

Bran held up the note, offering a faint, uneasy smile before tucking it into his pocket. "You've been persistent. Anyone that can get that many messages past security deserves--well, I don't think I could have resisted at least--meeting you." *Stammering again. Get a grip, Bird.*

The phantom waiter appeared again, filling the glass of his mysterious host and setting steaming plates of pasta in front of them. Bran watched as the waiter disappeared again before raising an eyebrow at the food. The sights and smells before him caused his stomach rumble in anticipation, reminding him rather insistently that he hadn't eaten all day. When he looked up again, the man stared at him expectantly, already chewing on his first bite.

Doubting the possibility that he would be poisoned after such a long courtship, he twirled a few strands of sauce-soaked pasta around his fork. "Five months and I don't even know your name."

"Oh, you're *cute*. No wonder I picked you," he replied, smirk shifting to a flirtatious grin. He abandoned his pasta long enough to take a small sip of his champagne, casting an approving look toward the flute.

"Normally, you wouldn't," he continued, "but this deserved a personal visit. I think you and I could work very well together, Bran. Most call me 'M', but please call me Jim."

Bran couldn't resist grinning slightly at the compliment, grateful for the low lighting against his warming cheeks. Quickly he cleared his throat. "Jim, then. I know you didn't call me down here just for the sake of wining and dining. Not that I'm complaining."

He relaxed enough to sip his drink. The champagne felt surprisingly smooth against his tongue. It would be far too easy to get drunk on something so pleasant. "Speaking of which, odd choice of liquor, if you don't mind my saying," Bran mused. "Isn't wine traditional with this sort of setting? Champagne is more of a celebration type of drink."

"You caught me there," Jim said, a smile forming on his face. "I was hoping you would give us a reason to celebrate."

Again the other man took a bite and washed it down with a sip of champagne. "I am in need of a smart boy like you. If you prove useful to me, I'll give you whatever you like. If you don't, well, let's say our little meeting will come to an end." The smile he wore shifted seamlessly into something blank and uncaring, leaving Bran questioning whether he'd seen it at all.

"One word from me, and you can have anything. Arranging this was only a taste." Shoulders square toward the younger man, he leaned forward, shadows playing across his face. "So, tell Daddy. What does his little codebreaker want?"