

LORE & LUST

Date Night in Milan



KARLA NIKOLE

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This story takes place before Nino and Haruka were bonded. It is ideally nestled between chapters 31 and 32 of Lore and Lust Book One.

SATURDAY

10:15 a.m.

Nino slides the silver dagger across the top of the envelope, smoothly tearing the paper in a fluid motion. He sets the letter opener down and pulls the paper from inside. It's another returned survey (they're coming back much faster than anticipated). This one, like many others, includes a personalized note.

Gracious Lord Bianchi and Lord Hirano,

I am returning the completed survey as requested. It is my great honor to help with this noble and exciting endeavor. My mate and I sincerely hope that our contribution will be of value.

If you will forgive my indulgence, I wanted to give some narrative with regard to the context of our bond, because I feel it is truly remarkable. Of course, I am biased. None the less, even within the greater context of our culture, our circumstance is undeniably unique.

As indicated on your survey, our bond was formed of our own volition (not arranged by outside influences or for political, social gains). In fact, our families—being rival vinegar makers in the northern region—dissuaded us from becoming romantically involved. Operating in the same circle of business, we inadvertently grew up together, often playing and running through the crowded outdoor markets hand-in-hand when our parents were busy selling products.

After coming of age, we bonded almost immediately. After only three tries. We exchanged blood because it felt right. We were intimate because it came natural to us. We trusted each other. I keep my personal stance on this subject private under my realm, but I truly believe that this is the key to establishing a healthy bond.

I wish you well in your research. Thank you for including us. I hope your findings help to restore and strengthen our population.

Nino sighs, smiling when he finishes the letter. He walks toward Haruka, who is sitting on the floor with his legs folded. They're in Giovanni's office. It's quiet.

"We got another letter with the returned survey." Nino hands the paper to Haruka, then sits down closely at his side with his legs outstretched. "This one says they bonded of their own volition. Three tries."

Haruka eyes widen as he accepts the letter. "Three times? Impressive."

He reads. Nino watches him. Haruka's bright burgundy eyes scan the page under his very dark lashes. The bright sun almost makes his milky-almond skin glow. The tiny mole just off the bridge of his nose is faint, barely noticeable like a speck of pepper in a bowl of heavy cream.

They have mutually crossed the strict boundaries of friendship, having done things that are unquestionably reserved for lovers. Or for those who wish to express the passionate bloom of intimacy that is rooted in deeper, sincere desire.

Even still, Nino hesitates. It is all very new and *some* boundaries still exist. He wants to kiss him...

So he does.

While Haruka is focused on the letter, Nino tilts his head and leans into his neck. The skin there is soft, smooth against the tip of his nose as he breathes. Haruka smells divine. Not like something he wants to eat. More like something he wishes he could douse himself in. Both inside and out. As if it could perfectly satiate the deep ache within him—the clean sweetness of it filling him up and then overflowing, saturating every inch of his being.

He closes his eyes and drags his tongue against his flesh. Divine. Nino does it again. Then again. Quietly, he is smelling and licking, kissing and tasting. He is mindless with it as he pulls at Haruka's shirt collar with his fingers, moving down into the curve of his shoulder.

If I could just taste you...

Ever since Haruka started releasing his aura, Nino can barely sleep at night. His body prickles with want of his blood and the need to feel him innately. To take their connection and intimacy deeper in a way that only their unique natures as purebred vampires allows.

Haruka turns his head, making Nino sit up and blink. He feels delirious with desire. Before he can feel shame, Haruka smiles warmly with his vivid eyes and swiftly leans into Nino's mouth. The connection is firm, playful behind Haruka's smile. Nino isn't playing though, parting his lips and wanting Haruka's tongue inside him straightaway.

He licks and slides his tongue into the dark vampire like a person who is looking for something. Something important—someone digging deeply into their bag to find their wallet or keys. A child plunging and twisting their hand into a sandbox with the hope of finding buried treasure. Haruka breathes and moans, surrendering himself to Nino's intense action and yielding to his rhythm.

Nino slides his hand against the small of Haruka's back, crawling his fingers down and flipping his hand underneath his sweater. He touches Haruka's naked spine there, sensing the tight pulse of his aura inside him. Knotted and constrained.

Nino presses his fingertips into gentle concave of his back, then slides his free hand up and into Haruka's thick hair. *Stop doing this...*

He wants to feel his aura like he wants to taste his blood. He's getting greedy and wants everything. He can't say it. He won't. But Nino's nature within him is starved for it.

Haruka pulls up from the intense kiss, the sound of it loud in the silent office. His eyes are alighted and Nino's are, too. Haruka grins. "I like this confidence."

"I like kissing you," Nino smiles. He loves kissing Haruka. He loves Haruka. For now though, they can't do much else. They have agreed. Haruka is worried. He's been hurt badly in the past and even doing this—being here and opening himself—is miraculous. Nino understands, completely.

And they can only make love three times... their whole lives.

Jesus help me...

"I wish you weren't leaving tomorrow," Nino stares into his glowing eyes, his fingers still laced in his hair.

"I should prepare for returning to Japan," Haruka says. "But you will visit me next week when you come back to England?"

"Yeah, of course... Haru can we go out tonight? Just you and me?"

Haruka has been out in the city a lot in the past week, but primarily with Nino's older brother. He's been meeting the "who's who" of the Milan aristocracy—something Nino has no interest in. As such, he stayed home. They went out to a dinner party once, but the evening was a disaster. Before Haruka leaves, it would be nice to do something together in his hometown. Preferably something that doesn't involve his being openly berated by an older vampire.

"Yes," Haruka nods, "I would like that... Just know that sometimes I attract attention. With my aura enclosed, the impact is less dramatic, but still noticeable."

Don't enclose it at all... "I know Haru—the bonding ceremony. Remember?" This thing he does is unnatural. Contorting himself and holding back his primal nature. Nino wishes he would let it rest outward—

that he would be himself and let his beautiful essence free. “It’s okay, I’m not worried about that. I just want you to be comfortable.” Nino closes the small distance and brushed his lips against Haruka’s. He moves his hand from his hair, then gently presses his fingertips to his abdomen.

Nino stares into his glowing eyes. “Does it hurt? Knotting your nature up like this?”

“No...” Haruka returns his gaze. “I have done it for so long that it feels natural. Letting it rest outward is more unnerving at this point.”

“God, Haru...” Nino’s heart breaks as he leans into his forehead. “When did you start doing this? After your bond broke?”

“Mm,” he says, closing his eyes, breathing within the gentle warmth of their connection. “It is not so unpleasant. Primarily, it is a form of self-preservation. I had not realized it, but I had always been offered a kind of... covering? Protection, perhaps? Within the confines of my realm. My ancestral roots are there and I had been betrothed to Yuna since we were children. I never experienced such a visceral reaction from other creatures to my nature until I began traveling. I needed to either alter my nature or return home. The former felt like the lesser evil at the time.”

Nino sits up from his forehead and exhales a heavy sigh. He wants Haruka to let go and feel comfortable with him. If he could, Nino would cover him. He would do anything for him.

Haruka places his palm against Nino’s cheek. “There is no need for you to be distressed. I’m perfectly fine.”

You’re not.

“I much prefer your smile...” Haruka leans in, kissing him sweetly. Nino melts into it, moving his chin against him and perfectly content with having Haruka here and being like this. So much so that he doesn’t notice when Giovanni enters the room.

“I would apologize...” his boisterous, heavy voice rattles Nino, making him sit up from the kiss, flustered. He looks up with panicked eyes. His brother is standing over them.

“But this is *my* office,” Giovanni smirks, his thick eyebrow raised. “Can you two make out somewhere else? I have shit to do.”

Haruka scoffs, amused, but Nino cringes as they both stand from the floor and gather their papers and materials for their research. He is utterly embarrassed—like his dad has walked in and caught him watching porn.

His back straight, Haruka walks through the archway leading to the outer office first. Nino is trailing behind him when his brother calls out. “Nino.”

He turns, his shoulders tense. “Yes?”

“Since we’re obviously not ‘just friends’ anymore, you and I need to have a talk. He leaves tomorrow afternoon, right?”

“Yes.”

“Meet me here Monday morning.”

Nino nods, his posture lightly rounded as he shuffles out of the room.

7:05 p.m.

In a rare event, the winter sky is clear over Milan tonight. The color is a deep, deep blue but swirled with wispy clouds in translucent white. The bright stars are like silver sprinkles on the celestial expanse.

They're taking a taxi into the city, zipping past the bright lights of urban sprawl. Nino has found a jazz café in Navigli—his favorite district of the city. The area is known for its streaming canals, trendy bars and charming, social atmosphere.

It's Saturday night, but cold, so the streets are sparse. It's still beautiful in its barrenness—the strung lights along the canal reflecting prettily against the inky water. They hold hands as they walk and the warmth of it spreads up Nino's arm and throughout his body. He doesn't notice the chill. Currently, he's immune to it.

When they reach the bar and step inside, the crowd is comfortable. The space is simple in its design: classic and elegant. A long mahogany bar stretches along the left side while recess lighting in blue and purple hues makes the bar almost dreamlike. At the back of the room, a jazz quartet is setting up on a small stage. This is why Nino has chosen this location.

He spots two empty stools at the end of the bar. Still grasping Haruka's hand, he pulls him forward. When they settle there, Haruka's head is whipping around in awe.

"I was not expecting a live performance," he blinks, his wine eyes bright.

"Surprise." Nino grins, waiving down the bartender. "You're going to love it—a Kenny G cover band."

When Haruka is silent, Nino looks back at his face—which is disgusted, as if he's just been told that they're having pigeon for dinner. Nino laughs. "I'm just kidding Haru. Your face!"

"I do not see the humor in this."

This makes Nino laugh harder. He catches his breath. "The band has their own stuff, but they mostly cover Bill Evans and John Coltrane. Some Chet Baker because the pianist sings. The You Tube channel even had a cover of a song from Scenery."

At this, Haruka perks up. Now, dinner is fillet mignon. "Ryo Fukui?"

"Yup," Nino nods just as the bartender approaches.

“Buono Serata,” the male smiles. “Desiderate?”

Nino switches to Italian. “Good evening. Do you have a vintage Sangiovese?”

“I do. I have a Salvioni. Brunello di Montalcino.”

“Perfect.” Nino says. “I’ll take a bottle please—and a negroni.”

“You got it.”

The bartender walks away. When Nino turns his head, Haruka is staring at him with his dark eyebrow raised. “I am capable of ordering for myself.”

“Of course you are. But I also know what you like. Let me treat you—it’s your last night here and we’ve barely left the house together.”

Haruka turns his long body to face him. He leans forward with his back straight, resting his palms against Nino’s upper thighs. His eyes are frisky. “Have we not been productive during our time indoors together?”

“We have...” Nino says, distracted. His groin is suddenly tight and hot as he stares into Haruka’s elegant face. It’s amazing. A few days ago, Nino was coping with the fact that he may have to hide his true feelings forever. Stifling his love and living his life pretending as if Haruka isn’t incredibly special—as if he isn’t the first vampire Nino trusted enough to offer himself to.

But now... He sucks in a breath before he leans in to meet him, placing a full but swift kiss on his mouth. Nino swallows and lifts his head, but Haruka is still leaning. He opens his burgundy eyes. Expectant. Just staring. Understanding, Nino meets him again, slower, and not running away this time. He has never done this—kissed someone in public. He tries now, relaxing his body and ignoring what any strangers might think (his brother was a different situation entirely). Instead, he focuses on the dark male underneath his mouth.

This goes on, slow and steady, lifting but then catching each other’s mouths again. Nino tilts his head one way and Haruka another, chasing him. Puzzle pieces fitting together in boundless ways. Nino’s hands are simply resting on Haruka’s because all their energy is focused on this singular point of contact. These kisses. It feels like physics: the force component is perpendicular to the surface area.

Haruka gently pulls up and Nino’s head is spinning. He has shamelessly (ravenously) French kissed another creature in a bar *and* in his brother’s office within the same day. Like developmental milestones.

“Here you are.” The bartender places the wine bottle down, opens it and pours Haruka a generous glass. A second barmaid comes with Nino’s drink and small plates for their aperitivo.

When they’re alone again, Nino picks up his drink. “You were worried about attracting attention?”

“Not worried.” Haruka picks up his wine glass, examining and swirling the liquid. “More like... a forewarning.” He sniffs the rim before taking a swift sip. He pauses. “This is *exquisite*.”

“Good.” Nino grins proudly, taking another pull from his own glass. “You saw a lot of the jazz greats perform live, didn’t you?”

“Yes. My first trip to America was to Café Bohemia in New York to witness the Great Quintet—Sextet, by then.”

“Is this Miles Davis? Coltrane?”

Haruka nods. “I was fortunate enough to see one of their final performances together—in Stockholm. The improvisation and creativity that night from Coltrane and Kelly were *astounding*... Like brushstrokes on a canvas with new colors. Colors we have never seen before and have yet to imitate.”

“It sounds incredible...” Nino listens with awe. He is not the jazz aficionado that Haruka is, but he appreciates these moments when he waxes poetic about this topic. His groupie days when he chased these iconic artists from country to country.

Haruka is still young, but he has lived life. When they first met, he’d been hiding himself away in the British countryside. The more Nino learns about him, the more he sees that Haruka was not always that way. He traveled and immersed himself in music and culture. While Nino was truly hiding away within the stone walls of his family’s compound, Haruka had adventured out into the world, diving deep into the proverbial pool of his vampiric adolescence.

Listening like this, Nino feels as if he can share his experiences. Live vicariously through him and his youthful vigor. Nino asked him once why he suddenly stopped traveling and isolated himself. Haruka’s answer was vague. Something about things getting out of hand. His last stop before England had been Greece. It feels like something happened there, but Haruka is tight lipped about it.

Asao always traveled with him. Haruka had wanted to venture out alone, but the older vampire refused it. Haruka admits that in the end, he

was glad to have his manservant and guardian as a travel companion.

“You’re so passionate about music, do you play?” Nino asks.

“I do. The piano and cello. Both classically trained. However, I have not played either in at least a decade.”

Nino draws back, wide eyed. “I don’t know why, but I was expecting you to say ‘no.’ Holy shit that’s amazing.”

“I am undoubtedly rusty.”

“You should jump onstage tonight—join the rhythm section. Do a solo. I want to see.”

Haruka smirks in disbelief, his long fingers holding the curved swell of his glass. “Did you *not* just hear me? I’m out of practice and I would never do something so... ostentations.”

“Sure... But kissing me in a bar full of people is fine?” Nino raises an eyebrow, smirking.

Haruka brings his glass toward his mouth but pauses. A roguish look in his eyes. “In that instance, the reward far outweighs any consequences.” He drinks.

Nino throws his head back in a laugh just as the bar lights dim. The band jumps into their set, filling the room with an upbeat, energetic tune that he can’t name, but that reminds him of a bustling city sidewalk on a sunny day.

9:15 p.m.

Haruka has polished off an entire bottle of wine by himself. This in itself is not unusual, but the speed with which he has done so tonight is extraordinary. He is not drunk. He's relaxed—much more so than usual. Which is... nice.

However, it means his guard is down. After the jazz quartet had finished their set, he and Nino had talked and drank, laughed and enjoyed. Haruka cannot remember the last time he's felt so... uninhibited? Especially in the company of another vampire. It is curious and magnificent. But in his enjoyment, he's careless. Nino—having grown increasingly (deliciously) confident in initiating intimacy—had surprised him by casually taking hold of Haruka's hand, then slipping his fingers into his warm mouth. Haruka had exhaled a breath from the delight of it, and so slipped his aura for a fraction of a moment.

Knowing, Nino's eyes had gone wide, immediately alighting golden sunlight. Haruka's eyes had glowed to life as well from a messy mix of arousal and panic in re-securing his nature. But the damage had been done. The occupants of the bar had all paused and stared at the two of them as if time had frozen. When Haruka had been bonded, the potency of his aura was not like this. His bloodline is strong, but being mixed with Yuna's had tempered it somehow. Or at least communicated that Haruka was not available as a mate or resource. He felt less exposed then. Protected in some innate way.

It is a shame. In being bonded, this singular benefit paled in comparison to all the other detriments forced upon him.

After Haruka's mishap, and a brief squabble about who would pay (wherein which Nino proved triumphant), they left the bar. A driver from the Bianchi estate was already waiting at the curb, so they climbed inside and were soon in motion.

Haruka is absently gazing out the window when he hears Nino's voice in the comfortable silence. "I'm sorry..."

He whips his head against the seat to stare at Nino. "Why should you be?"

"That happened because of what I did. Then the low-level vamp came up and all the honorifics and bowing. You hate honorifics and bowing."

Sitting up straighter, Haruka focuses and meets his eyes. “Nino, you do not need to apologize—*never* apologize to me for something like this. I enjoy and will always encourage your confidence and initiative. Besides I—I consumed that bottle too quickly. Inevitably what happened is my responsibility.”

Nino relaxes his shoulders. “I’m glad you liked the wine.”

“It was exceptional,” Haruka smiles. “Honorifics be damned.” He relaxes a little when Nino laughs and sits back, his friend’s earlier tension dissipating.

“Do you think... your aura registers so strongly because you keep it restricted all the time? Maybe that’s part of the issue?”

“Perhaps...” Haruka watches him fondly. Nino always notices these arbitrary, small things about Haruka’s character. His innate preferences and grievances. Things Haruka never remembers explicitly stating at any given moment, but Nino takes the context clues across each interaction, each conversation and weaves them all together.

“Nino, what do you dislike?” Haruka knows that Nino dislikes stuffy vampires and aristocracy events, but what about little things? Specific things.

“In what context?” Nino blinks, his amber eyes confused. The glare of a passing light catches them in the darkness of the backseat, making his irises flash for the briefest moment.

“In general,” Haruka smiles.

Nino looks straight ahead, thinking for a moment. “Wet socks.”

Haruka laughs at this because it truly feels random. Nino goes on.

“Food stuck between my teeth. When it’s been too long since the last time I fed and my incisors pulse and throb. It’s like, shut up I *know*—I don’t need this added stress... When a human asks to see my fangs. Oh! Standing in line. I really hate long lines.”

“Many of your grievances are centered around your teeth.”

“My teeth are important, Haru.”

“And doesn’t everyone hate these things?”

Nino shrugs. “I don’t know. There might be some wet-socks lovers out there. People who get off on organized crowds.”

Still laughing, Haruka shifts and slides closer, leaning into him and holding his chin in his fingertips. Haruka takes a breath, grinning. “Nino Bianchi, you are truly enchanting.”

Nino returns his smile, his voice low. “Yeah? Because I have weird hang-ups about my teeth?”

“Because you are unquestionably authentic. I am mesmerized by you.”

Haruka leans in, his intention to start slow as he parts his lips and gently flickers his tongue against Nino’s bottom lip. But Nino promptly opens his mouth and meets him, smoothly dipping into him and wrapping the fingers of one hand at the back of Haruka’s neck.

How long can they do this? The intensity of their affection grows with each passing day—with every hour. They have only just entered this new territory. Three short days of exploration. Already, Haruka feels himself slipping. Hungry. He has set boundaries: they can only make love three times to ensure that they do not form a bond. It’s limiting. He knows. Still, they should be careful and hold out as long as they can.

They *should*.

The darkness of the backseat and the allure of Nino’s scent and warmth overtake him. Suddenly, Haruka is in a vacuum and his nature is having its own way.

As they kiss, he trails his hands down to Nino’s waist, unfastens his belt, then works at the button on his chinos. Nino leans back, short of breath. “Haru—”

Haruka unzips his pants and yanks the material apart. He is determined now. He doesn’t notice at first, but the car has stopped and they have arrived at the estate. He only realizes it when the driver speaks.

“We’re home, my lords—”

“Please leave us,” Haruka says, his voice weighted with lust. That is all. Go.

Now.

The manservant nods and quickly steps outside the car.

Nino adjusts against the seat, sensing Haruka’s objective and gaping his thighs open. He breathes a laugh. “You’re the one that said we can’t go too far, but then you’re always taking my pants off.”

Haruka crawls his fingers into Nino’s briefs, wrapping his fingers around his naked shaft. He smiles as he grips him tightly. “That is a fair assessment.”

Nino sighs in pleasure, resting his head back against the seat and exposing his neck as his eyes close. Haruka leans in, dragging his nose against his flesh before licking him.

He is truly gluttonous tonight. Haruka is drinking, kissing and flirting. Licking, feeding and sticking his hands down this poor male's pants without even asking. If he were to look in a mirror at this exact moment, he wouldn't recognize himself. When has he ever behaved this way? With such abandon? Perhaps never. Even when he was bonded, he was always very respectful. Cautious.

He is thinking about his behavior as he sits up from Nino's neck. He really should control himself.

"Why'd you stop?" Nino's voice is low as he lifts his head, opening his eyes.

"May I feed from you?"

Smiling, Nino wraps his fingers into Haruka's hair to cradle his head. He pulls him in and places a firm kiss on his mouth before he answers. "You can always feed from me. I told you before you don't need to ask." Nino kisses him again, this time following the line of his jaw bone.

"I worry... It feels as if I am gradually losing sense of my inhibition when I am with you..."

Nino pauses, looking directly into Haruka's face. "*Good. Feed.*" He relaxes back and closes his eyes once more. He gently lifts his hips to encourage Haruka's hand at his groin.

He leans into the cinnamon-mahogany vampire again, deciding to indulge. To simply enjoy him and give him pleasure. His nature is urging him to do so. It always is.

Haruka licks up the length of his flesh. The taste of Nino's skin is salty and warm against his tongue. His eyes alight just as he bites down into him, sinking his incisors deep into his body. Nino practically melts underneath his hold, exhaling a throaty groan as Haruka feeds and tightly grips his hardness in his palm. Haruka closes his burning eyes—the rich, spicy sweetness of Nino's blood fills him.

In exchange, he gives Nino access to his mind. He allows him to feel how pleasing his blood is to him—how perfect and fulfilling. How no other vampire's blood has ever tasted this sublimely delicious to him, and how he's never enjoyed another person's company the way he does Nino's. Never trusted anyone so openly.

Haruka pulls harder at his flesh, his mind reaching deeper to grasp the innate boundary of Nino's vampiric aura. He senses it, only pulling at its

metaphorical edges when he feels Nino tense and spill over in physical ecstasy in his palm.

But Haruka isn't finished. He sucks harder, coaxing and snatching his aura up from his gut like a hunter quickly grasping a fish from a lake. He releases Nino's energy in a rush of bubbly warmth, his aura swirling bright and dazzling within the confines of the dark car.

Lifting his head, Haruka cleans the healing puncture marks on Nino's neck, then sits up straight. He watches in awe as Nino's beautiful aura slowly fizzles out—the smell of him flooding his senses in the intimate space. Nino is slouched and breathing, his chest deeply rising and falling with his eyes closed. Haruka brings the back of his hand to his mouth and licks at the wetness there. He shrugs. He is gorging himself tonight. Wildly out of control.

Nino opens his heavy lids and Haruka pauses in his gluttony, his hand still at his mouth. Their eyes meet in a moment of silence before Nino smiles in a bubbly laugh. He falls over onto his side against the backseat. Haruka watches him, blinking. “Wh-what is it?”

He laughs for another moment before he exhales a heavy sigh, the sound of it like the beginning of a cheerful song. “You're just... *not* what I was expecting.”

Haruka leans over his body, his palm resting against the seat. “What... does that mean?”

“In life,” Nino smiles, turning his head to focus his amber gaze on him. “I never expected you—or that someone like you could exist... That I could feel like this and be like this with another person.”

Haruka bends down so that their faces are close and he can feel the warmth of Nino's skin. He whispers, “I echo your sentiments.” He presses his forehead into Nino, but he doesn't kiss him. They simply rest there in an isolated moment, breathing each other in as if they're synchronizing themselves. Quietly interlocking the energy of their mutual understanding and contentment.

After a long, peaceful moment, Nino opens his eyes and places a quick kiss on his mouth. “Next time you have my cock in your hand, please don't stop in the middle to be polite. Can we agree on that?”

Haruka blinks, taken aback as he sits straight. He grins as he helps to pull Nino up from the seat. “Better late than never?” he asks.

“No,” Nino sits upright, busy adjusting himself. “Better *never* in that particular circumstance.”

SUNDAY

11:25 a.m.

Haruka's bags are packed at his side. The car is out front and a manservant is waiting to drive him to the airport. The only hurdle is saying goodbye to the handsome vampire presently holding him captive within his arms as they stand in the foyer. Not even "goodbye" necessarily. More like, "see you next week." Though much less final, it is still proving difficult.

Nino squeezes him tight, his arms wrapped around Haruka's waist and his face pressed into the concave of his neck. Haruka's arms are comfortably wrapped around his shoulders. It has not escaped Haruka's awareness that Nino is fixated with the curve of his neck. Almost constantly, he kisses him there or simply rests his face there to breathe against his skin.

Haruka should offer himself. He knows. It is natural that with this level of intimacy—Haruka's feeding deeply from Nino, pulling his aura and physically arousing him—Nino's innate nature requires more from him. Even if Nino himself refuses to ask, his body *needs* it. Haruka is taking from him, wantonly indulging in him. In turn, he should reciprocate and give of himself.

He will. Soon. When their circumstance is more stable and they can openly rely on each other. Hopefully in his realm. Hopefully.

"Are you sure you don't want to take some almond biscotti?" Nino's voice is muffled against his neck. "You really liked it—and Chef Marco can wrap some up for you for the flight?"

"No," Haruka laughs. "Thank you, but I have truly overindulged this past week." The last seven days, he's felt like someone exposed to a glorious buffet for the first time ever, and he has eaten *everything*.

Everywhere he's looked, there have been wonderful things for the eyes and stomach to behold. It hasn't only been food (although there has been plenty of that, too). All the good things life has to offer—meaningful work and camaraderie, romance, intimacy and laughter, delicious food and beautiful landscapes. New meetings and refined entertainment. He's even let his aura sloppily release. The Bianchi Clan has generously blessed him with all these things, but now he should return to his real life. It's time to restart the strict diet. Only celery and watercress for the next several days.

Nino lifts his head from Haruka's neck, concern in his amber eyes. "I don't think you've overindulged... Did you enjoy being here?"

"I have not enjoyed anything or *anyone* this much in decades." Haruka shifts his chin forward to swiftly catch Nino's mouth before he continues. "Your home and community are exceptional."

"Everyone loved having you here," Nino smiles, resting his forehead against Haruka's temple. "I—I enjoy being with you. Us being together. It feels... right."

Haruka squeezes his shoulders a little tighter and closes his eyes. "It does." He doesn't know why he is so openly emotional with this vampire. It is peculiar and not his typical behavior. Something about Nino and his candid personality... Even when things were new between them and he confessed his abuse as a child, he has always been honest and communicative. It is not something Haruka is used to, but he is trying to adapt. He wants to.

"Your grace, we should leave soon to catch your plane," the driver says, standing just inside the bright doorframe as Haruka looks up.

"I am coming," Haruka assures. The manservant bows and takes Haruka's suitcases to the car. Haruka focuses on Nino. "I look forward to seeing you next weekend?"

Nino squeezes his waist, pressing their bodies into each other even tighter. "Maybe you'll finally let me touch you and get *you* off next time?"

"I—I am very content pleasing you. You nourish me." Haruka swallows, embarrassed by the sudden frankness of the conversation and his stiff groin. He is *trying* to adapt...

"Okay, but I want to do things to you, too. Why am I always the one half naked? Or fully naked... This isn't a complaint, but..." Nino grins and runs his fingers into the top of his thick, coppery head. They drop arms and Haruka takes a step back, rubbing the nape of his neck with his palm. In an odd moment, he doesn't know what to say.

Thankfully, Nino saves him by cupping his face with both hands on his cheeks. "Next weekend?"

Haruka nods. "Next weekend." Another soft kiss, then another before they separate. Haruka moves toward the door with Nino close behind. When he's outside and walking toward the car, Nino calls out, his voice warm and affectionate.

"Buon rientro, amore mio."

Smiling, Haruka turns as he moves. “Am I your love?”

Nino’s amber eyes shine in the sunlight as he grins, his teeth white and beautiful. They are indeed important.

“Sì,” Nino says.

Haruka lifts his chin, watching Nino just before entering the vehicle. “Tu sei mio.” He watches as Nino practically glows with delight, running a hand into the top of his head again and beaming. As Haruka settles himself in the backseat, he feels it too. His nature warmly twisting with affection for the golden vampire. For this kind male that he already misses.

You are mine.

He loves Nino. Selfishly. He can’t give Nino what he deserves—a proper mate and bond if that is what he truly desires. But Haruka will give him anything else to keep him close. To please him and make him happy. He shouldn’t monopolize him this way. It isn’t right. And if Nino ever wanted to establish a genuine bond with another vampire... It would hurt terribly. It might destroy Haruka, but he will understand. He has to.

For now, simply being together is enough. Without the burdensome weight of a bond or strict labels. Without rigid expectations or great personal sacrifices. They love each other and they trust each other. It is enough. For however long he is blessed to have Nino this way, he will accept it.

Haruka doesn’t want to bond ever again. He won’t. Bonding ruined his life and he will never forget that fact. But where his life was once a pile of shattered glass, Nino has started to rebuild. Piece by piece, carefully. Lovingly, he has helped put Haruka back together, giving him some semblance of shape and meaning again. Regardless of what their future holds, Haruka will always be grateful to this male and the tenderness and friendship he has shown him.

I will be good to him. I’ll be excellent.

He can’t bond with him—and Nino hasn’t asked. But anything else Haruka can do to nourish and please him, he’ll do. He loves him. And as Nino has taught and shown him over the past few months, that is what love is.

Thank you for reading!
*The second book in the Lore and Lust series, **The Vanishing** will be released on April 1st, 2021.*



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