

## 2. Isaac



1. n "—Isaac's no better than the rest of these guys, but at least he seems to know a lot about these vampires."
2. n "He took off at the speed of light down the alley, though, so I've gotta hurry if I want to catch up!"
3. mcp "\"Sorry! Maybe some other time!\\""
4. n "With a hasty shout to Rex, I turn on my heel and sprint after Isaac as fast as I can."
5. lp "\"...!\\""
6. n "On the way, I pass by Luka, who throws me a shocked stare."
7. lp "\"Wait, it's dangerous out there! Come back!\\""
8. n "He calls out anxiously to me, but I don't have the energy to shout out a \"Tell me something I don't already know!\" in reply."
9. n "When I get closer to Isaac, he seems to notice my presence, because he slows his pace down a little."
10. ip "\"Why, fancy meeting you here, [mc]!\\""
11. ip "\"Decided you wanted a taste of the fun after all~?\\""
12. mcp "\"How about you just tell me what the fuck is happening?!\\""
13. mcp "\"...Your sense of fun is pretty messed up.\\""
14. ip "\"Hah!\\""
15. n "Isaac lets out a bark of laughter, shoving his glasses back up on his face as we run down the street."

16. ip "\"You saw Rex and Dominic fighting, didn't you?\""
17. ip "\"How about two whole {i}gangs{/i} of vampires fighting each other?\""
18. mcp "\"You're insane! Who the hell would want to be in the middle of something like that?\""
19. n "My angry question makes Isaac's broad grin darken a little bit, and his eyes flash behind their lenses."
20. i "\"Wouldn't you rather see monsters tearing each other apart rather than attacking humans?\""
21. i "\"After all, every dead vampire just makes the world a better place... isn't that something worth watching?\""
22. mcp "\"...\""
23. n "—Was there a strange bitterness in his voice just now, or am I imagining things?"
24. n "No, I definitely heard it. But why did it come on so suddenly...?"
25. n "Before I can question him about it, we round a corner, and Isaac abruptly stops."
26. n "There, before us —"
27. n "The alley is filled with burly figures clawing and slashing at each other, like wild animals."
28. u "\"Ahahaha!\""
29. u "\"Come here, you Helgen piece of shit—!\""

30. u "\"I'll rip your head off, bastard!\""
31. n "Angry shrieks and shouts echo in the air."
32. mcp "\"Uah—!\""
33. n "I have to quickly duck to dodge a spray of blood, which splatters on the wall behind me."
34. mc "\"Isaac, this isn't safe! What the hell are we...\""
35. mc "\"...Are you taking {i}notes?{/i}\""
36. n "Open-mouthed, I stare at Isaac, who's scribbling something down on a small pad of paper."
37. i "\"Why do you look so surprised? Didn't I say I was an information broker?\""
38. i "\"I have to know who the strongest vampires on the food chain are right now. It's just business, [mc].\""
39. n "As casually as if he were talking about the weather, Isaac gives me a shrug, then goes back to writing."
40. mc "\"You're a madman, I swear.\""
41. n "I shake my head in disbelief, turning back to the ongoing fight."
42. n "At some point, it seems like Rex jumped in because I glimpse his red-haired figure in the middle of things."
43. r "\"Come on, come on! None of you fuckin' cowards gonna challenge me tonight?\""
44. r "\"I guess I'll have to find a new playmate! Ahahaha!\""

45. n "His maniacal laughter blends into the fray, and I can't help but shudder."
46. n "They really do look like animals... vicious wolves tearing at each other's throats."
47. n "All this while, these creatures have been stalking the night streets of San Fran – and I  
never knew?"
48. n "The thought makes my blood run cold."
49. i "\"Ah, what a shame.\""
50. i "\"He's not here tonight... not like I expected him to be, really.\""
51. n "Isaac's quiet mutter interrupts my thoughts, and I shoot him a curious look."
52. mcp "\"He? Who's 'he'?\""
53. n "But when I question Isaac, he only shakes his head, letting out a low sigh."
54. i "\"We should leave. Things are getting pretty nasty.\""
55. i "\"I don't want to get any blood on my shoes, either. I just had them cleaned  
yesterday.\""
56. mcp "\"Never mind that, I'd be more worried about getting my neck torn open...\""
57. n "I grumble nervously, eying the vicious gangs going at each other."
58. i "\"No argument there. Come over this way, then!\""
59. mcp "\"I thought you were excited about our ringside seats to this bloodbath?\""

60. mc "It's more entertaining than TV, except for the part where we could get ripped into shreds at any second."
61. i "Yes, well, too much of a good thing and all that."
62. i "Come on, this way!"
63. n "Isaac motions for me to follow him, and we head away from the alley, much to my relief."
64. n "But even once we're out of sight, the image of the vampires tearing into each other keeps replaying in my head."
65. mc "Do they really do that... every night?"
66. mc "Wouldn't the police notice?"
67. n "Isaac shakes his head, letting out a patient sigh."
68. i "All-out brawls don't happen too often, except when tensions escalate."
69. i "The two gangs hate each other a fair bit, even though they're technically part of one large San Francisco coven."
70. i "I was hoping to work out a trade deal tonight, but it seems it's not in the cards. Oh well..."
71. n "He grimaces, wearing a disappointed look."
72. n "...Christ, how can he act like this is such a normal thing? They're monsters, for God's sake! He must be insane."
73. mc "Ngh. I'm getting out of here before any more crazy shit happens."

74. n "Sucking in a deep breath, I begin heading in the opposite direction, towards my apartment."
75. ip "\"—Wait.\""
76. ip "\"I wouldn't leave so soon, if I were you.\""
77. mcp "\"...\""
78. n "When Isaac calls out to me, I pause, turning back towards him reluctantly."
79. n "Wearing a sly, knowing smirk, he closes the distance between us at a slow pace, and soon, he's standing right in front of me again."
80. i "\"It won't be long before the other vampires in San Fran hear that you know about them.\""
81. i "\"You know what that means, right?\""
82. n "His smug \"I know something you don't\" voice makes me clench a fist in annoyance."
83. mcp "\"Could you cut the bullshit and just tell me, already?\""
84. n "The dangerous lilt in his voice makes me swallow reflexively."
85. mcp "\"...No, but I can guess that it's not anything good.\""
86. n "Isaac snickers, his eyes narrowing in delight behind his glasses."
87. i "\"To put it bluntly – humans who learn about what goes on here at night? They get dealt with quite expediently.\""
88. i "\"Luka and I are exceptions, since we do business with them. But you? Hah.\""

89. n "He leans in, lowering his voice to a provocative purr as he brings our faces close together."
90. i "\"Before the week is out, you'll end up drained dry and left as a lonely corpse...\""
91. i "\"Or, more likely, as the cute little pet of whatever vampire catches you first. Kept around for your blood and your pretty face...\""
92. i "\"Flattering, right?\""
93. mcp "\"...\""
94. n "The crude but confident way he's talking about all this is... disturbing, to say the least."
95. n "I want to argue, but after I remember the way Rex was looking at me just earlier –"
96. n "I realize that Isaac probably isn't exaggerating."
97. mcp "\"So you're saying I'm screwed?\""
98. mcp "\"I have to leave the city, or else I'll be spending the rest of my days as vampire cattle?\""
99. i "\"...Well, that's {i}one{/i} option, naturally.\""
100. n "Isaac raises a hand, and I feel his fingers drifting through the back of my hair."
101. mcp "\"...\""



102. n "My first instinct is to duck away from his touch, but —"
103. n "All of a sudden, I can't tear my gaze away from the hypnotic, swirling glimmer of his eyes."
104. n "This is just like last night... {w}what kind of messed-up power is he using on me?"
105. i "\"You see, if you were working as an 'assistant' of mine, you'd be much safer on the streets.\""
106. i "\"Neither clan wants to get on my bad side. The chance of them harming you would be very low...\""
107. i "\"...Don't you think that's a tempting agreement?\""
108. mcp "\"...\""
109. old "Try to resist"
110. old "Give in"
111. n "Ngh... I have to try and clear my head... I can't fall prey to this guy."
112. n "But everything just feels so cloudy, like I'm inside a dream.\n{w}All I can see is Isaac's beautiful golden gaze."
113. i "\"Hmm? You heard me, right?\""
114. i "\"It's a very {i}tempting{/i} agreement... and beneficial for both of us, certainly...\""
115. n "His voice drips into my ears like honey, melting away my will to resist."

116. n "Soon, I find myself nodding my head, unable to disagree with his words."
117. n "Everything feels so cloudy, like I'm inside a dream... {w}I don't want to fight against it."
118. n "All I can see is Isaac's beautiful, golden gaze."
119. n "Feeling dazed, I numbly nod my head."
120. i "\"There's a good boy. You know I have your best interests at heart, don't you?\""
121. n "His hand drifts from my hair over to my cheek, and those slender fingers trace down to my jaw."
122. n "I can't think of anything other than the seductive murmur echoing in my ears."
123. n "I think I'm falling asleep... {w}or maybe I already am, since..."
124. mcp "\"—!\\""
125. n "—And just like that, the fog in my head vanishes."
126. n "I realize how close Isaac's standing to me and quickly stumble back, blinking in confusion."
127. mc "\"What... what'd I just...\""
128. i "\"Well! Now that you're officially my assistant, I'll stop by your fine establishment tomorrow night to get things settled.\\""
129. mc "\"Wait!\\""
130. mc "\"Hang on, I didn't really mean —!\\""

131. n "Isaac grins cheerfully, giving a few playful clicks of his tongue."
132. i "\"An agreement's an agreement, right? You're not intending to just break your word, surely?\""
133. i "\"If you are... well, there're a few vampires I know who'd {i}love{/i} to punish an untrustworthy mischief-maker like you~\""
134. mc "\"...!\""
135. n "I can't believe this guy! {w}Could he be any more open about blackmailing me?!"
136. n "More importantly, what the hell did I just agree to? And why couldn't I resist?"
137. n "There's definitely something supernatural about him, even if he's not a full vampire..."
138. mc "\"You – you're a real goddamn piece of work, Isaac.\""
139. n "I finally manage to growl out some words at him, though I doubt I sound very threatening."
140. mc "\"Ngh. I should've kept walking.\""
141. n "More angry at myself than at Isaac, I ball my hands into fists."
142. mc "\"...Fine. Come to the diner tomorrow.\""
143. mc "\"But I swear, if you pull something else like this again...\""
144. i "\"Pull? Pull what?\""

145. i "\"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm just an ordinary businessman – with extraordinary talents.\""
146. n "Isaac innocently shrugs his shoulders, then offers me a little wink before turning away."
147. ip "\"I'll show up promptly at closing tomorrow night, so be ready! Make sure to wear your Sunday best!\""
148. mc "\"And get it all grease-stained, sure.\""
149. mc "\"I hope you slip on the sidewalk and crack your head open on your way to the diner, bastard.\""
150. mc "\"...I can't wait. If I'm lucky, I'll get struck by lightning before I reach the diner.\""
151. n "Only letting out an airy chuckle at my sour response, Isaac waves a hand at me while heading off down the road."
152. n "I scowl at his departing back, which soon vanishes around a corner."
153. mc "\"...\""
154. n "But once he's gone, all of my angry energy from earlier dissipates, leaving me exhausted."
155. n "But once he's gone, all of my tense energy from earlier dissipates, leaving me exhausted."

156. n "Ugh... and my head hurts, too.{w} It must be because of that weird thing Isaac keeps doing with his eyes..."
157. mc "\"I should get a pair of good sunglasses. Maybe that would help.\""
158. n "Grumbling quietly, I shove my hands in my pockets and begin walking home."
159. n "...It's all Isaac's fault that I've been swept up in this."
160. n "If it weren't for his stupid invitation last night, I'd still be living my normal life, blissfully ignorant of vampires."
161. n "An \"ordinary businessman,\" sure, just like Rex is a pink bunny who vomits rainbows. Tch."
162. n "—Home sweet home."
163. n "If only I could pretend all of this was a crazy fever dream..."
164. n "If only it was that easy."
165. n "I end up tossing and turning in bed for what feels like ages, until eventually..."
166. n "The exhaustion from tonight pulls me into a deep sleep."
167. mc "\"Ngh...\""
168. n "The early afternoon sun trickles into my apartment, fighting through storm clouds to arrive upon my face."
169. n "I push myself up with a yawn."

170. extend " I can't say I feel very refreshed."
171. mc "\"...\""
172. n "Those events last night, the fight between Dominic and Rex..."
173. n "...The vampires."
174. n "I was hoping it would be a dream, but –"
175. extend " it sticks too vividly in my mind, like a bad taste that won't leave my mouth."
176. mc "\"This would make for a great story to write about... except I'd definitely have an anxiety attack while writing it...\""
177. mc "\"I could mix up an amazing EP inspired by this stuff... although I'm not sure if I'd live long enough to drop it...\""
178. mc "\"But I feel like I could draw some amazing vampire shit right now... it would probably land me on the cover of a teen goth magazine, though...\""
179. n "Still half-asleep, I mumble to myself as I put on the coffee machine."
180. n "It's true, all this excitement's definitely inspired me a little – though I'm also too on edge to really channel it right now."
181. n "Isaac..."
182. n "His words from last night are still ringing in my ears."

183. n "Am I really in that much danger? {w}Did I need to accept his offer, or is he just playing off my fears?"
184. n "Isaac reeks of \"sleazy businessman,\" and he seems to have pretty questionable intentions, but..."
185. n "I get the feeling he was telling the truth. {w}And to be honest, I'd rather not take any chances."
186. n "I manage to get some writing commissions finished up during the rest of the day, although they are sorely in need of some editing."
187. n "In the last couple hours before work, I decide to start a new little story, drawing heavily from the crazy stuff that happened last night."
188. n "I change a few details here and there, but it reads more like a diary rather than fiction."
189. n "I finish a couple of short songs for the indie game I was hired onto, but I know I'll need to go back and give them another listen when I'm more focused."
190. n "In the last couple hours before work, I decide to play around with a new track, trying to capture the essence of the tension from last night."
191. n "It ends up as some dark, trip-hoppy piece with out-of-tune guitar and grungy synths. {w}Sounds like it'd be right at home in a vampire game, at least."

192.       n "I spend the rest of the day on a few commissions, my eyes glazing over a little as I color and shade in auto-pilot mode."
193.       n "In the last couple hours before work, I decide to draw the new picture filling my head – a looming, shadowy figure in an alleyway."
194.       n "I make sure the light is focused on the figure's bared teeth, using the memory of Rex's fangs as reference. {w}It turns out surprisingly well, almost {i}too{/i} well."
195.       n "—When I get ready to leave for work, the sight of the darkening sky outside makes me tense."
196.       n "After Isaac warned me about the threat of being caught by a vampire, I can't get it off my mind, even if he was exaggerating."
197.       n "I'd better hurry to the diner before it gets too late... and hope that Isaac keeps his word."
198.       n "Luckily, nothing happens on the way to my shift, and I flick on the diner's lights with a sigh of relief."
199.       mcp "\"This crap is doing a real number on my stress levels, I'll say...\""
200.       n "Muttering to myself, I switch the sign to \"Open\" after a little bit of prep work, and the night finally begins."



201. u "\"Y-yeah, I'll have, uh... just the fries, uh, yeah...\""
202. mc "\"Coming right up.\""
203. n "—Just the normal drunk customers."
204. u "\"Hey dude, can I get... an ice cream frothy... thing?\""
205. mc "\"...You mean a milkshake?\""
206. n "—Average, high-as-a-kite teenagers."
207. n "Nothing out of the ordinary... {w}not yet."
208. n "Sometimes I glimpse a shape moving outside of the diner's windows, although  
it's probably just a random passerby."
209. n "...But for some reason, I have an uneasy feeling."
210. n "It's like I'm being watched – and not in the comforting \"guardian angel\" way,  
either."
211. n "A couple minutes before closing time, I moodily stare at the linoleum floor  
while wiping a glass."
212. n "None of the people who came in here seemed like they were vampires, but  
then again, I never guessed Dominic was one either."
213. n "At this rate, I'm gonna go paranoid and end up committed somewhere,  
seriously..."
214. u "\"Good evening. Is that my lovely new assistant I spy over there?\""
215. mc "\"—!\""

216. n "An airy voice calls out to me, breaking my thoughts, and I realize a new customer has walked in."
217. n "...No, not a customer. {w}Isaac."
218. mc "\"Oh, so you came after all, huh?\""
219. mc "\"Glad you decided to give me the gift of your company.\""
220. i "\"Now, now, you're going to have to work on that attitude of yours if you want to move up the corporate ladder!\""
221. n "Pushing up his glasses, Isaac flashes me a cheerful, energetic grin."
222. n "I swear, his face looks more punchable every time I see him."
223. n "For someone who's got no problem blackmailing other people, he's pretty damn lighthearted."
224. i "\"So, are you ready to head out?\""
225. i "\"I'd rather not spend too much time here. I can already feel the grease soaking into my suit.\""
226. mc "\"Yeah, yeah. Let me get my keys.\""
227. n "As I close up the diner for the night and head out with Isaac, I can't help but feel a little relieved."
228. n "Call me a coward, but having his \"protection\" is a lot more reassuring than going out alone."
229. n "Is it worth the price, though? {w}I guess I'll have to find out."

230. mcp "\"Where are we going?\""

231. n "I question Isaac as he extends an arm to call a taxi, and his golden eyes flick  
towards me."

232. ip "\"Why, to our apartment, naturally.\""

233. mcp "\"...'Our' apartment?\""

234. ip "\"Mine and Luka's. We're roommates, since it makes our cooperative work a  
lot easier.\""

235. ip "\"He's out tonight, though, so you probably won't see him. Are you  
disappointed?\""

236. mcp "\"About not meeting that blond brat? Yeah, real devastated.\""

237. mcp "\"Not sure if I'd say that. I think the poor kid hates my guts by now.\""

238. n "Isaac laughs when I roll my eyes, but he nods understandingly."

239. i "\"You're not the only one. Luka actually hates me, too.\""

240. mcp "\"What? Why does he work with you, then?\""

241. i "\"Convenience, mostly. I'm just a means to an end for him.\""

242. n "He shrugs indifferently, apparently not troubled by such a thing at all."

243. i "\"I didn't rope him into working with me, unlike you. You should feel  
honored!\""

244. mcp "\"Right. I'm sure 'Vampire Arms Dealer's Assistant' will look great on my resume.\""
245. mcp "\"Honored's one word for it... would've chosen 'damned' myself.\""
246. n "After a short taxi ride, we end up in front of a much fancier-looking apartment complex than my own."
247. n "I follow Isaac inside, and we take the elevator up to one of the top floors."
248. mcp "\"Wow...\""
249. n "The apartment we walk into is an incredibly sleek one – well, relative to my own, anyway."
250. n "It even smells nice, a little bit like citrus. {w}I bet these guys actually buy air fresheners."
251. i "\"I hope it lives up to your expectations.\""
252. i "\"Oh, we're looking for another roommate, if you're interested. The rent isn't terrible if it's split three ways.\""
253. mc "\"You have a spare room?\""
254. i "\"No, actually. I figured we'd just share mine.\""
255. mc "\"...Of course. Should've seen that one coming.\""
256. mc "\"...Right. If I'm ever that desperate, I think a park bench would be more appealing.\""
257. n "My unenthusiastic response is met with a little chuckle."

258. n "Isaac closes the door behind us and clears his throat, a slightly more serious look climbing his features."
259. i "\"Now, as much as I'd like to flirt with you until the sun rises, there's business to discuss.\""
260. i "\"Why don't you take a seat, and I'll bring some coffee over?\""
261. n "He motions towards a large sofa near the window, then turns and strides off towards the kitchen."
262. mc "\"Hmph...\""
263. n "I guess he's not as terrible a host as I was expecting, but this still feels really weird."
264. n "I have no idea why he wants me as an \"assistant\" or what that even involves. Probably something shady... though at least I might learn what's going on."
265. n "And as much as I hate to admit it, I'm pretty damn curious about the city's secret vampire network, which I had no idea about until yesterday."
266. n "After I wait on the sofa for a little while, gazing out at the beautiful cityscape through the windows, Isaac eventually comes back."
267. ip "\"Sorry for making you wait! I hope you like your coffee bold.\""
268. mcp "\"I work the night shift, you know. I practically survive on dark coffee.\""

269. n "Isaac sits down beside me on the couch, handing over a mug."
270. n "I take a cautious sip of the brew, not expecting much... {w}and blink in surprise."
271. n "It's actually pretty good, and I'm a picky coffee drinker."
272. ip "\"Don't even try to complain that you don't like it. I can see approval written all over your cute face.\""
273. mcp "\"...\""
274. n "He beams at me in satisfaction, and I sulkily turn my head away a little bit."
275. n "I really need to work on a better poker face."
276. mcp "\"Well, I've had worse. I guess you're good for something after all, Isaac.\""
277. mcp "\"Anyway, didn't you say there was 'business' to talk about?\""
278. ip "\"Ah, yes.\""
279. ip "\"Very important business, actually, so you'd best give me your full attention.\""
280. n "Isaac sets his mug down on the table before turning to face me, his golden gaze growing a little sharper."
281. i "\"A key part of my job, you see, is collecting information. To do that, I need eyes and ears in a lot of places.\""

282. i "\"You probably don't know this, but a fair number of vampires have frequented  
your diner. Not a huge amount, but it's still in an important location.\""
283. mcp "\"...\""
284. n "...My mind flashes back to Dom at Isaac's words."
285. n "I really never would've thought of him as anything other than an antisocial guy  
if I hadn't seen him in the alleyway fighting Rex."
286. i "\"Now, I could very easily spread the word that your diner will be a new,  
temporary neutral ground for the city's vampires.\""
287. mcp "\"What?!\""
288. i "\"Calm down, calm down. It just means that a couple more booths will be  
occupied than normal.\""
289. n "Isaac smirks at my alarmed reaction, winking at me reassuringly."
290. i "\"And don't try to tell me you're worried about overcrowding. That place is like  
a graveyard.\""
291. i "\"...Although, if your only customers are undead, it might still be a graveyard,  
now that I think about it.\""
292. mcp "\"Well, yeah, but won't it be dangerous?\""
293. mcp "\"What if they attack me? Or start attacking each other?\""
294. mcp "\"Let me get this straight.\""

295. mcp "\"You want to turn the place into a watering hole for bloodsucking monsters?\""
296. mcp "\"I'd have to bring a shotgun to work every day to stop them from turning me into their own personal soda fountain!\""
297. i "\"Nonsense. They may be brutes, but they respect laws of neutrality. No fighting can occur on a neutral ground.\""
298. n "He sounds thoroughly confident, which makes me relax a little bit – but only a little."
299. n "The idea of the diner becoming a vampire den is pretty unnerving, no matter how you spin it."
300. mcp "\"What's the point of driving more vampires to the diner? To collect more information?\""
301. i "\"Precisely! I knew you'd catch on fast, [mc].\""
302. i "\"I want you to listen for something in particular... any vampires talking about a man named 'Bishop.'\""
303. mcp "\"...Bishop?\""
304. n "Isaac nods, his lips pulling together in a distasteful grimace."
305. i "\"Yes, Bishop.\""
306. i "\"Try to see if anyone's saying bad things about him or discussing the idea of a revolt. Anarchistic murmurings.\""



307. i "\"If you need to, you can prompt them a little. But don't arouse any suspicion, understand?\""

308. n "He looks quite serious all of a sudden, and the intensity of his golden eyes behind those lenses is a little intimidating."

309. n "...After hesitating for a good few moments, I end up offering a reluctant nod."

310. n "It doesn't sound like that much work, and if it's all I have to do to keep from being someone's dinner, I guess it's worth it."

311. mcp "\"All right.... even if it's against my better judgment.\""

312. mcp "\"Fine. You'd better not be lying about it being a 'neutral ground,' though.\""

313. ip "\"Good. That's all I need you to do, for now.\""

314. ip "\"I'll come to the diner nightly to check up on your progress, and I expect {i}detailed{/i} reports.\""

315. n "An airy grin flits back over his face, and Isaac reaches out to squeeze my shoulder."

316. n "Rather than trying to move away, though, I study his face curiously as he leans closer."

317. mcp "\"Why do you want me to listen for people talking about Bishop?\""

318. mcp "\"Are you trying to put down some kind of uprising?\""

319. ip "\"No... very much the opposite.\""

320. n "A cryptic smirk slowly spreads across Isaac's face."
321. n "His eyes flash darkly behind his glasses, making me wonder what kind of plot's forming in that head of his."
322. ip "\"If you do your job well, I'll give you some more details.\""
323. ip "\"Until then, I'm afraid that's all I plan to say.\""
324. n "He takes a relaxed sip of his coffee, as if to signify the end of that particular conversation."
325. mcp "\"...\""
326. n "I shouldn't really care that much about his motives, but now, I can't help but be interested in them."
327. n "I'll just have to wait until he trusts me more to ask, then. {w}But there's another question on my mind, too - an even more important one."
328. mcp "\"Can I ask you something else, Isaac?\""
329. i "\"Of course. I'll answer anything I can for you, darling.\""
330. mcp "\"Your eyes...\""
331. mcp "\"How did you gain that power? That... hypnotic look.\""
332. i "\"...\""
333. n "It looks like that question was the last one he expected to hear."
334. n "Well, after being duped by it twice, did he really think I'd just forget about what happened?"

335. n "Soon, Isaac's brow furrows slightly, and he glances to one side with a wry chuckle."
336. i "\"Right, I forgot... a Strix would've noticed it.\""
337. mcp "\"...Come again?\""
338. n "Isaac shakes his head, letting out a faint sigh while pushing up his glasses."
339. i "\"Never mind that.\""
340. i "\"To answer your question – you remember how I said I wasn't 'really' a vampire?\""
341. i "\"The truth is... once every few weeks, I drink a vampire's blood.\""
342. i "\"It gives mortals a fraction of their power, and mine manifests as hypnosis.\""
343. n "He calmly gazes at me with his brilliant, golden eyes, which are admittedly beautiful even when they're {i}not{/i} swirling mesmerizingly."
344. mcp "\"Really...? They just let you drink their blood, for free? Is it because you sell them information?\""
345. i "\"Hah. It's far from 'free.'\""
346. i "\"I've got a certain deal with someone for it, you see...\""
347. n "A troubled look briefly flits across his face."
348. n "No, maybe troubled isn't the right word. {w}It's more of a hateful look."

349. mcp "\"It sounds like you're pretty deep in vampire society, for a human.\""
350. mcp "\"Doesn't it ever get scary or start to feel like it's not worth the cost?\""
351. n "Rich or not, I'd never be jealous of Isaac. {w}He's playing with fire, except the  
fire has fangs and a strong appetite for blood."
352. i "\"...It does, you're right.\""
353. n "The usual confidence in his tone vanishes for a few moments."
354. i "\"I spend half my nights wondering if I'll be murdered the next day. There's not  
a single vampire I trust, and there never will be.\""
355. i "\"But I'm in it for the long haul, [mc]... I've got too much at stake to just turn tail  
and run away with a briefcase full of cash.\""
356. n "He gives me a faint, wistful smile, one that looks incredibly tired."
357. n "For whatever reason, a pang of sympathy cuts through my chest, even though I  
don't understand the circumstances he's in."
358. old "It must be hard..."
359. old "I don't want you to get hurt"
360. old "I don't want you to get hurt (unlocked)"
361. old "Don't run away, then"

362. n "I run a hand through my hair, unsure of what I can say to ease the tense atmosphere."
363. mcp "\"I'm sorry... I don't really know what you're going through, but I'm sure it can't be easy."
364. mcp "\"I wish I could offer you more support.\""
365. i "\"Hah. No need to pity me, dear, I've already got that base covered.\""
366. n "He exhales a faint sigh while adjusting his glasses, then straightens up."
367. mcp "\"...You should be careful.\""
368. i "\"...\""
369. n "I can hardly believe I'm saying this, but...{w} It's true. I don't want to see Isaac dead – or anyone else, for that matter."
370. mcp "\"This probably sounds rich coming from a guy who just found out about vampires yesterday, I know.\""
371. mcp "\"But I get the feeling that all of them are out for themselves... they're too unpredictable, too dangerous.\""
372. mcp "\"Even if we've got our philosophical differences, I'd prefer if you didn't get hurt. So don't get overconfident, yeah?\""
373. i "\"...{i}You're{/i} worried about {i}me{/i}? Shouldn't it be the other way around?\""

374. i "\"Ah, I'm not complaining, don't get me wrong. Please, continue telling me how much I mean to you.\""
375. mcp "\"...\""
376. i "\"In all seriousness, [mc], you're right. I'll be careful...\""
377. i "\"If only so I can keep hearing you fuss over me.\""
378. n "With a smug little chuckle, Isaac straightens up."
379. n "I hope he actually took my words to heart... Well, if not, there's nothing else I can really do about it."
380. n "The next moment, some kind of strange conviction grips me."
381. n "I nudge Isaac's shoulder with a fist, putting on a determined frown."
382. mcp "\"...Don't run away, then.\""
383. i "\"...\""
384. n "He eyes me with a mixture of confusion and surprise."
385. mcp "\"Do whatever you have to do, and finish your business with the city's vampires.\""
386. mcp "\"But after that, if I were you, I wouldn't deal with them a second longer than necessary...\""
387. mcp "\"I have a feeling it'll only lead to bad things, otherwise.\""

388. n "It's not like I have any experience in what I'm talking about, but my gut instinct tells me Isaac's playing a dangerous game."

389. n "And, even if he *is* kind of a dick, I don't think I'd want him to be torn apart or drained dry by vampires, since he technically saved me from the same fate."

390. i "\"...You're pretty perceptive, aren't you?\""

391. i "\"I had a feeling you had some smarts tucked away in there.\""

392. n "Isaac's eyes soften as he reaches towards my head."

393. n "Huffing, I try to dodge his hand, but Isaac manages to muss up my hair before I have a chance to escape."

394. n "He exhales a faint sigh while adjusting his glasses, then straightens up."

395. i "\"Well, enough of my moping. That's all I wanted to talk to you about tonight, [mc].\""

396. n "Rising to his feet, Isaac smooths out his vest, swiveling to face me."

397. i "\"You're free to go. Unless you're interested in, say, watching a movie and enjoying some quality ti--\""

398. mc "\"No thanks.\""

399. n "I quickly push myself off the couch, and offer Isaac the most skeptical look I can manage."

400. mc "\"You make good coffee, and you may have pretty eyes, but that's all you've got going for you, Isaac.\""

401. i "\"How rude! I'd like to think I have excellent fashion taste, too.\""
402. i "\"And, obviously, a talent for finding cute assistants.\""
403. mc "\"If I could get jumped at any second by a vampire, I shouldn't waste the precious time I have, don't you think?\""
404. i "\"You're implying I couldn't make our time together worthwhile.\""
405. i "\"I'm a businessman, [mc]. My chief concern is making every moment... profitable.\""
406. n "\"With a wide, charming grin, Isaac tips an imaginary hat to me, and I have to keep myself from cracking a smile.\""
407. n "\"In a surprisingly gentlemanly fashion, he escorts me down to the street and even pays for my cab fare.\""
408. n "\"As the taxi drives off towards my apartment, I glimpse Isaac waving in the rear-view mirror until we round the corner, out of sight.\""
409. n "\"—I wasn't expecting to arrive home in such a good mood, but tonight wasn't nearly as bad I thought it'd be.\""
410. n "\"My job as Isaac's \"assistant\" doesn't sound that bad, and I don't mind getting to spend more time in that fancy apartment of his...\""



411.       mcp "\"And I won't say no to free coffee.\""
412.       n "Maybe getting caught up in this vampire horror story wasn't as bad as I first  
thought."
413.       n "At least it brings a little spice to my boring life – even if that spice comes at a  
pretty risky cost."
414.       n "I'm so tired from my shift that, despite the coffee, I doze off not long after  
hitting my pillow."
415.       n "As I drift off to sleep, I have the sense that I'm being swallowed up by a pair of  
radiant, hypnotic golden eyes."
416.       n "—After that, the rest of the week was fairly uneventful."
417.       n "A few unusual guys showed up at the diner, and I caught the name \"Bishop\" a  
couple times."
418.       n "It sounds like he's some kind of boss to San Fran's vampires. No one seems to  
like him that much, but they all sound pretty scared of what he can do."
419.       n "Each night, Isaac would take me back to his apartment, and I'd report  
everything I heard at the diner."
420.       n "He'd listen closely, ask a few questions, and that was it. We'd chat a little about  
other random things, and he always brewed me a fresh cup of coffee."

421.       n "I learned that Isaac was raised near Hollywood and met a lot of celebrities as a kid. He seems to be a huge movie aficionado, too – he constantly raves about all his favorites to me."
422.       n "Curiously, though, he never said anything about what he did as a teenager or in college.\n{w}A part of me wants to ask, but I wonder if he's avoiding it for a reason..."
423.       n "One night during the week, Luka passed by the living room, a suspicious glare on his face."
424.       I "\"I hope you're not leaving any grease stains on the couch, Diner Boy .\""
425.       mcp "\"...\""
426.       ip "\"Luka!\""
427.       ip "\"Don't talk to my assistant like that.\""
428.       n "To my shock, Isaac actually jumped to my defense, and not in a playful manner, either."
429.       I "\"...\""
430.       n "Luka looked taken aback, too. {w}Isaac doesn't normally raise his voice."
431.       I "\"...Jeez, what're you so worked up about, old man? Calm down.\""
432.       n "Scrunching his face up sulkily, Luka stalked back to his room, leaving behind an awkward atmosphere."

433.        n "—That was about the only thing of note that happened during the week.{w} The rest of our time flew by, and before I knew it, I was settling into the routine."
434.        n "Tonight's just another average night, except a heavy storm's pelting down on our taxi as we drive to Isaac's apartment."
435.        n "I feel a little disappointed that I don't have anything exciting to report, but Isaac seems cheerful as usual."
436.        ip "\"You know, I'm thinking about trying a different roast. I'm getting a little sick of the current one.\""
437.        mcp "\"...You're pretty passionate about coffee, aren't you?\""
438.        ip "\"What can I say? It's an important part of the job for night owls like us.\""
439.        n "He elbows my side knowingly, his eyes sparkling behind his glasses."
440.        mcp "\"Can't argue with that one.\""
441.        n "We head upstairs like usual, and as Isaac goes to heat up some water, I let out a contented sigh."
442.        n "At some point, I grew pretty comfortable hanging around this place."
443.        n "Despite being a posh apartment, something about it feels down-to-earth, just like Isaac himself."
444.        n "Appearances really are deceiving. {w}Who'd have thought the fancy pants businessman was just a pretty normal guy?"

445. n "He's overly flirty and likes touching my hair too much, sure, but he's never been anything but kind to me – even though he's not getting a whole lot out of our \"deal.\""
446. n "And something about the way he always listens to me so intently... {w}well, it makes me feel a little special, as stupid as that sounds."
447. ip "\"Fresh coffee for my favorite assistant!\""
448. n "Striding up beside the couch, Isaac offers me a mug, which I gratefully accept."
449. mcp "\"Don't let Luka hear you say that.\""
450. ip "\"He hates me, remember? You don't have to worry about him getting jealous.\""
451. n "Isaac lets out a playful chuckle, sitting down beside me."
452. n "After a few sips of my coffee, I deliver my usual report while he watches me, as attentive as ever."
453. n "Once I've answered his questions, he gives a silent nod, then leans back against the couch cushions."
454. i "\"...\""
455. mcp "\"...\""
456. n "Normally, we'd start up our friendly chatter at this point."
457. n "But the atmosphere's a little different today, and Isaac isn't piping up like he normally does."

458. n "Instead, the silence is filled with the sound of the rain that's pelting down, and gusts of wind make rain droplets splatter against the window loudly."

459. mcp "\"Good thing we're not out there, huh, Isaac?\""

460. mcp "\"...Isaac?\""

461. n "When I curiously glance over at Isaac, he seems to be gazing past me with a distant expression."

462. mcp "\"Something wrong?\""

463. mcp "\"What's the matter? Coffee grinds stuck in your throat?\""

464. i "\"Mm?\""

465. i "\"Ah, no, it's nothing.\""

466. n "His eyes flick back to my face, and he shakes his head."

467. mcp "\"Really? You looked pretty lost in thought.\""

468. i "\"...\""

469. n "When I question him gently, Isaac hesitates."

470. n "Then, after a moment, he pulls off his glasses – his gaze flitting back to the cloudy sky."

471. ip "\"It was storming heavily, just like this... when I had my first run-in with a vampire.\""

472. mcp "\"...\""

473. ip "\"After that night, my life changed permanently.\""

474. ip "\"I couldn't see anything the same way – it was like I didn't belong in the  
'normal' human world anymore.\""
475. n "He sighs, a grim expression settling on his normally sly features."
476. ip "\"There's no going back, either.\""
477. ip "\"You, me, we both have to live the rest of our lives knowing that monsters  
stalk the streets at night, while everyone else sleeps peacefully in their ignorance.\""
478. ip "\"It makes you wonder... what kind of other dark secrets are hiding out  
there?\""
479. ip "\"Are there horrible things all around us, but we only ever notice a fraction of  
them?\""
480. n "Isaac's golden eyes close for a moment, and a fleeting, wistful smirk forms on  
his lips."
481. i "\"...It's a little more sad than it is scary, don't you think?\""
482. i "\"We're stuck in a shadow from now on, separate from everything else... in our  
own little world of darkness.\""
483. n "His voice grows steadily lower, until it's a barely audible whisper at the end."
484. mcp "\"...\""
485. n "For a brief few seconds, I desperately want to lean in and pull Isaac into a hug."

486.       n "He looks so lonely, so troubled, that it makes me wonder how much of his  
cheerfulness is just an act."
487.       n "He's been surviving in this underworld for a lot longer than me – and it's such a  
heavy burden to bear."
488.       n "–But before long, his frown relaxes, and he slips his glasses back on with a  
playful sigh."
489.       i "\"Dramatic, huh? Maybe I should go into theatre instead of business.\""
490.       mcp "\"...Well, you'd be pretty damn good at it.\""
491.       n "He laughs warmly, and I chuckle along with him, but I can sense that he wasn't  
really putting on an act."
492.       n "The world we're stuck in is just as dark as he said, and as every day passes..."
493.       n "I find myself wondering if things will ever be the same again."
494.       mc "\"Money in the b-a-n-k!\""
495.       n "Finishing up my latest commission, I push back from my computer and hop to  
my feet, letting out a satisfied yawn."
496.       n "It's time to head to work and to probably go through another uneventful  
night..."

497. n "But at least I'll get to have some of Isaac's coffee and see his face, so it's not all bad."
498. n "A few weeks've passed since he first \"hired\" me, but it's been so quiet in the diner that I almost wonder if he didn't take me on just for the companionship."
499. n "—My shift kicks off pretty much like normal, with the regular drunk crowd stopping by at intervals."
500. n "I spot a few familiar guys crowding around a booth, however, and I can guess they're probably vampires."
501. n "Grabbing a cloth, I head over to the neighboring table and start wiping it down, but I strain my ears to hear the conversation."
502. u "\"...I'm sick of this shit, man, we gotta do something about it!\""
503. u "\"Keep your voice down, dumbass!\""
504. n "An angry growl comes from the booth, followed by someone else's hiss."
505. u "\"I don't like it either. I wanna see that guy taken down, so we don't have to play by his rules anymore.\""
506. u "\"Yeah, he thinks he owns all of us, doesn't he?\""
507. u "\"Head vampire sittin' on his fuckin' throne of skulls, woo, scary.\""
508. mc "\"...\""



509. n "They must be talking about Bishop."
510. n "By the sound of it, they don't like him, either... but they sound way angrier than the other vampires I've heard before."
511. u "\"So what're we gonna do about it? Join up with those stupid Seirei guys? They're way too private and stuck-up for that.\""
512. u "\"Ngh, I dunno, man. Just wait it out for now, I guess... but I swear, I want that guy fuckin' {i}dead.{/i}\""
513. n "The conversation suddenly goes silent."
514. mc "\"...\""
515. n "I realize I've been standing stock-still for a few moments, staring at a nearby table while trying to listen in."
516. u "\"Hey... I know you, don't I?\""
517. n "When a drawling, sing-song voice calls out behind me, I quickly turn to see a familiar figure standing there."
518. mc "\"You – Rex?!\""
519. mc "\"What are you doing here?\""
520. r "\"What's the matter? Your buddy Isaac said this place is a new meetin' ground.\""
521. r "\"I don't mind, either. Means I get to stare at your ass while you wipe those tables all night.\""

522. n "He grins crudely at me, licking his lips."
523. n "...Deciding to ignore his comment, I glance over towards the other vampires by the booth, who're wearing similar outfits to Rex."
524. mc "\"Are those guys part of your clan?\""
525. mc "\"Can it with that shit, unless you want me to introduce you to my favorite kitchen knife.\""
526. mc "\"Those guys over in the booth... are they part of your clan?\""
527. r "\"You nailed it, baby.\""
528. r "\"Want some introductions? I bet they'd loooove to meet you~\""
529. mc "\"...I think I'm just fine, thanks.\""
530. n "Rex snickers as I grab my cloth and hurry back behind the bar, not wanting to stick around for him to drag me over."
531. n "—The group eventually leaves, and nothing else unusual happens for the rest of the night."
532. n "I keep replaying the conversation in my mind, making sure to crystallize every detail so I can thoroughly report it to Isaac."
533. n "Sure enough, he shows up right before closing time, flashing me his usual warm smile."

534. i "\"Ah, my little burger-flipper's looking delicious as always. Ready to go?\""
535. i "\"...Oh? You have a more serious face than usual, my dear. Something on your mind?\""
536. mc "\"...\""
537. n "I grab my keys and hurry up to Isaac's side, nodding eagerly."
538. mc "\"Let's wait until we get somewhere private.\""
539. i "\"Private, hmm? Naughty, naughty.\""
540. n "He teases me with a chuckle, but his eyes flash sharply behind his glasses, and I think he's guessed I have something important to tell him."
541. n "When we arrive at his apartment, I flop down on the couch and start to impatiently fidget."
542. n "Isaac always insists on getting me a drink before my reports like it's some kind of sacred ritual, even though I told him it could wait this time."
543. ip "\"Aaand here you go, my latest brew!\""
544. ip "\"Wow, you're excited today, aren't you? Something really juicy must have happened.\""
545. n "He hands me a mug and sits beside me, gazing into my eyes questioningly."

546. n "The rich coffee smell is irresistible, so I take a small sip before clearing my throat and speaking."
547. mcp "\"Tonight... I heard Rex and some other Helgen guys talking about Bishop.\""
548. mcp "\"It sounded like they wanted to kill him, or at least get rid of him. They even mentioned joining up with Seirei.\""
549. i "\"...\""
550. n "Isaac's eyes widen, and he stiffens, leaning in towards me intently."
551. i "\"...You're sure about that?\""
552. i "\"You saw Rex, specifically? What did the others look like?\""
553. n "He questions me urgently, and I recount all the details of the vampires I saw."
554. n "Isaac listens with the most excited, impatient look I've ever seen him wear."
555. n "This really must be important to him... he's never reacted like this to any of the other reports I've had."
556. mcp "\"Is it that big a deal? You never told me why you wanted to know this stuff, anyway.\""
557. i "\"It {i}is{/i} a big deal!\""
558. i "\"If some of the vampires really want to rebel, then maybe Bishop can finally be killed...\""

559. n "Isaac pushes up off the couch, standing up before me."
560. mcp "\"Uah—!\\""
561. n "He reaches down to grasp my hands, roughly pulling me up to my feet."
562. n "Before I know what's happening, Isaac' s tugging me over to the large windows,  
where the night cityscape shines below us."
563. n "One of his arms curls about my waist, while his other hand gestures out  
towards the city lights."
564. ip "\"When night falls in San Francisco, Bishop rules this – all of this.\\""
565. n "Behind his glasses, Isaac's eyes glint angrily."
566. ip "\"He's had an iron grip on the city's vampires for years and years, building a  
throne of terror for himself.\\""
567. ip "\"There's never been an organized uprising against him. But if the Helgen and  
the Seirei joined together to take him down, there might be a chance.\\""
568. mcp "\"...Why do you care so much about getting rid of him? Does Bishop affect  
your business?\\""
569. ip "\"...\\""
570. n "My question makes Isaac's face immediately darken, like I just flicked a switch."
571. i "\"It's not about {i}business{/i}, [mc]!\\""
572. i "\"It's about...\\""

573. n "He hesitates, casting his eyes to one side."

574. n "It seems to be a tender subject for him... {w}but I'm getting frustrated from  
how secretive he's being."

575. old "Just tell me!"

576. old "I'm your assistant, remember? (disabled)"

577. old "I'm your assistant, remember?"

578. old "You don't have to talk about it"

579. mcp "\"Just spit it out already, Isaac!\\""

580. mcp "\"It's not like I'm going to judge you or betray you. Is that what you're  
worried about?\\""

581. i "\"No, I...\""

582. mcp "\"Then you should trust me!\\""

583. n "I grab one of his shoulders with a hand, squeezing it tightly."

584. n "Even though I raised my voice, Isaac's expression actually softens, and he offers  
a faint smile to me."

585. i "\"...You're right, [mc].\""

586. i "\"I do trust you.\\""

587. mcp "\"...I'm your assistant, remember?\\""

588. mcp "\"If you don't tell me anything, I can't do my job properly... and neither of us  
wants that.\\""

589. mcp "\"Right, Isaac?\""

590. i "\"...\""

591. n "He looks downright floored for a couple of seconds, and I'd laugh at his  
reaction if the situation wasn't so tense."

592. n "Finally, his eyes soften a little, and he gives me a grateful smile."

593. i "\"And so the student instructs the master.\""

594. n "His arm squeezes tightly around my waist, and I lean a little into the comforting  
warmth of his side."

595. i "\"I couldn't ask for a better assistant than you, [mc], grease stains and all.\""

596. i "\"I'm sorry... I should've explained this awhile back.\""

597. n "...I guess I shouldn't push him any further."

598. n "He probably doesn't trust me enough to explain... which hurts a little, to be  
honest."

599. mcp "\"It's fine. You don't have to talk about it.\""

600. n "I mumble under my breath, giving my best attempt at an uncaring shrug."

601. n "—But Isaac shakes his head."

602. i "\"No, I should tell you. You deserve to know.\""

603. n "He sighs, pushing up his glasses, clearly a little uncomfortable."

604. i "\"It's... a difficult thing to say, but...\""

605. i "\"Bishop is my master – the one who gives me his blood every month.\""

606. mcp "\"...\""

607. n "Did I hear him right?"

608. n "{i}Bishop{/i} is the one who gives Isaac his powers...?"

609. i "\"In return, I give him all the information I've learned. Everything that happens  
in this city, Bishop knows about.\""

610. i "\"But he can hypnotize me the same way I can hypnotize you... so even if we're  
right next to each other, I can't try to harm him.\""

611. n "He bitterly shakes his head, narrowing his eyes."

612. mcp "\"But if he gives you blood, why would you want to kill him? Wouldn't you  
lose your powers?\""

613. i "\"...\""

614. n "Suddenly, Isaac presses me to the window, his hands slamming the glass on  
either side of me."

615. mc "\"–!\""

616. mc "\"Isaac, what–\""

617. ip "\"He's been {i}using{/i} me, [mc].\""

618. ip "\"I'm nothing more than a tool to Bishop.\""

619. n "His golden eyes are full of hurt and rage, glaring at me passionately."



620. ip "\"I trusted him, once. I thought he cared about me.\""

621. ip "\"But I'm just another part of his schemes, nothing more – and he'll kill me if I  
step out of line.\""

622. ip "\"In a way, I've been doing that to you, too... using you for my own ends.\""

623. mcp "\"Isaac...\""

624. n "I gaze up at him hesitantly, unsure how to reply, or even what to think."

625. n "Has he really been using me? {w}Our chats and teasing, his kindness – is that all  
just manipulation?"

626. ip "\"But it's not the same. The way I feel about you...\""

627. ip "\"I don't want you to be a tool, or my assistant, or even just a friend.\""

628. ip "\"I... I want you to be {i}mine.{/i}\""

629. mc "\"–!\""

630. n "All of a sudden, Isaac presses in towards me."

631. n "And a second later, {w}he covers my lips with his own."

632. mc "\"...mh...\""

633. n "He pins me tightly to the window, trapping my body between the cold glass  
and his warm chest."

634. n "Isaac fiercely covers my mouth with long, hard kisses, barely allowing me to catch my breath in between."
635. i "[mc]...\n"
636. n "He breathes my name before roughly pressing our lips together again, his voice deep and possessive."
637. n "His kiss is so intense that the pressure almost hurts, as if he's trying to leave bruises on me as a mark of ownership."
638. n "The warmth of Isaac's tongue soon starts to impatiently pry between my lips, and I let it slip inside my mouth."
639. mc "[Nnh... Isaac...\n"
640. n "He tastes a little bitter, like the coffee we just had, but a hint of sweetness fills my senses."
641. n "Our tongues slide and twirl together, so messily that a drop of our mingled saliva falls down the corner of my lips."
642. n "My eyes fall closed, and I shut out everything except for the delicious sensation of our kiss – and the heat flooding through my body."
643. n "...I can't help but think how strange this is."
644. n "I couldn't stand Isaac at first.{w} I figured he was nothing more than a slimy businessman, out\nfor his own profit and no one else's."

645. n "But there's something about him, something I can't explain, that makes me want to stay by his side."
646. n "Maybe it's because he's trapped like me, swept up in a secretive world of darkness – {w}and we have no choice but to trust each other."
647. mc "\"Mmh... fu...\""
648. n "Over and over again, Isaac lavishes my lips with burning kisses, his warm breaths tickling my cheek."
649. n "I tightly curl my fingers in the back of his shirt, standing on my toes to respond by nipping and sucking his lower lip."
650. n "My heart's racing so fast that Isaac's probably able to feel it, the way we're pressed together..."
651. i "\"[mc]... make me a promise.\""
652. n "Breathing heavily, Isaac pulls back a little, gazing at me with longing eyes."
653. i "\"We'll get rid of Bishop, you and I...\""
654. i "\"...And then we'll run away from this underworld, forever.\""
655. mcp "\"...\""
656. n "I slowly nod, and a deep, affectionate smile curls on Isaac's lips."

657. n "Even though I'm looking straight into those golden eyes, there's no magical hypnotism, no strange power playing with my head."
658. n "He doesn't need to use it anymore... {w}because I think I've already fallen too deep."
659. mc "\"Mmh...\""
660. n "Letting out a long groan, I roll over to block my eyes from the sunlight."
661. n "Damn, it must already be past noon..."
662. n "I should probably get up, huh?"
663. mc "\"...?\""
664. n "But when I sit up, I realize I'm not in my bedroom."
665. n "...Oh, that's right."
666. n "I stayed over at Isaac's place last night, and various... {w}events occurred on this couch."
667. mcp "\"Christ... it's a good thing Luka wasn't around.\""
668. n "As I push myself up and throw off the blanket covering me, I realize there's something on the table."
669. n "—A cup of coffee, covered with a small note."
670. n "A glance at the fancy, sharp handwriting makes it obvious that Isaac wrote it."
671. n "...{i}To my favorite assistant —{/i}"

672. n "{i}Stick the coffee in the microwave for 30 seconds and it'll taste fresh out of the pot.{/i}"
673. n "{i}By the way, we're official now. {w}I'll pick you up tonight, like always.\nxx Isaac{/i}"
674. mcp "\"...'Official,' huh?\""
675. n "Snickering, I heat up the coffee and enjoy a little bit more of the afternoon, daydreaming about what happened last night."
676. n "Then, I head back to my apartment, wanting to get some work done before my shift."
677. n "—But all the while, uneasiness weighs in my stomach."
678. n "I can't really explain it, but maybe it's from Isaac's words last night..."
679. n "He made it sound like we'd be part of some dangerous revolution – which is exciting and romantic, sure, but still dangerous."
680. mcp "\"Ngh... you can really be a wuss sometimes, [mc].\""
681. n "I shake my head with a sigh, gazing at the gathering clouds outside my window."
682. n "Maybe I should have more faith in Isaac. He's been a part of this seedy underworld for a lot longer than me, after all."
683. n "He's got it all handled... {w}so I'd like to think."

684. n "By the time I get to work, my nerves have calmed down a lot."
685. n "Instead, I hum to myself happily as I flip burgers and brew coffee, thinking about seeing Isaac tonight."
686. mc "\"...\""
687. n "Then, I notice something a little unusual."
688. n "None of the \"regular\" vampires I normally see have come by tonight."
689. n "In fact, I don't think any of the customers have been anything besides human. What's up with that?"
690. mc "\"Maybe another gang war or something...\""
691. n "I mutter under my breath as I dump a burger onto an empty plate."
692. n "My stomach flip-flops with nervousness, but I try to swallow my anxiety and tell myself nothing's wrong."
693. n "Just another normal night... {w}right?"
694. n "—Finally, closing hour arrives."
695. n "This is the time when Isaac is supposed to stride in, wearing his usual broad grin."
696. n "But... where is he?"
697. n "Maybe he got stuck in traffic, or had to finish up some work – even though he's never been late before."
698. mc "\"...\""

699. n "I shift my weight from foot to foot impatiently, leaning against the counter."

700. n "And then –"

701. mc "\"Isaac–!\\""

702. mc "\"...\""

703. n "When the door swings open, I immediately cry out in relief, but..."

704. n "The person who strides towards me isn't Isaac."

705. n "It's a very tall and elegant man in a crisp black suit, carrying himself with an air  
of authority."

706. n "As soon as he stops in front of me, a strong sense of fear grips my chest."

707. mc "\"Who... who are you?\""

708. n "Trying to contain the trembling in my voice, I gaze wide-eyed at the man's  
face."

709. n "And then I realize –{w} his eyes aren't a normal color."

710. mc "\"Who are you?\""

711. n "I do my best to meet the man's gaze, clenching my hands into fists at my sides."

712. n "But as I study his pale face – {w}I realize his eyes aren't a normal color."

713. n "...They're a bright, blood red."
714. u "\"Why, I'm sure you've heard of me before, [mc]... just like I've heard of you.\""
715. n "His deep voice reverberates lowly, so cool and confident that it sends a shiver  
down my spine."
716. n "I have a feeling I know who this man is, since there's only one person he  
{i}could{/i} be."
717. mc "\"...Bishop.\""
718. n "The moment I speak his name, a dark smile crawls over Bishop's lips, and he  
nods."
719. b "\"I'm sure you've heard a lot about me from my coven...\""
720. b "\"And perhaps from your 'friend,' Isaac?\""
721. mc "\"...\""
722. n "When he mentions Isaac, I instinctively tense up."
723. n "The way he talks, it's like he knows everything we've been doing and planning."
724. b "\"Oh, my. You didn't think I was unaware of what you two were plotting, did  
you?\""
725. n "Letting out a soft chuckle, Bishop shakes his head mockingly."



726. b "\"Isaac may be an information broker, but he's not the only source I have.\""
727. b "\"I thought he was smart enough to know that.\""
728. n "After he exhales a sigh, the vampire steps closer to me, casting a long and overbearing shadow."
729. n "It feels like the air around me suddenly drops in temperature, and a cold sweat breaks out on the back of my neck."
730. mcp "\"Where's Isaac? Have you hurt him?\""
731. n "I growl out at Bishop, trying to sound at least a little threatening."
732. mcp "\"You... you haven't hurt Isaac, have you?\""
733. mcp "\"Please...\""
734. n "My voice cracks slightly as I gaze up at Bishop, feeling my heart pound a mile a minute."
735. b "\"No, of course not. What sort of a monster do you think I am?\""
736. b "\"Isaac is currently inside my limousine, waiting for a ride back to my headquarters.\""
737. b "\"After all, it seems like we're in dire need of having a little talk.\""
738. mcp "\"...\""
739. n "Isaac's been captured...?"

740. n "Damn it—! {w}That idiot should've known Bishop would be looking for him!"
741. n "Maybe... maybe he thought Bishop trusted him... and that's why he acted so careless."
742. mcp "\"...Are you going to kill us?\""
743. b "\"Tch. Don't be silly.\""
744. b "\"It would be a waste to ruin my best servant like that, not to mention a soft, sweet little creature like you...\""
745. n "He reaches out, curling several long fingers around my chin, cupping it gently."
746. n "His skin is cold as ice, and I feel frozen in place, unable to move or look away."
747. b "\"Isaac simply needs his mind molded into a more obedient state. He'll be far less rebellious after that, I'm sure.\""
748. b "\"And as for you... your blood is delightfully special.\""
749. n "Bishop's tongue traces across his lips, and his eyes gleam hungrily at me."
750. b "\"You're lucky enough to be a Strix – a mortal with intoxicating blood to creatures like us.\""

751.        b "\"That is certainly why Isaac wanted to protect you. He was quite aware you  
would be captured and ravished, otherwise.\""
752.        mcp "\"...Strix...\""
753.        n "That word... {w}Isaac used it before, too, when we were in his apartment."
754.        n "Is that really why he hypnotized me that first night? {w}Because he sensed  
what I was?"
755.        b "\"But don't mistake his actions for kindness.\""
756.        b "\"You'd be a fool to think he wouldn't betray you, just like he betrayed me.\""
757.        n "Bishop's eyes narrow into a dark glare, and his lip curls scornfully."
758.        b "\"He thinks the world is using him, but he's nothing more than a hypocrite.\""
759.        b "\"I rescued him when he was only a boy, and it's {i}my{/i} blood that gives him  
his power... yet he repays me like this.\""
760.        mcp "\"You – you rescued him?\""
761.        n "When I stammer in disbelief, Bishop offers a slow nod."
762.        b "\"He was just a teenager when he was kidnapped off the streets, sold to be an  
older man's plaything.\""

763. b "\"And {i}I{/i} was the one who heard his crying from a window on a cold, rainy night.\""
764. b "\"{i}I{/i} was the one who killed his captor and set him free.\""
765. mcp "\"...\""
766. n "His fingers slide from my chin down to my throat, squeezing, and it quickly becomes a little difficult to breathe."
767. b "\"I gave him a new life, a way to escape from his past, and new powers that mortals could never dream of.\""
768. b "\"And that ungrateful {i}brat{/i} tries to stab me in the back... how pitiful.\""
769. mcp "\"...Ngh...\""
770. n "I struggle for air as Bishop's hand tightens around my neck."
771. n "But his grip isn't what hurts the most."
772. n "Isaac suffered through all that... {w}and he never told me?"
773. n "When he talked about meeting a vampire for the first time on a rainy night – that's when he was rescued by Bishop?"
774. n "–Suddenly, the grip on my throat loosens, and I can breathe easily again."
775. mcp "\"Ngh...! Haah...\""
776. n "As I gasp for air, cold fingers drift up along my cheek, and Bishop tilts my face up towards his own."

777. b "\"And he'll do the same to you, too, [mc].\""

778. b "\"When you've worn out your worth to him, he'll find someone else...\""

779. b "\"And leave you in the dust.\""

780. mcp "\"...\""

781. n "Blinking, I gaze up into Bishop's eyes, which swirl like bottomless crimson  
pools."

782. n "His words cut right under my skin, exposing a fear I didn't know I had."

783. n "But surely... I can't believe what he's saying."

784. n "Isaac wouldn't treat me like that. {w}He wouldn't."

785. n "He wouldn't... {w} right?"

786. old "I trust Isaac"

787. old "I can't keep gazing at him..."

788. old "I know this trick (disabled)"

789. old "I know this trick"

790. mcp "\"I... trust Isaac...\""

791. n "I mumble under my breath, but my ears don't even register my own voice."

792. n "That beautiful, blood-red gaze is swallowing me up, pulling me in."

793. b "\"No, you don't...\""

794. b "\"You trust {i}me{/i}, [mc].\""
795. mcp "\"...\""
796. n "Bishop breathes a few soft words, and they pour into my brain like sweet  
poison."
797. n "I... {w}trust Bishop? {w}Do I?"
798. n "I shouldn't, but I... {w}I..."
799. n "His eyes..."
800. n "They're so mesmerizingly beautiful that I can't bring myself to look away, but..."
801. n "I can't keep staring at them. {w}He's trying to hypnotize me, just like Isaac–!"
802. mcp "\"...\""
803. n "Those deep, glowing pools of red..."
804. n "I... {w}have to..."
805. n "...I know what he's trying to do."
806. n "Isaac did the same thing to me, twice. {w}Those eyes – they put words into my  
head that don't belong there."
807. mcp "\"I... won't give into you...\""
808. n "I shut my eyes tightly, refusing to stare up at him."
809. b "\"...\""
810. mcp "\"...You were the one who taught Isaac.\""

811. mcp "\"You should've known I'd figure it out, you bastard!\""
812. b "\"Hah.\""
813. b "\"I forget, sometimes, how tenacious some of you little creatures manage to be, even in the face of a battle you can't possibly win.\""
814. n "Rather than looking disappointed, Bishop seems thrilled by my response."
815. mcp "\"...!\""
816. n "He suddenly pushes me forward, and my back bumps against the counter."
817. n "I can't so much as budge an inch, not with his inhuman strength pinning my arms to the hard surface."
818. b "\"It's a shame to have to turn you so crassly, but I don't have any more time to waste here, I'm afraid.\""
819. b "\"Now, behave yourself, and perhaps a reward is in order later...\""
820. n "Bishop leans in towards my neck, tilting my head back to expose my throat."
821. n "If this is the price I have to pay for everything... then so be it."
822. n "I don't regret a single moment I spent with Isaac – {w}and I'd do it all again, even if this is how things had to end."

823. n "That thought is the only comfort I have as I close my eyes, bracing myself for Bishop's bite..."
824. mcp "\"...Bishop...\n"
825. mcp "\"...I...\n"
826. n "As much as I try to pull my gaze away, it's no good."
827. n "A pleasant numbness spreads through my body, and I relax in Bishop's grip before I know it."
828. b "\"Shh...\n"
829. b "\"I'll take care of you, my little [mc]...\n"
830. b "\"...Just give in to me.\n"
831. mcp "\"...\n"
832. n "I slowly nod, feeling a smile spread on my lips."
833. n "Everything starts to grow darker and darker, but I'm not afraid."
834. n "Bishop's arms are tightly curled around me – {w}and I trust him."
835. n "He's the only one I trust...{w} the only one..."
836. n "Bishop..."
837. mc "\"A-ah...\n"
838. n "A soft sound escapes my mouth before I can bite it back."
839. b "\"Mm...\n"
840. b "\"There's no need to be shy, [mc]. Let me hear more of your voice.\n"



841. n "Bishop purrs into my ear, dragging his tongue along the lobe."
842. n "I try to control myself, but the hand creeping up my shirt moves too skillfully."
843. n "His long fingers tease along my abdomen, trailing their way towards a sensitive spot –"
844. mc "\"Nnh–!\\""
845. n "Crying out again, I squirm in Bishop's lap, but he holds me firmly in place."
846. b "\"Good... what a lovely little pet you are.\\""
847. n "He chuckles lowly, and his cold lips press to the side of my neck, against one of the many bruises."
848. n "–I belong to Bishop, now."
849. n "It's been a few months since he kidnapped me, even though it feels like an eternity."
850. n "I struggled at first, trying to escape any way I could, but Bishop always found me before I made it out."
851. n "He keeps me with him in his headquarters at all times, using me for blood and pleasure..."
852. n "And there's no way for me to resist him."

853. n "The second I look into his crimson eyes, everything else melts away, and I can only think –"
854. n "...Of serving Bishop."
855. mc "\"Mas...ter...\""
856. n "As Bishop sucks on my neck, his tongue lapping along my flesh, I let out a soft whimper."
857. n "He punishes me if I say his name instead of calling him \"Master,\" so I have no choice but to play by his rules."
858. b "\"Good boy...\""
859. b "\"Aren't you happy I brought you in?\""
860. n "Bishop strokes my chest, his thumb brushing against one of the tender pink buds."
861. b "\"I'll treat you so much better than that fool Isaac ever could.\""
862. b "\"And perhaps I'll even give you my bite... so that you can be my prized pet forever.\""
863. n "His cool breath brushes my throat, and I can tell he's going to sink his fangs into me before long."
864. n "Isaac..."
865. n "How did it end up like this? {w}How did I fail you so much?"
866. n "Your mind must be broken, now."

867. n "Bishop promised he'd turn you into an empty slave...{w} and Bishop doesn't break his promises."
868. mc "\"A-aah!\\""
869. n "At that moment, Bishop bites my neck, and a sharp pain pierces through me."
870. n "But I've gotten used to it, now, and it's not long before the pain turns to a sweet, numbing pleasure."
871. n "My body starts to grow hotter, and I lean back against Bishop's chest, trembling as he feeds on me."
872. mc "\"Master... thank... you...\\""
873. n "I moan out the words – {w}words I have to speak every time he drinks from me."
874. n "It's humiliating, but every time we do this, it becomes easier to say."
875. n "Before long, it'll become natural, and I'll be nothing more than a slave to Bishop's desires..."
876. n "My world soon grows hazy and dark, and a powerful bliss courses through me like electricity."
877. n "I belong to Bishop...{w} to my Master."
878. n "Those words repeat in my head as I succumb to the pleasure, {w}and my consciousness fades to a murky, {w}wonderful, {w}painless black."

879. u "\"–Hey, old man!\\""

880. u "\"What the FUCK are you doing with that kid?!\\""

881. b "\"–!\\""

882. mcp "\"...\\""

883. n "Right at that moment, a loud yell echoes through the diner."

884. n "A voice that sounds... familiar."

885. r "\"I {i}said{/i}, what the fuck are you doing?\\""

886. r "\"This ain't your fuckin' turf anymore, Bishop!\\""

887. n "A man with a black jacket and a tattooed face stands before us –{w} Rex?!"

888. d "\"Let him go.\\""

889. n "And beside him, a tall figure with grim features – {w}Dominic."

890. mcp "\"You... you guys, what are you...\\""

891. n "But before I can manage any more words, the diner doors suddenly fling open."

892. u "\"Bishop, sir! We have to leave, there's –!\\""

893. n "A suited man tries to rush up towards me and Bishop, but a throng of other  
vampires swarm after him."

894. u "\"Shut the hell up, you goddamn yuppie shithead! I'll bash your fucking brains  
out!\\""

895. u "\"Yeah, get him! Fuck up all of Bishop's guys!\\""
896. b "\"Ngh—!\\""
897. n "Shoving me to the ground, Bishop deftly leaps over the counter and dashes towards the side exit."
898. r "\"Hey! Don't let that bastard get away!\\""
899. n "Motioning for the others to follow, Rex darts after Bishop, and the rest of his clanmates stampede behind him."
900. n "It's like a pack of wolves racing after prey – their eyes all shining with a terrifying rage and bloodlust."
901. n "They must really want Bishop dead, huh... but why are there so many of them here...?"
902. d "\"[mc]... are you all right?\\""
903. n "Dominic leans down beside me, offering a hand."
904. mc "\"A-ah, yeah, I'm fine... just a little dizzy...\\""
905. n "I rise up to my feet with Dominic's help, rubbing my forehead."
906. n "That hypnotizing gaze was so close to swallowing me completely... {w}The thought makes me shudder."
907. d "\"We came just in time. Thanks to —!\\""
908. u "\"[mc]!\\""
909. u "\"You're alive—!\\""

910. n "At that moment, another voice echoes through the diner."
911. n "A voice I'd recognize anywhere."
912. mcp "\"Isaac...?\""
913. n "His hair mussed up and glasses askew, Isaac rushes up towards me."
914. n "He pulls me into a crushing hug, and once I recover from the shock, I grip him  
back as hard as I can."
915. i "\"[mc]... I can't believe you're safe...\""
916. n "As Isaac embraces me with all his might, I sense Dominic quietly leaving us,  
slipping out through the side door."
917. mcp "\"Well, your loyal assistant can't just disappear, can he? What would you do  
without me?\""
918. n "Swallowing my emotions, I bury my face against Isaac's neck."
919. n "Somehow – {w}somehow, it's over."
920. n "Somehow I managed to resist Bishop, just for a few moments."
921. n "And Isaac... he pulled through in the very end, managing to convince the two  
clans to join together just before he was kidnapped... that's where he vanished to this  
morning."
922. n "I should never have doubted him. {w}Isaac isn't a man who gets so easily  
outsmarted – not even by someone like Bishop."

923. n "And me, the dumb guy who got completely swept up in his charms..."

924. n "I should know that better than anyone."

925. i "\"Happy birthday!\""

926. mc "\"...Oh, come on! I told you I didn't want anything!\""

927. n "I let out a huff as a small, neatly-wrapped present is shoved into my hands."

928. n "This guy never listens to anything I say, seriously."

929. i "\"You really think I'm that bad a boyfriend? Psh, I'm hurt, you know.\""

930. i "\"Go on, open it!\""

931. n "Isaac gives me a wide, playful grin – which usually means he's up to no good."

932. n "The wrapped present looks like some sort of a cup. {w}Why the hell would he  
get me a cup?"

933. mc "\"Fine, fine...\""

934. n "I tear open the paper, tossing it aside onto the balcony floor."

935. mc "\"A... a coffee mug?\""

936. i "\"Look! There's something written on it! What's it say?\""

937. mc "\"...\""

938. n "—I stare at the mug in disbelief."

939. n "Did he... {w}did he actually get me a mug that says..."

940. n "...\"I <3 Isaac\"...?"
941. i "\"Hey, you drink my coffee every morning, right?\""
942. i "\"I thought I'd get you a little something to remind you of me while you're  
drinking it~\""
943. mc "\"Isaac...\""
944. mc "\"...You're the most conceited, egotistical bastard I've ever met.\""
945. mc "\"...I feel like you could use a little lesson in humility sometimes.\""
946. i "\"Uh-huh. I love you, too.\""
947. n "Snickering, Isaac leans in to press his lips against my forehead."
948. n "The gentle kiss makes my chest grow warm with happiness, even as I sulkily  
stare at my \"present.\""
949. n "I'm half-tempted to toss it over the balcony, but... {w}I guess it is kinda cute, in  
an Isaac-y way."
950. n "—It's been a little over a year since Isaac and I became partners."
951. n "We're on the opposite side of the states, now, in New York instead of  
California."
952. n "Isaac's business skills are being put to good use – he's consulting for tech  
companies rather than vampires."



953. n "And as for me... {w}my freelancing's kicked off, somehow, and I'm making a pretty decent wage between actual stories and the occasional sell-out erotic novel."
954. n "And as for me... {w}my freelancing's kicked off, somehow, and I'm making a pretty decent wage from writing scores for games and indie films."
955. n "And as for me... {w}my freelancing's kicked off, somehow, and I'm making a pretty decent wage from private commissions and bigger stuff, like book covers and game art."
956. n "Living in New York isn't cheap, and this place's rent costs nearly both our wages, but..."
957. n "On nights like this, when we can gaze out over the city in each other's arms, it's completely worth it."
958. mc "\"It wouldn't be a bad mug if I painted over the letters...\""
959. i "\"Oh, come on, don't do that!\""
960. i "\"Otherwise, I'll have to demand a fee from you every time I make you coffee.\""
961. mc "\"I can't believe you're blackmailing me on my birthday! You're really something else, Isaac.\""
962. n "Unable to keep from snickering, I lean against Isaac's chest, closing my eyes."

963.        n "His warm hand drifts through my hair, and I nudge my head against it like an affectionate cat."
964.        n "...Even here in New York, neither of us can forget the presence of vampires."
965.        n "Once you learn what horrible things stalk the streets at night, you can never go back to a truly \"normal\" life."
966.        n "There's a chance that, wherever he is, Bishop will still come after us... {w}and we might never be completely safe."
967.        n "But as long as I'm with Isaac, I feel strong enough to take on whatever might come our way."
968.        n "Even if our worlds are changed forever, I can face the night without fear —"