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Are We Good or Bad or Somewhere In Between?: An Original Novel

Faith Lymburner

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Senior Thesis Approval

This Honors thesis entitled

“Are We Good or Bad or Somewhere In Between?: An Original Novel”

Written by

Faith Lymburner

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by undersigned readers.

Johnny Wink, Thesis Director

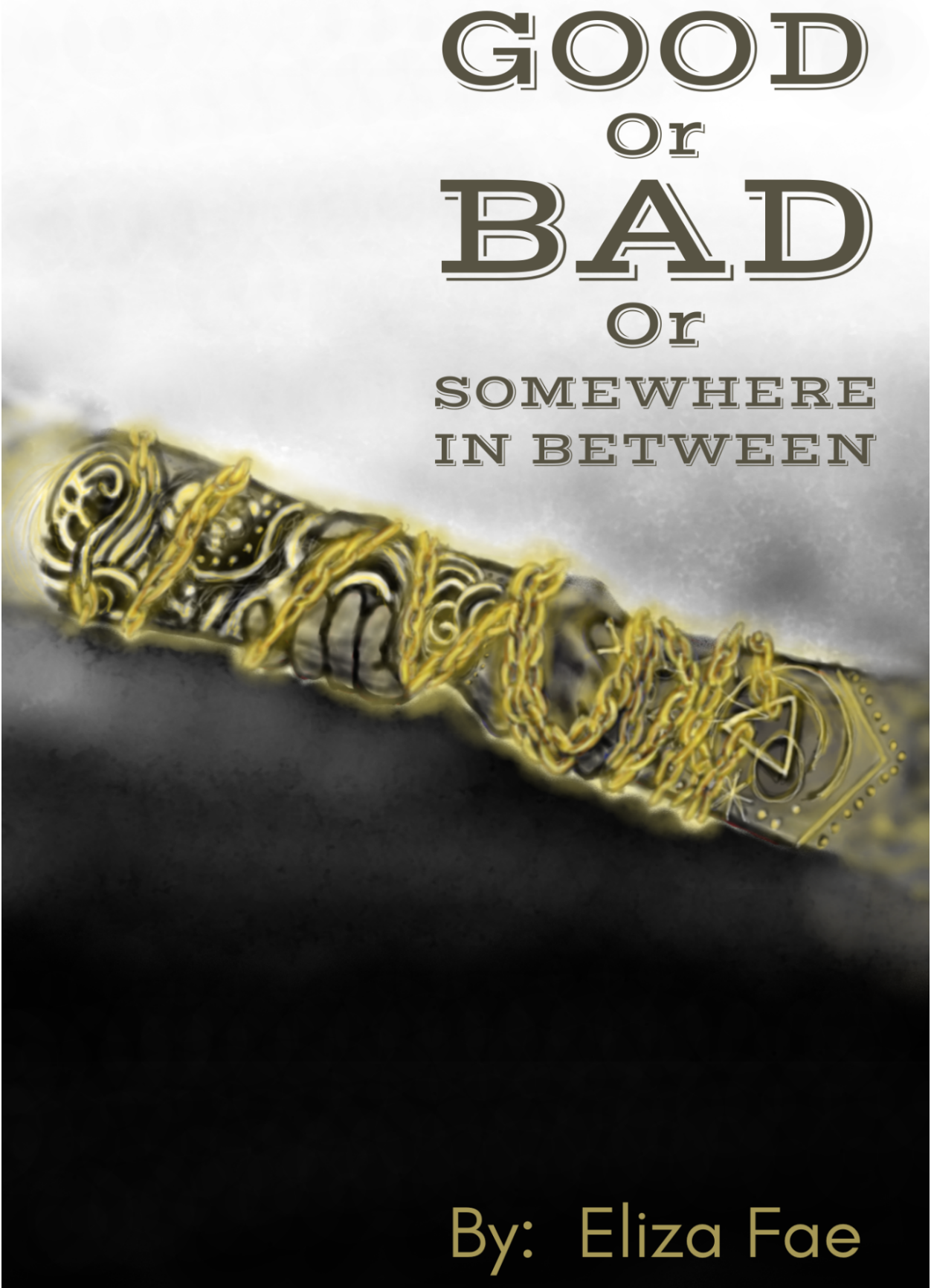
Sarah Smith, Second Reader

Sara Hubbard, Third Reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program Director

Wednesday, April 19, 2023

ARE WE
GOOD
Or
BAD
Or
SOMEWHERE
IN BETWEEN



By: Eliza Fae

I would like to dedicate this book to all the misunderstood people in life. Whoever you may be, know that you are loved, and that your journey and story is what you make it, not what others say it is.

Helpful Summary for Convenience

People are defined by their choices and nothing else. It doesn't matter if you view yourself as just good or bad; you will always exist somewhere in between. Quincy has long decided that he will never change himself to fit someone's view of good, but Oliver Tanner makes him want to try, just a little, or if nothing else corrupt him enough to step over to the 'dark side' if you will. Neither of them are perfect people, nor are they on the same side, but that doesn't stop them from trying to be friends or, at least, a frenemies version of it. Nor does that stop them from teaming up when both of their worlds erupt into chaos. They may have difficulty getting along but they do make one hell of a team.

Epigraph

“There is no such thing as only good and evil, my dear. Good and evil are a concept created by flawed beings who needed a way to define their choices. Those same flawed beings got so caught up in those choices that they split life into two halves, and decided that if something was unable to be controlled by them then it must be evil, but if controlled it could become good. When in actuality, the world and its beings are an eclipse of gray scattered with white and black like stars on a moonlit night. No one is just good or evil, as everyone is somewhere in between.”

- Quincy

Preface (why this book exists)

Writing has been my passion ever since I was a little girl. I've always known that I've wanted to write stories and tell them to the world. This has led to thousands of story ideas appearing in my head, which has allowed me to write almost every day. Now that I am older, I realize there is a lot more to writing and my passion for it than that and even more so, I think I look at my writing under a different lens now. My goal is to write stories that impact people positively and create change. When I found out I could do a creative project for my thesis, I knew immediately that I wanted to write a novel. I knew this was the final push I needed to finally write a full novel and get over that mental hurdle.

I tried to start in freshman year, narrowing down my ideas and having friends pick which one I should go with. It took a bit because, at the time, I had around forty ideas, but I finally settled on one called "*My Best Friend, The Protagonist*." This story is told from the perspective of the best friend of the hero and how that perspective can create a different view of not only the hero but also the villain. The problem was, and it's a consistent one I have, my imagination. I continually come up with new ideas and it's almost as if the motivation for one story transfers to the new one, and thus I end up in this cycle of new story, current project, new story. This cycle and struggle was exhausting, and it caused me to stall on the thesis novel for a while. When it came time to propose the novel, I knew I needed to pick one and by then I had around eighty ideas, which made it difficult. I finally settled on one that, at the time, I had motivation for called "*Brittle Bones*" (or its original title of "*A Bones Mystery*").

"*Brittle Bones*" is a bit personal as, for part of my childhood, I thought about being a cop or detective; however, my family said I would not be able to do that as I was too kind. This story captures what it would be like

if I decided to still go for it anyway with a renewed, and almost petty, sense of vigor. My main character is an FBI agent who ends up trying to solve a cold/serial case before it's too late. I had the main character and a first chapter but didn't know where to take it from there, leaving me stuck. Then I took a C.S. Lewis class in which we read "*Surprised By Joy*," and the voice of my main character hit me, matching up with Lewis's almost rambling and internal type dialogue. I turned around and rewrote the first chapter and then went on to write through the fourth. However, I ended up stuck again and even with advice from my director and readers, such as writing from different perspectives or going on walks while playing the scenes, I still couldn't write further. I was well and truly stuck. I started to realize that I might have bitten off more than I could chew with having a crime novel set in the real world as my first novel. I'm a bit of a perfectionist and I felt that the story needed to be completely factually correct or else I didn't want it. This led to me wanting to write but feeling like I needed to dedicate most of my time to research, thus, I was severely stressed over it. Writing has always been an escape for me; it's never supposed to be stressful, which meant that I needed to do some serious thinking. Over Christmas break, I took a big step back and looked at everything through a different lens. I worked on other projects and realized that it might be best to switch to a different novel, which I was allowed to do.

Over Christmas I had worked on an old piece that had only one chapter and no further ideas for the rest of the story. I finally did something I have never done; I sat down and wrote an outline, which if you know me, is an unnatural thing to do as I am more a spontaneous "write as it comes," type of person than a planner. This outline saved me and also showed me a different way of writing my novels that I was missing out on. All I did was write out, in choppy sentences, what happened in the first chapter. An

amazing thing happens when you do that, at least it did for me: suddenly you can sort of see your story form. You then get a feel for the natural progression for your story, which allows your writing to be more clear. At the end of this I had a fully outlined, twenty-seven-chapter-long story. One that gave me the ability to have a more complicated plot with intricate details. I then wrote six chapters over that break, created world maps, political/crime organizations, and many characters. I came back to the school for the Spring semester with a happy heart and a new motivation.

The new book is titled “*Are We Good Or Bad Or Somewhere In Between?*” It is still a crime/mystery novel. This time set in a fantasy world of my own design, so if something doesn’t make sense, well, I can make it make sense. This novel takes a deeper look at how no one is just good or bad; instead everyone is somewhere in between. The two main characters are Quincy, a master thief, and Oliver Tanner, an S.A.S. Agent, which is the equivalent of the FBI or CIA. Oliver is firmly of the black and white viewpoint while Quincy has long since learned that the world is full of shades of gray. These characters don’t start out as friends but they are forced to work together, because of which they both start to realize there is more to each other and the world than they thought. There is a lot of struggle between different viewpoints and lives. (Fun fact: this story was built off a random phrase I had created, which is found as the epigraph above, and a voice recording I did of an interaction between Oliver and Quincy. Thus, they were built from their voices.)

As the months progressed, I was writing almost a chapter a week and having fun with it. I did my best to not focus on mistakes and instead on just writing as the details don’t matter as much as actually doing it. I got a bit stuck near spring break, on chapter eleven, but ended up getting over that hurdle during the break. However, I realized at a point that I had around twenty days left to finish this thesis draft and fifteen chapters left,

which was, kind of, impossible. I discussed it with my readers, and we compromised. I would choose an earlier chapter as my thesis end point and then focus only on the chapters within that which have big moments between Quincy and Oliver, while blocking out the rest. This left me with five chapters to write. I got through three, but unfortunately the last two are not complete and have been left to be blocked out like the rest. I have done my best to be proud of what I have accomplished either way, remembering that I basically started this novel in January and have written fifteen full chapters and blocked out more in less than six months. It's frustrating, but I still have done more than I have ever done for a novel before. This path leaves me with things to work toward after I turn in this thesis, which is different from research projects, as most people don't go back to work on those after they turn them in.

My goal now is to write more before Scholar's Day, get a fully written first draft soon, after that find as many people as I can to beta read it, and then not touch it for probably the rest of the year, minimum, the summer. I know it's especially important to take a big step back on a project and leave it to breathe for a while, thus I will dedicate time to other projects while allowing this novel to do just that. When I do finish this novel, I hope to publish it, but until then, I'll continue to write every day with a joyful heart.

Table of Contents

Dedication 2

Epigraph 3

Preface (why does this book exists) 4

ONE

WATCHa Doin' Quincy? 11

TWO

Blues? Blues. 24

THREE

Kaido's Corner 29

FOUR

If I Could Go Back and Freeze Time For But A Moment 34

FIVE

Quincy's Favor 43

SIX

Oliver's Favor 47

SEVEN

Talking Sits But Whispers Walk 51

EIGHT

Maybe, Maybe Not 65

NINE

Doubt lies As Whispers Shout 78

TEN

How Prepared You Are Determines Your Success 92

ELEVEN

My Definition of A Party Is Apparently Different Than Yours 164

TWELVE

Deceit and Deceased 153

THIRTEEN

I Trusted You and You Betrayed Me 158

FOURTEEN

It started with Death and It Ended With It 171

FIFTEEN

Live Life Till You die 179

SIXTEEN

I Didn't Do It 187

SEVENTEEN

It's Just A Little Snooping, I Swear 189

EIGHTEEN

Maria's The Goddess of Chaos 191

NINETEEN

Prison Break...Sort Of 192

TWENTY

The Truth...But Only Like 25% 194

TWENTY ONE

Can You Hold Me As I Fall Apart? 195

TWENTY TWO

He Calls It Mercy, I Call It Murder 196

TWENTY THREE

Together 197

TWENTY FOUR

The Poker Game of Life and Death 198

TWENTY FIVE

Thank You 199

TWENTY SIX

What I See Is Different Then What I Saw 200

Twenty Seven

Everyone Is Somewhere In Between 201

Chapter 1: WATCHa Doin' Quincy?

The mall is loud and chaotic, as most malls normally are. People go about their business, rushing along without a care for anyone else, which is probably why the man blended in so easily. The man in question is of a slender and fit build. His gray coat allows him to blend in with the other shoppers, and it lays perfectly over his gray vest, red button down shirt, and gray dress pants. His dress shoes tap on the marble flooring with his red hair swishing in its short ponytail and his silver eyes lit up in amusement. The man hums and whistles as he saunters along his way with one of his slender gloved hands occasionally coming up to play with a star shaped earring that dangles from his right ear. He walks calmly and gracefully through the crowd, as if moving through water and not once does he bump into another person. He scans the stores as he strolls before lighting upon a little store called Otto's Watch Shop.

The man tilts his head consideringly before smirking. "This will do," he says, voice smooth as silk, before gliding into the store. A little bell dings as he does.

A chipper young boy with brown hair and gold eyes looks up from restocking a shelf. "Hello," he says, bright and chipper, "welcome to Otto's Watch Shop. I'm Laurie, how may I help you?"

The man smiles indulgently at Laurie. "I'm just here to browse. Thank you for the offer, though," He says smoothly, dignified despite his gentle demeanor.

Laurie smiles back, “alrighty, I’ll be by the counter so if you need any help finding anything just let me know.”

The man nods in thanks, “I will.”

As Laurie gets back to what he was doing the man walks to browse a few of the more expensive watches. He gazes at them with their gold inlays and designs before his eyes rest on a gold watch, a quite gaudy thing in his opinion. It has rubies inlaid in it and gold for the numbers.

“Perfect,” the man breathes. He calmly picks it up and puts it on as if it is already his and very blatantly does not bother with getting rid of any of the protection charms and security features. He smiles and calmly heads to leave, nodding at Laurie as he does. He gets just past the doors before the store’s magical Boundary forces him to freeze and an alarm starts to sharply ring out in the mall. The man stays frozen with an almost bored look in his eyes and Laurie frantically comes through the doors, waving his arms, panicked. Two security guards rush over and grab the man which forces the Boundary to release him.

“What do ya think ya doin’?” Asks the first of the burly guards.

“Who me?” The man questions with a false smile.

“Yes you,” the other guard says as he shakes the man.

“Oh,” the man says, “well I was walking out of the store before the security forced me to freeze.”

“Not that,” the first guard says, “what’d ya steal, thief?”

The man chuckles, “oh it must have been this that set it off.” He lifts the sleeve of his coat to show the watch encircling his slender wrist. “Oops,” he shrugs.

“Yeah oops,” the second guard chimes, “now give it back.”

“But of course,” the man says as the guards allow him his arms back for the moment. The man turns to Laurie who is standing to the side looking sullen. He unclips the watch from his wrist and hands it back to Laurie, who takes it and clutches it to his chest. “Terribly sorry for the trouble, little one,” he says with an apologetic smile.

Laurie looks at the man and then turns to the guards, determined. “I’m sure this man just forgot he tried it on and wasn’t trying to steal it. Could you please leave him be?”

The man looks at Laurie both fondly and annoyed. He looks at the unsure guards and then sighs, quite loudly. He turns back to the guards. “No,” he says, “I was trying to steal it. Not very hard, mine you, but it’s the principle of the matter.”

Laurie looks at him heartbroken but the man ignores him as he’s cuffed. The guards start to talk about taking him to the police station for questioning and what-have-you’s.

Before they turn to leave the man leans toward Laurie, “thank you for trying to stand up for me but this is really for the best,” he says with a smile. “Also, tell your boss that his work has gotten quite trashy and he should start taking your ideas into account from now on.” Laurie looks at

him in awe and the man winks at him before allowing the guards to escort him out of the mall and to the police station.

As the man is driven to the station a call is made to another man sitting bored at his desk. He has dirty blond hair and pale skin with electric blue eyes. He lays back in his chair and fidgets with the cuff of his white dress shirt. He groans and is about to get up and ask his boss for something to do when a gray and purple cuff on his wrist starts to beep with an incoming call. He sits up abruptly and almost sends himself toppling when his chair wobbles. He presses his finger to the cuff, connecting the call to an earpiece in his right ear. A shaky voice comes through.

“Excuse me,” the voice stutters, “is this Detective Oliver Tanner of the Organized Crime Division of Sword and Shield?”

The man blinks, “yes, this is he. What can I help you with?”

“Um,” the voice hesitates, “my name is officer Charles Ryder of the Donla PD. I’m calling because a man was arrested and brought to the station today. He matches the description of a man on your watchlist. I was told I needed to call you about that.”

Oliver’s eyes narrow, “I’ll be right there.” He hops up and grabs his tawny coat and quickly pulls it on. “Oh before you hang up” he says to Charles who has awkwardly stayed on the line. “What’d he do to get arrested?”

Charles hesitates, “um, he attempted to steal a watch from a store, sir.”

Oliver barks a laugh, “wow, I’m never letting him live this down. Be there soon.” And he hangs up abruptly before passing a quick message to his

boss about the situation. He then stalks out of the building and to his car to drive a few hours to deal with the problem.

Charles stares at his phone unsurely. He turns to the head detective near him. "Um, he says he'll be here soon, sir."

The head detective sighs, frustrated. "Well, I'll go and question our prisoner in the time I'll have him," he says gruffly.

Charles stares at the Head Detective as he marches towards the interrogation rooms where they cuffed and left the would-be thief. He sighs, "this can't end well."

The Head Detective barges into the room and then slams it shut. The man doesn't bother looking at him.

"My name is Head Detective Alic Wood. What's your name?"

The man looks at him and laughs, "your last name is Wood? Oh you unfortunate man."

Alic grits his teeth, "not your concern. What is your name?"

The man tilts his head and crosses his legs calmly, "Quincy."

Alic stares at him expecting a last name but then looks blankly at him when he doesn't get anything else except for Quincy's benign smile.

"Your last name?" Alic sighs out.

Quincy's smile widens, "oh you don't need that."

"It's not up to you to decide if I need it or not. Now what is it or am I gonna have to place you in the cells for a bit for ya to cooperate?"

"Well, you can't force me to tell you. Besides, I said you don't need it. Are you going deaf? That would be unfortunate as I can't quite get my nuances across in sign language yet."

"What?!" Alic shakes his head, "no I'm not going deaf. That's not. I need your last name for records. So I won't ask again, what is it?"

Quincy rolls his eyes, "and as I already said, twice I might add, that you don't need it. If you need further explanation for your minimal brain cells, knowing my full name is unimportant in the grand scheme of things."

Alic stares, "what?"

Quincy sighs and then begins to speak at Alic, very slowly, "you do not need it because I will not be here long enough for you to be in need of it. Detective Tanner is already on his way, correct?"

"That's not. How'd you?" Alic shakes his head, "Doesn't matter, I still need it for records."

"Fine," Quincy sighs out long-sufferingly, "it's nice."

"Nice what?"

"Nice try because the answer is still no."

Alic glares at Quincy but Quincy just smirks back at him. Alic looks away and misses Quincy's triumphant face. He hops up and marches out of the room, leaving Quincy cuffed to the table with a victorious smirk on his face.

Alic marches back down the hallway to Charles who startles and almost drops his coffee cup.

"I'm this close to killing that man." Alic says with his pointer finger and thumb touching.

Charles stares, "your fingers are touching, Sir."

"I know."

Charles looks unsure, "you can't kill him, Sir. Not only is it against the law and morally bad, but a S.A.S. agent is coming to pick him up. I don't think he would be happy to come and find a dead body."

Alic sighs, "I know that. I know I can't kill him but I can dream about it alright. Let me have this."

Charles nods rapidly and decides to leave it be.

Alic groans, "I'll be in the room connected to his interrogation room," he says, "I have to discuss this with Detective Myers."

Charles nods at him. He starts when he thinks of something and tells Alic's back that he'll send the S.A.S. Agent to him when he gets here. Alic

doesn't acknowledge Charles' statement but Charles just shrugs. "I'm sure it's fine," he says, very unsurely.

He regrets that statement almost immediately when Oliver marches into the precinct. Startling and annoying just about every officer there. They know that dealing with S.A.S. agents is on the level of snow in June; you can handle it but you'd rather not for the headache it evokes. Oliver ignores the looks and ruffles his tawny coat. He looks around and spots the nameplate on Charles' desk. Charles tries to make himself disappear as Oliver walks over but unfortunately for him, invisibility is not a part of his magical skill set.

"Hi," Oliver says as he leans an arm on the desk. "You're the one that called me about Quincy, right?"

Charles shakes, "oh, um yes," he squeaks.

Oliver closes his eyes and smiles, "great, where is he?"

Charles points a finger down the hallway, "um, he's in interrogation room 3, Sir. Head Detective Alic Wood is in the room attached to it."

"Thanks," Oliver says brightly. He turns and swiftly stalks away, leaving the annoyed officers and a terrified Charles behind. Oliver barges into the room that Head Detective Alic Wood and Detective Joseph Myers are occupying, startling both of them from their discussions.

"Woah," Detective Myers says, "you can't just barge in here..."

Oliver smiles and taps his wrist cuff. A badge flashes above it, glowing brightly purple in the darkened room. A shield crossed over by two swords appears in the holographic image. S.A.S. stands out in bright, bold letters with a picture of Oliver above that and his name set to the side.

The Detectives stutter and then look annoyed.

“I think you’ll find that I can be here. I’m also taking the man you have handcuffed in there,” and he tips his head to the one way mirror, “into my custody. Thank you and have a nice day.”

Both detectives try to stutter out an excuse but Oliver resolutely ignores them. He just turns and attempts to leave. Detective Myers gathers himself enough to attempt a further protest, missing Head Detective Wood’s facepalm in the background. Myers stands and rushes to block Oliver’s way.

“Now wait just a minute,” he says, “he was brought to our station and placed in our custody. You have to go through proper channels to have jurisdiction and take over his custody.”

Oliver looks at Myers with amusement. “What’s your name, Detective?”

“Joseph Myers,” Myers says.

“Okay, Detective Myers,” Oliver chuckles, “are you aware of what the S.A.S. stands for?”

Myers huffs, “of course I am. What does that...”

Oliver interrupts, “S.A.S. stands for Sword and Shield. Do you know what that means?” Oliver raises his hands to stop Myers from speaking. “That

was a rhetorical question so don't answer. What it means is that we are the attack and defense force of the Royal family. We live, bleed, and die for their majesties the Sors. Because of this there is very little that can be outside of our jurisdiction, even more so when it is a man on a watchlist." Myers gapes at Oliver and Oliver rolls his eyes. Oliver calmly steps around Myers and pulls open the door, he pauses before leaving. "I'll give you props for having the guts to try and argue with me when I very much outrank you, or maybe it was mere stupidity. Either way, have a nice day." Oliver politely closes the door behind him before crossing to the door next to it and swiftly opening it. Quincy doesn't even glance up. He merely continues tapping his fingers, bored.

"Oh, have you finally sent someone competent to question me?" he says in a smooth and even more bored sounding voice.

"Quincy," the S.A.S. detective says, voice tired and frustrated.

Quincy looks up with a smirk, "well, well, well, if it isn't Detective Oliver Tanner."

Oliver pinches the bridge of his nose. "What are you doing here?" Asking more for the actual reason because shoplifting is not a good, nor true one when it comes to Quincy.

Quincy's smirk sharpens, "well, if you can't tell. I got arrested." And he has never sounded prouder of that fact.

"Yeah, for shoplifting," Oliver says, and he drops his hands, "which is something you could do in your sleep, both hands tied behind your back and blindfolded. So, again, what are you doing here?"

Quincy's smirk slips for barely a second but Oliver still catches it, knowing Quincy as he does. "Well, Detective, I'm afraid I must confess that I...may need your help."

Oliver calms slightly, "you never ask for my help."

"I'm aware," Quincy states with a raised hand, "but truly, I do need a hand. It's just a minor little tiffle that I've come to find myself in that may or may not pertain to the Chakezi's and our first meeting. But trust me, it will hardly take a moment of your precious time."

"Fine," Oliver says quickly, realizing this is probably serious, "what do you need my help with?"

Quincy rolls his eyes, "well I'm not going to tell you here. Honesty, do you want everyone and their mother to know?"

"No, I suppose not," Oliver says blankly.

Quincy smiles smugly, "then let's get out of here. Their hospitality is absolutely atrocious."

"Right," Oliver drawls, "because that's the issue here. I'll get one of the officers to uncuff you and then we can..."

"Oh no need," Quincy holds up his, freed, hands with a smirk, "I was free the minute they put the cuffs on me."

"Then why were you still here?"

“Because I needed your help and I knew you would immediately get alerted if I was taken into custody by someone that wasn’t you, keep up.”

“Right, of course.” Oliver shakes his head slightly and holds the door for Quincy to walk through.

Quincy stands gracefully from his chair and walks calmly from the room. He seems to sway into the hallway and Oliver just follows behind him with an eye roll.

They walk down the hallway where Quincy waves at Head Detective Alic Wood and Detective Joseph Myers as he floats by. Both look annoyed with Alic accidentally snapping his clipboard. The two walk calmly into the main area with all the still supremely annoyed officers. Quincy smiles and waves causing the officers’ faces to darken. He then smirks and takes it even further by winking at a still terrified Charles, who then turns bright red and faints on the spot. Oliver grabs Quincy’s hand, pulls it down, and then proceeds to drag him out of the station. He further drags Quincy to the car lot and to a streamlined black vehicle. He taps his wrist to the driver’s side door and the car beeps happily at him and unlocks.

“New car?” Quincy asks.

“Nope, just new look” Oliver says shortly, “now get in.”

“You’d have to let go of my hand first for me to do that, Detective.”

Oliver looks down at his right hand and sees that it is still gripping Quincy’s tightly. He swiftly drops Quincy’s hand like it was on fire and

then gets into his car. Quincy laughs sardonically and then goes around to hop into the passenger side of the vehicle.

“Alright,” Oliver says tightly, “where to?”

Quincy smirks and looks at Oliver, “oh, you know where?”

“No,” Oliver starts, “not there.”

“But of course there,” Quincy says, “off, Detective, to Kaido’s Corner.”

Oliver groans but he still starts up the car, “why can’t we ever go somewhere else, like say that diner on the end of the street? The nice one full of ‘not’ criminals.”

Quincy lays his hand over his heart and gasps, “Kaido would be offended if he heard what you were saying right now. The Corner is perfect and I will not stand for this slander. It’s where anyone and everyone goes when they want to talk about ‘important’ things and not be overheard or bothered.”

Oliver rolls his eyes.

“Besides,” Quincy lays the final nail in the coffin, “you’re talking about Maria’s diner, which is one of the hot spots for the buying and selling of, mmmm, ‘antiques.’”

Oliver groans, “of course it is. Fine, The Corner, it is.”

“Yay,” Quincy claps his hands in delight as they drive off.

Chapter 2: Blues? Blues.

The drive to Kaido's Corner starts out silent. Quincy spends the duration gazing out of the car's window and watching the scenery pass by, while Oliver spends it focusing intently on the road so he won't get frustrated with Quincy. Unfortunately, Oliver isn't an overly patient man.

"Okay," he says, "why can't you just tell me now instead of us having to go to The Corner and deal with all of that nonsense?"

Quincy lets out a sigh, "finally, I was wondering when you were going to ask your questions." Oliver glares at him for a moment but Quincy ignores him. "But if you must know, it's because no one likes to talk business in a car. Terrible atmosphere for it really. But give me a fine meal, great company, and wine and we are set."

Oliver groans, "and your asking me for a favor is considered business?"

"Well, I don't like owing people but any time I owe someone a favor I would consider that business. Wouldn't you?"

"And what if I needed your help for something, this canceling out you owing me? Still considered business then?"

"Hmmm," Quincy hums, intrigued. "Oh, that would be even further considered business since at that point it's just a transaction."

Oliver tightens his fingers on the steering wheel.

Quincy turns away from his scenery gazing to look at Oliver. He then smirks, resting his chin on his right hand while his left rests over his heart. “And, what could dear old Detective Tanner need my help with?” He asks, eyes closed with his smirk.

Oliver heaves a deep sigh, “wait until we get to The Corner.” He adds, a little sarcastically, “after all, that’s where anyone and everyone goes to discuss business.”

Quincy’s eyes brighten and appear to be laughing without making the sound. Instead he hums and then turns to the radio. He starts to fiddle and switch between stations.

“In other news, Jess, the new laws on magic use may lead to riots in the streets.”

“This season the Fowl Fighters record has tanked. They just haven’t been playing as...”

“Now if I had a dime for everyone I heard...”

“Cause I’m hot, I’m wild, I’m just a chaos child.”

Quincy’s hand is abruptly smacked away from the buttons and the radio stays stuck on a wave pop station before Oliver just as quickly silences it.

Quincy pulls his hand to his chest in some form of protection, “what was that for?” He asks, offended.

Oliver gives him a glare, “stop messing with my stations.”

Quincy drops his hand and rolls his eyes, “oh please, we would have fallen back into the silence and I’m quite bored seeing as you won’t talk to me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you needed me to give you attention. Aren’t you usually annoyed when I do that?”

“Only because it’s when I’m doing something...”

“Breaking the law.”

“...but in moments when I want your attention then you supply it. That’s how this works.”

“Huh,” Oliver says, “you’re like a feral cat.”

“What?!” Quincy looks at him scandalized, “I am no cat. Nor am I feral.”

Oliver looks at him blankly, “definitely a feral cat.”

“I am not. But if I was, I would be a majestic cat. Like a black panther. Not some mangy stray you help once and it then proceeds to follow you around for the rest of...” Quincy fades off abruptly and he appears startled.

Oliver looks at him smugly, “I’m sorry what was that? You’re not a stray cat that follows a person around after they help you once. Oh but wait, isn’t that how we met?”

“No,” Quincy starts.

“Oh but yes,” Oliver says back, “you were in over your head, you saved my life, I saved yours (making us even), and then I saved yours again and I’ve been stuck with you ever since.”

“No,” Quincy says, “that is misinformation. I had everything handled and I have no idea why magic decided I owed you. It was factually incorrect.”

“Oh sure,” Oliver muses, “not like the new matching and glowing tattoos didn’t show that you owed me a life debt or anything.”

Quincy falls silent and then goes to mess with the radio again out of retaliation.

“No,” Oliver starts.

“Why not?” Quincy follows, “silence is horrible unless it’s on purpose and this isn’t. It’s just dull. Music is an art that has the ability to spice things up a bit. Now let me put on a station that isn’t trash.”

Oliver closes his eyes for a moment before focusing on the road again. “Quincy, no, you probably listen to classical music and I refuse. As much as I like classical, I don’t want to feel relaxed while I’m driving.”

“First of all,” Quincy says, “I don’t just listen to classical music. That’s for those special moments with books by a fire and wine. Second, you listen to classical music? Third, you could use some relaxing honestly, and fourth, the car would take care of any lapses in attention as that is how it works.”

“That’s besides the point and yes I listen to classical. Just move on.”

“No, I really think we need to discuss this.”

“We really don’t.”

“I believe we do.”

“Okay!” Oliver relents, “pick a station and stick with it so you’ll leave me alone.”

Quincy smirks but quickly smoothes his expression when Oliver looks at him. “Thank you,” he says politely like he wasn’t just being annoying on purpose to get his way. He then switches the station to land on a blues music station.

Oliver’s face goes through something akin to the five stages of grief, “blues?”

Quincy eyes him, “blues.”

“Alright.”

Chapter 3: Kaido's Corner

They arrive at Kaido's Corner sometime mid-evening. The streetlamps shine softly in the night but smog obscures the stars. The street is bitter and mostly silent, only interspersed by the sounds of strays, the murmurings of homeless, or deals done in shadows. Kaido's Corner, itself, is a humble building. A soft and bright cafe hidden besides crumbling exteriors and even sketchier interiors. A symbol is set on the clear windows, a sort of star within a circle and the borders of the star are done in an emerald green. Quincy gives it a quick nostalgic glance before turning to Oliver. Oliver parks, reluctantly, on the side of the road and turns to Quincy.

"Do we have to?" He slightly whines.

Quincy smirks, "yes," he responds pointedly and then he precedes to hop out of the car in that graceful flowing way of his and wait for Oliver to pull himself together. Oliver sighs but decides that it's better to get it over with. He pulls himself out of the car and locks it with a quick press of his wrist; the car beeps sadly as he does.

"No dilly dallying now Detective. I've been quite looking forward to Kaido's new rain river pie," Quincy says as he leads the way. Oliver rolls his eyes but follows. Bells twinkle as Quincy opens the door and they step into an interior that is just as contradictory as the exterior. The lighting is made of soft overhead lamps and candles scented like applewood and Autumn air. The walls are a light brown and tan brick with the flooring being warm mahogany. A fire burns merrily in a brick fireplace set in the back right corner with deep red leather chairs surrounding it on a deep brown carpet.

Light wood chairs and tables decorate the room with patrons chatting. A counter is set to the left made of a lighter brown wood and a deep red marble countertop. A display case exists in the middle with beautiful looking pastries and food items. A man moves behind the counter. He has soft brown hair paired with a soft brown complexion. His eyes are an amber color and a smile exists on his face with slight dimples. To add to his seemingly welcoming vibe, he wears a cream colored silk button up shirt with a soft brown vest over top and a deep brown bow tie with green stripes. His pants are a similar deep brown color and his shoes are a sort of soft chestnut and near silent when he walks.

The contradiction exists in the candles and fire casting shadows on brick walls, on the patrons faces set in false gazes, or the sharp look in the smiling man's amber cut eyes. Or maybe it's the bright red hair clip in his softly curled hair or the nails painted in messily and quite outrageous colors that the man wears with a pride that only a parent could experience when their child achieves something new. The man glances up at the sound of the bells and gives a closed eyed smile.

"Welcome, to Kaido's Corner," he says brightly, his eyes shining when he spots Quincy. "It's wonderful to see you again little Quincy. Have a seat and I'll help you and your little friend out."

Oliver looks at Quincy annoyed but nods politely to Kaido. Quincy nods brightly and then leads Oliver over to their usual seats by the fire. The ones that are comfy, warm, but still enable them to see the rest of the room. They sit down, Oliver heavily and Quincy softly.

"Well, no one can say that Kaido's Corner isn't comfortable," Oliver says.

Quincy smiles, “but of course. Kaido prides his cafe on being a safe and comfortable place for all.”

“Including criminals.”

Quincy dips his head in acknowledgement.

Kaido walks over with a bounce in his step. “Want me to start you with your usuals little Quincy?”

“Yes, that will do nicely Kaido,” Quincy says before Oliver can say anything. Oliver looks annoyed but let’s it be. Kaido nods and turns to bounce off to his counter, warm brown curls bouncing along with him.

“Why’d you not let me say what I wanted?” Oliver questions to Quincy.

Quincy just looks at him, “first, because you take a while even when you ultimately end up getting the same thing. Second, Kaido knows what you want anyway. It’s one of his many talents, well that and remembering every single one of his patrons.”

Oliver sighs but agrees. They sit in mostly tense silence while they wait, although that may just be Oliver as Quincy seems entirely relaxed.

Kaido comes back quickly. He sets a sugary sweet coffee down in front of Oliver as well as a blueberry muffin, and then turns to set a light berry tea and a slice of his new rain river pie down in front of Quincy. Quincy and Oliver both thank Kaido who just smiles at them. “Let me know if you need anything else,” he says with an underlying tone that shows he means

more than just good food and drinks. Quincy smiles at him and nods his head.

Olivier stares at Kaido as he leaves, “that will forever creep me out.”

“Well, that’s just how Kaido works. Forever a contradiction I’m afraid,” Quincy responds.

“Alright,” Oliver steers away, “now that we came all this way and went through all this trouble, what’s your favor?”

Quincy shakes his head, “ah ah ah, Detective, we just got our food. We must now sit and stew for a bit in pleasant atmosphere and semi pleasant company.”

Oliver groans, “I’m too tired to argue so fine.” And he proceeds to bite aggressively into his muffin before closing his eyes in bliss. No one can say that Kaido’s food is subpar. Quincy smirks smugly and similarly closes his eyes in wonder after a delicate bite of the rain river pie. Oliver finishes first and waits impatiently for Quincy to finish as well. Quincy closes his eyes, delicately dabs his mouth with a napkin and then sets his hands on the table, loosely resting on top of each other.

“Okay,” Oliver grits out, “will you tell me now?”

Quincy smirks, “well...”

“Oh, for the love of...”

“...I’m messing with you Detective.” Quincy then rests his chin on a hand, “yes I’ll tell you, I’ve put it off enough.” His eyes turn a deep gray and his tone drops, even as he ignores Oliver’s mutter of finally. “Do you remember the first time we met?” Quincy asks.

Oliver turns confused, “yes, we just mentioned it on the drive here and it’s kind of hard to forget that entire mess of a meeting and mission.”

Quincy hums, “yes, it was quite memorable wasn’t it?”

Chapter 4: If I Could Go Back and Freeze Time For But A Moment

The day was dark and cold and the mission was tense. Oliver had been sent to intercept a meeting between a master thief and a member of the Chakezi family. Their informant didn't know a lot but it was the perfect chance to catch both this thief and some of the Chakezi in something illegal.

The Chakezi are a member of the Ruling Underground families, nicknamed the "Blood" Families. There are five Blood families in total, one for each major, leading country/province in Lithana. The Matrikal's in Pansea, the Curdero's in Tality, the Ackbeck's in Genamar, the Lekray's in Enla, and finally the Chakezi's or "The Chak" within Freoce. Each specializes in their own area of the criminal underground, ruling over their own territories. The Matrikal's lead in magical weapons ruling the south, the Curdero's in drugs ruling the Southwest, the Ackbeck's in people ruling the north and northeast, the Lekray's in knowledge ruling the northwest, and the Chakezi's in jewels and artifacts ruling the rest of the east. Their own specialities are the only reason they haven't gone to war with each other.

Thanks to headquarters information and one of their spies, Oliver was able to sneak into the Chakezi mansion. He spent the time sneaking around the building and slowly making his way up to the room their informant told them the meeting would take place. He pressed himself against the poorly lit and wallpapered wall before looking in the reflective surface of an expensive imported vase to see where the two guards were. Oliver takes a deep breath and grabs a small metal orb from his belt. He

quickly tosses it around the corner. Smoke starts to fill the hallway and he immediately rushes into the smoke to catch the guards as they pass out before lowering them to the floor. He presses a button on his wrist guard and the smoke begins to fade. With a huff he grabs one of each guards' foot and drags them down the hallway to hide them in a room before heading back to the ornate blue doors. He presses another button on the wrist guard and leans against the door. Voices murmur and crackle through his earpiece before leveling out to be clear.

“Is that the best you can offer me?” A gruff voice says. Oliver hears terretta and hard stone in the voice. Male, age 43, really not a good man.

“Ohoho,” A smooth voice laughs, wind caresses Oliver's ears, he smells salt in the air and hears birds chirping, waves gently splashing a sandy shore, warmth fills his bones. Male, He believes, age 20, nature undetermined. The smooth voice continues, “the best, I, can offer. Please, you should be begging on your knees for me to do this job. Honestly, crime lords these days, you lot just have no manners.” ‘Is this man insane?’ Oliver thinks in shock.

The terretta trembles, “How dare you? I am not bowing to some low life thief. Either you do this job or I can get you out of the way for someone else to do it for me, someone better than you. Someone that knows how to keep their mouths shut.”

“Ha!” The wind whips past Oliver and the warmth feels a little like fire on his skin, “Sorry, sorry, I wasn't laughing at you. No, wait, yes I was. That was honestly a hilarious joke. I am not some lowlife thief, I am a Master Thief, with caps. Even more so, there is no one better than me. You don't

get my help, then you will never see that crystal. Maybe, I'll steal it for myself instead.”

Terreta shakes harder, rocks tumbling down cliffs, “Why would you need it? It's my family's not yours and would hold no value to you.”

The tides roll in an almost playful way, “Why not? It would annoy you and that's half the fun.”

Oliver steels himself, skin itching. “Why you...” the terreta starts, but doesn't get the chance to finish as Oliver moves his leg up and kicks the doors in. Before the men inside can gather themselves, Oliver springs himself onto the first guard, pulling their gun away and taking him out in the same movement. He then turns swiftly and slides to another guard, tripping them and knocking them out. The sea moves calmly aside, while the remaining guards rush Oliver. The terreta also moves back and away from the action. Oliver grapples another guard, elbowing him in the face, hard, he goes down and doesn't get up. Oliver then side steps the other guard trying to rush him and trips her as she runs by. She falls and He kicks her in the face to keep her down. As he turns, senses going wild and skin itching, he hears a gun cock. The one that felt like terreta has a gun leveled at Oliver's head. Oliver freezes, he knows they're too close; he won't be able to avoid the gunshot.

“Say goodnight you no good, S.A.S.” The man rumbles, finger resting over the trigger. Oliver gets ready to duck but finds that he doesn't have to. Right before the man pulls the trigger, he gets hit over the head with a metal chair, and then further bludgeoned with it as he goes down, and apparently for good measure, kicked in the head. Definitely no getting up

for him which is further proven by the terreta quakes and rumbles Oliver feels falling silent and still. Oliver stares at the downed man for a moment.

“Well, that was some awfully dreadful business.” The ocean drifts calmly and a breeze flutters by. Oliver moves his gaze up from who he now recognizes as Darian Chakezi to the man who took him out. The man is slender, a swimmer’s body through and through and is about 6’0 tall. He has hair in a smooth short, semi-curly ponytail the color of red wine and his eyes are a mischievous, peculiar silver color like polished metal. He drops the chairs and similarly gazes at Oliver. The man’s arms, smartly dressed in a satin red button down that is similar to his hair color, softly rest behind his black, swirl patterned, vested back. He wears no tie and the top two buttons of his collar are left open. He has a perpetual smirk on his face and a deep black star earring dangles from his right ear. He’s further dressed in black dress pants and surprisingly classy and reinforced black dress shoes. His look perfectly matches his voice; the look and demeanor of a lord of a noble house of Enla, posh and pretentious, which begs the question on why the man is a thief and why in all the groves is the man in Freoce. To be honest, the man is probably one of the most beautiful people that Oliver has ever seen and he finds it a bit unfair that a criminal has looks like that. The look is semi ruined by what comes out of the man’s mouth.

“Hello handsome,” The man says and waves push against Oliver playfully, “you now owe me.”

Oliver stares, frustrated but knowing he can’t refute that point as the new itching and glowing tattoo on his arm proves it.

The mystery man glides calmly toward Oliver and leans uncomfortably into his space, leading to him taking a hasty step backward. “And who might you be?” The man says with a curious glint in his sharp eyes.

Oliver shakes himself, “I’m Detective Oliver Tanner of the Organized Crime Division of the S.A.S.”

“Ohohoh,” the man says, intrigued, “well, I’ve never had a Sword and Shield agent owe me anything before but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.” Oliver huffs but knows he can’t refute. The man smiles, “my name is Quincy. I am one of the best, if not the best, Master thief in the business. It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance, Detective.” Here Quincy bows slowly, eyes still staring inquisitively at the Detective. Those eyes make Oliver feel uncomfortable but there isn’t much he can do about it. Quincy gets out of his bow and then walks around the Detective and out of the busted doors. Oliver stares at him in confusion. “Well, aren’t you coming, Detective,” Quincy asks, “everyone and their mother could hear the commotion you lot were making and more guards are bound to be on their way, best we be gone when they get here.”

Oliver debates staying behind out of spite and his job but knows that ultimately he has to follow this wacky thief because Magic Rules override the law. Oliver quickly makes his way beside Quincy and stares resolutely ahead while Quincy gazes at him with a smirk. They seem to meander down the hallway, Quincy swiping things of value along the way that seem to disappear whenever Oliver looks at him. They make it down a few corridors when they hear yelling and just so happen to round a corner into a hallway where about ten guards are walking through. Everyone freezes in shock, except Quincy who does an abrupt about face and heads back the way he came, leaving Oliver behind. Oliver quickly realizes his new leash is

gone and turns to run the same way with the guards knocking out of their shock to begin chasing them. Oliver rushes to catch up to Quincy, who is booking it down the hallways.

“Why did you just leave me?” Oliver questions in a tight tone of voice.

“I believed you had it handled mister S.A.S. Besides, we’re perfect strangers, no need for me to hold your hand,” Quincy replies back in a smooth tone of voice that Oliver is kind of jealous that he can have while running. Oliver’s skin begins to itch like crazy and his head rings with the motion of many different magics. He glances behind him for a second in time to see guns aimed at their backs. Oliver notices them about to come upon two blue doors and prays to magic they are unlocked.

“Get down!” He shouts as he tackles Quincy through the doors and then throws his weight against them to close and swiftly lock them. Quincy groggily pulls himself from the floor as Oliver begins to stack furniture in front of the door. Quincy then whines as he notices the glowing tattoos fading.

Oliver glances over, “what? Oh,” he then smiles smugly. “I guess we’re even now,” he says.

Quincy sighs, “I suppose we are, although you did kind of trap us in here.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m not thanking you for that.”

Oliver rolls his eyes but elects to leave it be. “Know of any other ways out of this room,” he asks in a joking tone, not actually expecting a positive answer.

“Of course,” Quincy replies and Oliver blinks in shock, “I memorized the layout before I came to this meeting.”

“This building has like 200 rooms,” Oliver mumbles in confusion.

Quincy pulls himself gracefully up from the floor and walks to one of the walls; he slightly pulls aside a deep blue curtain that blends in. The curtain reveals a shiny glass window pane with fancy designs. Quincy motions Oliver over and points down. Below the window is a roof courtyard, giving them a place to jump and land toward. Oliver looks at Quincy blankly but agrees that they have no other options. As Oliver tries to find a way to open the window Quincy just rolls his eyes, pushes Oliver away, and then busts through the window with his elbow. He further breaks it open to get them a place to crawl out of and then jump from. Oliver can't decide if this guy is either very sane or very unhinged but he again decides that he has no other options at the moment. Quincy motions for Oliver to go first and he takes a deep breath and then jumps, rolling upon his landing. Quincy swiftly follows the same movement. After they land they gaze around the grassy courtyard and then at the guards that soon run to surround them. Oliver looks at Quincy who stares back.

“I get the left, you get the right?” Oliver asks.

Quincy smiles sharply, eyes steel and matching a pair of glowing daggers that just appeared in his hands, “I can agree to that, yes.”

They both then proceed to absolutely destroy the guards, or at least they try to. They fight their way through the numbers, occasionally offering the other a hand; however, the guards seem to keep multiplying and both men are getting increasingly frustrated and tired. Quincy growls and the water in a nearby fountain begins to shake. As his fighting gets more aggressive and violent, so does the shaking of the water. It soon explodes, swirling like a violent wave, crashing and taking out a handful of guards. The water then flows to settle around Quincy, just as sharp, pointed, and cold as his eyes had become.

“I am sick and tired of all of these guards,” he storms out, hands tight on sharp and bloodied daggers. Oliver and his opponents turn to stare at Quincy and Oliver begins to understand why his magic warned him in the form of crashing waves and storms. Quincy in his uncontrolled fury doesn't notice a glint from an upper floor, but Oliver does.

“Quincy!” He yells, but Quincy either ignores him or doesn't hear him. Oliver realizes he has no other option and he again sprints and tackles Quincy to the ground. The ice drops and cracks at the same time a sharper crack sounds and a bullet hits the ground, aimed exactly where Quincy's head used to be. Quincy and Oliver stare, with Oliver's tackle snapping Quincy out of whatever mindset he fell into. They look at each other and then at the remaining guards and then they collectively decide to book it. They proceed to run and jump off the building and into some bushes. They quickly crawl out and begin running across the grounds as guards begin chasing them. A sleek black vehicle breaks through the gated walls and slides up beside them before beeping at them happily. Oliver quickly gets in and barks at Quincy to do the same. Quincy doesn't hesitate. They then drive off and break another hole through the walls before disappearing in the night and quickly hiding away under a bridge. They

slowly get out of the car and shake out their jitters before noticing something that passed their attention in all the chaos.

Quincy begins to yell, “what?! No, no, nonononono. Excuse me, I totally had that.”

Oliver looks at him, tired, “I guess you owe me now.”

“No, I was fine,” Quincy argues. “I was handling it. I have no idea what Magic is thinking, I owe you nothing.” But the new and bright glowing tattoos prove Quincy wrong, he now owes Oliver everything.

Chapter 5: Quincy's Favor

Outside of reminiscing on the quite chaotic first meeting and the many meetings that followed, Oliver can't think of a good reason that Quincy would bring it up. It's possible it's about the Chakezi crystal, whose thief turned themselves in quite abruptly but with no crystal found in their possession and it, as of yet, is still not in its rightful place with the Chakezi's. Oliver's never had any proof but he knows for sure that Quincy had something to do with that whole situation. Maybe the Chakezi suspect him and he needs help?

"Does this have to do with the Chakezi family and that crystal?" He decides to ask.

Quincy frowns at him, "not really no. Why on terreta would you think it would?"

Oliver deadpans at him, "because I'm pretty sure you stole the crystal and have it hidden away somewhere in one of your many hiding places."

"Oh no," Quincy chuckles, "no, why would you think I stole the crystal?"

"Because that is such a you thing to do and you're one of the only people who could steal it and get away with it."

"I don't know whether to be offended or feel flattered. I'll settle on flattered."

“That is not at all how I meant it but go off I guess.” Oliver grumbles and sips his coffee, “if it’s not about that then why’d you bring up that meeting?”

Quincy’s smile turns tight and his eyes color a stormy gray, “Because, I don’t know if you pay attention to this but I still owe you a life debt because of that mess.”

Oliver leans back, pulling the sleeve back slightly on his right arm as he does. Softly glowing swirls and waves appear on his skin before he puts the sleeve back to cover it up. He looks at Quincy’s tight face. “I suppose you do,” he says.

Quincy sighs, “Detective, it’s been years. Everyone knows it’s best to deal with life debts as soon as possible or it can cause...issues.”

Oliver rolls his eyes, “I don’t know what issues you could be talking about as I’m fine and haven’t suffered from anything?”

“I wasn’t talking about you.” Quincy pinches the bridge of his nose, “I meant it can cause issues for the person who owes the debt.”

Oliver sits up, “what do you mean?” Quincy looks to the side and gazes into the fire. “What do you mean, Quincy?” Oliver asks again, growing more concerned by the minute.

Quincy sighs and crosses his arms in a surprisingly self-conscious move. “I mean that the longer the debt goes without being fulfilled the less I can travel away from you. It’s a leash that gets progressively shorter everyday, Detective.”

Oliver sighs in relief, “well, maybe that isn’t such a bad thing. This way you can’t go and break laws easily anymore.”

Quincy looks at him with narrowed eyes, “is that truly what you think, Detective?”

“Yeah,” Oliver shrugs, “if that’s all then I can think of it as a deterrent.”

“So, you don’t care that the longer it exists the less freedoms and rights I have?”

“Look, no, I don’t like that but it’s like jail time. You can serve your time for the crimes you’ve done and when it’s fulfilled you can head out on your merry way and I won’t stop you.”

“I haven’t been convicted of any crimes, though, even if you love to try and pin things on me.”

Oliver sighs, “I don’t know what you want from me Quincy? It’s not like we can fulfill the debt easily; I’m trying to look at the positives.”

Quincy leans toward Oliver, “and that’s my favor. I need you to help me fulfill the debt as I am quite sick and tired of it now.” And Quincy truly does look tired in the fire light.

“Why are you so persistent about it, outside of the leash issue?” Oliver asks.

Quincy doesn't answer and instead he takes a small sip of his tea. Oliver frowns, annoyed at Quincy ignoring his question.

"Quincy?" He asks, "why?"

Quincy sighs, "because it hurts."

"It hurts?"

"Yes, Detective," Quincy answers, frustrated, "it hurts. The longer the debt exists the more constricting and painful it becomes. I want it gone."

Oliver stares at him in shock, "why didn't you say that in the first place? If I had known it was causing you pain I would have immediately started looking for a solution."

"Oh yes, because you definitely inspired confidence with the decision that it was fine to exist if it kept me leashed to you."

"You know I didn't really mean it."

"I don't care. Will you help me or not?"

Oliver stares at Quincy and Quincy stares back. Electric blue resting upon silver. "Of course," Oliver says finally, "and I think I know just the thing that might help. I think it's time I share what I need your help with."

Chapter 6: Oliver's Favor

The fire crackles merrily, while the conversations of other patrons appear muffled. Kaido flits about, giving drinks and food to people even when they didn't ask for anything, leaving them looking happy and fulfilled; Kaido always knows after all. Oliver and Quincy gaze at each other, the air heavy between them in light of Quincy's favor and Oliver's nonchalant attitude.

"What can I do for you then, Detective?" Quincy asks with crossed arms, ones that Oliver now notices are full of tension and he wonders how long Quincy has been in pain because of the debt.

"I was given an assignment recently which has been giving me some trouble." Oliver says and Quincy quirks a brow, intrigued despite himself. Oliver continues, "I've been able to figure out who is probably involved but I need an in, which is where you come in."

Quincy rolls his eyes, "I don't know what I can help you with there. I'm not particularly involved in most cases your division of S.A.S. overseas. I tend to try and stay out of their way, oh sorry, your way; you understand, yes."

Oliver sighs, "I no longer have time for your games today, Quincy." Oliver knows Quincy is just being difficult and it's probably payback for his attitude when Quincy brought up the debt. Oliver isn't saying he doesn't deserve it but he no longer has the time or energy to deal with it.

“Games? Me?” Quincy laughs and places his hand over his heart, “please, this is not a game, darling, this is life and my is it a fun one.” He then tilts his head slightly, thoughtful, “but, if it was a game, I’d be winning. Now again, what exactly can I help you with and how would this help me?”

“You’ve heard of the Matrikal family, correct?” Oliver asks as he leans back in his chair.

“The Matrikal family?” Quincy questions. “Well of course I’ve heard of the Matrikal family. Who hasn’t heard of the Matrikal family? After All, they are the Blood family of Pansea. Why are you asking?”

“From what I can tell, they are the ones connected to the case I’m working on right now. Something to do with gun runs and magic weaponry.”

Quincy lays his chin on his hand, “oh, well, that I do find interesting, although not surprising. The Matrikal’s are the leading family in that section of the underground.”

Oliver stares blankly, “I thought you said you were a different kind of thief than that, Quincy?”

“Of course,” Quincy waves his hand, “that’s just rumors. Why would I know anything about that? I take it by needing an in, you need me to help you go undercover.”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“My, the lovely Detective turning to the Thief. Well, it’s only a matter of

time until that lovely Detective becomes more criminal than the thief. Hmmm.” Quincy muses this outloud, a smirk adorning his face.

“What?” Oliver questions, confused, “you know you asked for my help as well right?”

“Semantics,” Quincy dismisses, “I see it as corruption at its finest, my dear.”

Oliver only looks more confused, “what are you talking about, Quincy?”

Quincy laughs, “don’t you worry your little do-gooder head about it.” Oliver rolls his eyes but stays silent as Quincy gets serious. “From what I’ve heard,” he says, eyes staring into his now empty tea cup, “the Matrikal family is having a party this upcoming Saturday. A birthday celebration for the Nana.”

“I find it a little suspicious you just happened to have that convenient piece of information.”

“What I’ve heard anyway.” Quincy continues, undeterred by Oliver’s speculation. “As the Master Thief that I am, I can easily get myself an invite. Now you are a little more tricky, but I happen to know a great many people. So, I don’t see it being a problem. You’d need to be in disguise of course as we can’t have anyone knowing there’s a S.A.S agent there. Why it would cause chaos, although, maybe I’d want that to happen. I do so love chaos.”

Oliver looks at him annoyed, “so you can get me in?”

Quincy smiles, “yes.”

“Good,” Oliver says pointedly, “then we can probably fulfill your favor along the way as we both know dealing with a Blood Family is just asking for trouble.” Quincy nods his head in agreement. Oliver grabs his coat and lays some coins on the table getting up to leave. “I’ll be off now,” he says, “dealing with you makes me tired and I seriously need a nap.” He turns to leave, walking away from the table, when Quincy calls out to him. Oliver tilts his head slightly to look back at Quincy.

“As you said,” Quincy says, “dealing with a member of the Bloods is asking for trouble. Are you sure that’s trouble you really want to get involved in? I mean, the whole situation with the Chakezi’s already caused you problems you barely escaped from.”

Oliver’s eyes harden, “I dealt with the Chakezi situation, even if the family is still around; I can deal with this. Like Darkmos I’ll let rumors and fear stop me from getting bad people off the streets. What about you? You’re not the type to bring bad attention like that to yourself, gonna back out?”

Quincy smiles at him but it appears sharp in the dim lighting and his eyes are the color of a sky before a storm. “I always have so loved a challenge, Detective. Why would the challenge being a Blood family be any different?”

Oliver shakes his head with a smile, “see ya later Quincy.”

Quincy nods at him, “till we next meet to cause some trouble, Detective. Au revoir.”

Chapter 7: Talking Sits But Whispers Walk

After Oliver leaves, Quincy spends some time sitting in contemplative silence. He stares into the fire, attention drawn to the way it crackles and the flames flicker, fingers absentmindedly playing with his empty tea cup. He heaves a deep sigh and sets the cup down, lifting a hand to rest his chin on as he hums in thought. Kaido walks in front of Quincy and perches himself in what was Oliver's chair, crossing his legs and cradling a steaming cup of what Quincy thinks is hot chocolate. Quincy gives Kaido a slight glance while Kaido gifts Quincy with a bright smile, other than that they both sit in silence with their thoughts.

After a while, Kaido calmly sets his cup down on the table and folds his hands in his lap. "Would you like advice or merely an ear to listen," he asks with a small smile.

Quincy turns his head to look at Kaido. "A bit of both, I think."

Kaido nods slightly and gives the go ahead for Quincy to continue. Quincy crosses his arms to prepare himself but quickly uncrosses them at Kaido's unimpressed look. "I don't really know where to start," Quincy says with a frown.

"The beginning is usually best."

Quincy takes a deep breath. "I'm unsure how to feel about the Detective," he starts.

Kaido tilts his head, "how so?"

"Well, I know you proclaim kindness and acceptance no matter who someone is. I know you told me to try and be friends with the man,

especially because of the debt. And I'm trying, I really am but he makes it so difficult."

"How so?"

Quincy groans and scrubs his hands over his face, "he's just so infuriating. One moment we seem to be getting along the next he's spouting off with a holier-than-thou attitude. He thinks just because he's a S.A.S. agent that he's so much better than everyone else, than me."

"Why does that bother you so much, Seashell?" Kaido asks, just as calm and steady as always.

"Maybe because I'm quite tired of it. Ever since I was a child I've been looked down upon for things I couldn't control. I worked so hard to become a Master Thief so that the underground would not look at me and see an easily taunted and exploited child. I worked so hard to become a Diamond level Marauder so the Association and the Crowns wouldn't look at me and see someone woefully inexperienced and Naïve."

Kaido dips his head in understanding, "why does Little Oli's opinion bother you so much in comparison to the others?"

Quincy stares at Kaido, "you know I didn't stay to talk for it to turn into an impromptu therapy session."

Kaido smiles, "I know, but sometimes people need someone to talk to who will listen and I am quite good at that. Now..." and he waves his hand for Quincy to continue.

Quincy slumps, "I suppose it bothers me because I'm quite stuck with this man and he hates me."

"Oh, hate is quite a strong word."

“What would you call it then?”

“Admiration, jealousy, and awe.”

Quincy looks at Kaido blankly, “where on Terreta are you getting that? The man constantly berates or insults me...”

“You do the same back.”

“...or he goes off about the choices I’ve made in life like he’s so much better because he’s an agent and I’m a thief.”

“Well, he is a man quite stuck in his ways of good or bad. It’s no surprise he views any breaking of a law as bad.”

“Yes, but it’s not like I was given much say in the matter. I grew up in this. Dove brought me up and out of the gutters. She taught me and I am only as good as I am because of what she made me. Without her, the Association, and well, you, I would have been dead in a ditch somewhere or doing even worse things to survive.”

Kaido frowns, eyes downturned and sad, “and I am glad you’re not, Seashell. Don’t mistake my playing devil’s advocate as disagreement or that I don’t understand. As you know, I perfectly do.” Quincy huffs and turns to stare intently at the fire again so he doesn’t look at Kaido and spill even more of his deepest insecurities. Kaido reaches over and gently grasps Quincy’s face, turning it to him. “Listen, Seashell, Little Oli admires your courage, is jealous of the freedom that you possess, and in awe of your skills, even if he would never say so. But he is a boy who grew up surrounded by people he thinks of as his heroes. People who appear as righteous as someone upholding the law and the Royal family’s stance should be. He is a boy who was taught that there are only two sides to a coin in this life, those who follow the law and those who don’t. To him,

breaking the law is almost like a cardinal sin. He doesn't realize that people make certain choices for a multitude of reasons and sometimes the choice you make is the only one you have. While, I know it is unwillingly, being forced to spend time with the man may show him a different perspective."

Quincy sighs and softly grasps Kaido's wrist to lower it from his face, holding it gently in his palm. "How do I go about doing that?" He asks, with a frown.

Kaido laughs a little and twists his hand to better grasp Quincy's. "By being kind and accepting. By trying to place yourself in his shoes while at the same time trying to guide him into yours. You must show him that while you are a Master Thief that doesn't make you evil, it just makes you someone who is trying his hardest to make the most of what he has been given in this life. Show him a little bit of who Quincy the man is more than just Quincy the thief."

"I can try," Quincy says.

"That's all anyone can ask of you, Seashell." Kaido says with a smile, "now, is there anything else you wanted to talk about or are you off to figure out how to sneak into a Blood family's party?"

Quincy shakes his head with a laugh, "I think that's all, thank you."

"I will always be here if you need me, no matter in what capacity that is."

Quincy smiles and gets up from his seat, grabbing his coat and swiftly pulling it on. He walks around the table to give Kaido a swift hug. "Have a great rest of your day, Kaido. I've got to head out as I have a very scary lady to go talk to."

Kaido hugs back tightly before pulling away. He raises a hand to move some of Quincy's hair back behind his ear and lets his hand fall to his

cheek. Quincy closes his eyes and leans into the kind touch. “Don’t be a stranger, Seashell,” Kaido says gently.

“I won’t,” Quincy says as he steps back before he gives Kaido a slight bow. Kaido smiles and bows back. Quincy straightens, gives a final wave and walks out of the café and into the night. The bell tings as he leaves and his breath fogs in front of his face as he stares at the street and then looks up to stare at the stars for a moment. He spots some brightly twinkling ones and smiles at them sadly. “I don’t know what you guys would think of me now and the choices I’ve made, but I hope you’re doing okay up there.” He then gives himself a shake before moving to meander down the sidewalk.

The streets are eerie and silent now. Quincy breathes uncertainly and brings his hand up to play with one of his hidden knives. While he doesn’t rush, he does quicken his pace in the hopes of getting to his destination faster and out of the creepy streets and the feeling of watchful eyes. He breathes a sigh of relief when he spots the building he was looking for.

Maria’s Diner, outwardly, hasn’t changed much since Quincy had last been there. It’s the same bright building done up in pastel colors and soft green lettering for the font. Quincy takes a deep breath, holds it, and lets it out before he pushes open the door and is met with music blaring loudly from speakers. He flinches but gathers himself to slink into the building. While outwardly Maria’s Diner appears soft and bright the inside is entirely different in comparison. It is done in dark, but tasteful colors and looks more like a bar than a diner. Patrons shuffle around drunkenly or loudly call out to their buddies. There are groups playing darts in one of the corners, with another group playing pool in the other corner and from where Quincy is standing, appearing to be swindled out of their money. He laughs when he looks closer and notices who the man doing the swindling is. It’s been a while, but Quincy could never forget Marz’s face.

Marz is an old friend of Maria's and an acquaintance of Quincy's. Well as much as someone who has done a few jobs with him can be considered an acquaintance. Marz is laughing loudly at something one of the others in the group is saying. His hair is still cropped short, with flame like designs cut into it. He is wearing a tight white shirt that stretches across his caramel skin and defined muscles; a dark blue, leather, hooded vest swishes as he moves to lean on the table. He's clad in dark gray ripped jeans and combat boots and his arms are covered in tattoo sleeves. The designs move and flare dramatically, consisting of flames or dragon type designs; golden scales glinting across his skin. He wears a deep green braided leather bracelet on his right wrist with a firecracker-like charm. Marz is also playing those men for everything they are worth with a charming smile on his face. Quincy thinks about going to talk to him but decides against it for now as he's here for a reason.

This leads to Quincy walking through the pushing crowd to the bar top and the bartender the crowd is surrounding. The bartender is showing off quite a few tricks, twirling and dancing as he fulfills drink orders. Sparks flare dangerously as he tosses around the quite flammable alcohol. Quincy chuckles, 'good ole Etchy.'

Etchy is another old friend of Maria's and Marz's partner in crime. Their magic is, after all, quite compatible. Etchy, this time, is dressed sensibly for a bartender, wearing a dark blue collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a dark gray vest and pants. A gray hat adorns curly white, blond hair, dipping low to cover a pale face, burnt umber eyes, and a smirking smile. Similar to Marz, Etchy is wearing a deep green braided leather bracelet with a flame-like charm on his left wrist.

Quincy sidles up to the bar top and rests his arms on it. When Etchy spots him, he has to do a quick hop and twirl to save the glass he almost dropped. "Hey, Etchy," Quincy says with a smile and wave.

Etchy sets the glass down and quickly finishes the drink before motioning for a moment from the crowd who boo's good naturedly. He slides to be in front of Quincy and quirks a brow. "Hello Quincy," Etchy says, voice smooth and coated in laughter, "what brings you here?" Etchy starts preparing a drink for Quincy even as he questions Quincy's presence. "Something to sell or something to buy, hmmm?" Etchy asks, inquisitively.

Quincy chuckles but accepts the Seawater Whisky that Etchy hands him. "Nah," he says, "at least I don't think so, but I could use Maria's help in a..." Quincy pauses for a moment to think and both his and Etchy's eyes glint. "...project, if you will," Quincy finishes.

Etchy smirks, "sounds interesting, I'll see if M'Lady is available."

Quincy nods in thanks. Etchy turns to look at a shadowed corner and moves a hand to twirl and tug at a piece of his hair. The shadow shivers and moves for a second before disappearing.

"We'll find out in a second," Etchy says as he takes up cleaning some of the glasses.

Quincy blinks, "was that Astaire?"

"Yes," Etchy smirks.

"His shadow magic has gotten a lot better."

"Oh definitely. You should have seen him on the last job, diev near perfection that one."

"I'll take your word for it," Quincy says as he swirls the blue shifting liquid in his glass.

Etchy leans on the bar top, "you should do a job with us again sometime, then you'll see."

“I’ll think about it.”

Etchy shrugs but doesn’t push. He leans back as the shadows next to him shift and a hand pops out to drop a note into his raised hand. Etchy nods his head as Astaire disappears to slink back to the corner he was originally hiding in. Quincy straightens, as Etchy looks down at the note. “Head on back,” Etchy says, “M’Lady is free to meet with you.”

Quincy smiles, “thanks for this and the drink.”

“It’s no problem,” Etchy says, “do you still know how to get through the gateway?”

Quincy smiles, “yes, see you around, Etchy.”

“You as well, Quincy,” he says as he gets back to wowing the crowd with his tricks or laughing to himself at Marz playing the crowds for broke.

Quincy shakes his head at the lot of them as he shuffles through the crowd to get to the shadowed corner Astaire has holed himself up in. Quincy gives Astaire a smile and slight wave. Astaire dips his head, the glint of his green ear cuff catching in the light, before stepping aside, allowing Quincy access to the wall behind him. Quincy takes a deep breath, does a crossing motion over his chest before putting his hands together and then on the wall. The wall melts away, allowing him to cross through before solidifying behind him as Astaire steps back into place. Quincy dusts himself off as he looks around.

The place hasn’t changed all that much. Statues still take up guard in every corner with priceless artifacts, paintings, and jewels set on display under Boundary fields and protection charms. It’s lit up with brightly shining candles, making a mysterious, yet somehow welcoming atmosphere.

Quincy doesn’t have long to reflect as wind chimes twinkle and a woman

steps through a beaded curtain, into the room. Quincy smiles, Maria looks just as beautiful as ever. Her light brown skin shines in the candlelight and lights up her raven hair. She's donned in a light purple Shar with a deep purple and gold patterned Tuk that is one sleeved. Gold adorns her wrists, neck, and ears. While a spark ruby dangles from a chain over her hair to rest over her forehead. A gold ring with a green stone rests on her right middle finger and a bracelet with the colors purple, lilac, and gold braided together rests on her left wrist.

"Maria," Quincy says with a wide smile as he bows to her.

Maria stares him down for a moment and waits, forcing Quincy to sweat nervously in his bow. Before she heaves a sigh and bows softly back. They both straighten before stepping to hug each other. "It has been a long time since you have stepped a toe into my domain, Kawansi."

Quincy sighs and steps back from the hug, "I know, Maria, and that is a fault all mine."

"Have you been hiding from me?" She asks with a laugh.

Quincy shakes his head quickly, "no, never. I just...have been busy. Maybe a bit lost."

Maria hums as she walks to a seating area hidden from view. "Yes, I suppose you would be a bit busy when trying to deal with a three-year long life debt," she says as she sits herself on detailed cushions, her deep brown eyes flashing purple as she stares at him.

Quincy frowns but sits across from her, "you know I don't like you looking through my head like that, Maria."

Maria shrugs, "can't help it. Need to look, you see."

Quincy sighs and shakes his head but doesn't argue further, knowing a losing battle when he sees one.

"Before we get to why you came, I believe there is a friend who wishes to see you," Maria remarks as she relaxes into her throne of cushions.

Quincy frowns in confusion before freezing as a deep growl resonates through the room and into his very soul. He turns to stare at a dark corner that shifts and then lunges before Quincy can get his feet under him. He is tackled into a pile of cushions and the air is driven from him as a weight settles on his chest and sharp points come to rest on his neck. Quincy breathes shallowly and gulps. He takes a moment to try and calm his heart before speaking. "Hey there, Atallah," he says as calmly as he can with Atallah's teeth inches away from ripping out his neck.

Atallah growls and presses a little in warning.

"I know," Quincy says, "I know and I'm sorry that I haven't visited. I promise I'll make it up to you."

Atallah grumbles before releasing Quincy's throat and then flopping on top of him.

Quincy oofs as the air he just got back is knocked out of him. He flops his head back for a moment and spots Maria sitting calmly.

"Not going to help huh," he asks.

"No," Maria says, "Atallah deserves to be a little upset."

Quincy gives her a glare before looking at Atallah's head that is resting on his chest. "Can I sit up, Atallah. I promise I'll give you all the pats and loving a prince such as you deserves."

Atallah stares at him with slitted purple eyes before huffing in his face and scooting back enough to allow Quincy to sit up with Atallah's head resting in his lap. Quincy laughs and brings his hand up to rest on Atallah's head. He glides his hand from behind Atallah's rounded ears, down past the lilac, purple, and gold braided collar on his neck, and further down his short, black furred back. Atallah's slender tail sways back and forth and his fur lights up in purple swirls as he starts to chuff and purr contently, eyes closing in bliss. Quincy laughs but continues to absentmindedly pet down Atallah's back as he turns his attention to Maria.

Maria smiles slightly, "now we get down to business."

Quincy smiles back, "let's."

Maria floats over a tea set, filling up the cups and floating one over to Quincy in purple light. Quincy accepts it with a smile.

"Now," Maria says, "what can I do for you, Kawansi?"

Quincy lays a hand over Atallah, softly petting his hand over Atallah's head. "As you've gleaned," he says, "and probably already know, I've been attempting to deal with the life-debt as it's been causing me so many problems."

Maria nods in understanding, "yes, life-debt's past a few months can have consequences, but to have one past a few years. Not very good for you, dear."

"I know," Quincy grumbles, "which is why I did all of that to get Detective Tanner's attention and it worked. I got his help and a possible way to deal with the debt even if it means helping him with his mission."

"Are you worried about going up against a Blood family?"

“No, in that regard I say bring it on. I’m worried about how I can keep this man safe when we are walking into the lion’s den.”

“Makes sense,” Maria says, “that man does like to walk into trouble.”

Quincy narrows his eyes at her and huffs. He takes a moment to enjoy his tea, bringing it close to his face to let the steam waft out and warm him. He takes a sip and the flavors burst over his tongue, something bitter and teretty. “It’s a highly unfortunate characteristic of his.”

Maria hums, “yes, but there are always ways to work around things.”

Quincy straightens, “how so?”

Maria stares at him before answering, looking for something. Her eyes flash purple and she answers, “I know a man. He is someone you once knew and can get you what you need.”

Quincy leans forward in interest, his eyes glinting, “who?”

“I am not sure you can handle it.”

“Well, I don’t really have a lot of options here, Maria.”

Maria sighs, “It is a man that goes by the name Nero.”

Quincy stares in shock. He continues to be almost frozen even as Atallah nuzzles him sadly. Maria frowns and floats his tea cup to rest to the side. She then nudges Atallah off and pulls Quincy up, proceeding to help him to the door. Quincy pulls himself together as he’s about to leave.

“Wait,” he says, “how do I find him?”

Maria stares at him and doesn’t answer.

Quincy grasps a hold of her hands, “Maria, please, where do I find him?”

Maria sighs, “you can find him at the very edges of Cricket Alley. He tends to frequent the club, Virtuoso, simply give his name to the bartender.”

Quincy breathes, relieved and smiles at her. “Thank you,” he says as he gives her a quick hug and then turns to leave.

“Kawansi,” Maria calls.

Quincy stops and turns to look back at her.

“Be careful,” she says.

Quincy smiles softly, “you know I always am, Maria.”

“Of course,” she says, “but be aware that not all is as it seems. Enemies can be friends as friends can be enemies.”

Quincy frowns at her thoughtfully, “I’ll be careful, Maria. I promise.” He stoops to give Atallah one last pat and then walks through the gateway.

Maria sighs as he disappears. “Danger follows that one, doesn’t it?” She says. Atallah growls in agreement.

“True,” a voice whispers in the dark, “but we will be here for him when he falls.”

Maria smiles slightly at the voice and the arms, a gold, purple, lilac braided bracelet on the left wrists, that appear from the dark to wrap around her.

“That is true, my love,” she says back, “but I can’t help but worry. I do not have your gifts.”

Her husband smiles and lays his head on hers, “no, you do not, mi amor, but trust me when I say that it will work out, one way or another.”

“I will always trust you, my love,” she says as she relaxes into the comfort of her husband’s arms, letting the worries go for now. Atallah huffs sadly and settles against their legs, worrying in his own way.

“We See for you all the best, Quincy,” her husband murmurs, eyes glinting bright gold in the candlelight.

Chapter 8: Maybe, Maybe Not

The Enlan headquarters of the S.A.S. Agency is situated in between the cities of Birmun and Chester. It's a large, imposing building, towering over everything else in the space. The structure is sharply cut and clean with the atmosphere being chaotic as much as it's organized. The Organized Crime Division is situated on the Twenty Seventh floor of the building, allowing for a somewhat nice view of the cities.

Oliver arrives at the building's underground parking with a tired sigh. He really wants to go back to his apartment, settle on the couch with Reeky, his tiger tabby, and crash, unfortunately he can't do that yet. So, instead, he trudges through the building, nodding at the guards as he passes by them. He toddles into the elevator, ignoring the others already there and indicates for the twenty seventh floor. When the elevator dings for his floor, Oliver slumps for a moment, before straightening and walking out into the bullpen. He trudges to his desk and slouches into his seat as soon as he arrives. The bullpen is miraculously quiet for now and he decides to try and enjoy it for as long as he can. He knows he'll have to get up and let his team leader know about the mission so the team can prepare but for now it's peace and quiet.

"Eyo, looks like someone's finally back from his impromptu mission," a voice says loudly.

Or, maybe not. Apparently, Oliver isn't allowed peace and quiet today. He groans, "Drew, do you have to be so loud?"

"No, but you looked so comfortable there that I felt I had to mess it up."

Oliver sighs and opens his eyes. Drew Roche is a member of Oliver's team and, if Oliver were honest, a bit of a prick. No seriously, Oliver is of the firm opinion that if you were to look up A-hole in the dictionary, you'd get a picture of Drew. He's a 6'3 tall man with bronze skin and built like a football player. He tends to show it off by wearing tight clothing, like now, where he is wearing a tight deep yellow turtleneck and black distressed jeans. His hair is a dark raven black shaved into an undercut, and he has deep black, cold eyes with a black u-shape situated on his forehead. The man wears a constant, condescending smirk on his face and sometimes Oliver wishes he could punch him. However, Oliver supposes that he can't complain as Drew does get the job done, quite efficiently as well.

Oliver sighs, "is there something you need besides annoying me, Drew?" He asks.

Drew laughs, it doesn't sound cheerful. "Oh no," he says, "just want to know why you ran out so quickly and were gone for pretty much the entire day. The whole team placed bets. I bet fifty druid that you were skivvying off and just 'said' it was an emergency."

Oliver takes a deep breath, "oh really, well you'll be upset to know you lose that bet as I left for a completely legitimate reason and Zarks was made aware."

"Aw too bad. I would have loved to see Zarks chew your kaes out."

"Hmm sorry to disappoint. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go talk with Zarks," Oliver says as he gets up and tries to edge around Drew.

Drew doesn't allow him to. "Aww, c'mon man, the whole team wants to hear where ya went and what ya were doin'." Drew throws an arm over Oliver's shoulders and Oliver barely suppresses his flinch.

“Well, you guys can wait, because frankly it’s not your business, yet, and Zarks is waiting for me so...”

Drew tightens his hold, “and he can keep waiting for a bit. After all, he’s not aware you’re back yet.” He then loosens his hold, but Oliver stays tense. Drew laughs, “loosen up a little man,” he says as he shakes Oliver a little, Oliver smiles weakly. Drew then proceeds to drag Oliver to one of the conference rooms that is set aside for their team. He takes a deep breath and his muscles tighten when he sees that the whole team is there, chatting merrily.

Oliver has been on this team since his beginning years with the S.A.S. He may have been one of the youngest members at the time, being only eighteen but they still welcomed him and he doesn’t know how he could thank them for that. Despite that though, and even in spite of working with these people every day for six years and placing his life in their hands, he still knows very little about them. Oliver isn’t overly upset about that fact, as he knows they can get the job done and they know very little about him in turn. One overwhelming fact that he does know, is that each and every one of them are efficient and dangerous agents who wouldn’t hesitate to do whatever they can to further themselves. Drew Roche, Merit Kyte, Lawx Torren, Tito Levesque, Lydia Koras, and Ardaty Martin are all deadly and Oliver knows that he can never let his guard down around these people. Despite that he still smiles when the rest of the team notices him.

Merit is a 5’9 male with fair skin, green eyes hidden under square, bronze glasses, and curly raven black hair. He routinely wears buttoned up shirts and sweaters, with comfy pants and shoes. From what Oliver has heard, he was recruited right out of the academy and has been working in the OC division ever since. He’s a serious individual and Oliver always feels like he is being dissected when those sharp cut jade eyes stare at him.

Presently, Merit greets him with a nod and not much else. Oliver hesitantly nods back.

Lawx gives a slight smile, “you’re finally back, safe and sound, I see,” he says. Lawx is an experienced agent, recruited from the royal family’s Honor Guard, after the attempted and failed war with Natveo. He has blond hair, light skin, and cold green blue eyes. His features are sharp and he routinely switches up what he wears to be prepared for any situation. This time he is wearing a white muscle shirt and tan pants. The man is a deadly and silent agent. Oliver constantly feels like everything Lawx does is a lie, like a role that he’s been tasked to play. Nothing Lawx has ever done can prove that as the man is too good and has never slipped up once. It’s more a gut feeling that Oliver has; his magic flaring in warning when the man is around, as it does now.

“Well, it’s not like he was doing anything dangerous from what I was able to find out,” Tito says with a bored smile. Tito is a small, slight male, standing at about 5’4, with brown skin, light blond hair, and purple, green eyes. He’s dressed in a gray shirt, green and purple puffer jacket that stops at his waist, and gray cargo pants with purple high tops, and purple headphones set around his neck. Tito is probably the member Oliver knows the least about. He’s their tech guy and he’s scarily good at what he does. Oliver has no idea how Tito got into working for the S.A.S. but he doesn’t care, because at least he’s on their side and not anyone else’s.

Tito smiles lazily as everyone stares at him. “What?” he muses.

Lydia deadpans, “we’re wondering what you found, Smarty,” she says with her painted red nails tapping on the table. Lydia is a muscular woman of 5’9, with dark skin, strawberry blond hair, and pink eyes. She wears a red blouse with a white blazer and white pants as well as sharp looking red heels. She’s a dangerous woman used to taking what she wants. She also

hardly, if ever, fails a mission. Oliver has done his utmost best to never get on her bad side. He's heard rumors about why she joined S.A.S.. The most common being that she joined after a situation with a former lover and her modeling that ended in some sort of disaster and a dead body. Though, Oliver doesn't really pay attention to that as he hasn't gotten any confirmation if it's true or not.

Ardaty covers her mouth as she laughs in response to Lydia's comment. Ardaty is a slight female of 5'3, with tan skin covered in dark markings, brown eyes, and dyed-blond hair. She wears a light blue blouse with gray pants and patterned heels. Oliver can't decide who is more dangerous, her with her gorillan strength or Lydia with her serpentine grace, either way both are deadly individuals that Oliver does his best to be polite and respectful to as his Mama raised a gentleman, thank you very much. It has nothing to do with his fear that they might suffocate him in his sleep if he doesn't, not at all.

"Oh, do tell, Tito, what ya find?" Drew asks as he drags Oliver into a chair at the table and five eyes stare him down, Oliver sweats.

Oliver raises his hands, "oh there's no need for that," he says with a nervous smile, like he did something wrong, even though he hasn't.

Tito stares at him with a smug smile and Oliver pleads with his eyes. Tito, apparently, does not care how Oliver feels, as he still decides to look to the rest of the team and answer. "He got a call from an officer in the Donla PD that his boyfriend got arrested."

Oliver freezes before stuttering, "he is not my boyfriend!"

The rest of the team stares. Drew laughs, "oooh dating a criminal, Tanner, that doesn't look good for you."

“We’re not dating.”

“How long have you been dating him?” Ardaty asks, laugh hidden behind her hand and brown eyes twinkling.

“Again, not dating.”

“I’m surprised,” Lydia states as she stares at Oliver with a bored look, “I didn’t think a man like you could snag a girlfriend much less a boyfriend.”

Merit stares in contempt at them, “you all are a bunch of idiots.”

“But you love us,” Tito states.

“No,” Merit says back, causing Tito to pout.

“Look,” Lawx says with a small, gentle smile that causes Oliver to shiver, “I’m sure they have a wonderful relationship. It’s not impossible to think that someone like Tanner could land a date.”

Oliver deadpans, he isn’t sure if he should feel offended or not.

Drew throws an arm over Oliver again. “Well,” he says, “tells us about your boyyyyy, and what he did to get arrested.”

Oliver shoves him off. “He is not my boy. He’s just a thief I met that I ended up stuck with because he owes me a life debt, okay. Nothing more to it.”

Merit sighs, “if he’s a thief then shouldn’t he be in jail?”

“No,” Oliver shakes his head, “I know he’s a thief but he’s never been convicted or caught for anything.”

“Either way, I get why you don’t want to say he’s your boyfriend. I’d be ashamed too if I was dating a criminal as an S.A.S. agent,” Ardaty says.

“That’s not,” Oliver fumbles, “I’m not ashamed that I know the man but we just aren’t dating. He may be a thief but he’s not a bad guy.”

“Tanner,” Lawx says with a frown, “you can’t be thinking like that. If he’s a good enough thief to not be on any of our radars that means he’s probably a part of the Marauder’s Association, at least a Platinum level. Those kinds of people aren’t good people and they are very dangerous.”

Oliver frowns at him but doesn’t refute.

“Well, he can’t be that good,” Drew says, “he did get arrested.”

“Yeah and it was for something as stupid as shoplifting,” Tito laughs.

“Oh that’s even worse,” Drew says with a mocking laugh.

“Nah,” Oliver says, “he got arrested on purpose so I don’t think it really counts.” He blinks when he sees his team staring at him.

“Who gets arrested on purpose?” Lydia questions, sounding as if she thinks anyone who does so must be lacking brain cells.

Oliver sighs, “Quincy apparently.”

“What was the reason?” Ardaty asks with a head tilt.

“Oh,” Oliver chuckles, “well, as I said, he owes me a life debt. He got arrested to get my attention so that he could ask for my help in dealing with the debt.”

“Why does he owe you a debt anyway?” Drew asks.

Oliver slumps, “remember that whole mess of a mission involving the Chakezi’s. The one I did a couple years back.”

“Oh yes,” Lydia says, “you failed that quite spectacularly.”

Oliver glares at her.

Tito pipes up, “ah, it’s here in the mission report. You say you met a man who goes by the name of Quincy and calls himself a Master Thief. You also talk about the debt and how this Quincy fellow is the reason you failed the mission.”

“That’s kind of scary how you can pull that up so quickly,” Oliver says and Tito just smiles back.

“Oooh,” Drews winces, “not good for the guy that he owes you a three-year life debt.”

“Yeah,” Oliver says, “which is why he went through so much trouble to ask for my help.”

Lydia shakes her head, “you told him no, correct?”

Oliver frowns at her, “no, I said I’d help.”

“Tanner,” Lawx sighs, sounding disappointed and Oliver can’t help but fall into himself, “in order to deal with a debt of that caliber you’d have to put yourself in severe danger. Why would you go out of your way for a thief?”

“And,” Merit follows up with before Oliver can answer, “the debt has him leashed to you, meaning he can’t break the law as severely while it exists leading to us catching him easier. Why waste the opportunity?”

Oliver stares at them and wonders. Is this how he sounded to Quincy, if so then he owes Quincy one Darkmos of an apology. Moreover, Just like him, his team has no idea that a prolonged life debt can cause pain. If Merit isn’t aware of it, then that means no one has looked into the long term consequences, which is concerning, actually.

“That’s tantamount to torture, actually,” Oliver says.

“What?” They ask.

Oliver sighs, “apparently, it’s not a known fact that a prolonged life debt can cause the person who owes the debt pain. That’s why Quincy went through all the trouble to ask for my help. He’s in a lot of pain and I had no idea. If three years causes pain then I shudder to think what any more time could lead to.”

Tito hums, followed by the clacking of keys, “there’s nothing on the Net that says anything about a long term debt causing pain.”

“Quincy wouldn’t lie,” Oliver says as he shakes his head.

“Of course he would,” Drew laughs, “the man is a thief. He’d do anything to get what he wants and right now that’s getting rid of the debt.”

Lawx nods his head, “I could see him lying to you so you would help.”

Oliver shakes his head again, denying that Quincy would lie to him like that. Although he doesn’t know why he’s so defensive of Quincy, it’s not as if Quincy hasn’t lied to him before and won’t do it again in the future to get what he wants. Maybe, it’s because Oliver looked into Quincy’s eyes and he saw the pain and call for help. Either way, Oliver wants to believe Quincy.

“Besides,” Lydia says, “you’re too much of a bleeding heart so of course he would be able to extract your favor.”

“Maybe,” Oliver relents, “but even so. It’s cruel to leave it be, so I’m going to help him. End of discussion,” he says when he sees the others about to speak.

“We’re just looking out for you,” Lawz says with a frown.

“I appreciate it,” Oliver says, even though at this moment he really doesn’t, “but in this case it’s not needed nor wanted, so just leave it be. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go talk to Zarks. Good day.” Oliver doesn’t wait to hear anything else they have to say. Instead he ducks under Drew’s arm and walks out of the room. He doesn’t know why he feels so annoyed or angry, It’s not like Quincy is his friend. Whatever the reason, Oliver made a promise to help people when they call for it, so that’s what he’s going to do.

Oliver leaves the room but comes to an abrupt halt when he almost walks into someone. He looks up and freezes, ah crap it’s his boss.

Oliver’s boss is a man named Nile Zarks. He’s a five star special operative and the head of Oliver’s team. Oliver knows very little about the man, personally, but he does know that Special Agent Zarks is a serious man who has very little patience for anyone’s, particularly his agents, bullkritt. He’s also very scary in both magic and demeanor, earning the nickname “The Stone Commander.”

“Oh,” Oliver says, sheepishly, “hello, Sir.”

Zarks just stares at him with glaring and cold, gray eyes. “How long have you been back, agent?” He asks gruffly.

Oliver gulps, “uh, not long, Sir. I was on my way to speak with you, actually.”

“I should have been your first visit instead of you slacking off with your team. I’ll have to get onto those idiots later.”

“Well, actually, I was coming, but then Drew grabbed me and...”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses, agent,” Zarks says, and Oliver fights not to slump. “Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Of course, Sir,” Oliver says quickly.

Zarks nods, “good, now follow, you need to report.”

Oliver nods before hurrying as Zarks is already walking off. It’s difficult for Oliver’s 5’10 height to keep up with Zarks 6’5, but he still tries by almost running behind his boss’s fast pace. They hurry along in silence before arriving at Zarks’ office. Zarks barges in and then sits in his chair before staring at Oliver.

Oliver blinks, startled, “oh right,” he says before closing the door gently and plopping down in a chair.

“Report, agent,” Zarks says, brusquely.

Oliver nods and lays out the situation. Reiterating for the second time why Quincy got arrested and why he needed Oliver’s help. Oliver also takes the care to point out how good it is for them, as he doesn’t want to have another argument, especially when he knows that’s an argument he would lose.

“Sir,” he says, “I believe this can be very beneficial for us in regards to the heightened gun runs issue. I was able to link the Matrikal’s to them. With Quincy’s help I have an in. The Matrikal’s are throwing a party soon and Quincy can get both of us an invitation, undercover. If we have the team on standby and are wired, we can catch these guys, I’m sure of it, or at least find out some crucial information.”

“So, a ruling underground family is involved,” Zarks states, nonchalantly.

“Yes,” Oliver says, “I realize that going against a Blood family is dangerous but it’s even more dangerous to leave things as they are.”

“You’re right about that,” Zarks says, “diev undergrounds like to cause us a whole bunch of issues.”

“So, I have the go ahead to prepare for this mission and follow through?” Oliver asks, voice hopeful.

“Hmm,” Zarks hums, “no. Too dangerous, we have no way of confirming if your informant is trustworthy. Best to leave it be, unless we get more information. We’ll catch em’ eventually.”

Oliver stares in shock, “but, Sir, didn’t you just say that the Blood families are causing us issues, wouldn’t it be better to take them down as soon as we can?”

Zarks stares hard at Oliver, but for once Oliver doesn’t feel nervous. Zarks sighs, “they are a ruling underground family, agent. We can’t go into anything with our guns half-cocked. So, the answer is still no, now leave it be.”

“But, Sir...” Oliver tries.

“Leave it.” Zarks says, shortly and Oliver falls silent.

“Yes, Sir,” Oliver says with a frown.

Zarks nods, “good, now get out of my office, you fools have been here long enough for today.”

Oliver nods and snaps off a salute and ‘yes sir,’ before hurriedly leaving. Oliver marches past the team, who are leaving as well, but he completely ignores their calls of his name. He has too much to think about to gather up the energy and bother with them now. He kind of gets where Zarks is coming from, but still. Wouldn’t it be better to take the chance? It’s a risk

no matter when you go against a Blood family, so why wouldn't you take the chance when you can prepare for it?

Oliver thinks on it the whole drive to his apartment. Even when he is finally changed into comfy clothing and resting on his couch with Reeky curled up and purring on his chest, he still thinks on it. However, Oliver is a loyal agent, first and foremost, so he knows that no matter how much he plans or prepares, that mission is never going to see the light of day. Oliver pets Reeky and tries to ignore the terrible feeling he has about that thought.

Chapter 9: Doubt lies As Whispers Shout

Oliver blinks the sun out of his eyes blearily before groaning, brain not fully awake. Why did he sleep on the couch? He sits up with a sigh and rubs his face, spotting Reeky's tiger striped body and bright gold eyes staring at him balefully.

"Yeah, yeah," he says, "I'm coming." He stands up reluctantly and stretches his arms above his head causing his back to pop and crack. He huffs and trudges to the kitchen to lay down a bowl of food for Reeky. Reeky meows at him, content. Oliver prepares himself some coffee and leans against his counter, contemplatively. He groans; he had planned on calling Quincy to let him know that the mission was off, but he ended up falling asleep on his couch. He'll blame the soothing motions of petting Reeky and Reeky rumbling on his chest, happily, if asked. Either way, it didn't happen. Oliver hopes Quincy hasn't gotten everything prepared already, although he doubts even Quincy could do that all-in-one night. He sighs debating, Quincy or work, both would wear on his thin patience so it all depends on which he would rather deal with right now. He really does not want to go into work today, especially with the way the team was acting yesterday and the way he left things. Oliver groans again and elects to call Quincy and deal with that problem first.

He rubs his wrist, where his wrist guard had dug into his skin since he fell asleep without taking it off last night. He decides to just go for it instead of putting it off as his mama didn't raise no coward. Oliver takes the guard off and sets it on the table before pressing on it causing a holographic purple image to appear. He scrolls through and presses the name that says, "My Daily Migraine." The guard starts to ring.

On the other side Quincy stares at his wrist band with bored eyes, contemplating ignoring the call because he can. Well, that and the fact he is on a train heading toward Cricket Alley. He elects to do just that and lets it ring out.

Oliver's eye twitches, as the call doesn't go through. He sighs and clicks it again.

This time Quincy smirks and answers.

"Hey, Quincy," Oliver starts.

Quincy smiles and then hangs up.

Oliver stares in shock, "That little krit; he hung up on me."

Quincy starts cackling on his side, which causes the other people on the train to stare at him wearily.

Oliver sighs and debates calling him again when Quincy starts calling him. Oliver huffs but presses the accept button. "Quincy," he growls.

"Now, now, now, Detective," Quincy says after he placed an earpiece in his ear, "no need to act so upset. Just a little fun you see."

Oliver sighs, "if you were next to me right now, I'd strangle you."

"Well, I'm not, which is a good thing as strangulation is just in poor taste" Quincy laughs, causing Oliver to growl again. "Anyway," Quincy says, "there's no time for games as we've got a strike against the Bloods to prepare for."

Oliver's eye twitches again, he takes a deep breath. "Quincy," he says, "that's actually why I called."

“Hmm,” Quincy hums, intrigued, “well, I’d assume so. We have a lot to do if we want this to go well.”

“About that,” Oliver sighs.

“I don’t like that tone of voice, Detective. What happened?”

Oliver frowns, “my team leader disapproved of the mission, which means he shut it down.”

“And,” Quincy says.

“And,” Oliver says back, “that means the mission is off. No party, no intel, no “strike” against the Bloods.”

“Oh,” Quincy hums, “so you’re actually going to do what they tell you to?”

Oliver sputters, “yes, that’s my job and it was a direct order.”

“So...”

“So! Quincy, I can’t ignore a direct order.”

Quincy stares at the passing landscape, eyes lidded, “of course you can. This mission is vital. If your boss says no then it just means it’s only the two of us.”

“Quincy,” Oliver says with a frown, “I can’t. It’s done so just drop it. I promise I’ll still help with the debt but the mission is off.”

“Oh, I’m not concerned about that,” Quincy says, “although I don’t like owing people, I could work around it. No, I just find it a little suspicious is all.”

Oliver blinks, “suspicious? What on Teretta do you find suspicious?”

Quincy hums on his end and shuffles around, eyes closed. “Well, from what I’ve learned of your boss, he’s not the biggest fan of the Bloods. It doesn’t make much sense that he would shut down a mission that could help cripple one such family.”

Oliver blinks, “well, he said it’s because he can’t be sure to trust my information.”

“You mean, he can’t be sure if he can trust me.”

Oliver agrees reluctantly.

“Well,” Quincy says, “that can’t be the only reason. You’ve gone into missions on less.”

Oliver sighs, “True. He just said it’s too dangerous and we’ll have other chances. He sounded pretty calm about it, so I trust him on that.”

Quincy laughs softly, “He’s calm because he never planned on sending you on a mission in the first place.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Quincy,” Oliver says with a frown.

Quincy sighs, debating if he should share what he knows or not. There are a prevalent amount of rumors within the underground, things whispered in the shadows that never make it to normal ears. Quincy recalls a major rumor, that honestly is more fact than rumor, that Lithana is ruled by shadows; the Bloods in charge of all major decisions, their ruling placed above that of even the Royal family’s. These whispers speak of corruption and darkness within the light. Quincy debates telling Oliver that his boss is likely in the Blood families’ pockets but decides against it; he knows Oliver’s poor good guy heart wouldn’t be able to handle it. Good ole regular subterfuge and manipulation it is then.

“Well, Detective,” Quincy says with a flourish, “maybe I’m a pessimistic individual, although I’ve always seen myself as more of a realist, so it may just be my personal biases finding it suspicious. It’s up to you either way to believe what you want. What I recommend is thinking on things more, after all, the world is never how it truly appears. I still say we follow through with the mission as you may never get another chance like this again.”

Oliver tries to speak but Quincy keeps going.

“But,” he says, “the decision is entirely up to you so whatever you decide I won’t stop you. Just know that if you decide not to I’ll be calling you a coward in my mind for life, but it’s just how it is. Now I have to go as I’ve reached my stop. Have a good day Detective and think on it. Tata.”

Quincy hangs up before Oliver can say anything, leaving Oliver staring open mouthed at his guard. That little...he knew exactly what he was doing. Oliver has never been one to back down from something especially if he deemed it the right thing to do and there Quincy goes playing to his pathos. Reeky meows at him and rubs against his leg. Oliver stoops to pick him up and hugs him. He needs the comfort as he apparently has quite a bit to think about.

Quincy, on the other hand, doesn’t stop to think. As soon as he hears the train announcer saying they’ve arrived at the station in Pervil, he hops up from his seat and off the train when the doors open. He glides out and calmly walks through the crowds. The sun is shining brightly down on him when he walks topside and he squints. The Pervil station drops him off in the heart of Sorren Alley, placing it in the heart of rich, uptown ville.

Quincy stares around blankly before shaking his head. As he turns to head to Cricket Alley, he spots a woman dressed in gaudy furs who is being quite rude to one of the store’s clerks. Quincy stares at the scene annoyed

before sighing. He walks up as the woman leaves in a huff, his side just barely brushing hers. He apologizes as she snaps at him. He glides to the overwhelmed looking clerk and smiles.

“Hello,” He says softly, “I’d just like...these,” and he plucks an expensive pair of sunglasses from the stand next to the clerk.

“Of course, Sir,” the clerk says in a soft and brittle voice, “that’ll be sixty-seven druk and eighty-five dekus.

Quincy winks, “thanks dear, keep the change.” He pulls out a hundred druk from the wallet he stole from the lady and lays it in front of the open mouthed clerk before leaving. There’s his good deed for the day done. He hums as he walks down the street. Gradually the clean and well lit streets and buildings turn into crumbling landscape being consumed by nature. Quincy walks confidently with a dangerous look in his eye, scaring off any who would think attacking him would be smart. He arrives at a long line in front of a very nice building, in comparison to the ones beside it, Virtuoso is written in big, fancy letters. Quincy stands at the end of the line with lidded eyes before meandering around everyone and walking to the front. He stops before a tough looking woman with buzzed hair who stares at him with a scowl.

“Hello ma’am,” Quincy says politely.

The woman’s glare deepens, “don’t call me ma’am,” she gruffs out. Well then, apparently politeness isn’t welcome then.

Quincy smirks, “I’d like to be let in.”

“Then go to the back of the line, Nvrix,” the lady says gruffly.

Quincy winces, oh dear, bringing out the slurs then okay.

Quincy gives a glare of his own and grabs the last two hundred druid from the stolen wallet. "I'd like to be let in," Quincy's glare deepens, "ma'am."

The lady glares but takes the money and steps aside to let Quincy through, ignoring the angry yells of the people in line. Quincy stalks past her just catching her grumble of 'diev Nvrix.' He takes a deep breath and does his best to ignore it.

Quincy steps into the club version of organized chaos. Music is blaring, lights are flashing, people are yelling, screaming, and dancing. It's a mass of bodies and Quincy frowns in distaste. He tenses and does his best to take up as little space as he can as he tries to edge through the crowd. In this type of crowd even his normal crowd skills won't work, and he ends up being pushed and shoved all over.

He makes his way to the bar, stumbling as if he himself were drunk. He hits the bar stools with a crash, which causes him to groan. The bartender stares at him blankly and Quincy smiles sheepishly at him, standing up with a flourish and pretending like nothing happened.

"Pick your poison," the bartender says with a false smile.

Quincy laughs, "oh no, I'm good thank you."

"Then what do you want?"

"I'm looking for someone."

The bartender looks dismissive, "can't help ya there," he says.

"Oh," Quincy smirks, "I think you can. I'm looking for a man that goes by the name, Nero. I was told I could find him here and that you could help me with that."

The bartender's fake smile falls, and he stares hard at Quincy. Quincy doesn't squirm, merely keeping his smirk on his face. The bartender sighs and points, "see the balcony up there."

Quincy turns to the side and sees a balcony windowed off from the rest of the club, with pristine faces looking over the chaos. Quincy quirks a brow. "How am I supposed to get up there?"

The bartender sighs, "it'll cost ya?"

Quincy grumbles, "how much?"

The bartender shakes his head, "not money but valuables."

Quincy stares confused.

The bartender sighs, annoyed, "ya leave something behind that is precious to ya. If the meeting goes bad then we keep it as compensation, if it goes well ya get it back."

Quincy frowns, he'd really rather not but he also doesn't really have a choice if he wants to meet with Nero. Quincy realizes that at this point it's more than just the possibility of Oliver getting his head out of his kases and more Quincy wanting to see Nero again. Quincy huffs out a sigh before reaching up to his right ear and taking out the earring there. He lays it in the bartender's hand reluctantly before being given a green card and pointed toward the guarded staircase.

Quincy nods in thanks and the bartender just gives him a bored look. Quincy edges his way through the crowd again to stop in front of the guard. The guard just stares at him and Quincy gives him the card with a smile. The guard takes the card without a word and steps aside, allowing Quincy to walk up the stairs. Quincy smiles and quickly goes up the stairs. If he had any less self-restraint he would be bouncing.

As he crests the stairs the rich snobby people in the balcony stare at him. Quincy takes a deep breath and stands proudly, posture straight and chin raised, eyes narrowed on the people as if they were less than him. He knows that if he wants these people to leave him alone or give him information they need to think he's one of them. Luckily for Quincy, acting like something he isn't is one of his many talents.

"Good noon, Madams and Masters," Quincy says with a false smile. He doesn't bow or move from his position. 'Appear greater than you are,' he mentally chants.

"Good noon, Young Master," an older gentleman says, dressed in fine velvet and rubies. Quincy tries hard to keep focused as this balcony is a veritable gold mine for a thief such as him.

One of the lady's, hair hidden by her hat and face covered by a veil, simpers. "Good noon, Young Master," she says lightly.

Quincy smiles benignly at her, "Young Madam," he says back with a polite nod.

Another gentleman dressed in silks and patterns scoffs, "I don't recognize you," he says quite rudely, "what is your title Nuvo?"

The Madams and Masters gasp and chortle at the gentleman's words. Quincy inwardly sighs, makes sense as the man just called him a Nuvo, the old money's words for the new money.

Quincy nods his head politely, "my name is Arturo De Lueroe, High Lord of Whitemell Crest." He says this all confidently, as if he says it all the time and it's fact, when it is definitely not. Parts of it are true of course, as Quincy knows the best lies are told with truth. Arture De Lueroe is an alias of Quincy's and Quincy does own the land of Whitemell. But is

Whitemell a Crest? No nor does it have any mansion on it and thus Quincy is not a high lord of it, but these people don't need to know that. They'll believe it as he sounds like he is one of them.

The first gentleman nods, "well met, Young Master," he says and Quincy internally cheers. The ladies simper more and whisper back a high pitched 'well met.'

The second gentleman scoffs again, "well, even if you are a High Lord, I don't know you so what is your business here?"

Quincy nods slightly. "I'm afraid my business is my business and not your business, so thus I have to ask you to leave my business alone. You'd be quite upset if I asked to your business as if to make it my business when it is only your business."

The man stares confused.

Quincy takes advantage. "I'm looking for a man named Nero," he says simply.

"Ah yes, a fine Young Master, Nero is," the first gentleman says.

The ladies simper again, and one says, "oh the handsome bachelor who stays in the corner."

Quincy turns to the ladies. "Madams," he says, "I can find him in the corner then?"

The ladies flutter and nod. Quincy nods his thanks, "good noon, Madams and Masters," he says as he leaves.

"Come back soon," one of the ladies says with her fan fluttering.

Quincy winces internally but smiles at the lady politely, “but of course, I could never leave a Madam such as yourself waiting.”

The ladies flutter as Quincy quickly walks to the corner and leaves them behind. He shutters as soon as he is out of sight. Ugh, upper society women drive him insane. They have their stupid high pitched simpering and fluttering, acting all polite and precious when Quincy knows that they are really monsters in disguise. If Quincy ever decides to get hitched so to speak it will definitely not be to a lady of upper society. She'd be more likely to kill him for his stolen fortune than anything else, scary.

Quincy walks away and finds himself in a modestly lit corner room, with comfortable seating and a man with short white hair playing a board game called, *tōcress*. The man doesn't look up from his game. Merely shuffles one of the obsidian orbs to one of the rests on the board, and humming.

Quincy coughs politely and the man raises his head to look at Quincy with blank reddish brown eyes. Quincy breathes in sharply and his chest aches, oh Nero. Nero looks so different then the last time Quincy saw him, but Quincy isn't surprised by that fact, nor does it stop him from recognizing Nero. For even if it's been years since they've seen each other, Quincy could never forget Nero's face.

“Hello,” he says, “my name is Arturo De...”

“No, it isn't,” Nero interrupts.

Quincy halts and stares at Nero in surprise.

“What's your actual name?” Nero asks, quirking a brow, stress lines prominent on his face.

“Oh,” Quincy coughs, “I'm sorry, my name is Quincy.”

“Full name,” Nero asks boredly and Quincy frowns, apparently, he is the only one feeling any sense of familiarity here. Normally Quincy would argue or make a joke of it to get out of saying his full name, the dangers stressed on him by his mentor, but not this time, not with Nero.

“Quincy O’Conllaigh, although my brother always liked to call me Q,” he says in a choked sort of voice.

Nero frowns at Quincy before standing and walking to be in front of Quincy. Nero stares down at Quincy and Quincy stares back in desperation, his eyes the color of a troubled storm.

Nero then smiles brightly before hugging Quincy tightly, “it’s so good to see you alive, brother.”

Quincy stiffens at first before slowly melting into the hug, arms wrapping around Nero trembling. “I thought you were dead,” he chokes out.

Nero pulls back and laughs, “it’s not that easy to kill me, little brother.” He starts pulling Quincy toward one of the couches.

Quincy laughs tearily and allows himself to be pulled. They settle on the couch with Quincy glued tightly to Nero’s side. Quincy has always been a very tactile person. Physical touch and gift giving being his primary love languages, but when you’re a thief both become difficult. You have to hide yourself and draw in tightly, touch is not allowed or it could lead to hurt and no one wants a gift from a thief. Nero was always one of the few who allowed Quincy’s hugs and who Quincy knew was safe, well him and...Dove.

Now Quincy makes up for lost time and tightly hugs himself to his brother as if he were an octopus. Nero tenses but allows Quincy to be.

“Is there something specific you need, Q?” Nero laughs.

Quincy hums from his lethargic puddle and doesn't answer.

Nero laughs again, "Q, you wouldn't come around these parts unless you needed something and you wouldn't have found me unless someone pointed you to me. My guess is that it was the good ole "Malady of Antiquities."

Quincy looks at Nero hazily, "hmm, oh yes, Maria did point me to you."

Nero looks at him with an amused smile, "and?"

"Oh yes," Quincy shakes himself and straightens, "I need two invites to get into the Matrikal party coming up."

Nero frowns, "that party is on Saturday."

Quincy winces, "I know, but Maria said you could do it."

"I'm not saying I can't," Nero sighs, "just that it's cutting it a little close."

"Yes I know," Quincy says, "but if you can do it for me that would be fantastic. I'll make sure to compensate you for it."

Nero shakes his head, "nah don't worry about it. Free of charge for this job; think of it as a 'I just found my lost brother' discount."

Quincy laughs as Nero smiles at him before reaching over and ruffling his hair causing Quincy to hiss and pout.

"I can do it," Nero says, "what names do you want on the invites?"

Quincy hums in thought. "Do Master Arturo De Lueroe, High Lord of Whitemell Crest for mine and hmmm," and here Quincy gets a quite malicious look on his face, "Sir Mimsy Astrodolphus, Lord of Eddington, for the other."

Nero looks at him amused, “alrighty, I’ll get that done and to you soon. Now tell me how life has been for you?”

They sit and talk for hours. Quincy cries but he’s okay with that as it’s only Nero. After Quincy gets his earring back; he finally gets himself out of the building intact, away from simpering ladies, suspicious masters, and loud, pushing crowds, with a new contact in his bracelet, a full heart, and a promise to see each other again. Quincy walks down the street, heading for the station. He gets on the train when a call comes in from Oliver. Quincy sighs but answers.

“I’m in,” Oliver says and Quincy smirks.

Chapter 10: How Prepared You Are Determines Your Success

Quincy meets up with Oliver on the Thursday before the party in the city of Ferox, one of the major shopping districts of Enla. Oliver appears just as annoyed as ever, probably because he had to use one of his sick days, if a little anxious but Quincy expects he can get that anxiousness to turn into determination soon enough.

“Hello, Detective,” Quincy says with a smirk, lowering the sunglasses he bought on a whim in Sorren Alley, to stare at Oliver with smug and victorious silver eyes.

Oliver huffs and rolls his eyes as he edges around some people to get to Quincy and the stall he’s leaning against. “Don’t push it, Quincy,” he says.

Quincy laughs as he stands up straight, “fine, fine, I won’t.” He looks at his bracelet to see the time. “We better get started,” he says as he begins to walk away, expecting Oliver to follow, “it’s four hetas till noon.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Oliver grumbles as he begins to follow Quincy. Oliver glances at the shopping district with wide eyes.

Quincy laughs when he glances at him, “don’t come here often, Detective?”

“I do, I guess I just expected it to not be as busy since it’s a workday.”

Quincy hums, “I suppose that’s fair, but you have to remember, Detective, the city of Ferox is Enla’s leading shopping district. It gets people from all over Enla or even other provinces, especially people from the Universities and Academies nearby.”

Oliver hums as he works to keep stride with Quincy's quick pace. "Where are we going first?" he asks.

"Why the tailors of course," Quincy says with a slight skip.

"Why there first?" Oliver asks as he hurries.

"Well, because we need to look the part of course and we can't use clothing we already own. You always order specially made clothing for parties such as this to match the theme."

"Right of course." Oliver huffs a bit, "what tailor are we going to?"

Quincy stops abruptly, catching Oliver as he stumbles when trying to stop just as quickly. "Why High Needle of course." Quincy points to the shop he stopped in front of. Oliver turns and stares.

The shop is a detailed and clean one. Gold edging covers it with clear windows and a beautiful emerald color painted on the solid brick.

"Ah, High Needle, should have known," Oliver says.

"Yes, you really should have," Quincy hums, "as you know, most high borns have their own tailors but for those who don't, High Needle is the place to go, especially when you need something done quickly and done well."

They walk into the shop and a bell dings as they're enveloped in an atmosphere that feels warm and sharp at the same time. Oliver shivers as a magic that feels like sharp needles pokes along his body in warning.

Quincy stares at him amused and Oliver narrows his eyes. Quincy laughs before staring around the empty shop. "Hello, Sir Parsimal, are you here?"

Even with the warning in the form of sharp threads tugging at his hands, Oliver still jumps when an older gentleman jumps up from behind the counter.

“Oh, Little Mischief, is it Thursday already?” The man says in a kindly voice as he straightens up. He straightens out his buttoned-up shirt, with green shining buttons, and suspenders as he walks toward Quincy and Oliver. Sir Parsimal then pulls off his little brown hat to fix his gray hair before plopping it back on and fixing his gray curled mustache last.

Quincy laughs, good naturedly, “hello Sir Parsimal, and yes, it is Thursday. Did you get caught up in your creations again?”

Sir Parsimal hums, “oh yes. You know how it is. I get an idea and I just can’t stop until it’s done. And how many times have I told you to call me Albert, you troublemaker.”

Quincy laughs, “yes, I’m sorry, Albert.”

Albert waves it off before also greeting Oliver. “And you must be Young Master Tanner,” he says with a nod.

Oliver nods, a little startled, “uh yes, that’s me. Pleasure to meet your acquaintance Sir Parsimal.”

Albert waves his hand, “now, now, none of that Sonny, call me Albert. I’m quite done with formalness nowadays. Too old to care now I suppose.”

Oliver nods and hesitantly agrees.

“Now,” Albert claps his hands, “you’re here for those outfits, aren’t you, Little Mischief.”

Quincy smiles, “yes, were you able to get everything done?”

Albert guffaws a little, “Well of course I was. What do you take me for, that old ninny on Tenth Street. No, I get the job done, of course.”

“Oh, Lady Marzipal isn’t too bad, Albert,” Quincy says with a laugh.

Albert grumbles, “Isn’t too bad, a joke if I’ve ever heard one. That old bat always likes to come to my shop and complain about my wears while claiming hers are so much better. Why the other day she came, complaining that I was stealing most of her customers for the upcoming Unity Ball when I know she’s just as busy as I am. Why I never, and she has the gall to call my clothing ‘fit for a ruffian.’ Well I’ll show her, ‘fit for a ruffian,’ my behind, she wouldn’t know a running stitch from a basting or Silk from Charmeuse...” and he trails off grumbling. Quincy holds his hand up to Oliver and makes a sign to just let the man vent, as this is quite a usual occurrence when Quincy comes to see Albert. The man doesn’t complain about much but oh does Lady Abigail Marzipal of High Threads on Tenth Street tend to get under his skin.

Albert leads them to a backroom, grumbling all the while. He stops before two covered mannequins.

“Wait,” Oliver says, confused, “you already have the outfits made?”

“Of course,” Albert says, sounding almost offended, “I get the job done quickly and efficiently.”

Oliver holds his hands up, “I didn’t mean it like that. I just didn’t realize you were already told about them and such.”

Quincy smirks, “but of course he knew, Detective. I met with him this past Saturday morning to give him the details and measurements.”

Oliver looks at Quincy annoyed and still a little confused, “how did you even get my measurements?”

Quincy smirks at him with closed eyes, “don’t worry about it.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Oliver decides to leave it and Quincy smiles at him smugly.

Quincy then turns to Albert. “I can’t wait to see them, Albert. I just know they’ll be fabulous.”

“Of course they will, it’s why you came to me and not the old ninny on Tenth Street. I trust it’s okay that I took a few liberties with them.”

“Of course, Albert,” Quincy says, “I gave you full creative freedom outside of the theme and usual high-born fashion.”

Albert nods, before reaching for the one to the left, “first the outfit for Young Master Tanner.” He pulls the cloth off with a flourish and Oliver forgets to breathe, staring at the gorgeous outfit in awe. It’s a mix of Pansean and Enlan high fashion, staying true to his alias’s roots and the roots of the hosts.

Albert guides Oliver forward to try it on, helping when buttons are difficult to reach.

Oliver glides his hand along the velvet surface of the top, hands catching on the detailed embroidery. It’s not as if Oliver hasn’t worn such clothing before, but since he started working with the S.A.S. the only high born type parties he’s been to have been S.A.S. functions or the Unity Ball put on by the Royal Family every year at the Sor Banquet Hall to celebrate another year of unity between the provinces. It’s been a long while since he’s worn something this done up and expensive.

Quincy whistles as Oliver walks out from behind a changing curtain. “You sure can clean up nicely, Detective.” Oliver glowers at him. Quincy merely smiles, “love the blue, it really brings out your eyes.”

Oliver looks over himself subconsciously, “you think?”

Albert nods, “oh yes, as soon as Little Mischief showed me a picture of you, I knew the blue would be the path to follow.”

Quincy points at the outfit, “could you tell us a bit about the choices you made?”

“But of course,” Albert says with glee, “I used a deep blue faux velvet-silk for the overtop to be soft, but also breathable and flexible. Easy to move around in and as we said, matches your eyes. The under top is a smooth white silk to be soft on the skin. The stitching, cravat, and buttons are all silver to not only blend with the blue but also match with Little Mischief’s outfit.”

Oliver looks up confused, “and why do I need to match him? It’s not like we’re going as a couple.”

“True,” Albert tuts, “but you are his plus one, and thus, you match him.” Oliver nods annoyed but understanding that those are the rules for events such as these.

“Now,” Albert continues, “The embroidery is also done in silver in the shapes of Bata flowers to represent experience, new age, and next adventures. There are kaleidoscope moonstones placed within the embroidery to represent a willingness to learn from elders, memories, and hope for the future, thus staying true to the theme of the party, of course.”

Quincy joins Albert in his circling of Oliver, appraising him. Oliver feels a bit uncomfortable from the look over but not as much as he usually

would, as he would probably do the same in Quincy's place. The outfit is truly that beautiful, and it's so comfortable too.

"You really went above and beyond here, Albert," Quincy says with an appreciative look.

Albert smiles, "why thank you. I tell ya that the old bat wouldn't be able to do anything half this good."

Quincy laughs, "of course." He points to the covered mannequin on the right, "and mine?" he asks with a head tilt.

"Oh of course," Albert says, as he grabs the cloth and pulls it off with a flourish. Oliver chokes on air for a second again. The outfit is similar to his in style, although more slender and almost feminine in its build, which makes sense as he is stockier than Quincy. Quincy goes to change into the outfit while Oliver marvels over his own again, his hands softly rubbing against the silky soft fabric.

Quincy steps out and this time Oliver almost forgets to breathe. He's always thought Quincy was unfairly pretty, feeling a little envious and inadequate in comparison, and this just proves it. The style brings out Quincy's more feminine features while still appearing masculine.

Quincy looks up from the outfit to stare at Oliver. "What do you think?"

Oliver stares blankly, his face feeling a little hot.

Quincy stares back at him with a quirked brow and waves his hand, "Detective?"

"What," Oliver starts, "oh, yes, it's...nice."

Quincy's lips quirk and he looks amused, "it is, isn't it?" He rubs his hands down the outfit before tuning to Albert with inquisitive eyes, "tell me about this one," he says softly.

Albert smiles softly back, as if sharing in on a secret and Oliver feels a little lost and wondering what he's missing. "So," Albert starts, "I kept a similar cut and style as Young Master Tanner, but slimmed and curved it a bit, making it a bit more flowy to bring out your more feminine features. This is so you can appear softer and thus those at the party will be less suspicious and more likely to share things with you." Oliver blinks in shock, wait that's why. Huh, kind of makes sense actually, for even with him knowing Quincy for the past three years even he wants to talk with him and spill his secrets, and he knows who Quincy is.

Albert flits about and continues, "the color is the inverse of Young Master Tanner's. With the over top being a lovely shade of silver, the under top as a soft black, and the cravat, embroidery, and detailing in a deep blue. The embroidery is similarly Bata flowers with a few Tokora bees spread throughout, to represent strength through struggle and adventure in hard times. I used a mix of kaleidoscope moonstones and Ametyte to represent new beginnings in old times. I also have this," and Albert hurries away while Quincy turns and poses in a mirror on one of the walls. Albert comes back out and beckons Quincy to bend down. Quincy stoops a bit and Albert places a sort of floppy hat on his head. Quincy stands and stares at himself in the mirror. His eyes appear a bit misty. He turns to Albert, "it's all lovely, thank you," he breathes out.

Albert just clasps Quincy's hands with a smile, "no thanks needed, Little Mischief, you deserve it."

Oliver stares at them feeling a bit lost again, like he's severely missing some greater part of the story. The moment is broken as Quincy stands and

starts to act like his usual cocky self. Oliver rolls his eyes and forgets about the whole thing. Then again probably not, what more could there be to a thief.

Oliver and Quincy quickly change back into their previous outfits with their party ones being carefully packed into a pocket stone that Quincy had, which according to him he got for all of their preparations for the party so they wouldn't be carting things around.

They leave the shop after a bright farewell from Albert. The crowds seem even more packed despite the early time.

Oliver stares before looking at his wrist guard, "we were there for a full heta,"

"Hmm," Quincy hums before looking at his bracelet, "oh yes, it's now around 9:00 in the morn. The Fair Market is open by now."

Oliver groans at the prospect of dealing with crowds. "Where to next then?"

Quincy hums, delighted, and begins to skip again, leaving Oliver feeling the slightest bit of terror. "Now, we are off to Anita Metallica."

Oliver looks over at Quincy in confusion, "Anita Metallica?"

"Yes," Quincy says with delight, "Anita Metallica is the best place to go if you want magical weaponry and you want them discreetly."

Oliver looks at him alarmed.

"Oh, no need to worry, Detective. It's all perfectly legal I swear," Quincy says with a laugh.

Oliver grumbles at him, "then why do you want weapons discreetly?"

Quincy looks at him, “because any form of weaponry is not allowed at the party of course, but we need something in case things go sideways.”

“So you expect it to go sideways?”

Quincy laughs, “but of course. You should know yourself, Detective, that no plan survives contact with the enemy. More than that we are going right into the lion’s den with no backup.”

Oliver huffs, “but I trust that you do have a plan, right?”

Quincy keeps walking and doesn’t say anything.

“Right?” Oliver says, a little worried.

Quincy turns toward him causing Oliver to halt. “I have a plan?” Quincy says firmly.

Oliver stares at him, “really?”

“Well, okay, it’s around one-third of a plan.”

“That’s not a plan, Quincy.”

“Well, if you come up with any better ideas I would love to hear them.”

“You’re the one that was so set on doing this.”

“Alright,” Quincy says, “I’m just following fundamental thief rules.”

“What fundamental thief rules, and also there are rules?” Oliver asks, confused.

Quincy laughs, “but of course there are rules and of course I follow them.”

“Quincy,” Oliver says exasperated, “What’s the rule.”

Quincy raises his pointer finger, “make a plan, expect the plan to go horribly wrong and die a tragic death, defenestrate the plan, don’t bother making a new plan and just wing it. The essential ‘fake it, till you make it’ rule.”

Oliver stares at Quincy blankly while internally screaming. “We’re going to die,” he says very matter of factly.

“Well,” Quincy says, “if we do then we’re going out with one Darkmos of a bang. Now hurry up, we don’t want things to get busy.” Quincy turns and starts marching down the walkway again. Oliver grumbles but hurries after him. They walk semi quickly through the crowds and arrive at a busy building. People are crowding around an outside area of the building that has a stone type rail and is covered by an overhang. Quincy calmly glides through the crowds while Oliver pushes to keep up with him, apologizing as he does. Oliver breaks through to the front and comes to a halt by Quincy before staring in awe. A woman is banging away at a piece of metal, hammer dwarfing her hands. She appears to have tanned skin under the soot covering her as well as black hair peeking out from under a patterned green headband. She’s wearing comfortable and flexible brown pants, a similarly styled shirt with the sleeves rolled up, with a thick green belt wrapped around her waist.

Quincy waves when she looks up and her red eyes alight on him. “Quincy,” she says brightly in accented Enlas.

“Hello Anita,” Quincy says back with a smile.

“Give me a moment. I will be right with you,” Anita replies as she wipes sweat from her brow, only succeeding in smearing it with soot and ash.

Quincy nods his head and points to a door on the side of the building. “Come on, let’s head in and get out of the crowd while she finishes up.”

Oliver nods his head in agreement, so Quincy leads him toward the door that has an emerald green border, while Anita gets back to hammering away at the metal to the crowd's ohs and ahs. Quincy holds the door open for Oliver and they step into a place infinitely cooler than the fiery forge. The room has weapons stacked on stands all around as well as delicately made metal jewelry and beautifully designed armor.

"She makes all this?" Oliver asks in awe.

Quincy laughs while he shakes his head, "oh no. Weapons are what Anita specializes in."

"Then where does everything else come from?"

"Well, those would be..."

"Unca Q!" A young voice shouts excitedly. Oliver looks up and sees a young boy of about ten with messy black hair, auburn eyes, and a tooth missing from his front teeth. He starts running toward Quincy. "Unca Q, it's you. Guys come out; Unca Q is here!"

Two more people come out from a hidden back room. One, a young girl that looks to be around seven with reddish gold eyes and curly brown hair flying about her face as she runs toward Quincy. The other is a boy of around sixteen with brown hair tied back with a green ribbon, amber eyes, and a scar across the bottom of his face who leisurely walks after her with a hand in his pocket.

"Unca Q!" The little girl shouts excitedly as she and the young boy ram into Quincy, who almost goes toppling if it weren't for Oliver grabbing his elbow and steadying him.

“Alexei, Ada, oh it’s so good to see you both,” Quincy says as he crouches and hugs the children tightly. Alexei and Ada bury their faces into Quincy’s shoulders and grip onto him like octopuses.

“Easy, guys, you don’t want to crush him,” the teenager says as he walks up.

“Oh, it’s alright, Aros. They won’t crush me,” Quincy laughs, “will you, you little rascals?” He stands with them and dances around while they shriek in joy.

Aros shakes his head. “He spoils them too much,” he says to Oliver.

“Oh, really,” Oliver mutters back, intrigued.

“Yes,” Aros hums, “he is always giving them gifts whenever he visits, even if it is on business.”

“Huh,” Oliver stares at the scene, shocked as Quincy seems entirely genuine in his joy of entertaining the children.

“No, no” Ada shrieks, “big brother save us, the tickle monster got Alexei.”

Ada runs over to Aros who picks her up and sets her on his hip. “Oh, no, that just won’t do,” he says and marches to join the fray. They end up ‘rescuing’ Alexei who had tears rolling down his face from laughing so hard. A fight then breaks out with Quincy and Aros grabbing Baxta swords, ones that are similar to fencing swords, to play fight. They go back and forth, one parrying and thrusting before Aros pretends to stab Quincy in the side and Quincy goes down, dramatically pretending to ‘die.’

“Yay,” Alexei shouts, “you defeated the monster.”

“Brother is the best,” Ada says as she and Alexei go to hug Aros.

Quincy laughs as he pulls himself up and shoves some of his fallen hair out of his face. “Well, that was fun. Although I do have a question to ask.” He reaches for Alexei and Ada, “have you two troublemakers been good for your mom and dad while I’ve been gone?”

Alexei and Ada look at each other and then at Quincy. “Yes,” Alexei says with a firm nod.

“We’ve been the bestests,” Ada continues.

“Well alright, if you’re sure,” Quincy says, “then here.” He pulls out two wrapped gifts and hands them over.

The children gasp, eyes brightening. They tear the paper away and shriek in joy before pouncing on Quincy with Thank-you’s. Quincy laughs and hugs them back. “Why don’t you show your brother?” He says.

The children jump up and run to Aros to show him what they got. Oliver stares in surprise. Quincy got Ada a soft wolf plush and Alexei a sketchpad and some expensive looking pencils.

Quincy stands to be by Oliver as the children excitedly exclaim to their brother, who good naturedly listens to their rambles.

“That was nice of you,” Oliver says.

“Hmm, it’s the least I can do,” Quincy says back, “I owe the Garez family quite a lot. I give the children gifts every time I visit, to repay it in some way even though they ask nothing of me. And well, I like to give gifts, it just helped that Ada is really into wolves right now and art is one of Alexei’s passions.”

Oliver hums but slots this information away into the puzzle that is Quincy, maybe one day he’ll figure him out.

A huge man then steps through from the backroom. He seems like a very tough man being just as muscled or even more so than Anita. He has sun kissed skin, long brown hair tied back with a green ribbon, much like Aros, and a full beard.

“I hope ya troublemakers weren’t given ole Quincy a hard time?” He says in a gruff voice.

“Papa, look what Unca Q got us!” Alexei and Ada shout as they run toward him to show him their gifts.

“Hey Da,” Aros says with a wave.

The man nods at his children. “Did you thank Quincy for his generosity?” He asks Alexei and Ada.

They both nod their heads before Ada tilts her confused. “What’s generosity?” she asks in a sweet tone.

The man chuckles as he crouches his giant height before her, placing a hand gently on her head, “Gen-er-osity is being kind in giving. Like when you give Nana those cookies every time you visit, even though you really like them and want to keep them to yourself.”

Ada lets out a soft Oh.

“Hello, Mario,” Quincy says as he walks up.

Mario stands with a heave and laughs before pulling Quincy into a tight hug. Quincy huffs but allows the hug. “It’s been a while, my boy,” Maria says as he pulls Quincy back to look at him, “you’ve grown, and you cut your hair I see.”

“Oh,” Quincy laughs, “yes, I wanted to try something a little different.”

Oliver stands on the sideline in awe at the easy atmosphere between this family and Quincy. Quincy even looks relaxed with them.

“Da,” Aros interrupts, “should I go and grab ma?”

Mario looks over at his oldest, “hmm.”

“No need,” Anita says as she walks in, wiping her hands on an almost black towel. It doesn’t really seem to do a whole lot.

“Ah, Mi Vida,” Mario says as he opens his arms to scoop up his wife and kiss her deeply, causing Alexei to gag, Ada to aww, and Aros to roll his eyes. Quincy looks at the both of them with a mix between an amused and fond look.

“Ello, Mi Amado,” Anita says back. She steps away from her husband and greets her children, who all greet her back happily. Anita turns to Quincy with a smile and open arms. Quincy swiftly steps into them, not even hesitating or minding that his clothes are probably covered in black ash now.

“Oh, little Q. My how you have grown,” Anita says, holding Quincy close to her heart.

Quincy breathes out, and almost melts into the hug, “I am glad to see you again, Anita.”

Anita laughs a deep joyful sound, “yes, yes, but we both know you are here for something specific.”

Quincy laughs and shrugs sheepishly.

Anita hums, “Aros, could you be a dear and go get the boxes in the backroom, the blue and red ones.” Aros nods and hurries away.

“Come,” Anita says as she ushers them through the door and toward a side room. They all sit in comfortable chairs with Ada and Alexei climbing over their father like he’s a jungle gym. Mario just laughs good naturedly. Oliver stares unsure knowing if he was with his father at that age, he could never.

Aros hurries back in with two boxes tucked under his arms. He sets them on the coffee table. Oliver tries to drink in the details. One box is stained a shiny beautiful blue color, like sapphire. There are beautiful etchings done into the wood of shields and cobalt guns. Oliver notices his family’s coat of arms, a wolf head howling with a round shield like the moon behind it; his name is etched under it in both Enlas and Genamaran. The other box is a beautiful wine red color, like spilt blood. It’s etched in swirls with Freoce type daggers within them; Quincy’s name is etched in Enlas, what looks like Freoc, and another set of symbols that Oliver doesn’t recognize.

Quincy reaches a hand out to hesitantly glide his hand over those unknown symbols and Oliver swears that Quincy’s eyes almost look misty.

Anita coughs slightly and the moment is broken with Quincy snatching his hand back as if burned. “It would have taken more time to make these, but the family helped, and I made them a priority.”

Quincy looks at her swiftly, “Anita, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Bah,” Anita says, “of course I did. Now look,” she pulls open Oliver’s box and Oliver gasps. Inside is beautiful silver velvet padding holding two silver cobalt guns and a broadsword made of Ley metal. The guns and sword have beautiful designs carved into them with a sapphire set into all three.

“You bringing the metal for these made it so easy,” Anita says, “Ley metal is very expensive nowadays as are sapphires, but for what you wanted that’s what they needed.”

“What he wanted?” Oliver asks.

“Yes,” Anita says as she picks up one of the guns, “little Q wanted a weapon that could remain unseen and switch between lethal and non lethal.” She presses the stone and the gun shines brightly before shifting into a ring with a sapphire stone. Oliver’s eyes widen.

“We imbued magic into the making of the guns and sword as well as used Ley metal, a metal best known for its ability to hold magic. I also called up my brother-in-law Toren to carve the runes into them. This enables the weapons to shift their look and hide under detections. You can choose if they are lethal or not based on feeling.”

“Right,” Oliver says, “S.A.S. uses similar weaponry. If you want it to be lethal you have to truly feel it and vice versa.”

Anita nods and calmly sets aside the ring for the sword, where she smoothly glides it across her arm, it leaves behind barely a scratch. “The guns are set to light stun, so they will only freeze or knock someone unconscious, almost like a taser. Quincy wanted that over dark stun, which can lead to side effects or long-term issues because of the full stasis it puts someone in, often causing a temporary or frozen death.”

Oliver nods, “makes sense. Dark stuns can lead to an actual death because they freeze the full body including internal functions, and if you aren’t given an antidote you can waste away.” Anita nods at him, while Quincy just looks impatient.

“And mine,” Quincy asks with a gleeful smile and Oliver shudders. Well, at least he’ll know what weapons Quincy got.

“Ah, yes,” Anita hums, “yours were fun.” She opens the red box and within lies the same silver velvet, with ornate daggers, throwing knives, needles, and a Baxta sword, quite the spread honestly.

“That seems like a lot,” Oliver comments.

“You can never have too many knives,” Quincy says back.

“I guess, but where would you even hide all of those?”

“Oh it’s not that hard.”

“Do you...do you have a lot of knives hidden on you right now?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Quincy waves his hand.

“But...” Oliver tries.

“Don’t worry about it,” Quincy finishes and Oliver decides it isn’t worth it.

Quincy smirks before turning to Anita, “They’re beautiful Anita and exactly what we need, thank you.”

Anita waves her hand, “Oh no thanks needed, little Q. It was fun.”

Quincy laughs before checking his bracelet, “well, I wish we could stay longer but it’s almost noon and we have a prior engagement.”

“We do?” Oliver asks.

“We do,” Quincy affirms as he stands and picks up his box. Oliver hurries to follow, picking up his box and clutching it close.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Anita says as she pulls Quincy into a hug.

“I won’t,” he mumbles.

Mario grasps Quincy into a tight hug next, “You be safe, you hear.”

“We will,” Quincy says with a tight smile. He hands Anita a small bag before he leaves and she thanks him. Oliver decides, just this once, he won’t ask. They place the boxes into the pocket stone and continue on their journey.

“Where to now?” Oliver asks with slumped shoulders, rubbing his eyes as he groans.

“What, tired already, Detective?” Quincy asks brightly. Oliver just grunts. Quincy rolls his eyes, “we are actually off to lunch.”

Oliver perks up a little, “Oh, where to?”

Quincy points ahead of him. “Lilac and Lady’s Lounge. It’s a lovely place owned by two sisters.”

The Lounge is beautiful and soft, done in springtime colors, with green being a predominant color. It appears to be a cross between a garden and a lounge. Quincy leads the way in, and the atmosphere is surprisingly intimate. Oliver tries to ignore the young couples being a little too touchy feely. A lady flits behind the counter happily, her dark skin shining when the sun hits her. Her wild, curly hair is semi pulled back by a bright green headband with sunflowers on it and is done in two wild pigtails. She wears a yellow crop top with dirt-stained green overalls over them.

She looks up at the ding of the bell, her yellow eyes shine and she laughs brightly. “Hiya, Quince,” she says as she almost bounces over the counter.

“Hi Lilac,” Quincy says back with a wave.

“What can I getcha’?” Lilac asks with a smile.

“A couple of menus, please. We’ll be in the usual spot,” Quincy says back with a soft smile.

“Alrighty,” Lilac says as she grabs a couple of menus and hands them to Quincy, “Here ya go, Quince. I’ll be by to help ya in a jiffy, I just gotta tell Sis that ya here.”

“Alright Lilac,” Quincy laughs, as he takes the menus and leads Oliver over to a table that has a beautiful view of Ferox and the bell tower. Quincy hands Oliver one of the menus, and they both start to glance over them. All of the options sound wonderful and homey. They remind him of his cousin’s meals in the south when he visited them during spring in his childhood.

Lilac skips up to them and Oliver notices that she’s hopping around barefoot, “what can I getcha to drink?” She asks.

“I’ll take an iced tea please, with lemon,” Quincy says, Lilac hums and writes it down on her notepad.

“Just water for me,” Oliver says.

“Alrighty,” Lilac says, “do ya know what ya want ta order?”

Quincy looks at Oliver and he nods.

“Yes,” Quincy says to her.

Lilac laughs, “Alrighty, what can I getcha?”

Oliver hums, “I’ll get the spicy chicken club with the potato soup as my side.”

“Ahuh ahuh,” Lilac hums. “And ya, Quince,” She asks, turning to him.

Quincy turns to her with a smile, “what does the lovely lady recommend?”

Lilac giggles, “oh, Quince, ya charmer. I’d say the gumbo. Sis’s gumbo is the best gumbo in all of Lithana.”

Quincy laughs, “Well, I have to get it then.”

“Alrighty,” Lilac says, “one spicy chicken club and potato soup for mistah’ blue eyes, and one gumbo for mistah’ charmin’.”

Quincy laughs and nods his head.

“Mkay, I’ll bring those out right quick,” and Lilac turns and bounces off.

“She’s...bright,” Oliver says hesitantly.

Quincy chuckles, “She’s just a very positive individual and an extrovert. Her sister is the calmer one.”

“That I am,” A bell-like voice says.

Oliver and Quincy turn and see a beautiful woman walking up to them, dressed in a beautiful deep purplish-blue dress that flows to the floor. Her curls are done up tightly and elegantly, with a moon hair piece done with blue green stones holding it in place. Her eyes are a deep blue color that shine.

Quincy stands. He holds a hand out in which the lady places one of her hands in. Quincy bows over it, not quite touching her hand. “Hello, Lady,” he says.

“Hello, Fox,” Lady says back with a calm expression. Oliver can’t tell if she’s happy to see him or not.

Quincy laughs and sits back down before offering Lady a seat. She shakes her head. “I only came to say hello,” she says, “and to give you something.”

“Of course,” Quincy says, “I know you’re a very busy woman.”

Lady hums before handing over something. It’s, as far as Oliver can tell, small and shiny, but that’s all he can see.

“Thank you,” Quincy says as he grasps it in his hands and immediately hides it away.

“Remember, Fox, you owe me for this one,” Lady says.

Quincy looks at her and nods deeply.

Lady gives him a searching look before nodding and turning to leave without a word.

“What did she give you?” Oliver asks.

“Don’t worry about it,” Quincy says with a shrug.

“Quincy...” Oliver growls.

“Detective,” Quincy sighs, “have a little bit of faith in me. I promise it’s nothing bad and if I feel it’s important for you to know I’ll tell you.”

“Fine,” Oliver grumbles, “you better.”

Lilac skips back over soon enough to drop off their food. “Here ya go,” she says, “I’ll leave ya to it, my babies need a little tendin’.”

Quincy nods his thanks.

“Babies?” Oliver asks, “I didn’t realize she was a mother, seems a bit young.”

Quincy rolls his eyes and prays for strength, “she meant her plants.”

“Oh,” Oliver says dumbly.

“Yes, oh.”

They fall into silence as they eat and are still silent when they pay and leave after a bright farewell from Lilac. They begin to walk down the paths in Farex and Quincy glances at his bracelet again.

“Well, this is where we part for now, Detective,” he says.

“Huh, so nowhere else to go then? Oliver asks.

Quincy looks at Oliver, “nowhere else for today at least. I’ll need to go and pick up our ID’s, gate keys, and invitations tomorrow.”

“Ah,” Oliver says, “So I guess I’ll see you Friday then.”

“Right you are, Detective. Friday, 7:00 AM sharp, meet at Donla station.”

“Right, see you, then Quincy,” Oliver says as he walks away. Quincy merely waves, engrossed in his planning. Oliver heads back to his apartment and cuddles Reeky while Quincy heads home to sit in contemplative silence for a while.

Quincy’s alarm goes off at 5:00 AM sharp and he feels like he hasn’t slept a wink. He groans and rolls himself out of bed, saying hi to Ferris, Fredrick, and Frita, the crows that like to hang around his balcony window. They caw at him happily while Frita drops a silver ring into his lap. Quincy laughs and reaches out to ruffle the purplish feathers on her chest; the purplish feathers around her face like a mask puff up with delight. Ferris’s red version of those feathers puff up indignantly as he hops over to get attention. Fredrick elects to stay back and preen his own orangish feathers.

Quincy chuckles and gives both Frita and Ferris attention, but stops when his alarm goes off again.

“Sorry guys,” he says as he hops up, “I have to get ready, but I promise I’ll give you a gift later.” Frita titters at him, Ferris puffs up in annoyance

again, and Frederick just turns his head to the side haughtily. Quincy shakes his head but goes to get dressed. He puts on his bracelet and earrings and marches out the door.

The train ride to Pervil is spent with Quincy staring at passengers and bouncing his leg. He rushes off when they arrive and speed walks toward Cricket Alley. It's early in the day so Virtuoso isn't open, but Quincy isn't aiming for there. Instead, he heads to a sort of Library/bookstore called Baroness Books. Quincy pushes the door open and is overwhelmed by the calming scent of books, tea, and plants. He walks to the clerk desk, but no one is there.

"Hello," he calls as he dings the little bell on the desk.

"I'll be right with you," a cultured and purring voice sounds.

"No rush," Quincy says with a smile and wave.

A woman walks out. Her skin is pale, and her hair is a beautiful soft looking gray, cut into an undercut. She's dressed in a soft gray sweater and leggings. A pair of gray cat ears twitch on top of her head and a gray tail swishes back and forth; her slightly glowing blue eyes stare at Quincy appraisingly.

Quincy tries not to stare himself. "Hello, Madam," he says politely.

"Hello, Darling," the woman says in a smooth voice and Quincy gulps a bit, "what can I help you with?"

"Uh," Quincy feels like his brain has blanked, "I'm uh, here because Nero said to meet here."

The woman tuts, "oh, Darling, that's not what you're supposed to say."

“Oh, right,” Quincy stutters, feeling very out of his depth, “there was a code. Ah, what was it? Um...oh yes, do you have a copy of Elysia’s Trials?”

The woman chuckles softly, reaching a soft hand out to cup Quincy’s face; her sharp claws resting gently on his skin. “For you, Darling, I’ll give you anything,” she purrs and Quincy sweats.

“Thank you,” he strangles out. “Uh, what’s your name...Madam?”

The woman hums and stares into Quincy’s eyes with slitted blue ones, “people call me Baroness.”

“Ahah,” Quincy chuckles nervously, “nice to meet you, Miss.”

“Oh, Darling, no, it’s a pleasure to meet *you*.”

Nero steps through a back doorway and pinches the bridge of his nose at the sight, “Baroness, please don’t molest my younger brother.”

Baroness releases Quincy and holds up her hands, “I wasn’t doing anything,” she says calmly.

“Then release him from your hold,” Nero says with a blank glare.

Baroness hums but her eyes fade to normal, human blue and her claws recede. Quincy lets out a breath and feels like he just came up from drowning.

“Wha...” he mutters.

Nero comes up to grasp his shoulder, “that’s Baroness’s gift. She has a skill in ensnaring men that find her attractive.”

“And women,” Baroness says and Nero rolls his eyes at her.

“I’ve got things from here Baroness, you can leave. Go spend time with your menaces of children.”

Baroness giggles and Quincy twitches toward the sound, but is held tight by Nero. Nero glares at her. She throws her hands up, “I was just having some fun.”

Nero sighs, “well, your children are kind of wrecking your living room, so you may want to go and deal with that.”

Baroness flashes a sharp smile, “oh, my sweet little kittens are just learning to express themselves.”

“Uhuh,” Nero says sarcastically, “that’s why Kai is wrestling with his siblings, Maya and Mara are playing pranks on everyone, Kono is exasperating the issue, and poor Mako is hiding away in a corner somewhere.”

Baroness only smirks, “that’s just how young kittens are. They need to explore and cause chaos. Besides, their magic has just appeared; they’re merely learning how to use it.”

Nero rolls his eyes, “right, well go help them before they bring down the building.”

Baroness rolls her eyes and leaves in a huff, tail swaying with her hips.

Quincy shakes himself and feels so much clearer as soon as she’s gone.

“Don’t worry,” Nero says, “the more time you spend in her presence the more immune you become.”

“Huh,” Quincy mumbles out.

“Well, come on,” Nero pushes Quincy toward a back room, “I got all your things back here.”

“Thank you for doing this Nero,” Quincy says.

“For you, little brother, anything,” Nero says before handing Quincy a small box, “now here.”

Quincy grasps the box and pulls it open. Two thin bracelets with blue and red stones are set in the box.

Nero points at them, “these are your new Comm Bracelets. They’re temporary, so they’ll only work for the party. They come equipped with your Aliases’ ID’s, your gateway keys, and your invitations within them.”

Quincy nods his head and tucks the box away, “I trust they work the same as normal Comm Bracelets.”

Nero nods his head, “yeah, these ones are of course more fancy, so you have to press the stone to bring up the menu but from there everything is the same.”

Quincy smiles in thanks before stepping up to hug his brother. Nero is stiff but he still hugs back, “you be safe, you hear,” he says.

Quincy nods into Nero’s shoulder. “I will,” he mumbles.

Nero steps back and looks Quincy over with his red eyes, “alright, then get out of here you rascal. Unless you want to be trapped here by Baroness. I promise you’re just her type.”

Quincy’s eyes widen, “yes, I’m just going to...” he points toward the door and Nero waves him out.

Quincy hurriedly leaves and shudders as soon as he gets into open air again. "That is one fierce woman," he mumbles.

Quincy heads toward Donla station to wait for Oliver, who arrives at 7:00 exactly.

"Hey Quincy," Oliver says as he walks up, "been waiting long?"

"Hmm, oh no, I just got here," Quincy lies with closed eyes.

"Did you get everything?" Oliver asks as he sits on the bench by Quincy.

Quincy huffs, "but of course I did. What do you take me for, a mediocre thief, please."

Oliver rolls his eyes. "What train number is ours?"

Quincy laughs at him, "oh we aren't taking a train."

"Why not?"

"It's better if we arrive as early as possible so we have as much time as we can to prepare and rest before the party tomorrow. Sort of acclimate ourselves to the environment if you will."

"Okay," Oliver says, "how we getting there then?"

Quincy stands with a flourish, "gateway keys of course."

"Quincy, those are Darkmosing expensive."

"I'm aware."

"How in the pits of Darkmas did you get gateway keys then?"

"I know a guy."

Oliver huffs, “should I be concerned?”

Quincy smiles a close-eyed smile, “not at all.” Oliver feels very concerned.

“Now, come come,” Quincy beckons. “They’re set to open at half past seven.” Quincy leads them over to a wall where a series of ornate doors are set up. They all look different with the names of different provinces over them. Quincy stops in front of an orange and red door with carvings of a charging bull, and the number 37 above it followed by Pansea. Quincy hands Oliver one of the bracelets he picked up earlier. Oliver grabs it reluctantly and snaps it onto his wrist, it shifts to hold comfortably.

“Off we go, Detective,” Quincy says brightly as the bell chimes for half past seven. Quincy glides the bracelet over the door, and it falls away to form an open gateway. Oliver huffs but does the same and they both step through. The door swiftly closes behind them. They glance at each other before Quincy leads them out into the streets of the city of Cerlona, the biggest city in Pansea.

“The party is taking place at the Verone Hotel,” Quincy says as they walk, “we are staying at the Calitonia Verus Hotel, which is a couple blocks away, for safety’s sake.”

Oliver nods his head as Quincy hails a cab. “Catilonia Verus, please,” he says to the driver who nods.

They arrive swiftly to the hotel and Quincy leads Oliver in and to the front desk. “Hello,” he says politely, in Pansean, to the man working the desk, which shocks Oliver who wasn’t aware Quincy knew more than one language. Oliver follows the conversation, having been taught Pansean by his father who wanted him to learn before going to the S.A.S. Main Academy in Pansea.

“Hello,” the clerk says back.

“Arturo De Lueroe, I have a room for a few days here,” Quincy says.

The clerk nods and looks through their screen, “ah yes, I see you here. Can you scan your ID for me?”

“Of course,” Quincy scans his bracelet over the pad the clerk holds out to him and it dings with a bright green color.

“Wonderful,” the clerk says, “I’ve set the room access to download to your bracelet.”

“Could we get one more access, please?” Quincy asks while tilting his head to Oliver.

“Oh, of course,” the clerk says while holding the pad out to Oliver, “please scan your bracelet.”

Oliver swiftly does so.

The clerk taps at a few of the holographic keys, “alright, that’s downloading for you. Your room is S143. Have a wonderful day.”

“Thank you,” Quincy says. He waves Oliver to follow, and they pass by security guards to get to an elevator with glass windows.

“Hello,” an automated voice says, and a screen pops up with a square animated face, “where will I be taking you today?”

Quincy smiles at the screen, “floor 14 please.”

“Please scan your ID,” the screen says. Quincy scans his bracelet over a pad on the wall and the screen flashes green, “one moment please.” They travel up swiftly and smoothly. “Welcome to floor 14, please enjoy your stay at the Calitonia Verus Hotel.”

“Thank you,” Quincy says as he walks out of the elevator with Oliver following. They follow the signs to their room near the end of the hall. Quincy glides his bracelet over a pad by the door and it clicks open. Quincy gently pushes the door the rest of the way.

Oliver whistles as he steps in, “diev, this is one nice place. Did we really need something this nice?”

Quincy sets his bag down on a couch and gazes around the penthouse suite, light shining in from the floor to ceiling windows. “Well, of course,” he says, “our aliases are high born, and invited to a Matrikal party. To have anything less would put us into question.”

Oliver hums in understanding and sets down his own bag, “how did you even afford this?”

Quincy rolls his eyes, “I’m not broke, Detective, but if you truly must know. The owner of the hotel owed me a favor.”

“Oh,” Oliver mumbles, “of course.”

“Now,” Quincy says as he lounges on one of the couches, “let’s discuss the plan.”

Chapter 11: My Definition of A Party Is Apparently Different Than Yours

Quincy's plan is simple, so simple that all Oliver can do is stare at Quincy in disbelief. "I'm sorry, what?" Oliver says.

Quincy rolls his eyes, annoyed, "is your comprehension so low that you can't understand a plan as simple as that?"

Oliver shakes his head, "no, I just can't understand how that is your plan."

"Simple is better of course, Detective."

"Quincy, your plan is literally to just walk in, mingle, get into a member of the Matrikal's favor, and find out their secrets."

"Yes, hopefully over a brunch of some sort."

Oliver rubs his eyes, "I don't even. It's so dumb, how do you expect to be able to get into the Matrikal's favor in one night?"

"Talent," Quincy hums, before laughing, "look, Detective, we have one shot to make or break this. One shot is not enough to make an impact. We need to get in their favor to earn more shots. I'm quite good at getting people to like me, besides, if we make the plan so convoluted it has a million steps it's failure rate moves from around a 75% to a for sure 100."

Oliver huffs, "good to know the 'simple' plan has only a 75% failure rate."

"Well, if you have any better ideas, I would love to hear them," Quincy says.

Oliver opens and closes his mouth but can't come up with anything better, so used to working with a bigger team and better preparation. He gives up, stress lining his bones for a plan that is almost guaranteed to fail but knowing it's their best option. Quincy is in a similar state just infinitely better at hiding it.

"Hmm, that's what I thought," Quincy says victoriously. Oliver glares but Quincy doesn't appear affected. "Alright," Quincy says with a clap of his hands. "I did my research on the Matrikal Family. There are certain people we want to speak and mingle with, a few we could get into the good graces of, a few we want to speak with sparingly, and a few we want to avoid entirely."

Oliver nods along, deciding to not question how Quincy has complete files on the Matrikal family in only a week. Quincy lays his bracelet on the coffee table. He presses a button, and a holographic screen pops up. Quincy scrolls through and presses his Matrikal file labeled "Event Planning." A screen pops up with a face. "This is Markos Matrikal, head of the Matrikal Family. He's the king if you will or the Leader Stone in a game of tōcress, if that comparison is easier."

Markos Matrikal is an intimidating man and it's easy to see how he's the boss of a ruling Blood family. His skin is tanned, styled with a black beard and mustache with gray sprinkled in. His eyes are a cold metallic color, and he has a gnarly scar that cuts across his nose to his right cheek.

Quincy leans forward and stares hard at Oliver. "The likelihood of us running into him isn't high," he says, "but even still, he's a must avoid at all cost. There may be a few we can fool but Markos is definitely not one of them."

Oliver nods as Quincy swipes on the screen. A woman takes the place of Markos, she has red hair, light caramel skin and gray with amber eyes.

“This brings us to Markos’s wife,” Quincy grasps his hands tightly, “Lady Claia, who is also someone we want to avoid. She may be even more dangerous than her husband.”

Another swipe, this time two faces. The older looking one has Markos bearing and look but his face is clean shaven and his eyes are similar to Lady Claia. The younger is around Oliver and Quincy’s age, with a sort of twinkle in his eye and a slight warm smile. “This,” Quincy points to the older one, “is their oldest son and heir, Elvaro. He’s selfish and prideful, but he’s also very clever. We can talk with him a little, but we need to be careful. The other,” Quincy points to the younger one, “is their youngest son, Ezan. What I’ve been able to find on him is contradictory. Some say he’s merciful and kind while others say he’s dangerous and cruel. One thing they all agree on is that he is a clever and charming individual who won’t hesitate to do what he can to get ahead. He might be someone we want to risk getting the attention of. We’ll have to feel it out and see which rumors are true.”

Quincy leans back a little, “those are the members of the main Matrikal line but there are a few of the side lines that we want to pay attention to.” Quincy swipes onto a screen with the faces of two gruff and scary looking individuals. “These are the twins, Cousin Vamir and Cousin Vira. It’s unclear if they are actual cousins of the family or just called cousins, but they are cruel, chaotic, and vicious.”

Oliver hums, “so definitely avoid.”

Quincy nods and swipes again, “most of the side members we can talk with. Lady Claia’s sister, Triadna, who’s a doctor and helps anyone for the right price, and her husband Dario, who’s actually a cop.” Quincy ignores Oliver’s offended and angered face and continues. “Their children: Anette, who is a player and most she dates end up dead or missing, so if you end

up on her radar, run. Irene, who is an engineer and always looking for new opportunities. And Julien, who is a photographer and always willing to listen or try something at least once. Aside from Anette, these are all people we can talk with and appeal to. Their youngest, Antonio, isn't likely to be there because of age."

Oliver yawns and stretches a bit and ignores Quincy's unamused stare. Quincy huffs, "the other side of the family is a little more iffy. Markos' brother Lui is a hitman, but he likes to learn about new things. His wife, Zora is a lawyer so no arguments with her, you will definitely lose. Their oldest, Evamira, finds people amusing so as long as we don't annoy her, we're fine. Their middle, Luma and youngest, Sergey, won't be there for the same reason as Antonio."

"Is that all?" Oliver asks with an annoyed huff.

Quincy rolls his eyes but swipes the screen one last time to a picture of an older, stern looking lady. "This is the guest of honor Nana Eya. She's the most dangerous individual in the family having ruled the Matrikal's for years when her husband passed, and it's rumored she had him killed."

Oliver pops his neck, "so avoid her." Quincy stays silent and Oliver looks up to see Quincy scrunched up sheepishly. "No," Oliver says. Quincy shrugs. "You can't be serious," Oliver says.

Quincy chuckles, "Nana Eya may be a very dangerous woman, but if you have the chance to get on her good side, take it, just know that failure has a lot of consequences."

Oliver grimaces and internally decides to leave that possibility to Quincy. "Can I go to bed now," Oliver asks, and 'no, Quincy, I am not whining.'

Quincy rolls his eyes, “for the plan and the people yes. I’ll pick up what we need for the rest of our disguises and to make our marks tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah disguise,” Oliver mumbles then he pouts, “we have to make marks at this one.”

Quincy looks up at him, “yes, that’s how high-born parties work. You should know that?”

Oliver huffs as he stands, “yeah, but I haven’t been to a true high-born party in a while. The S.A.S. ones don’t require marks.”

“Ah,” Quincy hums, “well, don’t worry I already know what marks to make and what they pertain to. I’ll get the non-irritating and easy to remove paint for your delicate comfort.”

Oliver grumbles at him but still says a quiet ‘thanks’ as he turns to head to bed. Quincy doesn’t bother to respond, already knowing that Oliver won’t hear him. However, internally he mumbles a small ‘no problem.’

Oliver pauses before crossing the threshold, “by the way, what name did you use for my alias?”

Quincy tenses slightly before chuckling, “Sir Mimsy Astrodolphus, Lord of Eddington.”

Oliver freezes, “what?”

“I thought it as a little bit of revenge.”

“For what?!”

“Well, if you hadn’t of had such an attitude when I asked for your help then maybe I wouldn’t have been so upset. You forced my hand, I’m afraid.”

Oliver stutters before grumbling, realizing arguing is pointless and he should have known Quincy wouldn't have let it go that easily.

Oliver wakes up in the morning to the smell of coffee, tea, and food. He groans but rolls out of the bed and heads toward the kitchen area of the penthouse. Quincy is lounging on one of the couches, taking up almost the whole space while delicately eating something with fruit and sipping some sort of tea. He's also reading a book and there are a pair of gray glasses perched on his nose, which causes Oliver to stumble.

"Food is on the table for you, Detective, and I made you coffee" Quincy says while pointing to a covered plate and a mug of coffee. Oliver grumbles a thanks before sitting and digging into his own fruit and oatmeal blend. He cautiously takes a sip of his coffee before humming in delight, realizing that it's just as he likes it. "So, what's the plan for the time until the party?" He asks.

Quincy hums, "nothing."

Oliver chokes on his coffee, "nothing?!"

Quincy looks up from his book, "yes, that's right. We've planned as best we can, have our weapons, invitations, ID's, and outfits, nothing much else we can do until 6:00 when the gates open, except for picking up the last of the stuff for the disguises and marks, which I'll do. The party starts in full swing at 6:30 with dinner being at 7:00. There's a silent auction that starts at 8:00 and dancing starts after dinner. After that is a Night Hour."

Oliver looks confused, "a night hour?"

"Oh, right, you work with the law so you wouldn't know." Quincy leans back, "a Night Hour is something people of the Underground utilize. It's

the time of the party for only people of the Underground and leads into more not quite legal grounds. All the upper ground high-borns believe that the party ends after the dancing and leave. You need an invite into the Night Hour, by way of a mark. Normally you get that on your original invitation, but you can earn one during the party by appealing to the hosts.”

Oliver stares at Quincy, “and this has always been a thing?”

Quincy smirks, “oh yes, why do you think it’s so difficult for your people to catch criminals. They do all their business in places you can’t reach.”

“Why are you sharing this with me?” Oliver asks.

Quincy sighs, “because you need to know for this but also because even if you know about it the likelihood of you being able to get invitations to Night Hours in the future are highly unlikely, you need some renown in the Underground. Knowing this isn’t going to help you much.”

They lapse into an almost comfortable silence before splitting ways.

Quincy goes out into the town to make sure everything is prepared for the night while Oliver stays in and does his best to relax. The time hits 4:30 and Quincy returns.

“Got everything taken care of?” Oliver asks as he steps out of his room, drying his hair with a towel.

Quincy looks up after setting down a couple of paper bags. “Yes, it’s best we get ready now.”

Oliver nods as Quincy goes to grab the pocket stone. He pulls out their outfits and weapons box, passing Oliver’s to him. They both disappear as they change, Quincy hiding his mass of weapons upon his body and Oliver putting his weapon rings on. They both step out of their rooms around

the same time. Quincy is brushing through his hair with a comb while Oliver's has been fully styled in a slicked back style.

Quincy indicates with his head to the bags, "I have what you need in there to make your markings."

Oliver nods in thanks as Quincy walks over to the bags and pulls out a pair of cuff earrings, silver and blue to match everything else. He hands Oliver one. "These are what the disguise is anchored to. Whatever you do, don't take it off."

Oliver nods and places his on his ear, near the top while Quincy does the same. He feels a tingling sensation as the disguise takes hold. After he shakes off the jitters and gets use to the feeling he looks over to Quincy and stares. Quincy's has darkened to a deep raven black and lengthened to end past his shoulders. His face has become more feminine, and his eyes have softened and changed from their piercing silver color to a soft red. Oliver quickly reaches for a compact mirror set to the side to look at his own reflection. His hair has turned into more of a deep brown than the dirty blond it was before. His eyes have also changed to a soft brown, with his features sharpening. He sets the mirror and looks back over to Quincy and laughs.

Quincy stares at him mulishly, "I don't see what you find so funny, Detective."

Oliver tries to stop his laughing, shoulders shaking in effort, "I'm sorry it's just...you shrunk. I'm taller than you now."

Quincy rolls his eyes, "very mature of you, Detective. Just finish getting read."

Oliver continues laughing even as he does what he's told, now prepared to milk this for all it's worth in the short time he is taller than Quincy. He pauses when he notices Quincy struggling to get his longer hair into the elaborate style that would work for the party and with his hat. "Um," he coughs out, "would you like some help?"

Quincy pauses and turns to Oliver, "you want to help me with my hair?"

Oliver glowers, "never mind, figure it out yourself."

Quincy chuckles lightly, "don't be like that. I would love the help If you're truly willing, just be gentle." He holds the brush out and lets his hair fall. It's similar to the length it was when they first met.

Oliver hesitates but takes the brush as he moves to sit on the couch.

Quincy hesitates, in equal measure but he moves to plop himself down on the floor in front of Oliver. Oliver starts to slowly brush through Quincy's hair, taking care to be gentle. He then begins to twist, braid, and twirl Quincy's hair into an elaborate but still tightly wound style, one Quincy will look royal in but still able to fight with. Oliver takes the hat and a few kaleidoscope and ametyte hair pins and pins the hat in place. "There," Oliver says as he drops his hands, "all done. Not sure if it was what you wanted but, yeah."

Quincy stands slowly and walks to grab the compact mirror. He lifts it up to gaze at his reflection. He draws a sharp breath in before releasing it shakily. Quincy will admit, only to himself and in the quiet recesses of his mind that Oliver did a good job. His hair truly looks quite beautiful. He shakes himself off and looks to an anxious Oliver. "It's adequate," Quincy says, and Oliver releases a breath. Quincy walks back to the bags and grabs the brushes and paint to create the markings. He hands Oliver a deep blue color, while grabbing a bottle of silver and a sort of rustic orange.

“Alright,” Quincy says, “yours are pretty simple. You only need the blue and the three dots to denote you as a noble and that being a Lord is your trade. Mine is more complex with the dots and swirls.”

Oliver hums and squeezes some of the blue paint onto a wooden plate Quincy set aside. He grabs the compact mirror and takes great care to put three perfect dots under his left cheek. He waves his hand to dry it a bit before grabbing a setting spray and spraying it over his face. He looks over to Quincy who has three dots under his left eye the colors being blue, orange, and silver with those colors blended in swirls and dots around and above his left eye.

Oliver tilts his head, “what do the other colors mean? I don’t think I’ve ever seen those before.”

Quincy carefully puts his brush down and sets the design. “Well, you know the blue means I’m a noble, the orange means I’m an art dealer, and the silver means I’m also an artisan myself by trade.”

Oliver nods in understanding but sets that information aside, as he knows that if Quincy is playing a role of art dealer and artisan that means he actually is in some capacity.

Afterward they stretch and snap on their alias’s comm bracelets, check that everything is good, and look at each other. “Think we’re ready,” Oliver asks.

Quincy looks back at him, “as we’ll ever be,” he admits. They walk out the doors and head down the elevator, the computer offering commentary as they do. A limo is waiting for them outside. They slide in and settle as they travel to what may or may not be their last moments in this life.

They arrive at a line of cars going through a dark metal gate. They stop by a guard post and Quincy rolls down a window to tap his bracelet against a metal scanner. It beeps green and the guards give them the pass to go through the gate. Oliver shivers as they pass through, feeling the Boundary probe him as they pass before deeming them acceptable. As they drive forward a massive mansion comes into view. It has clean, smooth white walls topped with orange shingle roofs. Its architecture is sharply cut and imposing. Oliver clenches his fists and does his best to breathe.

“Hey,” Quincy says, startling Oliver, “I know this is scary and it’s entirely possible this is going to end poorly but trust me and know that I have your back.”

Oliver looks at him shakily before shaking his head, “I don’t think I can do that Quincy.”

Quincy sighs and falls silent for a moment and Oliver goes back to trying to breath properly.

“My favorite color is green, not red like most people assume,” Quincy says into the silence. Oliver’s breath catches in his throat and he coughs before looking at Quincy blankly. Quincy looks back with a surprisingly soft and understanding look. Quincy tilts his head, “I’m an arrogant, realist that falls more into a pessimist. I tend to see the bad in people before the good and I don’t see the point in caring for everyone so I only care for me and mine. It makes me a selfish and prideful individual, but I’m quite okay with that.” Oliver feels like he should say something, maybe stop Quincy but no words want to come out of his mouth. Quincy sighs deeply, “I love softly, and possessively and if I consider you one of mine then there’s little you could do to change that view point.” Quincy smiles at Oliver’s shocked face, “I am not a perfect person by any means, and I am well aware of that, but I am trying my best to be the best I can be. Detective, in this

moment I consider you one of mine, so please, trust me. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Oliver swallows roughly, realizing belatedly that his breathing is doing better. "Okay," is all he can say in the wake of Quincy's heartfelt confessions. What else is he to do but to trust this man after something like that?

They arrive at the entrance and Quincy gives Oliver one last look, "just breathe and relax, make them believe you are who you say you are by believing it yourself. From now until we leave you are Sir Mimsy Astrodolphus, Lord of Eddington." The door is pulled open and Quincy smoothly steps out, face adopting an indifferent look. He turns back to Oliver, "come Mimsy, the party is just beginning." Oliver takes a deep breath, adopts his own neutral look, well as best he can, Quincy elects to not comment on the tightness in his eyes which Oliver is thankful for, and follows Quincy out of the limo.

They walk up the marble staircase and stop at the open entryway, two guards standing in place. Quincy and Oliver wait for their bracelets to be scanned and their names called out.

"All Welcome, Master Arturo de Lueroe, High Lord of Whitemell Crest and Sir Mimsey Astrodolphus, Lord of Eddington," one of the guards intones to the floor. Quincy nods his head politely at them before continuing on with Oliver following.

Quincy pauses before heading off onto the floor. The floor is full of people, with most migrating to an ornate ballroom. Quincy and Oliver follow the flow. The room is immaculate and creatively designed. An open and spacious place that is meant for joy and comfort. In true contradictory fashion, though, the air is tense, full of whispers and false laughter. Quincy isn't surprised by this, as this is a high born not a club and that leads to

polite faces and manners, restraint, and a general mask placed upon oneself. In truth, the whole thing is a game. A grand charade for all involved as they try to make conversation and further themselves in life.

Quincy sighs at the amount of mind games he's about to fall into before turning to Oliver. "This is where we separate," he says to Oliver who nods shakily, "try to make as many connections as you can." They then split ways, Oliver heading left and Quincy heading right to vanish into the crowd.

Quincy glides around people, glancing up and around the ballroom. He notices Markos and Lady Claia settled regally on throne like chairs set onto a raised platform, staring out over the crowd and judging all who preside there. Nana Eya is settled into a chair between them, her eyes cutting through everyone she notices. Quincy looks away and does his best to ignore them. He grabs a champagne glass off a waiter's tray and goes to mingle with groups of Madams and Masters. He does his best to be at ease and fall into the role as he catches Cousin Vamir prowling around in his corner with a dark and manic look in his eyes. Quincy continues his conversations while scanning his eyes over the crowd. He doesn't pause when he spots Lui and his wife, Zora, involved in what looks to be a deep conversation with a mogul that runs an oil business and who Quincy knows is involved in a lot of the spills in the Tiantic Sea. Quincy politely excuses himself from his current conversation to go and try and insert himself into the one involving the Matrikals.

"Yes, and I truly think your support could lead to a brighter future for everyone," the mogul is saying to an amused Lui and Zora.

"Possibly, though I doubt they truly want to fall into support with a man who is known for his inability to keep from spilling things," Quincy says as

he glides up. Lui looks at him with barely a glance while Zora takes a longer time to assess him, eyes sharp and cold.

The mogul sputters, “and what would you know?”

Quincy chuckles, “sorry, I seem to have forgotten my manners in the face of your audacity. The name is Master Arturo de Lueroe, High Lord of Whitemell Crest.” Quincy gives a slight bow.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Zora says as she raises her hand.

Quincy takes it slowly and bows his head over it. “The pleasure is all mine,” he says slowly and Zora smirks.

“As I was saying,” the mogul tries to start but Zora merely glares at him, shutting him down.

“The Master is correct,” she says, “we know about your miscalculations, and we would never put the Family at risk for an energy source that is nearing obsolete now.”

Lui grunts, “we’ve connected to leading members in the Power Stone communities and those are proving far more fruitful and environmentally friendly. It’d be a disgrace to partner with someone so against what our little nephew stands for.”

The mogul stutters before getting glared at by Cousin Vamir, causing the mogul to quickly high tail it away.

“Sorry for barging into your conversation,” Quincy says with a smile, “but the man’s voice coupled by his ignorance annoyed me.”

Zora laughs, “yes, he was quite bothersome, wasn’t he?”

Lui grumbles, “You must have more of a reason than that for coming over here.”

“I suppose,” Quincy says, “I’m merely trying to establish deeper connections. I’ve recently come back from traveling and have decided about settling down in Lithana again.”

“Traveling?” Zora says intrigued, “where to?”

Quincy swirls his champagne glass around, “a few places, I traveled to Siasa in hopes of learning more about their art styles, mainly Nndeo and Ajapa as I have a few friends from there. I also went around a few places in Marcea and Natveo.”

Lui perks up, “Natveo? I thought outsiders were completely cut off from there, especially considering Lithana’s failed war with them.”

Quincy hums, “outsiders are cut off, yes, but you can get a sort of...guided tour if you know the right people.”

“What are the cultures like there?” Lui asks, eyes lighting up. “I know they have many different tribes and have heard they are all different from each other. Is that true?”

Zora laughs, “oh dear, you’ve gotten him started.”

Quincy smiles, “I don’t mind. And yes that’s true, although there are some similarities between tribes. Think of it like the provinces here in Lithana, they all have some crossover and similarities because of close proximity, which leads to a sharing of traditions, but each is separate enough to have their own autonomy.”

Lui grins, “fascinating, tell me more.”

“Yes truly, there’s this one tribe that...” Quincy continues to enlighten Lui about the tribes of Natveo while Zora looks on fondly.

Oliver, on the other hand, is having a bit more difficulty with connecting to people. He separated from Quincy reluctantly and stalked through the crowd, making small talk along the way, and falling into the teachings he was taught throughout his life. He spots Cousin Vira prowling around with a dark grin and Oliver ignores her in hopes of appearing like she doesn’t bother him. He spots Triadna, her husband Dario, in the corner of his eye and has to take a deep breath to control his anger. He’s not a detective right now. Sir Mimsy wouldn’t have a true reason to be upset that a cop is a part of a crime family. He takes a few breaths to fully calm down, tries to follow Quincy’s advice and fall into the role, and then he walks. He walks around people and groups and conversations. When he alights on the Matrikals, he takes a moment to try and figure out the best way to cut into their conversation. He doesn’t get the chance to.

“Well, who might you be?” A sultry voice says right by his ear.

Oliver flinches and steps away, turning to see who decided to get all up into his personal space. He spots who immediately. Anette Matrikal is even more stunning in person. She wears a dress that flatters her figure and puts everything on display. Oliver keeps his eyes straight at her face and smiles shakily, mildly freaked out by Anette’s predatory grin. Anette stares at him and slowly travels her gaze up and down his form; he shudders. He tries to pull his composure back together and elects to treat her like an even more dangerous version of Lydia. Even if Lydia would never flirt with him in her life. It’s more for his sanity than anything else.

“Hello, Madam, it is a pleasure to meet you,” he says and hopes his voice didn’t come out as shaky as he feels. He takes her offered hand and bows his head over it but gets startled when she moves her hand up quickly to

where his lips touch the soft skin on the back of her hand. He pulls himself back and his cheeks turn red.

“Oh no, the pleasure is *all mine*,” Anette purrs back.

Oliver coughs, “um, yes, where are my manners, hah? My name is Sir Mimsy Astrodolphus, Lord of Eddington.”

Anette brings her hand up to her cheek, “oh, really. Not surprised a handsome specimen like you is a Lord.” She begins to circle his form and Oliver kind of feels like he’s trapped in with lions.

“Oh, Anette, dear, have you found a new plaything?” A voice says. Oliver looks up with a ‘help me’ look in his eyes which dims immediately when he notices that the owner of the voice is Anette’s mother, Triadna. Her and her husband, Dario, have finished their conversation and come to see what their daughter has found.

“Yes, I did mother,” Anette says, “isn’t he precious?”

Oliver kind of feels like he’s not even really there. They are talking over and about him like he’s not a person and he does not like it.

Lady Triadna glides up to Oliver and he has to force himself not to move as she reaches out and grasps his face in her sharply nailed hands. “hmm,” she tilts his head around, “yes, he is quite a specimen, different then your others. More submissive and obedient then your usual bad boy rebel ones.” She drops his face abruptly, “don’t you favor the ones that you can break?”

Anette giggles, “usually yes, but I decided I wanted to try something different. He just looks so precious, submissive but defiant. Oh, he would be so fun to play with. Don’t you agree?”

It takes Oliver a moment to realize that she is talking to him and that he should probably respond. But also, how, in the name of everything is he supposed to respond to that? If he says no, she would probably have him killed. If he says yes, he'd be her new boy toy, which again would probably result in his death. Gosh where is Quincy when you need him. This is more his field than Oliver's. Okay, taking too long, make a choice, death or torture into possible death.

“That sounds interesting, Madam,” He says in a very unconfident voice, “but I’ve always been a person who likes to learn more about others before falling into anything.” He prays that he didn’t just make a horrible decision.

Anette stares at him before giggling, “oh, you’re so precious. Normally boys can’t wait to be with me. That seems to be all they want. It’s a bit refreshing to get someone who wants to learn about me first before learning about my body.”

Dario laughs, “careful, darling, you seem to like this one more. Don’t want to break him so quickly.”

Oliver laughs along shakily.

Dario turns away and waves his hand slightly, “oh, Julien, Irene, come here and check out your sister’s new fixation.”

Oliver fights not to slump as two more people join the predators circling his form. Irene looks bored and like she only came because she was told to and not out of any want to learn about him. Julien looks slightly intrigued but more focused on the camera in his hands and checking his shots.

“Why do we have to learn about her new boy toy?” Irene drawls, “it’s not like he’s expected to last very long.” Oliver puffs up a bit, okay rude.

Julien pulls his camera up and snaps a quick picture before staring at it, “I do have to admit that he is quite handsome, but I’m with Irene. He’s not going to last a week, tops.”

Anette huffs, “Papa, they’re being mean to me.”

Dario sighs, “kids, don’t be mean to your sister. If she wants a new toy, she gets one, even if he won’t last long.”

Oliver kind of wants to pipe up and ask if he has a choice but realizes the futility in that so he decides that he better not.

“We’re just being honest, Papa,” Irene says with a waved hand.

A bell rings out, signaling the time for dinner.

Anette scowls before grabbing Oliver’s arm, “come on, let’s head away from these negative people, you’ll sit next to me.”

Oliver is dragged to the dining hall and placed next to Anette at the table, which places him right in the middle of Matrikal territory. You have Nana Eya at the head of the main long table with Markos and Lady Claia right next to her on the right and their two sons following on the left. Oliver spots Lui, Zora, and their daughter Evamira sitting around a circle table with plus ones and Oliver almost startles when he sees Quincy sitting beside Lui and seeming to be in a deep, enthusiastic conversation. Oliver is sat at another circle table with Triadna, Dario, Irene, Julian, and Anette. Oliver tries not to slump at the fact that he hasn’t escaped this group of lions. He notices a man being escorted away and screaming.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Anette says nonchalantly, “he was my plus one, but you are so much more fun to talk with.”

Oliver issues a silent apology to the man. The food is swiftly brought out. A magnificent spread with multiple courses and Oliver takes the time to try and enjoy something about this night, as well as, get out of speaking with Anette who has taken to leaning on his arm and giggling. As he shoves a spoon into his mouth he strains his hearing to try and catch what Quincy is saying.

“Yes, it’s all quite fascinating,” Quincy says to his table, “Natvean magic is based more in nature than any other I’ve seen. It’s very elemental. I met tribes who had mastery over multiple elements and used them quite creatively. Although, the main tribe I was with had a mastery over water.”

Oliver sits back in intrigue. He knew Quincy was part Natvean, hard not to with his coloring, he just never realized that Quincy had actually been to Natveo. You learn something new every day.

“What do you think,” Anette says in his ear.

Oliver startles, “hmm, oh. I’m sorry, I was intrigued by their conversation at the other table. Could you repeat the question?”

Anette giggles, “yes, the man speaking is quite handsome. I was asking what you thought about us having a bit of fun after this party.”

Oliver gulps, “I’m intrigued,” he says with a false smile.

“That’s not a no,” Anette laughs, “I’ll have you convinced by the end.”

Oliver laughs along shakily while internally screaming.

They hear clinking and look up to see Markos tapping his glass before standing.

“I would like to make a toast,” Markos states with his raised glass. “To my beloved Mama, who is the strongest woman, outside of my wife, that I

know. She took our family from little to much and I have never been happier that she is here with us.” He turns to Eya, and bends to kiss his mother’s cheek, “have the happiest birthday, Mama, I wish you new starts and adventures and all the wisdom life has granted you.” He turns back to the dining hall and raises his glass again, “To Mama Eya.”

The people in the hall raise their own glasses and call out “To Mama Eya.”

Markos laughs and lowers his glass, “well, food is done so I believe it is time for what everyone has been waiting for, Dancing. I release you all and enjoy the rest of your night.” The crowd cheers and gets up to make their way to the Ballroom.

Anette grabs Oliver’s arm as he stands. “Let’s go dance,” she says as she begins to drag him away. He sighs but follows her. She drags him to the floor. He rests his right arm over her left at an angle and his left on her waist. He does this lightly, a sign of mere strangers dancing and not intimate lovers. Anette doesn’t like that and steps closer, her right hand grasping at him tightly. He blinks and fights not to grimace. He looks up for a moment and spots Quincy in the read position with Evamira and seeming to be having a fun conversation with her. Why did Quincy get the good female Matrikal and he got the psycho?

The musicians start up the music and their off, dancing and twirling and swaying across the dance floor. As the song comes to a close and Anette leans in to ask for another dance, Oliver looks up and catches Quincy’s eyes. Oliver pleads for help with his eyes and Quincy sighs.

Quincy turns to Evamira, “it was lovely speaking and dancing with you, but it seems my friend is in need of some help.”

Evamira looks and sighs when she sees Anette hanging off of Oliver. “Yes, probably. I wish you luck, though, as he’s fallen into Anette’s clutches and

she won't want to freely let him go. Be careful, you're quite funny and I'd for such a handsome and amusing gent to be killed because of my cousin's poor tastes."

Quincy laughs, "I thank you for the warning and well wishes and will endeavor to follow them. Have a lovely evening Madam."

Evamira nods and walks away while Quincy glides over to Oliver and Anette.

"Good evening, Madam," Quincy says to Anette.

Anette turns and looks him over before giggling, "good evening Master."

Quincy tilts his head and smiles, "my name is Master Arturo de Lueroe, High Lord of Whitemell Crest and the man you have here with you is my good friend."

"Oh," Anette hums, intrigued.

Quincy bows slightly, "I promised him we'd have at least one dance together for old times sake. Do you mind terribly if I were to take him off your hands, for now?"

Anette stares at Quincy before looking at Oliver. "I suppose, but I would like him back at some point."

Quincy nods, "of course Madam."

Anette smiles and turns to Oliver bringing her hand up to rest on her face, "See you soon, dear. Have a little gift before I go, so that we may spend more time together." She lowers his hand, that has her comm bracelet on, and taps her bracelet to Oliver's. It dings. She waves and blows Oliver a kiss as she saunters away.

Oliver stares after her blankly before shaking his head and turning to Quincy. “Thank you,” he says with all his heart.

Quincy smiles, “it’s no trouble, no one deserves to be on Anette Matrikal’s radar. But nice job either way.”

Oliver tilts his head confused.

Quincy laughs, “that gift she just gave, was a mark. You are now invited to be a part of the Night Hour.”

“Wait really,” Oliver says, startled as he taps his bracelet. The invitation pops up with a new bright red mark on the right corner.”

“See,” Quincy says, “nicely done, now come on.” He raises his hand and waits for Oliver to grab it.

Oliver just starts at it confused, “I thought the dancing excuse was just that, an excuse.”

Quincy chuckles, “well, yes, but Anette is watching. She needs to see us dance or she may get upset that we lied.”

Oliver frowns, “do we have to.”

“Yes, now dance with me.”

“Fine, but I’m leading,” Oliver grasps Quincy’s hand and pulls him toward himself.

Quincy smirks, “fine by me.”

They wait for the music to start before twirling across the dance floor. Gliding and spinning past other people on the floor, who are using the dancing for what it’s intended for, connections, information, and secrets.

The dance comes to a close and Oliver and Quincy swiftly step away from each to softly bow.

“You’re not such a bad dancer,” Oliver says to Quincy.

Quincy smiles smugly, “well, of course not. I get invited to parties like this all the time. You’re not so bad yourself.”

Oliver rolls his eyes.

Quincy stands up straighter and his eyes sharpen. He leans slightly towards Oliver, “Elvaro Matrikal, ten o’clock.”

Oliver tilts his head slightly, “I see him. Looks like he’s coming this way.”

Quincy turns more toward Oliver, “looks like it.” He raises his voice slightly, “I’m just saying, Mimsy, you’re a Lord. You can afford to travel and relax sometimes. That’s what delegation is for.”

Oliver shakes his head and takes a deep breath, “that’s the thing, I’m no High Lord like you. I don’t have as many people under me. I’m also not an artisan or art dealer. You travel around a lot because of those.”

Quincy hums, “true, but I really think that—”

“Excuse me,” Elvaro says as he walks up.

Quincy and Oliver turn to him. “Oh,” Quincy says, “hello, Young Master.”

Elvaro bows his head slightly, “hello and well met Young Masters. I was wondering if I could share a dance with you.”

Quincy and Oliver look at each before pointing toward themselves in confusion.

Elvaro laughs, “sorry, I meant that one,” and he points toward Oliver.

Oliver ‘oh’s’ in realization and side eyes Quincy who points his chin in a motion that says, ‘yes, take the chance you moron.’ Okay it probably didn’t say that but Oliver feels like that is something Quincy would say.

“I would love to dance,” Oliver says to Elvaro.

Elvaro smiles and holds out his hand, which Oliver grasps in his own to be guided out onto the floor again.

Quincy walks to lean against a pillar as he keeps an eye on Oliver.

“Hello,” a voice says by Quincy.

Quincy turns and stills. Ezan Matrikal stands there with a charming smile.

“Sorry if I startled you,” Ezan says with a sheepish smile.

Quincy shakes his head, “oh no, you didn’t. I’m Master Arturo—”

“I know who you are,” Ezan interrupts and Quincy frowns. “My aunt and cousin were talking about you.” Quincy relaxes slightly.

“Is there something I can help you with Young Master?” Quincy asks.

Ezan laughs, “oh, yes. I was wondering if you would like to dance, maybe. Um with me.”

Quincy chuckles lightly, “I would love to.”

“Great,” Ezan says brightly as he holds his hand out. Quincy smiles and takes it.

Ezan leads him onto the floor and they start twirling and moving as soon as the music starts.

Ezan leans in slightly, “where are you from?”

Quincy tilts his head, “Whitemell. It’s where I was born and raised and it’s been in the family for centuries. I took over when my father passed. You, have you always lived in Pansea?”

Ezan chuckles as they spin, “yes, I was born and raised here. Pansea is my home.”

“It’s a beautiful home,” Quincy says.

“Thank you,” Ezan says as he spins Quincy, “I long to see it flourish even more.”

“I’m sure you and your family can help it along,” Quincy says.

Ezan hums, “I’m sure I can. My father expects my brother and I to work together in that regard. Do you have any siblings yourself?”

Quincy laughs, “ah, no. I was born an only child.”

Ezan tilts his head, “so I guess you’ve never had to suffer through being the youngest then.”

“Suffer?” Quincy asks confused.

Ezan spins Quincy. “Yes,” he says, “suffer, as the youngest, your second best and your brother is the expected heir. He’s the one who will take over the family and rule. No matter how much work and effort you put into proving that you are better, you never will be because you were born second.”

Quincy fights to keep his smile up as the air begins to feel tense. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ezan sighs, “not your fault. Although, there is a way you could help me change that.”

Quincy tries to step back but Ezan tightens his hold. “I don’t think—” Quincy tries.

“Oh, it’s nothing big,” Ezan says, “it’s just that, well, there are a few ways to push myself into the limelight and overshadow my brother. One of them happens to be outing traitors to my father. And look at that, I’m looking right at one.”

Quincy’s eyes widen and he tries to back away again.

Ezan doesn’t loosen his hold; he spins Quincy and dips him as the song comes to a close. “You really shouldn’t have tried to get one over the Matrikal Family, *Little Thief*, we don’t take kindly to such things.”

“I—” Quincy tries again. Ezan just smirks and raises Quincy up before shoving him. Quincy stumbles back into two bodies who quickly and tightly grab him. Quincy tilts his head back to look at who grabbed him and tries not to shudder when he sees Cousins Vamir and Vira smiling at him manically.

“It’s too bad,” Ezan shrugs, “you seemed like a fun guy.” He waves his hand at his cousins, “come on, we’ve got to grab the other one.”

Quincy tries to fight off the hold the cousins have on him but it’s useless. “Mimsy isn’t a part of this. We just came together. I swear he had no idea.”

Ezan tilts his head back, “don’t even try. I already know everything. Now shut up unless you want to lose an eye.” Quincy closes his mouth quickly. They walk across the floor leaving guests to pause and stare, whispering back and forth. They come across Elvaro and Oliver who have

also paused. Oliver stares at Quincy in shocked confusion. While Ezan is facing Elvaro Quincy mouths at Oliver to deny everything.

“What do you have there, little brother?” Elvaro asks annoyed.

Ezan smirks, “a traitor. What about you, big brother?”

Elvaro quirks a brow, “same as you.”

Elvaro’s words causes Oliver to stiffen and Quincy to bow his head in understanding that they are both caught.

Ezan laughs, “oh, see that’s where you’re wrong. You don’t have him, I do.” He tilts his head and hands grab onto Oliver tightly.

Elvaro turns to look, “you little—”

“Ah, ah, ah, Big Brother. I think this is only fair. Afterall, it was my information that found them out. It’s only fair that I take them to father. Maybe you need better informants and to be a little quicker next time.”

Elvaro growls but keeps quiet. Ezan smirks smugly and waves his hand for the guards to follow. They drag Quincy and Oliver along while Elvaro follows reluctantly. They get dragged down a long corridor and stopped before a guarded door. The guards pull the doors open and Quincy and Oliver are dragged into the room and thrown into chairs. Magic comes up and binds them to the chairs.

Ezan calmly sits into a chair while Elvaro stays standing with his arms crossed, the cousins stand right behind Quincy and Oliver, looming over them.

Ezan leans back, “I really have to thank you, Little Thief. This chance wouldn’t be possible without you.”

Oliver stares at Quincy angrily, but Quincy keeps his head bowed.

“Now, we wait,” Ezan says with glee.

Chapter 12: Deceit and Deceased

They aren't left to wait long. Markos Matrikal stalks through the doors followed by Nana Eya. Markos gestures for his mother to sit behind the desk and she does so elegantly. Markos then leans against the desk and stares at everyone in the room.

He crosses his arms and sighs, "alright, this better be diev important to cause a scene at your Nana's birthday celebration."

Ezan stands quickly and speaks before his brother has a chance to, "it is father. I was given some peculiar information and with that was able to catch two traitors before they could ruin the party."

"Traitors, hmm," Markos leans forward and stares hard at Oliver and Quincy. Markos frowns, "so you two thought you could cause problems for my family." Oliver catches his breath, but Quincy still hasn't lifted his head causing Markos to scowl further. Markos stands and crosses to Quincy grabbing his chin and roughly yanking his head up. "You look at me when I'm talking to you," Markos says.

Quincy frowns but keeps his head up when Markos lets him go.

Markos crosses his arms, "I don't know what you were planning or trying to do and frankly I don't care. All I need to know is that you were here to cause my family problems and I can't have that." Markos turns to his mother, "what do you think ma?"

Nana Eya stares at everyone and hums, "Little Ezan, where did you get your information?"

Ezan smirks and waves his hand, “from a reliable source.” A masked figure steps out of the shadows to stand beside Ezan, red eyes staring blankly at everyone and white hair flopping over his forehead. Ezan chuckles at the look on his brother’s face. “Blight are so good at their jobs, aren’t they,” Ezan says conversationally.

Elvaro scowls, “how the Darkmos did you get your hands on a blight?”

“I have my ways,” Ezan says nonchalantly.

Quincy stares at the blight and his eyes narrow, the eyes of the blight appearing almost familiar.

Nana Eya hums again, “Little Ezan, you found the information and caught the traitors. What do you feel the family should do?”

Ezan lights up and appears shocked before thinking, “make an example of them. Show the rest of the Underground that crossing the Matrikal family will lead to consequences, but...”

“But,” Elvaro says with a glare.

Ezan turns to Quincy with a malicious smile, “well, we’ve been trying for years to get an entry into The Marauder’s Association and this Little Thief just happens to be a high ranking member. If he agrees to join us and feed us info then maybe we can let him live.”

Oliver stares at Quincy but Quincy just narrows his eyes at Ezan.

“What do you think, Little Thief?” Ezan leans toward Quincy with a smug smile, feeling like he has Quincy trapped.

Quincy scowls, “I say no. Go ahead and kill me, after all, I’ve never been all that scared of death. I gave an oath when I joined the Marauders and I refuse to break that oath and betray their trust.”

Ezan scowls before smirking again, “well, we have our answer then, Nana.”

Nana Eya nods her head, “Yes, we shall make an example of them. I’ll leave it up to the cousins to deal with them.”

Markos offers his hand to his mother who takes it and stands walking by Quincy and Oliver without a glance. Elvaro follows with a growl.

Ezan goes to follow before pausing at the door. “Cousins, could I have a quick moment alone with these two?”

The two cousins look at each other before shrugging and leaving.

Ezan saunters back in front of Quincy and Oliver. He leans back on the desk. Quincy glares at him, causing him to chuckle. “Oh don’t look at me like that, Little Thief,” Ezan says, “it just had to happen, you know how it is. I’m sure you would have done the same in my place.”

Quincy scowls, “doubt it, I happen to have a bit more heart than you.”

Ezan shrugs, “fair enough.”

Oliver narrows his eyes, “how did you find us out?”

Ezan rolls his eyes, “with this blight of course. He found out everything for me, best purchase I ever made, let me tell you. Nexus really knows what they’re doing when it comes to their tools.” Ezan waves the blight over, who comes to stand by him silently. “Although,” Ezan says, “it probably helps that your Little Thief told him directly what was going to happen.”

Quincy frowns confused while Oliver stares at Quincy with narrowed eyes. “You bastard,” Oliver growls, “I never should have trusted you.”

Quincy sighs, “stop it. He’s obviously lying. I never told anyone anything.”

Ezan smiles, “really, are you sure? Think a little harder.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Quincy says, “I never told anyone except...” Quincy trails off, eyes opening wide.

“Except,” Ezan continues, and he waves for the blight to take off his mask.

The blight reaches a hand up and pulls the mask off, a young face with blank reddish brown eyes and stress lines stares back at Quincy.

“...Nero,” Quincy whispers.

“Huh,” Ezan says, “is that what his name is? Nexus designated him as Blight135. I’ve just been calling him Thirteen.”

“Nero,” Quincy says, voice desperate and broken, ignoring Ezan. Nero stares forward blankly.

Ezan looks back and forth between the two, “don’t bother, he can’t hear you. Part of the whole program they go through or something. He can only listen to my orders.”

“Let him go,” Quincy cries.

“Oh, Little Thief,” Ezan walks up to Quincy and pats his cheek, “I don’t think I will. Anyway, this chat has been fun, but I’ve got to go, party to enjoy and everything. This is the last we will see of each other. Thirteen stay with the cousins and make sure these two are taken care of.” Nero stares ahead blankly before nodding his head once and placing his mask back on. Ezan walks out the door and the cousins walk in.

The cousins walk in front of Oliver and Quincy hands playing with two strong tasers. Oliver and Quincy struggle in their chairs but the magical bindings just tighten around them. The cousins grin and jam the tasers into Oliver and Quincy’s necks causing them to seize up, crying out, before everything goes black.

Chapter 13: I Trusted You and You Betrayed Me

Quincy wakes up slowly, body tight with pain and head aching. He keeps his eyes closed as he thinks hard to remember what happened, vaguely noticing that his hat has gone missing at some point. Oh yeah, they were found out and Nero...Quincy dismisses the thought, knowing he doesn't have the time to fall apart now. He starts creating and dismissing plans, trying to figure out a way out of this. If all else fails he has a last ditch plan, but he'd rather not use it, knowing who and what he'd owe if he does. He's startled when cold water is thrown over him. His eyes open in shock and he can hear Oliver coughing behind him.

"Looks like the little troublemakers are awake now." Quincy leans back abruptly as Cousin Vira shoves her face into Quincy's space after she says this.

Cousin Vamir sighs behind Quincy, "well, of course they're awake, we just tossed cold water over them."

Vira grumbles at Vamir in return, "do we have to eliminate them immediately? I'd like to play with the pretty one for a bit before."

"Which one's the pretty one?" Vamir asks.

Vira points at Quincy in response, "this one of course." Quincy shudders a bit as Vamir stalks around to look over Quincy before smiling maliciously. He grasps his face and tilts it this way and that before Quincy pulls his chin from Vamir's hand.

Vamir just smirks wickedly, "you're right, he is fairly pretty. I'm sure Nana wouldn't mind if we had a bit of fun with him as long as we eliminate both of 'em afterward."

Vira smirks along with Vamir, "I've always wanted to torture a Nvrix."

Vamir moves his hand down to grasp at the start of Quincy's outfit, pulling buttons apart. "Let's get this out of the way first, want to leave clean marks and all that." Quincy tries to kick out, fight them off, but he can do very little while restrained in magic bindings.

Oliver pulls himself together enough to realize what is going on and for as much as he hates Quincy's guts at the moment for the betrayal, he wouldn't let something like this happen to him. "Hey," he shouts, "back off or so help me." Not fairly threatening, he knows, but he was more going for distraction than scary threat.

Vamir pauses for a moment and chuckles, "like you can do much of anything tied up like that. So, why don't ya shut up. We don't want your annoying voice ruining our fun." Vamir restarts his progression, buttons coming undone as Quincy's panic begins to grow, limbs shaking and eyes darting around trying to find some way out of the situation. Knowing he has no choice now, his fingers begin fiddling with a ring on one of his fingers, twisting it right twice and left once. He continues trying to get away but has already realized the futility in that. By this time his overshirt has been completely unbuttoned and Vamir is moving his hand to work on the undershirt. A flash of silver and a knife falls to rest delicately against Vamir's jugular. Vamir and Vira freeze, and Quincy opens his eyes, which had closed in preparation, in shock. Nero is standing, more looming, behind Vamir with a dark look on his blank face, eyes a little brighter than they had been in the office. His knife rests against Vamir's neck and he presses a little, drawing beads of blood when Vamir doesn't move.

Vamir puts his hands up, "oh come on, can't we have a little fun with them before we off em?"

Nero only presses a little more with his knife.

“Alright, alright,” Vamir says frantically as he and Vira swiftly back away, “leaving him alone.” Nero steps between Quincy and the cousins, placing himself as an immovable shield. Vamir rolls his eyes. “Come on sis,” he says, “let’s go get the stuff we need to take care of these guys. Mr. Broody McNofun can watch over them.” Vira huffs but follows Vamir as they walk out of the dark room.

Quincy lets out a breath as soon as they’re gone, hands still shaking and body still tight from the panic.

Oliver tries to glance back but can’t turn enough to see Quincy. “You alright?” Oliver asks, unsurely.

Quincy wants to say a lot of things in response. *I thought you weren’t talking to me? Weren’t you mad? Why do you care? No, of course I’m not alright, you moron, I was almost tortured.* He doesn’t say any of that. Instead he takes in a deep breath that he holds for a count of eight before releasing it in seven. “Fine,” he grits out.

Oliver huffs, “next time I won’t ask, kaes.”

Quincy’s eyes darken, words wanting to fall from his mouth in return, longing to go off against Oliver’s selfish, entitled attitude, but he holds off. Instead, he turns his attention to Nero, who has shifted to lean against some boxes that he can barely see in the dark.

“Nero,” Quincy begs, hoping for some form of response, especially after Nero just stepped in and protected him, but he gets nothing.

Oliver rolls his eyes on his side, overcome by anger and betrayal, he huffs bitterly, “don’t bother. Ezan said he’s a blight, they don’t listen to anyone but their masters.”

Quincy growls, frustrated and just about done with Oliver's crap, "I know that, but I want to still try."

"It's a waste of time. From what the S.A.S has been able to find, which is little, blights go through an even more intensive training than members of the blood or brights core."

"I'm aware," Quincy says, annoyed.

"Then why do you keep trying? Whoever he was when you knew him is gone. All that's left is a Nexus soldier that only listens to orders."

Quincy closes his eyes and counts backwards from ten, before deciding to ignore Oliver and his bout of extra mean. "Nero," Quincy says again, "please listen, even if you probably can't hear me. I'm sorry. If the reason you're like this is because of me, because of what happened to Dove and me running then I'm sorry. I am so so sorry."

Nero twitches slightly, almost swaying toward Quincy. The door bangs open and Vamir and Vira stalk in, crowing excitedly. Nero falls back into stillness, eyes a blank red.

"This is going to be so much fun," Vamir says.

Vira cackles, "I know right. I call killing the pretty one."

Vamir turns to Vira, annoyed, "no fair. I wanted to kill him."

Quincy widens his eyes and feels the ring again, which is slightly warmer than it was but not to the point he needs it to be. Time to stall then.

Oliver leans his head back, "you're pretty popular tonight."

"Shut up," Quincy growls.

Vira stalks to stand in front of Quincy while Vamir moves around to stand before Oliver. Nero stays as a quiet shadow observing in the corner.

“This is going to be great, and I don’t have to make it quick,” Vira says as she twirls a gun in her hand, the color switched to a lethal blood red.

Vamir chuckles as he twirls a knife, “yeah, too bad mine has to be quick.”

“Why the different methods?” Quincy asks quickly, trying to keep them talking.

Vamir pauses, “well, for different people, of course. You’re a little thief so dying of gunshots wounds is to be expected, it’s how most thieves who are caught go out. But this one,” and he taps Oliver’s cheek with his knife, “is a law man. So that won’t work, but say the job became too much and he just had to end it, well, no one would bat much of an eye.”

Vira rolls her eyes, “come on, as much as I’d love to drag this out longer, I wanna go back to enjoy the party.”

“Don’t complain, Vee,” Vamir grumbles, “you get to have fun with yours, mine’s just one and done.”

“You drew the short straw, Vay,” Vira says with a smirk, “those are the rules.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Vamir grumbles, “drew the short straw, my kaes, you totally cheated.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Don’t be such a whiny kaes, Vay.”

“Don’t be such a prissy smug baek then, Vee.”

“Kaeshole.”

“Psycho whore.”

“Narcissistic prick.”

Quincy and Oliver both gain a bewildered look on their faces as the twins fall into a heated argument, shouting insults at each other that get progressively worse. Quincy shrugs and leaves them be as it works in his favor, the ring on his finger growing warmer in the meantime.

“I’m Nana’s favorite,” Vamir says with a tone of finality and Vira gasps.

“You baek, you take that back,” she yells.

“I won’t, cause it’s true,” Vamir crosses his arms with a smug smile.

“Fine,” Vira shouts, throwing her hands down in frustration, “let’s just kill these guys and head back to the party so I can prove that I’m actually Nana’s favorite.”

“Fine,” Vamir growls back, “but you’ll soon see that I’m right.”

Vira huffs and moves back in front of Quincy while Vamir does the same for Oliver. Vira raises her gun and levels it at Quincy’s head, pressing the barrel tightly to his forehead. Quincy draws in a sharp breath.

“Wait!” Quincy shouts, “wait just wait. Don’t we get to say something before you kill us. Last words if you will. Not like we can speak to anyone before we’re done with, and you still get to kill us.”

Oliver rolls his eyes, “of course you want to talk more before your death. Just love the sound of your own voice, don’t you.”

“Maybe I do, what’s so wrong with that?” Quincy grumbles back.

“Oh, I don’t know, you can use that chance to draw someone in and then stab them in the back.”

“Oh, yes, because everything is always my fault?”

“Isn’t it?”

Vamir drops the hand holding the knife, “oh Magic, shut up.”

Quincy and Oliver abruptly fall silent and eye their prospective murder twins.

“Thank you,” Vamir says pointedly, “now you can say last words or whatever but make it quick and if I feel bored, I’ll just end ya in the middle of it.”

Quincy lets out a breath, “thank you. I’ll go first then.”

Oliver growls, “oh Darkmos no. You’ll probably spend the time talking all about yourself and I don’t want to be subjected to that. I’ll go first.”

“I feel I should go first,” Quincy says back, “it was my idea.”

“Yeah, well, you have a lot of ideas, doesn’t mean they’re good ones. Case in point as we are about to die,” Oliver says.

Quincy fights not to roll his eyes, *oh magic this stupid man.*

Vamir waves his knife around, “I’ll pick for you since you can’t stop fighting. Pretty one goes first and be quick because I’m losing my patience.”

Quincy smirks, “thank you.” Oliver grumbles behind him. Quincy shifts the ring on his finger, which has gotten close to burning. *Just a bit longer,* he thinks. Before he takes a deep breath and falls into his role, with the

slightest bit of petty. “Last words, right. Well, first I’d like to say that it’s been pretty terrible working with you, Mimsy—”

“Hey!”

“—But beside that I suppose this was fun. I’ve never snuck into a Blood family’s party before, so I suppose there’s that. Going out quite ambitiously if nothing else. I will say there are a few things I’ll miss when I’m gone. The stars, quite beautiful, let me tell you and the stories to go along with them, wondrous things those. I’ll also miss tea and wine, wonderful things to have when sitting comfortably by a fire with a good book. And I suppose I will also miss those moments. Those wondrous fireplace moments broken only by the mystery that is long-term silence—”

“Are you almost done?” Vira asks with a bewildered frown.

“—oh yes of course, then Mimsy may have his turn, I suppose. Anyway, where was I, oh yes. I shall miss those wine, book moments. The soft comforts of blankets and falling asleep beside warmth. Oh, and I can’t forget art, I shall sorely miss it. The beauty of a piece in all its complexity. The wonder of trying to see the piece through different eyes. The subjectivity of a piece and if it truly could be called art in other’s eyes—”

“Seriously,” Vamir grumbles, “are you done?”

“—truly, just a little more. I promise. I think most of all I shall miss my times of thievery. A glorious and momentous time if there ever was one. I wish I could go down in thieving history, but alas, I have been caught before such an occasion that could put me down in the books—”

Vira throws her hands up, “alright, that’s it. I’m done, let’s just end them and be done with it.”

Vamir twirls his knife, “now that I can agree with, sis.”

Quincy falls silent. Oliver frowns, “nice going blabbermouth, now we’re definitely dead.”

Quincy huffs but doesn’t respond before smirking subtly, a shadow shifting in the corner and the ring burning a harsh circle around his finger.

Vira walks up and presses the gun hard against Quincy’s forehead.

“Yes,” Quincy hums, “I suppose it is time to be done with this. Mimsy, prepare yourself.” All the lights in the building shut off abruptly after Quincy speaks.

“Wha--,” Oliver says before quickly following the advice. Little round metal balls are tossed onto the floor and smoke begins pouring out of them.

“What the Darkmos?!” Vamir shouts.

“Who’s there? Show yourself, cowards!” Vira yells into the darkness. She feels a tap on her shoulder, and she whirls around to come face to face with a bone white mask and a terrifying, drawn on face, waist wrapped in emerald green fabric and an emerald green band with a patch on their right arm. She yells and the masked figure lunges, quickly taking her down.

“Vira?!” Vamir shouts, hearing her yell. He swipes his knife through the smoke and squints his eyes trying to see something, anything. His eyes slowly adjust and he takes a scared step backward when he makes out multiple shadows in front of him, all with bone white masks and etched on smiles. “Who...who are you?” He stutters out. The masks tilt and laughter lights up. Hands come up behind Vamir to wrap around his throat and hold tight. “What the—get off!” Vamir tries to pry the hands away but they just hold tight as more hands grab onto Vamir and drag him down. He starts to scream. His scream cuts off as his air supply fades and

he starts to heave out choking breaths. His vision starts to fade and his hands fall away before dropping fully as he blacks out. The hands holding him fall away and the masked figures stare at each other, heads tilting left and right, while hands move in patterns. They break away and head to different sections, some going to the boxes to deal with them, others searching to make sure they missed no one else (Nero having vanished at some point within this time), and two heading to cut Quincy and Oliver free.

Quincy stands quickly as he's freed hands rubbing his cut-up wrists, "thank you."

The figure nods before tilting down so it's masked smile is beside Quincy's ear, "you are required to meet at Pirate's Cove in a month's time to pay back what you owe."

Quincy winces but nods back in understanding.

The figure pauses before leaning forward again, "the Council will be there to determine your standing."

Quincy looks at the figure startled, "they've called a meeting?"

The figure shakes their head, "they've called an inquisition. You are drawing the Association too much attention and bringing danger to the other Marauders. Stand down or the Council will be forced to intervene."

"I understand," Quincy says quietly, "thank you for the warning."

The figure nods their head before turning to leave, gesturing quickly.

"Hands off," Oliver says as he stands, "who the Darkmos are you?"

"Don't antagonize the people who just helped us," Quincy says, tiredly, as the figures abruptly vanish into the shadows.

Oliver startles before growling, “don’t tell me what to do and how the Darkmos did you know they were coming? Did you set this up?”

Quincy sighs, “I had a part in it, yes.”

“And you couldn’t have told me that.”

“When would I have had time for that?”

“Before we went to the party, you kaes.”

“I couldn’t make it obvious, and this was a last ditch effort. We had no other options.”

“Don’t tell me we had no options,” Oliver says as he gets into Quincy’s face, “You’re the one who betrayed me and gave us away.”

“Well, sometimes things happen. I can’t control everything,” Quincy says back.

“Who even were those guys?” Oliver says as he throws his hand out.

“Don’t worry about it?” Quincy says back.

“Don’t you tell me not to worry about it!” Oliver yells, “that’s what you kept saying and I’m tired of hearing that excuse. You said don’t worry about it and here we are, almost frixing killed because you can’t help but to be a thief. I should have known, once a criminal, always a criminal. My team was right, I should have never trusted you.”

Quincy steps back startled, “that’s not...”

“Save it,” Oliver waves his hand, “I don’t want to hear your bullkrit excuses. I’m done. You can deal with the life debt yourself. Maybe it will kill you and the world will be all the better for it, down one thief.”

Quincy's eyes widen, "you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do."

"Why is everything always my fault?" Quincy says back, voice calm and fists clenched. "Oh, I'm a thief, a bad guy, just pure evil. Everything wrong that ever happens is all because of me. So, no matter what good I do, I will always be evil."

"Oh, don't be whining. You chose to follow a life of crime."

Quincy snaps, "Oh and you think you're so good, huh!" He yells, "Special Agent Oliver Tanner, the epitome of goodness. What, you never made mistakes before? Never made the wrong call that ended in people's deaths. Never done something wrong. No, of course not, because you're the good guy and I'm the bad, that's how the story goes, but I never had a choice in this. This was the only way I could survive. Survive, not live, because I have not been living for a long time. You had a choice to be a hero here, but me, I never got that choice. So, don't you dare stand there and act all high and mighty. I am doing my best!"

Oliver shoves Quincy, "well, your best isn't good enough!" He shoves Quincy again and Quincy trips back falling to the floor. Quincy stares up, startled. "Don't act like you get to feel all sorry for yourself when you set this all up, acted like you cared, and then turned around and betrayed me."

Quincy's eyes fall to the floor, "I never betrayed you."

"Oh yeah," Oliver scoffs, "then what was that whole thing about literally telling our entire plan to the enemy. That not a betrayal to you?"

Quincy sighs, "I didn't mean to betray you, I'm higher class than that; besides, the life debt would never allow me to do anything to hurt you. I've tried it before. I just...trusted the wrong person."

Oliver drops his arms, still angry, “I thought you didn’t trust anyone,” he scoffs, “being a thief and all.”

Quincy frowns, “that’s true, mostly. But there are some I trust, and this person was one of them.”

“Why?” Oliver questions.

Quincy looks up at him with troubled, stormy eyes, “because he’s my brother.”

Chapter 14: It started with Death and It Ended With It

They stare at each other in silence for a while. They had decided, not long after their mutual shouting and blame, as well as Quincy's admission, to go somewhere. They had no idea where, just somewhere that wasn't a place with two psycho Blood family members, a missing blight, and the shadows of unwanted touches and almost death. They left the building in silence, coming to find, and not very surprised by the fact, that they had been tied up in a warehouse on the docks. They walked in silence too, neither leading, just walking beside each other aimlessly, deep in their own thoughts with a good six foot distance between each other. They arrive at an equally silent park, only broken up by crickets and critters. Lanterns are lit up, cutting through the night with stars shining overhead. Oliver stops at the fountain looking up at the shadowed sculpture; taking off the disguise earring, he turns and plops down, staring down at his feet. Quincy takes off his own disguise earring before coming to stand a good distance across from him and Oliver sighs.

"You gonna sit?" Oliver asks.

Quincy jerks from where he was staring up at the stars, "do you want me to?"

Oliver looks up and leans back on his hands, deciding to stare at the stars instead of Quincy's face, still overcome by anger and perceived betrayal and knowing that if he saw Quincy's face right now he might punch him. "I can't stop you. Do what you want as I obviously have no control over that," Oliver says, face set in a deep frown.

Quincy flinches slightly before walking to sit an arms length away from Oliver, head bowed and staring at the ground with his hands twisting tightly in his lap. “I—,” Quincy tries to start looking at Oliver for a moment before stopping and falling back to silence, with his head bowed to the ground.

Oliver tilts his head with a side eye for a second before sighing, “don’t bother saying anything unless it’s to explain.”

“I’m trying,” Quincy says quietly, “I know at this point that you deserve an explanation if nothing else. I just don’t know how to say it. I’ve never told this to anyone.”

Oliver sighs loudly but doesn’t say anything. They sit in silence for a long while. Oliver ends up swiping his hands on his knees before standing in frustration. “Alright,” he says, “if you aren’t going to explain then I’m going to leave. I’m done with this entire day of bullkritt.”

Quincy startles, looking up from his sore hands, he springs up and grabs Oliver’s sleeve. “Wait!” He says quickly.

Oliver looks back at him with an annoyed frown before looking pointedly at where Quincy’s hand is gripping his sleeve. Quincy quickly drops his hand.

“Wait,” Quincy says but he doesn’t continue and Oliver frowns before sighing.

“I’m leaving if you don’t start talking.”

Quincy just stares at him helplessly, voice choked and finding it impossible to get the words to fall out.

“Alright, I’m gone,” Oliver says and turns to leave.

Quincy holds his clenched shaking, fists in front of him before taking in a deep breath that he holds and then releases heavily, shoulder slumping. “I wasn’t born a thief,” he says quietly.

Oliver halts but doesn’t turn around.

Quincy falls back onto the fountain ledge and stares down at his hands. “I was born to a noble family, much like you. My mother was born in Enla, but my father was from Natveo, the Arkeshi tribe to be specific, and came over as a child before the war. Probably not that hard to tell,” Quincy chuckles bitterly, twirling a piece of his red hair and rubbing his tanned skin. “Him and his family got a lot of flack for that. When I was six they died in battle as heroes, but instead of me receiving aid, I was chased out of the base our family had been stationed at.” Oliver looks back startled. Quincy sighs, “I didn’t fully understand what happened, just that my parents were gone and for some reason they weren’t coming back and for the longest time I thought it was because of me. That they had grown tired of dealing with a mixed child that caused them to receive a lot of judgment. They tried to spare me from the words but rumors find a way.”

Oliver shuffles over to sit beside Quincy. Quincy glances up through his hair for a second before dropping his gaze so he doesn’t lose his nerve. “I still remember that night vividly,” He says in a somber voice. “It was cold and all I had was the clothes I was wearing. I was scared but no one would

help me even when I asked. It only led to looks of disgust or shoves, so I stopped asking. I was on the streets for a week and was not doing well. I had lived in luxury for the first six years of my life; I had no idea how to survive without my parents. The hunger tore me apart and a chill had permanently set into my bones, I was fading and fast.” Quincy twists his sore hands in his lap and bites his cheek hard enough to draw blood. “I tried to steal a piece of bread and it backfired horribly, but I was so hungry, I didn’t care about the risks. I was almost caught and beaten by the store owner but a boy saved me. He created a distraction and then dragged me away and we ran through the streets and alleys laughing like we didn’t have a care.” Quincy laughs humorously, “that was the first time I met Nero, or Nathaniel Warren as his name originally was, but it wouldn’t be the last. We ran into each other many more times until Nero asked me to come home with him and I agreed and there I met a woman who changed my life and helped mold me into the thief you see before you.” Quincy leans back and tilts his head at Oliver, a brittle smirk on his face, “her name was Aliyah Duvoeux, codename: Dove. She was a thief, one of the best, the youngest to reach Diamond level in the Marauder Association.”

Oliver looks at Quincy with wide eyes, “why haven’t I heard of her?”

Quincy’s feeble smirk falls before his eyes narrow, “because she was killed and they hushed up anything to do with her.”

“They?” Oliver questions.

“The Honor Guard and the S.A.S.,” Quincy spits out with a frown.

Oliver frowns, “they wouldn’t do something like tha–”

“You weren’t there,” Quincy interrupts, “so don’t proceed to tell me how it happened. They had Royal issued weapons and wore their badges with pride. I know what happened and who killed her. She was everything to Nero and I. She protected us, loved us, taught us. She’s the reason I’m alive and the reason I was able to join the Marauder Association. She put in my recommendation.”

Oliver decides not to argue with Quincy. “What happened?” He asks softly.

Quincy sighs and slumps, “it was my fault. Nero was about to become an adult and I wanted to be just like him so I convinced him to take me on a job that was high risk, but high reward. It went horribly and I got caught. The cops dropped me off at an orphanage for troubled kids called Orchard Ridge run by a woman named Carol Attory. That place and that woman were the worst sorts of things you could imagine. I was terrified. Miss Attory always looked at me with this dangerous look in her eyes and I overheard her talking to this man about a new batch of subjects. Kids would disappear from there all the time and no one cared.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Oliver says, “if I let S.A.S. HQ know I’m sure we can get involved and figure this out.”

Quincy snorts, “don’t bother. They don’t care.”

“Quincy, that’s not—”

“They knew,” Quincy says, voice fragile, “they just didn’t care. I told them every time I ran but they just sent me right back and told me to shut my Nvrix mouth. Dove and Nero staged a breakout but somehow S.A.S.

found out and were there to ambush them. Dove stayed behind to give us time to get away, but Nero and I just hid to see what would happen.”

Quincy begins laughing sharply, “we were so dumb, we should have just kept going, But curiosity killed the cat, I suppose.” His laughter peters out to be something more akin to laughing sobs. “She surrendered to them, Tanner. She stood down, to give us time. And they shot her for it, put her on her knees, made the strongest woman I had ever known bow and then shot her point blank in the head and laughed about it.”

Oliver opens and closes his mouth, unable to say anything and knowing that with the way Quincy is acting, it has to be true. Sure, Oliver knows not all S.A.S. agents are good people and would do what they need to in order to get ahead, case in point, most of his team, but still, to shoot someone who had surrendered, point blank. That’s not justice, it’s just murder in the guise of it.

Quincy lets out a sharp sob and bites his hand quickly to silence it. Oliver raises his hand to try and comfort Quincy but quickly drops it. Quincy continues talking, like he’s at the point that he’s started and can’t stop now. “I froze. I was fifteen and had just seen my mentor murdered. Thank Magic for Nero, who was able to keep his head. He started dragging me away but we were still spotted. We ran and Nero suggested separating and then meeting up at a hideaway point, in a day. I could only agree numbly. I used every trick in the book to get away and waited for hours until everything died down, and then waited longer still. I went to the hideaway point.” Quincy turns to look at Oliver somberly, “Nero never showed. I sat there and waited for days, but nothing. Maria found me and passed me along to Kaido, who made sure I was cared for. He got me a place and everything. Him and Maria fought to make sure I could stay a part of the Marauder’s. They dragged me out of my grief, just like Dove and Nero did

and after they did I made a pact. I was going to become the greatest thief ever and honor Dove and Nero, to steal from all those places that Nero and I dreamed about visiting.” Quincy slumps, drained, “I never expected to find Nero again. I thought he was dead, but this mission led me to him and I thought,” Quincy barks out a bitter laugh, “I thought we could go back to how we were. Like things would pick up where they left off. How stupid must I appear now, Detective. I trusted him with everything, he had my heart already so I saw no reason to lie. I was just so happy to see him again, but it was all a facade. Even then he had been playing me, and I—” Quincy scrubs his face, “I’m sorry, that things ended up the way they did because of me. I should have known. You can never trust anyone as a thief.”

Oliver clenches his fists, “no, Quincy just no.”

Quincy looks over at Oliver with widened red-rim eyes.

Oliver huffs, “I was an idiot okay. I’m sorry myself; I seem to keep putting my foot into my mouth and you’re left to deal with the brunt of it. I was angry, yes, but that gave me no right to treat you like I did. I didn’t even stop to think things through and realize, logically, that you couldn’t have hurt me. Or to even see how you were acting. Can you forgive me?”

Quincy stares at Oliver shocked, never expecting to ever get an apology. “I already have, Detective.”

Oliver looks at Quincy blankly, “yeah, I’m definitely paying for it later, aren’t I.”

“Oh most definitely.”

“Whatever,” Oliver bumps Quincy with his arm and stands; Quincy stares at him, tear tracks on his face. “Come on, I’m tired, I bet you’re tired, we both sorely need showers and to sleep for like a week. Let’s get out of here.”

“Of course,” Quincy stands, dusting off his pants, “your word is law, afterall, Detective.”

Oliver playfully shoves Quincy, and Quincy fights the flinch so it doesn’t set them back, “and don’t you forget it.”

Chapter 15: Live Life Till You die

They make their way out of the park swiftly and as sneakily as they possibly can, which essentially means they walked in awkward silence pretending like it was entirely natural. As soon as they got to the road, Quincy was hailing a cab.

“Straight to the train station, please,” he says and the cabbie grunts back an affirmative.

“Don’t we need to head back to the hotel?” Oliver mumbles.

Quincy sighs, “no, our things were grabbed for us by that little group of people I unfortunately owe a lot to now.”

“Yeah,” Oliver murmurs, “what was up with that?”

“In one sentence,” Quincy sighs out, “Lady can pull a lot of strings in the Association.”

“Ah,” Oliver says, as if he understood what that meant.

“Ah, Come one!” The cabbie shouts as he honks the horn, “hurry up, the light is green, kaeshole.”

Quincy and Oliver startle. “Everything okay?” Quincy asks.

The cabbie waves his hand, “yeah, people just be dumb and things are pretty tense after the outcome of the Matrikal’s event.”

Quincy and Oliver look at each other uneasily. “Uh, what outcome?”
Oliver asks hesitantly.

“What you don’t know?” The cabbie grunts out.

“No, we don’t,” Quincy says, “so, please, enlighten us.”

The cabbie leans back, “Well, word on the street is that someone used the party as a way to off Markos Matrikal.”

“What?!” Quincy and Oliver shout.

“Jeez,” the cabbie his ear, “yeah, and the whole Matrikal family is up in arms. They’ve got people roaming the whole city looking for the killer.” Quincy waves his arm and points it quickly, “wait, this is our stop. Thank you.” He grabs out a few coins, “keep the change.” He then grabs Oliver’s arm and ignores his protests to drag him out of the cab. He pulls Oliver down the street while the cabbie watches them go bewilderedly.

“What a weird pair of dudes,” the guy mutters as he shrugs and drives off.

“What the Darkmos, Quincy?” Oliver says as he’s dragged.

Quincy pulls Oliver into a side alley and whiles around, “we have to get out of this city.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s what we were trying to do.”

“No, you don’t understand. Markos Matrikal was killed and it has everyone on edge. Now who just recently escaped from being offed by the Matrikal’s right before that.” Oliver’s face dons a lightbulb expression.

“Exactly,” Quincy says.

“Then how do you expect us to leave?” Oliver asks.

Quincy looks at him, “we take a train and we do it quickly. They haven’t seen our real faces and I’m hoping Nero wouldn’t have shown them, but we have to hurry; the longer we sit still the more likely we are to be caught.”

Oliver nods his head, “lead the way.” This causes Quincy to look at him in shock for a moment before he shakes his head and gathers himself. He leans around the alley to watch the roads before waving Oliver to follow him. They step out and walk along the path, seeking to blend into the night and look just like a bunch of night folk, stalking down the street taking back alleys and staying in the shadows. They stop within sight distance of the entry to the station. Two burly men are stationed there, gazing at each person that passes them by.

“Well, that’s not good,” Oliver says as they duck down again.

Quincy gives Oliver a look, “you think?”

Oliver holds his hands up in surrender with a sheepish laugh, “what’s the plan?”

Quincy starts shuffling around and reaching into pockets, “wait here for a moment.” He then hops and turns the corner before Oliver can say anything.

“Rude,” Oliver mumbles.

Quincy on the other hand quickly slides from the alley to join a crowd on the sidewalk. He slides through and hears people wondering what all the hold up is about. With a sigh he slips his fingers into a man’s back pocket, quickly grabbing his wallet. He takes out all the cash and then swiftly plops the wallet back into the man’s pocket before gliding past a few others to do the same too. At the end he has a decent amount of cash and he calmly walks down the sidewalk before stopping in front of a cheap clothing store. He steps in and a bell dings.

“Welcome,” the clerk says and Quincy waves an arm dismissively. Quincy browses through the options and sighs, wishing he didn’t have to resort to this. He quickly snags a pair of jeans and a hoodie as well as some sneakers and a hat, before fighting with himself and knowing it’s the best thing for their cover. He grabs a long sleeve, high collar, red dress with white and blue flowers on it and a pair of navy blue heels. “The things I do to survive,” Quincy mumbles in disdain. He quickly hurries to buy the clothing. The clerk gives him a weird look with the dress. “For my sister,” Quincy says with a smile and the clerk puts on an embarrassed face. Quincy grabs the clothes and calmly leaves, walking as quickly as he can while still looking natural. He rounds back into the alley and almost gets punched in the face for his efforts. Quincy grabs the fists and glides his hand to the wrist before stepping to the side, pulling the arm down as he glides behind the assailant and knocks the person’s knees out as he pulls the arm behind their back.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Oliver says as he tries to lift himself to relieve the pain on his arm.

Quincy rolls his eyes and swiftly drops Oliver’s arm. “Why’d you try to punch me?”

Oliver cradles his arm, “I thought you were an assailant.”

“The only assailant here was you, moron.” Oliver rolls his eyes and mockingly repeats Quincy’s statement. Quincy sighs and throws the bag containing Oliver’s clothes at him. “Here,” Quincy says, “go change, and quickly.”

“Quincy,” Oliver says slowly, “did you steal these?”

“No,” Quincy says with a sigh, well, he did steal the money for them but Oliver doesn’t need to know that.

Oliver sighs and quickly goes behind some dumpsters to change. Quincy huffs before doing the same and sighing annoyed when his arms can’t tie the wrap around his middle.

“Hey, what do I do with the party clo...” Oliver trails off, “what the Darkmos are you wearing?”

“What does it look like, Detective?” Quincy huffs as he continues trying to tie the wrap.

“Well,” Oliver says unsurely, “it looks like you’re wearing a dress.”

“Very astute observation. Any other obvious things you want to point out or will you help me?”

Oliver walks over slowly as Quincy turns his back to him. Oliver ties the wrap and steps back. “Why are you wearing a dress?” Oliver asks.

Quincy turns back to Oliver, his hands pulling through his hair to take it out of its pins and letting it flop down to frame around his face and adding to the soft feminine look he was going for. “I am wearing a dress,” Quincy says, “because it’s the best disguise. The Matrikals are looking for two men wearing fancy clothing and with certain looks about them. Not a late teenager and his girlfriend. This way, even if Nero showed them our true faces, they may hesitate long enough for us to get away.”

Oliver makes a face of understanding, “okay, I get it, but..”

“What?”

“...do you have to be my girlfriend for this?”

“Trust me. I’m just as unhappy about this as you are, Detective.” Quincy waves Oliver closer and places the hat on his head, “there, now did you bring your regular comm bracelet?” Oliver nods and switches out his comm bracelets as Quincy does the same before handing both the bracelet and clothes over to Quincy’s expectant hands. Quincy plops them in a pocket stone. “Great, let’s go,” he pulls Oliver along as they walk around the corner, tucking his arm in the crook of Oliver’s and leaning against his side as they walk to blend into the crowd heading for the train.

“You’re too close,” Oliver mumbles.

“Just suck it up and deal with it,” Quincy grits out.

Oliver holds and then releases a deep breath before doing his best to appear natural. They smoothly walk by the two men, who gaze at them for a moment before dismissing them. Oliver and Quincy don't relax until they get on the train. They're the only ones in their train car, most people able to afford gate keys in this city.

Oliver sighs as he leans back before tilting his head to Quincy.

Quincy sighs as well, “if you have something to say, just say it.”

Oliver sits up straight, “do you hate me?”

Quincy turns his head to stare at Oliver consideringly. “I did,” Quincy admits softly, “especially in the beginning when I was first chained to you and I realized what that truly meant for me.”

“And now?” Oliver asks softly.

“Now?” Quincy ruffles his hair, playing with the strands, “no, I don't hate you and I haven't for a while. I suppose I got used to the chains and while I may not like you when you decide to be the world's biggest arse and say things that are not great to hear, I still don't hate you.”

Oliver winces at the arse comment but can't help but agree. “Why?”

“Why don't I hate you?”

Oliver nods reluctantly.

Quincy turns more toward Oliver. “Because, I came to learn that holding hatred in one’s heart only makes you tired and that I’d rather live life to the fullest until I die then be tired at the end.”

“That’s wise of you,” Oliver says.

Quincy chuckles, “you can thank Kaido and Maria. I probably wouldn’t have figured it out without them pointing out what was blatantly staring me in the face. But they were right and so I’ve done my best to live life as it comes and goes then be worried or angry about the things I have experienced or the wrong that has been done to me.”

Oliver leans back, “huh, so that’s why you are so good and coming up with plans on the spot.”

“A bit, yes, but I’m also just a fabulous thief.”

“Oh shut up,” Oliver bumps Quincy’s shoulder and this time Quincy doesn’t flinch.

Chapter 16: I Didn't Do It (blocking)

From the train and discussion.

Essentially decide to let everything drop and to move on even though their relationship has changed now, where they are more friends than enemies.

Oliver heads home and sleeps and then heads to HQ to tell his boss what they learned and about the death of Markos Matrikal.

His team arrests him as soon as he walks through the door even though he tries to ask what is going on.

They shake their heads and leave it up to his boss to explain.

Interrogation room.

Boss comes in asking him why he did it and Oliver is Darkmosing confused, did what?

Boss asks if Oliver is being threatened or blackmailed or something and Oliver is just confused.

Why'd you help him do it?

What do you mean?

We know you have a soft spot for your little thief but why'd you help him murder Markos Matrikal?

And Oliver freezes what?

They start throwing accusations around and Oliver denies everything, knowing there is no possible way Quincy could have killed Markos. Oliver tries to talk about Ezan and the blight but his boss bulldozes over him.

I can't help you anymore tanner; if you tell me where he is I might be able to get you a pardon.

As much as Oliver would like to not be arrested, he knows Quincy did nothing wrong, so he refuses.

They take him to a temporary holding cell.

Tito comes to speak with Oliver, knowing him and Quincy didn't do anything. Oliver asks for a chance to get a message to Quincy, knowing it's a gamble, luckily Tito is just morally gray and not loyal enough to S.A.S. to do it.

Tito: I can do you one better. I can get you a call. But only for five minutes.

Quincy picks up the call asking Oliver where he is.

I've been arrested.

What?

Oliver explains what's going on as quickly as he can and then tells him. Quincy, run.

This leads to Quincy, who is walking back toward his apartment to go on the run, outrunning the cops and S.A.S. agents.

Chapter 17: It's Just A Little Snooping, I Swear (blocking)

Quincy then goes to Albert and dons a disguise. Originally Quincy is fighting with himself to leave Oliver. Albert convinces him not to.

Albert: I think you've already decided what to do.

Quincy heads to Anita's for something that can get him into the building and get him the information he needs. She grabs something her brother/in law made and tells him to be careful, as well as what is going on in the underground now. Things have been shaken.

he sneaks into the S.A.S. agency. And is able to speak with Oliver to find out what is going on and figure out what to do.

Oliver says he's happy to be his friend and to let it go, leave and run.

Quincy says he's done enough running to last the rest of his life and he's quite tired of it. Quincy sneaks off and is almost caught before hiding in an office, which turns out to be Oliver's boss's office.

Quincy goes to the computer and uses a piece of technology created by Anita's brother (in law?). He is able to hack into the computer. Finds a lot more than what he was expecting, realizing there are files within that are hidden, he gets through and begins to look them over.

He finds the emails and the deal made between the boss and the head of the blood families. Illegal good for protection and looking the other way. Quincy is disgusted.

He keeps looking and finds a file on Dove and Nero, and himself. He hesitates before clicking on Dove's and starting to read.

He finds out that they killed her not because she was a top thief but because she found out secrets about the agency that couldn't get out. They silenced her but never found out what she knew and how.

Quincy has to stop looking when he hears a noise. The files finish downloading and Quincy quickly backs out and covers his tracks.

Tito chuckles from his cave where he had allowed Quincy through and to find those files. He then gets up to call his boss, from where he was about to go into his office, because he “found something”. Quincy breathes a sigh and then slowly leaves. Before calmly walking from the building.

Chapter 18: Maria's: Goddess of Chaos (blocking)

Quincy heads to one of his safe houses, which has been broken into. He's super hesitant and ready to fight before darkness overtakes him. He wakes up in Maria's place with an annoyed face. Etchy, Marz, Maria, Hugo, Astaire, Kaido, and Atallah. Maria explains that they got word he was in trouble and came to help. They tell him that the Marauder's have given him an out, if he takes it then he's free, but if he continues on this path (releasing Oliver, taking down S.A.S. and the Bloods) the Association will cut all ties with Quincy and stick his name and heart from the records.

Quincy thinks deeply about it and realizes that this is far more important than his own selfish desires and it's about time he went off on his own anyway. Hugo is just there to offer information and snacks. Kaido is there as an attempted form of self restraint. He's not trying very hard.

Etchy and Marz, cheer and agree.

Maria smiles: what's the plan?

Quincy: first, we get Oliver back, after that, well, that's anyone's guess.

They then discuss how to best get Oliver back. Etchy gets a message and we find out that he is actually friends with Tito. Tito says he'll help because why not.

Tito tells them Oliver will be transferred to a temporary prison hold in two days time. Tito can get the route and information. The rest is up to them.

Maria asks if she can cause some chaos in the meantime.

Quincy: I've got no other options, go for it.

They plan and then lead to them essentially going under cover.

Chapter 19: Prison Break...Sort Of (blocking)

They take control of the van that will transfer Oliver. Etchy and Marz in the van. Marz driving and Etchy in the back with another guard.

The van drives and then stops under an overpass. They hold the guard at gunpoint. Back of the van is pulled open by two of the cops following them, which turns out to be Quincy and Astaire.

Maria, near S.A.S. HQ starts a fire and sets off some bombs. Nothing close or strong enough to hurt people but definitely enough to get their attention. She cackles loudly as she does so.

Quincy: Come on partner, let's get you out of here.

Oliver: I thought i told you to run

Quincy: since when have I done anything you've told me to.

Astaire pops up to transfer them to a hideout, Quincy's place, since no one knows where that is.

(meet the birds, how they first came about).

Etchy and Marz set off to join Maria in causing chaos and they then call her husband who just shakes his head and calls her back. She calms down and heads back home. Astaire nods and leaves as well.

Oliver: they're a fun bunch.

Quincy laughs: there is a reason Maria and her crew are called many names. The mistress of chaos, The Malady of Antiquities, and her lovely crew the Mavens, for they are experts in their fields.

They then sit down and fully discuss what is going on and what their next steps are. Originally they plan to merely prove their innocence. Quincy talks about the files he found and the information he already found.

Oliver will pay attention to his connections to try and get information, which is really just Tito because he is living for this chaos.

Quincy is going to look through the files to see if there is anything in it to prove their innocence.

Chapter 20: The Truth...But Only Like 25% (blocking)

He looks through Dove's file. Learns a bit more on her and finds out she was a high ranking member of an underground rebellion. She had found files and was going to spill the info. But she didn't have the files on her when she was killed. He looks at the leading agent in charge and the one who pulled the trigger and sees one name. Krees Tanner.

Quincy shakes his head and quickly moves on. He goes to Nero's file. Finds out Nero was the bastard son of a noble and a night lady. Tossed aside. Carol Attery was the one to find Nero, searching for him specifically in the hopes he would have the files. He didn't. They caught him and then took him to Nexus and place him in the Genesis program and then the Ghost program. It took a long time to break him but now he is perfect. He is currently loaned out to the service of Ezan Matrikal. Leading officer to search for Nero was Krees Tanner

He quickly leaves that and hesitates before clicking on his file. What he learns shocks him. His parents didn't die in battle as heroes. They died under mysterious circumstances but given honorable memorials.

Quincy was supposed to have received aid as war heroes' child but didn't. He finds out deeper in the file that the files the S.A.S. were after were first found by his parents. His mentor discovered them when he joined her because he apparently had them on him. It says in the file it was suspected that he had them because S.A.S. couldn't find them anywhere. Quincy has no idea where they could be.

He learns that his parents capture and execution was called before they were killed by a noble and fellow Honor Guard member, Krees Tanner.

Quincy stumbles back in shock. Oliver calls out to ask Quincy if he'd like some tea or something and Quincy becomes angry and hurt.

Chapter 21: Can You Hold Me As I Fall Apart? (TBC)

Chapter 22: He Calls It Mercy, I Call It Murder (TBC)

Chapter 23: Together (TBC)

Chapter 24: The Poker Game of Life and Death (TBC)

Chapter 25: Thank You (TBC)

Chapter 26: What I See Is Different Then What I Saw (TBC)

Chapter 27: Everyone Is Somewhere In Between (TBC)
