

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Taking the call!

-x-X-x-

Right. Lucas lets out a breath and focuses up. He can't spend time waffling here, not when it's almost certainly Dragon on the line. Instead, he makes his decision and sticks to it.

"Sorry Emily. Rain check, alright?"

The freckled brunette smiles in understanding and gives him a nod to show there's no hurt feelings. Meanwhile, Sveta is already moving on the bed in front of him, her tendrils unbinding her as she turns around and holds out her hand. Lucas hands over the phone to her, letting the naked Case Fifty-Three pick up the phone.

"Yes?"

Thanks to Lucas' enhanced hearing, he can hear the feminine voice on the other end of the line loud and clear.

"... Hello, this is Dragon. I was given this number by Catalyst. She told me that she would put me in contact with the man who helped her?"

"Ah, yes. He's indisposed at the moment but will be available shortly. Please hold."

Lucas is reaching for his clothes when Sveta puts Dragon of all people on hold. He looks over at her incredulously, having expected her to keep Dragon occupied with small talk. But Sveta just sets the phone down, call still going, and climbs off the bed to help him get dressed. Seeing this, Emily hurries to do the same.

To be fair, with them working together, he is dressed again in record time, faster than if he'd stumbled around in a rush to make himself presentable. Shooting both Sveta and Emily appreciative looks, Lucas grabs the phone off the bed and ends the hold before bringing it to his ear.

He walks out of the bedroom as he does so, giving Sveta and Emily a chance to get presentable themselves, knowing he didn't need the distraction they might provide him for this coming phone call.

"This is Pact speaking. Thank you for waiting."

There's the briefest of pauses on the other end of the line... and then Dragon's voice comes through crystal clear.

"Was the woman I just spoke to Sveta Karelia?"

Lucas very nearly misses a step at that, caught off guard by the question. But he catches himself before he can stumble too badly, and after a mere moment of hesitation, he makes a choice.

"Indeed it was. I'm curious how you knew that off of such a short exchange with her though."

He doesn't see much point in trying to lie about it, truth be told. Dragon had obviously been investigating him, though the very fact that he didn't have one of her famous suits already baring down on him from above at any point in the past few weeks made it clear his power had been keeping her at bay.

Still, how had she known it was Sveta? Was she just guessing? Had he been had?

"I was able to match her voice print one to one from previous recordings of her."

Lucas blinks. Seriously? That was what she'd done in the scant minutes where he'd been getting dressed? Admittedly, that was both impressive and a little creepy. Especially since...

“Previous recordings of her... from the Asylum she was being held in? I have to wonder how you got access to things like that.”

The silence on the other end of the call is palpable, before Dragon finally speaks again. And of course she’s changing the subject.

“Catalyst told me that you might be able to help me, but I must admit, I have my doubts... and concerns.”

Truth be told, Lucas probably would have tried to change the subject off of Sveta if Dragon hadn’t anyways, so he can’t really complain. Instead, now that they’re talking about Dragon, the usual connection brought about by a potential deal starts to form between them.

However, there’s something strange this time around about it. Something that has Lucas standing still in the middle of the compound’s common area, his brow furrowed in consternation. It doesn’t feel like it did with Sveta. Or how it felt with Alice before he teleported to Alice’s dorm room.

It feels more like how it felt after he teleported to Alice’s dorm room. Also how it felt when he and Emily were making their deal, as well as when he and Uppercrust made a deal as well.

Put bluntly, it feels like Dragon is in the room with him right that moment, as though she’s present in a way none of his other ‘over the phone’ deals have been. It’s incredibly disconcerting and has Lucas looking around in slight worry, as though Dragon might be invisible in a corner or something.

But there’s nobody there...

“Pact? Pact, are you still there?”

Pulled out of his inner turmoil, Lucas grimaces as he focuses back on the matter at hand. Part of him wants to just call off the whole thing then and there and hang up on Dragon on the spot. Something about this interaction was already

weirding him out. However, he knows he can't do that. Or rather, he knows he *shouldn't* do that.

Not only would hanging up on Dragon cause problems for Alice, but this was also the opportunity of a lifetime. Getting Dragon in his debt, or more pointedly, getting her on his side, would be huge for Lucas' future plans. He could do so much more with Dragon as an ally rather than an enemy, that was for sure.

"Yes, yes I'm still here. Apologies, you were talking about doubts and concerns? I assume you can feel it by this point... the fact that I can give you anything your heart desires."

"... Yes, there does seem to be a connection of sorts between us. But that's still quite the offer. It has to come with some sort of catch, right? You were able to give Sveta an entire body... but at what cost?"

Lucas holds back the urge to grimace, knowing that even if Dragon can't see such things, she might be able to hear it in his voice. Instead, he injects as much confidence into his tone as he can... even as he answers truthfully.

"Service. The cost for Sveta was service. A cost she willingly and even eagerly agreed to, I might add. That said, the cost is different for everyone, Dragon. Until we've figured out what you actually want from me, we won't know what the cost will be."

"I..."

Dragon starts to respond, only to trail off after just one word. Lucas arches a brow... and then blinks when the silence continues on for an irritatingly long time. Until finally, it's him who's asking after her.

"Dragon? Are you still there?"

He could feel her to be fair, so he knew she was. Still, it seemed she needed the reminder she was in the midst of a phone call almost as much as he did, because only once he speaks does she start talking again.

"I don't know what I want."

Lucas can feel that that's the truth... but not the whole truth. There's something underlying her words, something he frustratingly can't quite understand.

"Well, Catalyst told me a little bit about you when she asked if she could give you my number. She said you suffer from an autoimmune disease that keeps you from interacting with the outside world."

"... Yes. That's true."

No it's not. Lucas blinks and his brow furrows incredulously because now he can taste the lie in Dragon's words. She's not telling the truth at all about that. There is no autoimmune disease, is there? So then... why? What keeps her completely locked away?

Not giving away his discovery, Lucas instead continues down the obvious path.

"We could start there then. With the removal of your disease, to give you a new lease on life."

... But no. It won't take. A deal can't be made because there is no autoimmune disease. His power reaches out to try and build an offer, an exchange of sorts, but there's no exchange to be had when one side is lying entirely about what the problem is.

They can both feel it, but of course Dragon rushes to try and prevent him from realizing the deception.

"N-No! I mean... I don't think that's the solution. It's not... not enough. It won't solve the greater problem."

This was like talking to a wall. Lucas had to admit, if it were anyone else but Dragon, he'd probably have already hung up on them. He felt like he was going around in circles. But at the same time, if he can make this work... well, it'll all be worth it.

“What exactly is the greater problem, Dragon? I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me.”

“I... I’m n-not sure I want you to help me. I can’t risk you taking too much from me. Perhaps this was a mistake... I should go...”

Lucas narrows his eyes and growls.

“You would give up that easily? You would surrender any chance of getting better out of fear?”

Dragon doesn’t hang up but her protests, when they come a moment later, are incredibly weak sounding.

“I... you... you don’t understand. I can’t just... I want to... but I don’t...”

Lucas takes in her disjointed speaking, trying to understand what in the world is going on with the Tinker. Dragon isn’t just a Tinker, she’s THE Tinker. And yet, she sounds like a lost little girl right now. Or maybe not lost... maybe she feels trapped.

“Do you want to be free, Dragon?”

Instantly, Lucas feels a deal starting to build between them. Dragon’s heart’s desire is indeed freedom from whatever is holding her down, even if the autoimmune disease is a lie. But then, what else could she be suffering from? She was easily the strongest Tinker in the world, so what or who did she need freedom from?!

Just as quickly as the deal starts to build, however, Dragon pulls back on her end and it all falls apart again. That bright and shining deal they could have had fades back into that feeling of potential in an instant, leaving Lucas scowling in confusion.

“I can’t... that’s not... I don’t need to be free, Pact. That’s not important.”

She sounds wooden as she speaks. Robotic, even. Lucas is almost certain that she doesn't believe her own words... or maybe she has no choice but to believe them. Does... does someone have the World's Greatest Tinker under a Master Effect?

But that's not possible. Dragon handles so much important infrastructure it isn't even funny. Surely someone would have figured out by now if she was being Mastered. Someone would have noticed and stopped it.

Unless, of course, they were the ones behind it. That thought is even more terrifying than the idea of Dragon being Mastered in the first place. Has Lucas stumbled upon some horrifying conspiracy that goes all the way to the top?

Either way, he knows he needs to tread carefully here. If she is being Mastered, Dragon is fighting hard to stay on the call with him. It recontextualizes a lot of the earlier, annoying parts of the conversation. Any irritation he felt fades away, replaced by pity and concern.

He needs to convince Dragon to make a deal with him. That might be the only way to free her from this Mastering. He could get in there in the midst of the deal and break whatever Master Effects he found in her mind. Sort of like how he removed the part of Alice's shard that would have driven her to conflict, as well as mellowing out her more sociopathic narcissistic tendencies.

But what deal could he offer Dragon that would be accepted at this point? Lucas furrows his brow in thought for a moment... before an idea dawns on him. They'd talked about Sveta earlier, and what he'd done for her...

"I could give you an entirely new body, Dragon. A proper, working, human body. No autoimmune disease... nothing else afflicting you either. How does that sound?"

There's a pause as he feels a deal starting to build between them once more. Lucas holds his breath, half-expecting it to collapse again and for her to pull

away as whatever Master Effects keep her from agreeing... but no. In the end, after a lengthy pause, Dragon speaks.

“... That might be doable. What would it cost me?”

He hears a sort of melancholy hidden under the feigned curiosity in her tone. This isn't what Dragon truly wants. Whatever is going on with her, her heart's desire isn't a new body like it was for Sveta. But it might just get his foot in the door... no, rather, it is getting his foot in the door.

“I won't demand something like my deal with Sveta. Sveta had no responsibilities to anyone else save for herself. She was happy to bind herself to me, to enter my service and be by my side. She *is* happy with me Dragon, I assure you of that much.”

“... I believe you.”

Lucas smiles grimly.

“But of course, we both know that you can't offer the same thing. You have to answer to too many other people, and you have things to do. Important things. That said, I don't mind dialing things back a bit. We could even make it more... nebulous. Perhaps favors?”

There's a brief pause before Dragon responds.

“Favors?”

The reason he couldn't go this route with the likes of Sveta was obvious... she didn't have the power or influence for a thing as nebulous as a 'favor' from her to mean anything. But Dragon is a different story. She's a woman with quite a lot of power and influence, even if apparently she's been suborned by someone.

A favor from Dragon is worth as much if not more than a favor from, say... Upper crust. Frankly, it was hard to even put a cost to such a thing, though Lucas' power is more than happy to.

“Three, to be exact. Three favors, to be redeemed at the time of my choosing. In exchange, I’ll make you a healthy, working human body.”

It’s a good deal. His powers say so. But if Dragon doesn’t agree, it’ll be right back to the drawing board...

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!