

## 5. Luka



1. n "—Well, Luka may be a brat, but at least he seems pretty normal."
2. n "If I hurry, I can catch up to him and ask what he knows about this crazy vampire stuff."
3. mcp "\"Uh, nice meeting you! Have a nice night, now!\""
4. n "Throwing a nervous grin at Rex, I turn and bolt in Luka's direction as fast as I can."
5. n "Luckily, the kid's only lazily jogging along, so I reach his side in a few moments."
6. lp "\"...You?\""
7. lp "\"What are {i}you{/i} following me for?\""
8. n "He throws me a suspicious glare when I start running by his side."
9. mcp "\"I thought we'd talk about the weather! Isn't it a great night?\""
10. mcp "\"...I wanted to ask about the vampires, idiot. Why else?\""
11. mcp "\"Well, believe it or not, I'm having a pretty hard time dealing with the fact that  
vampires are real.\""
12. mcp "\"I was hoping you could shed some light on things for me, since you're human and  
fairly sane.\""
13. lp "\"...\""
14. n "Luka slows his pace some, his eyes flicking hesitantly away from me."

15. n "I think he was chasing after Isaac, but the other man's already long gone."
16. lp "\"Why d'you wanna know about the vampires?\""
17. mcp "\"I just got attacked by one, for fuck's sake. I had no idea they even existed before!\""
18. mcp "\" If they're crawling around everywhere, I'd like to know so I don't get chomped on my way home one night!\""
19. n "My frustrated response makes Luka blink in surprise."
20. mcp "\"To protect myself, obviously.\""
21. mcp "\"After what happened back there, it's pretty clear how dangerous they are.\""
22. n "My earnest response makes Luka blink in surprise."
23. n "I don't know why he'd be surprised.{w} Isn't this a pretty normal reaction to learning that fantasy monsters are real...?"
24. n "—Slowly, Luka comes to a stop, turning around to face me."
25. n "He looks a bit reluctant, but his face soon twists up in a determined frown."
26. l "\"Fine. Let's go back to the diner.\""
27. mc "\"Back to... the diner?\""
28. n "When I repeat his words curiously, Luka gives me a long, impatient sigh."
29. l "\"That's what I said, wasn't it? I really want a soda right now.\""

30. I "\"And I guess I'll tell you about the vampires, since you seem like the type of guy who  
won't give up.\""
31. n "He raises an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for me to lead us back to the diner."
32. n "Man, this entitled little shit, I swear..."
33. mc "\"Right, sure. It's probably safer than being out here, anyway.\""
34. mc "\"C'mon.\""
35. n "...This kid, I swear."
36. mc "\"That's the price for your information, huh? Could be worse.\""
37. mc "\"Let's go, then.\""
38. n "I pick my way through the alleys and return to the main road, relying on my inner  
compass."
39. n "The streets of San Fran are messy as hell, but you get used to them after awhile."
40. mcp "\"You sure, er, Isaac's gonna be alright?\""
41. n "As we walk along, I glance over at Luka, who just shrugs carelessly."
42. lp "\"Isaac can take care of himself. He does stupid shit all the time and never gets  
hurt.\""
43. lp "\"He's been dealing with vampires for ages, too... Isaac's not afraid of them.\""
44. n "Luka scowls darkly, his eyes narrowing."
45. n "He sounds a little pissed off. {w}Is he jealous of Isaac, or angry at him? I can't tell."
46. n "When we get back to the diner, I flip the lights on with a relieved sigh."

47. n "Luka makes a bee-line for the bar and hops onto a stool, resting his head on the counter with a yawn. {w}Yeah, just make yourself at home..."
48. mcp "\"What kind of sugary carbonated beverage tickles your fancy today?\""
49. lp "\"Can you cut it out already? Just bring me a regular Coke.\""
50. n "Snickering at Luka's sour response, I fill up a glass with the fizzy liquid and slide it in front of him."
51. n "He grabs a straw from a nearby container and slurps down half of the drink in a few seconds."
52. mcp "\"Damn, you were really thirsty, weren't you?\""
53. mcp "\"Or do you just like sweet soda that much?\""
54. l "\"...I do, yeah. Got a problem with it?\""
55. n "Luka raises an eyebrow at me aggressively, shifting in his seat."
56. l "\"I live with Isaac, and he won't let me buy sugary stuff because it's 'bad for me'...\""
57. l "\"That guy thinks he's my dad or something.\""
58. mcp "\"Well, he's not wrong. You don't get to keep that fast metabolism forever.\""
59. l "\"Yeah, so I might as well eat all the sweet and fatty stuff I want right now! Makes sense, doesn't it?\""
60. n "Luka's frown melts away for a moment, and he lets out a little giggle."

61. n "...He's kinda cute when he's not making angry faces."
62. mcp "\"So, the vampires... Can you explain more about them to me?\""
63. mcp "\"I'm still sort of in shock. I could barely believe my eyes back there.\""
64. lp "\"...\""
65. n "When I question Luka more gently, he nods, his face growing serious again."
66. mcp "\"So, can you tell me more about what the hell's up with these... vampires?\""
67. mcp "\"I nearly got turned into a juice box for that crazy redhead.\""
68. lp "\"...\""
69. n "When I question Luka a little impatiently, he nods, his face growing serious again."
70. lp "\"Long story short — they're straight out of a horror movie, basically.\""
71. lp "\"Can't walk in sunlight, need to drink blood, live forever.\""
72. lp "\"Most of them hide in big cities, where they don't stand out as much.\""
73. lp "\"But they're {i}everywhere{/i}... we just don't notice them.\""
74. n "He pauses, biting the end of his straw thoughtfully, and narrows his eyes a little."

75. I "\"Here in San Fran, there're two big clans, the Helgen and the Seirei. They hate each other's guts, even though they're part of the same coven.\""

76. mc "\"Coven? You mean there's a larger group?\""

77. I "\"Yeah. All of the city's vampires are ruled by a guy named Bishop. He's really old and powerful, or so they say.\""

78. n "Luka wrinkles his nose in distaste, obviously not too fond of whoever this \"Bishop\" is."

79. n "Come to think of it, he really seems to hate vampires in general."

80. mc "\"How do you know so much about these guys? Are you and Isaac working with them or something?\""

81. I "\"Hah!\""

82. I "\"Isaac's just trying to make a profit. He sells them information and weapons, which both clans use to kill each other.\""

83. I "\"...I help him out, yeah, but not for the money.\""

84. n "His voice trails off to a low mumble, and he swirls around the ice in his nearly-empty glass with a sigh."

85. n "It doesn't take a genius to tell this is a sore subject for him. {w}Maybe I shouldn't pry..."

86. old "Why do you hate vampires?"

87. old "How about a refill?"

88. old "Anything else worth telling me?"

89. n "...But my curiosity's too strong."

90. n "Besides, Luka's not exactly polite to me — why should I have to hold back my  
questions?"

91. mc "\"Why do you hate vampires so much, Luka?\""

92. mc "\"I mean, it's not like they're cuddly and friendly or anything, but you really seem to—  
—\""

93. I "\"Shut up!\""

94. mc "\"...\""

95. n "Luka angrily snaps at me, his eyes narrowing."

96. I "\"If you wanna ask more questions about them, fine. But don't ask about me.\""

97. n "His voice doesn't even sound stubborn — it's just flat, like he's refusing to open up no  
matter what."

98. n "I guess I won't be getting any answers out of him today... oh well."

99. n "...For some reason, Luka's dark mood makes me want to cheer him up."

100. n "He's an annoying kid, sure, but I'd rather see him smiling than pouting. It suits  
him better."

101. mc "\"Want a refill? You're getting pretty low, there.\""

102. I "\"...\""

103. n "Luka blinks up at me."



104. n "Offering him a wink, I grab his glass and take it over to the soda fountain, splashing in a few different flavors."
105. I "\"Are you gonna charge me for this?\""
106. mcp "\"Of course not. It's on the house!\""
107. mcp "\"Although...\""
108. n "A sudden, evil urge comes over me, and I smirk at Luka while placing the glass back in front of him."
109. mc "\"I'll take a different form of payment, if you'd like~\""
110. I "\"...!\""
111. n "When I lean over the counter towards him with a sly grin, Luka's face immediately turns bright red."
112. I "\"P-p-pervert! I'm not gonna drink that!\""
113. n "...It's hard not to laugh at how comically flustered he gets."
114. n "Snickering to myself, I shake my head, figuring I should probably return to the main subject."
115. n "After all, if I tease him too much, he might just turn tail and run out of the diner."
116. n "...I might as well stay on subject. He probably won't answer any personal questions, anyway."
117. mc "\"Well, is there anything else I need to know to stay safe from vampires?\""

118. mc "\"Should I stock up on garlic? Maybe buy one of those tacky cross necklaces?\""
119. I "\"...Don't be an idiot. That stuff only works in movies.\""
120. n "Luka rolls his eyes at me, but a faint smile grows on his lips."
121. I "\"I'd say get a gun, but you don't look like you can handle one.\""
122. mc "\"Oh, and you can? The recoil would blow your tiny ass away.\""
123. I "\"Did you just call me tiny? I'm almost the same size as you, shithead!\""
124. n "He flips his middle finger at me, sticking out his tongue."
125. n "An angry Luka reminds me of a feisty puppy, trying to nip at someone's heels."
126. mc "\"So what's my alternative?\""
127. mc "\"Relying on you, my knight in shining armor, to protect me?\""
128. I "\"...\""
129. n "Luka huffs quietly, but for a moment, he actually looks a little hurt.{w} Oops."
130. mc "\"So you're saying I'm screwed, then? No way to defend myself?\""
131. I "\"Well...\""
132. n "The blond hesitates, letting out a small sigh, his eyes flicking to one side."
133. n "He looks like he's thinking pretty hard. {w}About what, I wonder?"

134. I "\"Since Isaac's the one who got you involved in this mess, I do feel kinda sorry  
for you.\""
135. I "\"If you want, we can make a deal.\""
136. mc "\"A... deal?\""
137. n "When I question him curiously, Luka nods."
138. I "\"Remember when I asked you to keep an eye out for vampires who come in  
here?\""
139. I "\"You keep doing that, and tell me about all the ones you see.\""
140. mc "\"And in exchange?\""
141. I "\"I'll stick around on your way home at night. Most of the coven knows me as  
Isaac's assistant, so they don't bother me.\""
142. mc "\"...\""
143. n "Am I hearing things right?"
144. n "Is he {i}actually{/i} offering to try and \"protect\" me?"
145. I "\"I-if you don't want to, then you don't have to. I don't care.\""
146. I "\"It's your life, not mine. It doesn't matter to m—\""
147. mc "\"Deal.\""
148. I "\"...\""
149. n "My confident reply makes Luka's eyes go wide."
150. n "Was he expecting me to say no, I wonder?"

151. mc "\"It's a win-win for me, isn't it?\""
152. mc "\"I just do my normal routine at the diner, and then I get to be escorted home  
by my shining knight.\""
153. mc "\"What? It's the best chance I've got.\""
154. mc "\"Besides, getting walked home by a cute brat every night sounds kinda  
fun.\""
155. I "\"...I have a name, you know. Start using it.\""
156. n "Grumbling quietly, Luka jumps off the barstool and steps back from the  
counter."
157. n "His voice is sulky as usual, but oddly enough, he looks a little happy."
158. mcp "\"Fine then — Luka.\""
159. mcp "\"You'd better show up here tomorrow night.\""
160. I "\"Do I look like the type of guy to break a promise?\""
161. mcp "\"Yes.\""
162. I "\"Wow, screw you too! Piece of...\""
163. n "With a snort, Luka turns on his heel and heads for the door, shaking his head."
164. n "I watch him leave, a grin spreading on my lips before I realize it."

165. n "I really shouldn't be smiling, considering the dangerous world I've been yanked into..."
166. n "But when Luka gets all huffy and tries to act like an aloof cat, it's hard for me to keep a straight face."
167. n "Closing up the diner for the second time tonight, I head home quickly, avoiding the alley where I was attacked by Rex."
168. n "The streets are empty, but the silence makes me more nervous than anything."
169. n "I can't shake the strange feeling that I'm being watched..."
170. mc "\"Mh...\""
171. n "When I get to my apartment, exhaustion hits me like a pile of bricks, and I collapse on my bed."
172. n "Excitement and fear still race in my chest, but I'm too tired to think about them any longer."
173. n "Closing my eyes, I let the comforting darkness take over and slip into a deep sleep."
174. mc "\"Ngh...\""
175. n "The early afternoon sun trickles into my apartment, fighting through storm clouds to arrive on my face."
176. n "I push myself up with a yawn."
177. extend " I can't say I feel very refreshed."

178. mc "\"...\""
179. n "Those events last night, the fight between Dominic and Rex..."
180. n "...The vampires."
181. n "I was hoping it would be a dream, but –"
182. extend " it sticks too vividly in my mind, like a bad taste that won't leave my mouth."
183. mc "\"This would make for a great story to write about... except I'd definitely have an anxiety attack while writing it...\""
184. 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...\""
185. 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...\""
186. n "Still half-asleep, I mumble to myself as I put on the coffee machine."
187. 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."
188. n "Luka..."
189. n "It was pretty cute how he offered to help me, but will I really be safe?"
190. n "If anything, I feel like {i}{/i} should be the one protecting {i}him.{/i} He'd yell at me if I said that to his face, of course."

191.       n "Well, I guess I'll play along. If nothing else, at least I get to tease him more."
192.       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."
193.       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."
194.       n "I change a few details here and there, but it reads more like a diary rather than  
fiction."
195.       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."
196.       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."
197.       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."
198.       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."
199.       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."

200. 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."
201. n "I used to love the sunset, but now, I can only think of the monsters that are coming out to crawl the streets..."
202. n "And in the back of my mind, I find myself worrying for Luka's safety as much as my own."
203. n "Luckily, nothing happens on the way to my shift, and I flick on the diner's lights with a sigh of relief."
204. mcp "\"This crap is doing a real number on my stress levels, I'll say...\""
205. n "Muttering to myself, I switch the sign to \"Open\" after a little bit of prep work, and the night finally begins."
206. u "\"Y-yeah, I'll have, uh... just the fries, uh, yeah...\""
207. mc "\"Coming right up.\""
208. n "—Just the normal drunk customers."
209. u "\"Hey dude, can I get... an ice cream frothy... thing?\""
210. mc "\"...You mean a milkshake?\""
211. u "\"Yeah, dude, {i}milkshake!{/i} That's totally what I meant, how'd you know?\""



212. n "—Average, high-as-a-kite teenagers."
213. n "Nothing out of the ordinary... {w}not yet."
214. n "Occasionally, I glimpse a shape moving outside the diner's windows, although  
it's probably just a random passerby."
215. n "...For some reason, though, I have an uneasy feeling."
216. n "It's like I'm being watched — and not in the comforting \"guardian angel\" way,  
either."
217. mc "\"...\""
218. n "A couple minutes before closing time, I moodily stare at the linoleum floor  
while wiping a glass."
219. n "None of the people who came in here seemed like they were vampires, but  
then again, I never guessed Dominic was one either."
220. n "At this rate, I'm gonna go paranoid and end up committed somewhere,  
seriously."
221. u "\"Hey, diner guy. I'm here to get you.\""
222. mc "\"—!\""
223. n "A familiar voice makes me sharply turn towards the door."
224. n "—When the hell did {i}he{/i} come in?"
225. l "\"Are you ready? I don't have all night.\""

226. mcp "\"You sure you don't want a drink first? Have you gotten your sugar fix for today?\""
227. I "\"Keep talking like that and I'm gonna leave, just watch!\""
228. mcp "\"You mean you didn't block out your schedule for me...?\""
229. mcp "\"I'm hurt, Luka.\""
230. I "\"Uh-huh, I can tell.\""
231. I "\"Could you quit whining and hurry up, maybe?\""
232. mcp "\"Right, right!\""
233. n "With an oddly excited feeling, I grab my keys and hurry over to Luka by the door."
234. n "I still can't believe he really came... {w}but I'm kind of glad he did."
235. n "We step outside together, and the cool night breeze brushes over my face."
236. n "Luka sticks by my side as I start to head towards my apartment, staying fairly close even on the wide sidewalk."
237. lp "\"So... did you see anyone?\""
238. mcp "\"See anyone?... Oh, right.\""
239. n "He wants to know if there were any vampires in the diner. {w}It didn't seem like the crowd was any different tonight, though."
240. mcp "\"Sorry, but no dice. Didn't even see anyone with sharp teeth.\""

241. lp "\"Mmh...\""
242. n "Luka exhales a quiet, disappointed sigh, obviously not too pleased."
243. n "Why's he so invested in this, I wonder?"
244. mcp "\"...Is there a reason you asked me to watch for vampires?\""
245. mcp "\"If you're working with Isaac, it can't be that hard to find them yourself, can it?\""
246. lp "\"...\""
247. n "Frowning, Luka turns his head towards me, eyes narrowed in suspicion."
248. n "Uh-oh, is he going to snap at me again? This guy really has a hair-trigger temper, doesn't he?"
249. l "\"Why do you care? It doesn't affect our deal, right?\""
250. n "His voice isn't sulky like normal — instead, he sounds a little hesitant, almost defensive."
251. old "I'm just curious"
252. old "I deserve to know, don't I?"
253. old "It's more about you than the deal (unlocked)"
254. old "It's more about you than the deal"
255. mc "\"...I was just curious, that's all.\""

256. mc "\"It seems important to you, so I'd like to know. I won't tease you about it, promise.\""

257. n "I reach out to gently ruffle Luka's hair, and to my surprise, he doesn't duck away."

258. I "\"Really?\""

259. I "\"You were curious... about me?\""

260. mc "\"Yeah. Weird, huh? Guess I just can't help myself.\""

261. I "\"...I thought you weren't gonna tease me.\""

262. mc "\"That one doesn't count, sorry.\""

263. n "Luka rolls his eyes, but he smirks faintly for a few moments."

264. n "Then, his expression grows more serious again, and he lets out a quiet sigh."

265. mc "\"...I deserve to know, don't I? After all, I'm the one doing your dirty work.\""

266. n "A bit annoyed, I raise an eyebrow at Luka."

267. mc "\"Don't get so up in arms about it.\""

268. I "\"...\""

269. n "He averts his eyes, looking a bit like a scolded child."

270. mc "\"...If I'm being honest, I'm asking because of you — not the deal.\""

271. I "\"...\""

272.        n "Luka narrows his eyes at me in a mixture of suspicion and confusion."
273.        mc "\"Hey, hey, don't give me that look. I think my curiosity's pretty justified.\""
274.        mc "\"You barged your way into my life, and if you're here to stay, I'd like to know  
more about you... even if it's just a little bit.\""
275.        n "I realize how cheesy my words sound after they leave my mouth, but they're  
completely true."
276.        n "A certain protective feeling comes over me whenever I look at Luka. {w}I want  
to know what he's aiming for, since I don't want him to rush into anything stupid."
277.        I "\"You're a really weird guy, [mc].\""
278.        I "\"Like... completely, hopelessly nuts.\""
279.        n "Although Luka rolls his eyes at me, an embarrassed smile warms his face."
280.        n "He turns his head away to scratch at his cheek, pausing for a moment before he  
turns back to me."
281.        I "\"...I'm looking for someone.\""
282.        I "\"I haven't been able to find them on my own, so I thought I'd ask you, since...  
you seem smart enough.\""
283.        I "\"And... vampires like attractive humans, so... there's a chance they'd try to talk  
to you...\""

284. n "Luka's voice grows quieter and quieter, and his cheeks turn pink."
285. mc "\"Wait, wait.\""
286. mc "\"Did you just call me {i}attractive{/i}?\""
287. I "\"Listen, I'm not a giant pervert like you! I'm just saying it from a scientifi—\""
288. mc "\"Holy crap, that's adorable. You're worse at flirting than a kid in elementary school!\""
289. I "\"Ngh... I should've just asked someone else...\""
290. mc "\"A scientific perspective? Of course, silly me.\""
291. mc "\"I had no idea you were using me a lab rat, but if you've got any more experiments planned, count me in.\""
292. I "\"Tch...\""
293. n "I can't hold back my gleeful laughter, even as Luka glares daggers at me."
294. n "Oh, man. This guy is something else, seriously."
295. I "\"Come on, let's keep going.\""
296. I "\"Unless you've got nothing better to do than being a dick to me, that is.\""
297. mc "\"Not really.\""

298. n "We reach my apartment a few minutes later — {w}without any unwanted encounters, much to my surprise."
299. n "I guess Luka really wasn't kidding about the vampires leaving him alone. Who would've thought?"
300. mcp "\"Well, this is it.\""
301. I "\"...! Already?\""
302. n "When I stop in front of the stairs, Luka blinks, his face falling for a moment."
303. n "But he recovers soon after, offering me only a stiff nod."
304. mcp "\"What's with the hesitation?\""
305. mcp "\"Did you want me to drag you inside or something?\""
306. I "\"...Into {i}this{/i} gross place? I'll pass.\""
307. mcp "\"Are you sure you'll be able to get back safely, too?\""
308. I "\"Yeah... Don't worry about me.\""
309. n "He seems pretty hesitant to say goodbye, so I flash him a winning smile and two-fingered salute."
310. mcp "\"Tomorrow night, then? Don't stand me up.\""
311. I "\"I won't. A deal's a deal.\""
312. I "\"...'Night, [mc].\""
313. mcp "\"'Night, Luka.\""

314.       n "And with that, I watched his small figure wander off into the distance, finally vanishing around the corner."
315.       n "The more time we spend together, the more different he seems from my first impression of him."
316.       n "Maybe he's still a brat, but... in an endearing way, I guess."
317.       n "I head up to my apartment and collapse into bed, not quite as tired as usual."
318.       n "As I close my eyes and let sleep finally crawl its way over me —{w} I dimly smile."
319.       n "{i}A deal's a deal{/i}...{w} Yeah, so it is."
320.       n "The next week passed pretty uneventfully."
321.       n "It wasn't long until I'd settled into my new routine with Luka. Every night, he'd show up at the diner, right on time."
322.       n "I got so used to him being around that my off-days felt a little lonely, with no blond brat to keep me company."
323.       n "I held up my end of the deal, of course — taking note of every potential vampire I saw wandering in the diner and giving Luka the run-down."
324.       n "But none of my reports ever provoked a reaction.{w} He seemed a little gloomy, even frustrated, every time I finished."
325.       n "I was curious, but it really wasn't any of my business."
326.       n "Or so I tried to convince myself, at least."



327.       n "We never had much contact outside of our nightly ritual, save for a few texts  
here and there..."
328.       n "Until today, that is."
329.       mcp "\"Hello...?\""
330.       n "Halfway into the afternoon, I pick up an unexpected call from Luka's number."
331.       l "\"Hey, [mc]. You busy?\""
332.       mcp "\"Not really, just working on some shitty fanfiction.\""
333.       mcp "\"Nah, just playing around with a new song idea.\""
334.       mcp "\"Only if you call drawing smutty sketches 'busy'.\""
335.       mcp "\"Why, what's up?\""
336.       l "\"I was wondering if you'd, erm, do me a favor.\""
337.       l "\"Weird as it is, I'm actually a lot safer at night than I am during the day. Thugs  
aren't as nocturnal as vampires.\""
338.       l "\"I need to go into a kinda seedy part of town to pick something up, so...\""
339.       n "He trails off, clearing his throat hesitantly."
340.       mcp "\"...Are you asking me to come with you?\""
341.       l "\"Y-yeah, I guess so.\""
342.       mcp "\"No need to be so shy about it. I don't mind.\""

343. I "\"Tch, who's being shy? I just didn't wanna sound, you know, rude or anything.\""
344. mcp "\"Uh-huh, like that's been a big concern for you in the past.\""
345. mcp "\"The tables have really turned, huh? Sure, I'm down.\""
346. I "\"Yeah, you'll get to be the escort this time.\""
347. mcp "\"...I wouldn't mind being an escort if you hired me...\""
348. I "\"...What'd you just say?\""
349. mcp "\"Nothing!\""
350. mcp "\"Anyway, meet me outside my apartment in fifteen? Assuming you can find your way here in the daytime.\""
351. I "\"Yeah, yeah. I'll be right over.\""
352. n "He quickly hangs up, trying too hard to sound annoyed.{w} Kid could've chosen anyone else to \"escort\" him, like Isaac... but he called me."
353. mcp "\"I think a call girl's lingerie is less transparent than you are, Luka.\""
354. n "Snickering to myself, I finish up my project before heading downstairs."
355. n "Sure enough, less than a minute later, a fluffy head of blond hair appears in the distance."
356. n "I can't help but think he looks a little angelic in the daytime, his boyish features lit up in the warm rays."
357. I "\"...Wow, you look even worse under the sun than in fluorescent lights.\""

358. mc "\"...\""

359. n "Guess it doesn't go both ways."

360. mc "\"You really think so? Could've sworn you called me attractive the other  
night.\""

361. I "\"I think you're mistaking me for someone else.\""

362. mc "\"Impossible. I could never forget a face I wanted to slap.\""

363. I "\"Wow, thanks.\""

364. mc "\"Huh, I don't think so...\""

365. mc "\"How could I mistake my protector for someone else?\""

366. I "\"Pretty easily, knowing you.\""

367. n "As we stroll down the street together, I notice that the atmosphere feels a little  
different from normal."

368. n "Sort of awkward and self-conscious, like two people meeting for a blind date."

369. n "But I do my best to ignore it, keeping up a cheerful — and slightly one-sided —  
conversation instead."

370. n "We reach a dingy little shop after about half an hour, and Luka runs inside for a  
few minutes."

371. n "When he comes back out, I expect him to scamper off, leaving me to fend for  
myself."

372. I "\"Hey, uh...\""

373. I "\"You know, there's a pretty nice coffee place on the way back home.\""

374. mcp "\"...\""

375. n "But instead, he offers me a shy smile, running his fingers through his ponytail."

376. I "\"I'm probably gonna stop in there. And if you don't have anything else to do,  
then...\""

377. I "\"...Well, they have a 'buy one, get one 50%% off' special, sometimes.\""

378. n "Wait, was this his plan from the start?{w} Did he really drag me out all this way  
just so he could nonchalantly ask me on a date?"

379. n "Holy hell, he really sucks at this."

380. I "\"What are you grinning about?\""

381. I "\"Did I say something that funny?\""

382. mcp "\"No, no, I was just excited about cheap coffee.\""

383. mcp "\"You {i}are{/i} gonna let me get the half-off one, right? I think I deserve at  
least that much.\""

384. I "\"I guess... Since you're pulling my arm and everything...\""

385. mcp "\"Not the exact phrasing I'd use myself, but I'll take it.\""

386. mcp "\"No, I just couldn't contain my joy at finally getting to...\""

387. mcp "\"...Have some nice coffee.\""

388. I "\"Y-yeah?\""

389. mcp "\"And I'm so happy that you and I can have the chance to...\""

390. mcp "\"...Step out of this heat! It's really killing me.\""

391. I "\"...\""

392. I "\"Ngh... Let's go already.\""

393. n "...Man, his reactions will never get old."

394. n "And so began our impromptu date, slightly soured by questionable coffee, but  
Luka's company makes up for it."

395. n "He starts to relax during our second cup, smiling and giggling at every other  
thing I say.{w}\nHe's pretty clearly enjoying himself, and I have to admit the same."

396. n "By the time we finish chatting about everything from B-movies to webcomics  
and had a few refills, it's already time for my shift — the time flew by, somehow."

397. n "We go our separate ways, and while I wander towards the diner, humming  
faintly to myself..."

398. n "I realize just how attached I'm getting to this little blond, horrible dating skills  
and all."

399. mc "\"...And those guys were the only ones I saw tonight.\""

400. I "\"Mm... Right.\""

401. n "A few nights later, I deliver my report to Luka as we make our way down the  
alley."

402. n "Like usual, he goes quiet for a little while, mulling over something to himself."

403. mc "\"...\""

404. n "Honestly, I don't think I can contain my curiosity any longer.{w} I didn't want to  
pry into his business, but..."

405. n "Well, now that we're getting close, I'm starting to worry a little about him."

406. mc "\"Hey, Luka.\""

407. I "\"Yeah?\""

408. mc "\"About my reports... I wanted to ask you something.\""

409. mc "\"Why are you —\""

410. mc "\"...\""

411. n "But I bite my tongue before I can finish."

412. n "At the end of the narrow street —"

413. extend " a small group of figures suddenly comes into view."

414. n "By the time I realize they're there, it's too late to turn away. They've already  
seen us, I'm sure."

415. lp "\"...\""

416. n "Luka notices them, too, because he stops beside me with a tense expression."

417. n "Shit. {w}Vampires or regular thugs, this could be bad."

418. mcp "\"Luka, should we...\""

419. mcp "\"—?\""

420. n "When one of the figures steps closer, my eyes widen in surprise."

421. n "Isaac...? {w}What's he doing here?"

422. i "\"Wow, what a coincidence! I was just wondering where you'd scampered off  
to, Luka.\""

423. i "\"And you're arm-in-arm with [mc], no less... what an unlikely couple!\""

424. lp "\"We're not a couple, Isaac.\""

425. n "Luka fidgets beside me, scowling at Isaac."

426. i "\"Oh?\""

427. i "\"Well, if you say so. It's not like you to just wander around with a 'friend',  
though.\""

428. i "\"That aside, I've got work for you to do, so let's head back to the apartment. I  
was just closing up a deal here.\""

429. lp "\"...\""

430. n "Throwing me an uncertain glance, Luka bites his lower lip hesitantly."

431. mcp "\"It's fine. I'm almost back home, anyway.\""

432. n "I nudge his shoulder encouragingly, and he nods, despite looking a little  
reluctant."

433. n "He really must be taking this whole \"protecting\" me business seriously.{w}  
Either that, or he's a masochist for my teasing."
434. i "\"The car's out on the main street, Luka. Go on, I'll be there in a second.\""
435. lp "\"Yeah, yeah. I'm going.\""
436. n "Luka shoves his hands in his pockets and stalks towards the street, throwing a  
brief glance over his shoulder at me."
437. n "I wave at him with a lighthearted wink, and he quickly turns away. Pfft."
438. i "\"As for you, [mc] — there's something I'd like to tell you.\""
439. mcp "\"Huh? Me...?\""
440. n "When Isaac abruptly steps closer, I blink in surprise."
441. i "\"Luka has you looking for vampires, doesn't he?\""
442. mcp "\"...He does, yeah. Didn't he tell you?\""
443. n "Isaac lets out a dry chuckle, shaking his head."
444. i "\"He's got his own agenda. I've tried to warn him to stop, but he won't listen to  
me.\""
445. mcp "\"Stop? Stop what?\""
446. n "My question makes him pause for a moment, and he pushes up his glasses with  
a slightly worried sigh."
447. i "\"He's getting too obsessed with finding a particular vampire.\""



448. i "\"If Luka gets any clue as to their whereabouts, I know he'll do something stupid, hotheaded kid that he is.\""

449. n "Well, it's hard to argue with that one."

450. n "In fact, I was thinking something similar, myself. What can Luka even do against a creature with supernatural power, like Rex or Dominic?"

451. i "\"Let me put it this way.\""

452. i "\"All you have to do is give Luka false information, either by making up descriptions or saying you didn't see any vampires at all.\""

453. i "\"It won't do him any harm — in fact, it'll even keep both of you safer.\""

454. mcp "\"You want me to lie to him?\""

455. n "Isaac nods, a peculiarly sharp light glinting behind his glasses."

456. i "\"Trust me on this, [mc]. I've known him for a lot longer than you.\""

457. i "\"This obsession of his won't lead to anything good. It's blinding him.. Keeping him from seeing what really matters.\""

458. i "\"And if you know what's good for you, you shouldn't get involved in it, either.\""

459. mcp "\"...\""

460. n "When he puts it like that, it's hard to argue..."

461. n "But how can I lie to Luka's face? {w}If he found out, I can only imagine how he'd react... he'd probably hate me forever."

462. old "I'd never lie to Luka"

463. old "Would it really keep him safe...?"

464. old "I'll decide for myself"

465. mcp "\"There's no way.\""

466. mcp "\"I'd be completely betraying his trust. How can you ask me to do something like that?\""

467. n "Isaac sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose with a dark grimace."

468. i "\"What a painfully naive thing to say.\""

469. i "\"If he wanted a knife to cut off his hand, would you politely direct him to the kitchen drawer?\""

470. mcp "\"...I don't think it's the same—\""

471. i "\"You don't know this world like I do, [mc].\""

472. n "He cuts me off sharply.{w} An unusually serious, wistful light burns in his eyes, bearing into mine."

473. i "\"It forces you into sacrifices, into impossible decisions... Makes you learn the difference between the things you love and the things you'd die for.\""

474. i "\"But it's only after the luxury of choice is taken from you that you really, truly see the weight of all your actions.\""

475. i "\"You've got such a luxury right now, [mc], remember that.\""

476. i "\"...I suggest you don't waste it.\""

477. mcp "\"...\""

478. n "For a few moments, Isaac gazes at me in cold silence."

479. n "His words hang heavily in the air like a storm cloud, and I feel an uncomfortable pressure on my chest."

480. n "Only the sound of our breathing and distant cars fills the long pause..."

481. i "\"Ah, there I go again...\""

482. n "...I don't know what Luka's after, but if he's putting himself in danger, then I doubt it's anything good."

483. n "And knowing how stubborn he is, maybe keeping him away is the only thing I do."

484. mcp "\"I'll... think about it.\""

485. mcp "\"If I could keep him away from danger, then...\""

486. i "\"Exactly.\""

487. i "\"You're a smart boy, [mc], I'm sure you understand where I'm coming from.\""

488. i "\"I want to protect Luka as much as you do.\""

489. n "He reaches out towards my shoulder, squeezing it firmly."

490. n "I've never seen him look so serious before...{w} I guess he does have protective instincts, after all."

491. mcp "\"I'll decide what to do when I find out what he's after.\""

492. mcp "\"Until then, I won't promise anything.\""

493. i "\"...A very logical viewpoint, I suppose.\""
494. n "He purses his lips, looking faintly annoyed but also a little amused."
495. i "\"Following my advice would be {i}more{/i} logical, but I can tell you've already  
made up your mind.\""
496. i "\"Just keep that rational head on your shoulders when it comes time to choose,  
and I'm sure you'll be fine...\""
497. i "\"Probably.\""
498. n "For a brief moment, Isaac studies my face closely, peering straight into my  
eyes."
499. n "...But just as his intense gaze starts to get uncomfortable, he lets out a light  
chuckle, shaking his head."
500. i "\"Well, that's enough lecturing for today, I think.\""
501. n "Isaac steps back then, a cheerful smile curling on his lips once more."
502. i "\"Just a few friendly words of wisdom. Now, it's about time for me to get back  
to the car.\""
503. i "\"Come around to the apartment sometime, hm? I'll make a pot of my  
renowned coffee for you.\""
504. mc "\"...Yeah, sure, as long as your coffee isn't as oily as you are.\""
505. i "\"How rude!\""
506. i "\"Don't provoke me, or I might just slip something into your mug~\""

507. n "After flashing me a roguish grin, Isaac turns around and strides off."
508. n "The figures he was \"dealing\" with have already gone off somewhere, leaving me alone in the alley."
509. mc "\"...\""
510. n "Feeling a little disappointed, I turn around and drag myself the rest of the way home."
511. n "...Luka..."
512. n "Could I really lie to him?"
513. n "There must be a reason Isaac warned me ahead of time, without giving me any real details... {w}\nI can never tell what that guy's thinking."
514. n "I end up tossing and turning for most of the night, unable to get more than a couple hours' sleep before surrendering to insomnia."
515. n "As I crawl out of bed and put on some coffee, the first place my mind goes isn't to my freelance work —{w} but to Luka."
516. mcp "\"...\""
517. n "We parted pretty abruptly last night... I hope nothing bad happened between him and Isaac after I left."
518. n "...I know I'm being silly, but I'd feel a lot better if I gave him a quick call."
519. n "Settling down in my chair, I dial up Luka's number, unconsciously holding my breath..."

520. I "\"What the hell are you calling me for?\""
521. I "\"Shouldn't you be asleep, or writing bad fanfiction, or whatever?\""
522. I "\"Shouldn't you be asleep, or making lame songs, or something?\""
523. I "\"Shouldn't you be asleep, or drawing gross stuff, or... whatever it is you do?\""
524. mcp "\"I just wanted to make sure you were okay, that's all!\""
525. I "\"Of course I'm okay! You think I'm gonna get jumped while I'm with Isaac?\""
526. n "Despite his annoyed response, the tone of Luka's voice sounds a little...  
grateful."
527. n "Maybe he's actually happy I called after all, but he won't say it, like the brat he  
is."
528. I "\"Hey...\""
529. I "\"...You wanna come over for a bit?\""
530. mcp "\"Huh?!\""
531. n "I nearly drop my phone in shock at Luka's sudden offer."
532. I "\"Don't go thinking any weird crap, okay?\""
533. I "\"Isaac just said I should invite you, that's all.\""
534. mcp "\"...\""

535. n "Did Isaac really tell him that? {w}Is he trying to get us together on purpose...?"
536. n "Or is Luka just making it up as an excuse? Damn it, I can't read this situation at all."
537. mcp "\"Well, why not? Sounds fun to me.\""
538. mcp "\"Should I bring a gift for my host? Maybe some sugary sodas for you?\""
539. I "\"I swear to God, if you show up at the door like that, I'll slam it closed in your face.\""
540. n "—And without further ceremony, the line abruptly cuts off."
541. mcp "\"Oh, Luka. The true Casanova of our century.\""
542. n "A soft beep signals that Luka's texted the apartment's address to my phone, along with a few rude words."
543. n "After letting out a playful sigh, I spend a few minutes grooming myself, making sure I look at least a little presentable."
544. n "Then, I head outside to catch a taxi. {w}It's painful having to pay for the stupidly high fare, but the place's too far to walk."
545. mcp "\"Wow...\""
546. n "The huge, fancy apartment building I end up in front of is — incredibly nice, to say the least."

547. n "Following Luka's directions, I head inside and take the elevator up to one of the top floors."
548. n "...I'm starting to get a little nervous, to be honest."
549. n "I feel kinda out of place in a building like this. Remind me to never invite him inside {i}my{/i} apartment."
550. n "Reaching towards the door, I give a firm knock, holding my breath."
551. n "It takes a few moments, but before long —"
552. I "\"Hey.\\""
553. mc "\"Hey, Lu—\""
554. I "\"Make sure you take off your shoes. I don't want you dirtying up the place.\\""
555. mc "\"...Real gracious host, aren't you?\\""
556. n "The apartment I step into is a modern, beautiful loft."
557. n "Rent has to be more than my yearly salary, Jesus."
558. mc "\"Where's Isaac? Out working?\\""
559. I "\"Y-yeah, he's not around...\\""
560. n "Luka fidgets all of a sudden, looking a little nervous."
561. n "...Is he nervous because we're alone? {w}He's the one who invited me over in the first place!"
562. I "\"You wanna go sit down? I can get you a... a drink, or something.\\""
563. mc "\"Sure. Get me one of whatever you're having.\\""



564. I "\"Right.\""
565. n "Luka scurries off into the kitchen, and I make my way over to the sofa to sit down."
566. n "Damn, this thing is softer than my bed...!"
567. n "Soon, Luka's soft footsteps approach the side of the couch, and he leans over to shove a cold can into my hands."
568. mcp "\"Luka? Are you all right?\""
569. mcp "\"Your face is a little red... you don't have a fever, do you?\""
570. mcp "\"You should hold this against the side of your face.\""
571. lp "\"Eh?\""
572. mcp "\"You're flushed as hell. You have a private sauna here too, maybe?\""
573. lp "\"What the hell are you talking about? It's just hot in this stupid apartment, that's all.\""
574. n "With a faint growl, Luka flomps down on the couch beside me, popping the tab of his drink and taking a long gulp."
575. n "I glance down to the can in my hands, peering at the label."
576. n "This is the same kind I gave Luka at the diner, back when we first met. {w}He must've really liked it."
577. mcp "\"...Is there a reason you love sweet drinks so much?\""
578. I "\"...\""

579.       n "Luka sharply shoots me a glance, but I offer a light smile to show I'm not teasing him."

580.       n "After a moment, he lets out a quiet sigh, closing his eyes in a pained expression."

581.       I "\"My younger brother, David... used to really like them.\""

582.       mcp "\"Used to?\""

583.       mcp "\"Did — did something happen to him?\""

584.       n "He doesn't immediately answer, visibly hesitating for a few seconds."

585.       n "I get the sense that I asked something I shouldn't have."

586.       n "Shit, maybe I should try and change the subject..."

587.       n "But before I get a chance, Luka reopens his eyes and gazes at me, his expression bleak."

588.       I "\"He was...\""

589.       I "\"He was taken in by a vampire, as a... as a pet.\""

590.       mcp "\"...\""

591.       n "Luka's fingers slowly curl into fists, clenching so tightly that his knuckles turn white."

592.       I "\"I didn't know where he'd gone, or why he suddenly disappeared. I felt so...so guilty, so terrified, not knowing if he was dead or alive.\""

593.       I "\"Until one night... I was out walking on the streets, and I...\""

594.       n "Luka pauses, biting his lower lip."
595.       n "The color drains from his face, and his eyes take on a cold, bitter look."
596.       I "\"I saw David. I saw him stumbling down the alley beside someone I'd never  
seen before.\""
597.       I "\"But when I yelled out to David, he...didn't recognize me. His eyes were just—  
empty, like there was nothing left inside him.\""
598.       I "\"He was brainwashed, broken — gone.\""
599.       mcp "\"...Luka...\""
600.       n "Luka's voice grows increasingly hateful, to the point where it barely sounds like  
him at all."
601.       I "\"That vampire, that {i}monster{/i}...\""
602.       I "\"They grinned at me. I saw their fangs, and I knew... I knew what they were.\""
603.       I "\"They escaped with my brother, and I couldn't do anything to stop them.\""
604.       I "\"But after that, I did everything to try and hunt him down. I researched  
vampires, found out they were real, tried to learn how to fight them.\""
605.       I "\"I even asked some of my friends for help, but they thought I was crazy. They  
didn't say it, but I could see it in their eyes.\""
606.       I "\"I got so desperate that I quit my job and started looking for vampires by  
myself, every night.\""

607. mcp "\"And that's when you met Isaac?\""

608. n "The blond nods grimly, his eyes flicking back to me."

609. l "\"He said he'd help me find that vampire if I worked with him. That's the only  
reason I stick around.\""

610. l "\"But it's been over a year, and we haven't gotten a single clue.\""

611. n "...So Isaac must be keeping whatever he finds out a secret from Luka, too."

612. n "I'm sure he has to know who this vampire is by now. {w}I guess he's staying  
quiet so Luka doesn't rush in over his head."

613. mcp "\"...That's why you asked me to watch for vampires at the diner, then?\""

614. l "\"Yeah... although I doubt the piece of shit I'm looking for is the type to show up  
at a diner.\""

615. l "\"They're probably just... with...\""

616. n "Luka's voice trails off, and he goes silent."

617. n "As his gaze falls to the floor, the anger in his face seems to melt away, replaced  
with bleak emptiness."

618. n "The sorrow and guilt in his eyes doesn't belong to the proud Luka I know."

619.       n "He looks much older, like someone who's had to bear the weight of depression  
and guilt far longer than they should have."
620.       l "\"I know I can't really offer you much of anything, and it's a risky game to play,  
but...\""
621.       l "\"...Would you hate me if I still asked for your help?\""
622.       mcp "\"...\""
623.       n "Luka refuses to meet my gaze as he talks, staring off towards the window  
instead."
624.       n "He sounds so uncertain, like he doubts himself more than he doubts me."
625.       old "When I get my hands on that vampire... (unlocked)"
626.       old "When I get my hands on that vampire..."
627.       old "I'll help you, no matter what"
628.       old "Only if you keep your end of the deal"
629.       n "Narrowing my eyes into a glare, I let out a long, slow breath through clenched  
teeth."
630.       mcp "\"When I get my hands on that vampire, Luka... I'm gonna make them into  
minced meat, no matter how goddamn powerful they are.\""
631.       l "\"[mc]...\""
632.       mcp "\"A monster like that needs a stake stuffed up their ass and a nice baptism  
in some holy water, don't you think?\""

633. I "\"Didn't I tell you before that those don't —\""
634. mcp "\"Don't worry, that part's just for humiliation. We'll introduce them to some  
shotgun shells first, put them in their place.\""
635. I "\"...Idiot.\""
636. n "A relieved, almost tearful smile spreads over Luka's face."
637. n "To be honest, I doubt I'd ever be able to make a scratch on a vampire... {w}but I  
just don't want Luka to be so discouraged."
638. mcp "\"Of course I'll help you. What kind of guy do you think I am?\""
639. mcp "\"I can't just leave you hanging like that.\""
640. I "\"...\""
641. n "Luka still doesn't look back up at me."
642. n "It's hard to read exactly what he's thinking. {w}Does he not believe me?"
643. n "—But finally, he lifts his head, a hopeful smile on his lips."
644. mcp "\"I'll help you, sure... as long as you keep your end of the deal.\""
645. I "\"...\""
646. n "Lifting his head, Luka blinks at me in surprise."
647. mcp "\"You said you'd walk me home every night, didn't you?\""
648. mcp "\"I won't let you back down from our deal. You'd better show up at the  
diner like clockwork, or I'm not gonna be happy.\""
649. I "\"[mc]...\""

650. n "I reach out to playfully tousle Luka's hair, winking at him."
651. mcp "\"Don't worry, Luka. We'll find this piece of shit.\""
652. mcp "\"And when we do, I'll —\""
653. mcp "\"Ah—!\""
654. n "Luka suddenly throws himself on me in a hug, pressing his head against my  
shoulder."
655. n "What's gotten into him all of a sudden...?"
656. mcp "\"And here I was, thinking you were like a feral cat that'd bite me if I tried to  
touch you.\""
657. lp "\"What the hell is that supposed to mean?\""
658. n "He growls softly, but it's clear he's barely holding back a laugh."
659. n "I squeeze my arms around Luka's small, wiry body, enjoying his little show of  
affection while it lasts.{w} I can still hardly believe he worked up enough courage to hug  
me."
660. n "After a few moments, he pulls back just enough to tilt his head upwards,  
meeting my eyes."
661. mcp "\"What's up? Do I have something on my face?\""
662. l "\"Tch...\""

663. I "\"I just think you're... pretty cool, is all.\""
664. mcp "\"...\""
665. I "\"Most guys would've freaked out when they realized vampires were real. But  
you barely batted an eye.\""
666. I "\"I'm even asking you to help me hunt one down, and you're not scared... I can't  
tell if you're stupid, or just stupidly nice.\""
667. n "I don't really feel like I deserve the warm, admiring gaze he offers up towards  
me."
668. n "But seeing him so happy...{w} makes me wish that I could see that look more  
often."
669. I "\"Don't let it get to your head, okay? You're still an asshat.\""
670. I "\"And if you think I'm gonna treat you to half-price coffee again, then you're out  
of your mind.\""
671. mcp "\"I'd never take advantage of your generous spirit like that.\""
672. mcp "\"Yeah? I dunno, I feel like you owe me at least that much.\""
673. n "We end up lounging on the couch together until the sun goes down — time  
always seems to fly when we're chatting or trading stupid insults with each other."
674. n "Luka stays curled close to my side, nestling against my arm with a lazy smile  
hanging on his lips."
675. n "I wish we could stay like this all night, but..."



676. mc "\"I should probably start heading home, Luka. Need to get a few things  
before I start my shift.\""

677. n "Finally, I gently disentangle myself and stand up, offering Luka a hand."

678. l "\"Your jacket's all messed up.\""

679. mc "\"It is?\""

680. n "I glance down to see my collar ruffled, probably from being attacked by that  
hug earlier."

681. n "But when I reach to fix it, Luka suddenly steps forward, his delicate hands  
grabbing the lapels."

682. lp "\"You should wear something nicer than this old thing.\""

683. mcp "\"But it's my favorite.\""

684. lp "\"Yeah, well, you're missing a button, and there's a coffee stain here...\""

685. lp "\"We should really go on a shopping tri—\""

686. mcp "\"Luka.\""

687. lp "\"...\""

688. n "He raises his head, and suddenly his two bright eyes are inches away from  
mine."

689. n "Our lips are so close that I can feel the fluttering of his breath."

690. mc "\"Did I ever tell you how bad you are at flirting?\""

691. I "\"Wh-what do you...\""

692. mc "\"Really, really bad.\""

693. n "As I whisper a few teasing words against his cheek, Luka swallows audibly."

694. n "I half-expect him to suddenly turn and bolt, but a second later..."

695. n "Without thinking, I lean in to roughly press my lips against his, sealing them together."

696. n "His mouth is soft, and he tastes a little sweet... kind of like I expected."

697. n "He tries to jerk away reflexively, but I tilt my head forward to keep him in the kiss, curling an arm around his waist."

698. I "\"...nh...\""

699. mc "\"...\""

700. n "A few moments later, Luka stops squirming."

701. n "His cheeks are completely flushed, but he slowly, tentatively starts to move his lips against mine."

702. n "Man, talk about a quick turnaround... although it doesn't take a rocket science to realize he was hoping I'd do this."

703. n "He jerks forward, messily crushing his lips against mine."

704. n "Phew, I thought he was gonna headbutt me there for a second..."

705. I "\"...nh...\""

706. mc "\"...\""

707. n "His mouth is soft, and he tastes a little sweet... kind of like I expected."

708. n "I tenderly return his caresses, letting him set the pace so that he doesn't get  
scared off."

709. n "He looked so excited and nervous that I have to wonder if this isn't his first kiss.  
{w}Is he really that innocent? Now I almost feel bad."

710. n "But I just moved on impulse back there — he looked so damn cute that I  
couldn't help myself."

711. n "Besides, I think it's pretty clear by now that he has a crush on me, and I'd be  
lying if I said I didn't feel the same way."

712. mc "\"Luka...\""

713. n "I whisper his name softly, letting my tongue slip forward to tease against his  
lips."

714. n "After a moment of hesitation, Luka presses his own tongue along mine, sliding  
them together in a wet kiss."

715.        n "His grip on my jacket loosens, but he keeps his fingers curled in the fabric, like  
             he's clutching onto a safety blanket."

716.        l "\"Mmh... fu...\""

717.        n "He lets out a small sound between a moan and a whimper, leaning heavily  
             against my chest."

718.        n "I nip and tug at his lower lip with my teeth, trailing warm, wet kisses all along  
             his mouth and jaw."

719.        n "...Is he trembling, or is it my imagination?"

720.        n "No, he's definitely shaking a little. Damn, am I overdoing it?"

721.        mcp "\"Luka, are you okay?\""

722.        mcp "\"If you want, we can stop...\""

723.        lp "\"Tch — I'm fine!\""

724.        lp "\"Don't act like I'm not used to kissing! I d-do it all the time.\""

725.        n "...Yeah, sure you do."

726.        n "It takes all my strength to keep from snickering at his flustered response, but I  
             manage to hold back and just nod, instead."

727.        n "Then, I lean forward once more, pulling Luka in for another deep kiss."

728.        n "This time, he responds more eagerly, trailing his tongue along my lips in a  
             slightly clumsy fashion."

729.        mc "\"Mmh...\""

730. I "\"Kh... [mc]...\""
731. n "He's so adorable that I can barely stand it... {w}I just want to pounce on him  
right here, pin him down, get him to make more of those sweet noises..."
732. n "Considering the way he's pressing against me, I don't think he'd mind, either..."
733. n "He's so adorable that I can barely stand it...{w} I just want to hold him all night,  
let him relax, cover his cute face in kisses for hours..."
734. n "I can feel him nudging me towards the couch a little, like he's getting impatient  
already..."
735. u "\"Hello hello, Lu — oh, my!\""
736. mcp "\"...!\""
737. lp "\"...!\""
738. n "Luka immediately pushes me back, his face going red as a rose, eyes wide in  
horror and shock."
739. i "\"Wow, sorry for interrupting! But Luka, you know you have a bedroom for this  
sort of thi—\""
740. ip "\"Whoa—!\""
741. n "Isaac ducks as Luka hurls a sofa cushion towards him with all his might."
742. lp "\"Knock next time, four-eyed bastard!\""

743. mcp "\"Hey, Luka, wait—!\\""
744. n "But before I can stop him, Luka storms out of the living room at top speed."
745. n "The distant slamming of a door is probably him sealing himself away, just like a sulky teenager."
746. i "\"Ah, I feel pretty guilty, now... should've assumed I'd be walking into something.\\""
747. n "Sighing, Isaac sets down the grocery bags he'd been carrying onto the counter."
748. mc "\"It's no big deal. Just, er, kind of a spontaneous thing.\\""
749. i "\"Spontaneous? You were getting pretty into it. I think I saw tongue!\\""
750. mc "\"...How long were you watching us? Christ.\\""
751. n "Isaac lets out a chuckle at my awkward mutter, shaking his head."
752. i "\"Well, Luka's probably half-dead from embarrassment, so he won't be out for awhile. Maybe you'd better head back.\\""
753. i "\"I'm sure he'll show up again at the diner tonight, though. You've made quite the impression on him, [mc].\\""
754. n "He pauses for a moment, then, the playfulness gradually fading from his eyes."
755. i "\"Just don't forget what I told you last night, mm?\\""

756. mc "\"I haven't... don't worry.\""
757. n "Isaac nods at my grim reply, looking a little apologetic, but firm nonetheless."
758. n "He ends up escorting me outside and even dishes out for my cab fare home —  
probably some kind of repayment for \"interrupting\" us."
759. n "But the blissful mood I'd been in after I kissed Luka quickly sinks down as I mull  
over Isaac's words."
760. n "For his own safety... {w}I should lie to him, right?"
761. n "Even if he trusts me, and even if I promised to help him..."
762. n "Maybe the truth isn't always the kindest thing to give."
763. mc "\"Ngh... Man, I'm tired.\""
764. n "Earlier today, Luka called me to say Isaac's bringing him to some kind of  
meeting."
765. n "No one's bothered us these past few weeks, so I reassured Luka that I'd be fine  
for just one night by myself."
766. n "I'll admit I'm a little disappointed, though.{w} It's been a couple days since we  
shared that kiss, and tonight, I was planning on asking him out more officially."
767. n "Guess it'll have to wait until tomorrow."
768. n "Caught up in my own airy thoughts, I start to round the corner to my  
apartment —"
769. u "\"Hey.\""

770. mcp "\"...!\\""

771. n "A familiar low voice calls out to me."

772. n "When I quickly swivel to face the new arrival, my eyes don't catch anyone at  
first —"

773. n "But then a tall, gloomy-faced man soon steps out of the shadows."

774. mc "\"Dominic...?\\""

775. mc "\"What the hell are you doing here?\\""

776. mc "\"...You weren't exactly the late-night company I was expecting.\\""

777. mc "\"Can I ask why you decided to follow me home?\\""

778. d "\"...!\\""

779. n "Although his stony expression isn't much different from normal, I feel like  
there's a strange air about Dominic tonight."

780. n "He looks... hesitant, somehow. {w}I don't see any of the grim confidence that I  
remember."

781. d "\"I'm here to give you a message.\\""

782. mc "\"...A message, huh?\\""

783. mc "\"Who's sending this message?\\""

784. n "Dominic pauses, staring at me wordlessly for a moment."

785. n "Seriously, what's up with him...?"

786. d "\"Someone who has information on Luka's target.\\""



787. mc "\"...!\\""
788. n "Is that really possible—?{w} Someone's figured out who Luka's trying to find?"
789. n "As if he can read my thoughts, Dominic offers a stiff nod."
790. d "\"He knows about... a lot of things. Even your apartment number.\\""
791. d "\"If you agree to meet him, he'll show up at your place tomorrow night.\\""
792. d "\"But you have to be alone, and keep the meeting a secret from Luka until after  
it's over... Those are his conditions.\\""
793. mc "\"He doesn't want anything in return?\\""
794. d "\"...I don't know.\\""
795. n "He grimaces slightly, shaking his head."
796. n "It seems crazy that the informant wouldn't give him more details, but — I  
guess he's trying to cover his tracks."
797. n "He even knows my apartment number, though...? {w}That's more than a little  
creepy."
798. mc "\"...!\\""
799. n "This could be my one chance — my only chance to help Luka. {w}To keep my  
promise."
800. n "But I can't shake the feeling that it's all too easy. {w}What if I'm walking into a  
trap?"

801. n "A hundred thoughts race through my head, logic clashing with impulse, until I realize it's no use trying to reason things out."
802. n "Taking a deep breath, I focus on my gut feeling, and finally decide..."
803. old "I'll meet with him"
804. old "It's too dangerous"
805. n "...I have to take this chance."
806. n "Maybe I'm a fool, and maybe I'll regret it, but I know I'd regret passing it up even more."
807. mc "\"Fine. I'll meet him tomorrow night.\""
808. d "\"...\""
809. n "For a split second, Dominic stiffens."
810. n "But a moment later, he gives me another nod, turning his face away a little."
811. d "\"Got it.\""
812. d "\"I'll let him know.\""
813. n "Even though I want to say yes, to get my hands on the information Luka's been searching for all this time..."
814. n "Isaac's words flash back through my mind."

815. i "\"This obsession of his won't lead to anything good. It's blinding him.. Keeping  
him from seeing what really matters.\""

816. i "\"And if you know what's good for you, you shouldn't get involved in it,  
either.\""

817. mc "\"...\""

818. n "He's right.{w} No matter how much I want to help Luka, I can't put both of us in  
danger."

819. n "I doubt he'd ever forgive me if he knew about this, but..."

820. mc "\"Sorry, Dominic.\""

821. mc "\"I can't.\""

822. d "\"...\""

823. n "For a fleeting few seconds, Dominic looks the tiniest bit... relieved."

824. n "Was he hoping I'd say no?"

825. d "\"Got it.\""

826. d "\"I won't bother you again.\""

827. n "With those curt words, he turns his back to me, starting to walk away."

828. mc "\"Hey, Dominic!\""

829. mc "\"The person who gave you that message...\""

830. mc "\"Can't you tell me who they are?\""

831. dp "\"...\""

832. n "He slowly shakes his head."
833. n "A sense of disappointment tugs at me, but I manage to smile faintly at him anyway."
834. mc "\"Right...\""
835. mc "\"Thanks. I'll see you around, then.\""
836. n "With no further words between us, Dominic disappears around the corner, and I head into my apartment complex."
837. n "As much as I try to ignore it, I can't help but feel like there's a shadow hanging over me, now."
838. n "I don't understand what it means, and part of me wonders if I even want to."
839. n "I just hope I made the right choice..."
840. n "...For Luka's sake as much as my own."
841. mcp "\"...\""
842. n "The next night, I flip a pair of burgers while on auto-pilot."
843. n "I guess I'll finally ask him out tonight...{w} Since I'm apparently the one who's gonna have to do it."
844. u "\"Hey, I said medium-rare, not well-done!\""
845. mcp "\"O-oh, sorry!\""
846. n "It's pretty hard for me to stay focused for the rest of my shift, but somehow, I manage."

847.        n "By the time Luka finally shows up at the door, my stomach is a knot of pure excitement."

848.        l "\"Hey, [mc]—\""

849.        l "\"Ngh, what's that smell? Did you burn down the kitchen earlier or something?\""

850.        mc "\"...Heh, don't worry about it.\""

851.        mc "\"Let's go, yeah?\""

852.        l "\"Sure, char-broiled boy.\""

853.        n "We head out onto the street, just like always."

854.        n "But this time, I notice a taxi parked right in front of the diner.{w} Weird, you don't usually see them around here. Does that mean...?"

855.        lp "\"You wanna come back to my place again tonight?\""

856.        lp "\"We can have a more relaxed talk, and erm... There are some things I kinda want to say.\""

857.        mcp "\"Like how you finally realized your true dream was always to work in a diner, and wanted to confess I'm your role model as the coolest burger-flipper ever?\""

858.        lp "\"No.\""

859.        mcp "\"Oh.\""

860.        mcp "\"Well, whatever else you wanted to say can't be as important, but sure. Let's go.\""

861. mcp "\"...Me too, what a coincidence!\\""

862. mcp "\"Sure, let's go.\\""

863. n "When we reach the apartment building a few minutes later, I spot a familiar figure standing in front of it."

864. n "He's gazing up towards the sky, like he's lost in thought about something."

865. lp "\"...Oh, hey, Isaac.\\""

866. lp "\"I thought you were supposed to be out doing a deal tonight.\\""

867. i "\"...\\""

868. n "For a moment, Isaac doesn't reply."

869. n "Instead, he looks directly at {i}me{/i} —{w} but I have no idea why."

870. i "\"Things didn't work out, I'll just put it like that.\\""

871. i "\"Anyway, why don't we head upstairs? We can share some coffee, and then I'll give you two your private time.\\""

872. lp "\"Hah... Sure, sure.\\""

873. mcp "\"...\\""

874. n "For a brief moment, the excitement fluttering in my stomach turns into a strange anxiety."

875. n "...I guess the tension from these past few days is getting to me."

876.       n "The three of us make our way into the fancy complex and up the elevator,  
arriving in front of Isaac and Luka's shared apartment."

877.       n "Luka and I step inside first, letting Isaac lock the door behind us."

878.       I "\"Actually, Isaac, I think we're good without the coffee.\""

879.       I "\"I sorta want to spend some time with —\""

880.       I "\"...\""

881.       mcp "\"Luka?\""

882.       mcp "\"What's...\""

883.       n "When Luka suddenly falls silent, I shoot a curious look over towards him."

884.       n "Then, when I follow his gaze over towards Isaac..."

885.       n "The man standing there is completely different."

886.       lp "\"Y-you...\""

887.       lp "\"Why are you...\""

888.       n "To my shock, Luka's eyes are lit up with recognition."

889.       n "He's met this man before—?"

890.       u "\" ...Hm.\""

891.       n "The towering, elegant newcomer lets out a low laugh, shaking his head."

892. u "\"Since your friend is a little too star-struck, let me introduce myself.\""
893. b "\"I'm Bishop, the leader of San Francisco's vampire coven.\""
894. n "...When I hear those words, my first instinct is to grip Luka's hand protectively."
895. n "If this guy's the vampire leader, then he must have some kind of business with  
Luka — but he'll have to go through me, first."
896. mcp "\"What do you want with us?\""
897. mcp "\"...\""
898. n "The leader of the coven... {w}He seems so different from the other vampires  
I've met."
899. n "His strength and powers can't be the only things up his sleeve. I'd better be  
careful."
900. b "\"There's no cause for alarm. I didn't come here to fight you — that's simply  
not my style.\""
901. b "\"But getting myself a private audience by traditional methods would have  
been rather difficult, don't you think? A little illusion doesn't hurt anyone.\""
902. lp "\"You want to say something, Bishop. Right?\""
903. lp "\"So tell us whatever it is... and leave.\""



904.       n "Beside me, Luka does his best to sound demanding, but obvious fear leaks into his voice."
905.       n "He seems even more shaken by Bishop's forceful aura than I am."
906.       b "\"Right down to business, I see. Isaac's worn off on you, after all.\""
907.       b "\"Then I'll waste no time — I know the vampire who took your brother, David.\""
908.       lp "\"...!\""
909.       n "A choked gasp comes from Luka's throat."
910.       mcp "\"...\""
911.       n "Does this mean... Bishop was the one who sent that message with Dominic?"
912.       n "If I'd accepted his offer, we'd be meeting alone right now.{w} The thought alone makes my blood run cold."
913.       b "\"This vampire a very powerful being, well-known in our society for many prior...exploits, shall we say.\""
914.       b "\"Of course, Isaac and I have had an arrangement of sorts. An ongoing contract regarding your safety.\""
915.       b "\"In exchange for some payment from Isaac, your brother's kidnapper agreed not to contact you or seek you — nor your {i}companion{/i} — out.\""
916.       n "Bishop smiles at me, his fangs glinting in the light."

917.       b "\"But, considering recent events, such as your lax performance in information gathering, your aggression towards my coven, and unauthorized induction of this human into our world...\""
918.       b "\"That contract expires tonight.\""
919.       n "His grin vanishes as quickly as it came, and instead, he watches us with a cold stare."
920.       b "\"Now, let's make no mistake. Your brother's mind is broken, unsalvageable, and even if his owner perishes, he will remain only an empty husk.\""
921.       lp "\"...\""
922.       b "\"But I came here to offer you a bargain, one that I believe is quite generous.\""
923.       b "\"Leave San Francisco — leave the whole West Coast tonight, and never come back.\""
924.       b "\"You'll never see David again, and never have a chance to deal with his kidnapper face-to-face.\""
925.       b "\"The alternative...\""
926.       mcp "\"...!\""
927.       n "A hand settles on my shoulder, suddenly pulling me away from Luka."
928.       l "\"[mc]...!\""

929. bp "\"If you want a chance to release your brother's spirit, and finally take your revenge... Then I will happily give you his kidnapper's identity.\""
930. bp "\"But in exchange, I'll have to take this friend of yours into my coven.\""
931. mcp "\"...\""
932. n "Struck speechless, I stand frozen next to Bishop, who still holds my shoulder in his clawed grasp."
933. n "He wants to turn me... into a vampire?"
934. bp "\"He'll simply join our ranks, a novitiate of the night.\""
935. bp "\"His body will take well to the affliction, as the nature of his blood makes him particularly receptive... And I'm in need of a skilled subordinate.\""
936. bp "\"A worthy, simple trade, wouldn't you say?\""
937. I "\"B-but I... [mc] is...\""
938. I "\"How can you ask me to just give him up like that?\""
939. bp "\"Revenge always has a price, Luka.\""
940. bp "\"Whether it's a possession, a companion, or within oneself... There is always a price.\""
941. bp "\"But isn't it one you're willing to pay?\""
942. I "\"...\""
943. n "Bishop's dangling the thing he's always wanted right in front of his eyes."

944. n "The goal that's been driving him all this time is so close, finally within his grasp..."
945. n "And I'm the only thing keeping him from reaching it."
946. mcp "\"Luka...\""
947. n "I can see him starting to waver.{w} No wonder — Bishop's words are so seductive, and in a cruel way, they make sense."
948. n "He gazes at me helplessly, desperately, and I know whatever I say next will seal my fate."
949. n "My fate...{w} and Luka's."
950. old "It's too late"
951. old "I'll do it"
952. old "Does revenge really mean anything? (unlocked)"
953. old "Does revenge really mean anything?"
954. mcp "\"Your brother's gone, Luka.\""
955. mcp "\"Going after him now... It's too late to change what happened.\""
956. l "\"...\""
957. mcp "\"Is revenge really the most important thing to you?\""
958. n "Luka closes his eyes tightly, inhaling a shuddering breath."
959. n "The seconds that follow seem to go on, and on, and on..."

960. n "Until he finally reopens his eyes."
961. I "\"...Yes.\""
962. n "He chokes out a single, weak word."
963. mcp "\"...\""
964. n "Does that mean I was wrong from the beginning, thinking he cared about  
me...?"
965. I "\"I'm sorry, [mc]...\""
966. I "\"But this is my last chance to put things right.\""
967. n "His voice breaks, and he turns his head away from me, like he can't look me in  
the eye any longer."
968. n "His expression is so pained...{w} Then why? Why?"
969. mcp "\"Luka...\""
970. bp "\"Very well. It seems we have an agreement.\""
971. n "I barely even realize what's happening as Bishop pulls me into his arms, leaning  
in towards my neck."
972. n "Should I feel angry?{w} Sad?{w} Betrayed?"
973. n "...Or happy, because I can be the key to what he truly wants?"
974. mc "\"...\""
975. n "Sharp fangs caress along my skin, beginning to press down against my throat."

976. n "They sink into me, and I shudder."

977. mcp "\"...\""

978. n "I told Luka I'd help him — even though I never imagined it would end up like this."

979. n "His brother means everything to him.{w} He means... more to him than me, I know."

980. n "If I refused Bishop's offer or tried to talk Luka out of it, how could I live with myself?"

981. n "How could I watch Luka suffer, knowing he could've finally had his vengeance and found peace, but his only chance is gone forever?"

982. mcp "\"Bishop...\""

983. mcp "\"...I'll join your coven.\""

984. I "\"[mc]...!\""

985. mcp "\"It's all right, Luka.\""

986. mcp "\"Ever since I found out about this world, I knew I was taking a risk by staying here and remaining a part of it.\""

987. mcp "\"If you can finally get what you've always wanted, and I can still get to see your face...\""

988. mcp "\"Then it's a fair trade, yeah?\""

989. I "\"...\""
990. n "Luka bites his bottom lip, pressing down so hard that a bead of blood wells up around the spot."
991. n "His hands tremble, and he clutches tightly at his jacket."
992. n "I want to comfort him so badly. {w}After this over and done with, I'll soothe him and tell him everything'll be all right..."
993. n "...Finally, Luka gives a slow, unhappy hint of a nod."
994. I "\"I... I don't even know what to say, how to thank you...\""
995. mcp "\"If this gives you what you want, then...\""
996. mcp "\"That's all the thanks I need.\""
997. n "For some reason, I feel completely calm as Bishop takes me into his arms, leaning in towards my neck."
998. n "I know I should be afraid, or sad, or overwhelmed with regrets..."
999. n "But when I think of how Luka could finally be happy when this is all over, the sharp fangs brushing against my skin are distant, unimportant."
1000. mc "\"...\""
1001. n "They sink into me, and I shudder."
1002. n "Something clicks in my mind, at last.{w} Something sad, maybe even weak — but something I understand."

1003. mcp "\"Revenge... doesn't have any meaning, Luka.\""
1004. mcp "\"It'll hurt you — no, it's {i}been{/i} hurting you more than it'll ever hurt  
your brother's kidnapper.\""
1005. mcp "\"You're surrounded by creatures you hate, obsessed with hunting someone  
you hate, stuck in a world you don't belong in.\""
1006. mcp "\"What would David want you to do, if he was still himself?\""
1007. mcp "\"Would he want you to risk becoming a slave, too? Would he want his big  
brother to lose himself in his hatred?\""
1008. mcp "\"Or would he want you to live on, letting go, letting yourself finally be  
happy again... even if you never forget his memory?\""
1009. mcp "\"Does revenge mean more to you than that...?\""
1010. I "\"...\""
1011. mc "\"Nnh...\""
1012. n "Bishop's embrace tightens.{w} The life slowly drains from my body, bit by bit,  
replaced with pure bliss."
1013. n "I start to let go of my consciousness, slipping towards a peaceful dark."
1014. n "...Until cold flesh presses against my lips, forcing something onto my tongue."
1015. n "Sweet and metallic — strange at first, then delicious, then addicting."



1016.       n "I swallow it greedily.{w} More of it flows down my throat, and it {i}burns{/i},  
horribly and wonderfully."
1017.       n "...It isn't until I've gulped down mouthfuls of the sweet liquid that I can finally  
open my eyes."
1018.       n "I'm still here, still myself, still alive...?"
1019.       mcp "... "
1020.       n "...No, not alive."
1021.       n "I have no heartbeat, no need to breathe, even though my chest rises and falls  
out of habit."
1022.       n "My vision is sharper, and I'm overwhelmed with a rush of scents and sounds I  
never noticed before."
1023.       b "\"Welcome to my coven, [mc].\""
1024.       n "A strange sensation washes over me when I hear Bishop's voice.{w}  
Commanding, but soothing, sending a delightful shiver down my spine."
1025.       n "I feel compelled to smile."
1026.       b "\"Now, if you wish to claim what you've been longing for all this time...\""
1027.       b "\"Then you have my blessing.\""
1028.       lp "\"...!\""
1029.       n "As Luka shrinks back into the corner, pretty features frozen in fright, a sense of  
euphoria washes over me."

1030.       n "Mine...{w} Luka is mine."
1031.       n "All mine."
1032.       l "\"[mc]...\""
1033.       l "\"[mc], n-no, please...!\""
1034.       l "\"You — you can't —\""
1035.       n "What a lovely voice.{w} I want to hear more of it.{w} I want to be the {i}only{/i} one to hear it."
1036.       n "He may not know it yet, but my chains will be for his own good — chains to keep him safe, to let him be loved."
1037.       n "...One day you'll understand, Luka, and your eyes will be filled with love instead of that cruel fear."
1038.       n "So come into my embrace.{w} I won't let you run away from me, the one who loves you most..."
1039.       n "Not now, not ever again."
1040.       n "The next night, it's my turn to call Luka and tell him I don't need an escort."
1041.       n "He sounds pretty unhappy about it, but finally agrees, under the condition I call him when I get home safely."
1042.       mcp "\"Silly kid, all worried for me...\""

1043.       n "I smirk to myself as I flip the last few burgers of the night.{w} With luck, this'll all pan out, and I'll have a great surprise for him tomorrow."
1044.       n "Just imagine his face when I finally get to tell him the information he wants so badly..."
1045.       u "\"Hey, I said medium-rare, not well-done!\\""
1046.       mcp "\"O-oh, sorry!\\""
1047.       n "It's pretty hard for me to stay focused for the rest of my shift, but somehow, I manage."
1048.       n "My legs can't carry me back to my apartment fast enough.{w} Excitement and nervousness bubble in my stomach."
1049.       n "Who's this mystery informant? What kind of price will he ask?"
1050.       n "...Will it be worth it?"
1051.       mc "\"...\\""
1052.       n "I burst into my apartment, panting heavily."
1053.       n "He's not here yet. {w} But what if I missed him...?"
1054.       n "No, that can't be right. He knows my apartment number, so I bet he knows my shift hours, too."
1055.       n "In that case, what if —"
1056.       u "\"No need to worry, [mc]. I haven't been waiting long.\\""
1057.       mc "\"...!\\""

1058. n "A voice suddenly purrs into my ear from behind."
1059. n "I swivel to face its source, sucking in a sharp breath."
1060. n "Tall, elegant, and wearing a deviously charismatic smile...{w} My mystery informant."
1061. u "\"Good evening.\""
1062. u "\"I believe we had a meeting scheduled for tonight.\""
1063. n "My fingers instinctively curl into fists."
1064. n "This dark aura, his piercing red eyes..."
1065. mcp "\"...You're one of {i}them{/i}, aren't you?\""
1066. u "\"Hmh.\""
1067. u "\"As much as I'd like to play coy and ask what you could possibly mean, I have other places to be tonight, so I'll cut to the chase.\""
1068. n "From the moment he speaks, I have to fight the urge not to duck past him and run."
1069. n "He gives off such a strong, cold atmosphere, like I've been pulled under icy waves."
1070. mcp "\"Who... are you?\""
1071. b "\"I am Bishop, the leader of San Francisco's vampire coven.\""
1072. n "...The coven's leader?{w} No wonder he has such a powerful presence."

1073. mcp "\"Is that why you know about David's kidnapper? He's one of your  
vampires?\""
1074. b "\"Precisely. I'm glad you catch on quickly, [mc].\""
1075. b "\"Now, forgive my directness, but...\""
1076. mcp "\"Ngh—!\""
1077. n "Before I can get out another question, Bishop swiftly steps forward, curling an  
arm around my waist and pulling me against him."
1078. n "My first instinct is to struggle or throw a punch at his face —"
1079. n "But when I look into his eyes, my anger fades almost instantly."
1080. n "My first instinct is to cry out for help —"
1081. n "But when I look into his eyes, my fear fades almost instantly."
1082. n "Red pools that endlessly swirl and gleam, pulling me in..."
1083. n "Why can't I look away?"
1084. b "\"I know how you feel about Luka.\""
1085. b "\"I know how much you want his trust... how much you want to make him  
happy.\""
1086. mcp "\"How... do you...\""
1087. n "My voice is thin, distant.{w} Everything he says is true — it's like he can see  
right through me."
1088. n "But his eyes...{w} They're so mesmerizing, so comforting, so..."

1089. b "\"But it's dangerous, isn't it? The two of you against a big, bad vampire, who  
might just take one of you as a new pet to replace David...\\""

1090. b "\"So what if there was another way to have Luka, [mc]?\""

1091. b "\"Another way to make him happy... and to make him yours?\""

1092. mcp "\"...\\""

1093. n "His voice drips warmly into my ear, coaxing, soothing."

1094. n "To make Luka mine...{w} Yes, that's what I want."

1095. b "\"Join me.\\""

1096. b "\"Accept the embrace into my coven, and Luka will be yours forever.\\""

1097. mcp "\"Accept the... embrace...?\""

1098. mcp "\"I... I...\\""

1099. n "Should I really —{w} can I really do this?"

1100. n "I want to, but for some reason, it feels like I'm in a dream, and I don't know  
what'll happen after I wake up..."

1101. b "\"He {i}needs{/i} you to look out for him, to love him, to protect him.\\""

1102. n "...I weakly nod."

1103. b "\"Then the choice is easy, isn't it?\""

1104. b "\"The only thing you have to do is say yes.\\""

1105. n "To say yes —{w}{w=0.4} to say yes — {w}{w=0.4} to say —"
1106. mcp "\"...\""
1107. mcp "\"...Yes.\""
1108. b "\"Good boy.\""
1109. n "His hand strokes through my hair, a heavenly touch."
1110. b "\"Close your eyes, [mc], and relax.\""
1111. n "I obey silently, tilting my head back and letting the tension free from my body."
1112. n "With these arms around me, I know there's nothing to be afraid of."
1113. mc "\"A-aah...!\""
1114. n "Sharp fangs suddenly pierce into my throat."
1115. n "A horrible pain, and then a strange, indescribable pleasure..."
1116. mc "\"Nnh...\""
1117. n "Bishop's embrace tightens.{w} The life slowly drains from my body, bit by bit,  
replaced with pure bliss."
1118. n "I start to let go of my consciousness, slipping towards a peaceful dark."
1119. n "...Until cold skin presses against my lips, forcing something onto my tongue."
1120. n "Sweet and metallic — strange at first, then delicious, then addicting."

1121. n "I swallow it greedily.{w} More of it flows down my throat, and it {i}burns{/i},  
horribly and wonderfully."
1122. n "...It isn't until I've gulped down mouthfuls of the sweet liquid that I can finally  
open my eyes."
1123. n "I'm still here, still myself, still alive...?"
1124. mcp "\"...\""
1125. n "...No, not alive."
1126. n "I have no heartbeat, no need to breathe, even though my chest rises and falls  
out of habit."
1127. n "My vision is sharper, and I'm overwhelmed with a rush of scents and sounds I  
never noticed before."
1128. b "\"You take to our beautiful affliction just as well I thought you might, [mc].\""
1129. n "A strange sensation washes over me when I hear Bishop's voice.{w}  
Commanding, but soothing, sending a delightful shiver down my spine."
1130. n "I feel compelled to smile."
1131. b "\"Now, I think someone's waiting for a phone call...\""
1132. b "\"And you don't want to let him down, do you?\""
1133. mcp "\"...Of course not.\""
1134. n "Without hesitation, I reach for my phone and find Luka's number, dialing it up."



1135. n "He answers almost instantly."

1136. I "\"[mc]?! Is that you?\""

1137. mcp "\"Luka...\""

1138. I "\"Why the hell didn't you call me sooner?! I was getting... really worried!\""

1139. mcp "\"...Come over to my place, Luka.\""

1140. mcp "\"There's something I want to show you.\""

1141. I "\"Huh? B-but —\""

1142. mcp "\"It's important. Just trust me... please?\""

1143. I "\"...\""

1144. I "\"O-okay. I'll be right there.\""

1145. n "{i}Beep.{/i}"

1146. mcp "\"...\""

1147. n "For a brief moment, I feel a twinge of guilt inside me."

1148. n "But I know it's for his own good — all of this is for his own good."

1149. n "Less than ten minutes later, an anxious knock comes at my door."

1150. n "I can detect his scent even from inside.{w} Deliciously pure, delicate,  
intoxicating..."

1151. n "...{i}Mine.{/i}"

1152. I "\"[mc]?\""

1153. I "\"[mc], are you in there?\""
1154. mc "\"Yes...\""
1155. mc "\"I'm coming, Luka.\""
1156. n "As I reach for the doorknob, running my tongue over these new, beautiful  
fangs—"
1157. n "I can't help but break into a grin."
1158. I "\"Nnh...\""
1159. I "\"A-aah... Please...\""
1160. n "So warm — so sweet."
1161. n "His taste is nearly as addictive as those sounds he makes, those whimpers and  
cries of surrender."
1162. n "As much as I've heard them by now, I can never get enough."
1163. mc "\"You're so beautiful, Luka...\""
1164. mc "\"I love you, every inch of you.\""
1165. mc "\"And you... Tell me who you love.\""
1166. n "I gently tug at his collar, reminding him of what's already engraved into his  
body, mind, and soul."
1167. I "\"I I-love you, Master... So much...\""
1168. I "\"Please, drink from me! Please... more...\""

1169.       n "Despite his eager, longing words, there's a certain hollowness in his voice."
1170.       n "It doesn't belong to the same fiery Luka I once knew.{w} That Luka is long gone,  
tamed into an obedient pet after a year's worth of training."
1171.       n "Bishop kept his word, of course. He told Luka who David's kidnapper was —{w}  
but there was nothing he could do, not with me imprisoning him down here."
1172.       n "The decision was an easy one to make. Luka's revenge is pointless, and he's  
much happier and safer here with me."
1173.       n "He fought me and resisted so much at first, but finally, he realized the truth  
behind my love for him."
1174.       mc "\"Mm...\""
1175.       l "\"Nnh—! Mas...ter...\""
1176.       n "My fangs sink deeper into his neck, and Luka cries out blissfully."
1177.       n "He squirms on my lap, but I hold his waist down with one hand, teasing my  
tongue along his soft, smooth skin."
1178.       n "...Sometimes, I remember how things used to be, before I received this dark  
gift... back when Luka and I were so innocent."

1179. n "How pathetic I was. {w}Weak, hesitant, and fragile."

1180. n "Not any longer."

1181. n "I'll keep him safe, safe forever, my beloved little blood doll and faithful pet."

1182. n "Trapped in this eternal darkness, this beautiful prison for just the two of us..."

1183. n "...Where the cruelty of the world will never touch us again."

1184. n "Luka closes his eyes tightly, inhaling a shuddering breath."

1185. n "The seconds that follow seem to drag on, and on, and on, until..."

1186. I "\"...No.\""

1187. I "\"Not any more.\""

1188. bp "\"...\""

1189. n "When Luka reopens his eyes, they burn with a sudden resolution."

1190. I "\"Isaac once told me there were things more important than revenge.\""

1191. I "\"Back then, I couldn't understand what he meant... how anything could be  
more important than killing the monster who took my brother.\""

1192. I "\"But I — I want to keep on living... with [mc].\""

1193. mcp "\"...\""

1194. I "\"I didn't think there was anyone out there who'd listen to me... who'd trust me,  
who'd help me.\""

1195. I "\"I thought I was all alone. That my life didn't need any meaning besides saving David, even if it meant I'd die trying.\""
1196. I "\"But...\""
1197. n "He takes a deep breath, eyelids trembling as he squeezes them shut for a moment."
1198. I "\"[mc]'s never asked anything from me. He's never doubted me, even though I didn't deserve his trust.\""
1199. I "\"The way he cares about other people more than himself...\""
1200. I "\"It's stupid, and I love him for it.\""
1201. I "\"If David's really gone, then...\""
1202. I "\"I know we'll meet again someday.\""
1203. I "\"When it's time to move on, I'll be ready to see him — to apologize, for everything — in the next world.\""
1204. I "\"But until then... I still have a reason to stay in this one, so...\""
1205. I "\"I can't accept your offer.\""
1206. n "When Luka's voice trails to a whisper, everything goes silent."
1207. n "Happiness and guilt ram into my chest, making it ache."
1208. n "Damn it, Luka... {w}Selfish, brave, defiant little brat."
1209. bp "\" ...So be it.\""
1210. n "Bishop's displeased voice echoes through the apartment."

1211.        n "He releases his grip on my shoulder and shoves me away from him, letting out  
a faint snort."

1212.        b "\"If you're ever seen around here again...\""

1213.        b "\"You'll wish you could've joined your brother in simple mindlessness.\""

1214.        n "He sharply turns away, long coat swirling through the air, before striding swiftly  
to the door."

1215.        n "It slams shut behind him, so loud that I can't help but wince."

1216.        n "But soon, there's nothing left of Bishop's icy aura, or even any trace that he  
was here at all..."

1217.        n "Except now, I know it's finally all over."

1218.        mcp "\"Good fuckin' riddance.\""

1219.        mcp "\"Won't be missing that guy any time soon.\""

1220.        lp "\"...\""

1221.        n "A soft smile lights up Luka's face at my comment."

1222.        n "Something wet glistens in the corners of his eyes, but he also looks hugely  
relieved, like a giant weight's just been lifted from his shoulders."

1223.        l "\"Guess we better start packing, huh.\""

1224.        mcp "\"Yeah...\""

1225. n "In the aftermath of that drama, I suddenly remember the ultimatum."
1226. n "Shit, we have to leave tonight?! Right after I just paid the month's rent, too..."
1227. mcp "\"What about Isaac? Won't he be pissed if you leave him without a  
warning?\""
1228. I "\"...\""
1229. n "He slips his hand into my own, warmly squeezing it."
1230. I "\"I think he'll understand. The old bastard catches onto stuff pretty fast.\""
1231. mcp "\"If you say so. I wouldn't put it past him to mail us something nasty if he  
tracks us down later, though.\""
1232. mcp "\"Anyway, I don't exactly have a lot to take with me, so I'll be ready by  
dawn.\""
1233. I "\"Make sure you pack some clean shirts and not the grease-soaked ones,  
okay?\""
1234. I "\"I don't wanna ride a bus next to a walking burger.\""
1235. mcp "\"Uh-huh, whatever.\""
1236. n "We share a small smile, and with one last, tight hug, I leave Luka's side to hurry  
towards the door."
1237. n "...But on impulse, I glance back at him over my shoulder."
1238. n "He's moved to stand by the window, gazing down into the distant cityscape."

1239. n "A few quiet words come from his lips, lightly fogging the glass — not addressed to me, but to someone far, far away."
1240. lp "\"David...\""
1241. lp "\"No matter how far we go, or wherever we end up, I'll never forget you.\""
1242. l "\"Not now, not ever...\""
1243. l "\"I promise.\""
1244. n "My fingers drift through soft, silky hair."
1245. n "I get the sense that I'm petting an angel's head. {w}It's about as delicate and pretty as I'd imagine an angel's to be, anyway."
1246. n "And with his eyes closed like that, he looks so peaceful, too... like he's lost in some kind of holy rapture."
1247. l "\"Ugh... [mc], why are your legs so bony? I should've brought a pillow.\""
1248. n "...Of course, when he opens his mouth, the \"angel\" image melts pretty fast."
1249. mc "\"Well, {i}excuse{/i} me. Should I fatten up to make myself a better pillow?\""
1250. l "\"...\""
1251. l "\"No, you're fine as you are... I guess.\""
1252. n "Luka smiles teasingly, gazing up at me with sparkling green eyes."



1253.       n "He's softened a little over time, although he's still mostly the same brat he's always been."
1254.       mc "\"You really have a way with words, Luka. Everything you say just makes my heart throb.\""
1255.       l "\"Yeah, well, that better be the {i}only{/i} thing that throbs. Don't forget I'm on your lap, diner boy.\""
1256.       n "Snickering, I tousle Luka's messy hair, admiring his pretty features."
1257.       n "If only the inside matched the outside..."
1258.       n "...No, on second thought, he's perfect as he is. I've started to love even his rotten personality, somehow."
1259.       n "After we left San Fran, Luka and I decided to travel, using our small savings to explore Europe."
1260.       n "Both of us are young, and we haven't seen much of the world. {w}So we've hitchhiked our way across a few countries together, enjoying new sights and experiences every step of the way."
1261.       n "But even in another continent, the night still grips both of us with unspoken fear."
1262.       n "It's impossible to forget the creatures stalking the streets after dark... {w}and if we're not careful, one of us may end up getting snatched away."

1263. n "I don't intend to ever let that happen to Luka, though."
1264. n "I'll do whatever it takes to protect him — and even if something {i}does{/i} happen, I'll get him back at any cost."
1265. n "Someone has to keep an eye on this spoiled brat, and I've already been suckered into the job... though I wouldn't have it any other way."
1266. I "\"Hey, [mc]...\""
1267. I "\"Do you ever miss San Fran?\""
1268. mc "\"Mm... No, not really.\""
1269. mc "\"You were pretty much the only thing I liked there, to be honest.\""
1270. I "\"Hah.\""
1271. mc "\"How about you? D'you miss it?\""
1272. I "\"...\""
1273. n "For a moment, Luka goes quiet."
1274. n "I wonder if he's thinking about his brother...{w} The brother he left behind, even if his real self vanished a long time ago."
1275. I "\"Yeah, a little bit.\""
1276. I "\"But it's okay. I don't think I need to go back any more.\""
1277. n "He mumbles a soft reply, nestling against my lap."
1278. mc "\"...\""

1279.       n "I start to gently stroke his head again, watching the slow rise and fall of his  
chest."

1280.       mc "\"Man, now I'm feeling all nostalgic. We should give Isaac a call later, for old  
times' sake.\""

1281.       mc "\"Want to, Luka?... Luka?\""

1282.       n "When he doesn't answer, I nudge my fingertip lightly against his soft cheek,  
peering down into his face."

1283.       n "But I realize pretty quickly I'm not going to get a reply..."