

Take your time.

[/u/Bilgebun](#)

It was, more often than not, the smiley ones I watched out for. While I checked their IDs, their gazes would frequently flicker over to their friends for support. The more jittery among them would chatter away with quotes plucked directly from the latest Fortune magazine or how "buying their own place was the best thing to happen to them". If only they knew they weren't the only ones saying those things ...

Inevitably, after about fifteen seconds of my careful, silent scrutiny of their spotless plastic cards, the first tracks of sweat would begin to appear on their foreheads. Their conversations would die down, and the fidgeting multiply. The desperate ones would say, with frequent glances over my shoulder at doorway through which pulsing lights and throbbing music emerged, "Could we, uh, hurry up? Our friends are waiting for us inside."

"I'm sorry, but you're underage. This ID isn't valid," I said.

Sometimes, I wished I could just tell them the truth—that I could identify crap-all about them from the card. The printed numbers meant little against the large, glimmering digits floating above their heads. It'd taken me several childhood years and the help of a mirror to figure them out, but they made me damned good at my job.

"This can't be right," the young man said, jaws tightening even as a visible, nervous shudder coursed through his body.

"I'm guessing, seventeen?" I almost laughed at his shocked expression. Jerking my thumb toward his older male companion, I said, "Your brother'll just have to take you elsewhere."

"C'mon, let's go," the other man said, pulling him out and shooting me one last dirty look.

Such was the life of a street-level NYC bouncer. As I was writing down the ID's details on a register, I heard the clicking of heels approach. Next moment, a slim, small hand slid an ID card onto my podium.

I looked up and did a double-take—literally jumping back a step. She was pretty, more girl-next-door than supermodel, with loose auburn hair hanging to her shoulders framing a lean face. About five feet tall, she wore a tight-fitting black dress that terminated at

mid-thigh, though her figure wasn't anything more spectacular than I'd been seeing for the past hour or so.

So, your typical college girl lookalike ... but for the number above her head.

Three thousand and nine.

What. The. Hell.

"There might be an issue with your age," I blurted before I could stop myself.

"Excuse me?" she said in a faintly European accent. Other than her mouth, the rest of her hadn't moved at all—even the fingers clutching the purse in front of her were like cold marble. I could feel goosebumps popping up on my arms as I reached for her ID.

"Sorry, just give me a moment to check," I said, darting furtive looks at the age number above her head as though I expected it to change at any time. I'd never been wrong before; perhaps this was the first time?

Her name was Helena Ricci. Born here in the US twenty-two years ago. I ran the scanner over it. Clean. Shit.

"Er, I'll need just a moment to register you into our system," I said.

"Take your time. I've got plenty," she said. Her eyes remained cold above her smile.

Once the process was complete, I handed the card back to her. "Have a pleasant evening."

She took the card and stalked off into the club. I felt tempted to go after her—so many questions were in my head—but that would mean revealing my gift. And one didn't go around spouting such nonsense so easily, so my dad had warned me.

So I threw my attention back to the impatient and growing line of patrons waiting for me.

The hours flew by. I kept an eye out for Helena among the clubbers trickling out. Once, I thought I saw her in the midst of a small group of men, who went and lounged by a Levante parked not far away. They smoked for a while before returning to the club.

At about four in the morning, when activity was visibly slowing down, she left the club, flashing me a grin on the way. That, more than anything, helped make up my mind.

"Helena," I called, jogging from my post to catch up to her. "I've got something I want to ask you."

She paused in her step, but maintained her distance out of my arm's reach. "Yes?"

I tore my eyes away from her numbers and met her searching gaze. "How old are you?"

She snorted. "Really? We're still not over this?"

"I can see people's ages, above their heads," I said in a rush. "I've always been able to—since I was a child. And I see that you're—"

"Quiet!" she snapped, looking around almost fearfully. "You must be dreaming, or imagining things. I'm only twenty-two, recently graduated—"

"That's bullshit," I said. "I've never been wrong. I know what I see. And I'm most definitely not high or anything."

She scoffed. "Stay away from me, mister. I've got Mace here in my purse." With that, she hurried away.

"I told you my secret. Don't I deserve a little truth from you?" I said.

She stopped in her tracks and turned her head halfway. "I never agreed to a trade."

"I won't say anything to anyone, I promise," I said. "I just—seeing you is almost the same as NASA revealing that alien life exists on the Moon or something. Can't you imagine what it's like for me?"

For a long time, she remained quiet. I could almost see the gears turning in her head. At last, she said softly, "Fine. Come, I'll show you."

Elated, I followed. She didn't speak to me as we traversed the silent, shadowy streets, but I held my tongue as well. If I asked one question too many, she could turn me away.

About fifteen minutes later, we arrived at an unmarked red door in a back alley, sandwiched between two dumpsters. I frowned at our surroundings, suddenly realizing that if she wanted to rob me—or worse—I wouldn't be discovered until the next week probably.

She knocked on the door, but instead of a rapping sound, musical notes floated from somewhere inside. Then, it swung open to reveal a heavily bearded giant of a man. His fierce gaze took one look at Helena before his expression melted with warmth, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"Who is this?" he said.

"With luck, someone smart enough to keep his life," she said.

I tried not to gulp as the man held out a brick-like hand for me to shake. "I'm Olander," he said.

"I'm Jeff, pleased to—holy crap, you're over a thousand years old," I said.

He blinked in astonishment. "How did you know? Oh, Helena, what have you brought us?"

"He might be useful. Shall we go in?" she said.

Olander led us into a long, stone tunnel with an arched ceiling. It looked extremely cramped for the big man, but he hunched his shoulders in a manner that indicated familiarity. The two of them spoke in a language I didn't know. Somewhere in the distance, there was a constant gush of water—perhaps we were near one of the city's waterways?

Moments later, we reached another door, this one made entirely of solid, carved wood. I had only begun to marvel at its surface when Olander pushed it in and revealed the chamber within.

I gaped, open-mouthed, at the twelve Roman columns supporting a ceiling of painted frescoes, spaced around the cavernous place lit by huge chandeliers and colorful wall-mounted lanterns. In the center of the room was a fountain almost ten feet tall, crystalline water spilling from the top into three descending circular pools and sparkling with light.

People of various races and attire filled the room, mingling in small groups; eating from the buffet tables, drinking, admiring paintings hanging on a section of wall, or listening to an orchestral quartet on a small stage.

And above all, I was stunned at the numbers everywhere. Two thousand and eighty-two. One thousand five hundred. One thousand and six. Three—freaking three—thousand, seven hundred and forty-four.

"How?" I stammered. "What is this?"

Helena didn't answer except to point at the fountain. And then it dawned on me. Before I could inquire further, she pulled me back out of the chamber into the tunnel.

"Would you be interested in a new job here at our club?" she said.

"I, er ... what job?"

"Doorman." She sighed. "You see, we can't have too many of ... us ... running around the world. Defeats the purpose of actively staying out of the history books, if you know what I mean. Anyone below a thousand must not be allowed in—sometimes, it's really hard to tell. But you already know that with your current job."

"I'll have to think about it," I said. My head felt like it was about to split apart. Those people ... some of their clothes looked like they predated writing. "Are there ... younger people ... trying to get in, too?"

"More than you know," she said in a grave tone. "Olander takes care of them, usually, but it's really insulting if you turn away the wrong patrons. And grudges can last for a long time with us."

"Well, you already know we have a great healthcare package, networking opportunities, insurance and investment returns. I won't pressure you to give me an answer tonight," she said, going to stand in the doorway. "Take your time. I'm in no hurry."