

That Dust Life

~~An Anno Amagium Short~~

A Risso Delorusso Joint

by Hank Whitson

“Come on, man! I can’t sell this shit!” Risso complained.

“Draw your own then,” Jemu said flippantly.

Risso sighed and looked around Jemu’s room eyes catching on an excellently drawn, full-color picture of a comic book hero resting on his desk. It was next-level compared to the collection of half-finished line art Jemu presented him with. *It’s alive. Full of brilliant, youthful passion. That drawing is a fucking memory all by itself, and if I can feel that, Sugarshine will get wet just looking at it.* Risso picked up the drawing and pointed at it.

“How about this one? I’ll pay you one hundred for it. This one all by itself.”

“I like that one,” Jemu said defiantly, carefully plucking the drawing out of Risso’s hands and placing it on the desk. “My parents like it too. Dad said it should be in my portfolio. If it goes missing, they’ll know something is up.”

“Dude, you’re killing me here,” Risso said, slapping the drawings Jemu initially proffered. “These are you just going through the motions.”

“Going through the motions is how you get better. Look, Nimsey will be home soon. Take them or leave them.”

Risso needed to be well-good and gone by the time Jemu’s sister arrived. They had attended Arroyo High together, and she knew his rep. Besides, a twenty-two-year-old dude alone with a thirteen-year-old boy was always a bad look. Worse if you were in his bedroom. Worse still if you were carrying five hundred in cash.

“Fine.” Risso pulled out his wallet and shelled out three twenties, then went about gathering the drawings. Jemu looked at him in outrage.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold up. We said one twenty!” Jemu’s voice cracked as he said it. *Christ. More bad news.* Risso made a note and continued the negotiation:

“Give me scratch paper and get scratch paper back. You’re lucky I’m not paying you in spare fucking change.”

“Fine. We’re done then.”

“That’s cool. I’ll go to Kité Rodriguez from now on.”

Jemu’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Kité’s anatomy sucks dick! He can’t draw feet to save his life and all his tits look fake!”

“Yeah, but he colors *everything*,” Risso said, like he was savoring every syllable.

Jemu took a deep breath, and pulled his masterpiece of his desk.

“One twenty for this one, *and* the one twenty we agreed upon for all the rest.”

“Two hundred for all of it.”

“Two twenty, final offer,” Jemu said, crossing his arms.

Before Risso could counter again, they heard the gentle crackle of leaves under tires, and the gentle, urdic hum of an automotive gyve engine from below. Both of them froze, then Jemu lunged for his room’s side window, which overlooked the driveway.

“Oh shit, dude! It’s my fucking mom!”

"I thought you said she was working late!"

"That's what she told me!"

Risso knew he needed to get out of there. But he needed the drawings almost as bad.

"Two ten for all of it," Risso said.

"Fine, just get the fuck out!"

Heh. I would've done two twenty. Risso pulled out the extra money and carefully slid the drawings in a manilla envelope. Jemu continued to watch from his bedroom window. Poor kid looked like he was gonna piss himself. *I'm pretty close myself.*

"Dude, she's walking to the back door!" he screeched, voice cracking again.

"Open your front window!"

"What? You'll break your fucking legs!"

"That's my problem! Just do it!"

It was an old Craftsman style window; the sort that pulled up rather than swinging open. Jemu unlatched it and struggled to pull it up. Risso pushed him out of the way when he made no progress, but the house must have settled funny, or the sill was painted over from the outside, or some other bullshit, because it wasn't budging. Risso grunted, putting every fiber of his wiry muscles and the full force of his meager *wyrd* behind his effort. With that surge of effort, the window finally cracked upwards.

He put the envelope of drawings in his teeth, ducked through the window, grabbed its sill, and lowered himself into a drop-fall as best as he could manage. The bushes below buffered his fall somewhat, at the expense of scratching him up pretty bad, and he bruised his shoulder tumbling to the lawn. It was also noisy as all hell.

Move! Move! Go, go, go! Risso stumbled to his feet and took off across the lawn, expecting to find some asshole neighbor watering his lawn, or a cop cruiser to come rolling by, but luck was on his side for once.

And that's good. God knows I could use a fucking break.

But the relief was short-lived. As he rounded the corner, slowing to a brisk but sane pace, he remembered Jemu Hashimoto's soprano cracking. *Twice.* Risso groaned and wiped his face, pulling at his blonde stubble. *Little shit's probably gonna hit puberty next week. And then I really am sunk.* Kité was a little bit younger—*eleven or something.* But he's no replacement. Even though he colored every drawing, it was just a hobby for him. Talented for his age, but only half as passionate about art as Jemu.

And the passion is what Sugar pays for.

It was surprisingly hard to find kids who were willing to sell artwork, even if they were making mad bank of it. Or rather, finding the kids was easy, but finding kids who were smart enough to be cool and hide it from their parents was a different deal entirely.

Risso reached into his back pocket for his cigarettes, only to discover they had been crushed by his fall. His eye twitched. He pulled one and lit it anyway.

"Super stoked to see how this day gets worse," Risso muttered.

It had been a bad morning.

After waiting three days, it was clear that a full kilo of Sunnyside had been seized on the way to a customer in New Amsterdam. His buyer called to say he was cancelling payment in favor of another supplier. It was possible the package arrived and the buyer randomly decided

to dick Risso, but it didn't seem likely. They had a good relationship to date and people in the Game didn't throw those assets away casually.

Regardless, Risso was out eight grand. Sunnyside was hard to procure. It came from Summer Court Royals. Pure euphoria that was even more potent when taken in season, and they were square in the middle of Leo. The absolute height of swimming pool weather. Best possible time to be a seller. Unfortunately, to get the best possible price for primo product, you had to go continental instead of local.

Gotta risk it for that biscuit.

Risso preferred to do business person-to-person at Arroyo's local colleges. Cal Tech students and honor rollers could never get enough gnome dust, which had the bizarrely specific side effect of making people better at math, especially when engineering or finance were involved. It also seemed to give ADHD meds an extra kick. Art Center students who had grown bored of cannabis relished muse dust—when Risso could get it—or pixie powder. The latter made up the bulk of his business by volume, but it also yielded the slimmest ROI.

There was also a solid market for ogre, orc, and troll dust among athletes, but that shit was as bad as bath salts and PCP—dangerous to customers and, by extension, his bottom line. *Sure, you might set a local homerun record, but you could just as easily try to fistfight a car for looking at you funny or some shit.* Local headlines like that led to pointed questions from cops—*asfalis* and *amagia* alike. *Nobody needs that noise.*

He stayed away from high school students for similar reasons. Drugs hit them harder, and their young minds were poorly equipped to deal with the adventures that entailed. They also spoke too easily, said too much, and said it too loud. Begging preteens and middle schoolers for art was bad enough.

It was creepy, at the very least. There was no getting around that. But it wasn't evil. In fact, it even did a bit of good. The Fae, all fae, without exception, were fanatical about kids. Fascinated to the point of stalking. To the point of abduction. Risso figured that dealing kiddie art to the fae might scratch their itch, and stop them from snatching brats up on their way home from school.

Yeah. You're a real goddamn hero. Saint Delorusso.

A sigh escaped his throat, and Ixina Delgado's voice drifted back into his head. *"The saddest thing about you, Risso, is that your Drug Dealer with a Heart of Gold shtick isn't actually a shtick. It isn't ironic. You want to play the Game—you think you can win the Game—without anybody getting hurt. But that's just not the world we live in. Even in Arroyo."* A pang of loneliness rattled through his *wyrd* and left his flesh goosed despite the dry heat.

I miss you, Ixie.

—II—

As Risso drew near his apartment, he heard a muffled, conversation between serious voices leaking out of his door, narrowly cracked open. *Oh shit.* He looked around wildly, ready to run at the sight of uniforms or a cruiser. Nothing.

Cautiously, he touched the knob, heart jump-kicking his tonsils with every beat. He pushed it open, ready to bolt, only to find Kavus Stern seated on his couch, watching a police procedural on his *symvision*. Judging by his bloodshot eyes, and the faint effervescent tinge to his *wyrd*, he was bombed beyond all recognition. Risso sighed heavily and shook his head.

“Nah. It’s cool. Come on in. Make yourself at home.”

“Why’d you give me a spare key if you didn’t want me to use it?” Kavus asked, languidly looking away from the big screen.

“Pretty sure I said ‘for emergencies only.’ Least you can do is lock the door.”

“I considered it. But wouldn’t it be more startling to find somebody behind a locked door? Shit’s bad for your heart. Besides, I turned up the TV so you’d know I was here.”

“Yeah, watching a goddamn cop show! I thought I was being raided, man. It’s been that kind of morning.”

Kavus turned down the show and looked at Risso reproachfully.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Goddamn Sunnyside package still hasn’t reached the east coast. Buyer pulled out.”

“Dude, that blows,” Kavus said sympathetically.

“He said he’d ship it back at-cost if it shows up, but that’s just another chance for it to get snatched, you know? And then I still have to find another buyer.”

“Fucking brutal.”

“It be like that.”

Risso retrieved a coke from the fridge and sank onto the couch next to his best friend.

Kavus was the last person on the planet somebody would guess for a stoner. His dark hair was always cut crisp and perfectly parted. Ever overdressed, even among the preppie masses of USC Law.

They couldn’t stand each other when they first met in elementary. But after migrating to the same middle school, and then the same high school, Mister Straight A’s found Captain Class Clown behind the gym with a joint—just pot then. Kavus was upset about something—neither of them could remember what—and in a fit of rebellion, he asked for a puff. Impressed and surprised, Risso indulged him. Then they just talked. Compared notes, found the common links, and that was that.

“No internship today?”

“Big boss is on vacation, so my boss told me to take the day off.”

Risso winced as he placed his arm over the back of the couch.

“You hurt?”

“Kinda. Had to jump out of a goddamn window to avoid my artist’s mom.”

“Well, as your future attorney and general life guru, I humbly recommend you get high as fuck. Look. I have even prepared a flight.”

Kavus spoke with the over-deliberate cadence of somebody trying to not appear *too* high. He pushed his bag of chips out of the way, revealing an array of spliffs spread across Risso’s sticker-covered coffee table. They were color-coded—*because fucking of course Kavus would color-code his joints*—three light blue, three burnt yellow, and one deep purple.

“I got some spring pixie there, some sand elf here, and this one? Genuine muse dust.”

“For real? Wait. Where’d you get all this, man? You cheating on me?”

“Downtown to Arroyo is a bitch of a drive, brother. Besides, you never charge me what your shit is worth and it makes me feel bad. This is my means of...recompense.”

Risso took a deep breath. Getting blasted sounded very, very good.

“I dunno, dude. I’m meeting Sugar at dusk.”

"It's Leo the fifteenth, man," Kavus said, and checked his watch. "Three in the PM now. Won't get dark until like seven at the earliest. You seriously gonna mope for four hours?"

"I mean, I planned on doing some reading for school. Missed most of the homework, so I need to ace the tests." Kavus paused a second too long before nodding and offering encouragement. Risso waved it away with disgust and said: "Don't jack me off, dude. I know I'm gonna fail this term too. But it's nice to pretend."

"You are... you are fuckin' *squandered* on school, man. It's just not your thing. I thrive in it because it's all about that good boy bullshit. Kissing asses and checking boxes. You've never had the patience for that shit because it is so removed from... reality."

"Maybe. But I don't have the heart to make it in the Game, either. Even in suburbia."

Kavus didn't have an answer. He picked up the light blue roach, lit it, and took a hard pull. Risso salivated. It must have come through his *wyrd*, because Kavus grinned and extended the joint to him. Risso sighed, looked away, then snatched it out of his friend's fingers and inhaled deep.

You could do anything with dust. Risso generally preferred smoking, because it hit quick, faded quick, and carried almost no risk of developing quirks. Edibles were fun if you had more time to burn—they invariably tasted gritty as shit, but gave you a good long high. Snorting was something of a party trick; an intense, immediate blast. There were also absolute maniacs who shot it, but that was the fast track to serious withdrawal and almost guaranteed lesser quirks after repeated use—growing goat horns, foliage for hair, or other bizarre faen shit.

The pixie was very, very nice. Smooth as silk. Made Risso's *wyrd* feel like it was being massaged by gentle, ethereal rain, while his skin was buffeted by unseen butterfly wings. Kavus said something too dumb to fully process, but Risso giggled all the same.

They segued immediately into the sand elf, which was surprisingly mild for what it was, but still felt like basking on a big river rock at sunset. Colors grew extra vibrant, and colors that were already vibrant seemed to sort of sing. They turned the *symvision* back on, trading cops for retro cartoons, which was always a winning trade in Risso's estimation.

The purple joint stared at them. Beckoning. Begging. Muses weren't common anymore and their dust was a precious, expensive commodity. Risso picked it up, stared intently, then passed it to Kavus.

"All yours man."

"What? Seriously?"

"This was nice. Just, like, exactly what I needed. But I'm good now. And I don't want to ruin a trip to dreamland knowing I've got work waiting on the other side, you know?"

Kavus nodded solemnly, and studied the joint as Risso had. After a second's inspection, he extracted an old-timey, silver cigarette case from his pocket, placed the joint inside it carefully, and patted it twice with his index finger before snapping the case shut.

"Dude, don't deprive yourself on my account," Risso protested.

"Nah. Dreamland is best enjoyed with friends. We'll save it. Maybe share it with Ixie."

"Think that ship sailed for the last time," Risso said, hopeless and rueful.

"Bullshit. She's as stuck on you as you are on her. Give it a minute."

Risso nodded and forced a smile, hoping Kavus would drop the subject. They sat for a long moment, enjoying the fading strains of the high. Time dissolved, or at least got very fuzzy around the edges. Finally, Kavus spoke up:

"What's your plan?"

"I dunno. Guess we could play a game? Grab a burger or something."

"No, I mean like...later," Kavus managed. Barely.

"I told you. I'm meeting Sugar to get more product."

"No, man—I mean, like, long term."

Risso took a deep breath and exhaled.

"Keep livin' that dust life. Deal 'til I die, I guess."

"Jumping out windows to hide from soccer moms is no kinda life, man. Neither is selling fae dandruff to ungrateful assholes like me."

"It's not actually dandruff," Risso said. "Think of fae as like, fires, right? Except not actually fire—more like really complicated anima—but anyway, fae dust is their smoke. You're ingesting a little bit of them. A brief taste of sweet madness."

Kavus nodded and folded his lip approvingly.

"Well, if the drugs fall through, you can always pursue poetry."

Risso laughed.

"I dunno. The dream is to go straight. This is gonna sound stupid, but I believe in what I do. Like, it's a necessary service, right? Good people like you need a release. Something to take the edge off. And we are on the cusp of legalization! If I can get squared away before that happens, be ready to ride that first wave—I'm set. I know product. As a business man. As a connoisseur. As a fuckin'..." It took Risso nearly five seconds to remember the word. "As an *ambassador*."

Kavus raised an eyebrow.

"An ambassador?" he asked, laughing to the point of coughing.

"Yeah, man. You gotta understand fae. But like, reputable fae. The fucking cartelleros are all in deep with Autumn and Winter because they're also running guns, and human trafficking, and like, fucking terrorism, man. And the human courts will never fly with the unseele courts. Nah. If we are going to legalize, it's gonna be with Summer or Spring."

"Honestly, they all seem pretty fucking tricky to me, dude," Kavus said.

"Says the lawyer," Risso scoffed. Kavus shrugged in concession. Risso shook his head and continued "Point is, I have an established connection in the Faed. And I am making connections with the right kind of people, too. Entrepreneurs. Not criminals. That's why this fucking lost package hurts me so bad. It's not just the money—it's the relationships. It's reliability. Or at least, the ability to appear reliable, which, honestly, may be more important."

"I got an idea," Kavus said.

"You *think* you got an idea," Risso said, tauntingly. It sounded funnier in his head.

"Nah, I do. I've been thinking about what area I want to specialize in, right? And you are right. This is important. I think I'll go into drug law. Work towards reform where I can. Maybe represent you when you launch your business."

Risso wasn't sure whether it was the dust talking, or Kavus was serious. His parents were liberal, but a very particular kind of carefully manicured, respectable liberal. *Hard to imagine you telling your mom you're gonna be a drug advocate after she spent god knows how much cash to put you through law school.*

But him saying it was a nice gesture. *A nice dream even.*

Risso raised his coke in a toast.

Kavus obliged.

—III—

Risso left the law student to snooze on the couch while he went to see Sugarshine. A mild headache lingered in the shadow of his receding hair, and he popped a pair of pain meds while waiting for the bus to Brookside Park.

Upon arriving, he took a looping stroll around the baseball fields and playgrounds, only moving to his spot when he was confident nobody was around. It was nestled atop a set of crumbling stone steps, built into the slope of the arroyo, and now overtaken by trees.

Fae couldn't cross over from the Faed just everywhere. They needed to find little holes in reality; liminal spaces between nature and civilization that were commonly referred to as soft-spots. They were a dealer's true currency. Their most precious commodity. In the city, lives came cheaper than a good soft spot. The suburbs were slightly more civilized, but from the moment he started dealing, at the tender age of sixteen, Risso never once gave up a spot.

He had been burned twice over the course of his career, by no fault of his own. Both times, people reported strange sights and sounds in the park, and the Keepers sealed the breaches overnight. But after some frantic searching on the Arcanet's dark web, Risso found an illegal scrying ritual that allowed him to speak with Sugarshine and they managed to reconnect.

The dryad had yet to arrive, so he sat cross-legged, reviewing his offerings. After a moment, there was a gentle rustle of wind, and the prickle of magic against the back of Risso's wyrd. A deep sweet voice addressed him.

"How do I find you this evening, Mr. Delorusso?"

Risso stood and turned to see a shorter woman with literal peach skin and honeysuckle hair standing before him. She wore a sheer dress woven from wisteria petals and lacewings in alternation, accentuating her lithe, shapely figure and pert breasts. It was always hard for Risso not to stare. He bowed low, like some old-timey douchebag, and said:

"Far better, now that you are here, my lady dryad."

Fae loved human theatrics. They lived for it. She extended her hand, adorned with delicate, jointed rings that ran up her forearms like metal spiderwebs, and he knelt to kiss her fingers.

"What offerings do you have today?"

"A masterpiece," Risso said smiling.

He extracted the manilla envelope and showed her the heroic vigilante, midflight in primary colored-spandex, cape outstretched and trailing over a vibrant metropolis. She shivered as she saw it, and breathed heavily as she touched it.

"My. Are they all of such quality?"

"By comparison, the others are, admittedly, a little lacking," Risso said.

He fanned out the other drawings of sketches, anatomically adroit, but unfinished and dead by comparison. Her expression withered into a frown immediately, and she fixed him with a flat, baleful stare.

"Keep them."

"Oh, come on now," Risso pleaded. "There's effort in here. There's hours of dedication!"

"Do you really think homework is what I'm after?"

Risso opened his mouth to respond, but knew there was no winning that argument. He slid the drawings back into the folder and bowed his head.

“What are you willing to offer in return for the masterpiece?”

Sugar’s smile twitched.

“Don’t overplay your hand, Risso. It’s a beautiful drawing. A cherished memory made flesh, but not a masterpiece by any reckoning.”

She produced a velvet bag, filled with smaller, drawstring pouches.

“Two pounds of powder from Glass Glade pixies. One pound each of gnome and Scorch Field pixies.”

“And—You know I have to ask—these are all pure?”

“Still don’t trust me, Risso?”

“Answers like that tell me I’m smart to keep asking.”

Fae were incapable of speaking falsehood, which, maddeningly, made them the world’s best liars. Sugar smirked ever-so-slightly, as she often did during these exchanges, and Risso had a feeling that the day he forgot to ask would be the day that he received pixie cut with redcap, spriggan, or some other awful shit. *Turn somebody into an instant psychopath.*

“I swear threefold that the dust is pure-as-labeled,” she said.

“Then we have a deal, my lady.”

He received the bulging sack and placed it in his gym bag.

“I must confess,” Sugar said, admiring the drawing. “This batch isn’t the freshest. You probably only have a week to sell, even if you store them in deadmold.”

Deadmold was fae slang for plastic, which was almost entirely magically inert. Tupperware and snack bags were near-ideal storage vessels for faen substances and materials that would otherwise steadily degrade outside the Faed.

“Jesus, Sugar! You couldn’t have told me that before we shook on it?”

“I didn’t have to tell you at all,” she said mildly. “Besides, it wouldn’t have changed anything. I could feel your desperation from the other side of the veil.”

“Thanks,” Risso said witheringly. “But can you fucking blame me? You’re squeezing me really hard here. That drawing’s top notch and we both know it!”

“This drawing is the only reason we have a deal at all. That child’s energy is souring. Those other sketches are... obligations. Harbingers of adulthood.” She said the word with disgust, but her eyes lit up when she looked back at the masterpiece. “But he drew this for the pleasure of it. This is a dying breath of innocence.”

Her words were accompanied by an orgasmic shiver. Risso nodded, but said nothing. He hated it when they were obviously, undeniably creepy. And even though it happened a lot, he would never get used to it.

“Do you have a new artist lined up?” she asked.

“Yeah, I know a guy,” he said, fighting irritation. *But if Jemu’s linework isn’t passing muster, I’m not sure what you’ll make of Kité.* “It’s not easy, you know? Kids talk. Or they buy expensive shit and then their parents get curious.”

“There is a girl,” Sugar said, at once airy and imperious. “A budding poet. I believe she attends South Arroyo Middle School. Her name is Sabritta.”

Risso looked up at her, shocked. Sugarshine had never once volunteered the name of a new artist to him. She seemed to delight in his surprise and continued:

"An acquaintance in Spring shared some of her work with me. The quality is enough to make a lady jealous."

"You want me to work with her?"

"You will be richly rewarded. For one of her poems, I shall manage another package of the Summer Court Royal dust you so cherish."

Risso's jaw dropped.

"*One poem?*"

"She is gifted," Sugar said, inclining her head.

"How...how do I find her?"

"That's your affair, Mr. Delorusso. I've already been more than generous."

"Uh, yes. Yes, you have. Thank you, my lady."

The dryad woman took a step forward, stood on her toes, and pecked Risso's cheek. He could smell the dust coming off her, and it immediately made him lightheaded. The sight of her blurred, then disappeared altogether with another dry zephyr. And then Risso was alone.

—IV—

Kavus was gone when Risso got home, which was a tremendous relief. He didn't want to talk about Sugarshine's tip. He didn't want any company as he searched for his new, potential provider. *And deep down, that tells you something. Doesn't it, Risso?* He turned up music and lit a stick of pixie to drown out his inner monologue, then started looking.

Sabritta Hotchkiss did indeed attend South Arroyo Middle School. The Arcanet made it terrifyingly easy to track down children, even with nothing but a first name and a school. All it took was one search for her social media profile to show up and from there, he had the option of sending a direct message to her microblog account.

If I ever have kids, we're moving to a cabin in the middle of fucking nowhere and they're gonna stay there 'til they turn twenty. No symphones. No arcanet. No nothing.

He created a dummy account and typed an awkward message:

Hi! We haven't met, and I know this is kind of creepy, but I heard from a friend that you are a very talented poet, and I was hoping I could pay you to write something for me?

It took him an hour to work up the nerve to send it.

If she got scared, all she had to do was tell her parents, and the feds could probably track the message to his apartment. It was an enormous gambit, save for one detail: if the Fae already had a poem, she was probably selling to somebody else already. That meant she understood her part in the Game, and how it was played.

Before he could close the browser window, he got a message notification:

Garfield Park Playground. Noon. Tomorrow.

Risso felt another chill, even though it was still eighty degrees out. Again, a voice deep in his stomach told him that this was a bad idea. *In for a penny.* He tried to type a response in the affirmative, but he got a notification that the user in question had blocked his account.

Ah shit.

Sleep never arrived that night, and came late in the morning. Instead, his brain provided a vivid playlist of roughly one million different ways things could horribly wrong. A full outfit of feds might be waiting. Or an older brother with a baseball bat. Or a father with a shotgun.

And I can't really blame any of them.

Most of his artists to date had been kids he knew personally, through other people. Friends' younger siblings, and their friends with similar artistic interests. Underclassmen, when he was still in high school. It was conversational. Trading mutual favors. But this was different. It felt wrong. He realized that he was almost hoping for a trap of some kind, because if he wasn't the prey, and Sabritta wasn't bait...

I am the world's saddest, least lethal, most cowardly predator.

"You my latest creep?"

Risso fumbled his phone and jumped on the park bench. When he looked up, he saw a preteen girl wearing an unsettling, mildly amused smirk. She had long, messy brunette bangs that deliberately hung low across her eyes. She wore purple jeans and a black tee-shirt under a vest studded with pins.

"Uh. Hi. Yeah, I'm the guy."

She nodded, unconcernedly and pulled out an older model symphone. *No. Wait. Is that a burner?* She continued talking in a bored monotone while she played with her phone:

"I charge fifty now, and another fifty after your order arrives."

Risso blinked. The girl held out her hand and raised an eyebrow impatiently. Risso hastily pulled out his wallet and handed the girl a fifty. He wasn't sure what he expected, but this definitely wasn't it. He looked around for an adult eyeing him suspiciously, or a cop cruiser, or a group of cartelleros approaching with chains, glocks, and nail-bats. The girl slipped the fifty into her pocket, looking bored.

"You said a poem, right? Want it to be about anything specific?"

"Uh, nah. Just, whatever inspires you, I guess. Whatever makes you happy. Needs to be handwritten though."

"Obviously," Sabritta said. "Some of them like certain topics. Others like to think that I write with nobody in mind. If you figure out what they want, you can get more out of them."

Risso's mouth hung open slightly. *What planet is this girl from?* Sabritta continued tapping at her phone and then handed it to Risso, where an empty contact form waited.

"Enter your address. No names. This is the first and last time we meet. I mail you all my stuff, and from now on you wire me money to the account numbers included with the poems." Risso nodded and shakily typed in his address, then passed back the phone.

Sabritta looked it over and nodded. "I'm gonna walk away now. Hang around a bit before you leave or else it could look weird."

Risso nodded and then looked down. He had to manually recover his breathing rhythm. *Come on, man! It all worked out. She's more on the ball than you are.* He forced a sickly smile.

Yeah. So why do I feel like I just chugged a quart of bleach?

When Risso reached the hallway leading back to his apartment, he saw that the door was slightly ajar again. He furrowed his brow, trying to come up with something appropriately dismayed to say to Kavus, but ultimately settled on:

“Kavus, I swear to fucking—”

He froze when he saw an enormous, handsome man sitting on his couch, watching the symvision. The man turned immediately, and emanated an apology before switching it off. The air smelled good. *Shockingly good*. Before Risso could ask any questions, a woman emerged from his kitchen holding the answer: a tray of freshly-baked cookies. She was a reasonably attractive natural brunette with blonde highlights, trimmed in one of those chin-length, receding bobs with the long bangs on either side of her face. She could have been aged anywhere from mid-thirties to early forties.

“Hey there,” the woman said brightly, and extended the tray. “Cookie?”

“Uh, no. Thanks. Sorry, but who the fuck are you?”

She smiled a bright, toothy smile.

“I’m Sabritta’s mother. Lucere Hotchkiss.”

Oh shit. Oh Christ, oh shit, oh fuck.

“No! No, sweetheart, there’s no need to be afraid. Really. You wanted offerings, right?” Risso started stammering an apology until the word “offerings” registered, at which point he stopped and stared. Hotchkiss nodded. “Yeah. She told me all about it. Texted me your address. You were gonna trade some of her poetry for a kilo or so, right? Maybe some drawings too? No, sweetheart, calm down. It’s oh-kay. I said my name is Lucere Hotchkiss.”

She placed her hand on her heart, and said gently, as if speaking to a frightened toddler:

“I run the drugs in this city. And I have been waiting to meet you for a while now. Rab, honey? Would you...?”

The six-foot-six, ex-marine-slash-male-model-looking motherfucker sitting on the couch walked over and extended his enormous hand to Risso. His grip was firm, but by no means mean or threatening.

“Hey bro, Rabbenet Hotchkiss. Nice to finally meet you. Why don’t we have a seat right over there?” The huge man gestured to Risso’s couch and gently scooted him in that direction. Risso complied then looked up at Lucere, who set down the tray of cookies and sat on the worn coffee table.

“You wanted to talk to *me*?” Risso asked.

Lucere paused then tilted her head to the side.

“Well, not *you* specifically. I just learned your name was Risso Delorusso five minutes ago when we had a little look around. But I knew there was at least one freelancer doing good business in Arroyo outside of my family, and I’ve been eager to meet.”

Fuck. Me. Oh god. Fucking hell shit Christ goddammit.

“It’s uh, it’s a pleasure, Mrs. Hotchkiss,” Risso managed, at a loss for anything else.

“Oh please. Call me Luce. I like ‘Mrs.’ better than ‘ma’am,’ but both make me feel old. Anyway. Risso. I’m here to offer you a partnership. Or rather, propose a merger. See, I’ve wondered how you’ve been supplying people with Summer Court product in Arroyo. At first, I figured that you were just a package boy for an out-of-state supplier, but then there would be more than one of you, more product moving through in general...” she waved away the rest of

the sentence. "I would've noticed. It didn't make sense. Which means you must have a local connection I don't have a relationship with... and sweetheart, that's *impressive*."

"Really?" Riso asked.

"Absolutely precocious," Hotchkiss said, then added: "Sorry, that means 'smart.'"

Riso nodded slowly, glanced at Rab who smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

"So, uh. A partnership?" he asked, looking back at Hotchkiss.

"Merger," Hotchkiss corrected. "I misspoke, it's really more of a merger. A job really. See, I have a robust distribution network, mostly here in Arroyo, but some contacts out in the city, the hills, and the valley. And, as I'm sure you're aware, Summer Court product isn't easy to come by, so I am always looking to... expand my avenues of acquisition. If you team up with me, you will never have to worry about finding offerings again.

"My oldest is thirteen, and so talented with a guitar that my suppliers don't even *care* that his balls are dropping. Sabritta is eleven, and as you must know, her poetry already has a reputation. I have a six-year-old and four-year-old at home, and another bun in the oven," she patted her stomach. "And by the time they're all grown? Grandchildren will be on the way."

Hotchkiss smiled, and Riso smiled back, awed.

Holy shit. You are a monster.

"It gets better!" Hotchkiss smiled. "You can keep all your clients and take forty-percent on all product provided by your contact, *and* fifteen-percent of sales from product that comes from *my* connections, which include offerings from all four Fae Courts. Everybody on your list will have access to everything from pixie powder to troll dust. More options mean a lot more orders! And best of all, if you establish other connections, I will bump *all* of your percentages. What do you say?"

"I mean," Riso flapped his gums and tried to cover himself with a laugh. "This is super sudden, right?" Hotchkiss smiled and nodded expectantly. *Fuck!* "I just... I wouldn't want to cramp your style, you know? And as a freelancer I really value my independence. It's, like, why I got into this line of work in the first place, really. And I'm also studying part time, so I can't—"

"Right, right. It would be a big commitment, and I know how young men are about commitment," she said, giving her eyes a good-natured roll. "But here's the thing: I'm not dealing to college kids, Riso. I'm dealing to their professors and parents. Whenever the big-name actors and studio executives from Burbank throw a party? They call *me* to provide the party favors. And that's just the beginning.

"Once we legalize, I'm going to own the first boutique pixie parlor in Arroyo. The first of a franchise. *The* pixie parlor franchise." Hotchkiss paused for emphasis, smiled, and whispered: "This is it, Riso. Your big chance. You just joined the big leagues! Congratulations! Be excited!"

She gestured for Riso to celebrate. A sad, sickly little laugh escaped his throat instead. *Jesus. Did Sugar know this was gonna happen? Did she set me up on purpose? Of course, she fucking knew. Nothing comes for free and the fae know fucking everything. But why!? Why now?*

"You're gonna kill me if I say no, aren't you?"

"Don't be silly!" She laughed. "We're not a pair of thugs from *the street*," she said, using a truly offensive impression of a black voice complete with faux gang signs, "Bodies are bad for business! You are completely free to decline my offer, and continue your freelancing in another state or country," then added, sadly: "But if you continue to hustle here, I will be forced to tell

the police that you offered my eleven-year-old daughter these drugs in exchange for sexual favors.”

Rab held up Risso’s plastic bin of drugs, but Risso didn’t even notice. He was still hung up on the threat. *You’d use your daughter to fuckin’... What kind of sick fuck... no. No! You know what? You fucked with the wrong dustboy, bitch. I am the Arroyo Keeping Force’s premiere confidential informant, and I will—*

“Now I know what you’re thinking,” Hotchkiss said, tilting her head from side to side in sing-song rhythm. “What’s to stop me from going to the police or the Amagium first?”

“Nuh, nuh-uh!”

Hotchkiss leaned forward and put a hand on Risso’s knee.

“Here’s the thing: I’ve been running the dust in this town since I was thirteen. I’ve never once used my product. I’ve never once brought a speck of my business back home with me. I am a team mom three times over, head of the PTA, and board chair of the West Walnut Soup Kitchen and Shelter. I am *a pillar* of this community. Calling me a drug lord would be... I mean, you’d sound like an absolute lunatic, sweetheart!”

She gave a little laugh then tilted her head to the side again.

“But for the sake of argument, let’s assume you get me in trouble. I have some very important friends, Risso. Important people. Important fae. And some connections that don’t really fit into either category,” Hotchkiss said. Then, for a second, she dropped her façade entirely and spoke with an emanation fit to freeze piss midstream. “And if you fuck me, Risso? They will come for *your* friends. *Your* family. And *you*.” Then with the soccer mom’s titter, she added, “And sweetheart—they won’t miss!”

Risso nodded, slow, and golemic.

“So. What will it be? Sign up or ship out?”

“Can I have the night to think it over?” Risso asked.

“Mm. Risso, you’re breaking my heart here. I need to know now. Because, if you’re shipping out, you’re shipping out tonight.”

“In that case...” Risso paused before saying, desperately: “I’m in. I’m all in.”

“Are you sure? Because I get the sense that you’re scared, Risso. Or angry. And that’s just not the foundation for a good business relationship. I think it might be best if you head out after all. I know it’s abrupt, But Rab here will help you pack while I order you a van.” Hotchkiss stood and patted her husband on his meaty forearm. “I’ll even settle things with your landlord, so there are *no hard feelings*.”

She turned on the ball of her flats and started for the door.

“No!” Risso said. “I mean, yes. This... *is* abrupt. And kinda scary. Terrifying really. But... opportunity is always frightening the first time you look at it. Right?” Hotchkiss paused and turned around wearing a cat’s smile. Risso shrugged, smiled sheepishly, and added:

“Where do I sign?”

“Oh, sweetheart. We don’t need ink and paper. *We’re family*.”

Hotchkiss approached with arms opened wide, and gestured for Risso to stand. He obliged and embraced her. Over her shoulder, Rab gave him a double thumbs-up. Risso smiled and nodded at him, eyes tearing up from Hotchkiss’ cloying, aggressively floral perfume.

Lady, you severely underestimate my talent for fucking things up.