puzzled.

"Tell me about our mutual acquaintance, Patricia."

Michael scowled. This sounded like Head Games 101, and Patricia thought they were both past that.

"Brilliant. Erratic. Unappreciative." Michael waved a hand. "Bitter, too."

Paul's face hardened. He was sure that Patricia could do better than this. "No, that's her talking. Don't *pretend*." Paul wondered if he should reinforce the request with a command. He'd rather not. He wanted to see how Patricia would react naturally.

Michael's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair and he frowned, lost in thought for almost a minute. Finally, he stretched - another feline moment - and his clothes blurred and became more formal. Dress pants, a blue button-down shirt with silver cufflinks - but no tie. Mussy hair spontaneously tidied itself into a tidy, unremarkable style.

To Paul's well-tuned senses, even the way Michael smelled changed. A hint of some expensive cologne, dry and citrus-y, reached him. Clearly, when she put her mind to, Patricia could manipulate her appearance very well. That alone was worth remembering.

Moreover, Michael's expression and demeanor changed - he became relaxed and more confident. He rolled his neck, like someone trying to shift a cramp, and he smiled briefly at a satisfying *crack*.

Paul shifted in his seat, unexpectedly discomfited by the ease with which the guise changed so completely.

"I see your point", Michael conceded. "This is much better." He looked around the room, as if seeing it for the first time, eyes finally resting on Paul. "So, Patricia, still?"

"Of course." Paul fussed with a bottle of whiskey beside him and poured himself a measure.

"She's a master of self-deception." Michael shrugged. "I've never seen anyone so skilled at hiding things from themselves. Even things she wanted to know."

"Like what happened to you?"

Michael winced. "Yes. Especially that."

"Why did you Embrace her?" Paul was honestly curious.

"So that she could realize her potential. She couldn't exploit it, the way she was."

"The sadism? An odd sort of talent."

Michael shrugged. "Only when inefficiently applied." He paused. "And she was in the right place at the right time."

"Oh?"

Instead of answering, Michael looked at the whiskey bottle beside Paul, a question in his eyes. Paul nodded and Michael rose to make himself a drink, taking his time with it. Paul glanced at Michael's hands as he manipulated the bottle and the ice bucket and, inevitably, his face.

Michael returned the evaluation with a raised eyebrow and a small grin. Paul shook his head in irritation. The Malkavian was trying to be provocative - and succeeding.

Finally, Michael returned to his seat and continued. "I like to mentor people. It's something I do well - help them understand what they want to be and then encourage them on their way. I thought Patricia wanted to be free to hurt and maim as she pleased." He sipped at his drink, surprising Paul again. Patricia had no stomach for anything but blood.

"I was... not wrong, but not entirely correct. She craved freedom but only-"

"Only within strictly defined boundaries." Paul said wryly. This was a conversation they'd had, before, albeit in different circumstances. There were no chains this time, for one thing.

Michael nodded. "Those boundaries defined by someone else, of course. Someone she could respect, or fear, or love. Or all three."

"Someone truly in control." Familiar territory.

They sat in silence for a moment while Paul considered the situation. Either Patricia was a far better actor than he had credited, or Paul had tapped into something that neither of them expected. He knew that this could get him killed come the morning, but like Patricia, Paul's curiosity could sometimes overcome good sense.

"But that's not how I operate." Michael said suddenly. "Patricia was determined to remain in a state of arrested development. So I had to leave."

"Tough love?"

"I didn't say I loved her," he said sharply. Then, more calmly. "She loved me, of course."

"Of course." Paul remembered something Patricia had said when spilling her guts - literally. "Did she have a choice?"

"To love me? Of course not. She was Bound to me before she even knew what the term meant. Naturally, this meant the decision to leave was entirely on my shoulders, but..." he shrugged. "I expected that."

"You still haven't really told me why you chose her. The right place at the right time? Really?"

"I had time on my hands and the Anarch territories are so refreshingly liberal when it comes to the creation of childer. I needed-" He stopped and chose his words with more care. "I wanted to take my mind off other events."

"Which were?" Paul wondered how far Patricia could extend this charade. Where did it end and the memories of her sire begin? He wasn't sure.

"I'd made some bad decisions. Backed the wrong cadre during some political debacle."

"Which was why you were in the Anarch states?"

"Precisely. A little self-imposed exile to let things cool off and let the situation back home improve."

"Where did you come from, Michael?"

"Chicago." He seemed surprised by the answer. Paul said nothing. "Lodin is - was - a vengeful swine."

"So I've heard." Chicago was a city that Paul had made a point of avoiding since Lodin's ascension, and saw even less reason to go there now that it had fallen to the Sabbat.

"But we're getting off the subject... Patricia was my busman's holiday, you could say."

Paul nodded. *I wonder how much of this Patricia is going to remember?* All of it, he hoped. Her reactions would be interesting to watch.

"You remind her of me." Michael added. "The same arrogance, the same misanthropy, the same-"

"Taste in suits." Paul interrupted, trying to divert the conversation. He didn't want to be compared to a Malkavian - this one or any other.

"Quite." Michael regarded Paul curiously. "I'm sorry. Does the comparison upset you?"

"I'm not sure," Paul admitted. "It depends on how she feels about you, now."

"A necessary evil."

"Ah. That makes sense."

"Ironically, she's being far harder on herself than I ever was. I suppose the capacity for self-punishment goes along with the capacity for denial."

"Why is she so hard on herself?" Another honest question borne of the moment. "Did she fail to meet some standard? *Your* standards?"

Michael's eyes narrowed at that - another nerve touched. "*Falling upwards*, I think they call it."

"She's been a Primogen and a Prince - not many vampires are smart enough or quick enough to walk away from either role. She must hold herself to a very high standard, indeed."

Michael nodded. "I don't think she even knows what that standard is. Only that whatever she does, it's just not good enough."

"It sounds like a girl trying to please her father."

Michael laughed. "I'm sure that's at least part of it. A very large part, perhaps. Strange, given how she overwhelmed her real parents. And they weren't stingy with their approval, either. Maybe..." Michael's expression softened, lost in thought. "Maybe because it all came so easily to her - it still does at times - that she's convinced she doesn't deserve it. That she hasn't worked hard enough for it."

To Paul, this was the classic story of a clever mind and low self-esteem. *Interesting*. Not that any low self-esteem was apparent at the moment, he realized. Far from it. "Michael" oozed self confidence to a degree he'd rarely seen in Patricia - if ever.

Paul decided to go for broke. "Does she really need my help, again?"

Michael considered this, then nodded slowly. "Just as much as you need hers."

Paul winced at that.

"Don't be embarrassed," Michael insisted. "Mutual assistance is the most beneficial. And you don't have to worry about her being indiscreet."

Paul nodded. He appreciated the reassurance. "Why me? Because I remind her of you?"

"You were in the right place at the right time," the Malkavian smiled.

"Hardly an answer." Paul snapped.

Michael shrugged, apparently enjoying a point scored.

Finally, "Yes, because of that. Although not at first. At first, she just knew that you had a reputation of being a bastard and not at all squeamish. Besides, she expected the association to be beneficial, politically - eventually. One of you would end up in the other's debt and, to her, that was win-win."

Paul's eyes widened at that. He hadn't expected her to perceive the situation that clearly.

"And now you're upset that she's not quite as stupid as you hoped." Michael chuckled. "Patricia's motto should be *qui bono*. In that way, she took to the Camarilla like the proverbial duck to water..." Michael drained his glass in one long gulp. "But surely you don't like them stupid?"

"I don't like them *perceptive*".

"Then you're in for more than you bargained for," Michael grinned. "She notices the

oddest things - small things."

Paul felt the ground shifting under him, tried to regain it by lashing out. "But misses the forest for the trees."

"She's missed the forest for the leaves." Michael still smiled, and then closed his eyes.

"Your suit is old-school Saville Row, but your shirt is French. Your shoes were hand-made in...Rome. Given the choice, you prefer writing to typing, but prefer ballpoints to fountain pens." Michael's eyes opened. "Little things."

Paul stared at his companion. "Parlor tricks," he said, more stiffly than intended. "Hardly difficult for one of us."

"Oh?" Paul recognized the expression of someone taking up a challenge. "And there's *something* about this guise that upsets you."

Paul didn't know how to reply to that, particularly as Michael was right. He wondered if Michael knew *why* he was uneasy.

Michael took advantage of the moment to pour another drink.

Instead of sitting down with his freshened glass, Michael looked down at Paul, who was trying not to retreat into his chair.

Paul didn't know why he suddenly felt vulnerable. He squared his shoulders, forced himself to sit upright.

"Yes, you're really..." Michael seemed puzzled, and almost sympathetic. "Quite put out." He put down his drink. "Tell me why."

Paul tried to assert himself. "You're not in charge here."

"Neither is she." He smiled. "Tell me. Please?"

Paul stared up at the Malkavian, momentarily speechless. Then he flinched as Michael ran the back of his hand down Paul's face, the slight smile not moving at all. "Oh, of course." Michael sighed, as if only just realizing something.

"You mean you didn't *know*?" Paul said, dripping sarcasm.

Michael ignored the jibe and instead, thought aloud for a moment. "When entering a room, you notice the men, first. Then the women. Your tone of voice changes when you speak of your Sire, although you prefer not to mention him at all. You'll pick on both women and men for sport, but will only submit to men."

Michael watched Paul's face closely. "*One* man, I'm guessing."

Paul tried to push Michael's hand away. "That's enough."

Michael remained where he stood. "I don't think it is."

Paul shifted in his chair, wanting to stand. "I said -"

Michael pushed him back down without much effort. "I know. And you're wrong. Look at me."

Paul started at the insistent tone. Lacking any other recourse, he peered at Michael's face. "And?"

"You misunderstood. *Really* look at me. Past this face."

Paul stared harder, calling on a Discipline that usually allowed him to pierce all disguises. He blinked rapidly, surprised yet again. "I can't see her."

The half-smile returned. "That's convenient." Again, Michael stroked Paul's face and that, more than anything, surprised Paul beyond words. Patricia wasn't affectionate - or so she

always insisted.

Paul cleared his throat. "What are you-"

"Isn't it obvious? Or is it your turn to be in denial?" Michael cupped a hand under Paul's chin, the other pressed on his shoulder, keeping him in his place.

"But-"

Michael leaned in close - very close. "Be quiet." he breathed in Paul's ear.

Paul nodded, struck dumb by circumstance. *I'm being seduced by a ghost!* He couldn't quite believe it, despite indications otherwise.

Michael pulled at Paul's tie, unbuttoned his collar. "We've all the time in the world," he murmured.

Paul remained mute and motionless, even as he felt Michael's teeth nipping gently at his neck. "Just do as I say, and we'll be fine..."

Paul sprawled on the floor, not very comfortable, but that didn't matter. Michael lay half on top of him, arms crossed on Paul's chest.

He was an interesting sight, Paul thought. Michael's hair was finally mussed, and he was apparently unconcerned about the blood soaking into the cuffs of his shirt. Paul wondered if his own collar was similarly stained and suspected it was. The smell of blood pervaded the room.

Michael broke the silence. "It's been a while since I've done that. You?"

Paul didn't want to answer the question, but he didn't want to lose the game, either. "Not so long, no."

"Your Sire?"

Paul nodded awkwardly.

Michael smiled, slow and wicked. "I've met your sire. That must be a sight to see..."

"Stop it." Paul snapped, despite the afterglow.

Michael looked at him. "That's just for the two of you, is it? I can't believe that you're stifled by some notion of shame."

"Yes." he sighed. "I mean, yes it's private."

"Not anymore."

Paul sighed and said nothing. Then: "Aren't you worried. About this?" Paul tapped a bloody cuff.

"What? Oh, a blood bond? Hm..." Michael considered what to say. "It was a calculated risk. I had to break you out of that lethargy somehow."

"It seemed more like a spur of the moment thing to me."

"No keeping secrets from you anymore, is there?" Michael replied lightly. Not an answer, Paul realized.

"Are there any secrets left?"

"One or two." He smiled. "One or two." He thought for a moment. "You don't seem particularly concerned, either."

Paul tried to shrug. "I have my reasons." He was not about to divulge that the blood bond didn't affect him. Let Michael think he was Bound to the vampire who made him.

The answer seemed to satisfy Michael.

A moment came and went in silence. Abruptly, Michael stood up. "Well, I can't spend all

night rolling around with my elders." He announced without an apparent care in the world.

"Where are you going?" Paul tried not to sound too curious.

"Out and about. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You will?"

"Yes. I'm taking you out to dinner. I'll pick you at nine." Apparently this wasn't subject to debate.

Paul stared at Michael's retreating back, uncertain whether he should laugh or shout.

"Patricia?"

Michael turned back to face him. "What?" Not a shred of concern in his demeanor.

Paul thought better of it. "Never mind. I'll see you tomorrow." *In whatever form you're going to take.*