Dirty Little Secrets

by joshuaorrizonte

Summary

It is a Friday night, and Maya finds herself in a seedy porn shop with none other than Miles Edgeworth. That chance happening leads to the happiest relationship she could ever imagine, with both of the men closest to her.

But when tragedy strikes Miles, and disaster strikes Phoenix, Maya finds herself alone to cope with a dirty little secret...
Chapter 1

It's a Friday night, a few weeks after returning from my return trip to Hazakura Temple. Nick didn't want me to do that training course, going so far as to say that he would do it too, if I did. Still recovering from his cold and injuries, I didn't want him hurting himself, but he insisted. I couldn’t tell him ‘no’; it was literally impossible. When Nick gets an idea in his head, you’ve got to present hard evidence that it’s a mistake.

Unfortunately, I haven’t figured out how to use my spiritual power to look into the future, so I could present him with the image of him I left Hazakurain with: slumped over his desk, mind too dull with feeling like poop and utterly exhausted to focus on his work. The fever’s gone- again- and he isn’t nearly as stuffed up as he was a few days after the Special Course, but he’s still miserable, and still on antibiotics.

He doesn’t need me around, so I leave. I don’t even know where I am going, but after a round of burgers- it’s no fun without Nick- I find myself here, and think to myself, “Hey! I’m over eighteen! Why not?”

So now, I'm looking for something. Based on the kind of store this is, it isn't too hard to figure out what I'm looking for, but it's definitely something I don't want Nick, Mr. Edgeworth, Detective Gumshoe, or frankly any of my friends to find out that I'm looking for.

So when I see him browsing the dirty magazines, I duck into the little room that all the kinky outfits are in and hope he didn't see me. It's a little strange, but I don't think twice about him being here. After all, he is a man and Nick has rather shamelessly admitted that yes, he uses pornographic material. Said in just that manner. "Pornographic material." He makes it sound so... so clinical and I have to wonder how on earth he manages to convince me that I don’t want a relationship with him, every time we talk about sex. He talks to me like he’s a teacher in a sex ed class.

But, since Nick and he are about the only two examples I have to go on- two shining examples of neurotic men incurably addicted to their work- I tend to assume that if something is generally true for one, it’s true for them both because, hey- they’re men.

In any case, Nick doesn't know I wouldn't mind having sex with him. Well, that I wouldn't mind it as long as we didn't talk about it. That big sister schtick is just to throw him off. He's more experienced than I am- he's told me that he's not a virgin, although he says it was with one person, years ago, and he's not willing to talk about them, even to confirm gender. I suspect it's a woman, but since he's not talking about it, I accepted long ago that I'll never know.

It's with Nick on my mind that I actually start looking at the outfits. These are not what I'm looking for. However, since I can't leave the dingy little room until Mr. Edgeworth leaves the store, there's no harm in occupying myself. One of the outfits looks like the waitress outfits from Tres Bien, with a few... cosmetic updates. I bet I could get my point across to Nick in a damn hurry in that, in a manner that he can't possibly be intentionally stupid about and in a way that doesn't require us to actually talk about it, at all. I glance at the price tag in sheer curiosity and put that idea right out of my head. Nooooo way. I don't want him nearly that badly.

"Huh. Of all the people to see in a place like this, you're the last I thought I would, Ms. Fey."

I cringe and turn to face him. He's empty-handed, and his face is quite red. I'm sure mine is at this point, too. "Yeah, well. I was hoping you didn't see me."
"It didn't help that you exclaimed, 'Oh no, Mr. Edgeworth!' rather loudly,” he comments, a smug but uncomfortable grin on his face.

I stick my tongue out at him. "Well... uhm... yeah. So... what are you doing here?"

"It is a Saturday night. This is an adult novelty store. What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Lamenting that you couldn't get a date?"

"That is, unfortunately, much closer to reality than I'd care to admit," Mr. Edgeworth replies, the blush on his face deepening. "Although I can't fathom why you're in a place like this. Don't you and Wright go on dates every Saturday?"

"I wish," I said, turning around. "I hardly call a trip to McDonald's a 'date'."

"... huh. I guess I had your relationship all wrong. Just about everyone at the prosecutor's office believes you're an item."

There's something odd in his voice at that statement. Something I don't particularly care to delve into. I don’t know what it is but I get the feeling that I really don’t want to know. "Well, no. We're not. Remember all those times Nick got flustered whenever someone implied I was his girlfriend? Yeah, he's not acting. I'm not."

"... I see."

We stare at each other for a few moments as I try to figure out what, exactly, Mr. Edgeworth was so concerned about. Something about finding out that Nick and I aren’t lovers is bothering him, but damned if I can figure out what. He finally smirks again, coming to stand next to me and examining the modified waitress outfit I was only moments before. "But I assume you do have a boyfriend, if you're looking at stuff like this," he observes in a flat tone of voice.

He’s on a fishing expedition! I ponder briefly what kind of information I want to give him, and then I answered, “No, not really. This isn’t what I came in here for. I was just occupying myself until you left the store.”

“Ah. So what were you looking for?”

“It’s a Saturday night. This is an adult novelty store. What do you think I’m looking for?”

Much to my surprise, Mr. Edgeworth laughs at the way I turn his previous statement around on him. “Did Wright stand you up for burgers?” he asks in a teasing voice.

I scowl at him. “He’s working on a very complicated case,” I inform him. “He’s been working on it since early this morning.”

Mr. Edgeworth glances at his watch, and gives a low whistle. “His brain is going to leak out of his ears if he doesn’t let up on that case a little,” he mutters. “Maybe I should call him and let him know that Payne doesn’t actually have anything.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “You know about this case?”

“Indeed. Payne cornered me Friday afternoon, demanding my assistance. He tried one of Wright’s style of bluffs on him and it actually worked. He’s going to feel like a fool when he goes into court
on Monday. Wright is working entirely too hard on this case.”

“I think Nick will feel like a fool when he goes in and discovers that he didn’t need to do all that, too,” I remark with a giggle.

Mr. Edgeworth regards me blankly for a few minutes, and then shrugs. “But if Wright wants to fall for one of his own tricks, I suppose I should let him,” he says finally, a mischievously wicked edge in his voice.

“What’s to stop me from telling him myself?” I ask, my own voice mischievous.

“What, and tell Wright you met me in a seedy porn shop in the bad side of town?” he asked incredulously.

“I can lie!” I protest.

“And I can tell him the truth,” Mr. Edgeworth counters.

I feel like we were in a courtroom with the way we are going back and forth. It is an interesting feeling. “You really want to tell Nick where you were when you met me?” I challenge.

“Mutually assured destruction, Ms. Fey,” Mr. Edgeworth replies, shaking his finger at me with a grin. “Spoil my fun, and I’ll have to have a little fun with you instead. You trying to explain why you were here would be an interesting conversation to listen in on.”

“Oooh, you’re cruel,” I laugh. “I’ll have you know I’m an adult, Mr. Edgeworth.”

“You are not!”

I’m not really sure what to make of that statement. Did he just insult my maturity? Well… that is likely, but… “I am too! I’m almost twenty!”

He seems surprised by this statement. “Really? You don’t look that old. You look about seventeen to me, although I suppose your presence here does indicate that you’re past the age of majority.”

I giggle again. “That’s only about three year’s difference. I’d be surprised if you could accurately tell the difference between a nineteen and seventeen-year-old.”

“My job is noticing almost unperceivable details,” Mr. Edgeworth sniffs at me.

We are off topic. “Regardless,” I say with a smirk, “I don’t have to explain anything I do to Nick. He’s my boss, not my keeper.”

“Touché. Now answer the question this whole thing has spawned: are you truly going to call him and tell him what I said about his case?”

I shake my head, laughing to myself. “I was just messing with you, Mr. Edgeworth. Perhaps if he’s still tearing his hair out tomorrow over it, but not tonight.”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Edgeworth nods.

The awkward silence descends again. “So, uh…” I grope for a conversation starter, and cringe seconds after I asked my next question. “Find anything interesting?”

“Actually, yes, I did. You might be interested in it, too.”
“Wh-What?!”

He smirks at me. “Let me show you.”

I follow him out of the outfit room hesitantly. “You have no idea how much like a dirty old man that made you sound,” I inform him flatly. He just laughs as he guides me to a particular section of the porn DVDs, one dedicated to parodies of movies and TV shows.

Mr. Edgeworth goes directly to a particular title, snaps it off the shelf, and hands it to me wordlessly. My jaw drops in a mix of horror, awe, and fan-like excitement as I read the title. "Is this what this looks like?" I demand, probably sounding more like an obsessed fangirl than is healthy.

"If that looks like Steel Samurai porn to you, then it is what it looks like," Mr. Edgeworth confirms for me. I let out an immature squeal of delight and Mr. Edgeworth cringes. "Ms. Fey! You're going to get us thrown out of here!"

"I'm sorry!" I exclaim. "But- but- but-! Steel Samurai porn! Are they serious?! Oh my god, I wonder if it's any good!" I flip the box over in my hands, scanning for the price. My mood instantly falls as I read the tag; it's about five bucks more than I have. “Damnit..."

"What?"

"I don't have enough," I mutter, handing it back to him. It strikes me as strange that porn is more expensive than what I actually came here for, and I'm so wrapped up in pondering this piece of information that I almost miss what Mr. Edgeworth says: "This was actually what I was going to purchase. If you like, I'll let you borrow it."

"Really? That'd be awesome!"

Despite my enthusiasm, I am sure I'm beet red by now, and Mr. Edgeworth's face couldn't get any redder. I walk with him to the register; the cashier eyes me, demanding to see my ID. I flash it in irritation, and the clerk nods and rings up the sale. "Enjoy it while it lasts," Mr. Edgeworth tells me as the clerk slips the DVD into a black plastic bag that totally doesn't scream, "Failed attempt at being discreet". "You'll appreciate being carded when you get to be my age."

"You're not even thirty yet."

Mr. Edgeworth pays for the DVD, smirking at me. "And yet, somehow, I still miss being carded sometimes," he replies. "Let's go, Ms. Fey."

As we exit the store, Mr. Edgeworth asks me, "Where am I taking you?"

It takes me a moment to realize he's offering me a ride. "No, that's okay. I can walk," I tell him, wondering if it's "proper" to ask to borrow that porn right now.

He makes a face at me. "Have you forgotten where we are, Maya?" he asks. I'm a little taken aback by his use of my first name; not that I mind, but it's a little unusual for him. He's a little incredulous as he says, "Frankly, if you walked here, I'm shocked you arrived safely."

I smirk at him from under the lights of the parking lot light posts. "That's because I'm tough. No one wants to mess with me!"

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not letting any young woman walk anywhere in this neighborhood in the dark, let alone a friend," he says firmly, striding towards a rather nice-looking car. "Get in and tell
I shrug absently as he unlocks the car, and I slide into the passenger seat. He gets in the driver's side and immediately locks the doors. "If it's so dangerous here, how on earth do you still have hubcaps on this thing?"

"How on earth do I still have this thing, period?" he retorts, a hint of playfulness in his voice. "Where to, Ms. Fey?"

I ponder his question. He's usually a lot more precise than that; I decide to test him a bit. "I dunno," I comment, sighing. "I don't particularly feel like sulking about on my own. Nick's going to be busy most of the night... Wanna hang out?"

My proposition makes him raise his eyebrows. "Hang out?"

"Yeah. You do know what that phrase means, right?"

He sighs heavily. "Yes, Ms. Fey, I know what the phrase means. I'm simply surprised that you'd wish to do such a thing with me. I doubt our concepts of fun agree with each other."

"Yeah, well. Like I said, Nick's busy with that case and I've got no one else to hang out with. I doubt you do, either."

"That is true."

"Plus, we've got goofy-looking porn now!"

"Huh?!!"

I burst out laughing. I managed to completely bewilder him! "I wasn't serious," I reassure him. "We can watch a few episodes of Steel Samurai. The real one, I mean. Wouldn't you classify that as even a little bit fun?"

"I suppose," he concedes, avoiding eye contact with me. He puts the key in the ignition and starts the car. "So, my place or yours?"

"You just sounded like you were picking me up, again."

"Or I could just drop you off at Wright's office and go about the rest of my night," Mr. Edgeworth adds in a mildly threatening tone. "That's no problem, either."

I can't suppress a giggle. "My apartment is a mess," I inform him.

I don't need to give anymore information. "My place, then," he says absently as he pulls out of the parking lot.

Much to my surprise, Mr. Edgeworth's home is quite small. Quite nice, but still small. I suppose my surprise is apparent because he smirks at me as we get out of the car and walk to the front door. "Were you expecting a mansion or something?"

"Something like that," I admit.

Mr. Edgeworth chuckles. "I don’t make that much," he informs me, amused. He unlocks the door and steps in to flick on the foyer light, and then moves away, bowing slightly. "Ladies first," he says in a mildly mocking tone.
The fact that he’s making fun of me isn’t lost on me, but I let it go with just a glare as I accept his invitation and step inside. He follows, closing and locking the door behind him and stripping off his heavy pink jacket. “Can I take your coat?” he asks, his voice slightly louder now that we’re inside. I pull it off and hand it to him, pondering briefly about the change of volume, but it is almost ten by now. He was probably speaking so quietly as to not disturb his neighbors.

Divested of my jacket, I pull my cell phone from my pocket and hit the speed dial number for Nick. Mr. Edgeworth casts an inquisitive look at me as he moves past me to turn on the lights in the living room, tossing that not-quite-discreet black bag onto the coffee table. I mouth Nick, to him as the phone rings once, and then immediately goes to his voicemail: “Hello, you’ve reached the voicemail of Phoenix Wright. I am unable to take your call right now, but if you leave your name, number, and a brief message, I will return your call as soon as possible. Thanks!”

I hang up without leaving a message. “Sorry,” I say, noticing Edgeworth is still waiting for a real answer. “I thought I’d give Nick a call and let him know where I am. I told him I’d be back at the office in a bit.”

“You didn’t say anything, though.”

“I got his voicemail. He’s probably got his phone off while he tries to figure out what Mr. Payne was talking about in court.”

Mr. Edgeworth snorts, looking amused. “So I suppose we couldn’t tell him to relax about it if we wanted to,” he observes.

“No, there’s the office phone, but if he’s got his cell off, he doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

Mr. Edgeworth makes an agreeing-kind of noise as he kneels in front of a bookcase. The bottom two shelves are filled with DVDs. “We agreed on Steel Samurai, correct?”

“Yes, but if you have any Pink Princess or Jammin’ Ninja, that’s fine, too.”

He looks up at me. “But I thought you hated Jammin’ Ninja,” he says.

“I changed my mind.”

My voice is probably a little flatter, a little dryer than I want it to be, and he gazes at me, looking mildly concerned, for a few more seconds. Then he turns back to the DVDs. “I’ve got the Pink Princess and Steel Samurai crossover OVA,” he informs me. “Want to watch that?”

“Sure. I don’t think I’ve seen that.”

He pulls the DVD from the shelf and stands, handing it to me. “Here. Set it up while I get us some snacks. The remotes are on the couch.” Without waiting for an answer, he pushes the DVD into my hands and disappears into the kitchen.

Snacks? What kind of snacks does he have? He’s never struck me as a “snack” type, but far be it for me to refuse food when it’s freely offered. I find the remotes and turn on the entertainment system, finally managing to differentiate between his DVD player remote, the TV remote, and a remote for some other piece of electronic equipment I don’t recognize. I put the DVD in and sit on the couch, slightly uncomfortable. This is weird. It’s almost like Miles Edgeworth is a real person, not just a super-hero prosecutor.

I set up the DVD with the settings I’m familiar with: Stereo, English language, no subtitles. Mr. Edgeworth comes back with a bowl of popcorn and a couple of cans. He hands me one of the cans,
a cola, as I notice that his can is different. I wonder what drink he has when he puts the popcorn between us and takes the remote from me. “Ready to see the absolute worst episodes of all these shows combined?” he asks with a wicked grin.

“Oh boy… too late to change my mind, huh?”

“Quite.”

The DVD starts, the opening credits roll. I sneak a glance at my companion, who looks quite pleased with himself as he munches on a few pieces of popcorn. I also manage to get a good look at his drink can; light beer? I thought he’d be more of a wine person… whatever. I crack my own can and focus on the DVD.

After only three minutes, I’ve already determined that Mr. Edgeworth’s claim that these are the worst episodes of that universe is an understatement. I note after a few more minutes that he’s more interested in my reactions to the dreadful mess that is this Pink Princess and Steel Samurai OVA. Every time I make a face, or issue an exclamation of disbelief or “Oh my god, this is terrible,” he laughs.

When it comes to the commercial break, I snatch the remote from him and stop the DVD. “I cannot take anymore of that!” I exclaim. “That is nothing short of blasphemy!”

“I knew you’d love it,” Mr. Edgeworth smirks at me.

“Why do you hate me, Mr. Edgeworth? Why?”

He pffts at me, takes a swig from his can, and sighs with that arrogant shrug. “I do not hate you, Ms. Fey. If you will recall, I offered and you accepted.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t warn me!”

He’s chuckling, still laughing at me, his eyes reflecting a warmth and general good-will that I’m not used to seeing. Then again, we’re on opposing sides of the courtroom when I usually see him. “Alright, just to prove that I don’t hate you, we’ll stop this one. You can pick anything you want this time without my interference.”

“You mean it?” I say, with a suspicious look.

“Yes, I mean it.”

I want revenge. My vision of my beloved Steel Samurai has been ruined before I wanted it to be. I had no doubt that porn would ruin it, but that was what I wanted to ruin it, not something that was supposedly part of the story’s canon.

Abruptly, how I’m going to get my revenge pops into my head. I’ll have to be careful to not let him see my own discomfort, but I know just the thing to wipe that smug smirk off that man’s face. “Anything?” I confirm.

He rolls his eyes at me for… what, the fourth time tonight? “You’re not serious,” he says, suddenly sounding like a cornered animal.

“Steel Samurai and the Deep Night.”

He looks a little confused at the title. I let my eyes wander to the little black bag on the coffee table, smirking, and he suddenly understands. “You’re not serious,” he says, suddenly sounding like a cornered animal.
“I am very serious.”

“But I was going to loan that to you!” He’s trying to get out of it. “Watch it now, and there’ll be no point later!”

“You said we’d watch anything I wanted,” I challenged. “Besides, what do you mean there’ll be no point later? Porn is porn, right?”

“No, that’s *novelty* porn,” he corrects me, grasping at straws. “And there’s absolutely no reason to watch one of those twice. It’s for a one-time kick and that’s it. It’s not even good for *that* then why are you so against watching it with me?” I demand.

Now it’s my turn to laugh as he realizes what he’s about to say. His face abruptly flushes crimson, his mouth snaps shut, and he looks away, drinking deep from his can. “If it’s not even good for *that* then why are you so against watching it with me?” I demand.

He makes a weird, undecipherable noise, and I wish his internal monologue was as easy to read as Nick’s. “You’re dead set on this, aren’t you?”

“You promised,” I say firmly. “I want to watch that.”

He sighs heavily, sets his can down, and grabs the bag. “You’re committing to this, you know,” he says, in a final attempt to dissuade me from watching it. “If you make me get up and put it in the player, you’re watching every last second of it. Understood?”

“You’re willing to put the DVD in, too? Wow, you’re such a gentleman! Nick could learn a thing or two!”

He pauses, eyebrows raised. “You watch porn with Wright?”

“Whaaat?! No, of course not!” Now it’s my turn to blush bright red. “Movies! Regular, plain old movies! Kid’s movies!”

Mr. Edgeworth chuckles; it seems I stepped into another one of his traps. Honestly, all this trying to fool each other is making me feel like I’m in elementary school. I break the cute boy’s pencils and he pulls my ponytail. That’s how it goes in my modern-day samurai cartoons with flashbacks. I pout about being fooled as he takes the DVD out of the bag and breaks the shrink wrap around it. “Last chance, Ms. Fey.”

“You’re on,” I reply seriously, flashing him a grin.
Chapter 2

It's getting late. I shake sleepiness off for the third time, glance at the clock. Almost ten. Huh. And Maya... is nowhere to be found in the office.

Just great. I was going to bribe her with burgers to get me a cup of crappy, stale coffee from the corner store. Or make some. I have a coffee maker in here somewhere... But it's late. I can't honestly expect her to hang around waiting for me to finish when I'm falling asleep at my desk.

Although a note would have been nice.

She has no idea. Not a clue. And I'm going to keep it that way, because she clearly feels nothing but sibling-like affection for me. I've replaced her big sister in her life. Well, not 'replaced'. No one can replace Mia. But I'm the big sibling in lieu of her and that's that.

And I can use that situation, and my incessant need to whine about it, to keep Edgeworth in the dark, too. Pristine, prim Edgeworth, who would be absolutely scandalized if he knew another man cared for him “like that”, would never know, because I'm obviously completely straight and wouldn't dream of being so shallow as to be in love with two people at the same time.

...

I berate myself for the self-scolding, get up, and set up the coffee pot. I have to figure out what the hell Payne was going on about these financial records. Accountant I am not, nor am I particularly good at math, but I'm not going to rest until this evidence has been thoroughly examined and the supposed contradiction found.

I already know that Edgeworth's probably just as bored silly as I am. I can only hope Maya's evening has been a little more exciting than mine.

I snag a handful of popcorn as Mr. Edgeworth gets up and switches the DVDs. He takes his seat again, picks up his can of beer, and presses play on the remote. Then he props his feet up on the coffee table and puts the remote on an end table beside him; I can’t even reach it if I climb over him. I’d have to get up to retrieve it. He’s serious; now that it's in the player, he’s going to make me watch it from start to finish.

For the second time that night, the Steel Samurai theme song plays, and the opening credits roll. Mr. Edgeworth is as surprised by this as I am. “I wonder how much the producer paid to use that,” he muses.

I grab the empty box from the coffee table and scan the credits on the back. “Nothing at all,” I say finally, finding the name I suspect would be on it. I hand the box to Mr. Edgeworth, not looking at him; I can sense him reading the box as well, and he gives a snorting laugh. “I should’ve realized Sal Manella was enough of a pervert to do something like this,” he says dryly, tossing the box back on the table.

The opening credits are cut short, since none of the TV show's actors are actually in it. The theme song opening fades into a dark scene, and the first thing I can see is chains. Heavy, black chains. They clink, and a woman's voice, from somewhere off-camera, whimpers: “No, please, no more!”
I grimace as the camera pans to a woman chained to a wall; her face is exposed, but I can tell from what bits of clothing that haven't been ripped off that she's the Pink Princess. The scene immediately launches into a brutal rape, with the Pink Princess screaming in agony and terror. Her rapist laughs coldly; this is an act of pure dominance, and nothing more. A flash of lightning in the scene illuminates the dungeon long enough to recognize the Evil Magistrate's outfit. The Princess shrieks a name, a male name that I can't quite understand, and the scene cuts to a shirtless man crying out and sitting bolt-upright in a darkened bedroom as a thunderstorm rages outside. He runs his hands through his hair and gets out of bed, and-

The screen pauses. I look over at Mr. Edgeworth; he's keeping his eyes straight forward, holding the remote, as he says, "I wasn't expecting this to be that kind of flick." He's probably the most serious now than he has been all night. "If you're uncomfortable with this, I'll stop it."

I have to admit, I am quite uncomfortable after that scene. I know Mr. Edgeworth's concern is genuine; he's not just trying to get out of watching it again. He's truly worried that I've been offended in some way by that scene. But I shake my head, explaining my reasoning as it comes to me. "No, it's fine. That was what, thirty seconds? And it looks like that guy was just dreaming, and he didn't like it. I don't think it will be 'that kind' of flick."

"You're absolutely sure?" I nod again, and he says, "If you change your mind, stop the DVD." And with that, he sets the remote in the place it was before his challenge: on the couch between us.

He doesn't unpause it. I reach down and hit the play button, as I assume he wanted me to. The scene picks up after a brief fade; it's now daylight, and the man who woke up from the nightmare is now in a police uniform, kibitzing with his coworkers.

As the scene continues, the problem is revealed: a young woman by the name Amber has been kidnapped. The suspected culprit is the arch-villain known as the Evil Magistrate, and Mr. Edgeworth snickers beside me. "Is that a plot? An actual storyline in my porn? Heathens."

"Hush, just watch the movie," I reprimand lightly.

He obeys. The young man, Craig, vows to find Amber. At some point in the interactions, it's hinted that he is the Steel Samurai, and this Amber girl is the Pink Princess. It reaches the half-hour mark of the movie and there hasn't been a lick of bare flesh since that opening; Mr. Edgeworth abruptly pauses the movie again. "Refill break," he says simply, grabbing the empty popcorn bowl and his can and standing. "Need another soda?"

I stand as well, holding my empty can. "Yeah. Is there anything I can help with?"

"Only if you want something other than popcorn."

"Not really. Got any other snacks?"

He nods. "A few. Take a look, see what you like."

I follow him into the kitchen and we deposit our empty cans into the recycling bin next to the trash can. Mr. Edgeworth shakes the remnants of the popcorn out of the bowl over the trash and places it in the sink, running water in it for a few seconds. While he's doing that, I'm glancing around the kitchen in awe. He's got two big baskets full of fruits and veggies on the counter, along with a loaf of white bread and a few other items that don't need to be refrigerated. Other than that, I might well be standing in Nick's kitchen. For some reason, I expected him to have all sorts of exotic ingredients, but there are only basic seasonings and even a plastic grocery bag full of instant noodle blocks.
I get over my shock that yet another impression I had of the prosecutor has been shattered, and glance around a bit more. One of the cabinet doors is still open, and I can see a stock of snack items in there. One particular bag catches my eye. "Gardettos?" I say, stumbling a little over the name of the brand. "What're those?"

"A kind of snack mix I can almost guarantee you won't like," Mr. Edgeworth replies.

"Just to be difficult, I think I want to try them." I smirk at him.

He shakes his head and retrieves them from the cabinet. I'd have had to reach to get them. He hands the bag to me, and I note that he's got another can of beer in his hand. "What are your plans after the movie?" he asks. "It's pretty late already, and I've a spare room, so you're welcome to stay here if you like. If not, I'll put this back."

I bite my nail. I hadn't thought about that. It is already past ten thirty. "Well, if you're offering I guess I'll stay here," I answer finally. "I mean, how long is that movie? Two hours?"

"Almost three."

"Yikes," I cringe. "Yeah, it'd probably be best for me to just crash here. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all, but you better get a hold of Wright and let him know you're here."

"Right, I'll try him again," I say, grabbing my cell phone out of my pocket. I cast a wicked grin at Mr. Edgeworth. "Mind if I invite him over?"

He shrugs. "I don't care. The more the merrier, but I'm not waiting for him to get here and I'm not starting the movie over."

"Spoil sport."

"Thank you, I try."

He leans against the counter, drinking from his new can, as I dial Nick's cell number again. Again, it kicks right to his voicemail. "Turn on your phone, you jerk," I mutter, hanging up and dialing the office number. It rings. And rings. And rings. And rings some more, but Nick doesn't pick up. After about ten rings, it sends me to voicemail as well: "You've reached the law offices of Wright and Company. Please leave your name, the time of your call, and contact number at the tone. If you've called within business hours, your call will be returned by the end of the day; after hours, as soon as possible. Thank you."

"NIIIIICK! Pick up the damn phone!" I growl. "Ooooh!" I hang up, irritated and a little hurt.

Mr. Edgeworth is staring at me, looking a little concerned. "I'm sensing a little more animosity than usual," he observes quietly. "Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, I'm just... frustrated. I've never not been able to reach him."

"Well, don't take it out on the English language," he quips, sipping from his can. "You've never been unable to reach him, you mean."

"Grammar snob."

"And proud of it. Shall we resume the movie?"
"Yeah. Hey, do you mind if I have one of those, too?"

He stares at me blankly. "I'm afraid not," he says finally. "You're under the legal drinking age."

I pout at him. "Who would know?"

"Maya, I'm a prosecutor. I can't blatantly break the law."

"Nick lets me drink when I stay with him," I say, hoping to imply that Mr. Edgeworth is somehow lacking since he won't.

My gambit seems to fail miserably. "Did you just inform me that Mr. Wright provides alcoholic beverages to minors?"

"I, uh... no. No, I didn't."

"I didn't think you did." He sips his can, still looking at me thoughtfully, and I'm still looking at him pleadingly. The puppy-dog eyes finally work. "Alright, fine. But I'm limiting you to two cans and you're not to tell anybody, not even Wright. Understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Edgeworth," I answer, pleased with myself. He gets another can from the fridge and hands it to me, and then hands me the bag of Gardetto's. "Let's get going on that movie before we're too tired to watch it," he says, heading back into the living room, with me in tow.

We sit down on the couch again, and Mr. Edgeworth restarts the movie. To be honest, I am starting to regard this as a plain-old movie that needed to be released direct-to-video because of one explicit scene.

My impression of the movie is proven wrong as night falls in the video, and the Steel Samurai launches into his rescue mission. His investigation reveals that the Evil Magistrate has dragged the Pink Princess to the ruins of an ancient underground city. Ominous music plays as he approaches the musty and dark staircase down into the ruins.

Abruptly, beside me, Mr. Edgeworth ruins the tense mood by blurting out, "Danger, Will Robinson!" I laugh and reach over the snack bowl- now filled with Gardettos that Mr. Edgeworth is eating on his own, because he was right and I don't like them- and smack him in the arm. The Steel Samurai descends into the city.

Creepy noises echo in the halls of the ruined, labyrinthine city. The Steel Samurai observes that he feels drawn to one room in particular, one that was much, much darker than the others. He grabs a torch from a sconce in the wall ("How did those get lit, anyway?" "The Evil Magistrate lit them, probably." "No, there are like, hundreds of them. He couldn't have done all that in one day and have time to torture Amber." "Shut up and watch the movie, Ms. Fey.")

The music abruptly changes from being ominous and creepy to almost nightmarish. "I think something terrible is about to happen," I say, putting my hand to my mouth. Mr. Edgeworth, a few seconds later, mutters, "Don't go in there, dumbass!"

I marvel briefly at what a mere two twelve-ounce cans of beer does for Mr. Edgeworth's vocabulary. My pondering is cut off by a sharp, DUN DUN DUN!!! on the screen as the room is revealed to contain the Pink Princess, being held hostage by a completely unfamiliar villain, along with- "Holy smokes!" I burst. "The Evil Magistrate!"

"Run!" The Pink Princess screams, her voice joined only a moment later by the Evil Magistrate's, shouting, "Get away from here, stupid!"
But a heavy stone door slams shut behind the Steel Samurai, trapping them in there. This new villain laughs maniacally. "I have you now!" he thunders, cueing up dramatic, out-of-place horror music.

Out of nowhere, zombies grab the Steel Samurai from both sides, driving him to his knees and holding him still. This new villain, who has yet to identify himself, chortles as the Samurai struggles in vain. Mind games begin, the villain proceeds to inform them all that the Steel Samurai is actually desperately in love with the Pink Princess... "And now," the villain says with far more delight than is believable, "You will watch your arch nemesis fuck the daylights out of your one true love, and-" he accentuates his point by yanking on Amber's hair sharply, "she is going to love it."

Edgeworth pauses the DVD again. "It looks like it's going to be one of those flicks," he says, giving me a sideways look. "Are you sure you're comfortable with this?"

I frown at him. "More comfortable with it than you are, I think," I say smugly. "Just watch the porn and be happy, will you? I know where the remote is if I want to stop it. And you're just as capable of saying 'no more' as I am, you know."

He snorts, pressing play again. "I am quite uncomfortable," he admits, "although probably for different reasons than you're assuming. But I am curious as to where this story is going."

"Great! Then eat your Gardettos and watch the movie."

"Yes ma'am," he mutters, taking me so literally that he snags a few pieces of the snack from the bowl and munches on them as we resume watching.

We start paying attention to the movie again, and boy, that villain wasn't kidding when he said that the Evil Magistrate would fuck the Pink Princess. The scene is drawn out, and I can feel a steady heat growing both on my face and in my abdomen. I'm fixated on what's happening on the screen, and it seems that despite both their best efforts to resist it, both participants in this forced sex act are thoroughly enjoying it.

My fascination is broken momentarily by disbelief when the zombies let the Steel Samurai go so he can jerk off, and giggle slightly. Yeah, right. Next to me, Mr. Edgeworth makes an amused noise as well, and I sneak a glance. But it's only a glance; he's sitting in an awkward position, elbow propped on the couch arm and hand slightly covering his mouth, and he looks as red as I think I probably am. Why in the world would he sit like that? That looks mighty uncomfortable.

I shift uncomfortably in my spot as well, fighting to keep my breath even and unperturbed. For some reason, letting Mr. Edgeworth know that I'm getting turned on by this is a mortifying prospect and I want to do everything in my power to stop that.

If I keep watching this scene, though, I'm going to fail in my effort to regulate my breathing. My heart is already racing, and I grit my teeth and suppress an urge to moan slightly as it seems that all three captives coordinate their climaxes perfectly. That would definitely give my state away and I consider asking Mr. Edgeworth to pause it so I can "go to the bathroom."

I don't need to. As soon as the three "heroes" collapse in exhaustion, the movie pauses and Mr. Edgeworth stands. "Sorry," he mumbles. "Have to use the restroom."

I can't bring myself to yell at him for pausing the movie again. If he's gotta pee, he's gotta pee. As for me, I'm going to take this opportunity to relieve myself. I have to be quick; Nick's in and out of the bathroom in under a minute sometimes, depending on how badly he had to go. As such, I don't
hesitate as I start rubbing myself through my clothes. I am so aroused that it doesn't take much effort at all and leaves me gasping for breath.

My need for speed remains on my mind as I take several deep gulps from my can of beer, and even munch on a few pieces of that snack mix, as I compose myself as best I can. I feel a twinge of being weirded out by the fact that I just masturbated on Mr. Edgeworth's couch, but I do my best to ignore that part of it, instead choosing to marvel at how easy that was, comparatively speaking. Maybe next time I go to the porn shop for something, it should be actual porn.

I'm completely calm after a few minutes, and then I realize that Mr. Edgeworth is taking a while. He interrupts my musing by exiting the bathroom that's down the hall; he looks a lot more relaxed than he did when he went in, and he flashes me a slight, sheepish grin as he sits down beside me again. "Sorry," he says, a little louder than he was before he went to the bathroom. He picks up the remote and presses play again, and I notice that he's not sitting at an odd angle anymore.

It's then when I realize abruptly that he didn't go to the bathroom to pee. Don't think about it, Maya. He's a guy, he'd need to do that if YOU were uncomfortable.

The scene continues. The villain laughs villainously, poofs into thin air, his zombies disappear, and the three captives are left to discuss what just occurred. The Evil Magistrate reveals that his real name is Greg, and that he'd come to this place looking for that villain, who apparently wanted to destroy Olde Neo Tokyo. And he sounds positively shocked when the Steel Samurai says, bluntly, that that's what he thought the Magistrate's goal was all along.

Beside me, Mr. Edgeworth mutters, "I knew it..."

"You knew what?" I ask, baffled.

He pauses the movie. Again. Mr. Edgeworth ignores my obvious irritation as he says, "I think this is actually canon, Maya," he says, looking as close to a fanboy as I've ever seen him. He maintains his composure, but he's grinning slightly, and his grayish brown eyes are shining with whatever revelation he just had. "And this proves it. This proves that the Evil Magistrate isn't actually evil."

I stare at him blankly. "You can't be serious," I say flatly. "The Evil Magistrate, not evil? Please, it's part of his character name!"

"No, hear me out." He's really excited about this... "Think about it. When has the Evil Magistrate done something absolutely evil?"

"Plenty of times!" I protest, and I start rambling off episodes.

He's somehow able to counter each and every one of them, and what he's getting at finally dawns on me, and I stop arguing. "You see, Maya. You see it now, don't you?"

"I... I think so. But why portray him as evil, then?"

"Do you think little kids can grasp such an idea as the ends justifying the means?" he asks, eyebrows raised. "Even Wright had trouble with that concept only a few years ago."

"That was because you were wrong, Mr. Edgeworth," I reply dryly.

"That is entirely beside the point. You see, though. It was never the Magistrate's intention to destroy anything; he simply believed that the ends justified the means, and he would do what he needed to in order to maintain order. The fact that Manella is the director of this story heavily implies that he himself agrees with the premise the plot just presented."
"That is absurd!" I laugh. "Miles, this is little more than fanfiction!"

"F-fanfiction?! Are you insane? The creator of these shows has given his support to this story and you're calling it fanfiction?"

"If the shoe fits," I smirk at him. It almost escapes me that I used his first name, and he didn't object to it. "Honestly. It has been lacking in the story department so far. I mean, the villain's lackeys let Craig go because he needed to whack off? Really?"

"You do have a point, but I insist that a creator of a story cannot and does not produce fanfiction for their own concepts. Ever. It's an impossibility. As far as the Steel Samurai universe goes, Manella is god."

I shudder at that. "I really don't want to think about Sal Manella being god," I say dryly.

"... That is quite a disturbing thought, isn't it..."

I take a sip from my can, and nearly do one of Prosecutor Godot's spit takes when he says, "I've always seen myself in the Evil Magistrate. Heh. Maybe I am just grasping at straws here."

"You're nothing like the Evil Magistrate," I counter, swallowing my mouthful of alcohol hard and wiping my mouth. "You've never been that ruthless, not even when we first met."

He chuckles. "I appreciate that," he says, staring at the can he's playing with in his hands. It's empty. "But I still had the same mindset that the Magistrate has, even if I was never as much of an extremist as the character. To be honest, you and Wright have always reminded me a bit of the Steel Samurai and the Pink Princess, too."

"But the Pink Princess wasn't around when we first met."

"She is now," he smirked at me. "Didn't you once brag that you inspired the Pink Princess, anyway? She should remind me of you. And if you think of their dynamic my way, it makes sense. Two sides of the same coin, light and darkness appearing to be at odds but working towards the same goal-"

"Darkness now? Have you gone emo on me?" I poke his arm playfully.

"No, Maya, I like to think of it as poetic."

"There's absolutely nothing poetic about this movie."

"That is absolutely true. Anyway, I'll be right back. I need another drink. Want something?"

I nod. "A soda, please."

"Okay." He shuffles away, and comes back with two colas and tosses one to me. That action alone lets me know why he doesn't have another beer for himself; I'm going to have to be careful with my can. I don't know if the toss shook it enough to make it fizz over when I open it, and Mr. Edgeworth should know better than to do that. Indeed, he's a bit more smiley than I've ever seen him. It's not over-the-top, but the two drinks have definitely loosened him up quite a bit.

As I start to ponder that I thought he'd be able to hold his liquor a little better than that, he asks, "Need anything else before we start the movie again?"

"No," I shake my head firmly. "Thanks for the soda."
"No problem."

The movie continues, and the plot kind of falls apart. The three apparent heroes of the story hatch a crack plan to escape that makes no sense and seems to amount to, "because the Story Gods said so"; when it succeeds, I hear Edgeworth mutter, "What is this? I don't even..."

Except they don't really escape, it seems; Craig and Greg, after seeing to Amber's wounds, go out to a bar. Mr. Edgeworth and I proceed to riff on this mercilessly, not paying the slightest bit attention to what's happening on the screen; he's almost as good a partner as Nick is, I'm shocked to discover.

We continue on just making fun of that series of non-events until we hear the distinct sound of sexual moaning from the movie. I stop mid-riff and look at the screen, as does Mr. Edgeworth, and I immediately snap, "Don't you dare skip this, Miles Edgeworth!"

I see him look at me out of the corner of my eye. "Why would I- You've never struck me as the yaoi fangirl type, Ms. Fey."

The next sex scene, based on what is happening now, stars the Evil Magistrate and the Steel Samurai, in a dingy hotel. I notice that they don't seem to be acting of their own accord, but that doesn't detract from the fact that this. Is. HOT. I'm torn in three directions: shutting Mr. Edgeworth's comment out altogether and focusing on the two men writhing against each other on the screen, asking why being a "yaoi fangirl" is a bad thing, or... was he about to ask why he would skip gay porn?

I really don't want a repeat of the last sex scene, so I decide to ask him about one of his statements. It doesn't take too much of one's attention span to watch porn. "You never struck me as the type to like yaoi at all," I countered his second statement. That should cover them both, actually.

"Porn is porn," he mutters back at me. We're both staring at the screen, but he seems to have the same philosophy as I do right now.

"I'm not sure many people would agree with you there," I say, distracted. "After all, didn't you pause the movie twice because of the kind of porn you thought it was?"

"True, but I paused it out of concern for you. I didn't care."

"Are you letting this play because I'm clearly enjoying it?" I challenge playfully.

"Stop trying to get me to say something incriminating, Ms. Fey, I'm not discussing my sexuality with you." He scowls, keeping his gaze on the TV screen, although he doesn't seem to actually be watching anymore; his eyes are unfocused.

I glare at him and sit back, fuming. The scene is no longer fun; that little personality change took me by surprise, and it's completely ruined my good mood. He was perfectly fine joking with me before! Why-

Abruptly, the movie pauses as the man beside me heaves a great sigh. "I apologize. I didn't mean to be so short with you. That kind of conversation rarely ends well for me and I did not wish for that topic to ruin our fun. I guess I did that on my own, though."

I grimace; he's looking at me, apologetically, and my anger fades slightly. "You didn't ruin anything," I say offhandedly. "I just kind of wonder why that tiny bit of poking got you so defensive."
He gestures at his slacks. "Maya, does any sane, heterosexual man even know that this color exists?"

"I didn't say-"

"I know you didn't," he cuts me off. "You wondered why I got defensive. That is why."

"The color of your pants?"

"Look at the curtains and the couch, Maya. I like pink."

I notice, for the first time, that the couch we're sitting on is indeed pink. I have to really look; at a glance, it looks like a light brown, but it's really a very dusky pink. I don't bother looking at the curtains. "So everyone assumes you're gay, I suppose," I say to myself. Well, that's a dumb assumption, in my opinion. That would be like people assuming I'm dead because I can see dead people.

Or something.

It's a protest I don't manage to get out before Miles says, "Correct, and the assumption is not."

Maybe it's just the fact that I'm not quite completely sober yet, but I feel the need to press on. Something tells me Mr. Edgeworth doesn't have many friends; the fact that he snapped at me over something that is really very trivial means that he's got something on his chest. He did call me his friend at the porn store, so... "Are you okay?" I ask, concerned.

"This isn't the Miles Edgeworth therapy hour, Ms. Fey."

"I didn't say it was. I'm just worried, that's all."

He sighs and sets his soda can down on the table. He leans forward, props his elbows on his knees, and looks at me. "I highly doubt you can help."

"I can try! Who knows, maybe talking about it would help a little in and of itself. You haven't talked to anyone about it, have you?"

"No, I haven't... what the hell, why not."
Okay, I think. This is good. This is progress. He's obviously bothered by something, and it was relatively easy to get him to talk about it, as opposed to him clamming up and going ice cold like he usually does. He clears his throat, and says, "A personal situation I've been ignoring is starting to turn unpleasant for me. Do you remember our conversation at the store?"

"Uh... at what point?"

"The very beginning."

I search my memory. It didn't seem like much at the time, but when I teased him about not being able to get a date, he replied that it was "closer to reality than he'd care to admit," or something similar. "I think I remember," I say slowly.

"That wasn't a flippant answer. Nor is it really for a lack of wanting..."

His voice drifts, and I fear he's going to stop talking. I really, really want him to keep talking. He's got to learn that opening up and letting other people in isn't as dangerous as he seems to think, that there are people he can trust, and besides, he's talked to me more tonight than he has the whole time we've known each other and I'm discovering that I quite like the sound of his voice-

-wait, what? How did that get in there? It must be the porn... Either way, that second-to-last point is also a good one. Let him clam up now and I can say goodbye to the good time we were having. Instead, he continues speaking as he rises again, his soda can in hand. I assume it's empty and the way he talks to me as he's walking away is an invitation to follow him. "I'm actually interested in two people right now," he says, his conversational tone strained and fake.

He dumps the can into the recycle bin, his pause a little unnatural. He's testing me; I don't know what about. I keep quiet, although that strikes me as a bit strange, coming from him. After a moment, he continues. "It's not a pleasant situation. One is the same woman a close friend is interested in. She doesn't know I exist, but at the same time, seems oblivious about what my friend feels for her and I have to periodically listen to him rant about not knowing what to do to get her attention."

"That must suck," I reply, thinking of Nick. No one knows how I feel about him, but I can imagine how it would feel if I had a friend who wanted him too and who constantly vented about it to me. It wouldn't be nice. "But you just said that you were interested in two people," I say. "I can see not wanting to move in on your friend's crush, but why not give your other interest a shot, if that's the case?"

"It isn't quite that simple, Maya." He's got another drink in his hand; it's another beer.

"Oh? Why not?"

He takes a nice, long swig and says, after a moment, "The second interest is that friend."

"Wow, you're greedy!"

The teasing insult slips out before I have a chance to realize how absolutely inappropriate that was. I'm reminded of my "Roman nose" joke that offended Moe the Clown so much as Miles smirks almost bitterly at me. "And you've a talent for making people feel better," he quips, his voice with a sharp, unpleasant edge.
I cringe. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"I know you didn't," he says wistfully. "But it's the truth, really." He eyes me suspiciously, and then asks, "You have nothing to say about the gender of my second interest?"

Abruptly, why the discussion about gay porn set this off makes sense. "Nope!" I say brightly. "It really doesn't matter. Why would I care who you're crushing on?"

His reaction is quite interesting: he winces. Visibly. And I get the feeling he wants me to care for some reason. It's mildly unnerving. Why would he? "Unfortunately, it seems that many who figure out this fact about me don't agree with you," he says sullenly.

Perhaps the wince was merely from a memory? "Screw 'em. Seriously, you know who your friends are, and I can tell you that Nick, Gumshoe, and Ms. von Karma wouldn't care, either."

"... Thank you, Maya."

"No problem. Can we go back to being incorrigible fans of Steel Samurai now?"

He grins, the pain of a few heartbeats previous fading from his face and eyes. "Sure. While we're in the kitchen--"

"Yes, I need another drink. And a potty break, while I'm thinking about it."

"What do you want?"

"Can I have that second beer you promised me?"

"I promised you nothing, but yes."

"Great! Be right back!"

Mr. Edgeworth's bathroom makes his love of pink abundantly clear. It's the cutest bathroom I've ever been in. I almost feel guilty doing my business in there, it's so adorable. But my bladder wasn't hearing any of that.

Relieved, I join him out on the couch again and crack my can. He's a little tense once more, but that's probably from me forcing what was bothering him out of him. But that's what friends do, right? And this evening has made me realize that he's really fun to be around, if he's able to relax a bit. What better way to get him to relax more than to let him know that it's okay to be himself?

I'm distracted myself at this point, though. Why have I taken it upon myself to show him that?

The scene changes and I decide that I'll analyze myself and my motivations later. For now, there's a bit of entertainingly bad porn to watch with a friend. After forcing that little tidbit out of him so he can stop brooding before he starts and keep enjoying the night, I'd look like a hypocrite if I started brooding as well, now. Nope. Put it out of my mind and watch the movie.

It seems that while the Steel Samurai and Evil Magistrate are busy fucking because the still-unnamed villain managed to poison them with some funky aphrodisiac, Amber was doing research online and managed to find information about this unnamed villain. "Did Manella even try past the first few scenes?" I boggle.

"It doesn't seem like it," Mr. Edgeworth answers doubtfully. "I'd take back what I said about this being a canon story if it didn't completely shatter my previous theory."
"It wouldn't," I reassure him. "Your arguments stand on their own; this just brought Manella's own vision into it."

"Then I take it back. There's no way this is canon, unless Manella can't write scripts worth a damn if he's trying to be an adult about it."

I look over at Mr. Edgeworth. "Think he's making fun of perverts like us?"

He laughs, still watching the movie instead of me. "That's entirely possible. You're missing the Steel Samurai and Amber screwing for no apparent reason, by the way."

I snicker and look back at the screen. Sure enough, Craig is in full hero regalia while Amber is not. "I wonder if Amber is a Steel Samurai fangirl," I muse out loud.

"I have no idea. All I know is that she was about to tell them what she discovered, Greg left the room for some reason, Craig climbed into the suit and they started going at it."

"What. The. Hell."

"I know. The beginning made it look like there was going to be a plot." He sounds almost disappointed.

I keep my eyes on the screen- I don't want to miss anything else that out of place- as I ask, "How much longer is the movie?"

"Uh... I think about an hour or so."

I nod to myself. "There probably was a plot in here. They realized they didn't have enough time while producing it and they wanted to get some Steel Samurai and Pink Princess in there."

Mr. Edgeworth's remark that Nick and I reminded him of the Steel Samurai and the Pink Princess abruptly and unbidden thrust itself in my head, watching the two characters go at it on the screen, and I groan at the mental imagery inwardly. I decide I want to drink this beer as quickly as I can; it's going to make me very tipsy for a few minutes, at least, but it'll also end up needing to be evacuated sooner, giving me an excuse to use the bathroom. I'm not even going to try to fight it this time. The image of me and Nick having sex is in my head now and it's not going to go away.

That scene wraps up; I am indeed done with my beer by then, and I grab the remote and pause it. "Sorry, gotta go!" I squeak, leaving Mr. Edgeworth looking after me with wide eyes. Safely in the bathroom, I take care of the more urgent issue, and then take care of the one Mr. Edgeworth thinks I'm in here for.

He looks a little concerned when I finally emerge from the bathroom. "Are you alright?" he asks me. "You were in there for a while."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, hoping I sound relatively smooth and unperturbed. "Just had to take care of business, you know?"

He nods as I sit next to him; there's something in his expression that says that he doesn't buy that I was "just taking care of business," but he doesn't vocalize it. "Shall we resume this train wreck of a movie?"

"Yeah," I nod. "I'm getting kind of tired. The only reason I still want to watch it is because it's funny."
"It'll be here tomorrow, you know."

I shake my head firmly. "No, we agreed: if I made you watch this with me, I had to watch it all. I'm going to stick by my word."

I shoot him a grin at that last remark, and he smirks at me. "You're a woman of your word, if nothing else," he says, taking the movie off pause once again.

Greg has come back into the room as the Steel Samurai and Amber are cleaning themselves up from their impromptu tryst. Amber wasn't spared from the wacky aphrodisiac, either. She claims there's a reason this villain is trying to force them to have as much sex as possible: he is, in reality, an incubus who feeds off negative sexual energy, and as the three most powerful people in Neo Olde Tokyo, he's using them to build the power he needs to destroy the city.

The counter? Positive sexual energy! They need to have as much sex, willingly and enjoyable, as they can to annihilate the power they've already unwittingly fed the demon.

I burst out laughing, and Mr. Edgeworth follows suit in short order, after a brief struggle to hold it in. "I don't think Incubi work that way," I manage to gasp through my giggles.

"I know next to nothing about mythology and I know they don't work that way," Mr. Edgeworth chuckles. The fact that this story has just taken a major mythology and brutalized it doesn't stop the characters on the screen from following through on that piece of mutilation; the three heroes lean into each other, hot and heavy. While the Steel Samurai focuses on recovering his stamina, the other two suit up. They share a long, lingering look, and finally, the Steel Samurai says, "All right, let's do this!"

"For great justice!" The Pink Princess and the Evil Magistrate respond in unison.

The bowl of Gardettos, at some point, got moved. This fact is one I am grateful for, because I proceed to flop over into Mr. Edgeworth's lap, laughing so hard I think I'm going to die. He's laughing just as hard as I am at this point, as well, and I so wish Nick was here to laugh with us.

A few minutes into the sex scene, Mr. Edgeworth and I both recover from our giggle fits enough that he's able to put his hands under my shoulders and push me back into a sitting position. "I am not part of the couch. You cannot lay on me," he tells me in a voice that is supposed to be stern, but failing miserably because of the laughter still reflected in it.

I'm still snickering, but I readjust myself on the seat so that I'm sitting upright again. "Whatever," I brush off his non-reprimand, and resume paying attention to the porn again. The Pink Princess has been sandwiched between the Evil Magistrate and the Steel Samurai, and...

... and Mr. Edgeworth's remark about the three of us being reflected in those three characters imposes itself in my mind over the bodies on the screen. What the hell! I'm used to fantasizing about Nick, but Miles? I can't blame something this clear on the porn; I can't even blame it entirely on the alcohol. I guess I can't deny now that there's something I find attractive about him, and I'm getting tired of being turned on. This is supposed to be funny, not hot.

This is, with any luck, the last sex scene, though, so I'm just going to have to grin and bear it for a little longer. It's at that thought that something on the screen catches my eye; neither man is supporting the Pink Princess. They're standing, and she's squished between them, but neither of them has their hands anywhere near her undersides. "How the hell?" I say, grabbing the remote and pausing the movie. Mr. Edgeworth snaps my name in protest, and I glare at him as I say, "You've been stopping this movie all night! I don't want to hear it!" I get up and point at the screen. "You
don't find that interesting? At all?"

His gaze follows my finger and he sits upright, frowning. "How are they doing that?" He grabs the remote from where I left it when I jumped up and backs the scene up about fifteen seconds, and we watch it again. It's very clear: the Pink Princess should be on the floor unless she can levitate, because she's not being held up in any way. Mr. Edgeworth's frown deepens, and he comes to stand next to me in front of the television, squinting at the frame he's paused it on. And then he gasps. "She's wearing a body suit and harness!"

"Of course she's wearing a body suit," I return with a raised eyebrow. The harness would explain why she's floating between the men, but-

"No, no, not her costume. I mean, a sheer full-body sheath that's intended to put a barrier between the actors in a regular movie with a sex scene," he informs me, tracing his finger along the curve of the Pink Princess' thigh. "She hasn't had sex once in this movie!"

"Whaaaaaat?! I don't believe it. There was clearly penetration! I saw it! I know you did, too!"

"Special effects, Maya," Mr. Edgeworth remarks in a flat voice, his expression quite annoyed. I look closer at the picture on the screen. It's hard, but sure enough, if I look at it at just the right angle, I can see it. "You're right," I murmur. "There's no intercourse here at all..." At this thought, I look up at Mr. Edgeworth with a teasing grin. "You better call the cops, pal, because you've been robbed!"

He shakes his head, still staring at that scene. "I don't believe it. I paid that much for fake porn?"

I look back at the TV, wondering how many other perverted fans have been in our position, realizing the whole thing was faked at the last scene. That's the only reason I can come up with to make it so blatant that the Pink Princess is being held up by a harness. I sigh heavily, shaking my head as well. "She must be really, really light," I observe wistfully. "The wires holding her up are so thin, you can barely see them even if you're trying."

"They're probably stronger than they look," Mr. Edgeworth says absently. "I think we can turn this off now."

"What, you don't want to know if their plan to defeat the evil not-Incubus succeeds?"

He smirks at me. "I do, but I'm quite annoyed right now."

"Well, let's leave it paused and do something else for a few minutes," I suggest.

"Like what?"

"Like... I dunno. Not get more snacks or soda or alcohol," I say quickly, wistfully. "After all the sugar and junk I've had tonight, I'm sure Nick'll tease me about being fat again-"

Mr. Edgeworth's face goes blank. "He teases you about being fat?"

It sounds like he doesn't believe it. "Well, I know he's not serious," I backpedal, "but you know- I do eat a lot. I'm surprised I'm not huge."

"But you're not," he replies, his face still blank. "So why would Wright-"

I snicker. "I'm certainly not thin, Mr. Edgeworth."
"No, you're healthy."

"And fat."

"You are not."

I get the feeling he's taking my joking self-deprecation seriously. In an attempt to get him to see that I'm joking, I grin at him and say, "Prove it."

The corner of his mouth twitches slightly. "Very well," he says evenly, and then before I know it, he's picked me up rather easily and is holding me with no difficulty. "Well?"

"Miles Edgeworth, put me down this instant!" I laugh, kicking in his arms, just hard enough to get the point across to him.

"Not until you admit that you're not fat," he insists haughtily.

I snort in a very unladylike fashion at this. "So you can pick me up!" I babble at him. "Big deal, so can Nick- Whoa!" As I speak, Mr. Edgeworth adjusts his hold on me and now I'm hanging upside-down from his arms. "Mi-Ster-Edge-Worth!" I wail, unable to sound serious because I'm laughing so hard. "Put-Me-Down!"

"Admit it, Maya!"

"No!"

For his next demonstration of how light I am, he rights me, and then flings me over his shoulder. "How about now?"

"I'm not a sack of potatoes!" I protest.

"You're right, a sack of potatoes would weigh more," he says smugly.

"All right, fine! You win! I'm not fat!"

He's laughing as he walks back to the couch, and eases me down onto it in a sitting position. I'm breathless from being hauled around and laughing, and I'm a little light-headed. "I should kick your ass for that," I breathe, still giggling.

"It would in amusing to see you attempt that, Ms. Fey."

He's challenging me. I stand and attempt to get in his face, impossible since I only barely come up to his shoulders. He smirks down at me, and says quietly, "I'm waiting."

I don't want to back down, but it's obvious that I can definitely not kick his ass. "Well, I don't want to," I say, sticking my tongue out at him. "I wouldn't want to hurt you."

"I see. It's heartwarming to know that."

His smirk is getting more and more arrogant and irritating by the moment, and I want sooo desperately to show him up. "But how about this- I can probably lift you off the ground!"

Mr. Edgeworth quirks an eyebrow. "And what would that prove?"

"That I'm strong enough to kick your ass if I wanted to."
He laughs, and uncrosses his arms from his chest. "All right, you're on," he smirks. "Lift away."

We've somehow arranged ourselves during this confrontation so that he's the one whose back is to the couch. I consider asking him to move out into the middle of the floor so I have a little more room- the coffee table is almost touching the back of my leg.

I decide that it would probably be smarter to just do it here. At least here, if I discover that I'm a little more inebriated than I think I am, we could fall onto the couch instead of the floor. I take a deep breath. "Alright! Prepare to be amazed!" I say, with as much gusto as I can manage, and I wrap my arms around his waist.

I notice with irritation that he completely relaxes, dropping his weight. He's not going to help me out with this at all, I realize, and with three deep breaths, I heave up with all my strength.

"Don't strain yourself," I hear Mr. Edgeworth protest, his voice serious, but I pay no attention to him as I struggle to lift him. And then I succeed! Only his heels leave the floor, but I've lifted him a little bit! I'm quite pleased with myself and let go abruptly, laughing in triumph.

But being lifted partially off the floor has thrown off Mr. Edgeworth's balance, and he stumbles. My arms are still around his waist, so his stagger sends me off balance as well, and the only thing I can brace myself against to catch it is him. Mr. Edgeworth struggles to get his footing for only a second, before letting us both fall onto the couch, probably fearing that we'd fall in the other direction otherwise.

I land on top of him, straddling his waist. His arms went to my waist and shoulders in an attempt to brace me, so that our tumble to the couch didn't hurt me. I start to mumble an apology, intent on climbing off of him; as I start speaking, our eyes meet and lock.

I barely observe that the emotion in his steel eyes is rather intense, and something I've never seen before, and I realize that I really have to get off his lap, before Mr. Edgeworth abruptly leans forward and presses his lips to mine, hard. My reality seems to shatter as, instead of pushing him away as I believe I should, I lean into the kiss, encouraging it, letting it become deeper, more passionate. My mind is racing; his embrace tightens around me, and all the strange little signals he was giving off all night make sense now, that woman he's interested in is me, and that means that the man he's interested in is-....

... Oh my.

I'm enjoying this. On one hand, I love the way his arms feel around me, the way his lips feel on mine, I never want this kiss to end- how- how shallow of me! On the other hand, I'm insisting to myself that I'm very close to being in love with Nick, and how could I do this, but on the third hand, I've already established that I'm somewhat attracted to Mr. Edgeworth and Nick's never shown an interest in me, but wait! On the fourth hand, Mr. Edgeworth told me that Nick's got it for me, right there in his kitchen, and where the hell did all these hands come from?! I'm so lost in my thoughts and in the confused pleasure of the moment that Mr. Edgeworth has to forcibly break our kiss. We stare at each other, wide-eyed for several long moments. And then he lets his left hand fall limp to his side, his head falls back against the back of the couch, and he says, very quietly but very emphatically, "Scheisse."
I keep my gaze trained on the couch itself; Mr. Edgeworth stares at the ceiling. I'm in such a position that I can feel his racing heart slowing to a more reasonable pace. I don't want that to happen; I don't want him to calm down and I don't know why. I'm so, so confused and I get the sense that he is, as well. After all, I'm not interested in him- at least, I wasn't until tonight. Or was I? Oh god, I'm so confused!

"Maya..."

I don't look up at him. "Yeah?"

"I... I, uh..." He says something in a language I don't understand; I assume it's German. It sounds like German. And then he falls silent again.

His right hand is still on my side. I think that if he wasn't afraid I'd lose my balance, he'd let go completely. He's extremely uncomfortable. I am, too. "M-Miles?"

"Ja- Yes, Maya?"

I know that "ja" is yes, so my assumption that phrase-whatever it was-was German is somewhat confirmed. "I... Are... Are you okay?"

He sighs heavily. "No, I'm not. But there's nothing I can do about that now."

"Is... is there anything I can do?" I ask. I don't know what the hell I'm doing or saying. How does one react to being kissed like that and you had no clue...?

Mr. Edgeworth picks up his head and looks at me; I return his gaze. "There's a rule all attorneys quickly learn, regardless of which side of the courtroom they're on," he says evenly. "That rule is to never ask a question you don't want the answer to. I'm surprised you don't know that, Maya."

I frown, not understanding his analogy. "I do want the answer," I insist. "I- I- I care about you, I do. I don't want you hurting or-"

"Even if you want the answer to that question, you won't like it," he cuts me off. The cold edge I'm used to hearing in the courtroom is creeping back into his voice, and it hurts me much more than it has ever in the past. With another sigh, he says, a little gentler, "I think we better call it a night before something happens that we'll both regret."

I understand him now.

It's frightening. Does he mean to imply that he was about to lose control of himself?

It's flattering. He wants me. Miles Edgeworth, a man attractive enough to have any woman- or almost any man- that he wants, wants me, Plain-Jane, chubby and unrefined Maya.

And, although I'm not so far gone to do it, it makes me want to just kiss him back and let him have what he wants. I want him to feel better.

As I'm weighing the pros and cons of doing that- common sense says no, no don't do that, you have a friendship to maintain- I realize that his level of self-control at the moment isn't the only thing I'm afraid of. In fact, I'm not actually afraid of that at all. I know he won't.
But I have to get up if I’m not going to put out. And, yeah, putting out, this suddenly? Not going to happen, I’ve decided.

I shift my weight, my heart hurting, trying to find a good position to get off his lap. "Do you want me to leave?" I ask. I know I sound frightened. He'll probably think I'm scared that he'll say yes, and I'll have to walk home from here. Let him think that's why. It’s better than letting him know that I’m afraid this has just ruined our friendship.

Mr. Edgeworth starts moving for the first time in about fifteen minutes, bringing his other hand up to my side to help me slide off him easier. "Absolutely not," he says firmly. If he's sure of nothing else right now, he seems to be sure of this. "You've been drinking and it's the middle of the night. I wouldn't ask you to leave in these circumstances, no matter how distraught I am."

"Th-thank you."

We've both managed to pull ourselves to our feet; I realize just how exhausted I am when Mr. Edgeworth puts his hand on my shoulder as I sway on my feet. "You can't go to sleep right here," Mr. Edgeworth informs me, shaking my shoulder slightly. I bat at his hand in mild irritation as he says, "Come on, I'll show you to the spare room."

I obey with a heavy sigh. Just past the bathroom, the hallway ends with two rooms on the right and left and a closet at the end. He opens the door on the left and turns on the light; I follow him into it. Surprisingly, this room's color theme isn't pink, it's a rather pleasing light blue. "I've extra pillows and a blanket in the closet if you think you'll need them," he tells me.

I shake my head. "I'm used to cold and uncomfortable," I tell him with a slight grin. "My training as a spirit medium is all about the cold and uncomfortable."

"I highly doubt anything that's happened tonight would count as training," he replies dryly. "If you do discover you're uncomfortable, feel free to grab the pillows and blankets."

"Thank you," I say, walking over to the bed and taking my cell phone out. I ponder trying to call Nick one more time, but no- as Mr. Edgeworth says, it's the middle of the night now. If Nick isn't worried about me, I'll just annoy him by calling him now.

As I set the phone down on the stand next to the twin bed, Mr. Edgeworth says, "Well... I suppose I shall see you in the morning."

I turn to face him abruptly. "I'm sorry, Miles," I say quickly.

My apology seems to surprise him. "For what?" His question leaves me at a loss for words. For what, indeed... I can't verbalize what, exactly, I'm sorry for. He shakes his head as I try to find the words and says, "I'm the one who owes you the apology. I should have stopped drinking when I originally planned to."

"Please don't," I say. Don't what? Don't apologize? For what? Ngh... Maybe I'll be less confused after I sleep...

"... very well. I suppose you're right; we're both pretty fatigued and probably shouldn’t talk about it until the morning. Good night, Maya. Sleep well."

"Good night, Miles..."

He closes the door behind him softly. Of all the things to ponder at that moment, I chose to ponder the fact that since the kiss, we've been using each other's first names and not questioning it. And
then I realize that I need to sleep almost nude or in my clothes tonight. Well, even though I'm sure he wouldn't mind even if he knew, which he wouldn't, I wouldn't feel comfortable just sleeping in my underwear in a strange place, how welcome I am regardless. With that in mind, I turn on the lamp on the nightstand, turn off the overhead light, and climb into bed. I consider sleeping with the lamp on- I hate the dark, especially when I'm someplace unfamiliar. I'm fine with it at my apartment and even at Nick's or the office, but here, I'm not so sure.

After only a few moments, I decide that it'd be better to turn the lamp off, and do so. I dream of Nick and Mr. Edgeworth, of the Steel Samurai, Pink Princess, and the Evil Magistrate, and that strange, nameless Incubus who didn't quite match the description of what an Incubus should be. Despite the events of the night, my dreams are disjointed, make little sense, and aren't erotic in the least.

In other words, how they usually are.

I can’t believe myself.

I’m surprised she still feels safe enough to sleep here. I should take it as a compliment. It’s coming across as an insult, to my upset mind, but I should be taking it as a compliment. She trusts me. Why? I’ve done little, in reality, to gain that trust. Wright knew me before von Karma got his claws on me, and we’ve interacted quite a bit outside of the courtroom. We’ve had to, what with Maya getting kidnapped and trapped in frozen caverns and whatnot.

Maybe that’s why she’s made the show of trust, but helping her in those situations was little but my job. The fact that it was her made me focus all the more on rescuing her, but it was still my job and I’d like to think I’d exert that much effort to rescue an ‘ordinary’ civilian in those circumstances.

I can’t sleep. I already know I can’t. I’m upset. I’m frequently upset, but I rarely am upset enough to actually show it, and I just made a fool of myself. I’m glad Maya didn’t want to do anything, because I wouldn’t have had the restraint to say no.

Good lord, what did I just almost do…

Letting her stay here is a mistake. I can’t sleep. I try to work on organizing my files, a project that I started after the fuss at the embassy. I wonder how they’re all doing.

Yet my mind inexplicably is drawn away from them and back on the young woman sleeping in the guest room. I find myself wanting to go wake her, talk to her, “do something that we’ll both regret.” If I can convince her, of course.

But if I have to convince her…

Instead of knocking on the guest room door to rouse her, I turn to my own bedroom, grab the landline phone, and dial the number to my home in Germany. It’s about mid-morning there. Everyone should be up; I won’t be disturbing any meals.

“von Karma residence.”

“Franziska.”

“Miles Edgeworth. This is… unexpected.”
“I called on impulse.”

“Ah. Anything in particular trigger this foolish impulse?”

Her tone is lightly affectionate, despite the harsh phrasing. I take a deep breath. “I’m in trouble, Franziska.”

“Again? Miles, you-”

“No, not trouble like that.

There’s a pause. “Tell me,” she orders, seriously.

I don’t know how long I’ve been sleeping when I’m woken by the sound of Mr. Edgeworth’s voice, speaking quietly. It’s still dark, so I know it’s still night time; and I don’t hear another voice, so I figure he’s talking on the phone. He’s not talking in English- again, I believe it’s German, it certainly sounds like it- and he sounds distressed. After a lengthy pause, I hear, "Nein. Nein!" and he continues speaking, fast and upset. I swear I hear "Maya" and "Phoenix" in his phrases, but he’s talking so quickly that I can’t be sure that’s what I heard.

It’s rude to eavesdrop, even if I can’t understand a word he’s saying, so I turn over and close my eyes again, trying to relax back into sleep.

The next time I wake up, it’s bright in the room, and my phone is playing the Pink Princess’ happy-go-lucky theme. I grab my phone as I shake the sleepiness from my head, frowning as it stops ringing just as I pick it up. The display lets me know that I’ve now missed five calls, and I wonder how I slept through the ringtone four times already.

Abruptly, the phone vibrates in my hand and the theme song starts up again. The caller ID flashes “Nick” and his cell phone number; I hit the receive button. “Hello?” I say, trying to sound more awake than I am.

"Where are you?!"

I almost chuckle at how absolutely nerve-wracked the man sounds as he issues his frantic demand. "I’m at Mr. Edgeworth’s," I answer, still too groggy to play my usual headgames.

"Why didn’t you call me last night? Are you okay? Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?!"

"I called you three times last night. I’m fine, and I imagine you can’t be that worried since you still didn’t have your cell phone on by ten thirty when I’d told you I’d be gone no more than an hour at seven,” I answered his questions, more blunt than I mean to be.

“... You’re right, of course. I’m sorry.” There is another pause, and then, "So you’re at Edgeworth’s place? Mind if I come get you?"

"Well, I just woke up," I reply with a yawn. "But if you feel like it, sure. I mean, I’m sure Mr. Edgeworth won’t mind. If I was able to get a hold of you last night, you might be over here now, too."

Nick chuckles ruefully. "Anyway, I’m at your apartment. Do you know how to get to his place from here?"
"Not a clue. Why are you at my apartment?"

"Well, see, I fell asleep at the office. I guess I lost track of time trying to figure out that stupid case. When I woke up this morning and you weren't there, I assumed you'd be here. You weren't answering your home phone, so I tried your cell, and you didn't answer that, either, so I came here and started panicking when you weren't here after all."

"I see," I answer, filing that information away for when I'm more awake. I'm now aware of sounds beyond this room; there seems to be running water in the kitchen and dishes clanking together. "Anyway, no, I don't know how to get here from there. Mr. Edgeworth is up, I think so I could go ask him if you want."

"Would you mind, Maya?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I minded." I inform him, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and standing. "Just give me a few moments to get my bearings."

I shuffle out into the main area, and then the kitchen, where Mr. Edgeworth is. I sleepily shove the phone at him as he looks at me inquisitively; “Edgeworth speaking- Wright. Ah, yes. No, she didn’t eat me out of house and home. That’s a bit of a long story- yes, that would be best. You’re at her apartment now? I think so-” he rambled off my street address and then, after a pause, “Yes. Are you coming on foot or by taxi? I can come get you if you wish- alright. From there, you want to head back out to Phoenix Drive, and then to Route 55.” I tuned out the directions Mr. Edgeworth was giving, sitting down at the kitchen table with a tired sigh. After only a few more moments, he said, “Alright. See you in a bit. Do you want to talk to Ms. Fey again? Alright. Goodbye.”

He hangs up the phone and sets it down on the table. “You don’t look like you slept well,” he tells me quietly.

“You have no room to talk, Mister,” I say, pointing at him. “And I slept fine. I just don’t think I got enough sleep. I know you were up for a while after me, so I can’t imagine that you got enough sleep yourself.”

He sits down on the chair across from me, rubbing his eyes. “I’d have loved nothing more than to sleep in,” he admits, “but I’m so used to waking up at six and I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“Poor Mr. Edgeworth,” I murmur, and I mean it. He looks so tired.

Mr. Edgeworth yawns slightly, shaking his head. “It’s partly my own fault,” he admitted. “I… was preoccupied, and did nothing to attempt to clear my head for an hour after you went to bed. That took a good chunk of time, too.”

“I heard you talking last night,” I say cautiously. “Did you call someone to talk or something?”

“Franziska,” he says. I know that she’s a good person, of course, but the idea that she’d be a good listener is ludicrous to me and it must show on my face, because he smiles slightly. “She has her shortcomings, but she tends to give really good advice.”

“Did she last night?” I ask, even though I don’t want the answer to that question. I have to know what he intends to do about last night.

He nods absently, looking away. “She did,” he says softly, “but I’m not prepared to act on any of it. Not yet, anyway.” He chuckles a bit and stands again. “She called me a ‘foolish fool’ more times last night than she did during our whole childhood,” he informs me with a smirk. “I’m going to make myself some tea. Can I get you anything?”
I blush slightly, wondering for a moment if he’s only being such a gentleman because… I force that thought from my mind and say, a little meekly, “I’m kind of hungry…”

“Want to wait for Wright?” he asks me with a slight grin. “It’s almost lunch, and I hear you don’t mind burgers first thing in the morning. He’s told me your burgers are… how did he word it? One of the undiscovered wonders of the world.”

I giggle. “That’s odd. He always complains that he’d rather have a grilled chicken sandwich.”

“Yes, well, he always follows up that praise with a longing that you’d give grilled chicken sandwiches a shot,” Mr. Edgeworth returns, holding a kettle under the kitchen sink faucet and filling it. “So how about it; you have something small to tide you over and treat us to these burgers that are supposedly so amazing that you’ve almost converted Wright from chicken to beef.”

“Sounds good to me!” I say with a grin. “I like my burgers, too. You’re going to have a mess to clean up afterwards, though.”

“I can make Wright do it,” Mr. Edgeworth says smoothly, putting the kettle on the stove. He gets me a handful of oatmeal cookies and we sit and make small talk over tea and oatmeal cookies until the doorbell sounds; we don’t mention last night a single time. Oddly enough, our avoidance of the subject doesn’t feel forced or awkward.

I follow Mr. Edgeworth to the living room, where he opens the door to let Nick in. He looks from me to Mr. Edgeworth and back, looking a little nervous. “Ah… you both look really tired,” he says finally.

“Late night,” Mr. Edgeworth replies.

“O-oh… so, what happened?”

I raise my eyebrows; he sounds like he’s doing an investigation! “Well, we, uh… ran into each other at the store I was going to,” I told him, “and decided that since you were so busy, I should stay out of your hair for the night.”

Nick considers this for a second. “I appreciate it, but… I hope she didn’t annoy you too badly, Edgeworth.”

“I appreciate it, but… I hope she didn’t annoy you too badly, Edgeworth.”

“Not at all,” Mr. Edgeworth replied. “We had fun last night, actually.”

“So what did you guys do?”

I immediately think of the kiss, blush hard, and sneak a glance at Mr. Edgeworth. He’s fiddling with the collar of his shirt and taking an inordinate amount of interest in the bookcase with the DVD’s. We’re silent for only a moment, but Nick almost immediately says, “Um… What’s with the Psyche-locks, guys?”

I’m a little startled that Mr. Edgeworth seems to know what he’s talking about. He looks at Nick again, a cruel smirk on his face. “Jealous?” he asks, something hard and unforgiving in his tone.

Nick’s face goes carefully blank and I can almost hear his own Psyche-locks slamming down in place around his heart, even thought I don’t have a charged Magatama. I should rectify that. “Not particularly,” he says, an air of arrogance in his own voice. “I’m just curious as to what you two could have done last night that you’d want to hide so badly that the Magatama responds to it, that’s all. If you don’t want to tell me, it’s none of my business.”
Mr. Edgeworth and I look at each other. “Just so you don’t get the wrong idea,” he says finally, “We spent the night watching an extremely bad pornographic movie.”

“You what?” Nick’s voice is surprised.

I giggle at his reaction. “Yeah. I think I laughed more during that movie than I have in a very long time. Mr. Humor here laughed a bit, too,” I chuckled, elbowing him.

Mr. Edgeworth continues surprising me by smirking and mimicking the Steel Samurai. “All right, let’s do this!”

“For great justice!” I reply, about to burst into laughter at the memory.

Nick’s eyes widen. “S-Steel Samurai porn?” And I lose it, laughing my head off.

“Yes,” Mr. Edgeworth replies. “Although it was an… interesting experience, it certainly wasn’t worth what I paid for it.”

“Huh.” Nick peers at us, his hand fidgeting in his pocket. He shakes his head slightly; I think we’ve still got those Psyche-locks, of course. I, for one, don’t care if he knows about the porn.

“Anyway,” Mr. Edgeworth says smoothly. “Maya says she’s willing to make us those burgers you’re always raving about, Wright.”

Nick sniffs at him. “I don’t rave about them,” he replies. Then, I notice that he’s carrying something for the first time, as he shoves a plastic shopping bag at me. “Here,” he says shortly. “I figured you’d need a change of clothing.”

I take the bag, grinning. “Oh, you’re so good to me!” I reply, opening it and peeking in, as if I need to know what’s in there. Same uniform, different day… Neither Nick nor Mr. Edgeworth are wearing their jackets today, and I’m a tad jealous. They get some variation in their clothes… I look up at Mr. Edgeworth, making my best “damsel in distress” expression. “Hey, uhm… I feel kind of dirty, actually. Do you mind if I borrow your shower?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Only if you stop begging,” he responds sharply; it seems having Nick here has changed his demeanor a bit. Back to good old rough-around-the-edges Mr. Edgeworth. “And be quick. That’s the only bathroom in the house. It wouldn’t do to have it tied up when someone else needs it.”

“Yes sir.” I manage to sneak a hug in to Nick, who blushes like a schoolboy, and make my way to the bathroom.

While I’m in the shower, I’m able to think a little clearer. I absolutely do not want Nick to know that I kissed Mr. Edgeworth, under any circumstances. I somehow doubt he will, but if he uses that Magatama on me, I’m in trouble. I can’t think of any way he can get proof of our brief make-out session, but this is Nick I’m talking about. If it happened, that man can get proof that it did.

I discover that Mr. Edgeworth’s shampoo is passion fruit-scented. How exotic… I scold myself sharply when I start trying to think of ways to get close enough to smell his hair. I can smell the passion fruit shampoo just fine washing my own hair with it. I don’t need to go huffing Miles’ hair and the fact that I was considering it is jarring. It seems I’ve got some serious soul-searching to do.

That’s about the only remarkable thing about Mr. Edgeworth’s toiletries. The previous day and night’s sweat washed off me, I feel a lot more awake than I did an hour ago. I get out of the shower and dry off quickly, only toweling my hair dry enough that it’s not going to drip down my back. I
dress in the fresh acolyte's uniform Nick bought me, and tie my hair back in a straight ponytail. More awake I might be, but I still don't have the energy to do my hair the way I usually do. Ponytail is easier.

I check myself in the mirror. Plain-Jane Maya Fey, at your service. With a sigh, I go back out to the living room and then the kitchen, feeling like I’m about to face a firing squad.
“Wright. We need to talk.”

Hooooo boy. Here we go… I have to say, that was the first time I’ve ever seen Psyche-locks break without any effort on my part and I’m not sure I really want to know what he, at least, was hiding. It’s dangerous to assume that they’re hiding the same thing. “Yes? What is it?”

“It’s… about Maya.”

I brace myself. Porn was involved. I saw a couple of beer cans sitting out, so alcohol was involved. It doesn’t take much thought to work out what those Psyche-locks were about. I don’t know how Edgeworth could do that to me, knowing how I feel about her… but he did it and I’m taking this as a show of remorse. I have to. I’m hurt, but I’m not ready to give up our friendship. “Yes, go on.”

He’s trying to find the words to tell me he slept with the woman I’m in love with. “There’s something you should know, first.” His steely eyes meet mine. “There’s a reason I’m so sympathetic to your plight with her. I’m in the same position.”

What? “Did you just tell me that you’re in love with her, too?” I ask, trying to keep my jaw from falling to the floor.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Wright. I don’t feel that strongly. But I do feel strongly.” He falls silent again, searching his vocabulary, and I can’t help but have a little sympathy. This isn’t something he’s taking pleasure in, that’s for damn sure. “I kissed her,” he said finally, simply.

“You kissed her? That’s all?”

“That’s all. It went no further than that.”

I squeeze the Magatama in my pocket. He is, it seems, telling the truth. That’s not so bad. “So what exactly does this mean, Edgeworth?” I ask, feeling pretty low. Yes, he kissed her knowing how I feel about her, but I’ve ranted to him dozens of times without knowing how he felt about her. No matter how shallow it is, I do love him as well and who knows how long I’ve been hurting him with that.

“It is what it is,” he replied cryptically, “but be aware that I’m not going to stand still on this. I wasn’t the only one with a critical reveal last night.”

He’s going to pursue her. Shit. “Oh really? And what was hers?”

“She implied that she loves you.”

“Of course she loves me. I’m the big br-”

“You’re as intelligent as a brick sometimes, Wright, and twice as dense,” he cuts me off sharply, his tone critical. “Stop being stupid. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Well, there goes my smooth escape. “Okay. She returns my feelings. I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” I say pathetically. I know exactly what he’s getting at.

And he confirms it in the next sentence. “That’s your head start. Make a move, Wright, or I will.”
When I get back out to the kitchen, my companions are just staring at each other, completely silent. It’s as if they’re staring each other down, and frankly, I don’t like it at all. I clear my throat. “Thanks for the shower!” I say brightly. “I feel a lot better now, Mr. Edgeworth.”

Nick and Mr. Edgeworth stop staring at each other, both turning their attention to me. “I’m glad,” Mr. Edgeworth says, his lips turning up very, very slightly, and his grayish-brown eyes soften as he looks at me. If I hadn’t spent so much time around Nick, looking for itty bitty details like that one, I would have missed it.

“Well, I’m hungry after all that searching I did,” Nick says, grinning like an idiot and looking from me to Mr. Edgeworth. “Is it lunch time yet?”

Mr. Edgeworth shrugs. “Don’t look at me. I thought we agreed our chef for the afternoon was Ms. Fey.”

“That’s right!” I chirp. “Let me at that stove! I’ll make you burgers that’ll make you feel like you’ve died and gone to heaven!”

For some odd reason, that analogy makes Mr. Edgeworth smile rather openly, but it’s only for a split second. Nick clears his throat from the table, and says casually, “Remember, Miles: You’ve never beaten me yet.”

“Engarde,” Mr. Edgeworth counters, moving out of my way so I can get cooking.

“That was different,” Nick says with a chuckle. “You may have won the trial, but that’s only because I stopped fighting.”

“It couldn’t have ended any other way,” Mr. Edgeworth murmurs; his voice is thoughtful. “In any event, Ms. Fey, feel free to poke around as much as you want in here. And you, Phoenix Wright.” Mr. Edgeworth points at him. “You know that I have an advantage here.”

“You always do,” Nick replies dryly. “When has that ever helped you?”

“Will you stop doing that?”

I get the uneasy feeling that Nick knows about the kiss. I feel sick to my stomach; even though we aren’t together, I now feel like I’ve cheated on him. Much to my relief, the two men change topics at Mr. Edgeworth’s plaintive request. They’re now talking about Nick’s case, that case that Nick’s been going mad over since Friday afternoon. I’ve already got a pan out and three pre-formed burger patties cooking when Mr. Edgeworth finally decides to tell him: “You know, Payne cornered me on Friday night. He was in a bit of a panic.”
“Oh?”

“Yes. Apparently, you are just as susceptible to your own tricks as we prosecutors are, and he has no idea how he’s going to substantiate the claim that got the trial extended.”

“… you’re. Kidding. Me.”

“I’m afraid not, Wright.”

“Arrrgh!”

I giggle as Nick proceeds to “bang” his head against the table- he’s really banging it against his hand that’s laying flat on the table. Mr. Edgeworth snorts, clearly trying to suppress a chuckle. By now, they’re both shooting me expectant, eager glances, although Mr. Edgeworth is making a greater effort to mask them. “Uh, Maya-” Nick starts.

I shake the spatula at him for a moment before flipping the burgers again. Ah, they look just right… “You better settle down if you want one,” I threaten playfully. “You know I can eat two very easily.”

“Maaayaaaa…”

“Can’t you hear that the man’s dying, Ms. Fey?” Mr. Edgeworth says. “Have some mercy on the poor man!”

“I’d have them all plated up by now if not for this conversation,” I return. “Hold your horses!” I quickly fix the burgers just so on their buns- the condiments have to be just right- and put a plate down in front of Mr. Edgeworth, and one at my own seat. Then I fix Nick with a look and demand, “What’s the magic word?”

“Gimme.”

“I’m sorry, try again.”

“Now.”

I snicker as Mr. Edgeworth watches this exchange with something of dumbfounded enchantment. I shake my head at him. “One more try, Nick, and then I eat it.”

“Feed me or I’m never buying you burgers again.” His voice is completely even, his expression straight, and I immediately set the plate down. He means it.

Lunch is very pleasant, but by the time we’re done, Mr. Edgeworth looks like he’s going to fall asleep at any moment. Nick does his best to keep him talking, but eventually has to concede, “I think you better take a nap or something, Edgeworth.”

“I am almost twenty-eight years old,” he replies grumpily, slurring his words slightly. “Grown men do not take naps.”

“Grown men who got only about two hours of sleep do,” I say, genuinely concerned. “C’mon, you really should go lay down. Nick and I should probably be heading to the office anyway to get things in order for court tomorrow.”

Mr. Edgeworth “Mmphs” at us and starts to comment that Nick doesn’t have to get anything at all in order because he won the case on Friday. Nick cuts him off. “Honestly, Edgeworth, do you
know how many times I’ve been reprimanded for napping in the defendant’s lobby? There’s really no harm in sleeping when you’re tired. I bet you’re so tired, if you lay down now, you’d sleep through the night.”

Mr. Edgeworth half-yawns, half-sighs and mumbles, “Perhaps you’re right…”

“Of course he is,” I joke, standing and grabbing his arm. “Come on, Miles. Let’s go. You’re going down for a nap whether you like it or not.”

“Please don’t treat me like an infant,” he says with a scowl, but he rises with me and leans on me a little as we walk to his room. He sinks onto his bed with a sigh and shakes his head. “This is embarrassing,” he says.

“It is not. This is you having had an emotionally trying night,” I counter, pushing him down firmly. He doesn’t resist as he maneuvers himself so he’s lying fully on the bed. “Have a nice nap,” I say softly. “Nick and I will clean up and show ourselves out.”

Mr. Edgeworth waves to me; he’s already falling asleep. I leave the room and close the door quietly behind me, ignoring the impulse to kiss him on the forehead. Nick is only about ten feet away; the fact that he’s in a different room is meaningless.

When I join him again in the kitchen, he’s already cheerfully washing the dishes we used, and the two of us make small-talk. A few of his remarks are insidious and, if they mean what I think they do, are extremely passive-aggressive. Yes, Mr. Edgeworth told him what occurred between us, without a doubt. When Nick asks, directly, “So is there something going on you want to tell me about, Maya?” I can’t help but frown hard at him.

“I thought you said it was none of your business,” I challenge him.

“I did. And you just admitted that something happened last night.” My frown turns to a scowl; he hasn’t pulled out the Magatama, and I somehow doubt he’ll use it. He already knows why my heart’s locked up. “Maya, I need to know. I really, really need to know.”

“Why?”

“Just because I do.”

If I’m reading him right, he just wants me to collaborate Mr. Edgeworth’s story. His insistence that I divulge this information, I realize now, is indeed borne of jealousy, as Mr. Edgeworth implied upon his arrival. However, he’s trying his damndest to keep his feelings out of it, and just figure out what is going on with his two best friends. He’s worried as well as jealous.

Having deduced that, I answer, “We were drinking, a little turned on from the porno, and acting like complete goof-offs. We goofed ourselves into a compromising position and kissed, and then we went to bed in completely different rooms.” I look him in the eyes, and say solemnly, “I don’t know what you think happened, but if it’s anymore than that, you’re wrong.”

Nick’s reaction is odd, and I can’t really gauge it. On the surface, he maintains eye contact with me, implying that everything is all right and he believes me, nods, and says, “Thank you, Maya.” But he’s standing with his arms crossed over his chest, much like Mr. Edgeworth does when he’s consciously emotionally guarded. And his tone is tense, like he really, really wants to say more. But he doesn’t.

We finish the dishes, and after a brief discussion as to whether or not to leave a note for Mr. Edgeworth- and we do- we leave, making sure to lock the door behind us. We talk very little as we
walk back to the office; what we do is cheerful, friendly banter and Nick asking me if I’m sure I’m going to make it; he asks how much sleep I got, and I inform him that it was at least eight hours. There isn’t any real reason for me to be this sleepy.

We get to the office, and our collective mood brightens a bit as we pick up the flurry of paper Nick left all over the place when he woke and realized he didn’t know where I was. We packed up his briefcase, discussing in conspiratorial tones how much we’re going to love it when Payne walks in and is forced to admit that he was only bluffing.

That done, Nick asks me to lie down for a bit, at least. Even though I had more than enough sleep, I’m obviously fatigued, and, “I can’t imagine you weren’t upset by how last night ended up.” He’s right; I was very upset, although probably for reasons other than what he thinks.

When I wake up from my position on the couch, he’s sitting at my desk- the reception desk, sound asleep. The TV we have mounted on the wall on to a rerun of one of the shows Nick likes- a goofy sitcom about a defense attorney whose long-lost twin sister is a prosecutor and their older brother a detective. It’s also dark out. I sigh and roll over on the couch. I’d wake him up- he’s going to have a terribly stiff neck if he spends the night in that position- but he’s impossibly crabby if he’s woken up, regardless of reason. Therefore, I’m just going to go back to sleep. I’d rather not think about the dilemma that’s on my hands now… or about the fact that I’m not hungry in the slightest.

And I don’t know much, but I know enough to know that sign is a very, very bad one indeed.

The days pass idyllically; Mr. Edgeworth and Nick seem closer than they ever have been. Although you couldn’t see it outwardly, there have always been little hints that they care about each other very much; these signals have become stronger. Half a week after our little sleepover, Mr. Edgeworth awkwardly asks Nick and me to call him by his first name, and he’ll try to do the same for us. He manages to get the hang of calling me “Maya” instead of “Ms. Fey” but he can’t do the same for Nick, and after a few more days, Nick tells him that calling him “Miles” is a little strange for him, too. So they go back to being “Wright” and “Edgeworth” to each other.

We hang out again at Miles’ place that Saturday, sans porn. Nick insists on having pizza instead of burgers, and Miles is absolutely chagrined. “If you two keep feeding my junk food, I’m going to start gaining weight,” he protests.

I giggle a bit. “Two meals in two weeks, Edgeworth,” Nick counters, preparing to order the pizza. “I doubt you’ll have a problem; just walk someplace instead of driving once a week. That’s how we do it.”

“I suppose you’re right…” Miles doesn’t sound convinced. Nick and I don’t eat healthy by any stretch of the imagination, and he knows it. We could probably stand to have salads every now and then. Something tells me that next weekend, if this goes well, Miles is going to be the one picking what we eat, and it’s going to be something good for us. I wonder if either Nick or I will be able to handle it. Our bodies would probably shut down if we ingest anything leafy or green, out of sheer confusion.

“Besides,” Nick adds with a smirk at me, “as long as you don’t eat like Ms. Bottomless Pit here, you’ll have no problem.” He emphasizes his statement by poking my stomach, right where I’m ticklish. His comment stings a little, but I can’t help but giggle when he hits that spot. Somehow, despite my best efforts to prevent it, he’s managed to discover quite a few tickle-spots on me and hits them frequently. It’s his way of letting me know he’s just teasing.
But Miles sees the hurt expression on my face in the moment before Nick strikes at my tummy. “Why are you always putting her down?” he demands, not quite angry but a little more than annoyed.

“Wh-what?”

“You do that constantly.” Miles scowls. “Why? Can’t you just leave her be or, God forbid, actually take a tactful approach?”

I say Miles’ name quietly, in an attempt to head off the argument that just appeared out of nowhere. Nick doesn’t hear me, though, and he frowns hard. “I wouldn’t hurt her and she knows that! She knows I’m just teasing her!” he snaps back, angry. “Besides, it’s not like she doesn’t do her own share of ribbing—”

“What is this, Kindergarten?” Miles cuts him off incredulously, his temper rising as well. “That’s why you’re always insulting her? ‘She started it’? I swear, Wright, you were more mature in fourth grade—”

Nick yells something and Miles raises his voice as well. I don’t hear what they’re yelling at each other and I don’t care, I’ve had enough. “Stop it!” I shriek over them both. They’re startled into silence, both looking at me with wide eyes. I cross my arms over my chest, eyeing them. “This is stupid!” I say, my own voice raised to just under a shout. “You’re supposed to be friends! We’re supposed to be friends!” I don’t know where I got this idea, or why I felt the need to slam them in it— they both look shamed by my outburst already— but I add, “Here’s a newsflash for you two: most women do not actually like seeing men fight over them. In fact, I find it rather off-putting, especially when those men are best friends!”

Poor Nick looks like he’s about to cry; Miles just looks away, grimacing. “Miles,” I say hotly. “Nick and I have been teasing each other like this since we first met and you know it. Why the heck are you bringing it up now if it bothers you so much?”

He doesn’t have an answer for me; I don’t expect him to. I point at Nick accusingly next. “And you, sir, stopped paying attention to whether or not your teasing actually hurts me long ago,” I inform him, “so don’t even pretend that you’re so in-tune with me that you’d stop if you hurt me.”

“I—I’m sorry…”

“I don’t want an apology,” I say, feeling somewhat petulant, but damn it all if I’m going to let their friendship be ruined over this weird love-triangle-thingy. “I want you to hug and make up.”

Miles looks at me, the guilty expression on his face replaced by one of surprise. “Wh-what?”

“You heard me, Miles. Hug and make up. I want to see some serious cuddling going on or I’m going home.”

I kind of expect one or both of them to refuse my demand entirely, although I hope they don’t— I haven’t thought of another ultimatum to issue. Much to my surprise, then, Nick stands, walks around the coffee table to the free seat on the sofa, sits down, and does exactly what I demand. He hugs him, tightly. “I’m sorry,” he says, softly but clearly. “I didn’t realize it bothered you that much. I’ll try to curb it.”

Miles’s face looks like it’s on fire, he’s blushing so hard. Nevertheless, he returns Nick’s embrace. “I apologize as well. I shouldn’t have shouted at you.”

I’m grinning from ear to ear as I clasp my hands in front of me and nod in approval. “Very good!” I
croon. “You’re learning how to be nice to each other! How about that pizza, Nick?”

Miles and Nick calls for pizza, and the whole while they’re both absolutely glowering at me. I can’t shake the feeling that they’re going to get me back for that. Somehow, some way, they’re going to get revenge. I don’t know whether to be worried or amused. Maybe both.

I am quite surprised that the rest of the evening goes smoothly. I can't get an uncomfortable ache out of the pit of my stomach after that, though; they're serious. I can see them competing for my attention the whole night. When I was a little girl, I'd dream of something like that happening: two handsome, caring men vying for my affections.

It doesn't feel as good as I dreamed it would. It actually doesn't feel good at all. I'm going to have to make a choice, and I’m going to hurt one or both of them, and it makes me sick to think about it. So I try not to.

Nick and I spend the night there, with me in the spare bedroom and Nick on the couch. We're all quite a bit more refreshed than we were last weekend, although sleeping only diminished the weird tension a little bit. Much to my surprise, the three of us spend most of Sunday together, as well.

And then we meet Tuesday evening for dinner at McDonald's. Miles invites us over on Friday night, as well, although again, it is sans porn. We also play this strange game that Nick calls "Suicide isn't an option". He's sure that's not actually the name of the game, but the goal of it is to spin a bottle and give the person it points at a choice of two things that will make them ask, "Can I kill myself instead?" It's actually quite amusing when Nick asks Miles who he'd rather be trapped in a room for three hours with, Wendy Oldbag or Lotta Hart.

I almost expect one of them to ask me which one of them I'd rather sleep with. I'm quite relieved when the worst either of them comes up with is having to chose between Larry Butz and Detective Gumshoe, courtesy of Miles. I love them both dearly, but not like that. Never.

Nick was told to give up either being a lawyer or his two best friends. Miles is clearly referring to the two of us, I think. Nick makes a face at him. "You're supposed to give me hard ultimatums, Edgeworth. Of course I'd give up law instead of you guys."

We somehow lose track of time, and it ends up too late for me and Nick to walk home. Mr. Edgeworth feels too tired to drive, so we spend the night, again. "You two keep this up, and you may as well just move in," he jokes as we split up for the night.

Of course, tomorrow night, we were planning on another sleepover, so that isn't much of a big deal. Sure enough, Miles drags the two of us out shopping at a horrifically upscale supermarket, claiming that since I've already cooked for them and Nick was kind enough to spare us from such a fate ("HEY! I'm not that bad a cook!" Nick protests) that it was his turn and he was going to make sure it was real food this time ("What, did I imagine those burgers or something?" I ask). We just seem to be along for the ride, but by the end of the trip, I have the distinct notion that Miles is trying to subtly get us to tell him what kinds of foods and flavors we like and burgers, pizza and grilled chicken isn't descriptive enough.

For a moment, I think he's going to slap me upside the head when I tell him I like the kind of flavor in a shrimp instant noodle package. He just sniffs at me and informs me that I should feel free to make some if I get hungry in the middle of the night or something.

On the way home, we stop at the liquor store. I wait in the car while Nick and Miles go in; I can't go in there myself, being only nineteen. They don't take very long; a couple of six-packs and Nick even picks up something for me! I can tell that Miles isn't very comfortable with that, but he doesn't
have much right to say anything after giving me alcohol himself.

We start watching a movie of Nick's choosing when we get home; none of us have seen it before. We also all start drinking. By the time we all agree that this movie is horrible, I'm just about drunk and both of the boys are quickly getting to that point. Miles and I debate which is worse, Nick's movie or the Steel Samurai porn.

Nick suggests that we solve this issue by putting in the porn. None of us realizes, in our inebriated states, what a profoundly bad idea that is, so in the porn goes, from the top.

When I wake up in the morning, my head is aching, as is the rest of my body. I am naked as the day I was born and most certainly not in a bed, although I am covered by a blanket. I feel something warm and soft next to me, and somehow manage to realize that something is a person. Although I really don't want to- I'm terrified of both what I'll find next to me and what the light will do to my headache- I force my eyes open with a groan and look at the figure who has me in a loose embrace.

Nick.

And although I haven't looked under the blanket, I somehow know he's nude, too.

My propensity for odd thoughts in these situations crops up as I muse about how cute his hair is when it's all mussed up, instead of slicked neatly back. "Good Morning, Maya," Miles' voice comes from somewhere by the kitchen. I sit up as gently as I can, not wanting to disturb Nick until I figure out what the hell happened last night. I can make a few guesses- I've discovered that I'm sticky in a region of my body I absolutely should not be- but I need to know. "Di-did we do what I think we did last night?"

Miles is holding a cup of tea, leaning against the entrance frame to the kitchen. "I believe we did. I have to admit, it's comforting to know that I'm not the only one with a clear recollection of last night."

Aaaah- M-Maya-

I blink as the memory of hearing him moan like that flashes through my mind. I'm slightly horrified but I try to not jump to conclusions. "This is embarrassing," I mutter, holding the blanket up to my neck. Nick is starting to stir; I have to figure this out now! "I- I hope Nick and I didn't-right in front of-"

Miles' mouth twitches slightly. "You certainly did," he says dryly. "Not that I cared at the time, considering my involvement in it."

"Y-your involvement?"

N-Nick- don't-

"Yes. I'm as much in the dark about the specifics of it as you are, but I'm quite sure I was involved."

My jaw drops. "Oh."

Wh- what? What do you want me to-

"My."
Both Miles and I look at the last of us to come to consciousness. Nick's looking up at me with wide blue eyes, clearly confused and inches from a freak out. He was the one who finished my blasphemous oath. "We didn't!" he exclaims, wincing and putting a hand to his head. He's wearing one of my wrist straps.

"Maya and I just established that we did, Wright," Miles says, as blunt as he always is with Nick, but a hint of a sympathetic undertone is in his voice.

Nick starts cursing, using words I didn't think were in his vocabulary. I'm still confused, bits and pieces of last night's extra-curricular activities trickling through my head, and Nick's ranting isn't helping matters. He's scaring me, in fact. "Wright, calm down," Mr. Edgeworth demands sharply.

"Calm down?! I slept with two people last night and I don't remember it and you want me to calm down? How are you so calm?! What the hell is-"

Miles crosses the distance between us in a few strides, kneels, and grasps Nick by his bare shoulders. "Stop it!" he snaps, shaking the other man slightly. "You must calm down! You're scaring Maya!"

Nick stares at him, and then catches the expression on my own stricken face and realizes that he is actually frightening me. He takes a few deep breaths, nodding slowly. "Calm. I'm calm," he says, his voice breaking. "How are you so calm, Edgeworth?" he repeats his question, sounding a little less hysterical now.

"I had my panic attack hours ago," he replies with a rueful grin. "Unlike the two of you, I wasn't drunk enough to pass out afterwards. I wore out my panic a few hours ago."

"You haven't slept at all," I say, almost accusingly.

"No. I wanted to stay awake in case one of you woke up. Someone had to be there to calm you two down when you did, and I didn't want to risk being asleep when you did."

I'm startled- and touched- by Miles' concern for the two of us. Up close now, I can see that he's utterly exhausted, in more ways than one. But there is no way he's going to be able to sleep. Not until there's some modicum of understanding between the three of us. "What does this mean?" I ask, intending to get that understanding as quickly as possible. "Where do we stand now?"

Miles looks from me to Nick and back, his mouth a grim, mildly confused line. "I don't know," he answers honestly. "I really, really don't know."
Chapter 6

Nick showers first, while I sit in the kitchen with Miles. He offers me breakfast, but I decline; if I eat, I'll throw up. Whether it's from last night's binge drinking, the fact that I lost my virginity last night and don't remember it or a combination of both is an unknown, but doesn't really matter.

Although to say that I don't remember is a bit untrue. I remember bits and pieces, and the more I think about it, the more I remember. I just can’t get it to form a full picture.

When Nick emerges from the bathroom, he looks quite a bit more alert, refreshed, and calm. Without a word, I take my leave and go to shower myself. There's very little hot water left, but I don't care; I like cold showers, which is exactly why Nick got to shower first.

I remember more and more of the previous night as I clean myself up. I still can't remember who instigated it, but at some point, Miles's comparison between the three of us and the three heroes of the porn came up. My memory blurs there. Despite my best efforts and the bits and pieces trickling into my head, I can't piece together exactly what occurred last night. I can't tell if I really don't remember or if this is selective amnesia or something.

I'm so distracted that a knock on the door startles me. "Maya?" I hear Nick's voice; he sounds very worried. "Are you okay in there?"

"Y-yes," I answer. "I'm fine."

"You sure? You're taking an awfully long time-"

"I'm fine," I cut him off, recovered from being startled. "I'm almost finished."

"Okay."

I put the events of the night out of my mind and focus on washing up. I get out, dry off, and get dressed as quickly as I can; if I've worried them enough for Nick to check on me, I must have been in there a while. I flash a sheepish grin as I join them in the kitchen. "Sorry about that," I mutter, sitting down and fixing my gaze on my hands.

No one says anything for several minutes. And then, Nick says, "What do you want for breakfast? Edgeworth and I have already eaten."

I shake my head. "Don't worry about it. I'm not hungry."

"Please eat something, Maya," Nick says.

I shake my head again, and this time, Miles says, softly, "You're scaring us."

What am I supposed to say to that? "Is toast okay?" I ask meekly. "Because I'm really not hungry. Really. I feel a little sick, actually."

Miles nods and gets up. He pops a piece of bread in the toaster and turns around, leaning against the counter. I can hear the clock on the wall ticking. We all know we need to talk, but no one has any idea of what to say. I finally say the one thing that's bothering me the most: "I don't know where we're going from here, but I really, really don't want to lose your friendship."

"That's not going to happen," Nick answers immediately, firmly, and Miles nods in agreement. "If..."
if anything, I think this is probably going to make our friendship stronger."

"I agree," Miles says. "This happened because we are friends and we care about each other. I highly doubt any of us would have done this casually."

"So it wasn't casual," I agree. "What was it, then?"

"That's the million dollar question, isn't it?" Nick says, rubbing his chin.

Miles clears his throat uncomfortably. "I... have a proposal." Nick and I turn our attention to him, curious. He looks at us both, thinking hard before speaking again. "I suggest we take caution not to over think this. We're three friends with at least two of us with stronger feelings for both other parties in the friendship."

At this, both Nick and Miles look at mequestioningly. I grimace. "You're not the only ones," I admit softly. At that moment, my toast pops up and Miles busies himself with putting it on a plate and buttering it.

As he places it in front of me, he says, "So we're a group of, how did Maya put it? 'Greedy people'. We all actually got what we wanted last night, even if the circumstances weren't ideal."

"That's true," Nick admits grudgingly, "but I dunno, though, I always thought I was a pretty monogamous person."

"So did I," Miles says. As I'm munching distractedly on my toast, he adds, "I suspect Maya did, as well. And maybe none of us were mistaken. Maybe we were. Maybe we should just let this be what it is and not try to control it."

"You mean just see where it takes us," Nick says, his voice bland. He doesn't want us to know what he thinks of that idea.

"Exactly."

I swallow the bite I was chewing and say, "I think that's a good idea. It'd certainly be better than sitting around awkwardly and feeling badly about it. Just as long as it doesn't ruin our friendship, I'm okay with it."

We look expectantly at Nick. He nods. "Actually, that's my biggest concern, too."

"Alright. Then we agree to stop trying to 'figure things out' and just go wherever we may end up?"

Nick and I nod in unison. "Right. That was strangely easy," Nick says, shooting the two of us a wry grin. I have to agree. It was way too easy.

Then again, we did agree to just go with it now, didn't we?

We spend the day doing friend-type stuff; Miles drives us to a mall and we walk around, talking and dragging each other into stores that the other two couldn't care less about. Well, Nick and I do that. Miles just kind of goes with the flow and lets us be as goofy as we like.

By lunch, I have my appetite back, and I can tell that Nick and Miles are greatly relieved by this. The week passes; we hang out together almost every evening, and that weekend there's another sleep-over at Miles's. This time, we're all completely sober and in our right minds. It's awkward and embarrassing, but none of us freak out like we did last week.
It’s awkward and embarrassing, and all kinds of amusing and fun. Actually exploring and focused on each other, gauging reactions, what feels good and what doesn’t, working out the logistics of doing this with three people when, before, all three of us considered this an act for two people. At some point, Nick suggests popping in the porn for some pointers- there were threesomes in it, right?

Miles pauses in his current exploration to grab a pillow, hit Nick in the face with it, and goes right back to what he was doing. Despite the fact that he’s doing it to me and I’m plenty distracted, I have to laugh.

When it’s over, the three of us are just squished, not uncomfortably, onto Miles's bed. The two of them sleeping soundly, I realize that something did change, distinctly, and it’s not the sex that I’m thinking about.

Nick and Miles have started fighting all the harder against each other in court; Nick is a bit more energetic these days, and I'm a little calmer. Miles is also a little more relaxed and he smiles a little more, although not by much. Nick and I don't quite know what to say when Detective Gumshoe pulls us aside one day after court and asks who Mr. Edgeworth is dating, because he's obviously in love.

And I- well, I'm happy. Very much so. Greedy people indeed, but it seems that it's working out anyway.

Pearly is a problem.

Now that I know who Iris is, to me and to Pearly, I have to keep them in contact. Iris is her sister. I don’t think she knew Pearly existed before my aunt tried to assassinate me. I don’t think Morgan would let that much slip. But we all know now, and so I start insisting on hauling Pearly to the city and the detention center to see Iris.

I am Pearly’s guardian, and now that I’m the Master, what I say goes. But the Powers that Be in Kurain don’t like how often I’m interrupting Pearly’s training. Well, tough. She needs to know her sister.

It helps, a little, that Nick is still Iris’ lawyer. It’s been several months since the incident at Hazakura Temple, and Nick’s still fighting pretty hard to get her out of detention. He’s right, though, she doesn’t belong there. Her crimes were grave. It was a grave situation. She, Mr. Armando and my mother didn’t have the option of being innocent at that point.

I have to wonder why Nick seems so nervous around her. It hurts, and it doesn’t escape Pearly’s notice, slapping Nick hard enough to cause a nosebleed.

That’s our first real argument. After that visit, which went smoothly after Iris admonished Pearly not to hit people- and she listened, wonders of wonders!- the four of us to back to Miles’. We pretend to be ‘just friends’ when Pearly is with us. We have no choice. I can’t have her going back and telling the Elders that I’m having an affair with two men at the same time, and she would. Innocently, of course, asking if it’s really okay to do that, and without realizing just how much trouble she’s causing for me. But it would cause problems, so friends it is.

She’s having a nap before dinner; Nick and Miles are working on cases. I suspect it’s the same one: Iris’s. I don’t think it’s safe for Miles to be the prosecutor in charge of her case, but he
reassures me that it’s fine. He’ll be censured if it comes out that he defended Iris on the first day of her trial, but that’s all that’ll happen, he insists.

And I’m bored. Until they start talking. “Edgeworth,” Nick says, passing him a few sheets of paper. “Need you to sign this.”

He takes them, and reads them over. “No,” he replies, handing them right back.

Nick is shocked as he takes the papers back. “No?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Wright, they did tamper with a crime scene.”

“Yes, but that was to try to keep Godot off the suspect list.”

“Exactly.”

“Edgeworth, come on!”

Miles turns to him, his face stern. “No,” he repeats emphatically. “I am not dropping the charges against her.”

“Why not?!”

He’s getting a little angrier than I think is reasonable. “Nick, chill,” I interject in confusion. “He’s right. What don’t we want the world at large to know?”

“Exactly,” Miles adds. “If I drop those charges entirely, there will be an investigation and taking an action like that due to a personal relationship is a very high abuse of power. I’m not doing it, but if you’ll wait a moment, I’ll have my offer ready for you to look over.”

“I thought you insisted on taking her case to help her!” Nick snaps.

“I did!”

“But you’re not!”

“You haven’t even seen the offer yet!”

“I don’t need to! I know it won’t be-”

“Wright, stop!” Miles says, the volume and pitch of his voice rising slightly. “You’re going to wake up Pearl! What’s gotten into you?”

For a moment, Nick looks like he’s a deer caught in headlights, but he recovers fairly quickly. “Nothing’s ‘gotten into me,’” he retorts angrily. “In case you don’t remember, she’s in this position because she was trying to save Maya’s life. You don’t think that’s something to take into consideration.”

“It is and I am. And I still don’t understand. You’re not nearly this vehement about Mr. Armando’s defense.”

“Armando could’ve stopped it before it began. I appreciate that what he did, deeply, but his
intentions-"

“Are irrelevant, Wright, and you know it. There’s another reason why you’re pushing for Iris to not be punished at all.”

“There is not!”

“Sorry, Nick, but there is,” I interrupt again. I’m more than a little irritated with him by now. “You’re always so skittish when we go to visit Iris. Why? Don’t tell me you still have a crush on her.”

His face flushes. “I don’t have a crush on her and never did,” he grumps.

“Good,” I return, rising from my place at the couch. “Because if you do, maybe we need to have a breather until you get over it.”

Nick scowls hard at me. “That isn’t fair, Maya. First of all, I strongly resent you using our relationship as a damn bargaining chip. Second, she is your cousin-”

“Yes, Nick, exactly! Do you know how creepy it would be to wonder if you’re thinking about my cousin every time we…” My voice trails off, just in case there are little ears listening in.

“That sounds like a personal problem, Maya.”

I’m blown away by how absolutely crass this man is being. Miles can’t just let her off the hook. I do wish he could but he can’t, and if I know he can’t, Nick has to know he can’t. And Iris doesn’t want to just be let off the hook for what she did, either. I’m about to ask Nick why he’s being so... stupid about this- it’d be much easier on everyone if he just cooperated with Miles, I know Miles is going to do everything in his power to help her- when Miles says, “Oh. I see.”

“What? What do you see?” I asked, getting frustrated.

His steel gaze flicks to me, but he doesn't answer, turning his attention right back on Nick. “She doesn't know about your trial, does she?”

“What trial?” I ask in confusion. It can't be when he was accused of murdering Sis. He knows I was involved in that.

“No, she doesn't. Very few people actually do.” He looks down at the paperwork Miles has rejected. “I don't like to think about it.”

“Still? I thought you and Iris came to an understanding.”

“Wait, Nick knows Iris?”

I am, again, ignored. “She cleared up who she was and why she impersonated Dahlia, and I told her that I never believed she tried to kill me. That's a little different than coming to an understanding, Edgeworth.”

“You know where to find her, Wright. You need to resolve this. Wanting to blatantly break the law isn't resolving it.”

“Hold it!” I yell, just about fuming. “What the heck are you guys talking about?! What trial?! What do you mean, Iris impersonated Dahlia and never tried to kill Nick?! Of course she never tried to kill Nick! Iris would never do something like that!”
The boys look at each other, and then at me. “She deserves and explanation as well,” Miles says.

Whatever it is, Nick really doesn't want to talk about it. “It's in the past. There's no point in digging it up again.”

As I'm yelling at him that yes, there is, Miles repeats, “She has a right to know about this, Wright. She's your lover. This was a major and traumatic event for you and Iris both. Iris is her cousin. She has a right to know.”

Nick looks at me grimly; he clearly believes I'm not going to like this.

After his tale is done, I feel even sorrier for Iris than I did before.

It also frightens me a bit. “You still have feelings for her, don't you?”

“Of course I do. But... I'm not in love with her anymore. If I ever was at all.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him, curious but not sure I want to know. Miles' admonishment after our first kiss comes to mind.

He shrugs. “I was a brat. And a crybaby. And disgustingly clingy. Mia could tell you, she was my attorney. She actually called me a pussy at one point in the trial.” Just as I am about to protest that I can't imagine Sis using that language, he adds with a chuckle, “Not that those words came out of her mouth. But there weren't many other valid interpretations.”

“What exactly did she say?” I ask.

“I don't remember exactly why, but I started crying about something. Mia's boss yelled at her for it and she made a remark that the P on my sweater didn't stand for Phoenix or something like that.”


“Why Edgeworth. Complimenting the bimbo?”

I frown, along with Edgeworth. “Might I remind you, Wright, that I was twenty years old, arrogant, and just came out from under the tutelage of Manfred von Karma? You know I wouldn't dare insult Mia Fey in such a manner now.”

“You still are arrogant, Edgeworth.”

“Wright!”

“Relax, I'm just teasing,” Nick chuckles. “Regardless... that's the story. I'm not sure I'm ready to completely forgive her for abandoning me, but... I can't just let her rot in prison. I can't. Not after the lengths she went to protect Maya and Pearls.”

Well, at least I understand now why he's being so irrational about her. And why he seemed so conflicted about her when they “first met”. And why she stared at him. And, although he never said it, this identifies the woman he lost his virginity to. Yeah, this is going to cause me a few problems. She's beautiful, she's smart, she's loyal... Well, I'm loyal, but I'm far from beautiful or smart.

While I'm brooding, the boys continue to discuss this. “But she's not going to,” Miles informs him.
“If you would just wait, I can finish this offer and you'll see that I'm not going to let that happen. I owe her as well, you know. Trust me, Wright, please.”

Nick fidgets. “Can you give me a run-down of your bargain?” he asks.

“Time served, one year house arrest, four more probation, and the record is expunged at the end of the probationary period.”

I don't know much about plea bargains but I know enough to know that is extremely generous, considering the gravity of Iris' crimes. But... “That means she can't return to Hazakura Temple,” Nick says. “She'd have to leave the state to do so. Sister Bikini can't afford to be without assistance up there, especially not now.”

“I can take care of that,” I interjected. “I can send some acolytes from Kurain Village to help out. I was planning to, anyway.”

Nick's about to ask me how I can do that, I just know it, and then he stops. “Oh yeah. You're the Master now.”

“Yep. The one and only.”

There's a bitter tone in my words and neither of my lovers misses it. They both look at me in concern, and then turn their attention to each other. “Will you let me finish the document?” Miles asks him.

He takes a moment, and then nods. “Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm just a little stressed, that's all.”

“Understandable, considering. This should only take a few minutes longer. Once Pearl is awake, we can go down to the detention center and discuss matters with Iris. Alright?”

Nick nods. “That's fine with me. Thanks, Edgeworth.”

“Doing my job, Wright,” Miles replies with a slight smile, turning his attention back to his paperwork.

The silence is awkward now.

As Miles says, it takes only a few minutes to finish he plea bargain, and for Nick to read and sign it. Pearly gets up around that time, and we gather her up and head out to the detention center. Nick'll talk to her first; he is, after all, her lawyer.

That was the plan, at least. When we arrive at the detention center, it's in a state of upheaval. The guard tells us that it'll be a few minutes before he can show us to a meeting room, since the prisoners are in lockdown at the moment. But he'll do his best to get us to see who we came to see as soon as possible, and he'll take our names and the prisoner's and get back to us as soon as they're done.

When Nick tells him that we're here to see Iris of Hazakura, the guard's harried demeanor changes. “You're her lawyer.”

“Yes,” he answers, bewildered. “I am.”

“Follow me Mr. Wright, please.” The three of us exchange looks as Nick is led away, into the
guard office. We can see Nick's expression change as the guard speaks to him. Something is wrong. When Nick finally emerges, he says immediately, “We need to go to the Hotti Clinic.”

“What? Why? What's happened?” I ask, as Miles and I follow him out.

“Morgan Fey happened, that's what.”

Miles looks down at me, as I make a horrified, worried noise, and we quicken our pace. She couldn't have hurt her own daughter, could she? Beside me, Pearly is confused, but holds her silence. She's learned to be quiet when she doesn't understand what's happening.

I ask Nick to explain the situation when we're all in the car again. He just shakes his head. “I thought she was in the penitentiary, Edgeworth,” Nick says.

“She was transferred to stand trial for her role at Hazakura,” Edgeworth replied, “but I was very clear that she was not to be permitted contact with Iris!”

“Someone didn't get the message,” Nick replied. “He's not sure how bad she is. Someone needs to stay with Pearls.”

“M-Mr. Nick... What... happened to Sister Iris? What did my mother do?” Poor Pearly sounds like she's going to cry. I sympathize.

“Hush, Pearls. I don't know exactly yet,” Nick replies. “We're going to see now, alright?”

Pearly cuddles into me, in the back seat of Miles' car. I cuddle her back. I'm so sick of Morgan. So, so sick of her...
She’s fine. She’ll be fine. I just have to keep telling myself that.

Despite all that’s happened between us, it still hurts to see her like this. Morgan has hurt the people I love for the last damn time. I’m not going to let her do it again. I’m not. No, I’m not in love with Iris. Definitely not. I can’t even say I was in love with her in college anymore; it was “puppy love”, infatuation that wasn’t given a chance to mature. And even if I was in love with her, I was in love with a lie.

But I do still care about her, very much.

Iris’ eyes open, very slightly. “Feenie,” she breathes.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t.” Iris squeezes her eyes shut again, breathing deep, trying to drag herself to full consciousness. “I’m sorry you had to make the trip out here.”

“I’m your lawyer. This is my job.” I try a little smile for her. “I’m not going to ask you what happened. Prosecutor Edgeworth is here. I’m sure he wants to know and I’d rather you only have to relate it once, alright?” She nods, and I know she understands, doesn’t see it as a slight. “In the meantime, I actually came here to discuss your case. Are you up for it?”

She nods, again, brown eyes glazed over a bit. I’m not sure she’s in the right state of mind to fully understand what I’m telling her, but I want her to be released from the clinic straight to Kurain Village. She’s been through enough and I’m not risking her being within claw reach of that awful witch again. I’ve just got to hope that she’s alert enough when she speaks to Edgeworth that he won’t call me on getting the consent of someone who can’t give it.

I tell her Edgeworth’s offer, and add, “This is extremely generous. I strongly advise you to take it, Iris.”

She smiles brilliantly at me. “I trust you, Feenie. Whatever you think is best.”

“Very well.”

I’m fighting not to show what I’m really feeling. I don’t trust her. I have little reason not to, except for the fact that I was dating her for six months and sleeping with her for three and she wasn’t who she told me she was. And the fact that she let her sister try to frame me for murder. And that she let me struggle with the cognitive dissonance that trial caused me for five years, and only told me the truth because it was a condition Edgeworth placed on defending her.

When one lies that much to someone they love, there’s something wrong with that picture, and the last client I didn’t trust was Matt Engarde.

Which leaves me with a terrible, choking taste in my mouth.

I’m about to tell her that I’m going to let Edgeworth speak to her about the assault now, when she grabs my wrist. My heart jumps and the bitterness twists up in conflicting affection and want. I’m human, and there was absolutely no closure for me. I can’t blame myself for the desire, but I do.

“She’s your lover, isn’t she?”
That sentence sends chills through me, and not in a good way. But Iris doesn’t sound upset or bitter. She sounds pleased, happy. “Yes,” I reply evenly.

“As I suspected.” Iris smiles brilliantly at me. “She has excellent taste in men. I’m glad the Master is in good hands.”

I gently pull my arm away from her, breaking her grasp. “Well, we weren’t when we visited Hazakura Temple. This is… relatively new.”

“You love her, though, don’t you?”

“I do.”

She closes her eyes. “That’s wonderful,” she tells me. It’s getting kind of creepy, almost like she’s trying to convince herself that she believes that it’s wonderful. “You better go get Mr. Edgeworth. I’m getting sleepy again.”

“Alright,” I say, beyond relieved. “Focus on getting well. I promise I’ll keep you out of detention once you’re discharged.”

Nick is in a strange mood when he emerges from my cousin’s room and Miles goes in. I try not to think about it. I don’t want to think about it. Iris was attacked by her own mother. I know almost exactly how that feels, except that I knew that my attacker was actually Dahlia Hawthorne. She doesn’t need me getting jealous. She needs me to be supportive.

But when my lover looks like he’s being faced with a decision that will tear heaven itself asunder if he makes the wrong choice, I have a little trouble focusing on the big picture.

Things are awkward as I wait for Miles to return from her room. Pearly wants to see her sister. Badly. She also doesn’t seem to realize how torn Nick is or how worried I am about that.

Miles’ interview with her doesn’t take long, though, and in only ten minutes he’s back with us, and needs to speak to Nick. I take Pearly in to see Iris, and things are awkward. She makes it even worse on me as we’re leaving, by telling me to take care of him.

The four of us go out for dinner: burgers. Miles, if he minds, keeps silent as always. Pearly doesn’t mind and asks for the kid’s dinner, which the three of us put together ourselves because there are no kid’s meals at all at this particular burger place. Apparently McDonald’s isn’t good enough for Miles. Neither is Burger King. He’s willing to do burgers, not heart attacks in buns.

And then we go our separate ways. Pearly is absolutely dumbfounded when Nick asks to be dropped off at his apartment and she and I don’t go with him. “He has a lot to think about right now,” I tell her, ignoring the uncomfortable twist in my stomach.

Miles works in his home office while I entertain Pearly until it’s time for her to sleep. She doesn’t want me to take the couch; she wants to take the couch, which works out well for me. I’m losing Nick. I know I am. We both are. I need to feel secure.

Once she’s out, snoring away adorably on the couch, Miles and I quietly go back to the guest room to talk. He won’t leave until I tell him what’s bothering me so. And then he just listens. He’s completely calm about this and it’s almost infuriating. If he’s having doubts about us and those doubts lead him to leave, Miles will be losing him, just as much as I am.
“I’m not worried about that.”

“How can you say that? How are you so sure?” I demand.

Miles shrugs. “I trust him.”

I stare at him, my jealousy and paranoia making a sharp turn at guilt and heading down to shame. I blush, hard. He’s right. This is silly. But…

“No bottling, Maya. Out with it.” He brushes a hand down my face, gently.

“I already told you what’s bothering me,” I protest, not wanting to let him know I still don’t think I can win against her.

Miles sighs, and rubs my back and the back of my neck. “You are so easy to read, Maya,” he informs me, his voice affectionate. “You haven’t told me everything. Come on, out with it.” I don’t answer him, instead just lean into him. He puts his arm around my shoulders. “Please?”

Well damn. If he’s saying please instead of just insisting, he must really want to know. “I can’t compete with her, Miles.”

“What do you mean, you can’t compete with her? Wright isn’t going anywhere, Maya.”

“You don’t know that. She was his first girlfriend. They broke up because of her evil twin sister, he didn’t want to. She’s smart, pretty, sensitive-”

“And you’re even smarter, prettier, and more sensitive,” he cuts me off.

Hearing him say that actually upsets me more. “You don’t have to say that,” I tell him. “I know I’m dumb as a brick and pretty- yeah, pretty ugly!”

Miles snaps my name. I realize just about then that I sound pretty insecure and irrational. “You are not dumb by any stretch of the imagination, and I don’t know where you get the idea that you’re ugly. You’re beautiful.”

I lean into him again, letting him put his arms around me. “You really think I’m beautiful?”

“I do.”

I’m comfortable with how he’s holding me. It’s a stark contrast to how awkward and uncomfortable we both were with any physical contact with each other the night a goofy porn movie changed everything. It seems so long ago, although it’s only been about two months.

Things sure are changing fast. I wish the world would stop turning so quickly.

---

My childish insecurities dealt with, Miles and I engage in a different kind of discourse. It’s dangerous with Pearly sleeping out on the couch, and I’m struck with the odd feeling that I’m cheating, again. Which is ridiculous, since Nick doesn’t care if I sleep with just Miles. Miles doesn’t care if I sleep with Nick and I don’t think I’d care if those two decided to have a night to themselves, either. At least, that’s what we’ve agreed on. All three of us are in on this, and only us three. As long as no one brings anyone else into the picture, we’re fine.

He goes back to his room after a few minutes of after-sex cuddling. I don’t want him to, but we’ll
be in really deep trouble if Pearly catches us. She’d take it right back to Nick and then we’d have the uncomfortable task of explaining why Nick doesn’t care and why she shouldn’t tell anyone in Kurain about this.

And Pearly hates any kind of dishonesty, but she especially hates dishonesty by omission now. I feel a little guilty about this, but this is a private matter. And I doubt she really wants to know about my love life in detail. As long as I’m with Nick, she’s happy.

Miles takes me and Pearly with him to court the next day. When I see Nick, the veneer of tension is gone, and he smiles broadly when he sees us, greeting us both warmly, and he’s even openly affectionate. He asks how our night went and hugs Pearly, and then it’s down to business. Iris isn’t here today, obviously. She’s still in the hospital. Can they do this without her present?

As long as he got her agreement, then yes, Miles tells him. This should go very, very smoothly; there shouldn’t be any hitches in the process.

There is one hitch: the judge points out that the agreement doesn’t seem to have been run by anyone in Kurain Village. Someone has to give the okay for the prison to release her to the village’s custody and ensure that her house arrest will be enforced. Fortunately, I have more than enough authority to do that, so after an amusing exchange between the Judge, Nick and Miles that yes, I, Maya Fey, at nineteen years of age, am the one who should be making such major decisions about the village as this one, the Judge calls a recess and Miles escorts me and Nick to the prosecutor’s lobby so they can amend the plea agreement. He has me sign it, and then things run smoothly.

The order goes into effect immediately. As soon as Iris is released from the hospital, she’s to be escorted to Kurain Village. I immediately agree to be responsible for that transport, although Gumshoe has to accompany us as well.

She’s healed enough from the attack to go in only a few more days. Pearly is ecstatic, her exuberance only slightly diminished when she discovers that no, Nick won’t be coming with us this time. Miles isn’t, either. Nick has a few things with Mr. Godot to wrap up and Miles is in charge of prosecuting my aunt, again. He’s driving for a very stiff sentence this time. While she still hasn’t killed anyone with her own hands yet, Miles is arguing that she did intend to kill her daughter when she attacked Iris.

But they will both be following when they’re done. That makes Pearly a bit happier and Iris smiles at that news.

Iris stays in the manor, with me, in the room next to mine. Gumshoe stays with us for a few days, too, to make sure her ankle bracelet is functioning as it should and make sure she knows just how far she can go from the manor, which isn’t far at all. He has to make an adjustment to make sure she can get to our midwife’s home, at least.

We don’t talk about Nick.

There’s tension between us. Iris is trying very hard not to show it, but there’s definitely resentment there. She knows that I’m sleeping with Nick, at least, and she resents it. I try to call her on it and she does little but smile sadly, genuinely affectionate, and tell me that it’s her problem, not mine.

In about a week, Nick and Miles arrive. I can already tell that things aren’t sugarplums and happy fairies between them, either. They’re sharing another room in the manor; not the side room, they’d have little privacy there. But I know there’s nothing intimate happening, out of respect at least. And very possibly out of resentment between them, as well.
Iris herself identifies the cause of the tension between Nick and Miles. “Mystic Maya, might I ask a question? It is a little intrusive, but I’m confused.”

Oh dear. “Go ahead,” I tell her, faking a smile.

“Why is Mr. Edgeworth acting like he’s jealous every time Mr. Wright speaks to me?”

It’s only been a few days since the boys arrived, and Iris has started calling Nick ‘Mr. Wright’, which makes me feel marginally better about this situation. I doubt she’d be that formal with him if she was pursuing him, or vice versa. But Miles? Jealous? No. “What do you mean?”

“It’s almost as if he’s trying to avoid speaking to me; if I’m talking to Mr. Wright, he waits until I’m done but he’s rather short with him. There are other things, but those two are the most striking.” She looks as though she’s about to cry. “I haven’t done anything to offend him, have I?”

“I doubt it,” I tell her. “We’re pretty close. I’m sure he’d have at least told me if you did, but I’ll talk to him.”

“Only if it’s no trouble,” she said doubtfully. “I don’t want to cause trouble between you and your friend.”

My friend, huh… “It’s no trouble,” I reassure her. “Leave it to me.”

I find him in the manor’s little library, which isn’t surprising. He took a lot of interest in that room when I showed them around the rest of the manor; not even Nick’s been able to see all of it until now. I intended to show Nick around after I channeled Mimi Miney, but that didn’t quite work out as I planned. Miles probably would have been happy if I’d told him not to worry about the rest of the grand tour and have fun looking through the books. As it is, he’s reading up on the history of Kurain, a subject that bores me to tears but Miles seems thoroughly engrossed in.

As he is now. “Hey there. You busy?”

He looks up from the volume he’s reading. “Not particularly.”

“Iris is afraid that she’s offended you.”

Miles rolls his eyes, going back to his book. “She has.”

“What? How?”

“That ‘Mr. Wright’ business is fake.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand-”

He sighs, closes the book, and sets it carefully on the desk beside him. “It’s an act,” he says in a flat voice. “I happened to overhear part of a conversation between the two; they didn’t know I was there. I don’t know what they were discussing but she referred him as ‘Feenie’ the whole time.”

A cold discomfort grips my insides at that. “Why would she-”

“Probably for the same reason Wright was calling her ‘Rissy’.”

That hurts. It didn’t take him very long at all to replace her pet name, did it? As I’m about to voice
this, Miles says, “Careful, Maya. There aren’t very many explanations for this but the obvious, but we both know sometimes the obvious isn’t the correct one. I’m choosing to trust him. I ask you to give him the same benefit of the doubt, Maya.”

“Is that why you haven’t confronted either of them yet?”

“Yes.”

As discomfited with this as I am now, he’s right. The easiest explanation isn’t always the right one. “I told her I’d talk to you,” I say, uncomfortable and not knowing what I’m supposed to tell her now.

Miles sees my dilemma and thinks about it for a second, before answering. “Tell her that it’s my problem, not hers. I’ll deal with it.”

It’s drawing close to when Miles has to return to the city, and the two of us will go with. That is the plan. Iris doesn’t know what I’d said to Miles, but she thanks me for talking to him. He is less cold than he had been.

The more comfortable Iris is in Kurain, the more Nick backs off. Perhaps he’s only been so friendly until she was comfortable? “That’s a reasonable deduction,” Miles replies, when I run that idea past him. “I told you we could trust him.”

Our plan doesn’t pan out as we expect it to, though. Three days before he is scheduled to return to work, Miles gets a call at the main house from the chief prosecutor, begging him to come back. Apparently some young hot-shot has made a mess of an investigation and Miles is the only one the chief prosecutor trusts to fix it.

I am more than a little surprised when Pearly reveals that she is sad that Miles is leaving early. He is kind to her, and while she’s never had a father she imagines that is what having a father is like. When I press her about Nick, she says she feels like he is more like a big brother.

Therefore, upon finding out that Nick and I are to go back to the city in two more days as well, Pearly begs me to go with. Her training won’t be a problem, she promises. She’ll train extra, extra hard so she’ll be okay for a week, at least. Maybe Mr. Edgeworth will watch Kid’s Theater with her again!

I hadn’t known that he did in the first place.

I can’t say no to her, with how wound up she is. I have to get Nick’s okay, as well as Miles’. Miles is due to call to let us know he is home safe in only a few hours; I’ll get that out of the way, first. Once he says it is alright, I can talk to Nick.

I’d just gotten off the phone with Edgeworth. Morgan Fey wasn’t an issue anymore.

It happened suddenly; the EMTs on duty had tried to save her. They really had. But the heart attack was too severe, too long in coming, and she was probably dead before she hit the floor. There was nothing that could be done.
Well, good. I couldn’t feel sorry for her. I am relieved. The woman was a monster and I was glad I wouldn’t have to fight her influence in Pearls anymore.

I do feel sorry for Pearls. She is a child. Despite the evil Morgan did, Pearls still loves her mother; we had to convince her that it was okay to love her, that she wasn’t a bad person because she did. Pearls now understands that her mother tried to hurt Maya. She knows it was wrong. That was what Maya and I were worried about, and it isn’t a problem.

But how am I going to tell little Pearls that her mother has died?

Morgan has two immediate next of kin. Pearls is a child and I don’t know how I’m going to handle her. The next is Iris. I don’t know how Iris will react, either, but at least she’s an adult. She’ll likely be the one to finalize arrangements.

I’m getting to know her again, but I’m still not comfortable talking to her. Maya thinks she’s ugly and stupid compared to her and Edgeworth doesn’t like that I would rather let Maya work that out on her own. Yes, it’s awkward and uncomfortable but Maya’s stronger than he’s giving her credit for. She hasn’t talked to me, or Iris, and we’re the ones she needs to come to for reassurance, not Edgeworth. Even he acknowledges that it doesn’t matter what he says when she’s worried about our opinions.

He still thinks the burden should be on me to initiate the conversation. But it’s awkward and uncomfortable and frankly, I don’t want to.

And, it seems, I’ve done something else to piss him off, and like Maya, he’s not talking about it. Passive aggressive little…

Dreadful and ridiculous discomfort or not, though, Iris is my client. Edgeworth called me because it’s my job to tell her things such as this. I’m getting paid to. Not very much but I am getting paid. Sister Bikini insisted. I represent clients on a sliding scale; if they claim they can’t pay a flat fee, they can provide financial information to prove it and I’ll reduce the fee for them, to something they’re more able to pay. This often results in pro bono work, as has happened to me four times, twice for the same person. I’m not charging Armando; saving Maya’s life is payment enough. And I didn’t get paid for Matt Engarde’s defense, because, well… Defense lawyers generally don’t throw their clients under the bus like I did.

I didn’t mind not getting paid. It felt good to see the disgusting man get what was coming to him.

And when Sister Bikini insisted on paying me, I insisted on using the records that covered the dates of the trial. Even if their ability to pay has changed. It’s only fair. Besides, she keeps tipping me despite my protests that she shouldn’t be tipping a lawyer. You tip a busboy, not a lawyer.

And, since I’ve found Iris in the library of the manor, I need to stop making comparisons between busboys and lawyers, because that’s not what I was seeking her out to talk about. “Iris. I need to talk to you about something. I have some bad news.”

I almost choke at calling it bad. “Yes?” she prompts, closing the book she’s reading, brown eyes full of worry. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing to do with your case,” I reassure her. “It’s a different matter. You may have to go into the city to deal with it, I don’t know. I still have to talk to Edgeworth again, I said I’d call him back once I talked to you.”

“Mr. Edgeworth is involved?”
Oh man, that wasn’t reassuring at all. “Only as an intermediate. Rissy, I… don’t know how to tell you this. Your mother… passed away this morning.”

Her eyes widen ever so slightly. “How?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“Massive heart attack.” Iris’s eyes drop, and she sets the book on the couch next to her. As she presses a hand to her mouth, I add, “They did everything the could for her, Iris-”

“She just got away with everything…”

I raise an eyebrow at that. “What?”

“My mother. Sending me and Dahlia away, using Pearl, hurting Maya, killing that doctor and my aunt… she’s not to be punished for any of it now!”

This has taken me by surprise. Dollie? Wishing ill on someone? Really? Is she… “I suppose you don’t believe in hell, then,” I say quietly.

She shakes her head. “We continue existing forever, it is true, but there’s no punishment aside from one’s own mind. My mother’s conscience is clear and she holds herself blameless for her failures.” The reference to how Mia and I got Dahila to leave Maya isn’t lost on me; she must’ve heard about that last bit of testimony somewhere. “It would’ve been better for her to live. She’s getting away with it all, Feenie!”

Iris starts crying. She’s stressed and upset and grieving at the same time she’s angry that Morgan won’t be punished for her crimes. This has been horrible for her, and she’s probably angry at herself for feeling this way, if this is really Iris and not Dahlia.

Iris has no spiritual power, though. The thought that she’s Dahlia is a paranoid ideation to be embarrassed about and thoroughly ignored. I can’t ignore how much she’s still suffering, either. I can tell her that she has to deal with Morgan’s final arrangements somehow, and ask her assistance in telling Pearls later. I sit next to her and pull her into my arms as she cries. Right now, she needs her friend, not her lawyer.

We stay like that for a while, even after the tears stop. “I’m sorry, Feenie,” she says finally, not pulling away. “This isn’t like me, at all.”

“It’s alright, Rissy. This is a stressful situation for everyone. You have every right to-”

My sentence is cut off by the door to the library slamming open, abruptly. My gaze jerks in that direction, my heart jumping unpleasantly at who I see there, watching me holding my ex-lover in the library with the door closed and, at this moment, for no apparent reason.

Maya.
I hear Nick yelling at me to wait. I don’t listen. Miles was wrong and we’re both complete idiots. Why why why why did he do it this way? Why couldn’t he have just told us?

I come to a stop at a tree in the manor’s huge yard, a climbing tree I remember hauling myself up when I was a child. My sister stood by laughing as I ascended, yelling at me to be careful, I would hurt myself if I fell. I never did.

As I sink against the tree, ready to have myself a good cry over this, I see Nick approaching me. I don’t want to talk to him, absolutely not. I’m not ready to hear anything he has to say. It will probably do him no good right now.

But then I see that he’s barely holding back tears. My resolve to tell him to leave me alone right now melts. “Do I get a chance to defend myself?” he asks in a tight voice, as he approaches.

I look up at him, determined not to cry over this in front of him. “Do I have a choice?”

“Of course you do. You’ll hear it from Edgeworth if you don’t, though.”

“Was that a threat?”

“That was an observation.”

I keep my voice bland as I say, “Defend away, Nick. It’s what you do best.”

He smirks at me. “This isn’t how I wanted to tell you this.”

I can’t tell whether the smirk is the genuine expression, or the unshed tears. Is it possible to look smug and heartbroken at the same time? “What, that you’ve decided to go back to her?”

Nick shakes his head. “No. Your aunt is dead.”

O-oh… “You… you mean, you were holding her… b-because…”

“Yes. I’d just told her that her mother passed away, Maya.”

I put my head against my knees, the urge to cry much stronger now. “I am horrible,” I whimper.

Nick sits next to me, putting a hand on my back. “You are not, Maya,” he says in a bit of a scolding voice. “And you’re starting to scare me. And Edgeworth. And now you’re scaring Iris and Pearls, too.” He pauses. “We want you to get counseling.”

I try to process that little bit of information. This started off as me jumping to conclusions and now it is a discussion about my mental health. He’s got a point, I have to admit. But the way he barrels on tells me that he thinks I’m going to argue with him. “I’m not saying you’re crazy or anything like that. I just know that when someone you love tries to murder you, it hurts like hell and I really wish I’d actually gotten counseling instead of relying on Mia to drag me out of it. She did a good job, but she wasn’t a counselor and I am neither a counselor nor Mia, and-”

“I agree with you.”

“Maya, please just listen- what?”
“I said I agree with you,” I repeat myself, taking a deep breath. “I mean, I was completely infatuated with you, at least, when we went to Hazakura and I teased you about Iris. It didn’t bother me then. So why does it bother me now?”

“Oh, that's easy,” Nick informs me.

“Is it now?”

“Uh-huh. It bothers you now because you know what my relationship to her was, and because of our relationship.”

I frown at him. “In other words, you think I'm jealous.”

“Didn't say that. At all,” Nick replies, a bit defensively. “If anyone's at fault for this misunderstanding, it's me. I... should have been honest about everything. But that doesn't mean that you're off the hook, Maya. If this wasn't the catalyst, something else would have been.”

I nod, agreeing with everything he was saying, from it being his fault I came to the conclusion he did to the fact that I probably would have found something else to get super upset about. “You have to promise me something, though, Nick,” I tell him, “before I agree to any counseling of any sort.”

“What is it? If I can do it, it's yours.” He leans over and kisses me on the forehead.

It feels good and I smile. “Promise me you won't keep any secrets like that again,” I tell him. “I know that things were different then, but you really worried me and if I'd known everything, I don't think I'd be as scared now.”

“You're right. You're my assistant. If anyone should have known, you should have. I'm sorry. No more secrets,” he promises solemnly.

“Thank you.” I heave a sigh. “We better get back to the manor. I owe my cousin a huge apology.”

Iris, much to my relief, accepts my apology with a sincere, “I understand, Mystic Maya,” a hug, and then we both have a good cry over my aunt, holding each other. We both feel like traitors to ourselves and each other, but she was our family. She might not have loved us, but we loved her.

We talk, long into the night. Nick keeps Pearly occupied. We talk about Nick, we talk about training, we talk about Mr. Godot and his relationship with Mia. We talk about how Dahlia poisoned him, not only because he was too close to the truth, but because it would hurt my sister. She knew who Mia was, even back then.

We talk about how everything could have been avoided if she’d just spoken up, either when she dated Nick to get the necklace back, or when Godot discovered the plot against me. I’m angry at her and I feel bad for it. My mother could have said something, too. I wish she had. Iris suggests getting someone to channel her; I decline. I’m not ready to do that.

I’m also not ready to tell Pearly her mother died today, but I must and we talk about the best way to do it. Quickly, with all three of us there. That would probably be best. Of all of us, Pearly is the one who is going to take this the hardest. She knows the truth about her mother now, and I know, even now, that it tears her apart.
Nick is the last one up the next morning, as usual. Iris, Nick and I sit in the kitchen, making awkward small talk and drinking coffee as we wait for Pearly’s Kid’s Masterpiece Theater to finish. No point in spoiling her small pleasures in life.

When it does, at eleven-thirty sharp, the three of us go back out to the living room, solemn. “Pearly,” I say, sitting on the couch. “C’mere. We need to talk to you about something.”

She looks so terrified, but she obeys. “Yes, Mystic Maya?”

As I try to find the words, Pearly blurts out, “You’re sending me away, aren’t you? I was bad so I need to be exiled, right?”

“Wh- no!”

Iris pales at Pearly’s words, and I’m flustered, too flustered to speak. Nick somehow manages to take that in stride. “No, Pearls, you’re not being sent away. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Nick?”

“I’m sure. Would I, a lawyer, say someone is innocent when they are not?”

“Uhm… You said that nasty actor-”

“That was different,” he cuts her off with a heavy sigh. This just got a lot more difficult. “Pearls, listen… this isn’t about anything you did. No one’s mad at you; no one’s sending you away.”

“Okay, Mr. Nick. I trust you.” She clearly does not. “What did you need to talk to me about, then?”

Iris is the one who speaks. “Pearl, sweetie… we got some very bad news last night. About Mother. She…”

Pearly cuts her off, her fear reaching into panic. “She’s not coming back, right? Tell me she’s not coming back! Please! I don’t want her to make me do anymore bad things!”

“No, Pearl, no, she’s not coming back,” Iris says, taking the child by the shoulders, leaning down to make eye contact easier. “She can’t ever come back now.”

Pearly’s panic calms down, although now it’s replaced by dread. “Sister Iris… what do you mean, she can’t ever come back?”

“Pearl… she… passed away, yesterday.”

My baby cousin quiets immediately.

Beside me, Nick is holding his breath. We’re all watching as she processes this new information, her expression frozen in that look of impending doom. After a second, she takes a shaky breath, and says, “I won’t cry.”

“Pearly, it’s okay to cry,” I say.

“She was a bad person.”

“She was our mother,” Iris counters, her eyes tearing up.

The little girl breaks down, throwing herself into her sister’s arms. I ignore a pang of jealousy; this is how it should be. Pearly should be going to Iris. Iris gathers her up in her arms as Pearly cries.
Nick and I exchange a look and, quietly, leave the room.

“You okay?” he asks when we close the door behind us.

I nod tiredly. “We need to call Miles and tell him that Iris and Pearly know,” I say. And I need to ask him about that counseling Nick says I’m supposed to get.

Wright sounds terribly tired and heartsick when he calls me back. The excrement became intimately acquainted with the fan, as it were, which has resulted in Maya agreeing that she needs grief counseling. Especially now.

It sounds like little Pearl might need it, as well, from what Wright says. It’s too early to discern that, though. Pearl is only nine years old; she has been exposed to things that would make a grown man’s blood chill in his veins. She is likely much tougher than Wright is giving her credit for, but I understand the concern. He loves that child like his own.

Iris is taking the news of her mother’s death well. Wright reports some anger with her, but that is, again, understandable. She is with Pearl, right now, so she cannot discuss a trip to the city to take care of Morgan’s final arrangements. But Wright will have her call me just as soon as Pearl has settled down.

In the meantime, I will make arrangements for Maya to speak with a grief counselor. She has seen things that would make a grown man’s blood chill in his veins, and she is likely much tougher than I am giving her credit for. But I can’t help it; it seems I love her.

I sigh as I hit the receiver to hang the phone up when I am done speaking to Wright, and dial the number for my victim’s advocate contact.

I see the social worker Nick and Miles wants me to see, twice. The first visit goes well; we talk about a lot of things. She expresses quite a bit of disbelief over my career, but in the end accepts the possibility of it, especially since Miles hands me Iris’ trial transcript. It’s all there in black and white.

We talk about Sis’s death, about how much it hurt to be blamed for it. We talk about my kidnapping, my mother’s killing, the feelings of betrayal that are tainting my new relationship with my older cousin.

Time is up by the time we start talking about Dahlia, so we pick up with that the next visit. I talk about being angry with Nick for hiding who Iris was to him, even though this happened long before we became lovers, and the hiding part happened before that, as well. Somehow the subject of Miles comes up.

“You mean you’re sleeping with both men?”


“And you are nineteen?”

“Yes ma’am.”
“How old are these men?”

I shrug. I’m an adult; I don’t see how it matters, but I answer anyway. I’m not the professional.
“Twenty-six.”

“And you’re nineteen.”

“Yes.”

It’s all downhill from there and that is the end of that. Just to spite this mean, judgmental woman, not only do I wear them out that night, but I’m so demanding that Miles ends up calling me “your Majesty” by the end of the night. Tell me my best friends are exploiting me…

Miles wants me to try another counselor. I refuse. In order for any counselor to do me any good, they’ll need to know what my current “situation” is and I can’t foresee any future discussions about the three of us ending any differently than that one did.

Besides, don’t they have books for this kind of thing?

Well, yes, Miles replies. They have books for everything. But self-help books are no replacement for real, face-to-face help with a professional, he tells me.

“Do you think I’ll find a counselor who doesn’t care I’m sleeping with two older men?”

Nick is quiet through this discussion. I can tell by his demeanor that he agrees with me. Miles can tell, too. “It is possible. It’s fallacious to think that all grief counselors are too conservative to appreciate a polyamorous relationship.”

“That was a really weak straw man, Edgeworth,” Nick interjects. “Try answering the question.”

“Well, no, it’s not likely, but-”

“Great, it's settled. We'll hit the bookstore tomorrow.”

“But-”

“Miles.”

“Come now, Wright, this isn't nearly serious enough to warrant using my first name.”

I giggle as they go back and forth, their antics for my benefit, I know. Eventually Miles drops the issue with a prediction that we’re going to regret going this route, and we sleepily talk until we’re all three falling asleep.

The next day, as Nick says, we head out to the bookstore. I spend more time in the manga section than in the self-help section; Miles eventually drags me over to where I’m supposed to be, and Nick’s already flipping through a few books. He has suggestions, based on how I am, and the three of us finally decide on a title that has a lot of exploration activities, and very little by the way of explanation. That’s probably best, Nick thinks, considering how distracted I can get.

Miles also springs for a pretty purple notebook with blue flowers on it that he catches me looking at. “Use it for the activities,” he tells me when we get to check-out. “I can’t stand it when books are marked up.”

“But it’s intended to be marked up!” Nick protests.
“I don’t care. Books weren’t meant to be handwritten in.”

Nick and I drop it, eyeing each other knowingly. Good old obsessive-compulsive Miles Edgeworth.

It takes me a few months to work through the book, between my studies at Kurain, running Kurain, and my employment with Nick. But it helps. It helps immensely. I don’t know how or why, but it does.

Very little changes between the three of us. Nick and I start keeping changes of clothes and even a few snacks at Miles’s, where we end up just about every Friday night. We try Nick’s place, and mine, but Miles’s is by far the household that’s big enough to easily handle three people; my tiny studio apartment isn’t going to cut it and Nick’s only slightly bigger one-bedroom apartment isn’t much better. Especially considering how messy he is.

I happen to know that Nick and Miles are still sleeping together even when I’m in Kurain for training and governing, and occasionally dealing with problems in said governance. I care remarkably little about this fact. A little jealousy that I’m getting left out, maybe, but they both make that up to me when I return.

It’s during one of those visits to Kurain Village that it happens.

It’s after training for the day; I’m sitting back, watching a rerun of the Steel Samurai, enjoying a strawberry smoothie and plotting ways to make one of the boys make me one when I get home. All of a sudden, the news jingle cuts in and “BREAKING NEWS” flashes across the screen. The news reporter, along with the photo from Nick’s court ID is on the screen, and my stomach lurches painfully before the anchorwoman even speaks: “We’re live from Central Los Angeles, where a real court drama is unfolding as we speak. Our court contacts have just revealed that renowned criminal defense attorney Phoenix Wright has just been arrested on charges of forgery and aiding and abetting…”

I put my drink down, my heart and mind racing. What the hell is- my train of thought is interrupted by the main house phone ringing; I pick up the receiver and Miles’s voice comes through, without even giving me a chance to say hello. “Maya!” he exclaims; he’s breathing heavily, and it sounds like he’s running. “You have to come home now! Wright is-”

“I know,” I cut him off in a whisper, my eyes glued to the television. “I’m watching it on the news right now.”

“Wh-how the hell did they find out-” Miles briefly stops running when I say that, and then I can hear his footsteps, faster than they had been when he called. “You just- you need to come home. Quickly!”

“I’ll be there as soon as I-”

“I have to go,” Miles pants, and he hangs up. I let my the hand holding the receiver fall to my side, watching as Detective Gumshoe escorts Nick through the courthouse doors, the detective’s hand on his arm. His demeanor is protective, and as reporters surge forward, clamoring for a statement, Gumshoe glowers with a ferocity I thought he had reserved for threats to Maggey Byrde, and barks for them to stand back. Light glints off the silver handcuffs binding Nick’s hands in front of him. He looks dazed, like he’s trying to pretend this isn’t happening to him. A blond man who can’t be older than twenty follows behind them, his expression grim.
Seconds later, Miles bursts through those same doors. “I’ll take it from here, Mr. Gavin,” he says, short of breath from his dash to get there in time.

And then he, too, is mobbed by reporters; the blond man is separated from the other three as Gumshoe helps Nick get into the police cruiser waiting for them as quickly as possible. A reporter is asking Mr. Gavin if he has any comment. “He does not!” Miles calls over the din of the reporters.

“Miles, I—” the blond man starts, and Miles turns and points at him. “Say a single word to the press about this and you’ll be looking for a new job!” he roars.

This clearly upsets the other man. “You can’t do that!” he snaps. “Just because you’re his friend—“

“How dare you!” Miles cuts him off angrily. “Thin ice, Mr. Gavin! Very thin ice! No, we have no comment!” and with that, he gets into the back of the cruiser next to Nick, and they drive away. I assume they’re heading for the detention center.

The station reporter’s voice cuts in over the roar of the media, saying, “We just witnessed Mr. Phoenix Wright, renowned criminal defense attorney—”

I turn the TV off and dial Nick’s cell phone number, my hands shaking. It rings twice, and then goes to voicemail; Miles must have turned it off. Fine then! Fighting back tears, I hang up and call his cell number.

“Maya—”

“I want to talk to him!” I say, almost hysterical. “Let me talk to Nick!”

He sounds torn, unhappy, almost afraid. “I can’t do that. He’s under arrest—”

“I know. I know! But please, Miles, I’m begging you!”

He makes a noise, unhappy and distraught. “Hang on.” I can still hear his voice, but it’s muffled. Nick says something, and in the background, I can hear Detective Gumshoe. And then Miles, questioning, and what sounds like an affirmative sound from Gumshoe. The next thing I hear is the clink of metal against metal, and Nick’s voice, shaking and frightened. “Maya?!”

“Nick!” I’m relieved to hear him, although his voice doesn’t ease my own fear. “Are you okay?! What happened?!”

“I didn’t do it, Maya,” he says simply. “I didn’t forge that evidence. Someone set me up. You have to—”

“I believe you,” I say in what I hope is a reassuring voice. That doesn’t tell me what he supposedly did, but I suspect that he’s worried about saying the wrong things; he is, after all, under arrest and everything he says is liable to be brought up in the case against him. “What about that aiding and abetting thing?” I asked.

Nick laughs. It’s a tired, upset, bitterly amused laugh. “I didn’t do that, either. I didn’t know he was going to do that. If I had, I would have alerted the court—”

I’ve figured out by now that Nick isn’t going to give me any details right now. Not with a detective and prosecutor right there, no matter whom they are. “Okay, Nick. Just stay calm, I’m coming to get you.”
“Don’t, Maya. Edgeworth is having Gumshoe sit on my paperwork until he can force a preliminary hearing. He’ll have me out of there in a matter of hours.”

I can’t express how relieved I am to hear that Miles is trying to help him. “I’m still coming,” I say firmly. “You- Nick, I can’t-”

“Alright,” he says softly. And then I hear something that might be a small, controlled sob, and he adds, in a whisper, “Maya, I’m so scared.”

“I know. You’ll be okay, Nick. Everything will be okay. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“… see you then…”

He hangs up, and it occurs to me that it was probably difficult for him to hold the phone to his ear on his own if he’s still handcuffed. I firmly put the thought of Nick being handcuffed out of my head and dash about to get ready to go.
Chapter 9

I maintain my composure in the courtroom when it goes to hell. I have to; I still have an innocent client about to be condemned. Too late, I realize that telling the judge that he can’t hold my client responsible for my personal actions can and probably will be construed as an admission of guilt.

And then my client runs.

I am still positive that he is innocent, and I don’t regret taking on his case. I do, however, wish, as the judge orders my arrest and Gumshoe complies, that Maya was here. And at the same time, as he cuffs my hands in front of me, a show of trust and faith that I don’t miss, I am glad she’s away. I don’t want her or Pearls to witness this.

Gumshoe escorts me from the courtroom to head for the detention center. As we pass one of the defendant lobbies, I catch sight of Mike Meekins watching over a little girl. My fear-addled mind and the strain of staying calm delay it, but I recognize her after a moment: Trucy Enigmar. My client’s eight-year-old daughter.

Trucy looks up as we pass and our eyes meet, for just a split second. She’s trying just as hard to stay calm, stay strong, but I can see the horrible pain in her brown eyes.

Oh god, he’s abandoned a child. Forget what’s going to happen to me! I’m an adult, I can handle myself.

What’s going to happen to Trucy?

I’m ready to go in record time, just under fifteen minutes. Pearly, when she realizes that I’m leaving for the city because something is horrifically wrong, wants to come with, but I insist that she stays in Kurain. I doubt Nick wants her to see him like this.

The train ride seems so much longer than it usually does, and I’m on the express train. I’m able to flag down a taxi pretty quickly, and when I tell the cabbie that I need to go to the Detention Center, he says in surprise, “You’re that lawyer’s assistant, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am,” I confirm.

“I’ll step on it, then,” he says. As he pulls away from the station, he adds, “Listen, you tell that lawyer not to let them do this to him, you hear? They ain’t got no proof he did anything wrong and they know it. He’s being scapegoated clear as day. He shouldn’t stand for it. You got that? You tell him to fight them, you hear?”

Based on what I’d heard from the news, this man’s vehemence that Nick is innocent is startling. “I will,” I answer, “but tell me- what are they saying about him?”

We’re stuck at a red light. “Well, some of them talking heads are saying that he took on a guilty man and was desperate to get him off the hook ‘cuz of the man’s little girl. Some others think he’s the devil who’s getting’ his due, and still others are sayin’ what I’m sayin’- that he’s bein’ railroaded because he’s good and they’re embarrassed. An’ I know that they’re the ones who are right, ‘cause of that Engarde case two years ago. You remember that one, dontcha?”
“How could I forget it,” I mutter, angered at what the cabbie just told me. The devil getting his due indeed.

We pull up to the detention center, and the cabbie reaches back and hands me his card. “Here. Give this to ‘im, let him know I’ll be giving him a special rate if he needs a cab ever. This trip’s on me, Miss.”

I’m astonished by that, but I don’t have the luxury of looking a gift-horse in the mouth. “Thank you,” I say as I get out of the taxi. “Drive safely.”

I don’t hear his reply as I close the car door and dash up the detention center’s front steps. Miles meets me in the lobby, crossing the distance between us to pull me into a tight embrace. “How is he? Can I see him?” I ask quickly.

“Considering the circumstances, he’s well. And yes, but in a few moments. I’ve already arranged for his release. His review with the Bar Association is tomorrow at nine and his criminal hearing will be at noon. I’ve managed to have myself placed as the prosecutor, and another defense attorney has already stepped forward to represent him there.”

The fact that Miles has all of their ducks in a row already is a bit of a relief to me. “What will happen at the hearing?”

“This hearing is only to determine if the charges against Wright are founded,” he answers absently. “I couldn’t block them from being filed, but this is the next best thing; we both know there’s no basis for criminal charges here. Being human isn’t a crime.”

“But if he was arrested, then there must be some proof that he did it.” I’m anxious, and I’d be wringing my hands if Miles didn’t still have his arms around me.

Miles shakes his head. “The only proof they have is that he presented clearly forged evidence. Possessing and presenting it doesn’t mean he was responsible for its creation. We have absolutely no proof that he was; we can’t prove he even knew about his client’s escape plans, either, let alone that he helped with them. The charges are unsubstantiated and I’m going to make sure they’re dropped tomorrow at the hearing.”

Satisfied that Miles is capable of what he says he’s going to do, I ask, “And his review with the Bar Association?”

“That I have no control over,” he says grimly, “and I can already guarantee he won’t come out of it with his badge.”

My stomach twists painfully at that statement. I want to stay in Miles’ arms and cry, but I can’t do that. Nick needs us to be strong right now.

Less than a minute after that conversation, the heavy bolted door leading to the holding cells opens, and a guard escorts Nick out. He looks haunted, grim, and distraught; his black hair is messed up, his tie is loose and the first couple of buttons on his shirt are undone. He’s carrying his suit jacket; when he sees us, he pulls it back on to free his arms and rubs one of his wrists absently. We wordlessly leave the detention center,

By the time we arrive at his home, Nick is talking. Not about the case, not about his arrest. Surprisingly, about Steel Samurai, scolding me for getting him into the series, casually mentioning that we still don’t know how that porn ends, but he’s really not in the mood to finish it tonight; maybe over the weekend. He’s hungry; they only feed the detainees who are staying around for a
while and he was in there for a number of hours. It’s way past dinner time now and would Miles mind calling for Chinese take-out?

We respond to his inquiries, but I can tell by Miles’ voice that he’s just as frightened by Nick’s apparent state of denial as I am. As we get out of the car, Nick rubs one of his wrists absently again and mutters that he needs a shower and a drink. “You know where both those things are,” Miles responds as he unlocks the front door and shows us in.

While Nick is in the shower, Miles calls for the asked-for Chinese food, and then we discuss Nick’s demeanor, working out a plan of action if he snaps. It’s a possibility that neither of us wants to believe is there, but the way he’s just ignoring the events of the afternoon…

The sound of him clearing his throat startles us; he’s standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall, already in the sweatpants and t-shirt he usually wears to bed. “I appreciate the concern,” he says evenly, with a smile. “But I’m not actually in denial, you know. There’s nothing I can do about it right now. Why worry?”

We both look at him doubtfully, and he laughs. It’s so obvious that it’s forced and I wince at hearing it. “If you two could see your faces,” he snickers. “I’m fine. Really. Things will work out, like they always do. How could I stay down when I’ve got such great friends? If all else fails, I can freeload off Miles, right? So I’m losing my badge and may be going to jail. My life is over, but that’s okay. Every new beginning needs an ending of some sort, right?”

His eyes are watering and he’s fighting pitifully hard to keep smiling, but it wavers when neither of us answers him. “Right?” he tries again. Miles gets up and walks to him. He’s barely able to suppress tears now as he says, “You’re here, so everything is-”

“Shut up, Phoenix.”

I stand and join them as Nick’s tears bubble over and he begins crying, great sobs that tear from him, shaking him. Miles yanks him into a tight embrace and I force my way into the hug as Nick cries it out.

He’s in tears for only a few minutes, and he’s mostly calm by the time our takeout arrives. We eat together, with Nick keeping up a steady conversation. This time, we participate fully in it. After we finish, Miles asks uncomfortably, “I need to know what happened, Wright, as detailed as possible.”

Nick fidgets uncomfortably. “I’m going to have to testify tomorrow, right? You’ll find out then.”

“I want to be prepared,” Miles replies. “Hearing it for the first time while you’re on the stand gives me no time to prepare, and I happen to know for a fact you didn’t tell your lawyer a damn thing, either. I’d rather we not both be going into this blind. You know as well as I do that Prosecutor Gavin is going to raise hell when I motion to have the criminal charges dropped.”

The black-haired man sighs heavily. “I took the case over from another attorney,” he says softly. “The one representing me now, in fact. I’d barely had enough time to go through the files. I tried to get Mr. Enigmar to tell me more, but all he would tell me was to do my best and not to worry. His daughter gave me a piece of evidence; she said that it was given to her with instructions to make sure I got it. Said it was very important.”

I put a hand to my mouth. “That was the forged evidence, wasn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” Nick grimaces. “If I’m asked where I got it from, I’m going to have to refuse to testify. I’m not going to put an eight-year-old who has been abandoned in that position.”
“Please don’t refuse to testify on this,” Miles responds pleadingly. “I’m a little insulted you’d think I’d put a child in her situation on the stand, Wright.”

“You made Cody Hackins testify,” Nick retorts.

Miles frowns. “That was different. In any event, we have to establish the possibility that you knew nothing about the forgery. This certainly opens that door, and if need be, your lawyer and I can ask the judge to interview the girl in his chambers about the matter. How did you react when she gave you the evidence, by the way?”

Nick closes his eyes for a moment; I can see him replaying the event in his head. “Surprised and a bit confused,” he says finally. “I wanted to ask her more about the person who gave it to her, but I didn’t have enough time. She wasn’t around during the recess to ask her then, either.”

“I wonder if she’ll remember your confusion,” Miles muses. “What about his escape?”

Nick sighs now. “I should’ve known. Mr. Enigmar kept saying that he couldn’t be found guilty. Not that he wouldn’t, that he couldn’t. The thought that he was planning to run didn’t cross my mind until he was gone.”

Miles looks at his hands, folded on the table. “I’m disappointed,” he says finally. “I was hoping there was something that your attorney and I could use to prove your innocence and get an acquittal. The best I have is that there’s no decisive proof either way.”

“That’s good enough. Just keep me out of jail and off probation. I can’t investigate if I’m locked up or can’t move freely.”

“Investigate?” I repeat, my eyes widening.

And he smiles. The first genuine smile he’s given us since his release from the detention center. It’s horribly bitter, but it’s real. “Yes. Investigate. You can’t seriously think this is over, because it sure as hell isn’t. I’m getting to the bottom of this mess, no matter how long it takes me.”

Miles nods absently. “I thought you’d say something like that. I can’t help you with that, you know.”

“I know I’m on my own with this. I wouldn’t even ask Maya to help. Losing my badge will seriously cripple my investigation, but so be it. I don’t want either of you involved beyond the hearing tomorrow.”

At this point, Nick changes the subject, and we play cards until about midnight. We go to bed then. We’d have gone back to our original sleeping arrangement- with me in the spare room and Nick on the couch- except we need to be refreshed and we’re too used to being together when we’re at Miles’s. We’d actually be more uncomfortable separated. Besides, neither Miles nor I think that Nick should be left alone right now.

I meet the little girl who gave Nick the forged page the next day; she talks to his attorney, a blond man who looks almost exactly like the prosecutor yesterday, except older. The girl also talks to Nick, quite openly. While they’re talking, if he’s not kneeling to make eye contact, he’s holding her. I find it a bit odd that she’s so comfortable with him, but it seems to give Nick some measure of comfort, so I say nothing.

Nick puts me in charge of the child- Trucy Enigmar- during the hearing. Nick’s going to take it on himself to find her someplace to go, which was what he talked with his lawyer about last night, instead of this case. Child Protective Services has already agreed to give him temporary custody,
but for the sole purpose of locating her relatives.

The hearing doesn’t go as Miles believes it will. Sure, Prosecutor Gavin does object, loudly and obnoxiously, when Miles motions to have the charges dismissed. He and Gavin get into an argument, heated and fierce, until Nick’s lawyer, whom I’ve discovered is actually Prosecutor Gavin’s older brother, snaps, “Klavier, stop it! You can’t prove he did anything but present it and you know it!”

I expect Prosecutor Gavin to argue with his defense attorney brother now, and Miles clearly does, as well. Nick watches the exchange passively, his face blank, showing emotion only when Prosecutor Gavin stutters for a moment and then immediately stands down. This is more than just deferring to his big brother. Klavier Gavin is profoundly bewildered by his brother’s statement.

Much to my surprise, little Trucy seems confused, too. “Are you okay, sweetie?” I whisper to her.

“Yeah, Miss Maya. I’m just… what’s going on?”

I try to think of a short, uncomplicated way of explaining it to her. “Mr. Nick-“

“Mr. Attorney, you mean?”

I wince. If she calls him that, it’ll hurt. “Yes. His name is Phoenix, but all of his friends call him Nick,” I tell her. “Something bad happened with your Daddy’s trial, and Nick may be held responsible for it.”

“Oh no!” Trucy is chagrined. “But- but- but he only did what he was supposed to, right?”

“That’s right,” I say firmly. “That’s why he has someone defending him, and the other man, the one in the pink suit.-“

”That’s magenta, Miss Maya.”

“-is trying to explain that Mr. Nick was just trying to do his job and didn’t have anything to do with the bad stuff that happened.” I resist the urge to laugh at Trucy’s correction.

“Oh. Well, I hope they understand…”

“They will,” I whisper. The two of us talked through Nick’s testimony. The Judge shakes his head sadly. “Do you need a cross-examination, Mr. Gavin?” he asks.

“No, your honor. I believe Mr. Wright has given us all of the relevant information in his testimony already.”

“What are the prosecution’s thoughts?”

Miles glances at the two of us in the gallery. “There is only one thing I wish to ask the witness,” he says. “Why did you accept the evidence from that child?”


“Mr. Wright’s method of investigation is rather unconventional,” the Judge concedes, shaking his grey beard. “I believe that’s part of the reason he’s been so successful until now. With his testimony, I don’t doubt that he simply did not think hard enough about it.” The Judge examines the papers on his desk, and then shakes his head. “You’ve been disbarred already, Mr. Wright.”

“Yes, your honor,” he answers, his voice strong and unwavering. “I turned in my badge this
morning following the Bar Association’s review.”

“Then I see no reason to proceed with the criminal charges against you, especially with the dearth of hard evidence on either side. It would be a phenomenal waste of the court’s time, and I’ve never liked the idea of kicking a man when he’s already down.”

Nick doesn’t say anything in response. “Well, if there are no further objections,” the judge says with a sigh, “then I’m prepared to put this nightmare behind us all. Mr. Gavin, are you absolutely positive you have no evidence that could benefit your client's position?”

The judge sounds childishly hopeful. Mr. Gavin shakes his head sadly. “I'm afraid not, Your Honor. Believe me, if we had any decisive evidence that would prove the defendant's innocence, you would have seen it long before he testified.”

The judge's face falls. “Miles? Does the prosecution have anything to say?”

I’m stunned that the judge used his first name. He really doesn’t want to see Nick ruined. “We're in the same position as the defense,” Miles answers, his voice bland. “There is no proof that Mr. Wright had that evidence forged, nor is there proof that he had prior knowledge of Mr. Enigmar’s plans to escape.”

The judge sighs heavily. “I have no choice but to close this matter, then. The court hereby orders that all criminal charges against Mr. Phoenix Wright be dropped immediately following this hearing. This court is adjourned.”

The sound of the gavel hitting the wooden block is almost deafening to me; Nick suddenly looks defeated and weary. I try to pretend to not understand—this was the best scenario he could hope for. But I do understand why he was so sad, so distraught. He'd worked miracles for many clients, myself and Miles included.

And yet there is no miracle for him.

Miles makes sure to clear his schedule for the next few days, so immediately after the hearing, all of us—little Trucy included—pile into Miles's car and we go for lunch, and then back to his place. Miles and I talk about mundane things while Nick occupies himself with entertaining Trucy. We both start when Nick laughs, happily, during a bit of gentle rough-housing in which Trucy manages to “pin” Nick in a “wrestling match.” “I win!” she crows triumphantly.

“Oh yeah?!” he demands, reaching up and ticking her sides. She falls over laughing as he tickles her mercilessly. “You know,” I say to Miles, as softly as I can and still be heard over Nick and Trucy's playing, “I think they're actively trying to distract each other. It's a bit weird for an eight-year-old to be that perceptive and selfless, isn't it?”

“Mmm.” Miles watches the two of them as intently and thoughtfully as I am. “Perhaps. She seems wise beyond her years, though. I think she knows things are as bad for him as they are for her, and for the same reason.”

I nod slowly in agreement. Nick's panting and trying to settle the child down again; he's winded by their most recent tussle and needs time to recover, but Trucy isn't hearing any of it. I know Nick sometimes regards himself as a father-figure to Pearl, and I can see him already sliding into that role with little Trucy, even though he doesn't realize it. Of course, Nick knows about as much about full-time parenting as he does about healthy eating or driving a car. But, despite everything going on, he's doing his best to be there for the little girl.
... but is he doing it despite of everything, or because of it? Either way, I recall his broken expression when the charges against him were dropped, how I knew it was because there was no miracle for him. Perhaps I was wrong on that count...

Slowly, things start to go back to normal, or at least as normal as they can get with Nick caring for a child. She’s been out of school long enough that she’s going to have to repeat the grade, but Trucy doesn’t seem to mind. And he’s no longer spending the night with us at Miles’; on nights when he spends time with us, he hires a babysitter for a handful of hours before returning to his own apartment. The three of us take turns paying the sitter, actually; we’re all getting a benefit from her work, after all.

The next Friday night, it’s Nick’s turn to pay for the sitter and he can’t, so Miles and I venture to his apartment. Trucy’s already asleep in Nick’s room; she’s been sleeping there and he’s on the couch. We’re both also surprised to discover that he’s making an effort to keep the apartment relatively neat and to keep healthful foods in the fridge; there are more fresh fruits and vegetables than there have been the whole time I’ve known him. Miles and I agree that we can blame his healthful grocery shopping for his inability to pay for the sitter.

We play cards; Nick likes it, it seems. We used to play poker at the office and I’d steamroll him every time, but I always knew he was throwing the games. As we play, we talk quietly; for some reason, they’re discussing the last time we made love, about a week ago. “Guys, stop,” I say softly. “What if Trucy gets up and hears this?”

Miles shakes his head and asks for two cards, which I provide; Nick holds his hand and changes the topic. “So, uh… I’ve really got to start looking for another job,” he says. “The only problem is that I don’t know what else I’m good at.”

An extremely inappropriate smirk crosses Miles’s lips and I laugh quietly, shaking my head. Dirty minds… Nick’s face flushes and he chuckles ruefully. “I don’t think prostitution is a viable option, you guys.”

“I’d pay you,” I joke.

Miles elbows me. “Hush. Trucy’s a room away.”

“Seriously, help me out here.” While we’re talking, we reveal our hands- oh look, Nick’s won. Again. He gathers up the cards and shuffles them; it’s his turn to deal. “If I’m going to do this, I need to have a steady job. Right now I can’t support myself, let alone a growing girl.”

“But you only need to support her for a little while longer, right?” I ask as he deals the cards again.

“Yes, you haven’t mentioned anything about your search for her family in a few days,” Miles observes. “How is that going?”

Nick sighs heavily. “She has no living relatives but Shadi Enigmar,” he says, “and I don’t think he’s coming back. So I talked to her about it today, asked what she wants to do.” He falls silent, examining his cards, and I’ve got a bad feeling. Realizing that neither of us will come to the conclusion he’s hinting at, he says, finally, “I’m going to fight for full permanent custody. Kristoph’s already started the adoption paperwork.”

“I’m speechless,” Miles says flatly, putting one of his cards down.

Nick replaces it. “I don’t have much of a choice here,” he says smoothly. “I’m at least partly responsible for the position she’s in. I’m certainly the only responsible party who is going to admit
to and take that responsibility. I’m not letting her get lost in that nightmare we call the child services system.”

I put down my whole hand. When Nick moves to give me a new one, I wave him away. I don’t much feel like playing anymore. “I can’t tell if your actions are more noble or idiotic,” Miles says finally. “I have to say I’m impressed by the level of both, though. It takes talent to be equally noble and stupid at the same time.”

“Thanks,” Nick replies dryly. “Call ‘em?”

“Yeah.” The boys set their hands down face up; Nick’s won again. They look at me expectantly and I shake my head. “I fold. I don’t want to play anymore.”

Miles gathers the cards; I wonder if they intend to keep playing. Nick sighs, seems to be gathering courage. This is what I have a bad feeling about, I know it. Finally, as Miles deals, Nick says, “This also means that I… I can’t… be with you two anymore. CPS has every reason not to give me custody. I don’t want to give them yet another one.”

“I see.” Miles’s voice is hard, quiet, and emotionless.

“I don’t,” I snap. “What’s it matter? There’s nothing wrong with it! We all love each other and this arrangement makes sure that she’s always got an adult to turn to! So what’s the big problem?”

“The big problem is that polyarmory is taboo in this society, at best,” Miles answers me. “It reflects badly on people who are sleeping with more than one person. If Wright gets caught in an open relationship, his moral fiber will be called into question even more than it already is. It could completely kill his chances of getting custody.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with it!” I insist, shades of that therapist coming back to me.

“I’m not saying there is,” Nick says flatly. “I wouldn’t be doing it if I thought there was. But this isn’t the time or place for me to fight this particular battle, Maya. Please understand.”

“No,” I say petulantly. “I don’t want to understand.”

Nick sighs heavily, putting two of his cards down. Miles shakes his head, laying his whole hand down, and says, “I fold. We both know you’re going to win anyway.”

“You’re kidding me,” Nick says flatly. “Et tu?”

He’s hurt, twice as badly now that Miles has rejected his request for understanding as well. Miles frowns at him. “Phoenix, you’ve just dumped us,” he says. “Do you expect everything to be okay right now?”

“I guess it’s a little too much to ask for,” Nick replies bitterly, gathering his cards. “I mean, it’s not like my life has been destroyed and I’m just trying to do what’s best for everyone or anything.”

“Blatant guilt trips don’t suit you,” Miles responds, just as bitter. “It’s not like we’re saying we hate you or anything, Wright. Just give us a little time. You want understanding? Try giving a little!”

“… I’m sorry.” He taps the deck of cards on the table a few times, staring at them, just as heartbroken as me and Miles. Then he takes a deep breath, and adds, “I don’t want this to ruin anything between you two. Please don’t let it.”

Miles and I look at each other, and I shake my head. “I dunno. It’s not going to be the same.” Miles
murmurs his agreement. “But I… I’ll try.”

Miles abruptly changes the subject. “How are you holding up? Financially, I mean.”

“I’m fine for now,” Nick answers immediately, his tone and expression both showing how grateful he is for the change of subject. “I saved most of what I made from the big cases, and I still have some of that to pick at. Mr. Enigmar also paid half my fee when I took the case, so I’ve got that. It’s going to run out quickly if I don’t get another job soon, though.”

“I’ll ask around the office to see if anyone knows any place that’s hiring,” Miles says. “I’ll keep you informed.”

“Thanks, Edgeworth.”

There is an awkward silence, and I stand. “I want to go home,” I say softly.

“Alright,” Miles acknowledges, standing himself. “I’ll keep in touch, Wright.”

“Yeah. Take care, guys.”

He walks us to the door, gives us both loose, tense hugs, and the moment the door is closed, I hear him sob softly. Miles sighs heavily, and then does something he’s never done before: he takes my hand and holds it as we make our way to where we parked.
Chapter 10

Once we’re in the car, I get a feeling of déjà vu as he asks, “Where am I taking you, Maya?”

The answer on the tip of my tongue is “home”. “Home” is a little vague nowadays, I realize at the last moment. “My place,” I say sullenly. I’m not sure what I want to do, but I know I’d rather be somewhere completely familiar right now.

Wordlessly, he starts the car and takes me back to my little studio apartment. For a moment, I think he’s just intending to drop me off, but he parks and gets out of the car as I do. I take the lead up the stairs and into my home. Miles is comfortable there, as comfortable as we are at his place or at Nick’s, but doesn’t take his jacket off as we step in the door. “Do you need anything?” he asks anxiously.

“No,” I answer, trying to stay grounded. This whole thing has been an absolute nightmare and I’m still trying to figure out what I want right at this moment. There is one thing: I really, really don’t want to be alone. I know that much.

But Miles isn’t a mind-reader. “… very well,” he says after a pause. “Call me in the morning, Maya.”

“Wait!” I exclaim, turning and grabbing his wrist before he can leave. “Don’t go,” I say emphatically. “Don’t leave me alone, please.”

“Are you sure you want me to stay?” he asks softly, hugging me. I nod, burying my face in his chest and trying not to cry. “Alright. I’ll stay, then.”

After what just happened I’m not sure if this is a good idea.

In fact, I know it isn’t.

Just as my affections are focused primarily on Maya, though, I know hers is mostly focused on Wright. I love him all the same, of course, and I know she loves me as well, but that’s just how it is.

Perhaps I was a bit jealous of Wright; it’s only human nature. But I know very well now that I didn’t want the alternative. Maya cries openly as we embrace; I am forced to ignore my own bottled grief of the loss of our third to keep asking her if she’s sure she wants this. She does. She needs the comfort as much as I do.

We are frantic, emotional, and possessive, as if afraid of something that will tear us apart as well. There is no danger to the two of us. In fact, I think as we somehow manage to both squeeze onto Maya’s twin bed to sleep, so spent from intense love-making that we don’t even have the energy to get up to clean ourselves up, that now we could make it public. No more knowing smirks or laughing at Gumshoe wondering why we are laughing.

That actually doesn’t sound like something I care for if Phoenix isn’t part of it.

I wake in the morning with an impending sense of doom. Maya is still fast asleep; it is very early. We have no plans that I am aware of, but I cannot countenance spending the whole day in used undergarments and clothes.
As such, I get myself dressed silently and leave Maya a note to inform her of why I have left and that I will call sometime in the morning. I fully intend to spend the day with her, just enjoying each other’s presence. We can discuss what Wright’s departure from our relationship means for us two tomorrow.

The first thing I do when I arrive at home is shower. I can’t shake the feeling that I did something dreadfully unforgivable to Maya last night, no matter how forcefully she informed me that she wanted me. The feeling of muted horror won’t go away; I write it off to Wright’s situation.

As I’m toweling off, I think about calling Maya that instant. She should be up by now if she is not; her schedule in Kurain has her up before I was this morning. I am normally not an early riser, but these unsettling feelings forced it. If she is not up soon, her whole schedule will slip off its axis and I will feel responsible for any difficulties she has when she finally resumes training in Kurain.

But it was a difficult, traumatic night. Just because I wasn’t able to sleep in doesn’t mean she shouldn’t be allowed to.

As I’m debating this, my cell phone vibrates in my hand. I am expecting to see Maya’s home or cell phone number on the display; I am thus very surprised when Franziska’s cell phone flashes at me. The sensation of doom builds. “Good evening,” I answer, for it is evening where she is.

“Fool!” comes the immediate response. She is crying and I am now severely alarmed. Before I have a chance to ask her what is wrong, she says, “It is morning there, not evening! You must come home, little brother, immediately, as quickly as you can!”

“What’s wrong?” I get out, quickly, before my hysterical adoptive sister has a chance to continue.

“Little brother… Cassandra… she has…”

I listen numbly as Franziska speaks as clearly as she can, telling me of the events of the day. She is right. I must return. Quickly. “I will be there as fast as I can, Franziska. Just hold on. Tell her to hold on.”

“I do not think she has a say anymore, Miles.”

“Don’t say that. Please don’t say that. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

I take down some information from Franziska, and hang up my phone. My next ten minutes are spent hurrying around the house, dressing fully between the times it takes for travel-booking websites to load, and packing lightly to travel quickly. I have plenty still in Germany; I merely need enough to tide me over until I arrive.

Airline tickets and a car rental purchased, fully clothed and prepared to travel, I begin to shut my computer down, and then curse. Maya! I cannot believe I have forgotten her in my desperate scramble! Wright needs to know as well.

It takes me only thirty seconds to compose and send the message to them both. I cannot call her. If I hear her voice, I will lose sight of what I must do. And I must return to Germany. I have no choice. I cannot afford to even open the door that I will lose my resolve.

I make myself feel better by reassuring myself that I am not leaving forever. I fully intend to return. As I am heading out the door, I stop short on an impulse, stoop at my DVD rack, and snatch a title off the shelf.

My reminder that I have loved ones in America in my hands, I leave.
He isn’t there in the morning. He left a note by my bed telling me that he was going home for a while, but he’d call when he was prepared to come back. I sigh, scooting out of bed and showing, getting dressed, and I attempt to eat. Not hungry. I’ve figured out by now that means I’m depressed. The man I shared the night with taking off before I woke up didn’t help, I suppose… Ignoring the cereal I poured for myself, I turn on the old, decrepit computer I bought the first time Nick was able to give me a share of his attorney’s fee, immediately checking my e-mail.

And my stomach twists painfully when I receive one, from Miles’s e-mail address, the subject line, “I’m sorry”. I don’t want to open it. I don’t think I want to know what he’s apologizing for and the impulse to just delete it is strong. I open it anyway, reading the headers before scrolling down to the body of the message. He’s sent it to Nick, too.

Again, I resist the urge to just delete it. If it’s anything important, Nick will tell me, right? But what if Nick thinks the same thing I do… he’s more likely to want to avoid being upset than I am right now. So I scroll down, and read the message:

Wright, Maya:

My older sister was in an accident last night. I must return to Germany. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone; I’ll keep you updated.

And then his standard, pre-filled signature. I’m already dressed, so my keys are in my hand and I’m out the door in only a few moments. Maybe he hasn’t left yet. If I can get there before he leaves, then-!

-Then what? He’s going to go anyway, but- but- I have to see him!

I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I get to his house, but his car's still in the driveway. I ring the doorbell several times, and then pound on the door, hoping I sound like I'm dying so he'll come answer it. But he doesn't. But the car is still in the driveway! He's still there, he has to be! I root around in the flowerbox by the living room window for the key I know is there; I retrieve that key and let myself in. That's why he told me and Nick about that spare key, right? So we could let ourselves in?

Miles is a neat person, in perfect contrast to Nick. But he's not this neat; many of the signs that the house is actually lived in are gone. “Miles?” I call, hoping I'm wrong, but no. The house is definitely empty.

The bookcase that has the DVDs at the bottom catches my attention; several of the books are gone, probably to be used as reading material on the plane and while he's in Germany. I can't help but notice that two DVDs are gone, too. The Steel Samurai and Pink Princess crossover, and...

... and the Steel Samurai porn. I'm flabbergasted. He took that with him?

It takes Nick's voice, asking me softly if I'm alright, for me to realize I'm crying, kneeling on the floor by the DVD case. Of course Nick would have come. He got the e-mail, too. “I'm fine!” I sob. “Really, I am! It's just that stupid jerk, he took the Steel Samurai porn and we still. Don't. Know. How. It. Ends!”

Nick kneels next to me; I sense Trucy closer to the entrance of the house, watching in concern. Nick wraps his arms around me and starts whispering comforting things, like that Edgeworth will be back. I didn't think he'd believe that I broke down over the porn, but it was worth a shot,
anyway.

It's almost lunchtime by the time Nick and I get back to his apartment with Trucy. This time, we are completely and blatantly ignoring what just happened. Nick looks pissed and after what I told him, I can't blame him. I tried to make sure he understood that I don't think Mr. Edgeworth was intending to skip the country this morning, since he said in his note that he'd be back.

But Nick's got another take on it entirely. He says he understands, but I can see by the way he's handling the knife as he cuts tomatoes for some sandwiches that it doesn't make him anymore sympathetic to Miles. Maybe I should have been more discreet with my details, but despite my own understanding, I am hurt and hurt badly. I’m not even worth a phone call?

You’re welcome, Miles…

By nightfall, we are quite a bit calmer. We discuss which sister this is while Trucy colors on some of Nick's stationery; by then, we're both afraid that the sister he's referring to is Franziska. We both know that Miles is older than she, but she calls him her little brother. All we can really do is keep checking Nick's e-mail and leave our phones on.

Trucy falls asleep at the kitchen table; Nick scoops her up and tucks her in bed. We wait some more, quietly. And then Nick's phone rings, close to midnight. "Wright speaking," he answers with veiled trepidation. "Edgeworth- yeah. Things were a little touchy for a few hours, but... right. Kind of pissed, but I guess you had no choice."

I'm frustrated that I can't hear Miles' end of the conversation, but I'll have to make due listening to Nick's. After that last remark, he asks. "So, your sister- how is- oh. Oh no. I'm so sorry, Miles..." I close my eyes, understanding that part and silently and selfishly praying that she was the sister who was not Franziska... "... I see... wow, what a douchebucket. I don't blame you. I'd have beaten the daylights out of him... You're a better man than I am, then."

I'm curious now, but I hold my silence. Nick's expression goes from sad to even sadder in only a few more seconds. "I see. Wait, you're a prosecutor, though- but I thought you- really? Wow. That explains your comments last night, I suppose. I had no idea. Too bad I didn't know that before I asked Kristoph to handle the adoption, I think you'd have been cheaper- Not even for me? Aww... Yeah, I guess that'd be a problem. We'll see you when this is taken care of, then. Oh, she's right here, actually."

I perk as Nick looks directly at me when he says that last bit. "Do you want to talk to her?... you're being a real asshole, you know that?" Nick sighs, and I cringe. I guess the answer to that question was 'no'. "I know, I know. Look, you've got enough to worry about. Let's hang up before you create another by talking about this. Yes, that was a threat... bring it. Oh? I'd like to see you try. And what army are you going to accomplish this with?"

Nick's words would concern me if he wasn't laughing, and it's a real laugh, not a forced or bitter one. "Yes, that's a good idea. Keep us informed, Edgeworth. Take care."

Nick hangs up and tosses the phone onto the couch beside him with a sigh. "Before you ask, he didn't want to talk to you because he's already extremely distraught and didn't want to upset you," he informs me. "As for the rest of it, his older sister passed away from her injuries a few hours ago."

"Poor Miles," I say, putting a hand to my mouth.

"I know. He's going to be in Germany for a while. His former brother-in-law is a massive tool who
shouldn't be let within fifty feet of a kid. Franziska's already said that she wants custody of their niece, and Mr. Douchebucket showed up at the hospital to gloat and inform her that she'd never see the kid again. Edgeworth's staying to help her fight him for custody."

"But he's a prosecutor," I reply, bewildered.

"Yeah. He's also licensed to practice family law in Germany. Did it for giggles, actually, but I guess it's about to pay off now."

"Guess so," I reply heavily.

Nick glances at the clock. "Well, I'm not letting you walk back to your apartment this late at night," he says with a lopsided grin. "I better go get some extra blankets and try to get the floor comfy for me, I guess."

---

We pass our time with mundane and completely unexciting things, like grocery shopping and Trucy deciding the city bus is a good place for a nap. Nick sighs heavily as he sets his burden on the couch and throws a blanket over her. "I don't get it," he muses quietly. "She falls asleep every time I carry her, without fail. Am I that comfortable?"

"Yep," I answer, putting the keys and my own burden—a bag of groceries—down on the counter. It's been only a few days since Miles left and I got a call late last night from Kurain. I dropped everything to come back to the city to help Nick, including some pretty important training. Standard procedure dictates that any time an acolyte stops a portion of training without completing it, they have to start over. An exception is being made for me—extenuating circumstances—but if I don't return soon, I will have to start over. This particular training is rather boring and I'd rather not.

Besides, I've already swiped a copy of Nick's fees from both times he defended me, as well as when he defended Iris, and I intend to see if I can get away with paying him now. I want to contact Larry and tell him that he really needs to do so as well, but I doubt that Larry's going to pay him with anything but offers of beer and babysitting. Hopefully not at the same time, of course. In any event, I don't have access to Kurain's ledgers while I'm in Los Angeles.

But my leaving is going to devastate him. The longer I wait to tell him, the worse it's going to be, so I take a deep breath and say, "Nick, we need to talk."

"You're going back to Kurain," he says absently.

"Wh- you knew?"

"Why wouldn't you?" he asks me with a sideways glance. "You're the Master now. You have a ton of responsibilities. I don't have a right to ask you not to fulfill them."

Yes, you do! I want to shout, but it won't do either of us any good to yell at him for his defeatism and wake his foster daughter in the process. She's already calling him "Daddy". It's just so adorable. "Well… yes. That is what we need to talk about," I answer, a bit sullenly.

I'll be fine," he says softly, calmly. "Just… don't be a stranger, alright?"

"Of course not," I scoff. "I'm planning on calling you every week, anyway."
“Isn’t that going to get expensive? I don’t want you to get in trouble with whoever’s in charge.” He’s genuinely concerned. Nick had always been money-conscious but the last month or so really brought it out. Unless he finds a job quickly, he’s in trouble.

Again, I put an outward show of arrogance, in part to hide what I’m really feeling. “I’m the one in charge,” I assert firmly, “and even if anyone does have something to say about the phone bills, they’ll just have to adjust.”

He laughs softly. “In that case, call anytime you like,” he says with a smile. “The phone is better than nothing at all. When you get settled in, we have to discuss when you’ll come visit again.”

“Yeah,” I confirm with a nod. “It won’t be for a while, though.”

“That’s fine. I didn’t expect it would.” Nick looks down at Trucy, and then back with a rueful grin. “You’re planning on leaving now, aren’t you?”

I wince. I wasn’t, but actually, that’s not such a bad idea. He’s making such a concerted effort to hold it together that it’d probably be an act of mercy if I left now. “Yeah,” I said. “I’ve got to go back to my apartment and settle things with my landlord, but I was planning on leaving right after that.”

“Right… sorry I can’t go with you, Maya,” he apologizes, with a glance down at the sleeping girl.

“It’s fine,” I wave off his concern. “You’ve got plenty of responsibility of your own. I’ll call you when I’m back in Kurain.”

“I’d appreciate that.” He walks over to me, pulling me into a tight hug. “Thanks for everything, Maya. I’m in your debt.”

I return his embrace, trying not to cry. Nick pulls away slightly after a moment, glances back over his shoulder at Trucy, and, seeing that she’s still sleeping peacefully, leans down and kisses me, chaste and fast enough that I don’t have time to protest; not that I could, anyway. My goodness, I’m getting tired of crying. Even when I’m dangerously depressed, I’m not this bad. What the hell is going on? It can’t just be Nick’s legal troubles.

I take a shuddering breath, trying to calm my tears before Nick has a chance to notice them. I know he has, since he brushes his thumb on my cheek, under one of my eyes, but he has the tact not to say anything about it. “Take care, Maya,” he says softly. “You know where I’ll be if you need me.”

“Right,” I manage to reply. “Well, then… goodbye.”

“See you later.”

I leave, managing to get to People Park before sitting down on a bench and having a good cry. Once that’s done, I drag myself back to my apartment complex; my landlord is used to me coming and going with little notice, and doesn’t seem bothered that I’m leaving today. “I’m packing up everything I intend to take with me,” I tell him as he walks with me to the apartment; I’ve already given him my key. I’ll retrieve it again when and if I return and it’s open. “Feel free to do whatever you want with the rest of it.”

“Certainly, Ms. Fey,” he says with a smile. The apartment might be far too small, but at least the landlord is pleasant and understanding.

I do as I claim I will, and head to the train station, and back to Kurain. Nick’s cell phone is off
when I arrive, so I leave a message and, with Pearly’s help, start to settle back in.

I’m surprised to discover that Iris knows the whole story and asks tentative, cautious questions. I fill in the blank spots and she listens, concerned and eager to be helpful. She’s adorably disappointed when she realizes that there is no way she can help Nick, but promises to help me as much as possible. I can’t help but smile in appreciation. Things between us are still tense, but we’re working on it. We’ll have all the time in the world to work on it now.

I have to call on her help a few times over the next few days, whether it’s to help me work out how much of Nick’s fees from his defense of the two of us I can get away with sending, backing me up when confronted with the larger-than-usual phone bills, or just listening to me vent, something that I need to do a lot nowadays. My usual happy-go-lucky attitude seemed to have been stolen away with Nick’s badge; we kick around possible reasons why this, of all things, after all I’ve been through, would traumatize me so badly.

I suspect I know. Things change when you make love with someone. But Iris doesn’t need to know all that, really, and it still doesn’t explain the horrific mood swings and stomach upset that’s getting to be chronic. It’s starting to worry me, and there’s something I know I’m forgetting that I really, really shouldn’t be.

One afternoon, about a month after coming back to Kurain, Pearly comes to me after my training, pale as a ghost and clutching her lower abdomen with a grimace. “Mystic Maya,” she whispers, looking frightened. “I think I need a doctor…”

“Why?” I ask her, concerned. The way she’s holding her abdomen, I immediately worry about appendicitis.

Pearly motions for me to stoop down so she can whisper in my ear. “I’m bleeding from… there,” she whispers.

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. She’s only ten; that’s a little early. Just to be clear, I ask, “From where your underwear covers?”

She nods. “And it hurts really badly, too. I’m scared.”

I shake my head and take her hand, the twinge that I’m forgetting something bothering me again. “You don’t need to be worried, Pearly,” I reassure her. “This is normal for girls.”

“What- what is it?”

I’m guiding her to my room so I can give her a pad. She can figure tampons out on her own when she’s older. “It just means you can have kids now,” I tell her. Again, that twinge… what the hell? What am I forgetting and why is this reminding me, of all things? “Every month, if you’re not having a baby, you’ll bleed like this for a few days. It’s really, really nothing to worry about.”

“Why, though?” she asks plaintively. “And why does it hurt?”

I really, really resent Aunt Morgan for sheltering her so much now, and I also really, really don’t want to give her a biology lesson. As I retrieve and hand her the pad, I say, “A doctor will be able to explain it better than me. We’ll schedule you an appointment just to make sure everything is okay. Us girls should get regular checkups just in case, you know.”

“Ohay… what’s this?”

I explain it to her, alarms going off in my head. At this point, I wonder if I’m just playing stupid
about something and doing a damn convincing job of it. She takes it and runs off to the bathroom, returning with her soiled undergarment as I instructed. We need to get the blood out. Once we’ve done that, I show her my planner. “I’ll make sure we get you one of these now,” I tell her, grabbing a blue pen. I use red myself; I don’t want them to get mixed up. I put a little blue X on today’s date. “From now on, you need to mark every day you bleed like this. It’ll help you keep track of when you should be bleeding and if you-”

“Mystic Maya?” Pearly asks as I stop talking abruptly. “If you miss a month,” I finish my sentence distractedly, flipping back a few weeks. “It could mean something’s wrong, or that you’re-…” There are no red X’s at all this month. I flip further back, trying very hard to stay calm as the moodswings start to make sense. “-you’re having a baby, although you don’t have to worry about that yet…”

Pearly tugs on my sleeve as I’m still flipping back weeks. “Mystic Maya, you look really sick,” she observes, her own pain forgotten. “Are you okay?”

“I’m…” I finally find the last red X. Right after arriving in Kurain the last time. Almost two and a half months ago.

The next thing I know, I’m on the floor, my head cradled in Iris’s lap, and Pearly is sobbing hysterically. “Look, look!” Iris exclaims as I open my eyes. “She’s awake! She’s okay, Mystic Pearl. Really!”

“I fainted…” I look up at Iris, the horror that caused me to pass out still there in the pit of my stomach. “Iris… I… I think I’m in trouble…”

My cousin looks up at her little sister. “Mystic Maya and I have to talk,” she says gently. “Could you go play in the winding way for a little bit?”

Pearly hiccups, nods, and slinks away. I sit up, feeling dizzy. “What’s wrong, Maya?” Iris asks me. In response, I show her my planner the page set to the first week in April. She flips forward again, eyebrows knitted together in growing consternation. “Do those red X’s mean what I think they do?” she asks.

I nod, swallowing hard. “I’m… sure it’s nothing,” I try to rationalize it to myself. “I mean, stress can make you miss your period, right? And I’ve been pretty stressed lately, you know?”

She nods. “It’s possible. I’ll go out to town tomorrow and pick up a test for you.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Right back into denial I go. I muse that this must be how Nick felt as I say, “I’ve only missed two. That doesn’t mean anything but that I’m really, really stressed. Nick was disbarred like, ten days before I should’ve started my next one.”

Iris shakes her head. “You may be right, but you still should get a test to make sure. I…” She pauses, wondering if she wants to tell me this, and then plows ahead. “I had a pregnancy scare five years ago, you know. It turned out that it was just stress, but he made me get a test anyway. Said that if it was just stress, fine, but not knowing was adding more stress and it’d delay my period further.”

I’m confused. As far as I know, ‘he’ should be Nick, but that sounds more aware of the female reproductive system than I think he should know. I vocalize this, and Iris grins. “I said the same thing. He bragged that sex ed was the only class he paid attention to in middle school.”

Well, that definitely does sound like Nick, I have to admit. I chuckle softly, scared out of my mind.
Iris interrupts my frightened thoughts by saying softly, “You should tell him, too, you know.”

“Tell him what?”

“About this.”

“No.” It’s firm, and it’s immediate. Nick’s got too much to worry about, already, and-

“Why not?... if you are pregnant, he’s the father, right?”


Iris doesn’t say anything for several minutes. Finally, she speaks: “I apologize. The father of the baby doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that you, the Master of Kurain, are the mother. No one here should care about anything else.”

I appreciate her effort to make me feel better, even if it fails miserably. “That said, Maya… please, tell me… this baby… isn’t possibly a child of violence, right?”

It takes me a moment to decipher her attempt at tact, and I laugh when I do. “No, Iris. I haven’t been raped,” I reassure her. “I know who the other possible father is, you don’t have to worry about that.”

She wants to ask me to contact him but I can’t. Miles has plenty to deal with too, and he’s half-way across the planet, besides. What a nasty predicament telling him of this would cause him! Fortunately, she neither asks me the identity of the other man, nor does she request that I contact him. She just sighs and says, “I’ll get you those tests tomorrow. Just stay off your feet and no more training today, okay?”

I cannot wait to get the hell out of this job. I loathe it with the passion of a million suns and I only took it because a job was more important than pride, when I have to give up eating altogether to have enough food for Trucy to have three meals.

But I’m still looking, desperately. Kristoph is helping me, but with the economy as it is…

My monotonous day on my feet behind a register is broken when someone I recognize comes through the door. She doesn’t see me, and I’m very curious. Maya told me that despite being off house arrest due to good behavior, Iris has gotten used to being in the village and rarely wants to do anything else.

So why is she in a chain drug store in Los Angeles?

And why is she- oh my…

“Good afterno-” her greeting cuts off abruptly in a startled little gasp as she recognizes me.

I smirk a bit. “Hiya,” I say, grabbing the four-pack of pregnancy tests and scanning them. I dump them in the bag, quickly, out of habit. Customers usually don’t want items related to reproductive health or sexuality out on the counter. “Long time no see.”

“Y-yes. I see you managed to keep your signature blue,” she replies, smiling again, eyeing my blue uniform shirt.
I chuckle. “Not by choice. How’re you? I would ask why you’re in the city, but…” I grab the bag and put it on the counter.

She knows me well enough to know that I’m curious. “One of the village girls thinks she might be having a baby,” Iris tells me. “She’s young, just a teenager.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. She told me in confidence, so please don’t tell the Master.”

I shake my head. “Of course I wouldn’t do that.” I feel bad for this young woman, whoever she is. The village is conservative; they aren’t cruel or abusive by any stretch of the imagination. They’re good people. But there may be some pressure on this girl soon, if she’s pregnant. Especially if she doesn’t know who the father is, or he’s someone the elders don’t care for. That the girl felt the need for confidentiality implies one of those two situations.

That makes up my mind; I glance at the price on the display, pull out my wallet, and finish ringing up the sale. Iris is horrified. “Feenie! You can’t—”

“Relax, Rissy, I got a ton of overtime last week,” I say, paying for the tests myself. “This way, you won’t have to explain to anyone where your cash went, right?”

“But—”

“If it helps this poor kid, I want to,” I cut her off, handing her the bag and crumpling the receipt. “You’re still not out of the woods, Iris. You’d have to account for those thirty bucks, you know it. This makes it easier for you to keep the situation confidential. No need for a scandal or confrontation if this girl isn’t pregnant, right?”

Her eyes mist over. “Feenie… You’re so kind. Thank you. I’ll find a way to repay you for this, I promise.”

I smile at her, genuinely. “Just help her through this, whoever she is. I know she’ll be fine if she has you.”

Iris nods, takes the bag, and with a final affectionate smile through being moved to tears, flees the store. I smile to myself and hope that I can manage to get through the rest of my shift without breakfast or lunch.

Iris does as she says she will the next day; the pack she grabs has four tests. Who needs four tests? “Women who are trying, I suppose,” she answers as I prepare the first one. “Have you ever done one of these?”

“Nope.” My hands are shaking.

“Then it’s good we have more than one, in case you mess up. Well… good luck, I guess…”

Three hours later, I’ve used the last test and gotten the same result. “Iris, you have to go back,” I mutter, frowning hard at the stick. “These things must be defective.”

“I doubt they are, Mystic Maya.”

“They have to be!” I insist, showing her the stick. “Look at that! They all gave that result! They’ve
got to be defective!”

She looks at it, sighs, and shakes her head. “You can do as many of those as you like, Maya, and you’re going to get the same result each time. They’re not defective.”

I gulp, looking down at the little blue plus sign that I’ve now seen four times. I’m pregnant.
Chapter 11

Fortunately, Iris is able to keep a calm head on her shoulders to make up for my low-grade panic. She tries to talk me into contacting Nick, at least; he’d want to know, and the other man, too. I haven’t identified him, but she’s sure that if I was comfortable being intimate with him, he’d want to know as well. The only way to determine paternity is to do a test, and the potential fathers need to help out with that.

No and no. Nick can’t afford anymore stress in his own life and Miles isn’t even in the country. Besides, single mothers who have no contact with their children’s’ fathers are nothing new in Kurain. The father present in a child’s life is the exception here, not the rule.

The whole while I’m making my weekly phone calls to Nick, telling him nothing of my condition. After two more months, life is getting exceedingly difficult. If I don’t eat, my stomach is upset. If I do, my stomach is upset. And it seems like I always, always have to pee. My ankles swell, moving about gets difficult and by the seventh month, I’m ready for this thing to get the hell out of me. I can’t see my feet to put on my sandals.

After hanging up with Nick one day, I pat my stomach. “I hope you’re a girl, for the village’s sake,” I tell the growing fetus in a mix of unwitting affection, annoyance and discomfort. “Because there’s no way I’m ever doing this again.”

When the pain starts, in the middle of the night, my first response is confusion. I’m not sure when exactly I conceived, but I’m pretty sure I’m not at nine months yet. None the less, if this kid wants out now, I’m not going to object. I somehow think that getting out of bed and trying to get to Iris’ room is a good idea; I make it only half-way down the hall to my destination before I sink to the floor, wailing in agony.

I must be loud, because both Iris and Pearly come running. Iris flicks on the hallway light, asking me rapid questions that I answer without thinking, and then looks down at her anxious and terrified little sister. “Go get the midwife, tell her that Mystic Maya’s having the baby,” she says firmly. “Go quick, as quick as you can!”

Pearly nods and dashes off, stopping only to slip on her sandals. Iris helps me back to my own room and settles me down again, holding my hand as the pain comes and goes in waves, each more intense as the last one. By the time the midwife gets there, I’m shrieking at the top of my lungs and I’m sure the whole village knows I’m having the baby now.

My utter refusal to get any kind of modern treatment for fear of running into Nick in the city is coming back to bite me now. There are only three things I want right now, and one of those is a painkiller. A freaking strong painkiller. The other two come clear without my conscious knowledge as I start ranting between contractions. Iris will later tell me that she’s glad Nick wasn't present, because she feared for his physical safety for several days after. The other man possibly involved in this was, it seems, getting equal amounts of threats against his person. It would be during that conversation that I realize that Iris now knows who the other possible father is, but Iris will, at that time, have the good graces not to say so.

Relief floods me when the pressure stops and I hear a thin, tiny wail. “You have a daughter!” the midwife croons, raising the newborn so I can see her before she goes to clean the baby off. I have three thoughts, then. The first is that I’m a mother. That's my child. My child.

The second is that I want to hold her. I don't care that she's gooey and bloody, I want to hold my
daughter.

The third one, thought as another shriek tears from me, more from surprise than pain, is why the hell do I feel like I'm about to give birth again?!

My abrupt scream gets both the midwife's and my cousin's attention; Iris comes back over to me, trying to find the source of this new pain. The midwife does as well, still holding my daughter, although she's wrapped up in a blanket now. The midwife's eyes go wide as she examines me, and she thrusts my daughter at Iris. "Take her, quickly! You might want to call in a medical doctor, too. I wasn't expecting this!"

"What? What?!" I manage through another scream of pain.

"I'm sorry, Master, but we've got one more to go. Are you ready?"

That last was a rhetorical question; I've got no choice. Mine, however, is not rhetorical: "Whaddaya mean, one more to go?!" I snap. "There's another one?! Where'd it come from?!

"Focus, Mystic Maya!" the midwife says firmly. "And one, and two, and push!"

I obey her, desperate now just for the pain to stop. After a few rounds more of pushing, I feel like I'm half-way dead and I can't do it anymore. Fortunately, I don't have to; I don't have the energy to open my eyes again as the midwife says, "And now you have a son, too, Master Maya. You've done well tonight!"

That's the last thing I hear that night.


Things are, surprisingly, going well.

My niece provided quite a bit of worry for Franziska and me. First, despite being almost ten, she didn’t seem to grasp the concept that her mother was dead. Then she thought that Franziska and I were romantically entwined.

That was an interesting conversation, bless Leah’s heart.

I am sure, after the last hearing, that Leah’s father isn’t going to get her back. He let his guard down and I used the loophole he left open to rip his case to pieces. He’s refusing the court-ordered supervised visitation, declaring that they’ve no right to keep him from his daughter, or to insist that they be watched when he sees her. Well, yes, they do, and they just did. This isn’t looking good for him and if he doesn’t pick up the visitation, Franziska will be granted custody at the next hearing. She is very young, but she has been self-sufficient for years, and she will have me, for the next couple of months.

And once she’s comfortable handling Leah alone, I get to go home.

“Little brother, what in the world are you daydreaming about?” Speaking of Franziska…

There’s no point in telling her ‘nothing’. I don’t often daydream, and when I do, it is painfully obvious. It is something that called down Manfred’s ire on me many times in my youth. Franziska is just as perceptive as he was. “I miss them,” I answer frankly.

“You’re a foolish fool, you know that?” I feel her come up beside me where I sit in a recliner by
the window, staring out the window. “Call them,” she urges.

"No."

“Why the hell not?”

“I don’t have the right.”

She huffs at me. “You are a fool,” she snaps. “You cannot account for every random act of fate that crosses your path. Phoenix Wright understands your predicament. I know Maya Fey will as well.” When I don’t respond, she throws her hands up. “Suit yourself, little brother. Suffer, see if I care.”

“I still have e-mail!” I call after her as she’s walking away.

“Call them!” comes her disgruntled reply.

I won’t. I don’t want to hear their voices, not right now. Franziska doesn’t understand just how foolish I really am. She knows of our previous arrangement; I’m not sure how the topic came up, but she’s aware. She’s aware of the circumstances when I left, and aware of how guilty I feel for leaving Maya as I did.

Thoughts of Maya are unpleasant for me lately. I experience the physical symptoms of mild anxiety whenever I think of either of them- Franziska tells me to stop being a fool and call it heartbreak and admit that I’m worried sick about them- but it’s spiked sharply when I think of her in the last few days. Being urged to call Maya, thinking of hearing her voice, fills me with a sense of utter loss, like I’ve done something absolutely unforgivable by not contacting her.

My gut instinct says that she needs me and I’m doing nothing to go to her, in any sense of the word. There is absolutely no evidence to back this feeling up. Foolish indeed…

Franziska breaks my ruminations. “Did you hear that?” she asks me, coming back into the living room.

I stare at her in response, listening. A car door slamming, right outside of Franziska’s home. I turn my gaze out the window; my vision is obscured by a sheer curtain, but I recognize my former brother-in-law immediately. And what he’s holding at his side. “Get Leah in her room,” I say tensely, getting up, “and call the police.”

“What-“

“Her father.”

“Why would he-“

Franziska looks around me, and gasps in horror at what she sees as he is almost to the door. “Obey me, Franziska!” I snap. “Secure Leah and call for help!”

My young adoptive sister runs to do as I say as I go to the door. He doesn’t scare me. He’s dumb, he’s dull, and he probably doesn’t even know how to shoot that thing. Thoughts of Maya are out my head, though, replaced by the thought that he’ll harm my niece over my dead body and not a moment sooner.
I sleep through the rest of the night and most of the next day. My few hours of consciousness centers on holding and feeding my children, but I can't for long; I'm too exhausted. When I wake up the next morning, I realize that yesterday was the usual day I call Nick. Not that it could be helped.

On that second day, Iris informs me that they've been referring to the twins as “baby one” and “baby two” and I must name them. We decide on Misty and Nicholas. I giggle as, every time I call for Nicky, trying to get him acclimated to his new name, he reminds me of Phoenix with his vacant, blue-eyed stare.

They're Nick's kids, no doubt about that. Misty's eyes aren't quite as blue as Nicky's but they are, undeniably, blue. A light, steel blue, but still blue.

I'm tending to them, trying to coax out a laugh from Misty- Nicky's fast asleep- when I hear Iris, seeming to talk to herself. It only takes a moment of listening to realize she's on the cordless phone: “... no, Mr. Wright, I don't think that's a good idea. Stop yelling at me, please- I understand you're worried, but- well, if you're not yelling at me, just stop yelling. Mr. Wright... no, she's still very tired. I will not... Calm down, first. I won't have you upsetting her. Calm down, please, or I can't let you talk to her.”

I'm surprised that he called me, and a little alarmed at Iris's side of the conversation. “Thank you for the apology, Mr. Wright. I understand. Hang on.” She pulls the phone away from her ear, and says, “He's almost as persistent as he was in college! He got worried when you missed your call to him this week. He'd like to talk to you.”

I take the phone from Iris, nodding in thanks, and I leave the room; Iris stays with the twins. “Hi, Nick,” I say tiredly. I'm still not recovered yet.

“Maya! Iris said you were seriously sick- are you alright?!?”

I smile; she covered for me. I'll have to do something nice for her. I know she's been against hiding this from him since we found out I was pregnant. “I'm fine now,” I try to reassure him.

“You don't sound fine. You sound terrible.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I didn't mean it like that.” Poor guy sounds like he's about to have kittens, he's so beside himself with worry. “But seriously- you're alright? What was wrong?”

“Stomach bug. A very painful stomach bug.”

I can't believe I just called my children a stomach bug. “I see... Well, as long as you're okay now, I guess I can relax again. I was about to come up there.”

“I don't think that'd be a good idea, Nick,” I reply quickly, without thinking.

“Why not?”

Oh crap... “Because, uh... there's a lot of stuff going on. Lots. And a lot of intensive training. I'm going to be missing a few weeks, so it's going to get pretty intense. I don't want you seeing some of
You make it sound like they're killing you.”

I cringe. How is he so good at finding exactly what to say to get around my excuses? “They're not. Besides, you can't really afford to take off work, can you?”

“Yeah, you're right there... I'm just really starting to miss you and Edgeworth. I know! How about you come visit me while you're recovering? You said you'd have to miss a few weeks of training, right?”

The prospect of being separated from my newborns scares me worse than any fear I’ve experienced so far in my life. “No, sorry. I shouldn't be traveling, either. I really shouldn't even be out of bed.”

I take comfort in the fact that both of those statements are completely true. “Oh... well, I really shouldn't keep you then.” I can hear him trying to mask his disappointment, and it breaks my heart. I'm starting to regret hiding my pregnancy from him, but it's too late now. It's hidden. “Give me a call next week, usual time?”


“Bye...”

She’s lying.

Her resistance to seeing me over the past months is more than just training and coming down with a stomach bug. There’s something more to it and she has never let illness interfere with our contact, not once. If she really couldn’t talk on the phone, she would have had Iris call me, or at least she’d have called me the next day.

I’m not usually one to respond to gut feelings, but all the evidence supports this one. Something is wrong, and I want to know what.

“Daddy? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, honey.”

“Don’t lie to me, Daddy. Lying isn’t nice.”

I chuckle. When she’s right, she’s right. “It’s not something I can talk about,” I try again. My daughter eyes me suspiciously and I suppress a sigh. “What?”

Trucy frowns. “Why can’t you talk about it?” she asks. “You want to.”

How does she do this?! “I want to, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

I grope for a reason. “Because it’s gossip and no one likes a gossip?”

She huffs at me, puts her hands on her hips, and frowns harder. “Daddy, I’m only nine,” she informs me, as if this was a fact that I didn’t know and really, really should have known. She reveals how this is relevant in her next statement. “I don’t care if it’s gossip. Who do you think I’ll
tell, Mr. Hat?”

“Mr. Larry.”

Her adorably severe mood shatters. “You’re funny!” she laughs. “Of course I wouldn’t tell Mr. Larry! I don’t tell Mr. Larry anything!”

I didn’t mean to, but it seems this is getting her off-topic, which is fine with me. “And why don’t you tell Mr. Larry anything?” I prompt.

“Because he’ll tell you!”

I laugh outright now. “Trucy, are you still angry at Mr. Larry for ratting you out about practicing your magic tricks instead of your words?” I ask her. “That was forever ago!”

“That was last week, Daddy!”

“Last week was forever ago,” I reply with a shrug.

My attempt to drag her off the subject abruptly fails. “No, last week was last week,” she informs me sagely. Oh god, this child is so cute. I almost wish I’d been able to raise her from infancy.

“What was forever ago was when we saw Miss Maya and Mr. Edgey last.”

“Where did you learn to call him Mr. Edgey?”

“Mr. Larry.” She shrugs, glares at me for trying to change the subject again, and says, “That’s what you want to talk about, right? You’re worried about Miss Maya, right?”

“Wrong.”

“You are bad at lying, Daddy, so just stop it.”

It’s my turn to frown. That tone and attitude is no longer cute, it’s disrespectful. “It’s not nice to talk to your father like that,” I reply in my Daddy’s Serious Voice. “Go do your homework, Trucy.”

“But-!”

“Someone’s daring today.”

Trucy huffs at me again and stomps off to her room. “Stop stomping!” I call after her; the response is for her to slam her door. I sigh, sit on the couch, and start counting the minutes until Larry gets here to watch Trucy while I’m at work. No games tonight. Kristoph’s on a case, so I can’t even rely on his company. I’m worried sick about Maya, I haven’t heard from Edgeworth in days, and now my daughter’s cross with me.

It’s going to be a long night.

Iris makes it abundantly clear that she doesn’t like lying to Nick. She doesn’t like it, but she’ll do it; it’s not her place to go meddling in his affairs anymore. I catch a hint of resentment, but she smooths it over pretty quickly. When I press her on it, she just smiles. “I’m human, Maya. I know I’ve no right, really. Just give me some time, okay?”

My calls to Nick resume as usual. He asks me every few months to come visit; but Pearly is too
young to really help out with the babies and I can't leave Iris with that burden. I made 'em, I've got to take care of 'em. Plus I really, really don't want to be away from them. And he still has no idea.

We end up having to risk a trip into the city with the twins, anyway. I'd started noticing, as they grew, that they looked nothing like each other, obvious body structure differences aside. Nicky was starting to grow a shock of black hair that liked to shoot all over the place, no matter how much time I spent combing it. At least Nicky seemed to like having his hair combed. It became my trick to get him to go to sleep.

Misty, however, was taking a bit longer to grow in her hair. At least, that's what I thought. I could feel a little “peach fuzz” when I stroked her head, but there was no black hair to be seen. But when there was enough that it wasn't just fuzz anymore, I started to wonder. After feeding that afternoon, I sit my kids next to each other, looking from one to another thoughtfully, trying to figure out where the hell Misty was getting dusty light brown hair from. Now that I had them side by side, actually looking at them and thinking about it, Nicholas definitely looks like Nick. Definitely. But Misty...

There is no getting around it. She doesn't look anything like Nick. She looks like Miles. “Alright, you two,” I mutter in confusion. “Cough it up. Which one of them is responsible for you two?”

And, as if Nicky understands me, he proceeds to burp and spit up all over his bib. I sigh and collect my son, wiping his mouth with the clean part of the bib, still staring at him thoughtfully. “You two ain't talkin', huh?” I ask softly, knowing I'm not getting an answer. “Well, that's okay. I think I know what you two are plotting. I'm pretty sure it's impossible, but... well, look whose kids you are.”

Misty whines at me, jealous of her brother. I manage to shift Nicky in my arms so I can grab Misty, as well, and head for the phone. I need an appointment to do this. Hopefully I can get in and out before anyone who recognizes me sees me.

Iris comes with me to the clinic the next week, right after I call Nick, a bit earlier than usual. The babies absolutely do not like the doctor sticking a cotton swab in their mouths and they like it even less when he rubs it against the inside of their cheeks. While we're waiting for the results of those tests and I calm the twins down, I confide my hunch to Iris. I also confide to her that I was under the impression that what I was proposing was impossible. She shakes her head, examining her little cousins closely, now that I've told her. “I don't know... I don't think it's impossible. I think I've heard of that happening, actually.”

I gulp hard at this. So it's not impossible. At least, not according to Iris, who claims she thinks she's heard of this kind of situation. Clear as mud, that.

The doctor returns with his results. He's professional and kind as he tells us, “Well, without a sample from the potential fathers, it's impossible to tell paternity,” he informs us. “However, I've been able to answer the first half of your question. Nicholas and Misty definitely have different fathers.”

I sigh heavily, looking at my kids again. Little amusing adorable lovable sacks of grief... speaking of sacks of grief, one of them is dirty, I can smell. Despite the bomb that's just been dropped on me, the only thought on my mind at that moment is that I need to check them to find the offending diaper and change it. Now that I know, I wonder what my point in this exercise was. Nothing has changed, really. They're still my babies.

I thank the doctor for his time, genuinely cheerful, ask Iris to take my check and pay the bill at the front, and haul the twins into the bathroom. Having tended to their needs, I haul them back out and
hand Misty to Iris as we leave. “Are you sure you don't want to tell them, Maya?” she asks.

I don't bother answering her.
Chapter 12

Somehow, months turn into years and the twins grow. I'm startled to discover that Misty is starting to develop Nick's personality, while Nicky is acting more like Miles as he grows. It might have been a little cruel, but I discover that I can make them point like Nick used to in court. All I have to do is do it myself; and if I cry, "Objection!" along with it, the babies will mimic me again. Of course, it sounds more like, "Bluhfurhur!" from them, but I get the idea.

And then they start walking and talking, and I quickly grow to hate the word "no". Walking is a whole other issue; Pearly makes a game of chasing them when they're on their feet. The only problem is that they somehow get the idea that Iris and I are playing that game with them every time we go to pick them up. And so, as soon as they see us coming, they give a delighted, ear-piercing shriek and off they go. It's fairly easy to catch them- their legs are much shorter than ours, after all- but it does add to the workload a bit.

My funny little babies. Heh.

Before I know it, they're actually able to mimic my "Objection" pretty well. They're growing so fast, time seems to fly by. I wonder frequently if the years are passing as quickly for Nick and Miles as they are for me. After all, Nick has a child, too.

I no longer have any way of checking on Miles. I don't have a computer here, let alone an internet connection. My source of information on Mr. Edgeworth was e-mails between him and Nick, and Nick had to cut his internet quite some time ago. When it started to come down between various bills, the internet was the first to go. I have to make due just knowing that Nick is alive and well.

The babies are almost three now. One day, when pondering what Misty could possibly be asking for when she demands a "Samsoka", the manor phone rings. I glance at the clock before answering it; I hope this is quick, I'm supposed to call Nick in about fifteen minutes. "Hello, Maya speaking."

"Maya!"

It's Nick; he sounds overjoyed, but my surprise that he called me overrides my acknowledgement of his happy tone. "Nick? Is everything okay?"

"Absolutely fabulous!" he replies, mimicking a certain magician we got off the hook for murder several years back. "There's someone here who wants to talk to you."

He doesn't give me a chance to respond; I expect to hear Trucy's voice, telling me the latest in her grades or that an agent- a real one- is coming to one of her shows or something. Instead, a man's voice comes over the phone, familiar and comforting. His accent is much thicker than it was when I last saw him, but I can still recognize his voice instantly. "Hello, Ms. Fey."

"Miles!" I squeak in surprise and immediate joy. "Oh my god, it's so good to hear your voice!"

He chuckles on the other end. "Likewise," he says, and then there's a hesitation that feels strange. I don't have a chance to ask about it. "I promised him I wouldn't do this right away." and I can hear Nick protesting in the background- "but I'm really very curious. He says he hasn't seen you in years."

I grimace, feeling a little guilty. "He's right," I say softly. "Things have been hectic here in Kurain." And they have. I bet they'd agree with me if they tried handling infant twins on a daily basis.
"Ah. Perhaps we could come visit you." There's something insidiously suggestive in his tone, and I notice that Nick has gone quiet. "Perhaps we could help out with whatever is so hectic."

"No, I don't think that'd be a good idea," I tell him immediately, without any hesitation. This is absurd. Are they ganging up on me? "This is a lot of family business, you see. Remember what happened last time Nick got involved in Fey family business?"

"I remember what happened every time we both got involved in Fey family business." Miles' voice is dry as a desert. "I suppose you have a point there. Of course, this means that you will just have to come here, then."

"No, I'm sorry, I can't," I turn him down. "There are too many things I have to take care of-

"So he's right. You're going to make us do this the hard way."

"Wh-" Miles' voice is indecipherable now, and I fear that they're going to try something crazy like kidnapping me or something. Abruptly, I can hear everything on the other end, including cars passing by. And then, suddenly, I can hear Nick, clearly: "What, she's turning you down, too?"

"It seems like it. Maya. What's going on? Why won't you even come visit?"

I'm at a loss for words for a moment. He put it on speaker phone? I didn't know Nick's phone could do that... "I've told you already," I say blankly. "I have responsibilities-"

"So many that you can't spare a day or two in three years to see your friends?" Nick's voice is accusing. "Especially one who came from Europe? You're half the reason he came back, you know."

Now I know they're ganging up on me when Miles adds, "Yes. I can't tell you how disappointed I was when I arrived home and discovered that you had stayed away for so long, and Wright didn't believe that we'd be able to get you to come into town."

"I have-" I try again, but this time Nick cuts me off. "Responsibilities, yes, we know. All work and no play makes Maya a cranky Maya, we all know that. I can't imagine that you're not able to justify taking three days to visit us."

"Nick-

"Three days, Ms. Fey," Miles says firmly. "That's all we're asking for."

I steel myself, preparing to issue a final negative. If that doesn't work, I'll have to hang up on them, something I don't want to do. Suddenly, though, a third voice chimes through the phone: "So, you guys break her, yet?"

"Nope. She really, really doesn't want to come, for some reason."

"Hey, that's not cool! Gimme the phone, Edgey!" I grimace harder as Larry Butz's voice sounds, extremely loud, "Maya baby! What's the big deal, huh?! You're going to make these two gentlemen wait even longer to see you! Edgey came all the way on a plane for you! Whoosh!"

I can't help but laugh, and Larry continues, "I'm telling you, Maya. Things are sooooooo hard for Nicky these days! You've got to come cheer him up, man! I'm running out of ways to do that that doesn't involve getting him wasted."

"Larry!" Nick protests in horror. I'm still giggling, but now I have a problem. I now have three men
ganging up on me, and I'm going to have to get more specific if I want to get out of doing this.

I know I'm defeated when yet a fourth voice speaks. Trucy. "Hey Daddy! Is Miss Maya going to come to the show tomorrow night?"

"It doesn't look like it, sweetie," Nick replies sadly.

"Ooooh, but I'm doing a big show tomorrow, just in honor of Mr. Edgey coming back!" I vaguely hear Miles object to "Mr. Edgey" but I'm more focused on Nick's little girl's disappointment. "I had to argue really hard to get Mr. Wunderbaer to agree to let me do this show. I really wanted Miss Maya to see it, too..."

As Nick tries to console her, Miles says, sounding smug, "Did you hear that, Maya?"

My willpower breaks. "Let me call you back," I say, not sure exactly what to do about this. "I'll see if I can get away. I'll try, but I can't promise anything."

"Let me speak to whomever is keeping you if you're unable to get permission," Miles says, the flat quality in his voice somewhat threatening, although it isn't me that it's aimed at.

I smirk in amusement at this, thinking that he won't be able to argue with a couple of toddlers very well and he's insane if he thinks I'm about to let him bully my babies. "I will," I reassure him, though. "Give me half an hour."

"We'll be waiting."

I hang up after Miles does and I heave a heavy sigh. Time to go see if Iris will babysit the kids for a few days.

I wonder if I really need to leave them behind. I mean, the burden of raising them alone is getting heavier; I can only imagine that, soon, they'll start asking about Daddy. How I'm supposed to explain this situation to them is beyond me. Plus, I'm still suffering from an unreasonable fear that the moment I step foot out of Kurain, something horrible is going to happen to them. They're just babies! It's my responsibility as their mother to protect them, and I can't very well do that if I'm out on a date. What if Nicky's bad habit of putting things in his mouth turns into a choking incident? What if Misty gets sick? She did have a bit of a fever this morning, I think. I think. I only felt her forehead. But she had the sniffles, too, and-

"Maya, what is it? You've been standing there for almost five minutes. It's beginning to get unnerving."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Iris," I say, blushing. "I was just thinking, that's all."

"Oh? What about?"

"Mr. Edgeworth is home," I inform her.

"Oh! That's wonderful!" Iris beams, and her face falls when I shake my head. "They... teamed up on me to get me to visit them. Along with Larry Butz and Trucy."

"Trucy? Mr. Wright's daughter?"

"Uh-huh. She spent a good deal of time getting her boss at the Wonderbar to let her put on a special show to celebrate Mr. Edgeworth's return to the states. She really, really wants me to be there."
Iris smiles at me. "Okay. So why do you look so depressed?"

"I can't go!" I wail. "I have responsibilities here-"

Much to my surprise, Iris cuts me off. "I can handle most of those, and those I can't, can probably wait. You wouldn't be gone for long, would you?"

I blink. "Well, no, I wouldn't. But the twins-"

"I can watch them. Pearl is getting close to fourteen now, too; she can help."

For a moment, I don't believe it. And then I realize that Iris is siding with them. She's telling me to go. "But what if they get sick?" I ask, wringing my hands. "What if they get hurt or something?"

"They will not," Iris contradicts me with a smile, "and if they do, I'm more than capable of handling it." I stare at her incredulously, my mouth open, and she laughs. "Go visit them, Mama Bear. Your cubs will be perfectly fine. They're not going to disappear if you take your eyes off them for a few days."

"But-" My protest is interrupted as Nicky attempts to eat his sister's hand, and she squeaks and smacks him in the face for it, resulting in Nicky letting out a thin, watery wail that Misty promptly mimics. Iris shakes her head in amusement as I pick up Nicky and Iris gathers up Misty, effectively separating them. "They're not going to cannibalize each other, either," she says dryly. "Go, Maya. Everything will be fine, I promise."

The return phone call is short and to the point. "Well?" Nick answers bluntly.

"I'll be there in a few hours," I tell him.

"Zvarri! Absolutely fabulous!" I giggle as he manages to mock two former acquaintances at once. "The two of us will be waiting for you at the station."

"Two of you?"

"Yeah. Actually, Miles has been home for like, a day. We asked Larry to come by the restaurant today to help us out. He's also agreed to watch Trucy for me for a few days in return for me introducing him to Melissa."

"Melissa?"

"One of my coworkers. The head waitress. This deal's quite handy for me, too. Introducing her to someone like Larry Butz will definitely get the message through to her. Apparently turning down her offers for drinks after closing every night isn't enough."

I can't help but chuckle. "Are you sure it's okay to leave Trucy with Larry for that long?"

"Yeah. He's grown up a bit in the last few years. Besides, he knows they'd never find his body if he lets anything happen to her."

The protective edge in Nick's voice triggers a pang of regret in my heart. But this is the bed I've made, and the bed I must lay in. "Well, I hope everything goes well for his sake, I guess," I say. "Let me go get ready, okay?"

"Yeah, I better let you go before you change your mind. See you in a few hours, Maya."

I prepare to leave, packing lightly. Miles wants me to stay for three days. He's getting two and he'll
be happy with it. Tonight, and tomorrow night, and then I'm coming straight home. I kiss my babies goodbye, ironically amused by the fact that neither of them seem perturbed—of course they aren't, they don't understand I'm leaving and Iris has been around them since they were born—while I'm bawling my eyes out. This is going to be tougher on me than it is on them.

When my train pulls up to the station and I get out, however, my worry for the twins is temporarily forgotten as both Nick and Miles sweep me up in a group hug, and I'm relieved to note that I'm not the only one who is weeping openly; Nick's almost as bad as I am and Miles is even a little moist-eyed.

It's almost dinner time already, so Miles drives us back to the Borscht Bowl Club, the Russian restaurant Nick plays piano at. A gentleman at a table close to the door moans loudly when we walk in. "Nixie! You're not supposed to be playing tonight, are you?" he asks, looking like he's dreading the answer.

Nick laughs. "No, Kev, but I can if you really want me to."

"No, no, no! If you're a patron tonight, you're a patron. That means no working. Please!"

"What was that about?" I ask, wide-eyed, as a pretty blond waitress seats us. For some reason, she's shooting me all sorts of nasty looks.

Nick laughs again as we take our seats. "Thanks, Melissa," he says as he takes the menu he's handed, although he immediately sets it down. He works here, he probably doesn't need it, and his identification of the waitress just told me why she's all but snarling at me.

It doesn't seem that Nick plans on telling me what that gentleman was about, so I glance at the menu, wondering what Russian food tastes like. Much to my surprise, and relief, I discover that they have plain old burgers here. I decide on what kind of burger I want and set my menu down; Miles is still skimming the menu, but now I can hear that customer from the front of the restaurant again. There's only one other person in here, and he seems interested in the conversation "Kev" is having with Nick. "So, who's the pretty lass?" Kev's asking. "You cheatin' on Miss Trucy?"

Nick rolls his eyes. "Don't you think Trucy's a little young for me?" Nick replies, speaking across the restaurant.

"You know Kev's a dirty old man," the other patron replies. "Or you should by now, Nixie. Anyone with a shoulder on their heads knows that pretty lass there is either handsome young man's lass or Trucy's new Mommy she keeps demanding."

"Anyone with a shoulder on their heads?" Nick repeats incredulously, as Miles and I exchange looks; he's blushing slightly at the compliment and I'm sure I am, as well. "You're flagged, Mr. Sorata."

"You can't do that, Nixie! You're just the piano player!"

"I can and I just did." Nick's leaning back in his chair so the front legs of it are off the floor, and his eyes are half-closed, his expression relaxed and lazy. "And to answer your question, I dunno. Although I don't think she'd go along with being Trucy's new Mommy."

I nod my head in agreement with Nick, still trying to figure these strange men out. "I'm not ready to be anyone's Mommy yet," I say, internally cringing with the irony of that statement.

Kev says something in response, but it's Nick's reaction that gets my attention. His blue eyes go wide and he abruptly lets his chair fall on all fours. "What the-?" he whispers.
It takes only a moment for me to understand what just surprised him so. The Magatama! Oh crap!

"What? What is it?" Miles, in his effort to ignore the other patron's riffing on Nick, completely missed our own exchange.

Nick's composure returns as quickly as it goes, except now his expression is vacant, blank, with a bored half-smile. His eyes are half-closed again, but this time it's less from being relaxed and more... what? I've seen that expression before, four years ago. His poker face, he called it. "It's nothing," he says as Miles' cell phone goes off. The other man looks at the display and winces. "I have to take this," he says apologetically. "Excuse me."

"Franziska."

"Little brother. You told me you'd call when you arrived."

I grimace. She doesn’t sound angry, just calm. The calm before a storm, in fact. "I apologize. When I arrived I discovered that conditions were less than favorable."

"What is that foolish remark supposed to mean?" she demands firmly, a bit sharply. I explain to her that after I lost contact with Wright- "Fool! You did not lose contact! You refused to make contact!"- Maya became absolutely averse to seeing him. At all. "He was in bad shape," I finish. "He tried to hide it, but he can hide little from me. My primary concern was reassuring Wright and getting him to see Maya."

"Did you succeed?"

"Yes. She’s currently dining with us at the restaurant Wright’s employed at."

"Good. Have you determined why Maya Fey refused to see Wright yet?"

"No. She’s dodging the question every time it comes up."

"Perhaps she is no longer in love with him."

"I very strongly doubt that. Something is wrong."

"I see. Good luck getting to the bottom of it, little brother.” She paused. “Leah’s father has been sentenced.”

A tight ball of nervousness ties itself in my chest. "And?"

"Maximum sentence for all charges. No chance of parole for attempting to murder you, no chance of parole for attempting to murder Leah, and the judge left the possibility of retrying him for murder if Leah… doesn’t make it."

I relax. That means he will be serving a minimum of fifty years before he even has a shot at getting out on the weapons, assault, and order violation charges. Franziska is safe, and my niece is as well, so long as the hospital can keep her alive. “Good. Keep me updated on Leah’s condition.”

"I will, little brother. You do the same for the situation with Wright and Maya."

“Indeed. Take care, Franziska.” I hang up the phone and sigh. Something’s definitely wrong with Maya, and Wright is in no condition to listen to me whine. Especially about something no one can
do anything about. Leah’s been in this condition for the past two years. She’s not going to get better. I take a small comfort in knowing that the son of a bitch that killed her- she is dead, we’re just waiting for her body to follow her now- will be punished for it.

I can tell them the truth when she finally passes away. I will have to, because I’m going to be going back for her funeral; I’m not going to miss saying goodbye. For now, though, I need to come up with what that phone call was that was important enough for me to interrupt the date that I insisted on.


Nick and I watch Miles go to the front of the restaurant; I see him standing outside the front panoramic window, and I wonder who's calling him. Then Nick puts his hands in his sweat jacket pockets, tilts his chair back again, and smiles absently. "So, what's up, Maya? Why're you so desperate to keep me and Edgeworth out of Kurain? You cheatin' on us or something?"

I frown, noticing that it feels like it just got colder in the restaurant, and suddenly the lights don't seem quite sufficient. "I'd have to be actually dating you two for it to be cheating," I clip at him. "And I'm not, remember?"

"I remember. I'm the one who caused that. I better remember it." He notices that I'm shivering. "Sorry 'bout the temperature. We've all tried to convince the owner that this is one part of the authentic Russian experience our customers don't need. Want my jacket?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

"Alright. So what's up? Why aren't you letting us visit?"

"I told you. Family business. It's pretty complicated stuff that'd just piss you guys off."

"Bullshit." I'm startled by Nick's curse. "Maya, I've had to help thwart assassination attempts against you because of that 'family business'. I don't think there's much that can piss me off as much as that did. The branch families aren't looking to do you in again, are they?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

"So what is it?" When I don't answer, he says, "You know, I still consider you and Edgeworth to be my lovers. I always have. I wish you trusted me more."

I wince. His voice is soothing, almost hypnotic. It makes me want to trust him, want to just break down and spill everything... a thought occurs to me. "You're not using the Magatama on me, are you?"

"I've never used it on you before, have I?"

"No, I guess not..."

"And you know I wouldn't use it on you unless I felt I absolutely had to." He's silent for a second. "You know, I think I know why you don't want us to visit Kurain."

"Oh do you?" I try to sound undisturbed, amused, but I'm terrified.

"Yes. Does anyone in Kurain, by any chance, know of the kind of relationship you had with me and Edgeworth before my... downfall?"
I cringe again, gasping as it feels like something in me just broke. It's a rather dramatic response to the question, no matter how loaded the question is, and I try to brush it off. "I ended up telling Iris," I admit softly.

Nick chuckles. "Iris? That must have been a fun conversation. Wish I'd been a fly on the wall for that one."

"It wasn't so bad. We had bigger problems to worry about at the time," I inform him.

"Ah. In any event, I'm willing to bet my beanie that's part of why you don't want us to visit Kurain."

"Oh? I didn't do anything I'm ashamed of," I reply defiantly. "They can think what they want of me, I don't give a damn. I'm surprised you care, either."

"Oh, I don't particularly care what they think of it, either. I'm not ashamed of it. In fact, I quite miss it. That wasn't why I think you don't want us to visit."

I sit back, oddly intrigued. My mind is screaming at me to stop this conversation, but I feel compelled to continue it, like he's somehow forcing me to talk about it. "Right. I'm assuming you're going to tell me why, since I was wrong?"

His smile gets a little bigger. "How old are the Masters when they have children, Maya? Usually, I mean."

I think about that quickly. "Mmm... Nineteen, twenty. Somewhere in there."

"And you're how old?"

"You know how old I am."

"Of course. Are you testing me?"

He's laughing quietly at that last, and I frown at him. "I'm twenty-three."

Nick nods. "You're late, you know. To start trying to get a successor, I mean. About three years late. I can't imagine the Powers That Be aren't starting to get a little nervous about that."

I smirk at him. They absolutely don't have to worry about that, that's for damn sure. She's too young to measure her spiritual power yet, but I've got high hopes for Misty. "Your imagination has always been a little on the wild side, Nick."

"Ngh...!" He flinches and grasps his chest for a moment, as if my words physically hurt him. I should be more worried about that, but I'm not and I can't figure out why. "I know I'm right about one thing," he gasps. Nick coughs, clears his throat, and says clearer, "This has something to do with children. The psyche-locks only appeared when you said that you weren't ready to be anyone's mother. If it's not because you're being pressured to have a kid, what is it?"

There's no point in denying that point. His reaction when I made that remark let me know damn well that he saw psyche-locks at that moment. I don't want to answer, either, and stubbornly hold my silence. "Not talking, huh? Well, humor me. You've rejected every offer I've made for me to go visit you in Kurain. You rejected Edgeworth's offer. We had to bully you into coming here today."

He rubs his chin, graced with a five-o'clock shadow. "And then you get those psyche-locks when you mention being a mother. Why?"
I hold my silence. I'm not going into this. I'm not. I'm not. Then, he gets another idea. "You know, you never actually denied that they're pressuring you to have a kid. You denied that they're nervous about it. My hypothesis could still work."

"And that is?" If he's still going on about them wanting me to have a kid, he's wrong. I'm comfortable with this.

"They don't have a reason to be nervous." Again, I feel like something inside me is breaking apart; Nick raises an eyebrow, but doesn't comment on my grimace. "Because, if they know you were sexually active with two men, and the situation ended through circumstances beyond our control, wouldn't they have two candidates for you right there if we were to visit?" He sits forward, his expression intense. "You're not worried about being pressured yourself. You're worried about one of us being pressured."

I swallow hard as that breaking sensation persists and grows. Yes, although it's not my primary reason for hiding it, that's part of it. Misty's father is still a question mark, although I think Iris has figured it out. But the moment Nick steps foot in Kurain and anyone who has functional eyes and the good sense of a rock sees him, they'll know he's Nicholas' father. He's already a prime suspect in most of the village's opinion.

And this whole time, I've been reminded of everything I love about him. Especially his voice. The way he's speaking softly, gently, like he's handling me with the utmost care and doesn't want me to get hurt. I can hear that he's worried sick, and he just wants to know that I'm okay. If I'm honest, I'm not. I can trust him. I know I can. He'll know what to do, how to handle this. Sure, he might get a little upset that I've hidden something this big for this long, but he always focuses on the bigger picture. I can tell him...

I scold myself sharply. I'm not a lovesick teenager, for crying out loud! He always focuses on the big picture? Please. Telling him this will only give him enough to worry about that he'll give himself an ulcer, and to say nothing of how Miles would react, since I know Phoenix won't lie to cover my own poor choices. No, I can't tell him anything. Especially not right now!

What am I doing?! I scold myself sharply. I'm not a lovesick teenager, for crying out loud! He always focuses on the big picture? Please. Telling him this will only give him enough to worry about that he'll give himself an ulcer, and to say nothing of how Miles would react, since I know Phoenix won't lie to cover my own poor choices. No, I can't tell him anything. Especially not right now!

Nick gasps sharply and sits back, his poker face shattered. The temperature seems to rise a few degrees, the lighting is decent again, and although I know that Nick is completely trustworthy and his voice is still one of the most enthralling I've ever heard, he no longer looks completely trustworthy and I don't feel hypnotized by his voice anymore. "Well damn. That's never happened before."

I gasp in shock. "You were using the Magatama on me!" I accuse, just about ready to march up to Miles and demand he drive me back to the station right this instant.

Nick's not bothered by my anger and gives me a lopsided, sheepish smile. "I don't recall ever saying I wasn't."

"You did! You said-"

"I said that I never have before and wouldn't unless I thought there was a dire need to," he cut me off. "I never said I wasn't using it at that moment."

"I said that I never have before and wouldn't unless I thought there was a dire need to," he cut me off. "I never said I wasn't using it at that moment."

He's right. I'm seething about it, but he's right. He didn't actually say he wasn't using the Magatama. And he did say that he'd only use it on me if he thought he absolutely needed to. So, if that was the case, then... "Why'd you stop, anyway? I imagine you were winning with how I was feeling at the end of them."
"The locks came back."

"Huh?"

"You have five Psyhe-locks," he says, his tone bland. "I broke four of them; I was trying to figure out what to say that would break the last, and all of a sudden, those four locks I already broke just slammed back into place. I've never seen that happen before; didn't want to push it if I'm not sure what it means. I'm figuring that it just means that you managed to convince yourself that you really didn't want to talk to me, but still."

I nod absently, my anger quickly draining away. He can try masking it all he likes, I can tell he's worried sick about it. "I'm sorry, Nick," I say softly. "Now's just not the time to tell you. Not yet."

"Does that imply that you intend to eventually?"

"I have to," I admit. "Just when the time's right."

"I can understand that," he says absently. "I guess everyone has them, then. Even someone like you."

"Everyone has what?"

"A dirty little secret or two."
Chapter 13

Miles returns to the table just then. "Sorry," he says as he sits back down. "My niece was having some trouble with her English homework. Franziska refuses to help her. She doesn't seem to understand that English really is a difficult language."

"Someone finally admits it!" Nick exclaims, laughing. I shake my head at him and say, "That's right, Miles. Last time I heard of you, you were still fighting what’s-his-face in court. What came of that?"

"Well," he says, "what eventually came of that were restraining orders, actually. Three against him and one against me. Please don't ask what transpired. I'm not proud of my conduct."

I'm not going to say anything and Nick just looks at him sympathetically. At that point, the waitress returns and takes our orders; I note in amusement that she takes mine last, in a quite pointed fashion, as both of the men I'm dining with try to defer to me. Once she's gone, Miles continues, "In any event, he proceeded to try to get the case thrown out because of the mutual ROs. I had to argue nice and long that I was disputing the one against me. I eventually won that, by the way, Franziska got custody. Any attorney could have gotten that result at that point, though. He contested all three ROs and all three were upheld. It's hard to have custody of a child who has a restraining order against you."

"I'm glad it all worked out," I say, smiling. "I know how hard you were fighting for them from Nick."

"Yeah," Nick agreed, putting his hands behind his head. "Just out of curiosity, were the three ROs against your bastard-in-law placed all in one fell swoop, or were they separate incidents?"

"All from one incident," he answered. He looked haunted as he said, "I imagine I won't be able to return to Germany for quite some time. It was... traumatic."

Speaking of dirty little secrets... But I'm not going to press him. He's already said he doesn't want to talk about it. Maybe he'll be able to someday. As I'm considering this, he asks Nick, "What about your investigation? Anything turn up about the forged evidence?"

Nick grins serenely. "Oh, I know all about that forged evidence. I know who made it, who ordered it, why it was ordered... not that I can prove any of it, mind you. But I'm sure I know most of what there is to know about that particular issue."

"Well? Are you willing to share?" I prompt hopefully. I want the head of whoever did this to Nick, and that desire hasn't been muted by the years nor forced maturity that came of becoming a mother.

He shakes his head. "I never accuse without being able to back it up," he reminds me. "You know that."

"A discussion over dinner is hardly an accusation," Miles says as Melissa brings our meals. Nick's having a grilled chicken something and Miles a bowl of borscht. Miles looks over at my plate and pokes me with his spoon in a rare show of playfulness. "You're boring, Maya. You order a burger at a Russian restaurant? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"No where to be found when it comes to food," I inform him with a grin. "I like what I know is good."
"The borscht is pretty good here," Nick tells us. "Not that I'd know what borscht from anywhere else tastes like. And it doesn't matter, Edgeworth. Gossip travels fast."

At this, the issue is dropped. Miles gently pokes at the subject of my absence; much to my relief, Nick immediately tells him to drop it, although not in so many words. We discuss mostly light-hearted things, until another customer comes in, someone I assume is another regular by the way he gapes in horror at Nick. "I thought you were off on Thursdays!" the man says.

"I am," Nick replies, grinning broadly. I can identify the emotion in that grin now. It's quite close to sadism. "I'm just enjoying a dinner with a couple of my friends, that's all."

The newcomer looks relieved. "Then you won't be playing?" he says hopefully.

"Not tonight, Eric. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Not at all, not at all! It's good to see you in here with someone other than that stuffed-up grape leaf-"

"That stuffed-up grape leaf is one of my closest friends," Nick cuts him off, his grin getting bigger. "I'd watch it if I were you."

"I'll watch anything you want, Nixie, just keep your hands off that piano."

Miles puts his spoon down. "I'm sorry," he says, "but this is the third customer who has commented disparagingly about your playing. Why is that?"

"Because there's nothing good to say about it," Nick replies, laughing softly and eating his chicken.

"Why would you have a job as a piano player if you can't play?" I ask, trying to keep the other patrons from hearing me.

The place is so empty at the moment that my voice carries easily. "That's not his real job," Eric informs us. "He's a poker champ, actually. You should see the place when he's actually workin'. Usually all kinds of types comin' and goin' to play against him and watch him play. He's undefeated, you know."

"Mr. Cheslok will throw you out if I tell him to," Nick replies threateningly. "Especially since you haven't even ordered yet."

The patron chuckles. "Delusions of grandeur, I see. I don't blame you with that hottie sitting next to you-"

At that, Nick drops his fork and leans back abruptly, his left hand poised above the keys of the piano and a demonic smirk on his face. Miles and I exchange shocked and horrified looks as we realize that Nick is furious and is trying desperately hard to hide it. "Finish that sentence. I dare you."

"Now Nixie, no need to be hasty!"

As Eric speaks, Kev and Mr. Sorata both throw rolls at Eric, and Nick's hand crashes down on the piano keys. An ear-piercing, dysphoric chord pierces the air and all three of the customers cringe. "You're embarrassing me!" Nick hisses, his temper boiling over ever so slightly. "Knock it off, guys! This is a restaurant, not a playground!"

The three customers immediately mutter apologies, and Nick continues to glare at them as he
straightens in his seat and picks his fork up. "Sorry about that," he murmurs. "They're all good guys, really. They're just not used to seeing me with anyone but Kristoph and Trucy. They're showing off."

Our conversation resumes where Eric interrupted it; Melissa brings the bill and leaves it face-down on the center of the table. As soon as she's collected our plates and has wandered away, the three of us look at each other predatorily and we all make a snatch for the bill. Nick and Miles both manage to get their hands on it, and Miles orders, firmly and without room for argument, "Let go, Wright."

Nick laughs and obeys, and Miles examines the bill for a second. "Looks like Melissa really wants to get on your good side," he says with a smirk. "She didn't charge us for yours, Wright."

"I didn't think she would. She'll start after next week, though." Nick looks oddly pleased with himself.

Miles drops a few dollars of varying denominations on table along with the bill, and we all leave the establishment. It's a beautiful night, and we stroll for a while down the street, with Nick pointing out interesting stores, me pointing up at stars and other night structures, and Miles pretending he's interested in either subject. Just like old times.

It doesn't really take long for us all to start getting a bit tired. We haven't ventured far from the restaurant, and so we turn back and get in Miles' car. "Where are we going?" he asks as Nick slides into the back seat and buckles himself in.

"I thought we were going back to your place," Nick says. I can hear the frown of confusion he's wearing; I don't need to see his face.

Miles smirks. "Yes, but we forgot to clear that with someone."

"... Oh. Oops."

"Well, I don't have an apartment here anymore," I say softly, "and I don't think Nick's place is big enough for the three of us, especially if Trucy and Larry are already there. Either way, I need to stay with either you or him tonight."

"Do you object to going to my home?" Miles asks.

"No, not at all."

"All right, then."

---

I don't know how I'm going to get through this.

When Miles showed up at my apartment, it was a surprise, a huge one. His expression was one of absolutely contrition, and the first words out of his mouth were, "I'm sorry."

My response was to yank him into my apartment, kiss him fiercely, and proceed to try to rip his clothes off. It was uncharacteristic of me, and I'm surprised he didn't try to stop me because of that. Although he didn't let me rip them off, but he did divest himself of them pretty damn quick.

"I missed you too," he said after a round of what was probably the most intense lovemaking I've ever engaged in.
“We need to get dressed,” I replied. “Trucy will be home soon.”

I felt far better after doing that. We simply did as I said, I made tea and we talked. About Trucy’s grades, about the smooth adoption despite my circumstances, about Maya.

And then, when Trucy got home, we went out. She was thrilled that Mr. Edgey was back and was plotting something. Something about using that song I helped her program into her little jukebox computer program and an extra-long show at the Wunderbar.

Oh, and we had to get Miss Maya to come visit now, too. Edgeworth informed her, in no uncertain terms, that he intended to, and then ordered me to call Maya. He’d pay my cell phone bill that month.

This is probably the calmest that I’ve been since my arrest, three years ago. I worried about the bills. I worried about keeping my child fed. I worried about Edgeworth and I worried about Maya, and soon I found myself worrying for no reason at all, randomly and in a rather intense fashion. My hands would shake, my heart start pounding and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was going to die at any second, like the world would collapse beneath my feet.

The first time it happened like that was after my conversation with Vera Misham. When I knew that I was trapped, that there was no way out of this, I started panicking; I had to stop walking back to the Wright Anything Agency, as Trucy dubbed it, because I just didn’t have the strength to keep walking. I was shaking too badly, and I’d made myself dizzy hyperventilating.

It is debilitating, it is embarrassing, and there’s no way I want these two knowing about it. But the longer I am with them, the greater the chance is that I’m going to panic in their presence. All I can do is hold on, focus on them, and hope that the fear stays at bay.

So far it has. They’re a stabilizing force for me, it seems. As we talk together, enjoying each others’ presence as if nothing changed, I feel myself relaxing more, letting my guard down. It’s safe. I don’t have to worry about them seeing my panic. I won’t, if I’m with them.

When we get there, it's like another wave of déjà vu. Nothing in the little house has changed, except for maybe being a little dustier. Miles spent the night here last night, and probably did a bit of cleaning, but I can still see what has dust on it. The three of us sit around the living room, drinking. I keep a cap on my own alcohol consumption; Miles doesn't protest this time around, since I'm over twenty-one, but I've got things I don't want to say that could very well come out if I get too drunk. My companions seem to be carefully controlling their liquor consumption as well.

I don't know who brings the subject up. I don't know how it turns from an immature joke-fest to a serious discussion. And I'm not sure how Miles and I come to an understanding that we, at least, want it to happen. I don't know how we convince Nick that it's a good idea, either.

And I vocalize all this when we wake up squished in Miles' bed in the morning. Nick gives me a sleepy smirk and replies, "Just like old times, huh?"

Miles props himself up on his arm and reaches across me to smack Nick in the face with a sock. "Go back to sleep," he mutters crankily.

"... Okay, maybe not just like old times."

I laugh out loud, scoring a glare from the sleepy prosecutor, although I'm spared a sock-lashing.
Nick and I get out of bed to escape Mr. Crankypants; while Nick's in the shower, I call Kurain to check on my kids. Iris tells me quickly that they're both fine, although Misty had a minor fit last night when she called for Mama and Mama didn't come. Nicky went through the same thing this morning; I cringe and want to return to Kurain right this instant, but Trucy's already been promised that I'll be at her show tonight. Plus, Iris points out helpfully, I'll look like a complete witch if I just take off now.

I wrap up the quiet, almost whispered phone call by the time Nick's out of the shower. Miles is up by then, and quietly jumps in ahead of me. Not that I care much; I'm still training under ice-cold waterfalls. I'm not particularly hungry- I'm too worried about the twins- so I turn down Nick's offer to make me breakfast and just wait for Miles to get out of the shower.

Nick's gone by the time I get out of the shower myself. Miles answers my question before I have a chance to ask it: "He's got to help Trucy prepare for the show tonight. He assists her during these big shows; she called him while you were in the shower to tell him that she wanted to do a stunt that normally requires several days of preparation and rehearsal. He wouldn't tell me what this stunt is, but he wasn't very pleased with her about it."

"I hope they have enough time to prepare," I say, worried. "What time is the show?"

"A little after five," Miles answers. "He asked me to show up at four-thirty so Trucy can see us before the performance."

"That leaves us with a lot of time to kill," I observe.

"Yes. I have an idea how to kill it, too. Are you up for going out right now?"

I nod. "Sure. You'll have to buy me lunch, though."

He rolls his eyes at me as he grabs his keys and heads for the door. "Ah, the joys of buying you lunch. To think I'd almost forgotten."

"Hey!"

I can't hide my surprise as we pull up to the prosecutor's office. Miles passes his clearance at the front desk with relative ease; I'm amazed that they still consider him an active prosecutor, after all this time, and his office has been left alone. "I got in contact with Gumshoe as soon as I arrived back in the States," Miles informs me as he goes right to his computer. "He told me that our beloved Wright has been up to some... interesting... tasks."

With a few clicks of his mouse, Miles has brought up an interesting file. Nick's picture is there, along with his age, social security number, address, cell phone number, and... I read the information on him with growing interest. It seems that this file is being used as a communication port of sorts, because a user of the name "PW" has made several editorial remarks, and even gotten into a debate with one "Prosecutor G." About the history and usefulness of the Jury System the country had for centuries before the judicial system collapsed under its own weight... PW is arguing quite clearly for this system to be reinstated, and Prosecutor G. is arguing against it, although more in a devil's advocacy style than because he truly believes it shouldn't be. "What... is this?" I ask, mildly bewildered.

"This is Wright having had enough of a corrupt judicial system and trying to work to change it," Miles answers, his tone grave. "I take it that he's said nothing to you about this."

I shake my head, reading through Nick's debate with Prosecutor G. It ends abruptly when personal
attacks start coming into it, and whoever has control of these profiles posts for them to behave like
the grown men they are and "locks" the debate. I have a touch of smug satisfaction in seeing that
Nick got the last word in: "You forget, Gavin, that you weren't able to prove a thing. Maybe that's
why you're so against a jury system. If I'd plead not guilty before a jury I'd have been acquitted in
less than a day and you know it. Guilty consciences are a bitch, aren't they?"

The rest of the information on Nick's profile is interesting, with various comments from a few
familiar and unfamiliar names; Detective Gumshoe has a few nonsequitur comments here and there
that are largely ignored by everyone but Nick. One piece of information contrasts the rate at which
death sentences were overturned in the 90's and early 2000's and now. It's much higher now, and
Nick points out that the climb directly correlates to the percentage increase in death sentences since
those days. "I'm not going to point out the number of cases in which proof of innocence was found
after execution," he writes, "but it's an interesting figure if you care enough to look it up
yourselves. In a terrifying way."

A little farther down, another debate about the merits of the jury system. An unknown prosecutor
asks directly, "How would u propose we change that? u no wed have to overhaul the entire
evidence gathering process. Keeping trials short is important. How do u think we would
accomplish all this and still keep them under a week?"

"Don't ask me," Nick replies, and I can almost smell the snark. "I'm not a lawyer, remember? I
don't even know why I have access to this file in the first place."

Miles is reading right along side me, pointing out various things. We get down to the first message
on the profile, signed by user PW: "Hello? Anybody out there? Why does my security clearance
still work on this thing? You guys might want to revoke it. I'm sure you didn't mean to let me keep
it."

And then Prosecutor G.'s response, the only one to that message: "This is all you still have access
to; consider it a gift. This matter isn't closed and everyone knows it. You've been looking into
some interesting topics and I'm sure everyone would be thrilled to hear about it."

"Why did Nick have access to the prosecutor's system anyway?" I ask.

"All defense attorneys do," Miles replies, closing the window on the computer. "Although their
access to the prosecution's side of the system is limited, and vice versa. Do you understand what
he's trying to do?"

I nod, thinking over his interactions on that page. "Prosecutor Gavin gives a new meaning to the
phrase 'friendly hostile'," I muse. Aside from that one debate that nearly descended into a flame
war, he seemed to be helpful, or at the very least, not hurtful.

"Indeed," Miles agrees. "I'm... confused. Every time I've spoken to him about Wright's case, he has
insisted that Wright is corrupt. Yet he, personally, restores Wright's access to his own profile on
the prosecutor's system and invites him to discourse, and appears to seriously entertain Wright's
push for a revival of the jury system, all the while insisting that Wright should have been convicted
on the corruption charges." His grey eyes meet mine and he asks, rhetorically, "What's this man's
game?"

I look over Nick's interactions with the prosecutor again, something tugging at my memory. It's
been a long time, but... "I seem to remember Mr. Gavin being surprised that Nick's attorney was so
vehement that there was no proof," I say. "After insisting over and over to you that the fact that he
presented the evidence was proof enough, why would he back down when the defense does
nothing more but repeat that it isn't?"
"Kristoph Gavin is Klavier Gavin's older brother," Miles replies, in a masked, *You should know that* voice.

I nod. "I know. But it really looked to me like it was more than just him listening to his big brother. He looked absolutely confused."

Miles frowns at me. "I don't remember that."

I return his frown, thinking hard about that day, the details burned into my mind. That was one of those little details I didn't think I'd ever be able to forget, even if I tried, but... "It was years ago," I say, shaking my head. "Maybe I'm wrong."

"Possibly. Although I was more focused on getting the judge to agree that there was no proof that Wright committed any crime. I may have missed it."

I lean back against the shelves behind Miles' desk. "So, Nick's trying to persuade the judiciary to give the jury system another chance, in some form. What can we do to help?"

Miles shuts down the computer. "I've already asked," he says, "and Wright's asked me to act as an intermediary between him and the prosecutor's office. His last post to that profile was right before he was forced to cut his internet, and I noted that no one seemed even remotely interested in continuing the conversation after that. I'm to try to reestablish communications."

"Okay, then, let me rephrase," I say. "What can I do to help?"

The prosecutor looks in my eyes, and says, very seriously, "You know, he told me that he felt abandoned."

"Wh-what? But I was calling him every week-"

"And telling him you didn't want to see him." Miles looks down at his hands for a second, and adds, "You could probably start helping him by telling us why. I know we both walked away, but at least he knew my reasons. He was left guessing at yours."

I shake my head. "It's not that simple, Miles," I say sadly, turning away, realizing something terrible. This situation is almost exactly the same as the one that made Nick break up with us four years ago. Reveal this, and Nick's moral fiber is questioned, his credibility damaged, and that credibility is already still on life support. Even worse is the fact that this time, Miles' credibility is just as vital. Nick's got no chance of doing this on his own; Miles is his only ally who has any clout. Damage to Miles' credibility, even when this has nothing to do with the judicial system, could mean death for Nick's efforts.

They already have every reason not to listen to Nick. They don't need me to give them another one.

"Maya?"

I shake my head again. "I told Nick last night," I say firmly. "I'll tell you guys what's going on when the time is right. That's not now."

This gets his attention. "I'm involved in this?"

"More than you know," I mutter to myself.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."
"It wasn't important," I wave it off.

He sighs, sitting back. "Don't walk away from him again, Maya," he says finally. "If you're not going to explain yourself, don't walk away as well. He needs us both to be here."

I stare at him grimly. He's right, but... my responsibilities... "I'll try," I say, swallowing hard.

He bows his head, clearly not satisfied with that answer. But neither is he willing to push it further, and I'm well aware that he's performing a balancing act. He, of all people, knows that I do things like disappear for three years for a reason. "Very well," he says finally. "The afternoon is half gone. Shall we go get lunch and head to the Wonderbar?"

Relief floods me as he drops the issue. We go to the burger joint I used to love so much, and head for the bar that Trucy performs at every few days. As we enter, I see Nick on the little stage, conversing with Trucy. He's clean-shaven and in an outfit I've never seen before: black slacks and belt, black shoes, and a black vest over a blue shirt with the four suites of a deck of cards sewn on down the sleeves. It looks nice. Cheap, but nice. Nick sees us and waves us to the stage. "Look at you," I croon, eyeing him. "It looks like you're a real part of the act, Nick!"

He laughs, shaking his head. "Nah. I'm just a prop."

"I'm sure Trucy wouldn't ask you to get in a costume if you were just a prop," Miles contradicts.

Trucy looks confused at this. "Why not? Mr. Hat is in a costume."

"Anyway!" I say quickly, trying to change the subject before there can be any fallout from Nick's daughter calling him a prop. "I'm so glad I could be here, Trucy," I tell the child. "I'm so excited!"

"I am, too!" Trucy croons. "I was so disappointed when Daddy said you might not be able to make it, but when he told me that you were, I was so pleased that not even Mr. Larry's bad jokes could get me in a bad mood." Trucy grins broadly at this, and adds, "I don't even think I'll mind having to babysit him again tonight!"

Nick's standing behind her, arms crossed over his chest and looking around distractedly, probably trying to pretend that his daughter didn't just claim that she was babysitting her babysitter. She looks over her shoulder, and then kneels and beckons me closer. I lean up against the stage, and she whispers in my ear, "He's happier with you and Mr. Edgey here, too."

"I can hear you, Truce," Nick says in an amused voice.

Trucy laughs teasingly as she stands again. "Well, good. It shouldn't be a secret anyway. You're not nearly happy enough, Daddy."

"I'm plenty happy."

"Liar."

Nick chuckles. "Go get ready for your show, sweetheart," he says with a genuine smile. "You've got more prep than I do."

"Yeah. You're part of my prep and you're not done yet."

He rolls his eyes. "Check Mr. Hat's joints to make sure he's working right."

"But I already did that!"
"Do it again."

"Daddy-" Trucy whines.

"Trucy," Nick whines back, mimicking her voice.

She pouts and stomps off in a dramatic fashion. "I figure that bought me about half a minute," Nick says quickly, with a wry smile. "Thanks for coming, guys. I know you're not too interested in this, Edgeworth. And I know you've got some pretty serious business going on," he says to me, directly.

Miles shrugs and shakes his head. "It's nothing, Wright," he says. "Yes, this is a waste of time. I don't believe I had anything better to do tonight, though."

"Well, hopefully you'll enjoy the show anyway," Nick says, over Trucy shouting for him from back stage. "I've gotta go. She's changed the stunt she needs me for three times and I think it just changed again."

"See you," I say lamely as Nick retreats.

Miles turns to me with a sigh. We both know Trucy's right about Nick not really being happy, but there isn't much we can do right now. Not much we can do yet. "Shall we find our seats, Ms. Fey?" Miles prompts me.
Chapter 14

We take a table that's pretty close to the front of the stage; we'll have a good view of the stage here, and we order some fried mozzarella sticks and drinks, and we talk. Miles has gotten better at small-talk since he left for Germany, and he grins when I tell him that. "I had to," he says dryly. "My niece talks almost as much as you do, and she actually expects me to participate all the time."

I ignore the uncomfortable implication that I remind Miles of his niece, remind myself that there's no blood relation between the two, and munch on a mozzarella stick.

As the minutes tick by, the bar fills up, and I'm in awe at how large a crowd this magic show is drawing; it might fill the building to capacity. Fortunately, that doesn't quite happen by the time the lights in the bar dim, the lights above the little stage brighten, and a spotlight shines on the middle of the stage. There's a small smattering of polite applause even before there's movement on the stage.

Much to my surprise, it's Nick who walks out into the spotlight. Somewhere behind us, I hear a woman whistle and catcall; Nick grins broadly and winks. "We know why that young woman came to this show, I suppose," Miles whispers.

"I'm afraid Ms. Wright owes the crowd an apology tonight," Nick says, clasping his hands in front of him. He probably looks and sounds natural enough, but I can tell he's reciting a script. "You see, there's a particular prop of hers that has gone missing. No one can find it. As she was planning to use it in most of her act-"

"Daddy!" Trucy's voice echoes from off stage. She storms into the spotlight and Nick's expression of horror is exaggerated, and I'm sure most of the patrons know it's an act now. "Sorry, gotta go!" he yelps, dashing off the stage in the opposite direction. Trucy comes to stand in the spotlight, huffing. "My prop!" she cries. "Daddy, get your butt back here this instant!"

The crowd is laughing, and even Miles issues a chuckle as Trucy turns to the crowd, her arms across her chest. "Props aren't supposed to run away," she pouts, her acting much more obvious than Nick's. "What, oh what am I going to do now? Oh! I know! He's my prop! I'll just bring him back!"

With a dramatic wave of her hands and a sudden BANG!, a puff of smoke obscures the stage for a moment. When it clears, Nick is standing next to her again, his left wrist handcuffed to her right wrist. There's a moment of pause, of staring at her, before he holds up his chained arm slightly, to give the crowd a good look at the cuffs, and even jerks his arm away a little. They're definitely secured firmly, even if we have no way of confirming that they're really locked.

And Nick doesn't look so good. At all. I glance at Miles; if he sees it, he's not showing it.

After the bit of applause for Nick's magical reappearance passes, and Nick has covertly demonstrated that he is indeed shackled to the young magician, he sighs heavily. "Trucy, I don't want to do this," he whines. "Can't we do something else that doesn't involve twisting in all kinds of impossible ways?"

"Why's he whining?" Miles whispers to me. "He should be used to twisting in all kinds of impossible ways." I choke on my soda as, between Miles' insidious tone and odd wording, I understand what he's saying and suppress a laugh. Pervert.
On the stage, Trucy's responding: "Come on, we're half way there already. The quicker you stop acting like a baby and give me your other hand, the quicker you can go back to drinking your grape juice."

I can tell by the sharp, disbelieving laugh Nick gives that Trucy just deviated from the script. "This is the young lady who expects me to buy her chocolate snackoos every other day!" he informs the crowd incredulously.

"Better than S-s-s-saaaamu-"

"Don't you dare say it!"

"Samurai Soda!" she exclaims, laughing wildly, as the rest of the crowd laughs as well at the implication that Nick drinks Samurai Soda.

"You are so grounded."

She smiles sweetly at him. "So if you're sufficiently annoyed enough to help me to my trick, Daddy..."

Nick sighs heavily and presents his right wrist to her. She snaps a second cuff on it, and hands the still-unlocked side to him; in return, he secures the metal bracelet on her wrist. They tug away from each other, again, to demonstrate that they are now firmly bound to each other. "Okay, Daddy, you know how to do this," Trucy says in a wheedling tone.

"Yes, sweetheart." Nick sounds superficially irritated, but I can, once more, hear that he's acting. Mostly. I still can't get the feeling out of my head that he's not alright up there, but he's really acting like he's fine. He twists around as he kneels, raising his arms so he can awkwardly duck underneath the crossed handcuffs. This results only in Trucy's arms ending up wrapped around his shoulders. "Thanks for the hug, dear," he says sarcastically, "but I don't think our audience wants to see family bonding."

"I'm not hugging you, silly," Trucy remarks, trying to shift her stance to reach into the pocket on Nick's shirt; she can't reach. After a few tries, she cries, "Daddy, help!"

He laughs. "What exactly am I supposed to do?"

The crowd laughs with him; I wonder if the trick didn't just go wrong by how Nick's laugh sounds a little flustered, and Trucy sounds genuinely upset. Very carefully, the pair reverses their previous maneuver, and Trucy just reaches up to grope in Nick's pocket. Meanwhile, Nick's pointing at her with his far hand and making a funny face. A chuckle sweeps over the crowd again and Trucy looks up at him; his expression goes flat once more. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"This!" Trucy exclaims in victory, producing a... a pair of very large, frilly panties. Ordinarily I'd wonder why Nick had a pair of women's panties in his breast pocket, but those are far too big to have been retrieved from that pocket. Where'd they come from?

I watch in amazement- and a level of disappointment- as Trucy pulls a small object from the panties that she insists is the key to one of the set of handcuffs. I suppose it shouldn't be so much of a surprise; Trucy is very young, and probably needs a lot more practice. As the pair on the stage maneuvers so that Trucy can undo that set of handcuffs, Nick says, "Uh, Truce? That's not a key."

"Oh? What is it?"

"A firecracker."
"A what?!"

A small explosion goes off on stage, and my stomach lurches uncomfortably as smoke fills the little stage again, this time accompanied by a burst of glitter as well. I relax and applaud just as loudly as everyone else as the smoke clears, and Trucy and Nick are now standing on opposite ends of the stage, each holding one of the sets of handcuffs. Trucy has hers in one hand, her hands on her hips and grinning broadly, and Nick is leaning against the wall on the other side, twirling one of the cuffs around on his index finger. As the applause starts to fade, they meet at the center; Nick turns his set of cuffs over to Trucy, and then takes her hand and holds it up as she steps forwards slightly and curtsies. That done, he issues a small salute to the audience and leaves the stage.

Trucy thanks Nick for his assistance, and then the next fifteen minutes or so are spent doing a few small illusions, such as asking a patron close to the front of the bar to pick a card and correctly identifying it, and then taking that card and turning it into a tiny purple rose (which I later discover in my sleeve) and doing the same stunt again, this time turning it into a tiny red rose (which Miles pulls from his pocket a few minutes later), and then calling Nick back out onto the stage, doing it a third time with him, and handing him the resulting tiny blue rose.

Miles and I exchange questioning looks; we wonder just what that was all about, but Trucy's already gone into another act. After another scripted dialogue with her foster father, she convinces him to wheel out a small gurney-like table and lay on it. She then produces a hoop and, somehow, in a way I can't figure out, manages to get Nick to float through the hoop and back onto the gurney. He's rather pale by the end of the stunt, but just sits up, jumps off the gurney, and takes the props off the stage.

Mr. Hat's next, and an act with her magic panties. Nick "wanders" onto the stage to clean up after her as she just pulls item after item out of the panties, including Nick's blue beanie and a piece of paper. He glances at the paper as she's reaching into the panties again and bursts, "Whoa, hold up! You got a D on this, Trucy? Really?"

"Oh, ooops. I guess that's where I hid that test, huh?"

The crowd seems to love these little exchanges that always end with Nick being flustered or outsmarted. The last item she pulls from those panties is a whip, which she immediately attempts to use on Nick. He's fast enough to catch it, though, with a light-hearted, "Nice try, sweetie."

"That would have been handy for him to be able to do when Fransizka was practicing law here," I whisper to Miles. He just chuckles and stirs his drink, as oddly enthralled by the performance as I am. That whip seems to transform into a silk scarf, one that lengthens as Nick just walks away from Trucy, holding onto the end of it firmly.

There are a few more stunts and illusions; it's clear that Trucy's trying to do some tricks that are out of her depth, but the whole show is just so charming that I don't care, and I suspect that most of the other patrons are of a like mind. As a bit of music that sounds like it was programmed with an old computer starts playing, Trucy announces the end of her show, and says, "You guys are all real lucky, you know. This is the first and last time this routine will ever be performed. It's one of a kind. I hope you all enjoyed it!"

As the music continues, a light tenor voice rings through the bar. Having only heard him hum absently occasionally, it takes me a few minutes to realize that Nick is singing. His voice is shaky, and he sounds breathless after long notes; it's obvious that he is most certainly not a professional. His voice has a pleasant timbre to it, though, and he can carry a tune well enough that it's not a bad experience. No one would be eager to hear him sing again, but no one can object to it, either.
As Nick is singing from somewhere backstage, Trucy finishes her act in a flurry of illusions using glitter, tiny bits of pyrotechnics, silk scarves and butterflies, all timed to the rise and fall of the song, and finishes with the illusion of her crumbling to pieces in a heap of blue ice as the song comes to an end. The lights in the bar come up as the patrons applaud enthusiastically, and bar staff begin to clean up the stage. She did make a bit of a mess of it.

Miles and I discuss the act quietly as we finish our drinks. It was amateurish, but still extremely impressive for a girl Trucy's age. Even more impressive was her ability to get Nick to cooperate in his role on stage; we were discussing what exactly Trucy had to bribe- or blackmail- him with to get him to sing when he approached our table, holding his own drink. He was out of his costume already, wearing that beat-up sweat jacket, windbreaker pants and sandals. His blue beanie stuck out of one of the pockets, ready to be put back on at any moment. "So, what'd you guys think?" he asked, his smile ever so slightly strained. "By the way, it was a bribe."

"She's an extremely talented girl," Miles replies pleasantly. He's not normally one to enjoy things like amateur magic shows, but he made an effort to enjoy this one, an effort I'm sure Nick appreciates. "What was the bribe, by the way?"

Nick looks down, grinning. "She agreed to spend no less than two hours on schoolwork and spend an hour less watching TV every night for a month," he tells us.

"If you knew how little effort that girl puts into school..." He chuckles, shaking his head. "In any event," he says, lifting his head and smiling openly, although I still can’t shake the impression that he’s distressed, "We can't have her wandering off stage. This is, after all, a bar, and she is, after all, very much a minor. That was the longest performance she's ever done, and she wants to go home as quickly as possible, but she wants to see you two before she leaves with Larry. Would you guys mind coming back with me?"

I'm done with my drink, so I just shrug and nod. Miles takes a few more gulps of the drink he's been nursing this whole time- he's driving, so he only wanted to have one drink and he wanted to make it last- and we let Nick guide us to the backstage, where Trucy and Larry are already in an animated conversation about the performance. "Hey Nick!" Larry says the instant he sees us. "I'm gonna marry Trucy when she grows up, 'kay? I think it'd be pretty handy to have a girl who can pull anything out of her panties around!"

"Hey Larry!" Nick replies with equal enthusiasm. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to let you marry my daughter, ever!"

"What if she says yes?"

"Tough luck."

Trucy laughs, shooting a look at me and Miles. "That's okay, Daddy," she says with a sleepy grin at us. "You don't have to worry about that. Mr. Larry's fun and all, but he's not my type."

"Aw, you're breakin' my heart here, Truce!"

I decide it would be best for me to assume that he is just having fun and not serious. Trucy slides off her chair and sleepily trundles up to me and Miles, hugging us in turn. "Thanks so much for coming to my show, Ms. Maya," she says as she hugs me. As I return her embrace, she whispers in my ear, "Whatever's wrong, it'll be okay. Just so you know."
I don't answer her. I'm sure it will be. I just don't know how anymore.

Larry gets serious enough for Nick to give him instructions for the night and to reiterate where he'll be. These instructions include a reminder of the conditions Nick placed upon his participation in this show, and then to Trucy, "And since I know very well he's not going to enforce them, I'll remind you, too. You don't have to do the schoolwork tonight, but no more than an hour of TV before bed. Understand?"

"Yes, Daddy," Trucy answers with a yawn. "Magician's honor."

I note with interest that Nick looks less than impressed with that oath. Miles cuts into the conversation: "You look sleepy, Trucy. Do you want me to give you and Mr. Larry a ride back to your apartment?"

She shakes her head, even as Larry agrees to Miles' proposition eagerly. "I'm not that tired," she answers. "Besides, it's a beautiful night. We can look at the stars while we're walking home."

"If you're sure," Miles prompts. Trucy nods and Larry protests and we all ignore him. "All right then," he says, smiling slightly. "I think it's best if we head to our own destination. Miss Maya's going home early tomorrow, if I have her plans right."

"I am," I say softly. Trucy hugs me and wishes me a good night and much to my surprise, Larry does as well, and it's a decent, friendly hug, unlike the hugs he used to give. "You listen, Maya," he says with a light, friendly peck at my cheek. "You're not allowed to stay away that long again, you got it?"

"I got it," I mumble in response, thinking that Trucy's idea of star-gazing might be a nice one. And that's when I realize that I've never seen Miles' back yard, and that if Trucy liked star-gazing, she probably should come to Kurain at some point...

At some point. I'd call Kurain when we got back to Miles'. As long as the twins were still okay, I would be okay coming back to the city more frequently, but now still wasn't the time to let the boys meet the twins. Especially not now that the three of us had a job to do.

The rest of our farewells are said, and we part ways. I go to call Kurain as I planned, although I have to speak in code; I can think of no reason to try to get away from Nick and Miles to make the call. I'm able to glean that my children are, in fact, still okay; Iris is able to convince them that I'm coming back, even though by now she needs to do it every few hours or so.

I make my star-gazing suggestion, and much to my surprise, the boys agree. We all head out to Miles' back yard, where we lay in a circle, our heads close to each other, and point out various heavenly bodies and just talk.

Soon, a cold wind blows in and the night clouds get thicker. It doesn't take long for us to realize that a storm is rolling in, so we gather ourselves up and head back inside. Nick calls his apartment to confirm that Larry and Trucy have already arrived safely- they have- and when he rejoins us fully again, the question of what to do next comes up.

Miles flashes us a mischievous grin. "I brought Steel Samurai and the Deep Night back with me," he says suggestively.

Nick looks at him questioningly, and I answer, "The porn that started this all."

"Ah." He gives a goofy grin, relaxed and amused. "I'm game if you guys are. I think I was starting to get into the plot by the time we... uh..."
"Yes, well," Miles cuts him off, his face reddening slightly. "Do you happen to remember at what point that was, Wright?"

"... no clue."

Miles next looks to me for guidance. I hold my hands up defensively. "Don't ask me, I think I was too drunk to remember it long before either of you were."

"Well, we have a problem then," Miles says slowly, "because I don't remember where we were, either."

"You wanted to start it from where we left off four years ago?" Nick asks incredulously. "Man, you're fired. Just put it in and start from the beginning."

Miles seems a little exasperated. "Do you remember how bad it was, Wright?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Of course I do! That's the point! I dunno about you two, but I could use a good laugh, especially if we aren't going to know what the hell's going on otherwise."

The sandy-haired prosecutor looks to me for assistance; I just shrug. "All I know is that I still haven't kept that promise to watch it from start to finish with you," I say, grinning. "If he wants to start it from the top and we've got the time to get through it, let's just do it and get it over with."

Miles glances at his clock and sighs heavily. "We've got the time. I suppose I've just been overruled."

Nick shrugs. "If you've got a better idea, let's hear it."

In response, Miles just opens the DVD player, retrieves the DVD from a duffel bag by the couch, and puts it in.

We watch the movie for the third time, and Nick starts asking questions about the Steel Samurai canon in a strange tone of voice, almost like he's trying to distract himself. It came naturally to me and Miles, since we already knew the story, but Nick's fairly clueless about the main plot. When I ask him why he's suddenly interested in the plot, he responds with smirk, using a vulgarity I rarely hear from him: "I was just interested in the fucking. It got pretty boring with all that plot going on; it got interesting pretty late on."

“I told you, porn with a plot is blasphemous,” Miles remarks.

“You two are blasphemous,” I retort. They laugh at me and we continue watching the movie.

All of us wonder at what point in the movie our relationship actually started and if any of us would be able to recognize it. At the point where the Steel Samurai and Evil Magistrate go at it, Nick gasps slightly. We’re all a little hot right now, but that wasn’t what Nick’s fairly clueless about the main plot. When I ask him why he’s suddenly interested in the plot, he responds with smirk, using a vulgarity I rarely hear from him: “I was just interested in the fucking. It got pretty boring with all that plot going on; it got interesting pretty late on.”

“Told you, porn with a plot is blasphemous,” Miles responds.

“You two are blasphemous,” I retort. They laugh at me and we continue watching the movie.

Abruptly, the conversation comes rushing back. Miles had, several scenes prior, already mentioned his comparison between the three of us and the Steel Samurai characters. Nick’s flippant comment was in reference to that; “If I recall,” Miles says, “Maya joked that it was yours as well, Wright.”
“Yes, she did,” Nick mused, clearly getting a kick out of the recollection.

Their reminiscence was starting to bring it back to me as well. “And then Nick said that it wasn’t his biggest but it was pretty high up there,” I said, giggling. “Someone asked what number one was. Who was it?”

“I think it was me,” Miles said.

No one needed to go further. The mystery of that night, after four years, was solved, and all we had to do was to watch the movie again. We’d all spent four years wondering about what exactly happened that night, none of us able to piece together enough to come up with a complete picture, and all we needed was to see the scene again.

Nick laughs. “Another mystery solved,” he says, grinning at the two of us. And then, directly at me, “Another dirty little secret brought to the light.”

I hear what he’s saying, between the lines, loud and clear. I sincerely hope he’s bluffing.

Nick’s odd tone of voice and my sudden discomfort doesn’t escape Miles’ notice; none the less, he picks up the remote and restarts the paused movie, saying, “You two can be cryptic later. We’re getting through this blasted thing tonight if it’s the last thing we do.”

I agree heartily; Nick’s less enthusiastic about that prospect, but I’m sure he would be if this was his third attempt instead of his second. We’re about to get to the magical suspended in thin air Pink Princess who the viewer suddenly realizes that they dropped a pretty penny for a fake porn, when a flash of lightning pierces the sky outside and an almost immediate blast of thunder seems to shake the floor. I give a little involuntary scream- I’ve never been good with thunderstorms and it’s been a little worse since the tragedy at Hazakura Temple- and discover that I’ve flung myself against Miles, burying my face in his chest. I feel his arms go around me, and Nick’s hand rubbing my back soothingly; his hand is shaking. Guess the lightning strike startled him, too. He says, “Do you have a flashlight or candles or something, Edgeworth?”

I feel him shift slightly. “There should be one in the entertainment center, third drawer down. Do you have enough light to find it?”

I pull away, blinking as I realize that it’s almost pitch-dark in the room and the movie’s stopped. The power must’ve gone out. As Nick carefully crawls over to the entertainment center to find the flashlight, I pull away from Miles, grateful for the darkness, since I’m blushing furiously. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s no problem,” Miles says. “I think all three of us jumped a little at that.”

As Miles speaks, light flickers from across the room, and Nick shines the flashlight directly at us. I catch a look at his impish face before it blinds me and Miles snaps, “Wright! Knock it off!”

Nick laughs and the light turns away, straight up to the ceiling. His face looks boyish and intense as I blink the spots out of my eyes, and he remarks, “I have two ideas now that porn is out of the question.”

“Oh?” Miles sounds annoyed. I am, too. I wanted to get through that movie tonight.

“Yeah. Ghost stories…” and with that, Nick brings the flashlight down under his chin and gives a diabolical cackle that, much to my chagrin, doesn’t sound the slightest bit forced. I get the feeling my misgivings about him being upset about something wasn’t mere paranoia.
The storm outside rages on. Something ominous is in Nick’s tone, in his body language. Something isn’t right and I can’t tell what and it’s driving me nuts that I can see it clearer in the dark than I could in the light, but I still can’t tell what it is…

“No thanks,” I say, with a wave of my hand, although I know Nick probably can’t see the gesture. Miles catches my hand and gives it a brief squeeze, trying to communicate something; I don’t get the message. If it’s that important, he’ll find another way to tell me.

“Didn’t think so.” Nick shines the light back up to the ceiling, and says, “Okay, then, second idea?”

“Shoot,” Miles answers.

“Let’s fuck.”

His directness is astounding. The suggestion isn’t a surprise- far from it- but he’s never been quite so eloquent about it. But… “Nick,” I say slowly. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Erm… why not?”

“Didn’t you previously have reservations about this kind of arrangement?” Miles answers for me, his voice indecipherable. We’d made love the first night I was here, but that was something of a heat of the moment thing and I didn’t know about his efforts to fix the court system yet.

“Oh, that. Yeah, well, I have full legal custody now. Full parental rights. And let me tell you, once you’ve got parental rights, the system has a bitch of a time getting them away from you. You’d have to do something remarkably antisocial.” He pauses, tapping the flashlight against his cheek. “Like using your daughter to run away from a courthouse to escape a guilty verdict in a murder trial because your lawyer just unwittingly presented forged evidence.”

My breath catches in my throat at the level of bitterness in his voice. Miles’ upper arms tense, probably thinking the same thing I am: he really has been traumatized, and pretty badly, by the sound of it. He’s been faking being okay this whole time.

Of course, Nick can’t see our stunned and worried reactions. It’s too dark where we’re sitting. But because of how close the flashlight is to his face, we can see that he’s not even looking at us, so our reactions are moot, lights out or not. He shifts around so he’s kneeling, holding the flashlight askew slightly. “So are we going to do what I want to, or do one of you have another idea of what we could do in pitch dark in the middle of a nasty thunderstorm?”

I have no idea what to say or do, and neither does Miles. I get the distinct, upsetting sense, as Nick leaves the flashlight by the entertainment center and crawls back towards us, that this isn’t about sex. He kneels in front of us, still sitting on the couch, watching him warily; he’s close enough that I can see his eyes.

The storm outside rages on, although I think now that I’d rather be outside in that storm than trapped in the one in Nick’s eyes.

He lunges for both of us, his hands and lips finding purchase with me. He kisses me savagely, his hands already tugging insistently at the sash holding my dress closed. I hear Miles protest and I push Nick’s hands away; as my own hands touch his, I feel him shaking. Violently.

Nick recoils as if I’ve struck him. “Why?” he says, his voice soft and questioning and my god, betrayed.
“Wright, what’s wrong?” Miles demands, his concern over Nick’s sudden erratic behavior even more apparent than mine.

Nick shakes his head, rubbing his wrists. “I don’t want to remember,” he whispers. “I can’t stop seeing it. Help me forget. Please. Help me forget.”

Miles slides off the couch, onto the floor next to Nick, and I follow him. On level with Nick now, he reaches out to touch my face, gently instead of demanding. And his hands are still shaking. Miles runs a hand through his hair from behind, a gesture intending to be calming, comforting, and asks, again, “What’s wrong?”

Nick takes a shuddering breath, leaning his head back against Miles’ hand. “I don’t want to remember anymore,” he says emphatically. “I can’t do this. Help me forget.”

My mind rakes over the events of the day, trying to find what in the hell triggered him so badly. Trucy’s words ring in my ears: “Whatever’s wrong, it will be okay.” I repeat her whispered words in my own whisper, leaning forward into Nick’s lap, and I kiss him just as gently as he’s touching my face, as Miles is stroking his hair.

When he materialized the first time in the magic show, I saw it.

Phoenix is a calm man, usually. I’ve seen him cornered in court; the only time I’ve truly seen him worked up like this was when Matt Engarde had his hit man abduct Maya. But I saw it twice, the first in the instant before he opened the office door when I arrived, and the second in the moment after the smoke cleared during his daughter’s show.

I feel stupid. I should have said something when I realized it wasn’t a trick of my own misgivings. I have not a clue what is wrong, but, “Help me forget,” is all he can articulate in the state he’s in.

I use his preoccupation with Maya to work this out. I am intimately acquainted with panic attacks; this is a rather intense one, certainly. What triggered it?

The two of them don’t seem interested in letting me go any further than that. I’m not truly in this, and I suspect they both know it. I’m too worried about why Wright is so shaken. Was it the thunderstorm? Something involving the movie?

As we tumble through the motions and I try to enjoy it despite my ruminations, I realize what Wright is doing. My own panic attacks, years ago, felt like I’d had an overdose of adrenaline; using it helped speed it along. That is what he is doing. He’s using the exertion of sex to burn out the excess adrenaline causing his shaking and racing heart.

I can pry what has triggered him so severely out of him after we’re finished. For now, Maya’s doing that to me in an effort to get my attention on them. Knowing that there’s some logic to Wright’s method of coping, at least, I succumb to them.
I’m not the only one who is too distracted to really enjoy the situation. Miles is thoughtful, distracted, clearly trying to work something out and Nick is frantic, trying to escape from whatever he’s trying to forget.

By the time I get tired of Miles not paying attention and take care of that, he’s obviously either worked out what he’s so concerned with or he’s decided that it’s not so important. Miles’ full participation lets me relax as well.

We’re soon slumped over each other and the coffee table and couch, panting and sweaty and trying to gather our senses again. We get dressed shakily, spent, and Nick excuses him to the bathroom, leaving me and Miles to get us drinks. I’m damn thirsty, he’s thirsty, and we’re both sure Nick is, as well. While we’re doing that, I muse, “I wonder what triggered him so badly…”

Miles shakes his head, using the flashlight to locate a bag of potato chips. We’re having tap water; the power’s still not on, and he doesn’t want to open the refrigerator until it is. “I’m not cruel enough to ask,” he replies flatly, his tone heavily suggesting that I don’t ask, either. And I don’t think I will. Asking might trigger him again. If he wants to talk about it, he will. We’ll be there to listen. And if he doesn’t want to talk about it… well, we need to make sure he knows that he can’t just up and rip our clothes off when he’s distressed, but as for what distressed him, it’s none of our business unless he wants it to be.

Nick returns while the lights are still out. We sit at the table and make small-talk, something that’s quite difficult when one person isn't usually one for chatter, no matter how good he was at it five hours ago, and the other clearly doesn't want to.

That might not be exactly accurate, though. Nick's quiet, but there's a thoughtfulness in his silence as he munches absently on the potato chips. Finally, in a lull in the conversation, he says, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have broken down like that."

Miles and I turn our attention to him. "It's alright," I say softly. "You're human. Remember when I finally broke down after Mom died?"

Nick chuckles and shakes his head. "I'm sorry for that, too. I had no idea what to do about it."

"Yeah, well... I'm sure the idea of comfort sex didn't cross either of our minds at that point."

I assume that's the end of that. It's not. "The first trick I did with Trucy tonight... I actually told her that I wouldn't do it. Period. I'm not sure how to deal with it now."

"Oh?" Miles asks. "Why didn't you want to do it?"

Nick's gaze flicks to Miles. "Handcuffs," he says in a flat voice. The broken, frightened, lost voice he had only fifteen minutes ago. As he speaks, he rubs one of his wrists absently. "It's strange. I can handle the trick where she's got my hands behind my back and locked around something, and Mr. Hat is the one that frees me. But I get upset if my hands are in front of me."

It makes sense now. That's another detail of that nightmarish week. The sunlight glinting off the handcuffs. Handcuffs binding his hands in front of him.

He keeps talking, conversationally. I'm not even sure this is more than him talking to himself anymore. "I had my badge back then, too," he says around a potato chip.
Miles, who was about to take a drink, puts his cup back down. "What?" He sounds like he feels just as much dread as I feel right now, too.

Nick nods absently, still eating the potato chips. "Yep. It was like, a year later, I think. Almost to the day, really. Heh. Having such a great memory marred by that really, really sucks."

I catch a glance at Miles, who is staring intently at Nick. "Are you telling me the movie upset you?" he asks slowly. Crap. Crap crap crap. We did that to him...

The black-haired man glances at Miles and shrugs. "I dunno," he answers vaguely. "I was okay with it until we started talking about that scene, really. I kept tacking the words, 'When I was an attorney' to myself at the end of everything we said."

"Brilliant, Wright. Brilliant. You worked yourself into a panic attack, then."

"Yeah, well, the lights going out didn't help," Nick replied dryly. What that had to do with the price of beans, I had no idea.

It seemed to be a night for nonsequitors, since thinking about the price of beans made me think of my kids, and I made an unhappy noise. "Ugh. Miles, let me have the flashlight," I say, checking my cup of water. "I forgot my pill this morning."

Miles hands me the flashlight as Nick asks in a flat, out-of-it tone, "Your pill?"

I don't dignify him with an answer as Miles replies dryly, "Most likely the reason why we don't have kids yet, Wright."

"Ooooh, those kinds of pills. Yeah, don't forget that. One's enough for now, thanks. Actually, forgetting it this morning isn't going to cause a problem, is it?"

I ignore the urge to cringe, wildly, at this exchange, grateful for the darkness. "It shouldn't," I say, using the flashlight to find my bags and retrieve the pills. "After-" I stop. How do I explain this? After giving birth to twins my cycle wouldn't stay regular and was almost as bad as childbirth so the kids' pediatrician gave me these to stabilize it? Right. "After Pearly started her period, the doctor we took her to was appalled that I hadn't had an appointment in years. Remember all those cramps I whined at you about, Nick?"

"Unfortunately," he answers me.

"Yeah. She gave me these to help with them. They've worked wonders, I tell you."

I'm amazed that I'm able to slide through that without telling a single lie. I've omitted a big part of the truth, but that's not lying, per se. Nick's saying how it's not so painful for me anymore and Miles cuts him off. "Wait. When Pearly started her period? When was this?"

Oh crap. "Oh, uh... I think it was about a month or so after..." I stop short, not willing to say it. As I'm approaching the table again, I can already see that Nick is flinching.

Miles stares at me intently by the light of the flashlight. "You mean to tell me we were having completely unprotected sex for almost a year?"

Craaaaap... "Uh... yes?"

He sits back, shaking his head. "You know what this means, right?"
"No, I don't." And I don't want to know, I think as I pop the pill in my mouth and take a swig of water, realizing that I never explained to Nick why missing it this morning wouldn't matter.

"This means that either you can't have kids, or neither of us can."

Nick snorts. "Really, Edgeworth?" he says. "Maybe we're just that lucky?"

"You might be that lucky, Wright, but Maya and I aren't known for our luck."

"Seriously. I find it highly unlikely that we're both shooting blanks, or Maya's infertile and the doctor didn't tell her."

"She didn't say she had an exam, Wright, she said the doctor was appalled that she hadn't had one."

I drink my water and let them argue this out. I happen to know for a fact that neither of them are "shooting blanks" and knowing my big mouth and how tired I am, I'm liable to let that fact slip past.

The ultimate denouement of their debate is to agree to just leave it alone and write it off to luck like Nick wants to, and Nick sighs. "Seriously, guys, help me out here," he says. "I know I need to do something about Trucy’s insubordination but there isn’t a whole lot I can do."

"Ground her," I suggest.

He shakes his head. "That won’t work. Trust me."

As he pops another chip in his mouth- I think he’s snacking just because he can- "You really are in a unique position with her," Miles says conversationally. "Just out of curiosity, has she fallen back on the 'you’re not my father' argument yet?"

Nick chuckles. "No, thank God. I think it almost came out of her mouth a few weeks ago but she stopped herself. She was quite a bit more contrite after the argument than she usually is, too." He lets his hand fall heavily on the table, thinking hard. "Arrgh! I can’t just refuse to perform if she does that when we’re already on stage, but I can’t—"

"Just refuse to perform period," I offer.

The idea seems to amuse him. "Maya, she’s twelve. Who else is going to trust her enough to let her handcuff them and set a firecracker off in their face?"

"How’d she do that, anyway?" Miles asked.

"A magician’s prop never gives away the secret," Nick replies haughtily. But he has a point.

Miles grimaces. "I suggest telling her how much the trick distressed you," he says softly.

Nick frowns. "I can’t. It’s not her problem."

"It is her problem. You are her guardian. If you had been at home tonight—"

"I wouldn’t have been watching bad nostalgic porn," Nick cuts him off dryly.

"None the less," Miles insists, mirroring Nick’s previously haughty attitude, “if you’re worried about what I think you are, I think you need to re-read that part of Parenting for Dummies. It’d be inappropriate if you asked her to make you feel better. Simply telling her how you feel is not and it would ensure she doesn’t do that again."
Nick blinked. “How’d you know?”

“I read it too. Leah was driving me insane,” Miles says dryly. I assume that Leah is his niece.

The black-haired man is still hesitant. “Well, that might be the best course of action to take. I dunno. I’ll think about it.”

I watch them interact, fascinated. Before Miles started giving Nick parenting advice, it hadn’t occurred to me, but he could have very well been in a paternal role with his niece while he was fighting the girl’s father in court. From what little I’ve heard of the other man, he wasn’t much of a father-figure at all.

I’m doing something heinous to my twins. But it’s too late. I have to keep repeating that to myself. It was the wrong choice, but this is one choice that I can’t go back on. I’ll do more damage than good by trying to undo it.

Nick’s talking about how he keeps wanting to call the apartment and make sure Trucy’s okay and how is Miles doing it? “I’ve been away from her several times, for extended periods of time,” Miles responds, seeming a bit amused. “This is the first time you’ve been away from your daughter since you were granted custody, correct?”

“Yes.”

“It’ll get easier with time. It really is harder on the parent than it is the child.”

Holy damn, can I relate to that…

Miles finishes his water, and then fidgets with the flashlight. “Are you done, Wright?”

He grins sheepishly. “Yeah, pretty sure. Thanks for listening to me whine.”

“It’s no problem, although if you do that often enough Maya and I will have to start charging you by the hour.”

Nick laughs. “Maya wouldn’t do that to me!” he counters.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” I reply slyly, munching on a potato chip.

A rueful chuckle from Nick later, he says, “Well, any chance I could pay with sexual favors, then? I’m afraid that’s really all I have of any worth.”

“That is a more than acceptable suggestion,” Miles laughs softly.

Just as I’m about to observe that I’m sleepy and the lights don’t seem to be coming back on, they do. “Hey, the power’s back!” Nick says brightly. “Who wants to finish the movie?”

That ominous, diabolical cackle rings through the air again as I chuck my pill pack at him at the same time Miles beans him in the face with his empty plastic cup.

We sleep that night with Nick in the middle, instead of me. It’s a strange change of routine, but after his panic attack, we’re both questioning his mental health, again. We seem to do that a lot anymore, when we’re all together, and we’ve only been reunited two days.

So what’s the best way to keep him out of trouble? Ensure that he’ll wake us up if he moves.
When I wake in the morning, I’m alone in bed. I hear the shower running and Nick’s voice from elsewhere in the house. I throw on my robe and make my way out to the living room. Nick looks up and gives me a little wave, not ceasing in his conversation on the phone. “Did he really?” he asks in a light tone. “Heh. I bet he asked you not to tell me that… I know everything, sweetheart, you know that. Yes, I know about the cookies. Pfft- you just told me, Trucy.”

He laughs at whatever her response is. “Yes, I’ll be home soon,” he tells her. “Mr. Edgey and I have to take Miss Maya to the train station. No, she really, really can’t stay longer. Trust me, honey, I tried. Of course she’ll be back soon, she promised Mr. Larry. You even heard that.” He chuckles, watching me; I’m smiling, although I feel really sad. “Look, I’ve known Miss Maya a long time. She says she’ll come visit more now, so she will. She doesn’t lie to me.”

At that, Miles comes out of the bathroom, and I duck in around him as quickly as I can and slam the door closed. I’m able to start the shower again before I start sobbing, much to my relief, but I’m fairly certain that I’m louder than the water is. If either of them heard me, they both have the tact not to bring it up when I emerge from my shower.

A few hours later, we’re at the train station, saying our goodbyes. “Call me when you get back,” Miles says softly as he hugs me. I’d planned on calling Nick, which is what we usually did, and then Nick called Miles to let him know. It was so routine that Nick didn’t remind me anymore. I wonder, briefly, at Miles’ desire that I call him, but ultimately decide it is just how long we went without seeing each other.

The train ride from the two people who are second most important in my life to the two who share the spot for first is painfully long. It's strange; the distances are no greater, and yet they seem to take ever longer. When I finally return home, though, there is a flurry of black and silver-brown hair as two tiny people slam into my legs, crying, "Mama!" and both of them trying to tell me everything about everything all at once. Even though I have a headache and after these past couple of days, I'm a bit overwhelmed, their unrepentant enthusiasm is wonderful.

I make the phone calls I'm required to, eat a few snacks with the babies while they scrawl on paper with thick crayons and bicker with each other, and then at bedtime I escort them to their room, carrying Misty like I usually do- Nicky hasn't wanted me to carry him anywhere since he learned how to walk. This is what I was waiting for; my plan could either go smoothly, as I like, or backfire on me terribly. I tuck them into bed and then sit on the side of Nicky's, my tone serious. "Mama has to talk to you two about something very important," I say.

Nicky tries to get up and I push him back down. Misty turns on her side, snuggled under her blankets. "What's it, Mama?" she asks.

I swallow hard. "I missed you two so, so much," I say, and I mean it with every fiber of my being. "I want you to know that, okay? I love you and I missed you and I'd never go away ever if I didn't really need to."

Another attempt on Nicky's part to get out from under his covers, another gentle shove back to the mattress. "You needed to go 'way?" Nicky asks, trying to draw himself up on his knees.

"Yeah," I answer, grabbing his ankle and giving it a sharp, but gentle, tug and he flops back onto the bed. Attempt to sit up, my hand on his little chest putting him back down. I swear he does this because he thinks it's fun. "Do you remember all the times I told you about Mr. Nick?"

"Yeah!" Nicky says. "The guy you named me after!"

Not quite, but not quite wrong, either. "Yeah," I confirm for him. "Do you remember what I told
you about him?"

At this, Nicky lies still- wonder of wonders!- and scrunches his little face up in concentration. Misty says, hesitantly, "Uhm... I think... you said he was bad..."

I laugh and shake my head. "No, sweetheart, Mr. Nick isn't bad. He's very good. But something very bad happened to him, right before you were born."

"When we were still in your tummy?" Misty asks.

"Yes, dear."

"I get it," Nicky says in excitement. "You have to save him, right?!"

My funny little babies, hehe... "Almost right," I tease him. "I'm helping him try to undo the bad thing. But to do that, I need to be in the city, where he is."

Misty sits up now. "That's great!" she chirps. "We gonna get to see the city, Nicky!"

"YAAAAAY!"

I sigh heavily. "No- Nicholas, calm down, please. No, I can't take you with me."

Misty turns steel-gray eyes on me; Nicky turns sapphire-toned ones in the same direction. "Why not?" he asks quietly, sounding heartbroken.

Oh boy... "Because this is very, very serious stuff," I say solemnly. "For adults only. We need to be able to think only about what we're doing, or we could mess stuff up worse than it already is. It's very important. If we mess up again, Mr. Nick could die."

My exaggeration is an attempt to head off further questions; I know it won't scare them, since they don't know Mr. Nick. Not even his son. But after Nick's breakdown, I have to wonder if it's truly an exaggeration. Nicky nods sagely, and say, "You know, Mama, you love Mr. Nick a whole lot, too. I can tell. So I'm going to be good and stay here and take care of Misty while you're away."

At this, Misty sits up stick-straight, and I switch the bed I'm sitting on the edge of with a masked sigh. "Who takes care of who?!" she squeaks indignantly.

"No fighting!" I say sharply, raising my voice slightly, only enough to let them know I mean business. Misty flops back down on her mattress with no coaxing from me, and looks up at me. "What about you, Mist-mist? Are you going to be okay with me going away?"

She nods hesitantly. "I guess so... I don't want you too..."

"I don't want to, either," I say gently. "But I have to help my friend. He's your friend too, even if you've never met him."

"Okay. I'll be good and stay here. I won't even cry," Misty says solemnly.

"That's very good. I'm so proud of you two," I say, genuine, leaning down to kiss Misty on her forehead. As I move to the other bed to kiss Nicky good night, I say, "I will be home for a long time, because we're still making plans, so I won't be away all the time. But I'm still counting on you two to be brave for me, okay?"

"Aye aye, captain!" Nicky says with a laugh.
"Good boy," I whisper to him, bending down to kiss him on the forehead. That done, I turn off the light and leave the room. "Sweet dreams. I love you."

Plans were set into place, and then set into motion. The next month, I spent a week with them, and my kids just about flipped kittens over it. But it has to be done, no matter how much it breaks my heart to see them so distraught. I simply remind them that we talked. The next month isn't so bad, and soon they're used to it.

I see Nick in that dissociative, panicked state only once more, about two years after our reunion. His investigation has ground to a halt; his efforts to effect change in the court system have slammed into a brick wall that he can't break down no matter how hard he attacks it.

I realize there's a bit more of a problem than usual when Nick's attitude becomes sluggishly flippant. If Trucy isn't around, all he wants to do is eat, sleep and screw, and eating is optional, he says. It's getting irritating, frankly, but I can't argue with his logic: "Nothing's happening. I can't make anything happen. We're standing still. Why bother railing against it? Something'll move eventually. We've just gotta be patient."

I'm poring over the evidence he's gathered so far, again, looking for the tiny flaw that would let us squeeze through to move forward, when the doorbell to the office- the Wright Anything Agency- sounds. Nick picks himself up off the couch with an annoyed groan and slinks to the door. "Wright Anything Agen-

I'm alarmed at how completely his speech is cut off, and I get off his old computer and follow him out into the main area. Upon seeing this visitor, I understand why Nick's just staring, eyes narrowed. "Mr. Gavin," he says shortly.

"Herr Wright." The young blond prosecutor is wringing his hands. He's nervous, but his tone is even and his gaze calm. "I was wondering if you could assist me in something."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"I require any files on State v. Byrde that exists. Since your office was so close, I figured I could attempt to circumvent the system and get them straight from the horse's trough."

Nick's eyes narrow further. "EG-7 or TZ-3?"

"TZ-3."

"Why?"

"I am in the middle of an investigation," Mr. Gavin answers. And that's it.

Nick's mouth twists in a bitter, disbelieving smirk. "You do realize that neither the defending or prosecuting attorneys are under oath, right? We can lie our asses off if we want to."

Gavin's honest, even expression doesn't change. "I am aware of that, Herr Wright. I have no desire to go looking for skeletons. At least, none that may be in your closet, that is."

Nick crosses his arms over his chest. I've noticed that he can look quite intimidating if he wants to be, and he's doing his damn best to menace the smaller man in front of him. "Is this a criminal investigation, or some other type?"

"What difference does it make?"
"It makes the difference between obstruction of justice and being difficult and uncooperative out of spite." The smirk gets bigger.

Gavin chuckles nervously, playing with his hair. "I can just tell you it's a criminal investigation, you know. I need to get those files."

"Do what you must."

The prosecutor sighs then, and after a moment, finally answers Nick’s question. "It is more of a personal investigation. I have a purpose, but you will not be committing a crime by denying me your records. You'll just make things more difficult for me. Which, I imagine, is a delightful prospect to you."

Nick chuckles mirthlessly, and steps aside. "Come in."

He walks past me, as if he doesn't remember that I'm there, and straight into his back office. He emerges a few seconds later, a file in hand, and thrusts it at Prosecutor Gavin. "Here. Get out."

Gavin scrabbles for a hold on it, stuttering. "Th-thank -"

"Leave."

Not willing to tempt fate with the man he helped to ruin, Prosecutor Gavin obeys. Nick looks at me as the door closes, his face pale and drawn. He takes a deep breath, and sits on the couch with his head in his hands. "How dare he," Nick mutters. "How dare he show up here? Asking me for a favor. Me. He has access to all of this information. How dare he show up here?"

He's shaking again, shaking violently, just like that night. I put my arms around his shoulders, trying to calm him. "Trucy," he breathes. "She'll be home soon. She can't see me like this. How dare he show up here."

It's amazing what will trigger him. Nick has seen Klavier Gavin since his disbarment, I know he has. I work it out that his panicked reaction has to be due to Gavin showing up at the office, one of Nick's personal spaces. And he's right, he's got to get a grip before Trucy comes home from school.

Miles comes in a little while later. "I was told that I may want to stop by," he says hesitantly. "What's wrong with Wright?"

"Klavier Gavin showed up here," I answer, because Nick's doing his best to just breathe at a normal rate.

Miles' face goes blank. Without a word, he pulls his cellphone out, hits a number on it, and puts it to his ear. A moment later, he speaks talking sternly in German; I hear his own name, and then "Phoenix" and he sounds pissed. After a moment, Miles snaps his phone shut and says, "He shall not be doing that again." With that, he sits next to Nick on the other side of him, and puts his hands on his shoulders. "You absolutely must stop doing this to yourself, Wright," he snaps. "How can you hope to accomplish anything if you-

"How can I hope to accomplish anything at all?" he bites out. "I'm out of leads. The judiciary won't listen to me. I know exactly who did this to me, how they did it and why and I can do absolutely nothing about it."

"Who did it?" Miles demands hotly, his eyes flashing. I wring my hands in my lap. This is going to get ugly… "Tell me! I'll find a way to-"
"No!" Nick snaps. "If I can't find decisive evidence, what makes you think you will?!

"The fact that I'm still a lawyer, that's what!" What little color had returned to Nick's face abruptly drains away and Miles points at him accusingly. "You're resourceful. You know the facts, better than either of us, and you know, you know who the guilty party is, but you are refusing to fight."

"I have nothing to fight with." Nick retorts through clenched teeth.

"You are so full of it," Miles snarls at him.

Nick abruptly stands and storms out of the office, slamming the door behind him. "That was unbelievably cruel," I snap, getting in his face.

"That was what he needed to hear," Miles retorts softly, all of the huff and puff he was previously displaying gone. "I just hope he heard me."

We occupy ourselves, again, by going over the evidence Nick already has, resuming my search for the flaw we can strike at. An hour later, we hear the office door open and close, and Nick calls out, "Hey, you guys still here?"

Miles goes out into the other room, and I hear the rustle of paper bags. "Here. I don't think you'll like it, but we're probably going to be here for a while. Gavin gave me an idea. I can probably find a lot of ammunition for judicial reform in my own records. Might as well get it all prepared just in case it suddenly becomes useful, right?"

I smile as the two of them come back into the room, and Nick drops a take-out bowl of Eldoon's Noodles on the desk in front of me. It seems Nick heard him, loud and clear.
I arrive at home late after one visit with the boys. Pearly tells me the twins are already in bed; they
tired each other out running around. “How’s Mr. Nick?” she asks me in a muted voice.

“He’s as good as can be expected,” I reply tiredly. “We spent the last three visits organizing his
files and putting them into his computer.”

“No breaks in his case?”

I shake my head. “Nick says that he knows who ruined him and why but he won’t tell us. He says
he doesn’t have nearly enough evidence to prove it.”

“I see.” Pearly sounds terribly, terribly sad at this, looking down at her hands folded in front of her
on the table. “I miss him, Mystic Maya.”

“I know, Pearly,” I reply, feeling gutted by guilt once more. He’s not here because of me. She
hasn’t seen him in years because of me. Because of me, and because of my stupid secrets.

The conversation lulls, already; I take note of various things that should be done. The dishes
haven’t been, for one. And I catch sight of a picture on the refrigerator, one that looks quite old. I
can see that the twins are in it, little blobs of yellow and black; Pearl is likely the slightly bigger
brown blob and Iris, the largest blob, colored black. I’m indicated in purple at the other end of the
paper, with two black and red blobs.

That disturbs me. Those two blobs, obviously Nick and Miles, look like they’re menacing the
purple one. “When did they do that?” I ask, indicating the picture.

“A little bit after you left this time,” she said. “We, ah… we didn’t want to say anything… We
figured you should probably be the one to talk to them about it.”

“So that does indicate what it looks like.”

“If it looks like they’re afraid your friends in the city are bad, then yes.”

I sigh heavily, looking at the picture. It must’ve taken a fantastic amount of willpower for Pearl
and Iris to just swallow that. They both know that neither Nick nor Miles would ever harm me. Not
intentionally, anyway. “I’ll talk to them tomorrow, Pearly. Leave the dishes, I’ll make sure they’re
done.”

“Oh? Really? I’m sorry they’re not done already, Mystic Maya, but I-”

I wave a hand, cutting her off. “It’s fine. You deserve a break.”

The prospect of my phone ringing this late at night is unheard of. Fortunately, my opponent tonight
flaked out on me and I’m up on the first floor of the Borscht Bowl Club, sitting with the devil
himself and pretending that I enjoy his company. I’m grateful for the reprieve and more than a
little worried when I see who it is. “Hey, Maya. Everything alright?” I answer.

“Yeah, Nick. I…” She hesitates, as if this call was a spur-of-the-moment decision and she didn’t
think through what she was going to say all the way. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to push my next
visit back a week or so. I’ve got some things to take care of.”
“Oh, okay.” I try to hide the disappointment in my voice, but she’s actually important to the village. I know I have to take a back seat when village business beckons. “You sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll take care of it. Should be pretty easy, just… tedious.”

Her tone sounds a little wistful, and I wonder if she used the right word to describe it. “Well, if you need my help, you know where I am.”

“… I… thanks, Nick.”

“No problemo. Let me know if you get this taken care of in time to come visit as usual, ‘kay?”

“I will. Take care, Nick. I love you.”

“Love ya back,” I say, my voice jovial to hide two things. The first is that this is actually the first time she’s said that outside of the throes of passion. The second is that if I let Mr. Demon here hear that I meant it, genuinely, she’ll become a target to ruin. I said her name. He can find her.

As I hang up, Gavin gives me a syrupy smile and I suppress a shudder at it. “Everything okay, Phoenix?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.”

No, everything isn’t fine. Fortunately, Trucy’s the only one who can see through my poker face. That whole conversation gave off a vibe of something very wrong and it aggravates me that I can’t pinpoint what. And it makes me nervous. Kristoph groans as I turn back to the piano, set my music to something easy enough that I don’t butcher it too badly, and try to use it to get my mind odd it.

“No, I think darkly, wishing both of my lovers were here to shield me. You hate me all the time, Kristoph…

The next morning I’m roused bright and early by my very eager twins, who set their alarm all by themselves to get up and surprise me with a breakfast of mostly-raw eggs, burnt toast with a slab of butter on top of it, and a mass of “pancakes” that have been drowned in syrup.

I’m extremely touched, even if I have to pretend that I’m eating them until Pearl and Iris can distract the twins long enough to swap the inedible attempt for fully-cooked food.

After breakfast, I hunker down to wash two meal’s worth of dishes, and I’m utterly shocked when the twins chirp that they want to help. Little Nicky drags two of the chairs over and before I can stop them, the pair climb up on them and stand at attention, awaiting instructions. I giggle. “I can handle this, guys. You can go play.”

“Nope!” Misty insists. “The faster you finish, Mama, the faster we can all play together!”

“Yes!” Nicky confirms. “We’ve been waiting all week, Mama,” he says, as if this was a lifetime. “You can’t just do chores all day now!”

My giggle turns into a laugh. “Okay, okay,” I concede, beaming at them. “Here, Nicky- I’ll hand
you the dishes to dry off and Misty can stack them by kind so they’re easier to put away, okay?”

“Got it!” my babies answer in unison, and we start washing the dishes together, talking about the schoolwork Sister Iris gives them and the special stars Mystic Pearl draws on their work if they’re super good and put in a lot of effort. My pride in them withers as we talk and I realize I have no right to be proud of them. I’ve helped with very little of their schooling since I started seeing the boys again.

We don’t discuss the menacing blobs that day. It’s too heavy for being reunited after a week of not seeing them and in a fit of contrition, I want to be the one to draw the special stars. Apparently I don’t do it right, so they suggest I draw them hearts. They like those just fine.

After schoolwork is done, we wash the dishes together- two six-year-olds who seem to enjoy washing the dishes! How lucky am I!- and they lay down for a nap, and after that, we go out to the lake so they can swim around.

“Mystic Maya.”

Her voice is soft enough that it doesn’t startle me. “Well hello there, Specter Pearly,” I say in a teasing voice. “When did you float over here?”

She giggles quietly, coming to sit next to me. “I just got here,” she tells me. “I’m sorry for being so quiet.”

“Oh Pearly, Pearly, Pearly…” I put my arm around her shoulders and hug her. “We need to break you of the habit of apologizing for everything.”

“I’m sorry-”

“Tut!”

At this, she laughs out loud and Nicky and Misty look up. “Hey! Pearly is here!” Nicky shouts. “Come swim with us, Pearly!”

As Misty shrieks her agreement, Pearly calls back, “Sorry, guys. I’ve got something to talk to your Mom about!”

“Well, talk and then come swim!”

“I’ll think about it!” They seem to accept this, and go back to splashing about as though they’re really swimming.

Once the twins are distracting each other once more, I turn my attention to Pearly, without taking my eyes off the kids. “What did you need to talk to me about?” I ask, amused by the kids’ antics.

“I was just thinking,” Pearly replies, hands clasped around her knees. “It sounds like Mr. Nick’s having a really hard time staying focused. Maybe there’s something we can tell him that will get him to put some heart into it again.”

At this, I actually look at her. I know what that “something” is and it’s out of the question. “No,” I reply evenly, although it’s hesitant. I want to. I’ve wanted to tell them for so long, but-

Pearly’s exasperated and she tries to hide it as she says, “Mystic Maya! There is no good reason not to! There never was!”
“There certainly is,” I say, turning my attention back to the kids. “If your goal is to get him to put more effort into clearing his name, telling him about his son will have the exact opposite effect. First, it’ll decimate his trust in me and I’m one of the two people he can trust and second, he’ll abandon his goal altogether in favor of coming here and making up for lost time.” Not to mention the fact that I’ll have to tell Miles if I tell Nick, and I’m not up for dealing with that.

The teenager’s expression falls. “Oh. Yes, Mr. Nick probably would just forget it and come here, wouldn’t he? The council would welcome him with open arms and any attempt on your part to get him back on track after that would be seen as an attempt to separate them again.” She sighs heavily, intensely disappointed.

And I feel bad. I reach over and pat her knee and say, in a comforting tone, “It’s a good idea, Pearly. It’s just… not the time.”

“When is the time, Mystic Maya?”

“That’s the million dollar question…” I reply, watching my babies again.

I sit down with the twins that evening, as I’m tucking them in. Nicky seems to have outgrown his desire to “play” with me and stays put, under his sheets. “So, I saw the picture you guys drew for me,” I say, smiling. “Thank you!”

“Do you like it?” Misty squeaks eagerly.

“I do. But something seems wrong about it.”

“It’s your friends in the city, isn’t it?” Nicky says, sleepiness heavy in his little voice.

I’ll have to make this quick since it’s past their bedtime, but I’m a little surprised that Nicky already knows. “Yep.”

Before I can say anything else, my son says in a smarmy tone, “I told you so, Mist.”

“Nicky!” I scold, but Misty doesn’t hear my admonition. “Yeah, well, you don’t know what about them is wrong! I might be right!”

“Quieeeeeeet,” I say firmly. “Night time voices, you two. No fighting, and ‘I told you so’ shows a really ugly attitude, Nicky. Can it.” Thoroughly chastised, my kids settle down and I say, “Why do you think my friends are wrong, Nicky?”

“Because they’re boys.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Because they’re boys,” Misty pipes up. “They keep taking you away. One day they’re going to keep you and you’ll miss us lots and we’ll miss you but they won’t let you come home.”

“I don’t get why she thinks that,” Nicky says sullenly. “She must hate boys.”

“If boys are so good why are none in the village?”

“I’m a boy, do you want me to go away?” he cries.

Before the two can escalate this further, I say over them, “No fighting!” They both quiet down, and I pause to make sure my volume is appropriate before saying, “Misty, honey, I call them my friends
because they are my friends. They would never keep me when I wanted to go home.”

“How do you know?” she whimpers. “Boys are scary!”

“That’s only because the only boy you know is Nicky. Do you think he’s scary?”

“Sometimes- EEEEK!”

I turn my attention to Nicky in time to see him making a mean face at Misty, pulling his bottom eyelids down with his index fingers and sticking his tongue out at her. “Stop that!” I snap. Nicky thinks it’s hysterical, though, and he laughs. I gently smack his hand, just enough to make him go, “Ow!” very softly, the expression more reactionary than genuine. “Be nice to your sister!”

“Yes, Mama,” Nicky says obediently, subdued and rubbing his hand.

I glare for a second more to let him know I mean business, and then continue, “As I was saying, yes, there are some scary boys. Girls can be scary, too. You think boys are scary because you only know one boy. I assure you, Mist-mist, my friends in the city are very good. Not scary at all. They’ve both helped the village a lot, in fact.”

“How come they never visit us if they help so much?” Misty challenges me.

Because your mother is a selfish bitch. I put the self-derogatory scolding aside and answer, patiently, “Because they are busy in the city. I am lucky; my part of it isn’t as important as theirs. I can come home and they won’t be set back. If they stop working, it could do bad things.”

“Like what?” my son asks me.

I know it is pure curiosity on his part, but Misty’s little face is amusingly skeptical. “Really bad things,” I tell them. It’s too complicated to explain to children barely out of the toddler stage. “Horrible, terrible things.”

Nicky looks across the room at Misty expectantly. “You’re sure they’re not going to keep you?” she asks me timidly.

“I am absolutely sure, Mist-mist. They’re my friends. They’re good and not at all scary.”

“Okay. If you say so, Mama.”

I don’t like her tone, and Nicky looks like he’s about to be cheeky again; I head that off by setting him with a look. He says it anyway. “I knew you were okay, Mama.”

“Be good and go to sleep,” I admonish, kissing him on the forehead. I get up, go to Misty’s bed, and lean down and kiss her on the cheek. “You too, Mist-mist. I love you guys.”

My babies murmur a return love you, and I sweep out of the room, annoyed beyond belief. Iris is waiting for me just outside the door. “I had no idea it was this bad,” she said, peering around me and into the room.

“What, that they seem to have very little respect for me?”

“They’d never dream of behaving like that with Pearl or myself.”

I look into the room. There’s no movement. “Maybe it’s not a respect issue,” I muse. “Sister Iris. I need to call Nick.”
The conversation goes smoothly, as smoothly as it can. The twins have a big blocky calendar in their room, so they know when I’m coming and going. I know I’m rewarding them for acting out negatively, but I have to do something. A week might not be much, but it is “something” and it will have to do for now.

When I hang up, Iris is wringing her hands. “Mystic Maya, are you sure that’s alright?”

I shrug. “Things are at a total standstill right now,” I tell her tiredly. “All I’m doing when I’m there is helping them input Nick’s files into his computer and packing away the hard copies. We’re almost done with that, too. They’ll survive without me for one extra week. The babies are more important right now.”

The next time anything moves forward is a year later, when I get a call from Miles in the middle of the night, informing me that Nick has just been charged with first-degree murder. I know it's a serious situation when Miles confesses that when Nick entered his "Not guilty" plea, as soon as he was processed at the detention center, for a moment, he didn't believe him.

This is an abrupt departure and my six-year-olds aren't sure what to make of it, after having cut back on the amount of time I’m in the city a bit. They hug and kiss me goodbye in confusion, and I'm off. The train ride seems to take forever.

I get into the city at around noon; much to my surprise, Trucy is waiting for me at the station, as well as Miles, and she seems completely unconcerned. "Hello, Miss Maya," she says as I step off the train. She's already fanning out a set of cards. "Pick a card, if you please."

I look at her incredulously. Her father is in jail for murder and she's worried about card tricks? I humor her anyway, and pull a card. "Which is it?" she asks enthusiastically.

"The ace of spades," I answer.

"Excellent."

She seems incredibly pleased with this result. "Wright is meeting with his lawyer at the moment," Miles says as we all head for his car. "He's quite eager to see you. High spirits. Probably the most spirited I've seen him since this bad dream started. Typical Wright, being excited by being called a murderer..."

Trucy says nothing. She just smiles serenely, like she knows something we don't.

When we get there, his meeting with Kristoph Gavin isn't finished. "I shall only be a moment longer," the blond man tells us. Then, to Nick, he adds, "Are you sure about this, Phoenix? Justice hasn't registered as your attorney yet. There's still time."

"I'm quite sure, Kris," Nick replies with that half-smile, completely relaxed on his side of the plexiglass.

"He's completely inexperienced."

"He'll have you next to him," Nick says. "Besides, the kid's a genius. I could tell the moment I saw at him. What better way for him to get his feet wet but by taking a case as easy as this one? It's open and shut, really."

Kristoph doesn't look convinced, but he nods anyway. "I will make sure Justice is familiarized with your case, then," he says. "See you tomorrow."
"See ya!"

Kristoph gives us a smile in acknowledgement as he brushes past us. I sit down in the chair as Trucy leans against the pane and Miles grimaces. "It certainly is open and shut," Miles says. "Because there's absolutely no proof that you're innocent, Wright."

Nick looks surprised. "Really? Are you sure you looked at my case, Edgeworth? Because there's so much evidence that I didn't do it, I'm surprised they're actually proceeding against me. I'm pleased about it, of course, but I'm still surprised."

"How can you be pleased about this?" I ask, abruptly feeling the frustration Miles is.

He smiles at me in response. A predatory smile, one that says, I've waited too long for this. "You'll see," he finally drawls. "Things are starting to move. You better brace yourselves, though. It's going to move pretty damn fast now."

Miles and I exchange baffled looks and Nick chuckles. "I need to talk to my daughter about something private," he says. "Would you mind giving us fifteen minutes?"

Having nowhere to go when I’m in the city, I spend the night with Miles. I don’t know which man to believe. Nick, with his complete and utter confidence, a kind of confidence I haven’t seen in seven years, or Miles, who seems to believe this is going to end with our boyfriend on death row for a murder he didn’t commit. It feels weird, sleeping in Miles’ bed and Nick isn’t there with us and I dream of Nicky, demanding unemotionally why I never told him, and…

… It’s the morning of the trial. I feel like I didn’t get any sleep at all.

Miles and I get ready to head to the courthouse in silence. He wanted to be the prosecutor for this case, but when Winston Payne jumped on it like a puppy on a bone, Miles let it go. If Nick somehow found a way to pull his old stunts in court today, even from the defendant’s chair and without his badge, Miles would be accused of tampering with the evidence.

And if Nick couldn’t get his hands in the trial and upend it… Miles shook his head at this point. He didn’t think he’d be able to handle being the man who sent Phoenix Wright to death.

Not that Winston Payne would be able to. That was the beauty of the man wanting so badly to get a guilty verdict. If Nick had even a fraction of the control over the situation he claimed he had, he’d be able to stop that from happening, at the very least.

Having rationalized myself into my own old confidence, we make our way to the courthouse, sitting together in the gallery. As Nick’s brought to the witness stand, he keeps his focus on the trial at hand; they start with discussing his poker games at the Bowl Club, something that feels absurdly irrelevant.

But he’s doing it. He’s throwing the court off. Everyone. Payne is his first target, thrown off-balance by a quick exchange of insults that Nick clearly wins. Then the judge gets a quiet, calm reprimand for asking him something off-topic of his testimony, and he even goes after his own attorney for not objecting to that little faux pas on the judge’s part.

Finally satisfied that everyone’s on their toes as they should be, Nick finally lets them ask him about the murder itself. I’m astounded at how easily he’s guiding the proceedings and how clueless everyone in this room is that he’s manipulating everything. I whisper this to Miles and Miles replies, “The court being somewhat incompetent is not new, Maya.”

“Somewhat?” I whisper back.
“Behave.” I give a soft snort and we turn our attention back to the proceedings.

I can’t tell if Miles is just as shocked as I am when Nick directs Apollo to accuse Kristoph Gavin of the murder. We both lean forward, gripping the rail on the end of the gallery, as Kristoph Gavin all but confesses. “Is this your idea of revenge?” Gavin snarls. “Revenge for the events seven years ago, that took your attorney’s badge?”

“Did he just-” I start, but Nick’s voice, commanding and stern, cuts me off. “My logic is like my past,” he says, his voice just below a shout. “Straight and true.”

“Dear god,” Miles breaths next to me. “All this time, Wright was putting himself at the mercy of…”

I shudder at the thought Miles doesn’t finish. How long as Nick known that Kristoph Gavin framed him? When he accepted Gavin’s offer to defend him at his criminal hearing? When he decided to file to terminate Shadi Enigmar’s parental rights and adopt Trucy? When? Why would he place his wellbeing in the hands of a man he already knew wished him ill?

My long absence comes to mind and I feel a wave of guilt rush over me. Anyone who’s willing is welcome when you’re completely alone, I suppose.

After Nick’s “not guilty” verdict, after the judge’s high praise and a short, sanctimonious speech from Nick about how ill the court system is, Miles and I go to the defendant’s lobby to collect our lover. He’s free to go now. When we get there, we catch the tail end of an exchange between him and his young attorney. I don’t know what Nick just said, but the slight man responds to it by hitting Nick as hard as he can, fingers closed in a tight fist of blind fury.

And then he looks absolutely appalled at what he’s done. Nick is still for a second, advises the young man on how to improve his uppercut, and walks towards us. We’re both still gaping at him as he says, briskly, “Let’s go. I’ve got something to take care of at the office.”

It’s well past lunchtime, and Miles saves me from having to ask: “Are you hungry, Wright? We could stop at that burger place-”

“No, take me back to the office,” Nick cuts him off, single-minded. “You two can go out for anything you like, if you just want to drop me off. This is pretty important. Very important. God, I hope it didn’t get damaged.”

Miles is just as confused as I am as we pile into Miles’ car and head to the office. Once we’re there, Nick barely gives Miles enough time to shift into park before he’s on his way up the steps of the building to the office. We follow, curious and concerned. And then I realize- “Trucy!” I exclaim in horror. We left her at the courthouse!

Nick has ripped his beanie off his head and is fussing with the odd pin on it. “Oh, she’s fine,” he says distractedly. “She’s got some errands I asked her to run after my release. I love her, but she’s a pain to deal with when I’m trying to work. Come on, you stupid thing…”

He finally frees the pin from the beanie and takes the back off. Miles gives a sharp intake of breath as we both recognize that it’s a camera. A tiny camera. “What-”

“I make a habit of recording just about everything now,” he says. “I’ve been screwed over once by not being able to prove something that happened. Not gonna let that happen again. It’s come in pretty handy, actually.”

My question is the obvious one, but Miles asks something entirely different. “So you recorded the
incident at the restaurant? Why didn’t you just bring that up in court?”

“So totally not ready to reveal this trick,” Nick responds, plugging the camera into his computer and turning it on. “Nope. I could prove that I didn’t kill him just fine without it. This footage is a last resort only.”

Miles’ question being answered, I ask my own. “So… you record everything?”

“Just about, yes.”

The man standing next to me catches my implication by my muted horror at Nick’s response. “Including…”

“Including… what? Would you mind finishing your sent-OH. Oh, no. No, I don’t record that! I always turn the camera off when we get together. Except that one time I accidentally forgot. But I deleted it as soon as I got home!”

“After you watched it first,” Miles says accusingly, voicing what I’m thinking.

Nick flushes and gives us a lopsided grin. “Of course.”

“And made a copy of it.”

“That I didn’t do. I swear I deleted it. Look, I’ll even give you the Magatama if you don’t believe me.”

The computer is started. Nick twists around to look at the screen, gritting his teeth and trying hard not to laugh or cry or maybe both, his face bright red. He brings up the MASON system, the program he’s been using to record all of his evidence. I still don’t know how he got it, even after working with it with him for years. He goes to the file for State v. Enigmar, the one that’s the biggest and most often accessed, and downloads the data from the camera. That done, he disconnects the camera and replaces it in the face pin, waiting for the footage to load.

It takes a number of minutes to come up; Nick’s computer is ancient in terms of this kind of technology, and I’m surprised it hasn’t up and died on him yet. Finally, it comes up, and seems pretty boring; he pauses the video and uses the mouse to drag it close to the end of the video, when Kristoph Gavin takes his leave of Nick at the restaurant and Nick is approached by the victim he was accused of murdering.

It’s a little creepy, but sure enough, the man Nick is recording now is Shadi Enigmar. Nick clicks around the screen a bit while the footage is playing; the time bar gets abruptly shorter, and he holds himself at ready as we watch the video.

At the end of the conversation, when Enigmar declares that he wishes to play Nick at cards, Nick pauses it and clicks around some more. At that point, the time bar is cut off at the other end and Nick saves the file, indexes it and closes the program. “I’ll deal with the raw footage later,” he says tiredly.

I’m not sure I understood all of what transpired in that video, but it definitely reveals that Nick’s innocent of helping Enigmar run. And… “That purple envelope,” Miles asks. “Where is it now?”

“I left it in my locker at the Bowl Club,” Nick answers. “I haven’t been back to get it yet and Gumshoe didn’t ask if I had any personal affects at the restaurant. I’ll get it tomorrow. You guys still up for burgers?”
As this was an unplanned excursion, I want to return to Kurain quickly. However, as it is, fate has different plans for us. Indeed, after a week, I’m about to suggest I should go back now, and we’ll pick up our investigation on the next week I’m supposed to be there. The conversation is interrupted by a call on Nick’s phone. He examines the number on the display with a quirked eyebrow, obviously not recognizing the number, and answers it. “Phoenix Wright speaking,” he says into the phone softly. And then an expression of utter shock crosses his features. “Gavin. How did you get this number? Ah, right. What- you’re kidding me.”

Nick sits straight up, his eyes flashing with something. It’s an emotion I haven’t seen him express in a very long time, and I’m not sure what it is. “You’re serious… you better be serious, Gavin. If you’re fucking with me I swear to God I’ll- right. Sorry. I’m on my way.”

Despite repeated inquiries, Nick is almost absolutely silent, except to tell us that he needs to meet Prosecutor Gavin at the courthouse. When we arrive, the blond man is waiting for us. “Sorry for the business casual dress,” Nick snips as he gets out of the car and moves to shake Gavin’s hand, “but this was very short notice.”

“No one’s looking at your clothes, Herr Wright,” Gavin replies seriously. “They’re listening to your words. Let me make one thing clear though: I’m not on your side. I’m only trying to get a good idea some air time. You’re the artist of this little tune; it’s up to you to sell it.”

“I’d have appreciated some time to rehearse,” Nick replies dryly as we go up the courthouse steps, playing along with Gavin’s music analogy.

“Yes, well. When the top producers want to hear the new stars sing, you do not make them wait.” We’ve arrived at the place we’re supposed to be at, it seems; I still have no idea what’s going on, but Miles seems to have some understanding. “I apologize,” Gavin says, turning to Miles and I with a brilliant smile, “but this gig is invite-only. I’m sure Herr Wright will give you a run-down of how it goes.”

As they disappear into the chamber, I look up at Miles, who is staring at the door grimly. “What’s going on?” I ask, feeling terribly small and frightened for Nick.

“Someone got the judiciary board’s attention,” he answers. “Someone or something.”

We wait; I pace while Miles either stands by the door or sits on a bench in the hallway, but we definitely have very little to do but wait. Once or twice, I hear things getting rather loud in the conference room. And once, I hear Nick swear- loudly- and demand to know why the hell they’re wasting his time.

He’s in there quite some time after that outburst, so I assume this isn’t actually a waste of time. When they finally emerge, Nick looks tired. Tired, but satisfied. “Well?” Miles prompts.

“I gave them a bit to think about,” he answers.

“A bit to think about?” I ask.

He nods, and Gavin says, “That’s the best he could hope for right now. At least they listened.”

“Why are you helping me?” Nick demands, suspicious of the man beside him.

Gavin does an air-guitar motion as he answers. “I already told you, Herr Wright. I’m not helping you. You’re going to do this alone, if you’re going to. But good ideas are good ideas, no matter how distasteful the source.”
“You’re a real charmer, you know that?” Nick replies dryly. Without waiting for an answer, he walks past us. “Let’s go home. Trucy should be home from school soon.”

The trigger for this meeting, Nick informs us, is that he now has the Judge on his side. And, whether Klavier is admitting it or not, the man has been actively arguing for Nick to have his time before the judiciary. So he’s not a lawyer. So what? They hear citizens with formal legal education all the time. As for me, I head home after another week of waiting for something to happen, and nothing does. My kids aren’t pleased with me. C’est la vie.
“Franziska. How are you?”

“I am fine, little brother. I am calling with some excellent news.”

“Oh? What is that news?”

“Ah-ah. You’re not going to trick me into being rude. How are you doing? How are Phoenix Wright and Maya Fey?”

“Hmph. Maya is fine, or so I have to assume. She’s become as closed and uncommunicative as I tend to be. As for Wright... That’s a long story.”

“I’m paying for the phone call.”

She’s interested and I can’t get her uninterested. I try to maintain an air of disinterest myself, although I was very much vested in the outcome of this and almost worried sick over what else Kristoph may have done to him in the years both Maya and I were away. I relate the details of Phoenix’s most recent arrest and trial, and the outcome of it. “He’s known for a long time that Kristoph was responsible for his disbarment,” I add at the end of it.

“But he’s been cleared, then, right?”

I’m a little baffled as to why she would think that. She knows better. “No. He was merely cleared on Shadi Enigmar’s murder. An off-hand exchange between himself and his lawyer’s boss out-of-context is about as far from evidence as one can get.”

“I see.” Franziska goes quiet, and then says, “I am glad he was exonerated of that murder and that Gavin is out of his life now.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am, in a way. Allow me to explain.”

Knowledge of myself and my companions out of the way, Franziska tells me what she called to inform me of. And she is right- it is news that makes me absolutely joyful, but it is double-edged. She needs me there now. And Wright needs me here.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t worry about it, Miles,” Franziska says. “I am resourceful and capable of caring for her. Phoenix’s situation is much more dire than mine. If you’re away when he needs your influence, he’ll hit a brick wall and there’s no telling how much damage that will do to his progress. Stay.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tiredly, I explain the strange and upsetting tension in Maya, how she is almost desperate to keep Wright and me from finding out anything at all about the village, and about how Wright kept his knowledge of his Judas to himself while maintaining a friendship with the man. I tell her how I asked him directly who had framed him and he declined to answer and in virtually the next breath defended him as ‘one of his closest friends’. “If that’s how he feels about Gavin,” I finish, “I’m not
sure I want to stick around.”

Franziska was quiet for a few moments. And then: “Little brother. He destroyed Phoenix Wright’s life, and went so far as to murder someone to continue to hide that fact. He is insane. What manner of damage could Kristoph Gavin have done to your career, had he gotten it in his head that you were a threat?”

“Well, I-“

“And as for Maya Fey… I don’t know. Her secrecy is vastly uncharacteristic, that much is certain. It sounds as though there’s something terrible happening in the village and she does not wish Phoenix to be burdened by it.”

“But I’m not Wright!”

“You are Phoenix’s lover. If she tells you, there is no guarantee you will not tell Phoenix.”

“I don’t like that implication, Franziska,” I say in a low, harsh voice. “I am no gossip!”

“I didn’t say you are. Tell me, since you are so sure that repeating Maya’s worries to Wright is just gossip, what those worries are. I’m in Germany. I can tell no one who cares.”

“How am I supposed to tell you something I don’t even know?”

“Exactly. You don’t know. You have not a clue what she is hiding and thus, cannot possibly know that you would have no reason to not to keep it to yourself.”

I’m quiet again. I hate it, but she’s right. Without knowing what Maya’s problem is, I cannot guarantee that I would keep quiet. If she cannot tell Wright, therefore, she cannot tell me, for without that guarantee that I cannot give, she has no reason to trust me with it.

Franziska finally speaks again. “Stay, Miles. They clearly need you more than I do right now.”

“… I’ll think about it.”

She sighs heavily. “You’re a fool, Miles Edgeworth.”

“I know. Call me if anything changes.”

“I will. Take care.”

I hang up the phone, my mind in more turmoil than it had been when Franziska first called. I don’t know how much of Maya’s secrecy or Phoenix’s lies of omission I can tolerate.

But aren’t I doing the same thing?

No. No, I’m not. Leah isn’t related to me by blood; it’s Franziska’s business, not mine. I’m just being a good “little brother” and keeping my mouth shut about things I don’t have a right to talk about. Placated, I decide it’s time for bed. I could call Phoenix but I’m tired and he’s been lacking in the ‘time for his daughter’ department.

Almost as if on-cue, my phone rings. I glance at it; it’s Trucy’s cell phone. I go cold, almost afraid to pick it up. Trucy never calls me. She has it in case of emergencies.

Maybe Wright’s own phone finally broke. Placated, again, I answer, completely unprepared for what she frantically tells me. I’m dressed again and out the door faster than I thought I was
capable of; I’ll call Maya once I know the situation is under control but right now, I need to get Trucy and take her to see her father in the hospital.

The next time I visit Los Angeles, I’ve been called back abruptly, in the middle of the night, again. “Who’d he supposedly kill this time?” I ask tiredly as Iris hands me the phone and stumbles back to her own room.

”No one, but someone almost killed him,” Miles answers dryly.

“Wh-what?!”

My heart is racing, I can’t breathe, and my chest hurts terribly. My hands start shaking and I’m barely able to calm myself when Miles realizes that I am half-asleep and didn’t catch his sarcasm. “He’ll be okay!” Miles exclaims. “He was hit by a car earlier tonight, but he’ll be fine. He sprained his ankle, that’s all.”

“Then why’d you tell me someone almost killed him?!” I demand, trying to get my hands to stay still. I make a mental note to apologize to Nick for ribbing on his panic attacks.

”Because he very well could have been killed. He’s a cat, Maya. That’s the only explanation. He’s a cat and hasn’t used up all nine lives yet.”

“Right, whatever. Sprained ankle, and that’s it, right?”

“Seems it. The MRI came back clean, but they’re still not comfortable with it, so they’re holding him for observation for a few days.”

“Right. Alright. I’ll be right there.”

I make sure to leave before the kidlets get up this time, not having the patience to deal with them as well right now. The back-and-forth is really starting to take its toll on me; if not for the fact that Nick is in the hospital, I would tell Miles to deal with it himself and go back to bed. I’m so tired. I’m tired of Nick’s drama. I’m tired of mine. I’m tired of Miles not having any personal drama whatsoever and it takes all my willpower to promise myself I’m not going to instigate an argument just to see him suffer with the two of us as well.

Miles picks me up to take me back to his place. It’s early in the morning and visiting hours aren’t for some time; I look like I need a nap, he says. As he’s driving, he’s keeping his hands tight on the wheel, eyes straight ahead. There’s something more to this than him just being an attentive driver. “Miles? What’s up?”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “Nothing I can do anything about.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“You could, but you won’t.”

I frown sharply at him, really not needing this right now. “Well, why don’t you let me decide that?” I snap at him. So much for my determination not to start trouble.

He sighs. “Don’t ask questions you’re not prepared to hear the answer for, Ms. Fey,” he says sternly.

His use of my last name stings, but my mind remembers the oddest little details. The only other
time he’s expressed that sentiment was after kissing me, before our little ménage à trois began. This is something personal and he doesn’t want me to pry.

Well, if he’s not willing to share, he can keep it to himself for all I care. Let him. I don’t need his drama too. As I collapse on his bed in exhaustion, with him telling me he’ll wake me in time to go see Nick, I hope desperately a nap helps with my crankiness, or at least makes me more reasonable.

Sure enough, when he wakes me at lunch, I’m quite a bit less annoyed with the world and he takes me for burgers before heading to the clinic. I’m touched. He’s been doing it for quite some time, but I know Miles really doesn’t like fast food. He’s doing it purely because I like it. Next time it’s just the two of us, I have to suggest that we just go to someplace he likes. I probably won’t find anything I really want, but such is the price of subsisting on ramen noodles and burgers the way I do.

I smile as Ema comes into the room. It had been so long since I saw her and when she showed up at the Wright Anything Agency, it was a lovely surprise.

Until she threw a chocolate snackoo at me.

And yelled at me for getting disbarred.

I managed to head off her wrath for having a kid in college and abandoning her then, though, since I didn’t do that.

Once she had it all out of her system, we talked. She may have been only fifteen last time we saw each other, but we regularly exchanged letters and our friendship had grown quite close over the distance, and I talked freely about Maya and Miles. It takes her a few minutes to realize that I am having sex with both of them, since I don’t just come out and say it- this girl is like a little sister to me- but when she does figure that part out, she takes it in stride, pauses the conversation to tease me for being a playboy, and we continue talking.

And Maya and Edgeworth’s little secrets come up. She’s a detective, she smugly informs me. Do I wanna know?

Yes.

I know she knows something when she comes into my hospital room. Ema’s previous jovial attitude is gone and she actually looks quite grim. “I’ve got bad news and worse news,” she said, sitting next to me.

I sigh heavily. I’m expecting them soon; if either of them find out I’ve done this, I’m going to be in deep trouble. “Let’s start with the bad news.”

“Alright. Mr. Edgeworth… now… has a criminal history in Germany.”

That gets a raised eyebrow from me. “For what?”

“Assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder. Mr. Wright, don’t jump to any conclusions. I was able to get my hands on the cover documents for both people arrested in that incident, and a second person was arrested for the same things, as well as endangerment of a minor and a second count of attempted murder. One of the victims listed on the second perp’s sheet was Mr. Edgeworth; I wasn’t able to get anything other than that, but based on that, I’d have to say that Mr. Edgeworth’s actions were self-defense.”
“He’s told me that there were restraining orders issued that day,” I tell her.

“Most likely. The fact that he’s here and there aren’t any open warrants for him in Germany tells me that the charges were dropped, or he was found not guilty or justified.”

Oh man, that’s heavy… “Alright. I assume you can’t get anymore information.”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Wright. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. What about the worse news?”

At this, she steels herself and I can see that she’s nervous about telling me this. “Did you know that Maya has children?”

Both eyebrows go up, my stomach twists painfully and my heart immediately starts racing. “What, like, adopted?”

“No. She is their birth mother.”

“Their?”

“Twins. The father’s name isn’t listed on their birth certificates. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get…”

I’m barely listening as Ema speaks anymore. Maya’s disappearance, insistence that we not visit her in Kurain, all the times she left early from her visits or pushed them back… It all suddenly makes sense.

And I feel horribly, horribly sick. Either Miles or I have children and she’s hiding them from us. Why?

When we get there, Nick’s already talking to a young woman, about my age. His expression is deadly serious; “More information. I would have gotten them, but those aren’t public record. I’d have to have a damn good reason to get at them. I can if you want me to, but it’ll take some time.”

Nick glances at us from his bed as we enter the room. “No, thank you, Detective. I’ve changed my mind. Absolutely nothing good is going to come from pursuing this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite. I’m sorry for wasting your time, Ema.”

“It’s no problem,” she says smoothly. The young woman, with long brown hair and huge, expressive eyes, stands and offers her hand to us. “Miles Edgeworth,” she says warmly in greeting. “It’s been a long time, Mr. Prosecutor.”

“It has,” Miles replies with his own warm smile, shaking her hand briefly.

Nick is the one to introduce us. “Maya, this is Detective Ema Skye. She’s an old friend.”

I take her hand, shaking it and looking at her curiously. An old friend? But she is very close to my age. He’d have to have met her when I was still officially his employee, but I don’t remember her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I say, still trying to figure out where Nick knew this woman from.

“Likewise. Mr. Wright talked so much about you during the case. One of my policies is that any
friend of his is a friend of mine.”

“Ema, stop it,” Nick chuckles. “I have some rather unsavory friends, you know.”

She turns back to him, looking amused. “Then it’s a good thing I don’t make a habit of licking your friends, huh? I apologize for the brevity, but I was assigned a case this morning. I just wanted to stop by to talk to Mr. Wright about a personal favor he called on yesterday. Excuse me.”

And then she was gone. We watch her go, and I turn to Nick to yell at him for getting hit by a car. His expression is strange, intense, confused and frustrated as he stares at me. “Uhm… Hi?” I say, intimidated.

“Hi,” he answers shortly. “Maya… I… I asked Ema to…”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“… never mind. It’s nothing.”

Miles starts a conversation with him and that is the end of that. Throughout my stay with them this time, I can’t get that piercing, devastated and betrayed blue gaze out of my mind. He knows.

I go out of my way not to avoid him. I don’t actually know that he knows and maybe, if I hang around him enough, he’ll eventually confront me and we can get this out in the open. But the confrontation never comes.

I stay for the next trial that young attorney, Apollo Justice, defends in. A few days before I am supposed to return home, for lack of anything better to do, all of us are in the office on a Saturday. The only two who are actually doing anything are Trucy, who is practicing a card trick that tripped her up last night at the Wonderbar, and Apollo, who is working on a minor case. He is a criminal defense attorney, of course, but he needs to keep himself busy, he tells us, or Nick and Trucy would drive him insane.

Miles remarks that he knows exactly what the defense attorney meant, and Nick sulks for a good half an hour before noticing that Apollo is having a bit of trouble with his case. “Want some help, kiddo?” he asks.

Apollo barely looks off his page. “No thanks. I’m fine.”

“’Kay.”

Miles and I are playing a card game—blackjack—for the sole purpose of ensuring that Nick doesn’t sweep us, should he decide to join us. He doesn’t. A few more minutes pass; Apollo gives a frustrated noise. “Want some help, kiddo?” Nick asks again.

“No, Mr. Wright. This is a lawsuit, not a criminal defense. I don’t think you’d have much more of a clue than I do.”

Nick grins. “Suit yourself.”

Another game of blackjack. I win. We’re not keeping score. Apollo growls sharply at his file and Nick gets up from his seat to sit next to Apollo on the couch. That done, he scoots close enough to the attorney to read the file over his shoulder, and Apollo is beside himself. “Wh-Mr. Wright! What do you think you’re—“
“Helping you,” Nick replies in a murmur, his eyes scanning the page.

“I told you, I don’t need any-“

“I don’t think I asked this time,” Nick cuts him off crisply. “Let me see that.”

Defeated, Apollo hands the requested document over to Nick. “I don’t get this,” he says as he hands it over. “His supervisor had to have known that the guard was loose on that machine. There was no way she didn’t. But…”

“Yep,” Nick agrees with Apollo’s unspoken protest. “She definitely knew about it. You’re right, there’s no way she didn’t.” He hands the page back. “You already know that she knew the safety guard was loose. That’s not the question you have to answer.”

Apollo’s eyebrows knit together in concentration. “Why didn’t she acknowledge it,” he says finally.

“Good. Keep going.”

“…if she acknowledged it, she’d have to get it fixed. But that takes time and money, and it was the only operational drill in the workshop at the time…”

“Almost there. Connect the dots now.”

Apollo frowns hard at the answer he comes up with. “She didn’t acknowledge it so that she could deny that she knew in case it hurt someone,” he says, going from bewildered to angry.

“Bingo.”

“How do I prove that she didn’t know?” Apollo asks.

Nick chooses not to play teacher on this. “You don’t,” he answers. “Again, wrong angle. You don’t prove that she didn’t know. You prove that it doesn’t matter. I’m sure OSHA will be more than happy to furnish you with what their reaction would be in a hypothetical situation such as this one.”

“Will they talk to me?”

“Beats me. I was a criminal defense attorney, remember?”

Apollo makes an unhappy noise at him, Nick chuckles, and Miles and I finish another game. He wins. We still aren’t keeping score.

From somewhere in the room, I hear my cell phone go off. “Where-?” I ask, looking around. My jacket is draped over the back of Miles’ chair. He twists around and digs into the pocket, and answers it as I deal. I don’t think about that. We answer each others’ phones all the time. “Hello?... Pardon? I’m not sure... Yes, she’s right here.”

He hands me the phone, an odd expression on his face. “She asked for ‘Mama’ initially,” Miles says, looking confused.

I’m sure my face goes ashen as I take the phone, trying to come up with an excuse as I talk to my daughter. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Mama, who was that man that answered your phone?”
“A friend.” It was stupid of me to let him answer it. “What’s wrong?”

“When you comin’ home? Nicky’s bein’ mean to me.”

I can only think that the lie is getting too much to bear and I’m doing these things to try to get them to say something already. “Put him on the phone,” I order Misty.

After a moment, I hear a short scuffle and Misty saying, “She’s gon’ yell at you now!”

Nicky protests his sister’s words and takes the phone. “Mama?”

“Are you being mean to your sister?” I demand.

”No! She’s the one being mean! I just wanted to color and she took all the crayons away!”

“Why’d she do that?”

”’Cause she’s mean!”

I almost say the boy’s name. “Tell the truth,” I say instead, catching myself. Why bother? I’m sabotaging my secret now. Why not just say it? It’d get Nick to say something for sure, and I can end this.

He sighs in an exaggerated fashion. ”’Cause I said that her pictures aren’t nice.”

“That was very mean.”

“I know.” He sounds genuinely contrite, suddenly, as if hearing me say it made him realize it. “I’ll go say I’m sorry.”

“Good boy. I have to go. I’ll be home soon, okay?”

“Kay. Love you, Mama.”

“Love you too, buddy. Bye.”

I hang up and try to look surprised by the way everyone is starting at me in disbelief. “What?” I ask.

Nick’s the one who speaks, much to my dismay. I still don’t want him to confront me. I want him to. I don’t want him to. He is now. I hope. I hope he leaves it alone. Oh dear Ami, I can’t think straight… “’Mama’?”

“Yeah, well… a set of twins was born in Kurain some time ago. Neither of their parents are in their lives very much.” It's not a lie, I realize in a level of horror.

“Ah. You never told us about them.”

“I didn’t think they were relevant.” I hold my breath and wait. This is it. He’s going to reveal what his detective friend told him, and it’s going to be in front of everyone. I’m tense and apprehensive and want this over with.

He chooses to draw this out. “Ah. So… what are their names?” he asks, something strange in his tone of voice. He knows. Damnit, he knows! He’s fishing for information on them. I can’t stop a sharp intake of breath. “Nicholas and Misty,” I answer. Honesty is the best course of action. Lie and I’ll have a scene on my hands.
Nick raises an eyebrow, smirking. “Nick?”

“It’s a common name!” I protest.

He narrows his eyes at me, the smirk still there. “Why so defensive, Maya?”

“I’m not—”

Trucy cuts me off. “Sorry, Miss Fey, but you are. And what’s with you, Daddy?”

“What’s what with me?”

“You’re terribly upset,” she answers him, sounding a bit troubled.

Nick shakes his head. “It’s just your imagination, sweetheart.”

Apollo sets his file down. “I’m afraid it’s not, Mr. Wright,” he says slowly. “I see it, too.”

On the other end of our table, Miles says, quite off-topic and unusually absently, “I haven’t heard from Leah lately. I should give her a call.”

We all look at Miles. Silence descends. Apollo clears his throat. “As a matter of trivia,” Nick says, his body relaxing again. “I’ve done some reading on anxiety disorders.” No one has to ask why. “Your client’s boss’s willful ignorance, in a psych setting, could be seen as a coping mechanism. Denial’s pretty powerful. Amazingly unhealthy, but powerful none-the-less.”

“I don’t think so,” Apollo contradicts. “I think that with normally healthy people, their minds wouldn’t let them go deep enough into denial for it to be useful.”

And then Nick has “The Look.” That look Apollo claims the man gets when he’s about to start screwing with the younger man’s head. Apollo attempts to backpedal, but it’s too late. “Hey Polly!” Nick says brightly, ignoring Apollo’s frantic protests. “Guess what I did to Edgeworth on this couch last night?”

“URK!”

Nick bursts out laughing; to be honest, I would have the moment Miles exclaims, “Not a thing!” if not for our own little fight just then. As Apollo’s face flushes a bright, bright red, Nick leans close to him. “See what I mean? Pretty compelling impulse, isn’t it?” Apollo scoots away from him. “Yes, quite,” he admits in a flustered, get-the-hell-away-from-me-you-psycho-type voice.

Nick laughs again, sitting upright, having creeped the poor man out sufficiently. “Now take that reaction and put it in a situation where there is only one possible conclusion, but that conclusion requires several things to be true, and these things are so impossible that the idea that your conclusion is correct is something absolutely fantastical and quite impossible to believe. Accepting that wrong conclusion, no matter that it’s the only one you can possibly arrive at, will cause nothing short of Armageddon, a rip in the very space-time continuum that will suck us all in and squish us all together in a nanopartical of a singularity.”

He pauses for dramatic effect. “Denial is quite useful in such circumstances. I’m sure you agree.”

All of us have our own reactions. Mine, unspoken, is to marvel at how he managed to use almost a hundred words to say that he has no choice but to trust me.
Apollo observes that yes, going into denial in such end-of-world situations would be quite useful, if they ever happened.

Trucy scolds him for watching Star Wreck after two in the morning.

Miles asks him if there's anything he needs to talk about it, because it certainly sounds like he does.

Nick shrugs. “Depends. Any of you particularly like being tortured?”

I stand, scowling. “If you have something to say, then say it!” I snap. God, I want this to be over! I’m practically begging him now, and he’s not doing it!

He looks over at me, his gaze even. “I don't make accusations without proof,” he replies, his voice very, very quiet, dark, almost poisonous.

The way he repeatedly used the phrase “willful ignorance” now makes sense.

Silence descends again.

Nick laughs. I've noticed that he's developed a strange habit of laughing at the most inappropriate times. “Sorry,” he chuckles. “It's just so weird that the big pink elephant in the room isn't my insanity for once.”

Things are rapidly becoming unbearably uncomfortable in this room. “Mr. Wright,” Apollo says, trying to alleviate some of the tension he can't possibly understand. “You're not insane.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Crazy people don't question their sanity.”

The Look returns to Nick's features. He likes trying to get under the young attorney's skin; he confessed as much to me and Miles. He likened doing it to kneading a stress ball. “I don't think I questioned it, Polly,” he says with a wicked grin.

Apollo is momentarily stumped. “Bu-but you said at your trial that you were 'quite sane'!”

“I didn't question it then, either, did I?”

The brown-haired man draws back further, absolutely perplexed by now. Out of nowhere, Trucy exclaims, “I've got it!”

We all look at her, hoping that her playful weirdness will be able to cancel out the absurdity of what's occurring. She looks quite pleased with herself. “You made Mr. Edgeworth sit through a whole season Steel Samurai, didn't you, Daddy?” She's absolutely sparkling and I know we're being made fun of, in her own way. “You guys watch kids shows! Why else would the three of you lock yourselves in here and not invite me and Polly? You're embarrassed, that's why! You guys watch kids shows!”

Unusually quiet throughout this all, Miles laughs softly. “That's... actually quite a bit closer to the truth than you realize, Trucy.”

She gasps, Miles' acknowledgment of her theory shocking her. “Reeeeeeaaaally?!?” she squeaks. Now she's off-balance, too.

Silence again.
This time, it's Apollo who laughs quietly. “Oh man...”

Nick puts his bad ankle up on the coffee table, props his other foot against its edge, and slumps down on the couch. “Deflect and deny, Apollo,” he says, carefully enunciating every word. “Deflect and deny.”
Chapter 18

My departure date is moved, again, while Nick takes care of the paperwork to finish up Apollo’s defense of Wocky Kitaki. He has a very specific reason for doing this; he has Apollo in his office one afternoon, talking to him. When he comes out, the young man looks amazingly pleased with himself. “Miss Fey,” he greets, as he was there already when we arrived. “Mr. Edgeworth. Mr. Wright needs to talk to you guys.”

Miles and I exchange looks, thank him, and go into Nick’s office. “Hey guys!” he says brightly. “Guess who got paid?”

“Excellent,” Miles says with a smile. “His defense was quite good. It really reminded me of you.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not, but I’ll take it as such. Here.”

Nick hands both of us checks; I gape at mine, and Mr. Edgeworth raises an eyebrow. “What’s this?”

“Payment for your services to the Wright Anything Agency.”

“This came from Apollo’s pay for Mr. Kitaki’s trial, didn’t it?” I say, putting a hand to my mouth. “Nick, we can’t accept this. Our work had nothing to do with-”

“Relax, I already talked to him about it,” Nick replied. “He’s my employee, technically, but you’re right, it was his work that got this money. However, and he agreed with me, the likelihood that he’d have an employer right now is extremely slim if you two weren’t here. He wants me to pay you, says it’s just the ethical thing to do.”

I continue to try to argue. “Is he paying Trucy too?”

“Under the table, yes.”

Miles makes an unhappy noise and Nick says, “Look, she’s fifteen. I got her absences excused by saying it was similar to an internship but I can’t officially put her on the payroll for another year, and she deserves to be paid, too.”

“Exactly. She did a whole lot more to help Apollo in this case than Miles and I-”

“Just take the money, Maya, please.”

I stop arguing. There’s something more in his tone, desperation, almost. I don’t think Miles hears it as he says, “Thank you, Wright. I appreciate it and I’m sure Maya does as well.” His gaze slides to me and I nod, unable to look away from Nick’s eyes, worried and frustrated and wanting.

~*~

This time, I’m supposed to leave the morning after a concert. Prosecutor Gavin offered Apollo two tickets to his band’s concert at a discount, and Trucy wants desperately to go. We suspect that Nick was the intended recipient of the other ticket, but since Trucy wants to go so badly, Nick asks Apollo to go. He wasn’t planning on it, either, but someone’s got to go with Trucy and he has some “things to take care of.”

Those “things,” he tells us that night, is that our relationship is on life support and he’s not letting it die. No, we’re going to sit in his office all damn night if that’s what it takes and figure out what
exactly is going on.

For the most part, it seems that it's just him trying to force me to talk about the kids. Miles watches impassively as we argue, and I finally break down and tell Nick, “You have the Magatama. If you want to know that badly, use it!”

“No.” He shakes his head, turning away. “No, I won't. I'm not going to force you to tell me- to tell us- something you should have years ago!”

For the first time, I tell a bold-faced lie. “How am I supposed to know what you want me to tell you when you won't tell me what you want me to tell you?!” I demand. “I have no idea what you're talking about!”

Silence. Yes, he has the Magatama, and I am absolutely positive he sees the psyche-locks. Is he just not going to dignify that with an answer? He doesn’t have to tell me he knows I’m lying. I all but told him that I know he can see when I’m lying.

Miles speaks, for the first time since we entered that room. “I think the three of us have come to an end,” he says softly.

I turn to look at him, my stomach twisting painfully. “Don't say that,” Nick says softly.

The prosecutor stands, regarding the two of us. “What am I supposed to say, Wright?” he asks. His arms are at his sides, and his expression open. He's not guarded at all. “These kinds of relationships never last long. It's a small miracle we've come this far. But it's inevitable: eventually, someone's going to get jealous.”

I'm struck by the statement. Nick's trying desperately to pick up the pieces of a shattered life that keeps breaking apart, my own secret has become so terrible that I feel like I've become downright evil for keeping it, and Miles is standing there, saying he's not getting laid enough? “Don't look at me like that, Maya,” Miles says harshly. “I'm sitting back, watching the two most important people in my life subtly trying to drive each other insane and I have no idea why. Meanwhile, I can do little about my own turmoil because you two are so wrapped up in your own!”

Now Nick turns to him. He looks stunned. “I wish I had a mirror for you to take a look in, Edgeworth,” he says, his sarcastic tone a strange contrast to his expression of concern, “since I'm sure neither of us knew you were having a hard time with something.”

There’s something insidious in Nick’s tone and I don’t need the magatama to realize that he just lied himself. He knows something about Miles that I don't. “You're leaning on me like I'm a crutch, Wright. How am I supposed to ask for your assistance with anything?” Miles asks.

I frown. “By realizing that's what lovers do?” I prompt.

“Kettle, you are black,” Nick says dryly.

“Oh, shut it,” is my snappish, cranky answer.

“Do either of you see what we've become?” Miles prompts, trying to get the conversation back on track. If Nick and I start fighting again, it's over. “I don't know about you two, but I can't live like this.”

“So don't,” Nick says defiantly.

Before he can continue, Miles scowls. “Your concern is noted,” he growls, angry.
“Your ability to let people finish their thoughts is duly noted,” Nick replies hotly. “How do you know we won't be able to help you with whatever this is? You're just discounting us both out of-”

“Out of concern? A certain measure of understanding? Love, maybe?” Miles turns away, disgusted. “If you're able to handle anyone's drama but your own, you've given no indication that you can.”

“Try us,” Nick challenges. Then, after a moment of hesitation, he adds, “I've a bit of a confession to make. Maya's not the only one I started digging around about and then stopped.”

“Phoenix!” Miles snaps, turning on us angrily.

“I stopped,” Phoenix repeats, “when I found out what the RO against you was about. I didn't look into the incident at all. What happened in Erkrath, Miles? This has something to do with that, doesn't it?”

I'm shocked, angered beyond reason. So Nick's violated Miles' privacy, as well. And he wonders why neither of us wants to talk to him? He can't be trusted any more than either of us can!

But hearing that Nick knows the name of the city Miles was living in, something he hasn't divulged to either of us, strikes some kind of chord with Miles. “Alright,” he says, straightening. “I'll tell you. I'm trusting you.”

“Fair enough,” Nick replies, with a sideways glance at me. “Maybe this will convince Maya that we're not going to run away screaming the moment something unpleasant comes up.”

This is a bit more than “something unpleasant,” but I'm more concerned with Miles. He looks from one of us to the other, and turns to look out the window, at the Gatewater Hotel. “I was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder,” Miles says softly.

Nick nods slightly, letting me know that was what he found. Oh dear god, those are both extremely serious charges! I can't believe Miles would try to kill someone! “I'd humiliated Roderick in court that day,” he says softly. His voice sounds slightly disconnected. “I knew he'd be angry about the things I'd brought up, but I didn't think he'd go so far. I couldn't think of what to do when I saw that he'd brought a gun that night.”

“He tried to kill you,” I say, absolutely horrified.

Nick murmurs a vulgar insult aimed at Miles' brother-in-law as Miles nods. “Yes. I was the one he was intending to shoot.”

“He didn't hit you,” Nick says flatly.

“Obviously, he did not.” A pause. “He shot Leah.”

Oh God, Miles...

He takes a deep breath. “I told her to go back into the house,” he says quietly. “I thought she obeyed me. If I'd known she was still standing behind me, I wouldn't have moved.”

Nick has a hand pressed to his mouth. I can't say anything or I'll cry; Miles sounds so, so sad. It's the most emotion I've ever heard from him, unless he is half-way drunk. He finally says, “Instead of helping my niece, I decided to wrest the gun away from Roderick and hold it on him until the cops got there. She nearly bled to death.”

“Your reaction was understandable,” Nick says, a bit coolly. “I would've shot the son of a bitch,
myself. Fransizka was there to help Leah, right?”

Miles nods, a distant look on his face. “She woke up right before your accident, Wright,” Miles says softly. “But she is damaged. Her memory... well. She remembers a man who likes the color red, in all of its shades, with sandy-silver hair and he's a lawyer in America. She does not know his name.”

“Miles...” Nick says.

“Her aunt... a kind woman, a bit strict, but kind. Of course, she knows that woman's name now, but—” Miles looks at us over his shoulder; he's turned away from us- “Fransziska has to remind her of it every day. She doesn't remember her own name without assistance. She can barely remember how to do simple tasks.” Another pause. “Fransziska has requested that I return to help care for her.”

We're silent for a second. I had no idea something like this was going on. I'm about to ask him what he intends to do when he says, “It is a request, in the purest sense. She knows of your situation, Wright.” Nick winces, and Miles and I have the good graces to ignore it.

Once he knows that we're not going to comment, Nick asks softly, “What are you going to do?”

Miles looks away again. “I am staying here. I left because seeing Leah like that was too much. I can't face her after what I did to her. Especially not after running away from it like I did.”

“You're an idiot, Edgeworth,” Nick informs him in a matter-of-fact tone. “How could you possibly blame yourself for what happened to her?”

“That bullet was meant for me.” His voice is flat, emotionless. It's frightening.

Nick scowls. “How absolutely selfish of you!” he snaps. As Miles is protesting, Nick continues, “I'll have you know that I care about you quite a damn bit, and even though she isn't acting it right now, I know Maya does, too!” Nick puts his hands on the other man's shoulders, shaking him slightly. “You didn't know she was behind you!” he snaps.

Miles shakes Nick’s hands off him. “And how would you know, Wright?” Miles snaps back. “Get off your high horse. You'd feel exactly the same if you were in this position with Trucy.”

“Probably,” Nick admits immediately, freely. “But that doesn't mean I'd be right, either.”

Silence, again. This is something else I'm getting pretty tired of. Awkward silences. Finally, I say, “Miles... You didn't hurt your older sister. You didn't abandon your niece. You didn't start fighting to take her from two loving adults just because you could. You didn't go to someone else's home intending to murder someone. And you did not pull that trigger.” I eye him seriously. “You're letting him off the hook far too easily.”

He makes an undecipherable, unhappy noise. “It almost sounds like you two want me to go back,” he says severely, when he finds his voice again.

“Nope,” Nick contradicts. “We want you to stop blaming yourself. It's not healthy.”

“You have no idea how ironic that is coming from you, Wright.”

Nick laughs. “Possibly, but it takes one to know one,” he retorts childishly. “Edgeworth. You're not responsible for what happened to Leah. You're not. You're not and I'll sit here all night repeating that until you get it through your head.”
“I will, too,” I say casually, propping a foot up on Nick's desk.

He glances at me and murmurs for me to please not do that. He doesn't care about people's feet on his desk, so I wonder why this bothers him so much. I take my foot down again, just to make him happy. Miles looks from one of us to the other; he looks mildly surprised. The fact that we're both completely focused on him and his wellbeing seems to be something he wasn't expecting. I resist the urge to be irritated with him as he says, “This must seem horribly trite.”

“You're kidding, right?” I ask flatly.

“Would I kid about something like this?”

Nick leans against the desk. “What do you want from us, Miles?” he asks, quite direct.

Nick's question is one that Miles clearly doesn't expect to hear. He searches for an answer, and doesn't find one. Nick sighs, putting his hands behind him on the desk. “Take back your 'end', please,” he says finally.

Miles shakes his head, frowning sharply. “Please,” I say, knowing I sound like I'm begging. “You've been dealing with this alone for how many years? At least give us a chance, Miles. You haven't even done that until now.”

He considers this for a second. Then, speaking very quietly, he says, “Fine. I'll give you a chance. The next moment I feel like I'm not part of this, though, I won't be any longer. I meant it when I said I can't live like this.”

Relief floods me, and from the way I see Nick put a hand to his face, I can tell he's just as relieved as I am. We have a brief discussion about going to Miles' for the night, what we're going to do. Nick mischievously brings up Steel Samurai and the Deep Night and is met with both Miles and I hitting him as he laughs at us. A few seconds more of discussion has us agree to borrow Trucy's neglected video game system and one of the family-type games Nick bought for her that was played only once.

Miles goes to retrieve the system from the main area of the office, leaving me and Nick to shut down his computer and ensure his critical files are locked up. As he's watching the computer screen to ensure that the dinosaur is shutting down properly, I say uneasily, “Now you understand, don't you?”

Nick nods. “I understood from the beginning. Being understandable doesn't make it any less wrong.”

His voice is absent and distracted. “I can't say it now, of all times,” I say finally. He doesn't answer. I'm suddenly slightly pissed off at him, and accuse him: “You know, Nick. You either know or you've got a pretty damn good idea. I don't need to tell you. So what's your excuse?”

He laughs. “Good one, Maya. You'd have made a wonderful prosecutor.” His voice is sarcastic, slightly angry. “My reason is that this isn't mine to own. It's yours. But don't misunderstand me, Maya. I know I'm as damned for it as you are for it.”

I'm not going to ask him what he means by that. I'm pretty sure I know. The computer shut down, he turns to me. “But mostly because I need to hear it from you,” he says, “not from Ema, not by connecting the dots myself. From you. I deserve that much. And he does, too.”

We stare each other down. I'm the one who looks away. “Come on,” he says, hefting his backpack. “We better get out there. That was a really, really close call. Miles is the most important thing right
The night is surprisingly pleasant. There is a dark cloud hovering above us all; Nick's inner storm rages on. If guilt were a noose I'd have hung myself by now. And Miles' grief and loneliness is almost tangible. But despite this- or maybe because of it- we enjoy the evening, focusing only on remembering what brought the three of us together to begin with.

Miles is surprisingly good at the video game we play- that isn't nearly as family-centric as Nick claims it is- and ends up thoroughly humbling us both. We end up getting pizza for dinner- yet another meal Miles isn't too big on, but it's easier than us all getting our shoes on and going out- and then the stereo goes on and we talk. Nothing important. No disbarment, no brain damaged loved ones. No mysterious children in Kurain. Just three friends behaving like friends.

And then three friends behaving like a little more than friends, and the whole thing is relatively lighthearted and playful. We're all acting, and we all know it, but it's refreshing to know that we can still set aside the pain and drama for a few hours.

Nick wakes us both up in the morning by bouncing lightly on the bed and calling our names. I'm about to sleepily scold him for his child-like behavior- I expect this from his namesake, not him- when he holds a finger to my mouth. “You guys think we can pull off what we did last night for a whole day?” he asks.

Miles rubs his eyes sleepily. “What are you going on about now, Wright?” he demands.

“Twenty-four hours in which we don't talk about everything that's wrong,” Nick answers. “Let's see if we can do it without being total drama whores, huh?” Then, without waiting for an answer, he scoots off the bed, and I notice that he's already dressed. “I'm going to go run up to the bagel place real quick to get us some breakfast. Be good,” he admonishes, and then he's gone.

I can't help but think that just pretending all the bad stuff doesn't exist isn't the slightest bit helpful. But I suppose he's right: we've had seven years to be angsty. We deserve one full day of not being angsty, at the very least.

Miles and I lay in bed, and I think he's trying as hard as I am to go back to sleep. After a few minutes, I snuggle against him, wrapping my arm around his and giving his shoulder a tiny peck of a kiss to see if he's awake.

Based on his response, he most certainly is.

I've never been quite as comfortable with Miles as I have with Nick, and Miles once told me that was why he rarely initiated- or responded- to intimacy between just the two of us. His immediate reaction to my unspoken invitation just proves to me just how badly Nick and I have been shoving him aside. That's just got to change. However, I realize that however lazy his lovemaking is, he's going to notice pretty quick if I'm thinking about that and not him, so out of my mind it goes for the moment. Or two. Or three. “You know,” I manage to gasp, “I don't think this is what Nick meant by 'be good'.

Miles nips at my neck. “I think this is exactly what he meant,” Miles says, somehow managing to keep his tone even. “Do you care at the moment?”

“Not particularly.” My back arches involuntarily as he bites my earlobe very gently. His point very well taken, I shut up about what Nick may have meant by “be good” and enjoy this.

I can tell that Nick probably intended for us to have some quality time, at least, since he's not back.
yet, even with the fact that Miles takes his time with me. We're cleaned up, showered and dressed by the time Nick does come home, and he's holding his cell phone to his ear as he sets the bag down on the kitchen table. “I'm not avoiding my daughter just to avoid Apollo, Gavin,” he says firmly. “No. No, I'm not being unreasonable. She's fifteen! Not by much- what? Twenty-two. Oh, get real. It's not th-” He gives an exaggerated sigh. “Why am I arguing with you about this? No, I'm quite sure it's not because I respect you enough to just not hang up on you. Good question. Sounds like you want me to.”

He's silent for a few seconds; Miles and I exchange glances as I grab a bagel out of the bag and munch on it; we can hear Klavier Gavin on the other end of the phone. Nick's face darkens in anger. “I didn't forge anything, Gavin,” he growls, “and I seriously resent the fact that you can't seem to have a conversation with me without bringing it up. Especially since you're the one contacting me.” Another lengthy pause. And then Nick's expression changes. “There was a murder at the concert last night!”

I put my bagel down, my throat tightening in fear for Nick. He has a hand to his chest as he listens intently, the disrespect in his demeanor gone. “I understand,” he says finally, in a strained voice. “Are they- Oh thank God... Jesus. That's rough.” He listens for a second more, and then nods, even though the man on the other end can't see it. “I understand. I'll keep my distance.”

He hangs up the phone, the happy-go-lucky expression gone. “You heard what happened,” he says grimly. “Who they're charging is absolutely absurd and Gavin's already set Apollo up to be the kid's defense.”

“What's this about you keeping your distance?” Miles asks.

Nick grabs a bagel, takes a bite, and swallows before answering. “This is a huge case, Miles. International. I'm sure we'll hear about it. The suspect is Machi Tobaye-”

Miles knows who he's referring to, although I don't. “Wait. I know that name.”

“Familiar with the folk artist Lamiroir?”

Nick knows a folk artist? “I do,” Miles replies. “Machi Tobaye is her pianist, correct?”

“Yep. He's the suspect.”

Miles makes a snorting noise. “That's absurd.”

“It gets better.”

“Oh?”

“Forty-five caliber.”

Miles laughs, startling me. It's a disbelieving, incredulous laugh. “Are they seriously claiming that Machi Tobaye used a forty-five caliber firearm to murder someone?”

“They are indeed.”

“Please tell me the detective on the case is Gumshoe.”

“Skye.”

“Oh dear. Ugh. And I'm not allowed to cut salaries anymore...”
I frown at them. “Mind filling me in?” I ask.

"I'd show you the CD case, but I just promised Prosecutor Gavin I'd do everything I could to avoid Polly until this is over," Nick says. "I'll have to sneak into the apartment to get fresh clothes, at least... in any event, Tobaye is one of the smallest fourteen-year-olds I've ever seen. A forty-five caliber firearm is so powerful, it can seriously harm the shooter if they're not used to using it. The kickback can dislocate your arm if you're not strong enough for it."

"And I can guarantee that child is not strong enough to use that weapon," Miles adds matter-of-factly. "Was he injured when he was arrested?"

"Yes, but it wasn't from a firearm kickback," Nick answers. "Gavin knows as well as everyone else that the kid didn't do it, but he's who he's being told to prosecute. He really, really wants to catch the guy who did it, and he's got no idea who it could have been. Hence he turns to 'Phoenix Wright's student'. Apollo. But since this is international..."

I'm only half following the conversation, but I understand that much. "Your record," I say numbly.

"Yep. If the media catches me so much as looking at the kid's lawyer, they're going to have tampering accusations."

Miles is seething at this, and I have to admit: every time Nick and Gavin cross paths, I like the young prosecutor less and less. Nick sets us both with a look. "To be fair, he made it clear that he didn't believe that I would advise Apollo to tamper with or forge evidence. But I can't help him. The charges may have been dropped, and even Gavin thinks that the forgery was a little more than a stupid mistake at this point." Nick can't keep a bitter tone from his voice as he says, "But I was definitely convicted in the court of public opinion."

We're silent. That black cloud is threatening to envelop us again. Nick kicks the leg of a chair lightly. "So much for that," he mutters darkly.

After a moment, Miles picks up a bagel of his own. "So what do you two want to do today?" he asks conversationally. Nick and I look at him in astonishment. It's like he doesn't see how upset Nick is. "Stop looking at me like that," he demands. "And get off the self-pity while you're at it, Wright. What happened to twenty-four hours drama-free? You can feel sorry for yourself tomorrow."

"... You're right. So, what are we doing, guys?"

I'm astonished. "Well, first I have to call Kurain and tell them that my plans have changed," I say. "I was supposed to go home today, remember? I really should have called last night."

"That's right. Are you sure it's okay for you to delay your return further?" Nick asks.

I shrug. "Considering the circumstances, it will have to be," I answer, standing and fiddling for my phone. "I'm fine with whatever you two decide, though, so go ahead and finish the conversation without me."

The boys both acknowledge me as I stand and go into the guest room, calling the Kurain main phone. Misty's tiny voice is the one that answers: "Hello, Kurain Village!"

"M-Mist-mist," I say in surprise. "Hey there, sweetie!"

"Mama?" Her voice is suddenly very excited. "Oh, Mama! Mystic Pearl says that you're supposed to come home today! When will you be here?! I miss you!"

"B-but.... Mama... Why? Don't you love us anymore?"

Oh dear, Maya, hold it together... I had no idea they thought that I wasn't there because I don't love them! How am I supposed to... "I love you very much," I say solemnly. "That's why I can't come home yet. It's hard for you to understand, I know, but this is very, very important. I'm here to help people-"

"Who? I need help too, Mama! Nicky is mean sometimes and he makes me cry, and Nicky cries sometimes because he misses you so much, and Sister Iris is sad because you're not here, and so is Mystic Pearl, and-"

"Misty, honey, listen to me. Please, sweetheart, just listen-"

She's crying now. "Who is more important than us, Mama?" she whimpers.

"They're not more important than you, Misty. And I'll be home as quickly as I can. I'm doing this for lots of people, Mist-mist. To make everyone happier. Please, sweetheart, I'll make it up to you and Nicky. I swear it."

Misty sniffles, hiccupping. I think my pleading is calming her down. "Okay, Mama," she says with a deep breath. "I know you're an important person and lots of people need you. I'm trying not to be selfish. I just miss you so much and I'm afraid you're never going to come back..."

I brush a hand across my eyes. "I am, sweetheart. I'm coming back. Please trust Mama, sweetie. Please trust me."

"O-okay. I will tell Sister Iris when she's back..."

"Thank you. Can you remember to tell her to call me back?"

"Yes, Mama. I love you."

"I love you too, darling. And Nicky, too."

"I'll tell him. Bye bye..."

I hang up, sinking onto the edge of the bed. The worst part about this is that I can't cry. The house is too small. They'll hear me, and we have an agreement. No drama. No tears for today.

But the lie is smothering me. I'm not sure how much longer I can do this. Did I just choose my lovers over my kids? I'm not winning any Mother of the Year awards, that's for damn sure. Then again, I'm not winning any Girlfriend of the Year awards, either, and I... I can't let Miles end it. Not until he knows the truth. And how am I supposed to tell him the truth after finding out he holds himself responsible for his niece getting so badly hurt? "Sorry, but you've got a kid by blood, so no more mourning for you."

Nice. Yeah, no. Not going to do that. I'm in too deep. I'm in way over my head and Nick's already made it clear that he's not rescuing me, not this time. If I let Miles leave us, he's going back to Germany, no matter what he says, and I'll never see him again. And that means that Misty will never know her father. And that'd be just as unforgivable to allow to happen, wouldn't it?
I can’t go back to Germany.

I’ve noticed that for the last few weeks, Maya’s been almost afraid of Wright. He runs hot and cold with her, abruptly angry and then contrite. Like he was this morning.

My mind wasn’t entirely on our lovemaking this morning. I know hers wasn’t, either. I was examining her body and while I’ve always found her naked body quite nice to look at, it is without any sexual intention this time.

I’m looking for bruises.

I’m intensely thankful when I find none, no injuries. But just because she has no visible marks on her body doesn’t mean I’m wrong, it just means that if he’s abusing her, he’s not being rough enough to leave marks. It could also mean that he’s being careful enough not to, but- and this challenges all of my beliefs about domestic violence, if true- I know Wright loves her. If his hold on his formidable temper is slipping, it means he needs help, not that he’s some kind of evil girlfriend-beater.

I have to be careful. If I leave without resolving this, I may return to discover Maya dead and Wright charged with a murder he did commit, however accidentally it may be. It’s a slippery slope, but one I’ve seen far too many times. I’m trapped here, now, with them, and I can only pray that I’m able to discern if he has become abusive in time to save them both.
When I put myself back together and head into the main area, the boys are done with their conversation about what we’re doing. We’re going to the mall we used to go to for the day. Most people would question how three grown adults would entertain themselves at a mall all day, but most grown adults aren’t the three of us. We’ll figure something out.

The flaw in our plan is apparent within an hour of arriving at the mall. Nick’s favoring his sprained ankle. It’s been two weeks; he was walking without a problem after falling into the Eagle River within one, if I recall correctly. But this is the same ankle and he’s not exactly a young man anymore. Not old by any stretch of the imagination, but youth is fleeing him now.

I ignore it. Miles does, for a time, as well. Nick’ll tell us if he can’t walk anymore.

Another hour passes. We’re still laughing and doing what we used to, ducking into stores Miles couldn’t care less about and some of which we couldn’t, either. But his favoring has become a noticeable limp now, and Miles makes us stop and insists that Nick sit for a second. He argues, but it’s clear that he’s grateful for the reprieve. “You should tell us before it starts hurting that badly, Wright,” Miles says.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Nick lies—badly—and gives us a cocky grin. “Besides, I’ve had worse.”

“Mm. Isn’t that the leg you hurt at Hazakura Temple?”

“Pfft. I can’t remember what I had for breakfast, Edgeworth. Are you seriously expecting me to remember something that happened almost eight–nine? – years ago? I don’t even remember anymore.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I am not. If I was, I wouldn’t have been an undefeated poker champion for seven years.”

“Well, you’re terrible at lying to me,” Miles corrects himself. “You really should be wearing sneakers until that ankle heals.”

“I don’t like sneakers.”

Nick’s suddenly gets a rather adorable deer-in-headlights expression. He sees what’s coming as much as I do, and frankly, I want to see this. Badly. “Well, I don’t like… uh… taking pills! But I do anyway–”

“Bad analogy, Maya,” Nick says flatly, although his grin is genuine. “Very bad analogy.”

“The point is that she does what she has to, Wright,” Miles says, “and you, sir, are going to do what you have to. Even if it means actually covering your feet for a week.”

“No.”

Miles grabs his wrist and tugs him to his feet. “Let’s go, Wright.”

Nick tries to hold his ground, planting his feet as firmly as he can. The bad ankle must hurt too much, though, because he stumbles along, wrist in Miles’ grip. “I don’t think this is necessary,” he gasps, clearly seeing what the end result of this will be as well as I do. “Honest! My sandals are
comfortable, that’s why I wear them! They are not making my ankle worse. I’m a decrepit old man, for crying out loud, things take longer to heal and—"

His protests go unheeded as Miles guides him into the athletic shoe store.

Half an hour and a lot of wheedling, reasoning and threatening later, the three of us walk out, and Nick’s now wearing a pair of gray sneakers that actually look pretty sharp. Miles didn’t let him see the price tag and I’m sure that Nick both wants to see it and doesn’t. Miles paid for them; Nick never quite got the hang of letting people buy him stuff, even when he lost his badge.

This does, however, lead to exactly what I believed it would. The next victim is Nick’s windbreaker pants, and once Miles has argued him into submission about that, since they’re already in the store, they might as well get him a decent shirt as well… Nick’s resigned to being used as a dress-up doll now and just lets Miles and I bicker about whether blue or black looks better on him.

By the time I suggest we leave the mall for lunch, Nick’s sweat jacket, tank top, and windbreaker is in a plastic shopping bag, and he’s now wearing blue jeans—and although I’d always suspected, they confirm for me that he’s got a very cute rear in denim—and a white tee-shirt with a black button-down shirt over it, although it’s not buttoned. He’s intensely uncomfortable and I suspect he’s going to react very poorly when Miles tells him to take off the beanie.

He does. “Trucy made this for me,” he protests. “I can’t—"

“It clashes terribly, Wright. You didn’t have much to begin with, but I know you’re not this fashion-stupid.”

He glares, and Miles glares right back. “I’m not taking it away from you. Just take it off. It’s the middle of summer, aren’t you hot?”

I gleefully point out the unintentional double entendre and they ignore me. Nick sighs, pulls the beanie off his head, and rakes his fingers through his messy black hair. “There. Happy? I suppose unkempt, tangled, ratty hair is a fashion statement, too.”

“It’s not that bad,” I protest, reaching up to brush a stray lock of the rough hair out of his eyes. “Besides, we had fun!”

“Glad someone did. You two owe me candy. Like, seriously. Now.”

Miles glances at his watch. “It’s just about lunch time,” he says mildly. “But not quite. We’ve still got some time to kill.” And his grey-eyed gaze rests on me.

Nick chortles and I look down at what I’m wearing. The same acolyte’s uniform I always have, even after becoming the Master. Of course, I change into what the Master should wear when it’s necessary in Kurain, but I realize that neither of them has ever seen me wearing anything else. Uh-oh… “How about we get something to eat and—"

“Candy is something to eat!” Nick exclaims. I’m enjoying his petulant child act as much as I enjoyed watching Miles play dress-up, despite knowing that’s in store for me. I wonder if he’s going to succeed in getting under Miles’ skin.

He is. “—we’ll hit the candy store on the way home,” he finishes his statement irritably.

Nick chooses not to push it. “Oh, all right,” he sighs, winking at me quite conspicuously.
“But not until after we’ve improved Ms. Fey’s fashion sense.”

I glare at Miles, puffing my cheeks out. “This is not ‘fashion sense’,” I say haughtily. “It’s a uniform.”

“It’s a uniform you’ve been promoted beyond,” Nick points out, grinning.

_Oh no. Oh no no no no…_ I see it coming, but like heck am I just going to roll over. I’m going to give them as much trouble as Nick gave us. It’s just the right thing to do. “It’s comfortable.”

My protest falls on deaf ears. “Wasn’t that the excuse Wright tried to use?” he said wickedly. “Let’s go, Maya. Your turn.”

“Oh no. Oh no no no no…” I see it coming, but like heck am I just going to roll over. I’m going to give them as much trouble as Nick gave us. It’s just the right thing to do. “It’s comfortable.”

“Only if we get to make you over, too!” I say in desperation, positive that this will either put him off, or that he’ll agree, which will make it totally alright.

“Unfortunately, we’ve only time for one more makeover. Maybe next time. Come on, I saw something I am positive will look gorgeous on you.”

Twenty minutes later I’m wearing a violet long-sleeve shirt and crisp jeans; fortunately, Miles lets me keep my sandals- his protest with Nick was purely out of concern for his ankle- but I do have silver bracelets I didn’t have before.

That wasn’t so bad and now Nick and Miles can’t keep their eyes off me. I thought I’d be self-conscious but I kind of like that attention. From them, at least.

Miles asks us what we want for lunch, once he’s done making me over, and we both tell him that it’s his choice today. He picks a café; I’ve seen it, but I’ve never been in it. It doesn’t look like it’ll have anything I want. We both object, however, when we realize that this is a fast-food place. An upscale fast-food joint. “Seriously, Edgeworth,” Nick protests. “You don’t have to keep choking down the grease bombs Maya and I do. Go someplace you want and we’ll adjust. We’re not going to die if something healthy hits our stomachs.”

“I assure you, there are no ‘grease bombs’ here,” Miles retorts dryly. “Go find a table. I’ll take care of ordering.”

Nick and I look at each other. “We’ve got to look at the menu first, right?” I ask.

“Let me order for you. Trust me. I know you two well enough to know what to get and we’d be here for hours with you asking me things like what gorgonzola cheese is.”

“Trust” seems to be a buzz word at the moment, and Nick and I wander off to a corner of the restaurant to find a relatively secluded area. We’re talking quietly- Nick’s not nearly as annoyed as he led us to believe but he’s probably never wearing this outfit again, it’s just not his style- when my phone rings. I brace myself as I read the name on the display, and answer. “Hello?”

I get my second surprise for the day, as the voice on the other end of the phone is certainly not Iris. “Hi, Mama!” Nicky says brightly. “I thought you’d want to know that Mist-mist calmed down. I yelled at her for being sad and Iris yelled at me for being mean but it calmed her down and she’s not crying anymore.”

“Th-that’s good,” I reply, stunned, knowing I should yell at him for yelling at her, but I’m too surprised.
"Yeah. So don't worry, Mama. I know you're gonna come back and I know you're doin' everything for me an' Mist-mist and I'll remind her anytime she gets sad. So just hurry up and do what you need to do so you can come home, 'kay?"

"Y-yeah. I'll do that."

"Great! We'll see you soon again, then, Mama. Don't worry about Mist-mist, I got her. Good luck with all that stuff! Love you! Oh, and I'll tell Sister Iris I took care of calling you so she doesn't have to."

"I-w-wait! St-" But I'm too late. I barely get in that handful of words before Nicky hangs up the phone, probably pleased as punch with himself. I wonder if I should call back, but no. Iris will call me herself whether Nicky says not to or not and I'd rather not risk one of the kids picking up again. My expression is probably amusing, as Miles has returned with our food and they're both watching me intently: Miles looks mildly concerned while Nick's grinning like a dope. "I get the feeling Maya just got owned on the phone," Nick remarks, munching on what looks like they might be an expensive version of french fries.

"No, they were just in a hurry," I reply, poking at the sandwich Miles ordered for me. What is that green thing hanging out the end of it? I've never seen lettuce like that.

"Oh? Pronoun games now, Maya?"

"Phoenix," Miles comes to my rescue. Nick flushes, but doesn't lose the dopey grin as Miles says, "I don't know why you're trying to get under her skin so much but stop it. Please."

"Not guilty, your honor," Nick drawls, fascinated with his sandwich as well. "Not this time, at least. I was just being difficult because I can. You know how it is. What is this?"

Bullshit. I know him well enough to know what he's thinking. Men are an endangered species in Kurain. None of the men of the village were previously associated with the main Fey clan. If it was a woman caller I'd use "she", but I didn't, so it must have been a "he". And what male from Kurain has access to my cell number?

That detail is one that I'm not sure Miles is aware of; if he is, he's ignoring it. If he's not, he's just taking Nick at his word. "Just try it," Miles says, after taking a bite of his own sandwich. "You too, Maya. Trust me."

I do as he says and try it, weird green lettuce-like thing and all. By the end of the meal I think I've identified most of the ingredients in the sandwich, none of which I'd ordinarily like much but I'm glad I let him order. It's fantastic. I like it almost as much as burgers.

Of course, as soon as Nick identifies his sandwich as involving grilled chicken, he has no complaints, either.

Iris does call me back a little while after we return to Miles' house. She is, quite understandably, annoyed with me. As is Pearly. But, she says, she trusts me to do the right thing. I'm taking the scenic route in getting to that point, but she's sure I will eventually. Besides, I'm only staying for a few more days. It's not like your boyfriend's daughter and subordinate are even indirectly involved in a murder every day. Especially not when your boyfriend isn't permitted to help at all.

Despite Nick's promise to stay out of sight, we go to the trial. "I'm a civilian," Nick says firmly. "He's got no right denying me access to a murder trial. Just being there when Apollo doesn't know I am isn't going to make a difference either way."
The moment I see the kid in the defendant's chair, I see why Klavier was so insistent that they are wrong, and how important it is that no one interferes, intentional or not. I know first hand how convoluted and twisted the court system is. If Klavier and Apollo can't finger the real killer, the court really will sentence this poor kid to death.

But they don't have to finger the real killer. Lamirior herself does. The trial is thrown into chaos and the gallery is thrown out. Nick and Miles seem terribly shaken by this turn of events; we spend the evening forcing Nick to stay in the house and not go help with the investigation. "If it's a cop who did it," he argues vehemently, "they could be in serious danger!"

"But they're not," Miles tries to reason with him. "Wright, Crescend is a detective. Do you think he'd be stupid enough to go after someone after he's been fingered in a murder trial? Let alone the defendant's lawyer!"

He’s not convinced Daryan Crescend isn’t going to assault Apollo and Trucy. He’s almost as concerned for the young attorney as he is for his daughter, and it’s less the, “Well, he’s my best shot at getting my foot back in the door” attitude he’s had and more concern for the kid’s wellbeing. He’s been worried about Apollo’s state of mind since he was told that Apollo found the body; even more so when Apollo revealed that he’d heard the victim’s last words. He wants to talk to him, make sure he’s okay with what happened.

But he can’t.

After Miles and I fail to distract him, again, Nick claws a restless hand through his hair and stands. “I’m going to the office,” he announces matter-of-factly. “It’s late enough that the kids shouldn’t be there and if they are, I’ll just lock myself in my own area. I’ve got a weird feeling about all of this; I want to get some things in order, just in case.”

“Just in case of what?” I ask, baffled.

He shrugs. “I dunno. I’ve just got a weird feeling about this case.” He catches Miles’ incredulous look and sighs. “I’m not going to talk to Polly or Trucy beyond ‘hi’ and ‘bye’. Scout’s honor.”

“You were never a boy scout,” Miles says dryly.

“I’ll have you know that I most certainly was. It wasn’t for long, but-”

“How long?”

He shrugs. “A month. Whaaat? I got bored!”

We give up on trying to keep him put. He’s about ready to crawl up a wall; with a few final admonitions to stay out of Apollo’s way and a turned-down offer for a ride, Nick leaves.

That was Maya’s son on the phone. I know it.

I wanted so much to grab the phone from her, to talk to him. I’m basing it on something illogical- the fact that she named him Nicholas in an attempt to name him after me while not really doing so- but I am utterly positive that boy is my son.

Men in Kurain frequently abandon their families. What has Maya told him about me? About Miles? I have to acknowledge that the twins may be his children. I can just feel in my soul that they’re mine, but the logical part of me won’t let go of the fact that intuition isn’t evidence. So what has she told him- either of them- about Miles, too? About us? Anything at all?
But I can’t do anything about this. I can’t call Kurain and demand to talk to him, or high tail it to Kurain now. I have the opportunity. I can get there and by the time Miles and Maya realize I’m gone, I’ll be half way there. I can’t do that, though. My daughter is in danger, my son and my other daughter have never even seen me, and I can do nothing to help anyone.

I’ve never felt so helpless. It’s a devastating feeling and I’m not sure the goofy feel-good self-help books will fix this for me. Nothing can. Nothing will.

I should just call her on it.

And then I realize that this will trigger drama. No, no, no. I can’t. Miles will leave. He’ll leave, or he’ll break up with us and sue for paternity testing, in an effort to take them from Maya if he can, and he’d succeed. What she’s doing is horrible.

But it doesn’t make her an unfit parent. She’s doing the best she can to juggle us and our kids. Surely Miles would be able to see that she thinks she’s doing what’s best for all of us! She’s wrong, but she’s not trying to hurt anyone. I don’t know what she’s trying to do, but I know that doing harm to anyone is the furthest thing from her mind. She would not be twisting herself into such convoluted knots if that was her goal and I just can’t see her trying to intentionally hurt someone.

I need to say something. But what if neither of us are the father? It’s possible that she was carrying on a relationship in the village. We weren’t in a relationship those first three years. In that case, as long as we stay out of the village, it most certainly is none of our business.

But no. That can’t be it. She wouldn’t hide something like that from me. I directly asked her if she was seeing someone. Unless she’s living some kind of double-life- no, that can’t be right, either. She wouldn’t do that.

That means that either those kids are mine or Miles’, or-

No!

I can’t accept that conclusion. I just can’t. Those kids have to be mine or Miles’. The only alternative that makes any sense is unacceptable. I need to speak up.

But if that conclusion is the right one, the only reason she’d hide them is shame. The shame wouldn’t be hers and I hope she knows neither of us would think less of her, but if she’s going to such lengths to hide it, then saying anything may make her go to Kurain and refuse to see us out of that shame.

But I’ve already decided that they can’t have come into existence like that, that they’re one of ours. And if that’s the case, whether or not I want her to man up and tell us already, I have an obligation to Miles to say something.

I need a distraction, or I’m going to go insane. I want to go help Apollo and Trucy. But I can’t. I can’t because that bastard Kristoph ruined my life. I won’t be able to stand it if something happens to those kids because of my own disgrace. Even if I say something, I can’t help Maya with her own kids, whether they’re mine or not. And Miles- Miles has enough stress. He loved that girl like his own, and he blames himself.

But he would want to know!

Oh god, what am I supposed to do?!
I’m surprised that I only feel mildly awkward, alone with Miles. With Nick gone, we discuss things that he wouldn’t be remotely interested in, such as the most recent series in the Steel Samurai universe. Sitting together on Miles’ sofa, sipping some kind of sweet wine, his arm draped over my shoulders and me relaxed against him, discussing children’s shows. It’s almost hysterical how easily we pull off such a scene.

His hand is in my hair. It’s definitely an intimate touch, but not suggestive. Well, that’s not quite true. The gesture is a gentle request, I get the feeling. I don’t respond right away. I know Miles is probably not enjoying the wine as much as I am; he likes it quite a bit drier than this. No matter. I’m happy he’s opening himself to me; it feels like he’s giving me permission to do the same.

I’m more interested in tearing down the weird barrier between the two of us than I ever have been. Maybe it’s the complete dearth of affection from Nick, ever since he figured out my secret. And I feel terrible for it. Am I just wanting Miles to be affectionate because Nick isn’t? Most people would call that using the poor man.

After another glass of wine, I can honestly say I don’t care. This is the most inebriated I’ve been since the night the three of us came together. And it’s strange. I know Miles sees it, but rather than gentle encouragement to stop, he’s gently egging me on. “Are you trying to get me drunk?” I accuse with a small smile.

“Is it that obvious?”

I’m taken aback by the easy admission. The next question is why. The most obvious answer comes to my lips as easily as my wine glass now. “You do realize I’d be perfectly willing if I’m sober, right?”

“Mental note: Maya Fey is absurdly insulting when she’s drunk.” He smiling slightly, but it’s fake. He’s tense, and there is definitely a reason other than my proposal for his behavior. I’m about to ask why when his fingers curls gently in my hair. “Maya, I need to ask you something.”

“What is it?” I ask, curious.

He takes a deep breath. “Understand that I am exposed to many types of criminal, from ruthless murderer right down to otherwise good men who cannot control their tempers. I wouldn’t be asking this if I haven’t seen some signs of it in this situation.”

I’m getting irritated. So he’s about to accuse me of a crime of some sort? Can’t be, unless being a heartless bitch is a crime… “Alright,” I confirm. “I get it.”

Another deep breath. “Has Wright ever become… violent, with you?”

I draw back from him, confused. “Wait, what?”

Miles’ expression is serious. “Please be honest with me, Maya. Has he ever struck you?”

I am floored. “Of course not!” I reply, with an incredulous laugh. “What in the world makes you think that?”

“A lot of things.” He pauses. “He has not threatened you, either?”

“No. Absolutely not.” I drain my glass after that. Looks like he was getting me drunk to make it harder for me to lie. After a moment, I look back at him, confused. “How could you even think that of him?”
“You don’t think it’s painfully obvious?” he retorts. “Wright’s angry with you. Very angry. I’ve never seen him try to bait someone as aggressively as he is with you. You’re defensive. I’m sure you don’t realize it, but you tense every time he touches you, regardless of the situation, as if you’re afraid of him.”

I shake my head hard and regret it as the room swims in my vision. “He hasn’t hit me. Ever. And he won’t ever hit me, either. And I can’t believe I’m having this conversation about Phoenix, of all people, hitting someone. Don’t you see how absurd that is?” I laugh, trying to envision Nick hitting anything but a pillow or slamming his hands on a desk. The image won’t come.

“… I see. If you’re protecting him, you needn’t do so. I’m not on a witch hunt here.”

“I’m not protecting him,” I say, “because he hasn’t hit me. Ever.” I toy with the glass in my hands. “And if you knew what he does, you’d be pretty damn pissed at me, too.”

“There’s no chance that you’re drunk enough to divulge that little secret, is there?” He sounds ridiculously hopeful.

It’s tempting. He’s not accusing me. He’s not trying to provoke me; he’s not taking every chance he can to remind me that I’ve got a secret he has a right to know. He genuinely doesn’t know and he’s being entirely reasonable about that fact. He’s not turning his back on me, trying to force me to speak…

“No, sorry,” I answer, although I can’t believe I’m turning him down. “I can’t. Not yet. Not… not with things like this.”

“Alright. Whenever you’re comfortable with telling me, Maya. And don’t let Wright bully you into it, either. We’ve both got the right to a little bit of privacy.”

And you have the right to know you have a daughter. I lean against him with a heavy sigh; he moves his arm very slightly, and I end up laying with my head in his lap, looking up at him. Seven years ago, he would have blushed six shades of red, sputtered and demanded to know when he became a pillow. “This is ridiculous,” I mutter, mostly to myself. “I’m keeping a deep, dark secret that I’ve no right to keep. Nick’s gone bitter and so angry that you’re afraid he’s an abusive boyfriend, and you mistrust me so much that you feel the need to get me drunk so you can see it better if I lie.”

Miles murmurs a protest at this, brushing my bangs out of my face. “Where did we go?” I ask plaintively, the alcohol making me a little more liberal with my whining. “Who are we, and what did we do with ourselves? Because we’re nothing like the loving trio we started out as.”

Miles looks up, looking distracted. “Wright blames himself for this, you know,” he says. “He says that this darkness swallowed us when he lost his badge and couldn’t cope. His failure dragged us down into this. Or so he says. I don’t know about your own problem, but I know he had nothing to do with violent brother-in-laws in Germany.”

I remain silent. Darkness. Nick’s always had a flair for the dramatic, but that’s pretty accurate. Darkness. Sadness, anger, depression. Negativity. I realize in horror that I haven’t felt contented and happy- I haven’t been in the light- since that horrible day. I suspect none of us have. “He’s fighting to force it back,” Miles adds, “but he’s almost out of hope. He’s convinced the darkness is never going to leave us now.”

“What do you think?” I ask softly.
He doesn’t answer me for several moments. “Dawn follows the darkest hour of the night,” he answers finally. “And I don’t think it can get much darker than this.”

I swallow hard. He still has hope, huh? “But the damage is done. Things are never going to go back to how they were. It’s gone.”

Miles says nothing. I roll onto my side, pressing my face against his stomach, and I cry as he just holds me. I hope he’s right.

By the time I’m done crying, I feel like I’m in a daze. I’m exhausted, in every sense of the word, and yet wide awake, watching the world through a dream. When Miles helps me scuffle to bed, I’m sure that’s all he intends to do, but my body seems to have other plans. I’m firmly convinced that I’ve got nothing to do with the way I’m kissing him, and I’m not sure I’m entirely awake when he asks me if I’m sure about this, before he pushes into me.

He’s as feverish as I am, his skin almost burning me where our bodies touch, and it doesn’t seem there’s an inch of me that he isn’t exploring, searching me for answers as much as I’m looking for the same in him. Is this okay? Although I know he’d do nothing but whine that we didn’t wait for him before joining, I don’t want Nick to come back right now. This is personal, between me and the man I’m making love with, as we’re trying to use sex to heal each other just a bit, to restore just enough stamina to make it through this.

I can tell he’s close by the way his breath hitches in his throat, and I tighten my embrace, trying to force him to slow down. I’m somewhere I don’t want to leave, and it’s going entirely too fast. Miles stops almost completely, kissing my face all over, murmuring comforting words, although he could be telling me what a great fuck I am and it’d be comforting right now, just hearing his voice. There’s one phrase he keeps repeating, like a mantra, but I’m not actually listening to his words, just the sound of them.

We only hold our peace for a few moments, at the most, and then I discover that slowing and stopping him doesn’t hold off the inevitable for long, but I’m okay with that. Everything feels completely right as we lay there, gasping in each other’s arms, willing this to last forever, for the afterglow to keep the darkness at bay just a little longer.

... everything feels right, of course, except my bladder, which has abruptly decided that it wants to rid my body of the alcohol I consumed earlier. I detangle myself from Miles, who protests softly, and I shuffle to the bathroom to take care of that.

After I flush, Miles knocks on the door. "Maya?" he asks from the other side. I open the door; he’s still as naked as I am. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just had to go."

"Oh."

The spell is broken. We’re back in this horrible place. Curses on my bodily functions.

Of the things I’m not sure of that night, I add how we ended up showering together to that list, although nothing sexual happens, unless one counts asking him to get the spot on my back I always have a hard time reaching. And Miles running a hand through my hair to make sure I got all the shampoo out. But that’s about it. We dry off together, wrap ourselves in bedclothes, and sit on the couch talking, waiting for Nick to return.

We talk about Nick’s duplicity. I’m almost jealous of Trucy and Apollo; they don’t get to see the
dark, storm-wracked Nick we see. Miles points out that this might be a good thing. Kristoph didn't see that Nick, either. We may be the only two people alive who know how he really feels.

Plus, Miles adds in an attempt to make me feel better, he carried out a congenial friendship with Kristoph for seven years, even after finding out that Kristoph was the one who ruined him. "The fact that he's so openly hostile to you right now is proof that he trusts you, I think," Miles says. "He's comfortable telling you how he really feels. I'm sure that means something."

It does make me feel a little better, looking at it like that. It means that he doesn't hate me, at least.

We talk about Miles' niece. He got a phone call from her the other day. He's quite happy to inform me that he reminded her what his name was at the start of the conversation, and still remembered it at the end. "She's getting better," he tells me, "but..."

"But what?"

"Her doctors don't think she's going to get much better than she is now," he says wistfully. "I'm considering looking for a physician here that may be able to help her more. I think she'd like it here, actually. Plus, Franziska is dying to see everyone."

"Dying to use her whip on everyone."

"No, not on everyone. Just Wright."

He tries to talk about my responsibilities in Kurain and I shut down that topic pretty damn quick. Discussions about Lamiroir follow, and Miles retrieves his copy of her CD and puts it in the player. It's quite beautiful, and relaxing, and I wonder why the hell Nick has something like this. It's nothing like the music he usually listens to.

I must have fallen asleep as we're listening to it, because the next thing I'm aware of is the sensation of strong arms underneath me, carrying me. He speaks; I can't hear his voice clearly, but I can tell from the timbre that it's Nick. Miles answers, his voice just as distant and incoherent as Nick's, and Nick laughs. I'm laid down on something soft- a bed?- and I feel a light kiss and hear something that sounds like it might be "I'm sorry."

I really must have been carried to bed, because when I wake in the morning, I'm right there in the middle, between my boys. The kiss and apology is so hazy, so unreal, though, that I write it off to being a fanciful dream.

Nick's got his backpack with him again, and it's quite a bit fuller than it was when he left last night. He invites me to have a look, and I discover five of his case files. The five most absurd cases we had to deal with, including the one in which he was impersonated. "Why do you have these with you?" I ask.

He shrugs with a smile. It's a little softer than it's been. Not by much, but it's noticeable. "No harm in being prepared, right?" he says.

"Prepared for what?"

"I dunno."

The trial itself is a nerve-wracking affair, and Nick's biting his nails- something I've never seen him do before. "Damnit," he curses softly, as court goes into recess in order to call the murderous detective to the stand. "I'll be right back," he says.
"Where are you going?" Miles demands.

"Bathroom!" And with that blatant lie, Nick's gone from the gallery. He's going to talk to Apollo. We both know it. That little pianist's fate is in the balance between a musician who has already been discredited to a certain extent and a detective. Who is the court going to listen to? Nick knows how Apollo can win despite the credibility issue, and he just can't sit and risk Apollo not getting it. All we can do is hope he's not caught.

Nick returns only seconds before court is reconvened, and now he has a bag of chocolate snackoos that he's quite contentedly munching on. "That was an awfully long bathroom break," Miles says dryly.

"Oh, I ran into Ema Skye. She was looking for Polly, but we talked for a few seconds."

"What's with the snackoos?" I ask in a whisper.

"These? Oh, these are a bribe from her. She wanted me to give Polly something for her." Miles snaps Nick's last name, and he grins and taps the button on his beanie. "It's cool. I don't think anyone saw me talking to either of them and even if they did, I have both conversations recorded. I did nothing but accept a bribe of snackoos to play messenger and state the obvious. Nothing that could even remotely be interpreted as tainting the case."

"You gave Apollo something," Miles points out sourly.

"And I have Detective Skye's word to back mine that it's from her, not me." He munches absently on a snackoo, his expression intense. "You know what to do, Apollo," he whispers. "Do it."

Daryan Crescend takes the stand. He spends half his time talking trash about Lamiroir, the other half trying to intimidate Prosecutor Gavin and Apollo. Apollo pulls out all of the evidence he needs to prove that Machi didn't shoot anyone, as if his tiny stature wasn't proof enough. But it's not enough. There's still no proof that Daryan Crescend did it. Even though it's painfully obvious, there is no proof. He had opportunity, means and motive. But Apollo just can't prove it-

And then, just as I'm about to snap at Nick to please stop holding his breath, Apollo asks to put Machi back on the stand. If Machi confesses, here and now, to smuggling, he has to name his accomplice. And that accomplice is Daryan Crescend. Crescend, desperate to stop it, practically confesses.

Nick smiles. It's a bitter smile, knowing, somehow mirroring the relief on Apollo's face, down there at the defense bench.

He doesn't waste any time leaving the gallery. Miles and I see him talking to Lamiroir as we make our own way out; "Leave him be," Miles whispers to me. "He mentioned having spoken to her a few times when he came home last night."

I gape at him. "So much for keeping his hands out of the case," I say, as we exit the courthouse.

"Gavin asked him to avoid Apollo, not Lamiroir. And they were discussing things unrelated to the case, in any event."

"Oh? Like what?"

Miles shakes his head. "He wouldn't tell me. Just said that it wasn't his place to talk about Lamiroir's personal affairs."
We wait quite a bit of time for Nick. If he wasn't joining us, he would have called or texted one of us by now. "I'm getting worried," I tell Miles.

He nods, looking back at the courthouse. "Perhaps I should go look for him."

"No need!" a now-familiar voice exclaims. We turn to its source to see Klavier Gavin approaching us, his expression grim. "But Herr Wright does need you inside, quickly. It's me and him in a battle of the bands, and believe me- with the judges we're against, we'll need all the cheering section we can get."
I sit closer to the back of the room. It's different than the courtrooms; almost like a miniature version of the rooms that congress uses when they're in session and the session is being televised. Miles apologizes briefly and sits closer to where the guests speak; I suspect Nick will be standing there soon, possibly with Prosecutor Gavin, based on how he phrased his request that we follow him. And it sounded like Gavin is openly on Nick's side in this, now.

Sure enough, a few minutes after I sit at the back and Miles sits at the front, Nick and Prosecutor Gavin approach the speaker's table together. A curved table sits in front of the speaker's table, and a group of five judges sits there, including our usual judge, at the head judge's right hand. "This emergency hearing is in session," the head judge rumbles, rapping a gavel against the block. "We're here at the rather passionate insistence of Prosecutor Klavier Gavin. I'm surprised to see Mr. Wright with you, Mr. Gavin."

Klavier nods. "I'm here to help him argue his case, your honor."

"This is highly unusual," one of the judges, a woman with a thin, nasally voice, says. "Last time we were in here to hear Mr. Wright's ideals, you stated quite clearly that you- how did you word it? - despised that you had to breathe the same air as Phoenix Wright." She leans forward, staring at the blond man intently. "It's extremely unusual for you to have such a change of heart, Mr. Gavin."

Nick bows his head slightly, patiently. "I despise the man," Gavin says evenly, "not his ideals. And after that ridiculous excuse for a trial, I find myself agreeing with his ideals more and more."

They're still not ready to let Nick speak, it seems. It almost feels as if he's there for show, that they're intentionally ignoring him. He remains as complacent as he was when he entered. "I believe we are all familiar with the trial that just finished," the head justice says. "For the sake of being thorough, I'm requesting the court clerk provide us all with copies of the transcript. Including one for Mr. Wright this time, please."

As the clerk scurries out of the room, our judge speaks up. "I'm sure Mr. Wright is eager to speak," he says with a slight apologetic nod to Nick, "but I think the proper course right now would be to hear Mr. Gavin's objection to the trial. Mr. Gavin?"

Klavier leans forward. "I don't intend to keep Mr. Wright here longer than necessary," he says. "I'll keep this song short and sweet. All I want to know is how the hell you people expect me- or any of my colleagues- to trust the police force when a detective so blatantly abuses his power as Daryan Crescend did in this case."

At this Nick looks at Gavin. "Sorry, but I have to ask," he says. "Didn't you abuse your power just as much as Crescend, Gavin? Aside from the killing people thing."

Klavier gives him a sideways glance. "I did," he admits. "I should not have used that shipping service for personal reasons, and I will accept any censure Chief Prosecutor Edgeworth issues."

I'm a bit shocked; I didn't realize he was the chief prosecutor. I knew he kept his title of High Prosecutor by how his office was untouched during his time abroad, but he never mentioned the promotion to me. Why not? That seems like a pretty big thing, and he can't be bothered to tell me about it? Hmph. Nick, for the most part, looks grudgingly impressed.

The judges are discomfited by Gavin's statement. "It's your job to prosecute," Ms. Nose says. "You
"You're kidding, right?" Gavin says with an arched eyebrow. "Justice Ambrosia, you did spend
time as a prosecutor yourself, right? How can you say that prosecutors don't need to trust the
police? I point to Prosecutor Edgeworth as an example. I'm sure you all recall his earlier years as a
prosecutor and the accusations of forging and tampering with evidence. He was held responsible
for it, although he had no knowledge of the problematic evidence. And," he says, once again giving
Nick a sideways glance, "that applies to defense attorneys, as well; except they must be even more
careful about whom they accept evidence from. Unknowingly accept and present forged evidence,
and a defense attorney is disbarred." Klavier puts his hands on the table, looking up and down the
half-circle of judges. "You can't tell me that trust isn't an issue when that much is at stake!"

"Wright was disbarred because he forged evidence," Ms. Nose hisses. "Mr. Edgeworth’s situation
is exceedingly rare and never happens with defense attorneys! They gather all of their information
themselves!"

"Objection!" Klavier hollers. "Wright was never convicted of forging evidence and was disbarred
for presenting it! I know you know the definition of defamation, your honor!"

The chief justice raps on the gavel block. "Order!" he hollers over Klavier. "Prosecutor Gavin, you
are not in a trial, there is no need to 'object.'" And then to Ms. Nose, he says, "He is, however,
correct. I suggest you refrain from making patently untrue statements, Justice Ambrosia.” The
woman huffs and sits back in her chair, annoyed.

Nick looks at Klavier questioningly and the blond man nods slightly. “Mr. Edgeworth’s situation
is more common than you would like to believe,” he says, his voice strong and unhesitant, as he pulls
one of his files from his backpack. “I have here my case file on incident…” He opens the folder
and scans the front page, and then finishes, “MF-9. I believe, if any of you question my integrity in
this case- or any of the ones I will present today- that you can confirm that everything is as it is in
the official records.” He produces a photograph; it’s hard to see, but it looks like a photograph of an
acolyte’s uniform, splattered with blood. I gasp in shock as I realize that’s my uniform. As the
photograph is handed to the clerk, Nick says, “You will notice that there is a bullet hole in the
uniform. A very conspicuous bullet hole that I had to point out myself in court, because the
investigators completely missed it, at every level. Initial investigation, forensics, all of it.”

Our judge and the one next to him- I recognize him as being a judge that we’ve had in court, but
not nearly as often- look grim upon seeing the photograph. “I remember that,” our judge says
quietly as it’s passed around. Ms. Nose and the chief justice are less than impressed; the judge next
to Ms. Nose, the youngest of the bunch, about Nick and Miles’ age, is completely blank.

“I can produce many, many examples of this happening,” Nick says.

As the photograph is passed back to him, Klavier says, reaching into a pocket, “Incidentally, I have
another piece of evidence here, from another case Mr. Wright worked on.” I barely suppress a
giggle as he produces a plastic baggie that contains the paper badge Furio Tigre used to
impersonate Nick. Our judge’s face flushes bright red as it’s shown to the board. “A young woman,
a former police officer, actually- was convicted of first-degree murder based on a ‘defense’ from a
mob loan shark who impersonated Mr. Wright. Incidentally, this imposter was also the true guilty
party. If someone hadn’t notified Mr. Wright of the impersonation so he could get the conviction
overturned, that young woman would have been executed for a murder she didn’t commit and the
true criminal allowed to walk free.” Klavier leans forward again. “It is devastatingly sad that,
despite the murderer’s obvious guilt, Mr. Wright had to lie to him to prove that he was the real
murderer before Ms. Byrde’s conviction could be overturned. It wasn’t enough to cast enough
doubt that believing that she was guilty was absurd.”

Nick is digging in his backpack as Klavier is speaking, and as he produces a piece of paper, Ms. Nose says, “You can stop touting the wonders of Phoenix Wright,” she drawls. “We all know how fabulous Forging Phoenix was in court. We all know why. This is sounding less like you want an overhaul of the justice system and more like you want Mr. Wright to get his badge back.”

“I promise you, that’s not-”

“Objection!” Nick cuts Klavier off loudly. The chief justice bangs his gavel again, about to reprimand Nick for his outburst, and Nick ignores him. “If you think this is still about my badge, you’re an idiot,” he snaps. “This is about the fact that you almost executed an innocent woman because of fraudulent evidence and a shoddy court system! This is about the fact that last year, six-hundred and seventy three people were executed, and over one hundred of them were exonerated after they were put to death!”

“In what universe is that acceptable?” Klavier demands.

“In what universe is it anything but evil?” Nick counters hotly. “If this were some kind of weird sci-fi video game, you’d be the evil empire the heroes are trying to topple!”

Ms. Nose laughs. “Did you just threaten us, Mr. Wright? Resorting to terrorism now?”

Nick laughs as well, although he’s clearly surprised by the accusation. Klavier is the one who responds: “I request that Justice Ambrosia be recused of this hearing!”

That garners quite a stir. “Prosecutor Gavin,” Ms. Nose says, her voice condescending. “Surely you understand that personal dislike is no reason for a judge to recuse themselves, hm?”

Gavin meets her gaze evenly. “Of course, your honor. However, accusations of terrorism based on a silly analogy goes far beyond personal dislike.” He grins at her. “The Gavineers are quite lucky that the general public doesn’t agree with the personal dislike of the reviewers, ja? Especially when said reviewers are members of publications that the law has had to go after before for shady practices.”

“That’s relevant… how?”

“You are clearly so biased that you can’t be impartial.” Klavier stands up straight. “I repeat: I ask that Justice Ambrosia be recused of this hearing.”

The chief justice raps on his gavel block. “Granted. Thank you for your time, Justice Ambrosia.”

“B-but-!”

“Thank you for your time, Justice Ambrosia.”

With a huff, she leaves the room. The judge sitting next to her frowns severely, but holds his silence. With her gone, Nick says quietly, “Iraq, Iran, and China all have lower execution rates than the United States.”

“Canada still hasn’t removed us from their list of countries that implement torture,” Klavier adds pointedly.

“Decades ago, our court system was the one that new democracies looked to for guidance.”
“We’re the laughing stock of Eurasia’s judicial system, by the way.”

“The time and money we save by doing things like this isn’t nearly worth the cost,” Nick says, shaking his head. “How does one put a dollar value on an innocent life?”

“Considering that decades ago, most states were considering outlawing the death penalty and Texas was mocked mercilessly for using theirs, the current state of affairs is quite ironic.”

As Nick and Klavier go back and forth, tearing down the court system mercilessly, the chief justice manages to get in a word, asking Nick to present the outline of his proposal again. Nick does so, and the two continue to spout random facts and trivia about the court system as copies of the proposal are passed around. After looking over it, the chief justice raps his gavel again. “I see you’ve made some changes since our last hearing,” he says. “Better, but I’m afraid it’s still lacking.”

“It is not,” Nick bristles. “Look closer. I’ve accounted for all of your objections, even Justice Ambrosia’s. There’s no reason you shouldn’t—”

“There’s plenty of reason we shouldn’t,” Mr. Silent finally speaks up. “Have you forgotten who you are, Mr. Wright? Why should we listen to a word you say?”

“If you don’t want to listen to me,” Nick replies desperately, “then listen to Prosecutor Gavin!”

“Indeed,” the prosecutor says sourly. “If you’ve only been listening to Herr Wright, my presence here was pointless. I could have tuned three guitars by now.”

The chief justice raps on his block again. “I have to agree with Mr. Gavin, Justice Uption,” he says. “None the less, this is still unacceptable.”

Nick grits his teeth. “Call a vote.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Call a vote!” Nick hollers. “I’m not going anywhere until you either actually vote on this, or I’m arrested, and there is very little excuse to arrest me!”

The chief justice pales. I know why; his son. He was probably called from the hospital to oversee this hearing, and wants to get back. “Very well,” he says tightly. “All against Mr. Phoenix Wright’s proposal?” He and Mr. Silent raise their hands; “In favor?”

Our judge and the one next to him—whom I now remember is our judge’s little brother—raise their hands. The chief Justice sighs. “Chief Prosecutor Edgeworth.” Upon hearing his name, Miles stands; “With the absence of Justice Ambrosia, we seem to have a deadlock. As the highest ranking member of the court system present otherwise, it falls on you to break the tie.”

“I can’t,” Miles says simply. “As the judiciary is acutely aware, I have a close personal friendship with Wright. Personal biases go both ways.”

The chief justice makes a distinctly unhappy noise. “The chief of police?”

“ Took it upon himself to deal with detective Crescend personally,” Klavier answers. “He is not present.”

Tense silence descends on the chambers. Nick squares his stance and shoulders, his expression defiant; he intends to carry out his threat to stand there until this impasse is solved. “Klavier Gavin,
obviously, as the next highest ranked prosecutor in attendance, cannot break the deadlock,” the chief justice says wearily. “The only two detectives I see in attendance are Detective Gumshoe and Detective Skye, neither of whom have the authority to vote here.”

Our judge looks around. “Can another prosecutor do it?” he asks hopefully.

“What other prosecutor is here?” the chief justice asks.

I barely repress a groan of dismay as the man our judge saw stands, a few rows down. “I am,” Winston Payne says in that thin, strained voice of his. “And I believe I am of sufficient seniority to vote on this matter.”

Payne is already descending to the floor as the chief justice says, impatiently, “Yes, yes you are, of course. I didn’t realize you were here. Come on, now, hurry it up and have a look at Wright’s proposal.”

The old man gets to the speaker’s table, holding out a hand for a copy of the proposal. Nick hands it to him; Miles and I may be the only two people in the room who can see past the bland mask Nick’s wearing to just how pleading his expression really is. Payne looks the page up and down, humming in an infuriating manner. Finally, he puts the page down and looks to the chief justice expectantly. “Well?” The man says impatiently. “What is your vote, Prosecutor Payne? For or against?”

I hold my breath, as Payne seems to hesitate purely for dramatics. Finally, he says, with a bit of genuine hesitation, “For, your honor. I vote in favor of Mr. Wright’s proposal.”

Somewhere to the right of me, I hear Ema cheer and Gumshoe exclaim, “Alright! That’s the stuff! I knew you could do it, pal!” Nick plants his hands on the speaker’s table and bows his head as the chief justice raps the gavel block once more. “This matter shall be resumed in one week’s time,” he says, “at which time we shall consider what the next step in testing this proposal shall be. Although I fully sympathize with Mr. Wright’s eagerness, due to the unfortunate circumstances I am in, personally, I ask his patience and understanding.”

“Of course, your honor,” Nick answers quietly, not looking up. “I am a father too. I understand.”

“Thank you. This hearing is adjourned.”

The room clears out. Gumshoe and Ema excitedly approach Phoenix, clearly not seeing how he’s using the table to support himself, or that his breathing is a little too rapid to be healthy. Miles gently guides the two of them away and I stay with Nick, my hand on his back as he fights to regain control of his breath. Klavier pats him on the back once they’re out of earshot. “Come, Herr Wright. Looks like you could use a drink or two.”

Nick stands, one of his hands on my arm to steady himself. He’s discrete enough that I don’t think Klavier notices, and we exit the room as well. Miles meets us in the main lobby, where we discuss what, exactly, Klavier meant. Once directions to the prosecutor’s favorite bar are given, we get in Miles’ car and head out.

The bar Klavier directs us to is nice, far nicer than the dingy thing that Nick hits occasionally after particularly trying nights of piano playing. Much to my relief, Klavier announces that all drinks are on him tonight, and Nick proceeds to order a shot of the strongest whiskey the place has. After that, his hands are probably less steady than they were before, but that’s more likely because he’s not used to such high alcohol content. I can smell it from my place across from him in our booth.
The group of us makes small talk. Klavier mentions casually that he’s stopped by Nick’s new place of employment and his playing isn’t all that horrendous for someone who has had no musical training whatsoever. I realize I still haven’t heard him play, but Miles snorts and asks how Gavin manages to be a rock superstar when he’s obviously tone-deaf.

“I said he isn’t all that horrendous,” Gavin replies snarkily. “That doesn’t equate to ‘good’ by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Thank you,” Nick replies, completely serious. “You had me worried Trucy spent all that cash on a lip syncher’s albums.”

“Don’t insult me, Herr Wright, please.”

At some point, Miles puts his arm around my shoulder; it’s cold in there, and I’m shivering. Gavin remarks that for all that he hates Nick’s guts, Nick sure is a good drinking partner. At another point, Gavin’s cell phone rings: “Klavier Gavin,” he answers. “Ah, yes. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. If I had any inspiration at the moment, I’d write a song here and now. Thank you for the lovely update, Fraulein.” With that, he hangs up and looks around the table, that broad, dazzling smile on his face. “With the information that came out during the trial today, we were able to get in touch with the Borginian authorities,” he informs us. “They are not pleased that we are refusing to release Machi Tobaye to them, but at the same time, they agreed to provide a dose of the medicine for Incuritis for the chief justice’s son. It arrived an hour ago and the young man is already starting to recover.”

Nick lets out a quiet cheer; I’m less quiet, loud enough that Miles clamps his hand over my mouth. This action causes him to pull me closer against him, and my cheer is cut short more from being flustered than from his hand over my mouth. “That’s wonderful,” Miles says, taking his hand from my mouth. Klavier is smirking at us. What does Ema always call him? Glimmerous fop.

Nick chuckles softly, pushing his empty glass to the center of the table. “Thank you for the drinks, Gavin,” he says. “I think we should head home now, though. I plan on starting work on this first thing in the morning.”

“I see. No rest for the wicked, eh?” Klavier stands to let Nick out of the booth. “Are you alright to drive, Herr Edgeworth?”

“I’m fine,” Miles says immediately. “I only had one drink and that was well over an hour ago. Are you okay to drive?”

“I’m walking,” Klavier replies smoothly. “I’ll have one of my assistants come out and retrieve my hog for me.”

“Good.” Miles’ question was to determine if he had to divest the young prosecutor of his keys; Klavier is very obviously not okay to drive. Klavier drops a few bills of unknown denomination on the table as Miles turns to Nick. “Where am I taking you? You said you wanted to start work first thing in the morning.”

“Your place,” Nick answers immediately, “if you’ve no problems letting me use your computer.”

“Of course not, as long as you don’t go to any shady websites.”

“Would I do that?”

“Yes.”
Klavier’s smirk when he saw Miles pull me against him is back. “I had no idea,” he says in a wry voice. “Herr Wright, you fox.”

“Lift your mind out of the gutter, Mr. Gavin,” Miles says, even as Nick laughs. “Ms. Fey has responsibilities at her home in Kurain village and we don’t see her nearly as often as we’d like. Thus, when she is in town, we stay together. I do have a couch and a spare bedroom.”

“I am only teasing, Herr Edgeworth,” Klavier says, although the smirk hasn’t left his face. “Don’t take me so seriously, it’s bad for my image.”

“Hmph. Do you want a ride, Mr. Gavin?”

“No, it’s fine. I have quite a bit of thinking to do. The exercise will do me some good, too. Good night.”

When we get home, I just want to go to sleep. I’m not used to drinking so much, and I’m not used to drinking more than one night at a time. My head is killing me and my stomach threatening to revolt; I can only hope I didn’t drink enough to make me sick.

Nick has other plans. “Thank you, both of you,” he says quietly as we take off shoes and start to relax. “I doubt I’d have made it this far without you two standing behind me.”

“That’s what friends are for,” I say, trying to sound bright and genuine — because I am — but fearing that I’m performing a little less than optimally in that regard.

The black-haired man chuckles. “I suppose. Sorry for keeping you up longer, Maya, but there’s something I absolutely have to tell you guys.” He leans against a wall, thinking, and then says, “I’m predicting that I’m going to end up somewhat isolated. That is, in order to keep this as kosher as possible, I should probably only interact with members of the team that will be assembled to deal with this. Gavin’s probably going to put me in charge of it, if I know his style. This means that I probably won’t be able to have anything but brief contact with either of you until this is done.”

“What are you talking about, Wright?” Miles says. “If you’re in charge of it, surely you’ll have some control over who is on the team, correct?”

“Yes, but—” Nick gets what Miles is implying. “Are you sure about this, Edgeworth?”

“I haven’t said anything yet,” Miles says irritably, “but if you mean to ask if I intend to be on this team, then yes, I am sure.”

Nick smiles, and for the first time in a long time, his smile reaches his eyes. He’s smiled plenty, genuine smiles, but that’s the first indication of true happiness I’ve seen in him in forever. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

“That’s exactly what you say,” Miles replies smoothly. “Are we done? Maya looks like she’s about to fall asleep standing.”

“We’re done. I just wanted to make sure you guys knew.”

He flashes an apologetic grin at me, kind of sheepish, and my brain finally processes the fact that he didn’t bother giving me a chance to respond. “Hold it, buddy!” I snap. “Don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily!”

The grin dissipates. “Maya, that’s not what I meant.”
“No, I know it’s not. That’s not what I meant.” Now it’s my turn to grin. “I’m on this team of yours too, right?”

Now he frowns at me. “Wh-Maya, I’m not going to be able to see Apollo or Trucy.” I note his careful emphasis. “I don’t think the Powers that Be in Kurain would appreciate it very much if you were away for as long as this may take. Besides, what use could I have for a spirit medium in designing a judicial system?”

Ordinarily, the implication that I’m useless would annoy me; however, my temper being thoroughly lubricated by drink, I merely smirk at him as I answer. “Sis.”

“That... would be pretty useful, actually. Still…”

“Maya, would you be able to channel other people?” Miles asks curiously. “Such as experts in law?”

“If they’re dead, I can channel them,” I answer confidently.

Nick still looks unsure. “I don’t know about this, Maya,” he says finally. “I know you have duties to attend to in Kurain. Duties you’ve already neglected for quite some time by being here.”

I lean forward, still smirking. Miles has to grab my shoulder to keep me from leaning right into Nick. “I am the Master, Nick,” I tell him. “Frankly, I can do anything I want. All I need is permission to reveal what I’m going to be doing. They’ll agree if they know how important this is.”

Nick regards me intensely for a few seconds. Then he nods. “Fine, but make sure anyone you tell in Kurain knows they need to keep their mouths shut. How long will you need to get things sorted out?”

“Give me a week,” I answer immediately. “That shouldn’t be a problem right? We can’t really do anything official for a week anyway.”

Nick nods and Miles says, “Right. I think the first parts of this project will be issues you won’t be able to help with, anyway.”

I’m not sure what he means, but I’m not going to bother pressing him. “’Kay, now that that’s all settled,” I say, “can we go to bed now?”

My suggestion is taken, eagerly. I’m practically asleep in the seconds between lying down and feeling Nick take his place beside me, even as I curl up against Miles’ back.

We sleep in. There’s no rush to me getting back to Kurain; I’m not even bothering to call to tell them I’m on my way home. When I get back to the manor, I discover that it no longer feels like home. Miles’ charming little house in LA feels like home.

---

It hurts to let her go.

I console myself in Wright, once we arrive back at my house. Confirmation that he is not harming her coming directly from the woman herself, I know I’ve no reason to further suspect him of such. But I can’t shake the feeling that he resents her, almost hates her.

“Okay, Edgeworth, let’s hear it.”

“Excuse me?”
We’re both naked, still, the curtains drawn and casting a dark, comforting shadow in the house. It is far too early for red wine but we two have no plans but each other, until Maya calls, at least, and we haven’t thought that far ahead yet. That was the first we’ve spoken other than breathless questions and reassurances after our lovemaking, and it’s a little jarring. “Something’s wrong,” Wright informed me. “So spill it. What’d I do this time?”

“It is nothing.”

“Oh wow, I don’t even need the Magatama. Miles, please… What’s wrong?”

I don’t know if I want to do this. “You will be upset with me,” I say in a casually warning tone. “I don’t want an argument on my hands if you take offense.”

“Because you know I would win,” he says, grinning lopsidedly. “Hey, come on. When have I been unreasonable? If I did something I want to know, Edgeworth. Can’t make it better if I’m in the dark.”

I ignore the impulse to snark that we’re both literally in the dark and take another sip of my wine. “Very well. Your behavior towards Maya is almost a perfect replication of the many cases of domestic violence I’ve prosecuted.”

He’s still. Utterly still. The only sound is my kitchen clock, ticking away. At ten ticks, he opens his mouth to speak, and closes it again. At twenty, I consider telling him that I’m not angry, I just want him to get help. At thirty-seven, he finally speaks. “How could you think that of me?” he asks quietly.

“You’ve taught me some valuable lessons, Phoenix,” I reply. “One is to never ignore the evidence. If there’s another explanation for your behavior-”

“There is.”

“-let me hear it.”

“I can’t.”

“Wright…”

His demeanor shifts from sad and slightly angry to frustrated. “I can’t,” he replies. “It’s not my place to.”

Satisfied that he’s not going to become furious, I start drinking again. “What do you mean, it’s not your place to?”

“Exactly that. You have no idea, Edgeworth. You have no idea how hard this is. I’m losing my mind with what I know about her and I can’t say anything. I don’t know why she’s doing this and until I do, I can’t say anything!”

“Say anything about what, Wright?” His frustration is rubbing off on me already.

“About what she’s doing!” He throws his hands up and drops them, shaking his head. “Look, Miles, I’m sorry… I’m sorry I’m giving you the impression that I’m abusing her. I’m not. I’m… I’m pissed, yes, but I would never hurt her. Especially with what I know.”

I regard him grimly. I don’t like this. My concern for her has now expanded to concern for him, as well, and I’ve got a sick feeling that whatever it is that Maya’s hiding- and Phoenix is protecting
her because of, since he obviously knows what she’s hiding- is going to make my world as I know it collapse. It’s a dramatic overreaction and I try to stifle it. “Perhaps if you told me, I could help.”

“You can. You can and you can’t. Oh man, Miles, we’re screwed by now no matter what the whole story is. Completely and utterly screwed.”

Or maybe it’s not an overreaction…
Chapter 21

I don’t alert anyone as I quietly use the manor phone to call Miles and let him know that I’ve arrived safely. That done, I seek out my kids. They’re not in their room, but a glance out of the window above Misty’s bed reveals them playing out by a huge tree, only a few feet away from the manor. I kneel on my daughter’s bed and open the window, and then rest my hands and chin on the pane and watch them play.

Perhaps it was a bit inaccurate for me to think that I hadn’t been happy since Nick’s disbarment. Those two certain make me amazingly happy. I even feel a little guilty for discounting them like that. Ah well… no harm, no foul, as long as I never tell them of that conversation.

Another dirty little secret, huh… but it’s not like I’d have a reason to tell them about that anyway.

I resolve to just let them play until they notice me. Nicky does, after a few more minutes, and shrieks, “Mama!” at the top of his voice. Misty does the same and they’re on their feet running for the manor in only a moment. For a second I worry that they’re going to run right for the window, but the twins veer towards the porch and I climb off Misty’s bed to stand in the center of the room, bracing myself.

Only a second later, the kids slam into me, still yelling happily. Nicky’s growing like no tomorrow; they’re barely seven and he’s already half-way up to my shoulders. Misty’s growing a bit slower, but she’s getting pretty big, too. I hug them tightly as Pearly and Iris come to investigate what has the twins so noisy; Pearly gives her own cry of joy at seeing me and Iris smiles. “Welcome home,” she says. “This is a surprise. I was expecting a call that you were delaying your return again.”

“A pleasant surprise, I hope,” I answer with a slight grin. “That was my intention, after all.”

“Very pleasant, Master. Can we get anything for you?”

I shake my head; my kids are both trying to get my attention. “No, I’m fine. I just want to cuddle my babies right now.” Their reaction is instant, denial that they’re babies and a sharp, “Ewww” from Nicky. Nostalgia squeezes at my heart for a second. It seems like only yesterday that the mere mention of cuddling my babies got an eager, happy response from them.

After ruffling Nicky’s hair- it’s already getting to be a little coarse, like Nick’s- just to annoy him further, I add, “But there is something I need to discuss with you two. It’s really, really important.”

“Me too, Mystic Maya?” Pearly asks, surprised.

“Of course you too,” I reply in a teasing voice.

Pearly’s face flushes in pleasure and she gives a slight bow. “I’m looking forward to it! I expect you to tell me all about Mr. Nick and Mr. Edgeworth, too. Oh, and how Trucy and Mr. Justice are getting on, and…” She bites her thumb nail, a childish habit she still hasn’t grown out of, even at sixteen. But she seems pretty sure she remembered everyone she wants to ask about and grins. “Yeah. Stories, Mystic Maya. You better have some.”


They leave me with my munchkins. As much as they try to pretend they are, they are not the slightest bit remotely interested in what I did while I was away; they’re all finger paintings, good grades on their homeschooling and, “Mama, Sister Iris was teaching us about ‘the birds and the
bees’ but what do birds and bees have to do with boy parts and girl parts?”

I cringe, make a mental note to forbid Iris from trying to do sex ed, and tell them that I’ll explain all that when they’re old enough to care. They’re both quite pleased with that answer and I get rewarded with yet another set of finger paintings for my efforts.

I watch an episode of Pink Princess with them, barely able to avoid associating it with Steel Samurai and the Deep Night. We have a kid-sized lunch, and they drag me out to their tree to play with them. And by play, they mean for me to watch them play, which is fine with me. By the time dinner rolls around, they’ve exhausted themselves and after a bath during which they insist that I stay with them (never mind that I haven’t bathed with them since they were three), Iris helps me get my tired little ragdolls in pajamas and in bed.

That taken care of, I manage to sit Iris and Pearly down. “All right,” I say, taking a deep breath. “First, I want to thank you both. I don’t know what I would have done without the two of you here to take care of them through this crisis.”

Pearly blushes and murmurs something about being useful, and Iris smiles. “Even if we didn’t want to, it is our duty to help you in any way possible. Pearl and I take that responsibility seriously.”

I can’t help but smile in return. I know it’s not their responsibility to care for my children; that’s why I resisted going to the city for so long after they were born. But Iris seems fine with it still, so I simply repeat my thanks quietly, and say, “You’re going to be upset with me. But I ask that you reserve judgment until you’ve heard me out.”

“You’re going back to the city,” Pearly says softly.

“Yes,” I confirm for her. Iris’s face goes carefully blank. “Did you two watch Apollo’s last trial, by any chance?”

“Like we had a choice,” Pearly answers. “It’s all that was on. Even Nicky and Mist-mist ended up watching it with us.”

I nod. “I’m sure you noticed Apollo’s dilemma at the end,” I say. “He had no way of proving Daryan Crescend committed that murder, and I somehow doubt the defendant truly would have testified, considering how frightened he was. If Crescend hadn’t all but confessed on the stand…”

I don’t finish my sentence. They both know where I’m going with it. “That’s why I’m going back,” I say finally. “This case has finally opened the door to change and the system is finally willing to give Nick a chance to fix things.”

“Does that mean he has his badge back?” Iris asks hopefully.

I shake my head. “No, and if I believe what he says, he doesn’t care about it anymore. He just wants to fix this broken system. He actually called it evil in the hearing they had about it yesterday.”

I try to ignore Iris and Pearly’s sad expressions as I take a deep breath. “Once this is finished, I intend to bring them to Kurain,” I say finally. My secret weapon. Pow. “I… regret doing this. All of it. Because the lie is too big for me to handle, and every time I convince myself that it’s time, something else happens. But they have to know, and if an opportunity won’t present itself, well… I’ll have to make one.”

My companions don’t answer me. I guess I have a bit more talking to do. With a deep breath, I add,
“I’m going to have to be completely focused on this. We’re building a court system. That’s pretty serious business. It’s also, apparently, quite a secret, so…”

“Don’t worry, Maya,” Iris says softly, her eyes downcast. “We’re good at keeping secrets.”

Pearly, upon hearing him, looks down at her hands, fidgeting with a ring. I don’t think it has any special significance; probably just a piece of jewelry she found attractive. The kind of guilt I feel edges dangerously close to shame. I bite my lip hard to keep myself from getting off-topic, and say, “And this could take a while. I don’t know what in all is involved in doing this, but I can only imagine it’s huge. I’m asking—not ordering, asking—you two to be patient with me and take care of them for a little longer.”

“Do we have a choice?” Iris asks. “What if our answer is ‘no’, if you are truly asking?”

I wince inwardly. “Then I stay in Kurain,” I say simply. “If Nick needs me for anything specific, I’ll help over the phone, if I can.”

Pearly smiles. “Well, Mystic Maya, you know that Mr. Nick is utterly helpless without you. If you going there will get him here faster, I’ll do it. I want to see him again, too.”

Iris nods, her serene smile returned. “That is what I wanted to hear, as well. Thank you, Maya. You needn’t worry about the kids; they’ll be just fine.”

Relief floods me. “I’ll be here for about a week,” I tell them. “I’ll iron out all the details with Nick and Miles tomorrow. I haven’t told the kids yet, though.” Again, an unhealthy shame creeps up on me as I say, “I’m not sure how they’ll react.”

“They’ll be fine,” Iris repeats. “They might not like it, but they both understand that adults have to do what adults have to do.” And then she giggles. “I shouldn’t have encouraged you to go see them, huh?”

I grin very slightly. “That’s right,” I joke. “This is all your fault, Iris.” She laughs, letting me know that she knows that I am just teasing. Pearly looks angry, though. Confused, but angry at the same time. “It’s okay, Pearly,” I tell her, trying to keep the laughter from my voice. “I’m not really blaming Iris.”

“O-oh. Okay, then.”

I don’t tell the kids the next day, either. I just focus on being with them, making sure they know I love them. The following night, however, I do what I did when I first returned to the city; right before bed as I’m tucking them in. Instead of putting Nicky down, I sit on the edge of Misty’s bed and pull the Master’s talisman from underneath my shirt. “Hey guys, I want to show you something,” I say, faking eagerness. “C’mere, Nicky.”

Nicky climbs up on the bed next to me as Misty kneels behind me, using my shoulder to keep her stable. I open the talisman and remove the two photos I keep in it; it’s a tight squeeze, but I managed it. One is of me with my tykes. The other is the one I want to show them. I hold that photo up for them to inspect; Misty says, “Those boys are your friends, right? The ones you go to the city to help?”

I nod, letting Nicky grasp the photograph to get a better look at it. He’s staring intently at it, and I can see the gears turning in his little head as he mulls over my companions in the picture. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get either Nick or Miles to behave for it; Nick looks like he’s trying to tug me along by my arm and Mile’s has the other, his smile more of an arrogant smirk. “That’s right,”
I say, “They’re very, very good friends of mine. Do you want to meet them?”

“Yep,” Nicky answers immediately, letting go of the photo. I notice, though, that he doesn’t take his eyes off it. “Any friend of Mama’s is a friend of mine, I say. Right, Mist-mist?”

“Right!” Misty giggles, reaching over my shoulder to grasp the photo. “I wanna guess! That’s Mr. Nick and that’s Mr. Miles!”

She points at them in turn and I’m a bit surprised that she correctly identified them. “That’s right,” I croon. “Remember what I told you guys a long time ago?”

“About Mr. Nick?” Nicky asks. “I remember.”

Misty’s biting a fingernail as she speaks. “Yeah. I remember too.”

I don’t believe her for a second. “Okay. But just in case, something really bad happened to Mr. Nick a long time ago, before you were born. That’s what I’ve been trying to help with when I’ve been away from you for so long. But something really, really good happened last time I was there. We might be able to make everything okay again.” It’s a bit of a fib, if I believe that Nick doesn’t want his badge back, and I’m not sure I do. My goal, at least, is that his disbarment is rescinded.

“That’s wonderful, Mama!” Misty exclaims. “I’m so happy for him!”

“Not so fast, Mist,” Nicky says abruptly, sounding terribly serious for a seven-year-old. “Mama said they might be able to make everything okay. That means that it’s still bad.” He looks at me, his blue eyes wide and his expression grave. “You still have work to do in the city, don’t you?”

I nod. “That’s right,” I say softly. “And this time, I’m going to be away for a long time. I won’t be able to come home until everything is finished.”

My kids are quiet at hearing this. Misty’s hand is still on the photograph and Nicky’s eyes are downcast. “But you asked if we wanted to meet Mr. Nick and Mr. Miles,” Misty says finally. “Does that mean that we will when your work is done?”

I nod. “That’s exactly what I mean. I think you’ll like them, and I know they’ll like you, very much. And I promise that they’ll come to meet you after we’re done.”

That’s a promise I have no way of knowing if I can keep and I’ve no business making it. However, with what Nick knows, I’m pretty sure that he’ll come willingly, and he’ll help back Miles into a corner if he doesn’t agree. Nicky says, “It’s to help people, right? I guess I’m okay with that. It’s our duties as members of the Fey family to help people when they need it.”

I’m not sure how I feel about Nicky being so philosophical about the whole thing. He reminds me quite a bit of Pearly. Misty nods, agreeing with her brother. “Plus, if they’re important to you, they’re important to us, Mama.” Her voice is subdued, as though she doesn’t like saying this, but she does. “As long as you come back, I’ll be okay. I have Nicky.”

Nicky smiles at this. I can’t speak. If I do I’ll cry. How did my seven year olds get so mature? This whole mess has damaged even them, and it was part of my intention to keep them from getting hurt! I couldn’t even do that right…

I have no room for self-pity right now, though. I clear my throat to stabilize my voice, and say, “Thank you, you guys. You’re the best kids anyone could ever have. Ever.” Despite previous objections, they let me gather them in a tight hug and I kiss them both on the forehead in turn. “I’m leaving again on Friday, okay? So I’ll be home to be with you for a bunch more days. We’ll have
lots of fun together, right?”

“Right!” Misty exclaims. “Right, Nicky?”

“Right,” my son responds, tightening his hold around my waist for a second. “Can we stay up late tomorrow, then?”

I barely suppress a laugh. “We’ll see, sweetheart,” I answer.

We spend the rest of the week in relative peace; each day I’m in Kurain, either Miles or Nick calls me to tell me what’s going on. When the day comes for me to go back- too soon- the twins are oddly subdued. Usually they’re either crying for me to stay or brightly wishing me a happy trip. Both do wish me luck; Nicky trudges away from me after giving me a tight hug, and Misty informs me that he’s upset that they can’t help more because they’re only kids. She’s sad about it, too. I give her a kiss on the forehead and tell her that being good is a huge help from them. It seems to make her feel better and she tells me she’ll tell Nicky that.

When I arrive back in the city, my other “kids” are waiting for me. I get off the train and approach them in the middle of a story: “… and I swear, she’s a bad influence on him.” Nick’s saying, shaking his head. “I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. And when I told him that they still couldn’t help, despite the mountain of evidence that they’d be a significant help- holy shit, Edgeworth, I thought he was going to blow my eardrums.”

“I noticed you have a few more CDs in your possession,” Miles responds, pausing to put an arm around me as I sidle up next to him and wink at Nick.

Nick chuckles at my antics. “Yes, well… I know very well that he’s just going to go out and buy a new set. But for now, Apollo’s Chords of Steel won’t be getting a workout. Damn, that kid’s loud…”

I suppose Nick’s “kids” wanted to help as well; Trucy must have been involved in that argument, since he mentioned her as I was walking up. “In any event,” Miles says, tugging me around gently with his arm around my shoulders, “now that Ms. Fey is here- and it’s terribly rude that you didn’t even stop your story to say ‘hi’, Wright-”

“Oh, look who’s talking?”

“-perhaps we should look into getting something to eat?”

“Sounds like a plan to me!” I say brightly, breaking out of Miles’ hold and grabbing both his and Nick’s wrists. “Let’s go!”

We still have the weekend to get through, so we decide to spend it just enjoying each others’ presence. Although nothing is set in stone, Nick is able to confirm for us over those nummy sandwiches at Miles’ favorite fast food place that we will be somewhat sequestered while we’re working on this new Jurist system, and he has something to show us at the courthouse. “Remember: nothing’s official,” he says as we finish up to head to the courthouse. “This is, for all intents and purposes, speculation at this point. But I’m pretty confident this is how it’s going down.”

I’m not sure I like the idea of being so completely isolated, but this is a touchy situation. “Klavier Gavin’s already intercepted one death threat aimed at me,” Nick tells me when I mention my discomfort. “This is as much for our safety as it is to keep outside influences to a minimum. Who knows if anyone who doesn’t like this idea is crazy enough to actually try to stop it?”
"What about Apollo and Trucy?" I ask, abruptly concerned.

I'm walking behind Nick; I see his shoulders and upper back tense. "It wasn’t a credible death threat, really," he replies tersely. "Come on, it’s hot out here. Hang around out here too long and Mother Nature will do that nutball’s job for him."

He guides us into the courthouse, past the most-used courtrooms, past that conference room. Through a door, down a hallway and up a set of stairs, into a wing of the courthouse I haven’t been in. It’s antiquated; the lights lining the halls aren’t the same style as those in the newer area of the courthouse, and the flooring looks like it’s treated wood instead of linoleum. As we walk, Nick ramble about this wing of the courthouse; why it was left as-is when the newer areas got remolds, which is probably somewhat relevant but I can’t bring myself to care enough to listen until I know that relevancy.

"… and now that I see I just repeated a portion of the courthouse’s history for no reason at all," he says pointedly at me as we come to a halt in front of one of the courtrooms, "I present to you the room we’ll be doing most of our work from. Behold, and be amazed." With that little bit of dramatics, he pushes the doors open and stands aside to let Miles and I enter first.

It looks almost just like the courtrooms I’m used to, but, like everything else in the courthouse that I’m used to, older. It’s the size of one of our courtrooms, but right now it has only a table and chairs in the center of the room. I walk around it, wondering at the weird feeling of reverence rising in me as Nick describes what he plans to do to this room; whether he’s able to or not is another story, but what he’s describing sounds absolutely inspired. This room is getting a remodeling, alright. And I’m going to be part of making it happen.

"Well?" Nick asks, leaning against the table and smiling more enthusiastically than I’ve seen him smile in seven years. "What do you think? Think it’s realistic?"

"Not in the slightest," Miles answers with a slight smile of his own. "But this is you and your ideas we’re talking about. I’m sold."

I giggle as I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Let’s do this! For great justice!"

Miles groans and Nick laughs. "You’re lucky my camera’s expensive, or I’d have thrown my beanie at you for that."

~*~

We spend the weekend with Trucy and Apollo. Fair enough; Nick’s not going to see them for a while, and they’re both quite happy to see the three of us acting like friends instead of like we’re about to claw each others’ throats out, as Apollo puts it. I’m actually quite surprised that Apollo even seems to be enjoying our weekend together, as crammed as it is in Miles’ house, because Nick’s apartment is far, far too small to handle five people at once. When Apollo and I are sent to the kitchen on snack refill detail, I mention this and he just grins sheepishly. "He behaves himself when you guys are around," Apollo tells me. "I like him, I do. He’s just a little... immature, I guess..."

"A little?"

"... well, you know what I mean."

"I most certainly do," I reply with a roll of my eyes, as we gather up the snacks and head back into the living room.
On Monday, it begins. We're at the courthouse earlier than we usually were for court, sitting in that conference room, and I'm afraid I'm lost for a good portion of the proceedings. I start paying attention when the "who" part of this comes about: Klavier is asking how the team should be selected. Nick names me and Miles and says, "Those two are all I need."

"Are you sure, Herr Wright? Think about what you're trying to accomplish. You're saying you want a three-man team, one member of whom has no formal legal education--"

"Ms. Fey has a few unique talents that make up for the lack of formal education."

"-to completely overhaul the judicial system? Think about what that entails for a moment. Are you positive you need only two other people?"

"I'm quite positive. Besides, this way, you only have to add two more people to the state payroll, since Prosecutor Edgeworth is already on it. And this project is not going to be cheap."

Our Judge's little brother clears his throat. "Mr. Wright, we're only able to pull strings so much to make sure this happens. I'm not sure how I feel about--"

"Objection!" Nick slams his hands on the desk, grinning gleefully. "If I'm going to be in charge of this, I need to be in charge of it. That includes securing me the funds I need to do it. I promise you, I have no intention on squandering the state's resources. I've gotten quite good at making money last over the last seven years, but if I say I need additional funding, you have to get it for me. Am I clear?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Wright. Crystal clear."

Klavier snaps his fingers, chuckling. "Well, Herr Wright, I suppose that also answers my doubts about whether or not three men will be sufficient. You are responsible for this, after all. If you say you need only two assistants, who am I to question you?"

At that point, we have to sign a never-ending parade of papers. Most of these papers are things I don't understand and I don't bother listening to Nick's explanation of them; one of the ones I recognize is a non-disclosure agreement, and an agreement that I will be sequestered until such a time as either the state, Mr. Phoenix Wright or the chief justice releases me from my duties...

Living arrangements are brought up, next. Klavier, being astonishingly well-versed in Nick's cases, has already discussed the issue with the manager of the Gatewater Hotel, who still happens to be that bellboy Nick had to interact with a few times after Sis's death. Apparently, he was more than happy to "donate" a few rooms for "the Great Phoenix Wright's" use, especially if he could advertise those rooms as the rooms Nick used while decimating the justice system as we know it after the new system has been unveiled. The question is how, exactly, we are to be arranged.

After some discussion, the three of us- with the judge and Klavier only offering their thoughts- decide that we'll take two of their cheaper rooms instead of the super-expensive ones the manager wants us to take. This hotel, like many others, features rooms in pairs; each set has a doorway between them, usually locked, but if a group rents both rooms, they're given a key that can unlock the doors between them, giving everyone in the group access to both rooms. Nick and Miles will share one room, with two full beds; I get the other, with one queen bed.

Klavier smirks at us some more, despite pointing out that we're only going to be seeing each other and maybe people in the court for the next however many months, the least they could do is make it easier for us to get together for a movie on a Friday night. I can't tell if he's just trying to be
annoying if he really suspects us of having the kind of relationship we actually do have.

All that took just about all day. I never unpacked, really, from when I came from the village; Nick and Miles, being prepared for this, already have most of their personal affects packed up. Klavier escorts us to the Gatewater Hotel, giving us instructions in case we discover that we've forgotten something or need something. This isn't a full isolation; we are allowed to leave our rooms and the hotel, but the three of us need to agree and Klavier needs to be notified, although he needn't necessarily need be told why. Notifying him is purely for the purpose of ensuring that there are no surprises later on when the muck raking starts, something he believes will be inevitable.

We get our rooms, and settle in. It feels terribly weird. Different. We decide, together, that we need to be somewhat abstinent while we're here. All we need is a sex scandal on top of everything else, if aforementioned muck rakers somehow learn of this project despite all the NDAs that are flying around. Not completely, but we definitely need to cool it.

As such, I sleep alone, in my own room. The door between the rooms is left unlocked and, at my insistence, slightly ajar. It's heavy enough that it blocks a good deal of sound, even if it's not completely closed, so if I or one of the boys can't sleep and wants to watch TV, we can without disturbing our roommates too much. And I can't sleep. I'm not at home with my kids and I don't know when I'll see them again. Nick and Miles are less than twenty feet away from me and I can't touch them. The gravity of what I agreed to today is almost crushing now, in this unfamiliar setting, so far away from everyone I love, either by distance or necessity.

I'm scared. If this fails, Nick will be ruined permanently, Miles' career will be severely- and possibly irreparably- damaged, and the Kurain School of Channeling will fall right back into ill repute. If this fails, who knows how many innocent people will be destroyed before anyone has the guts to fight back again. If this fails, it will be devastating, and at least partially my fault.

I'm terrified.

Half an hour and a good, but quiet cry, later, I crawl out of bed and go to the bathroom to get a drink of water; I cried myself thirsty. As I pass the door between our rooms, I hear Nick: "...ped crying."

"... good. I was starting to get..."

I smile as I shut the door to the bathroom. Typical of them. After going to the bathroom and getting my drink and a couple of Tylenol for the headache I gave myself crying, I feel like I can actually sleep now, and I go back into the main room, intercepting Miles' quiet voice: "... ted us to know, she'd have come..."

Yep. Typical of them. Their concern somehow makes me feel better, and I drift off to sleep with the comforting thought that if I need them, they are only a handful of feet away from me.

Our first day is nothing short of boring. After fifteen minutes of Miles and Nick debating the virtues of asking Klavier to assist them in getting a construction company in there to remodel the room against trying to procure such services themselves, and a brief debate as to whether or not to have me channel a famous architect that I've never heard of, they suggest I go to the reading room for the time being, since the ultimate decision on that debate is "no".

Their intention is for me to entertain myself, but honestly- there isn't a whole lot of light reading in a courthouse reading room. After several failed attempts to read up on court decisions about issues that actually interest me, I discover another way I can be useful. I'm afraid that even with the jargon I picked up from Nick during my time as his assistant, I still understand very little of what
I’m reading.

However, information about the Jury System from its arguable origin in 1215 in England? Yeah. He’ll like that. I scurry to the court clerk on duty and request a notebook; after confirming my identity, I get said notebook and a pack of pens to boot and head back to the reading room, and start taking notes.

I lose track of time; I’m roused from my studies by Nick. "Hey there," he says quietly, sitting across from me at my table. He looks worried. "Whatcha doin’?"

"Research," I answer, putting my pen down and rubbing my eyes. I glance at the clock- “Holy-!” It’s half past six already! Nick takes my moment of distraction to grab my notebook and flip through the pages I’ve filled with notes. "I agree," he says in awe. "You realize we sent you away so you wouldn't be bored, right?"

"Yeah. I wasn't," I answer, stretching. My god, my legs are going to hate me when I try to stand.

"You can't have found this entertaining."

"Nick, this is a courthouse reading room. What in here would be entertaining to a layman like me?"

"... good point... I'll have to ask Mr. Gavin if it's okay to go out and grab you a few of those cheesy romance novels you used to always have your nose in."

I miff at him. "I read mysteries nowadays," I say haughtily, even though mysteries bore the hell out of me, "and I felt bad just keeping myself busy while you and Miles are working. I wanted to be useful."

"Yeah, well... I'm afraid you probably showed us both up with this." He flips the notebook closed, giving me a goofy grin. "Looks like I've got some homework to do tonight. Let's go. You've been at this all day. I think we better feed you."

---

I’m surprised. Pleasantly, and almost to the point where I feel guilty. She’s fighting just as hard as we are. Possibly harder.

After dinner, Miles isolates himself. He’s ambivalent, he’s tense, and he’s unsure of a lot of things right now, and Edgeworth, when he gets fickle, needs his alone time. That is fine with me. After all, I have to go through all of these notes Maya took.

It’s useful knowledge to have. None of it seems particularly applicable but that is just as helpful as if it was: it tells me what’s already been tried, other than what I know from American History in eleventh grade, and has not worked. But it is, despite her denial, horrifically boring and about halfway through my mind starts wandering.

These few days, knowing I can’t be with my little girl, is torture. I can only imagine how Maya must feel and it doesn’t make me feel very good, either for her or for her kids. Those better be some damn mature seven-year-olds.

Then again, she’s spent more time in Los Angeles than in Kurain at this point. Iris and Pearls—sweet little Pearls, and I wonder, not for the first time since I was disbarred, how she is doing—are the ones likely in charge of the kids. I can’t think of two people I’d trust more with my kids, except maybe Trucy and Apollo—well, maybe not.
Still, Maya’s good at hiding how she feels and I know that. I’m angry with her. Furious, even, still, even after knowing what I do for several months. But I love her. I won’t be angry forever. I refuse to be, and the anger doesn’t mean I love her less. So, when I discover that I’ve stared at a page for ten minutes and not read a damn word of it, I get up and knock on her door. “Maya? You awake?”

“Well, I’m awake, Nick, it’s only ten.” I hear her rustling in the other room and she bounces to the door, flinging it open. “What’s up?” she asks me brightly.

“Just wondering how you’re holding up,” I tell her quietly. “You okay, Maya?” As I expect, a mental image imposes itself over my vision, the room darkening to utter blackness and heavy chains crossing over her, binding her. I can’t help but chuckle as it fades. “You know you can’t lie to me,” I cut her off before she can tell me she’s fine. “Come on, Maya. I know we’re not getting along very well but you know you can still trust me, right?”

She looks away. “Of course,” she says, giving me a sideways grin. “Can’t a girl have a few secrets for herself?”

“Not when she wants to work with the great Phoenix Wright,” I inform her, mimicking the Bellboy’s voice.

“Oh god, your ego, Nick. There’s not enough room in here for the three of us as it is!”

I laugh at her ribbing, and notice the tension in her shoulders relax a bit. I’m grateful, not for the first time, that Trucy took it upon herself to teach me how to read body language a bit better than I did before. I don’t have her ability to see even the slightest twinge but I’m better at it. “Well, me and my ego will go back to our room when I know you’re okay,” I inform her. “Talk to me, Maya.”

She sighs. “I’m just worried about... about the situation in Kurain.”

Yep. I was right. “You’ve got Pearls and Iris in charge of things, right?”

“You’re saying I’m being responsible by doing this.” Her tone was flat. I was, in essence, saying that she was being responsible in leaving her children, our children, alone in Kurain for months on end. Well, perhaps not alone, but they were only seven. They still needed her.

“So you’re saying I’m being responsible by doing this.” Her tone was flat. I was, in essence, saying that she was being responsible in leaving her children, our children, alone in Kurain for months on end. Well, perhaps not alone, but they were only seven. They still needed her.

“I’m saying you’re doing what you think is best for everyone,” I tell her. “Whether that’s the responsible thing for ‘Kurain’, I’ll leave that to your decision.” I claw quote marks in the air when he said Kurain. It’s pretty obvious that I’m talking about the twins.

She falls silent at that, and I’m not surprised to see the Psyche locks persist. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I know you’ve got enough of your own guilt.”
“It’s okay. I deserve it.”

Maybe Miles had a point when he accused me of abusing her. I feel terrible for it but damnit— I have a right to know my own kids, don’t I? This is absurd and I want to ask about them. Favorite foods, colors, what exactly their birthday is—

“Hey, Maya… you haven’t talked much about Pearls. How’s she doing?”

Maya’s mood lifts instantly, and mine takes a dive as she starts chatting rather animatedly about Pearls. I need to ask her. I need to just say something, get to the bottom of this, make her be accountable for what she’s doing to me and Miles.

But there’s nothing she can do about it now. She’s stuck here, we’re stuck here, and forcing the issue is only going to distract us and probably cause enough tension to make it impossible for the three of us to work together.

Abruptly, I understand exactly why she’s kept this from us. It will be a matter of months before I show my hand, and I’ve only been holding onto it for a few months so far.

I can only imagine how terrible it feels to have been waiting, waiting, waiting to tell the truth, only to discover that your chance to do so has long passed. I should have said something in the hospital.

It is far too late to do so now.
Chapter 22

I'm able to glean that they were, indeed, able to resolve the interior design issue, and the next day isn't much more exciting than the first, as Miles and Nick meet with a contractor to iron out a blueprint of what needs to be done to the room. I take my notebook- with pages now soaked in yellow highlighter, courtesy of Nick's "homework"- and resume my research. I finish up on the history of the jury system and try to think of what topic would be useful next. And I'm starting to regret having turned Nick down for a trip to the bookstore.

By the end of the week, I know more about the history of the American justice system than I think even Nick knows, and although he makes a face on Friday when I tell him that my subject of research that day was the moral and ethical implications of the three-day trial system, he tells me that subject's actually quite important.

On Saturday, bright and early, the three of us get up and go out. Klavier is, apparently, fully aware and expecting that our weekends are ours. The only thing is that we have to avoid the news at all costs, as well as any publications other than the scholarly tomes in the courthouse that could taint our opinions. That means, of course, that Nick has to bodily drag Miles away from the legal section of the bookstore, and they end up in the graphic novel section. Nick then proceeds to entertain himself by grabbing what he perceives to be the goriest, most disgusting action graphic novels he can find, and shoving them in Miles' face. Once Miles seems desensitized to that, he goes for the homoerotic-looking books, at which point Miles bodily drags him from the section.

Miles and Nick both make sure, before we've left the store, that I've chosen a few novels. They both feel badly that I seemed to have worked so much harder than either of them did that week.

That night, and Sunday, too, we do exactly what we claim we wanted the dual rooms for: ease of watching movies. Since we're comfortable in close quarters with each other by now, we all pile on my bed and play a few rounds of rock-paper-scissors to determine who gets to pick out the movie. I win, since Miles is disqualified by default for refusing to play. Despite my misgivings on our first night of being sequestered, I'm discovering that this isn't that bad of an arrangement.

The first thing we discover on Monday is that Klavier Gavin has been soundly chewed out for letting the three of us go to the bookstore alone. Apparently, doing that completely negates the point of isolating us. Despite the fact that the state is incurring absolutely no cost for our interment in the Gatewater Hotel, this is apparently a Big Atchung Deal and Klavier apologetically informs us that he needs to know of our weekend plans by Wednesday so he can arrange a "babysitter"- even if it ends up being him.

The second thing we discover is that Nick's cosmetic updates to that courtroom are almost done. The gallery has been altered to consist of seven separate chambers; a relatively simple construction. The complicated part comes next, Miles informs me.

I discover that I'm stuck in another half-week of doing research as "the complicated part" consists of Miles and Nick researching and purchasing video surveillance systems and computer systems, hiring a programmer who can flesh out and update Nick's data organization program, and hiring someone to install the whole thing. Our first brick wall is hit when Klavier informs us that Nick is spending his funds too fast. No, he hasn't gone through what has been allotted yet, but he's alarming just about everyone else involved in this.

"Alright, fine," Nick says, unperturbed. "Hope you don't mind three amateurs installing electronics in the courthouse."
He's kidding. He's got to be kidding. He's expecting us to install that mess? Miles is the only one of us who is remotely tech-savvy and that's only when it comes to operating stuff... although I guess Nick's got some more experience with computers and surveillance over the years.

I spend the next few days manning a circuit breaker to make sure the boys don't electrocute themselves, and a day after that, installing devices where the spaces were too small for Nick and Miles to get to. Things get a little nerve-wracking on the first installation, when Nick and Miles start arguing as to how exactly I'm supposed to connect a group of wires to a power supply. I get through it without being shocked, though, and once I'm done with the seventh and last device, I'm able to do it like a pro. Or so I like to buff my ego.

Two weeks down. Monday has us actually playing, it seems, rather than working; we have to turn everything on and test it. Nick leaves me and Miles in the Jurists' Chamber, as he's now calling it, to ensure that they know we're turning on all the new stuff and are prepared in case we blow the power to the place. And, as we're just talking about anything random that comes to mind, I reach for my cup of coffee and knock it over.

All over the documents Nick's already got spread out.

Miles and I exchange horrified looks. I say the first thing that comes to mind: "Miles, help!"

His answer is immediate: "No." And then he tries to walk away.

I grab his wrist, freaking out. "Why not?! He's going to kill me!"

"Ms. Fey, I highly doubt that Wright would murder you in a courthouse."

"Okay, maybe not, but he's never going to talk to me again, and-"

Miles shakes me off his arm, looking amused. "What makes you think Wright will react so strongly, Maya? Go get some paper towels or something."

"What if those were his originals?"

"Then I suppose you'll be recreating them today, won't you?"

Our conversation is cut off by Nick coming back into the room as he's sipping his own coffee. "Relax, Maya," he says; I can hear laughter in his voice. "Do you really think I'd give you the originals of anything? I don't even keep originals on me. I'll just grab the file from my backpack and make another copy. By the way, the cameras in the main area of this room work."

And with that, he walks back out of the room, chuckling and shaking his head.

Nick comes back with the paper towels a second later, and he helps me clean up my mess as Miles makes the necessary copy of Nick’s file. That done, and after I’ve retrieved another cup of coffee, we start checking the electronics in each jurist chamber. They’re not complete, but the rest of what we need is highly customized and will take a month or so, at the earliest. The power to each little room is turned on by one by one; the phrase, “Camera works!” becomes one that we manage to make amusing in seven statements. Especially on the fifth one, in which Nick and I decide to try to freak
Miles out and he just says, over the loudspeaker, “Camera works, and there’s Lysol in the cabinet out here. I’m getting lunch.”

Nick barely gets control of his laughter in time to reply over the speaker system, “No, no, Miles, wait! We’re not-”

“Surely you don’t expect me to join you in there, Wright. It’s barely big enough for two people.”

His voice is amused, dry, and I can’t stop laughing as Nick retorts, “No, we were just trying to annoy you.”

“You failed.”

Once we have everything running, and it hasn’t tripped the circuit breaker after lunch and an hour of just sitting in the main room with everything running, we shut down and give ourselves a short day. The good news is that Nick and I are on the clock, so we’re not getting paid for time we’re not there, and Miles makes his own hours anyway.

It turns into a waiting game with the computer program and the rest of the specialized equipment; left with nothing much else to do, we get the “cosmetic enhancements” done. Nick’s favorite word at the moment is “cosmetic”, I realize, as we stain the wood that comprises the outside of the jurist chambers so that it looks like a deep mahogany instead of the cheap crap Nick ordered. And then get to business in designing the new trial system from the ground up.

I actually get a chance to see the outline of Nick’s proposal for the first time, and I can’t tell which I’m more dismayed by: the fact that this has so little resemblance to the Jury System the country abolished in the first decade of the century, or the fact that this outline is so vague it’s practically useless. I voice this concern, and Nick gives me a predatory half-smile. “Why do you think the chief justice said it was unacceptable?” he asks me. “I had to do it this way. Their concerns about my original plan would have rendered a jury absolutely pointless.”

I’m astonished at how much thought needs to go into this. We start, first, by defining a jury. And then by defining a trial by jury, as it used to be. And then by defining the roles the judge, defense and prosecution play in a trial. This is all common-sense stuff and I can’t fathom why we’re wasting time detailing it. Miles only smiles vaguely at my protest and says, “You’d be surprised at how much of the law needs to be spelled out, even though it’s ‘common sense’. Neglect to spell it out and someone’s going to pretend they didn’t know it.”

Our progress slows to a painful crawl and it takes only a month of this to realize that we’re all going utterly insane. Nick’s the one who finally snaps; upon getting our lunches from the court cafeteria, Nick looks at his tray, whines, and picks up the little pack of plastic-wrapped utensils we get with it. He then proceeds to take the plastic knife out, put the wrong end against his wrist, and gently saw back and forth, tilting his chair back on two legs. He informs us as to everything that’s wrong in Nick’s World at the moment, the least of which is the fact that after that neat fast-food place Miles introduced us to, the court food is utter crap and if he doesn’t get laid soon we’re going to have a madman on our hands.

Despite the fact that neither of us finds suicidal gestures funny, even those that are clearly not serious, we just let him talk, laughing at some of the more ridiculous observations he makes. Such as the fact that attempting suicide in California used to be illegal. Now it’s just assisting someone else in attempting suicide, but which actually makes sense, but that law was just flat-out stupid because all that would do to someone who already had no hope would make them try again and after all the time and money spent on saving them just to slap them with a penal code, that would be really annoying. “You know, I’m a mandatory reporter, Wright,” Miles says suggestively,
although he’s still grinning.

“Yeah, you are, aren’t you? I’m surprised you haven’t called in a SWAT team just to be an ass yet.”

I lean forward, looking to pick on Nick too. “Well, maybe he should,” I say, trying to sound serious and knowing that I’m failing. “We have no way of knowing how serious you are.”

He laughs, loudly and enthusiastically and that sound definitely wouldn’t come out of a truly suicidal man. “Oh yes, Maya, yes, barely touching my wrist with the wrong end of a plastic knife is serious business.”

We somehow get Nick to eat his damn lunch so we can get started again. But his outburst has made clear what I suspect all three of us knows: we need to make some progress. This is absurd and there has to be a way to speed it along, or at least make things more interesting.

I wasn’t sure what we were expecting. The first person we had her call- George Washington- was too distraught and frightened by being there to be any use. That was Maya’s choice, and when she became herself again, she seemed suspiciously pleased with herself. Especially when we told her how little the man had helped.

Wright insisted that the solution to this dilemma was Mia Fey. There were several reasons that I could see why she would be of limited use to us, but he was so eager that I stopped debating. We had time. She could summon my choice after Mia told Wright herself that she was of little use to us.

And so, Maya channeled Mia. The woman looked around the room curiously. “Impressive,” she said finally. “Long time no see, Phoenix, Mr. Edgeworth.”

“Eight years, in fact,” Wright said, smiling warmly.

“Wow, and the years don’t appear to have treated you well, Phoenix.”

I suppressed a laugh as Phoenix’s smile became a smirk. “They haven’t, actually.”

“I assume I was summoned for assistance.”

“You assumed correctly,” I interject. “We are, however, on a schedule. How we ended up in this position is quite a lengthy story and will have to wait for another time. For now, we need your input on this project.”

“Is the history relevant?” Mia asks.

Wright shakes his head in response. “Not in the least. I’ll try to find the time to have Maya channel you again later so I can fill you in but for now, it’s not necessary.”

“Alright. Let’s hear the situation as it is now.”

We showed her what we had accomplished so far; she is utterly fascinated. She offers quite a bit of constructive criticism and feedback, far more than I expected her to be able to. In response to my surprise, she tells me that the jury system became a topic of extreme interest to her after the trial that sent her mother into exile.

That is a mention that makes me grimace in remembrance; Mia gives me a sympathetic look. Mine wasn’t the only life ruined by that incident.
By the time we get to the eventuality that I am anticipating—her admittance that she is not the best choice to assist us with this project—it is almost time to end the day. “You need someone who has fought in the jury system as it existed when it was abolished,” she tells us.

“Thank you for what assistance you provided,” I say. “Do you have any suggestions for who we can channel, or even merely contact?”

“You already have someone in mind, don’t you?”

I nod. “I do. My father.”

Wright looks at me, concerned. “Are you sure, Edgeworth? Are you up for that?”

I nod, firmly. “I am. He is the only one I trust with something this delicate.”

Mia smiles. “You should give Maya a chance to rest first,” she says. “I sense that she channeled someone who didn’t want to be channeled before me, and she’s been channeling me for quite some time now. She’s worlds more powerful than she was the last time she did so, but she still has limits.”

“It’s time to wrap up, anyway,” Wright tells her. “Don’t worry about Maya. We’ll take care of her.”

I try not to smirk at his double meaning and Mia nods. “Alright. I’m letting her go now.”

I am actually not sure I am up for this. There is so much I still want to say, and currently so much I want advice on, and I know he could give it. But, for right now, there is no time for such things. We need to remain focused on the task at hand, because most of the things that I wish to ask about are guaranteed to fall apart if this does not succeed.

Wright is going to fall to pieces if we can’t get this off the ground. We will fall to pieces. This is all that is holding us together right now.

We take care of at least one of Nick’s problems that night; we’ve been good until now and Miles and I agree with his assessment of that situation so much that we’re pretty quick, too. But we sleep in our own beds, none of us quite comfortable enough yet to risk going that far.

Another significant part of Nick’s issues at the moment are solved by the blond Prosecutor the next day, dropping off an order from that fast food place for lunch the next day, before we would go for lunch at the cafeteria. In response to our inquisitive expressions, Klavier replies smoothly, “The cameras in this room work.”

We ignore the implication that he knows most of what we discussed in here, including our joke about a threesome in one of the jurist chambers. Ooops.

The next day, they ask me to channel Gregory Edgeworth. Miles is tense as he can be, and I refuse at first. I know that this is my primary purpose in being here with them, other than moral support, but I don’t want to do something at the expense of my lovers’ well beings.

Miles, however, reassures me quite insistently that he will be alright, and it is necessary to do this. His father is the only one he truly trusts to give them decent insight into the jury system and the conditions that led to its abolishment. No one else will do. I can’t just channel someone else, and we can’t just get in contact with a living lawyer who has seen the jury system. It has to be Gregory Edgeworth.
Much to my relief, when I’m finally released— from exhaustion, actually, it has been almost eight hours as it turns out— Miles and Nick are both completely relaxed.

And Miles is smiling. Broadly, openly, happy.

I am so, so glad I didn’t insist that I not channel his father. It was worth it. Even needing to be half-carried was worth it. I only wished I could have channeled him longer for Miles.

~*~

Time drags on. August turns to September; I manage to steal a call to Kurain every few weeks, just to check on how things are going. The babies want to know when I’ll be home. I don’t even think they care about meeting Mr. Nick and Mr. Miles anymore. They just want me back. “Soon,” I say, even though I have no way of knowing that. “I’ll be home before you know it.”

We’re just about finished with most of what we need to do; we’re simply ironing out the details of how, exactly, the mock trial will be handled at this point. Nick is revealing himself to have some serious control issues at this point, insisting that he hand-picks everything from who the jurists are to what the scenario in the mock trial will be. “Of course he’s a bit of a control freak about this,” Miles says quietly in response to telling him that. “This has been his purpose for living for the past seven years.”

Then, one day, it happens. Nick manages to get a glance at the court dockets every day, and something he sees, at the very beginning of October, seems to spook him to hell and back. “Edgeworth!” he cries in a strangled voice, thrusting the page in the prosecutor’s face, frantically pointing at one of the lines. “Stop that trial!” he demands, sounding as if his life depends on it. “You have to stop that trial!”

Hours later, I find myself in that conference room, Nick shouting down Ms. Nose about that particular trial. I take a bit of comfort in the fact that Nick can still be every bit as loud when it comes to fighting for what he believes in, even if I’m not quite sure what it is he believes in at the moment. Ultimately, it comes down to another vote, this time with Klavier Gavin voting in place of the judge who is missing: Justice Uption. According to a whispered explanation from Miles, he will not be back; judges who issue death threats aren’t welcome in that panel. They’re still trying to replace him, however, hence the shortfall.

And Nick gets what he wants. The defendant in this case, Vera Misham, is accused of poisoning her father, Drew Misham. Nick’s goal was to get her a Jurist trial, and he gets it. Our plans have changed; originally, the mock trial was to be a reenactment and then continuation of the trial that got him disbarred. The first mock trial, anyway; there was to be several.

But this isn’t a mock trial. This is real. The stakes just went sky-high. It’s not just our own reputations and careers on the line anymore. Someone’s life is.

Nick can’t be the stand-in attorney for this trial, since he’s not. He names Klavier Gavin as the prosecutor he wants on the trial, and Apollo Justice as the defense attorney. “But what if he refuses, Herr Wright?” Klavier asks; he’s in as much a state of shock as Miles and I are in. This is happening way too fast.

“He won’t.” Nick sounds so, so sure of himself, despite knowing that there’s a distinct possibility that Apollo might, I believe him. “He might not like being told what to do, and he might not like it coming from me, but he’ll do it. Especially if I’m the one telling him to do it.”

I discover that our isolation period is over, abruptly. The mock trial is tomorrow. There’s no reason
not to give us our freedom back. Nick’s the only one who must be present for it, but Miles and I agree that we should be, too. This is it. It’s time to see what all our blood, sweat and tears are worth.

Nick stays at his own apartment; Miles’ home is cold and strangely unfamiliar after two months at a hotel. Especially with Nick away from us, although we understand why. My fear of what this will bring has returned, and Miles sees it. Another layer has been added onto the terror today: after this trial, regardless of the outcome, I’m going to ask them to come with me to Kurain. I can’t get out of it. I can’t break a promise to my children.

If this fails, we’ll be destroyed, a young woman will be executed, the dead trial system will continue to be used in place of one that can actually bring justice and my secret will be brought to the light. And strangely enough, it’s not Nick’s reaction I fear anymore. No, he knows enough to have already gotten past the shock and horror of what I’m hiding. The fact that he’s no longer digging at me every chance he gets is enough for me to know that he’s already forgiven me, or at least he’s started to. No, he just wants me to admit it now, and then, hopefully, he will see it as being done with.

But Miles…

He has no idea. I can’t begin to predict how he’s going to react to this. And I have no way of backing out now. I made sure I didn’t by promising Misty and Nicholas. Could I break a promise to Iris and Pearly? Possibly. They both understand my reasons, regardless of agreeing with them, and this is huge. They’d be disgusted, but they’d get over it.

The two people I can’t betray anymore, though, are expecting to meet Mama’s good friends. And I’m not going to let them down.

It’s funny. This whole mess started eight years ago, with a chance meeting in a seedy porn store. I didn’t want him to know I was there; I tried to hide it from him. The first dirty little secret. And now it’s ending with something else I don’t want him to know. It’s funny, and strange. A full circle, hiding from him, a circle that begins and ends with Miles Edgeworth and he’s clueless. That’s Nick’s job, damnit!

Miles sees my discomfort and knows better than to ask by now. No, he knows that if I want to talk about it, I’ll do it when I’m good and ready. It’s taken me eight years to be good and ready to talk about this and I’m still not. Although I know he’s not going to succeed, I let him try to comfort me. Why make him be miserable and awkward tonight?

The next day, Miles and I are waiting for Nick at the courthouse; he arrives with Apollo and Trucy. He gives Trucy a hug, wishes Apollo luck, and the three of us go up to the Jurist's Chamber together. Despite Miles' protest that three people can't fit in one of those tiny rooms, the three of us squeeze into the center one and Nick wishes the jurists good morning, reminds them of what is basically expected of them. They've each been given a handbook that should answer any questions they have; however, if they're not clear based on the book, to please keep their question in mind until a break in testimony, at which point they should feel free to ask him anything. He's there to facilitate and help them.

And then the testimony starts. I should be used to the tense beginnings when it seems that everything is against the defense; Nick reminds me and Miles of this, when he notices how nervous we are, by saying calmly, "Everything is under control."

Apollo tears that reporter's testimony to shreds. Vera herself is called to the stand. My heart stops for a few beats when it's revealed that Vera is the one who forged the evidence that destroyed
Nick. Miles gives a strangled protest, and Nick repeats, "Everything is under control." Nonetheless, he's watching the proceedings on the video feed a lot closer. Suddenly, as both Klavier and Apollo demand to know who her client was, and she stares hard at Klavier, Nick suddenly hisses, "The nailpolish-!"

"What?" I ask. Nick ignores me, grabbing the only headset in the chamber. "Ema!" he says, his voice desperate. "We have to stop the trial! Get Vera's hands away from her mouth! Now!"

And then all three of us watch in horror as Vera chokes, her body stiffening. Nick puts down the headset, murmuring, "Too late..."

The young woman on the stand collapses, falling stiffly backwards. Nick bolts, and I look up at Miles, if for no other reason than to get my eyes off the chaotic scene in the courtroom. He's staring at the monitor, wide-eyed, the shadows of a memory of his face. "Miles?" I ask, thoroughly frightened and freaked out now.

I hear Nick screaming, "Cut the cameras!" from the video feed. A second later, it fuzzes and goes dark. Miles pulls me into a tight squeeze, burying his face in my shoulder. I return his embrace, my mind reeling with what we just saw. Somehow, even from here, I can hear sirens from outside of the building. "I'm sorry," Miles says finally, abruptly pulling away. "That just... reminded me of something traumatic. We better go see if Wright needs our assistance."

With short instructions to the jurors to sit tight, we make our way to the courtroom. Nick, Apollo and Trucy are already out of it; Trucy's crying, and Nick's doing his best to just be there for the two of them, but he is livid. After seeing Miles' expression, he pushes Trucy away as gently as he possibly can, given the circumstances. "Go back to the office and wait for me there," he orders in a low growl. "I've had enough. I refuse to let his evil infect anyone else!"

"Mr. Wright!" Apollo protests, but Nick pays him no heed as he tears out of the courthouse doors.
I don’t want to believe this is happening.

I was an idiot. I had the stuff with the stamp figured out yesterday, when I went to visit him. And I knew Kristoph had given Vera that nail polish.

His plan worked exactly as he planned. Again.

It’s raining now, as I walk briskly through the streets back to the office. I can’t wait for another bus; I’d be drier, but it’d take too long. I could call Miles, but after that conversation, I need to think.

My friendship was never real, huh…?

I suppose that’s true. After I interviewed Vera, I knew what Kristoph had done to me. After talking to Brushel during my private investigation, making sure Apollo had everything he needed to do this, I realized that Kristoph’s friendship had been a mask.

Or had it?

Was it really a mask at the end of our friendship? Had he felt betrayed, as I had?

I’m not a vindictive man. I don’t like hurting people, no matter what they’ve done.

Well, then I’m a hypocrite, since I’ve been needling Maya as much as I can…

I stop at a corner, and lean against a lamp post. I abruptly burst into tears, everything that’s going on finally taking its toll on me. Poor little Vera, those little twins in Kurain who probably have no idea who I am. Maya, who has been hiding something terrible out of love, and Kristoph…

I’ve been absorbing all of his evil for the last seven years, holding it back from my precious daughter- she is mine, regardless of paternity, and nothing will convince me otherwise. Holding it back for Maya and Miles, standing as a buffer between them and Kristoph’s bad intentions.

My strength is almost gone. I’m about to break. I don’t know how much longer I can do this. If I can’t do this- if Apollo can’t do this- it will kill me. I’m dying, and unless I can drag us all out into the sunlight, it’s over.

I should have never tried to do this alone.

Miles drives the four of us to the Wright Talent Agency in silence. Apollo's phone goes off once; he says only four terse words: "Hello. Okay. Thanks. Bye." And then he hangs up again. Silence descends once more and hangs around us like an albatross when we arrive at the office. The tension is tangible; no one dares to speak.

When it starts to rain, Apollo suggests that we should try getting in touch with Nick to see if he needs a ride. Miles shuts him down: "No. I don't think you want to interfere with him when he's that agitated. If he needs something, he'll contact us."

"O-oh. Okay."

Silence again. How long? I don't know, but it's dark out when the door to the office finally bangs...
open and shut, and Nick is drenched, his beanie and camera wrapped protectively in his sweat jacket. "Apollo," he says crisply, only bothering to brush his dripping bangs out of his face as he heads to the back office. Apollo, looking slightly intimidated, follows him, and Nick closes the door behind them.

They're in there for what feels like forever; we can hear them talking, but their voices are muffled enough that we can't eavesdrop. When the door finally opens, an extremely pale Apollo emerges, followed by a grim Nick. Apollo goes right to a window and gazes out it, and Nick leans against the doorframe of his office, a towel hanging around his neck and his hair only noticeably damp now. "I can't do this," Apollo finally says.

"You have to," Nick counters evenly.

After a moment, the younger man chuckles mirthlessly. "And I still hate what you've become, Mr. Wright."

"You're not the only one, kid."

Apollo turns to him. The two of them are doing their best to ignore the rest of us; this is still a private conversation. One of them just got claustrophobic in the office, and who it was isn't relevant. "I can't do this," he repeats emphatically, desperately.

Nick sighs. "Apollo, why did you become a defense attorney?"

"Because of you. Because of Phoenix Wright."

The immediateness of the answer, the absolute honesty in his tone, would be heartwarming in any other situation. "I'm flattered," Nick says, a critical undercurrent in his voice, "but if that's your only reason, I recommend you turn in your badge first thing tomorrow and join the circus."

It is uncharacteristically cruel, and even Trucy objects. Phoenix flicks his blue gaze to the three of us, issuing only a quiet but commanding, "Hush, Trucy," while Apollo stammers through the shock of Nick saying such a thing. "I repeat, Apollo: Why did you become a defense attorney? Surely your reason isn't me, myself."

He swallows hard. "No. The way you believed in people when no one else would, the way you saved people."

"You want to save people, huh? What makes you think you can do that when you're standing here, looking me in the face and saying that you can't do it?"

"M-Mr. Wright-"

"Don't, Apollo. Answer me or shut up."

Apollo's mouth snaps shut. As angry as he is, a bright stain of shame is spreading across his face as the brutal truth in Nick's words hits home. And then the anger drains from Nick's own face, replaced with a profound, deep disappointment.

It seems that Nick's disappointment in Apollo manages to get his voice working again. "Vera's on life support," he says quietly. From what little I know of the younger man, ordinarily that would be snapped, loudly. This isn't an ordinary situation. "How, Mr. Wright? How am I supposed to save her now?"

"Shame on you, Polly. She's not dead yet. Nor has she been found guilty. Besides, she's not the
only one who needs saving in this mess."

Apollo meets Nick's eyes for the first time since this conversation spilled into the main office. "You, sir?"

Nick laughs. "No. No no no. It's far too late for me, Apollo."

"Then who?"

"You'll see in court tomorrow. If you start acting like the brilliant young lawyer I know you are and knock if off with this defeatist bullshit."

Apollo bites his lip hard, keeping eye contact with Nick. "Okay. Okay, right. I have to do this. No one else can, can they?"

"Nope."

"... fine. I'll do it. I will. I'll get Vera acquitted. I will. I have to."

Nick smiles at him, the hard cruelty gone. "That's more like it. I'll have this evidence ready for you tomorrow. Don't let Kristoph trick the court into his idea of what a forgery is. You know it isn't. It's just like Wocky Kitaki's check-up report."

"Right. Just like Kitaki's check-up."

At that awkward acknowledgement, Nick says, "Would you mind taking them home, Edgeworth? I have quite a bit of work to do before tomorrow. I'll find my own way home, if I don't just crash here."

"No problem," Miles answers.

"Wait- Mr. Wright!" Apollo exclaims.

Nick's already half-way in his office. "Yes, Apollo?"

He swallows hard. "I... I always believed in you. Bloody ace and all."

From the angle I'm at, I see Nick grin. "Honestly, the feeling’s mutual. Don't let it go to your head, kid." And before Apollo can respond, Nick shuts the door to his office behind him.

When Miles and I get to the courthouse the next day, Nick is already there, already engaged in intense discussion with Apollo. I’m worried about people who will think he’s trying to manipulate the trial, but this whole trial system is his brainchild. You can’t get much more involved than that. Besides, he still has that camera.

It’s early; the jurists are already there. Nick turns the evidence he was working on last night over to Apollo- a yellow envelope- and we go to the Jurist’s chambers. Before the trial begins, Nick asks the jurors to examine the evidence stored in the computer system- the MASON system. I’m uneasy about this, but Miles informs me in a murmur that this has already been cleared by both himself and the judge overseeing this project. It is, in fact, part of the project; if this trial system works today, jurors will have a chance to examine all evidence through this system, as well as transcripts of the trial. Considering the unique position we are in- completely unable to determine who poisoned Vera Misham by direct testimony- this is the only way to connect the dots.

Once the jurists have all examined the evidence Nick’s gathered over the years, and the evidence
Apollo has, he gives a signal to the courtroom that the jurists are ready to proceed. The first order of business: Who poisoned Vera Misham? Klavier is awfully quick to declare that she poisoned herself, and Nick grits his teeth. “Open your eyes, Klavier,” he mutters to himself.

Apollo contends that the person who poisoned Drew Misham is the same who poisoned Vera. And that person was Vera’s client. Klavier proceeds to accuse Nick of the crime, and Nick heads off our protests: “Everything’s under control.” And then, with a chuckle, he adds, “But wouldn’t I count as a mass murderer by now?”

“Serial killer, actually,” Miles contradicts absently. “There’s a difference.”

“Phoenix Wright, serial killer. I don’t think I like that.”

“It’s definitely not you,” I joke tensely. I get a terse chuckle in response.

As the discussion continues, the blond prosecutor becomes more and more agitated, finally telling Apollo, if he’s so sure that Kristoph is responsible, to prove it, or he’s ditching the case. The man looks like he’s being torn apart.

Apollo establishes the link. Kristoph is called to the stand. The trial continues, and Klavier appears profoundly confused; Nick’s analogy about accepting something so utterly wrong as fact comes to mind. “The truth is right in front of you!” Nick’s begging him, although we all know Klavier can’t hear him. “Your brother’s gone! See that thing for what it is!”

And then it happens. “You’re spinning out of control, Klavier,” Kristoph says, his voice insidious, controlling, sinister.

Klavier smiles, bitterly, but there’s a lilt of serenity in his voice. “Out of my control, Kristoph?” he asks, leaning forward. “Or yours?”

Nick relaxes slightly, taking a step back from the monitor. An expression of relief flits across his features, but this isn’t over. “One down, one to go,” he says, still talking to himself.

The yellow envelope finally gets seen, and Kristoph immediately says that there’s no possible way that’s real, because he already stopped Nick from filching it from his cell in prison. There’s a discussion about Nick’s “bad forging habit,” and although Apollo establishes that it’s not a forgery, the judge throws it out. Miles doesn’t react, but I give a small cry of anger. “Everything’s under control,” Nick repeats. I’m starting to wonder if he’s saying that for our benefit, or for his.

And then Kristoph all but admits that he set Nick up to take the fall for the forgery, that he set up the poison in the Misham’s home. Except he doesn’t; he merely says that everything happened as he imagined it and Drew and Nick got what they deserved. A vicious grin immediately spreads over Nick’s face. “You are a moron,” he informs the blond man on the stand.

Some more back and forth; “Breathe,” Miles mutters at me. I can’t. There’s no evidence linking Kristoph to the poisonings. He’s going to get away with it, and Vera’s going to die! How can they be so calm when-

And then Klavier points out the Jurists. Oh. Yeah. Them.

Kristoph is not a happy man, especially when Apollo breaks it to him that all of this is Phoenix Wright’s idea. He screams, and it takes me a moment to realize that he’s shrieking Nick’s name.

And then he stares, straight at one of the cameras in the courtroom. The one to the feed we’re currently watching. It almost seems as though he’s staring through the camera, straight at Nick;
Nick stares back, smug, grim, and bitterly victorious. In that moment, as Kristoph’s cool veneer shatters, leaving a sneering, sniveling mess of a man, staring at us even though it’s impossible for him to be, Nick’s description of him from last night hits home: evil.

With a few final words, the judge prompts Nick to tend to the jurists. The camera cuts, and he speaks to them, repeating the basics of what we need from them: Did Vera murder her father, or is someone else responsible for his death? One of the jurists, Jurist number six has a concern; it sounds like she doesn’t believe she’s qualified to sit on the jury. Nick reassures her that she absolutely is, and then activates the verdict panels in the Jurist’s individual chambers. Almost immediately Jurist Six’s panel lights up: Not Guilty.

We wait. The jurists can examine the evidence some more, play back portions of the testimony; one asks to confer with the judge, and Nick somehow connects the judge’s chambers to that Jurist’s. One by one, the panels light up Not Guilty.

At 2:14 PM, the Jurists reach a unanimous decision: Not Guilty. The judge confirms their verdict, announcing it with no small amount of joy. At the moment the Judge’s gavel slams down, Phoenix collapses. Both Miles and I move to assist him; I think, for a moment, that all this stress has caused him to suffer an aneurysm or a stroke or something similarly dire. But it’s not that, I realize, as Nick covers his head with his arms and screaming, soul-wrenching sobs wrack his body. I stand there, Miles’ hands on my shoulders, watching awkwardly as seven years worth of rage, agony, and despair flood out of him in his screams and his tears. The court staff that was manning the main area of the Jurists area will later report that it sounded almost as if Phoenix Wright were dying; one detective would have to deny, repeatedly and loudly, that his screams of pain drove him to tears, as well. His cries would resound in the chamber long, long after Nick had calmed himself.

Seven years of pent-up emotion drained, Nick is exhausted once his sobs subside. He meets our worried gazes; his blue eyes are darkened, but the inner storm has passed. “Let’s go,” he says, his voice thick with fatigue. “I just want to go home.”

After a stop by the men’s room so Nick can wipe his face and try to eliminate some of the evidence that he had been crying, we leave the courthouse. Of course, the steps have a veritable throng of reporters, shoving microphones in our faces the instant we step out of the building. Gumshoe is waiting for us, though; his shouts for the media to back off are unheeded as he tries valiantly to escort us to Miles’ car. Nick is, for the most part, ignoring the reporters’ questions; one cuts through the rest of them, and Nick can’t help but stop to look at the woman, dumbfounded. “What do my personal feelings towards Prosecutor Gavin have to do with this?” he asks, his confusion clear in his voice. Then, he shakes his head, ignores the reporters’ answer, and shoves forward with a mumbled, “Excuse me.”

We’re almost to the parking lot when another round of upheaval begins around us. Unable to resist curiosity, I turn to see who they’re swarming now; Apollo, Trucy and Klavier are leaving now, and they’re being assaulted as thoroughly as we were. We’re too far away to hear the questions being posed to them, but Klavier seems to be searching the crowd. As his gaze settles on the four of us, he bellows, “Herr Wright!”

Nick hears him, and turns to the sound of his voice. “I’m sorry!” Klavier shouts over the crowd, sending the reporters into a feeding frenzy around them. Nick’s so tired that he can only nod, and Miles puts a hand on his arm, practically dragging him away.

It’s not until we’re all safe in Miles’ car that how surreal all of this is hits me. Nick rests his head against the headrest of his seat, eyes closed; he hasn’t bothered to put on his seatbelt and I don’t think he’s going to. Miles and Gumshoe discuss what they’re going to do with the scruffy detective;
“Just drive me around the block, pal,” Gumshoe says. “I’ll walk back and get my car.”

“Be careful,” I say as he pulls out. “I think Nick fell asleep and he didn’t put on his seatbelt.” In response, Nick gives a low growl, although it’s not hostile, and he lazily pulls the seatbelt around him and buckles it. I suspect that growl is all he has the energy for at the moment.

Miles does as Gumshoe asks, and we drive back to Miles’ home. The first thing Nick wants is a shower and the second, a drink; Miles and I are worried sick. After his breakdown at the courthouse, we don’t know what to think of how sluggish he is. Out of the shower, dressed in his bedclothes—despite our protests that it’s only late afternoon—and a fluffy bathrobe Miles gives him permission to use, Nick gets his drink and then just sits on the couch, watching us through sleepy eyes, almost catatonic.

Trucy calls me once, asking how we’re doing. She tried Nick’s, but his phone is off, and can she and Apollo come see us? “I don’t think that’d be a good idea, Trucy,” I say. “He’s exhausted.” I don’t want to tell her how badly he’s spacing. Something tells me that last trial was hell on him, despite the exterior of calm he was showing.

But Nick isn’t catatonic; he’s awake, and he seems to be able to put two and two together. “Lemme talk to her?” he asks sleepily. I tell Trucy I’m handing the phone to her father and she thanks me, and then Nick has the phone. “Hey, sweetheart. Yeah, I’m fine, just tired. How are you and Polly? … yeah, we do have a lot to talk about. Are you okay, Truce? You sound—yeah, probably about as tired as I am,” Nick chuckles. “You performed beautifully today. All three of you. Uh, no. Trucy, no. Uh-uh. No. No. No, I’m not—no. Trucy, I’m not changing my answer. No. Nyet, nein, ie, no no no.” I giggle; I didn’t realize he knew that many words for “no”. Finally, he sighs. “Fine, but you’re cleaning up afterwards. Alright. See you tomorrow, then. Love you, and give Apollo a big hug for me. Ha! And in that case, tell him to shut up, he knows he loves me. Alright. Bye.” He hangs up my phone, handing it back to me. “We’ve got a party we need to attend tomorrow night,” he informs Miles and me sleepily. “She was quite insistent.” Miles chuckles, and I fidget nervously. “Speaking of plans,” I say, “what are yours?”

Both men look at me with questioning expressions. The Nick shrugs. “I was just gonna loaf around for a bit,” he says. “I think we’ve all earned some downtime.” I look at Miles. “And you?” Questioning looks both turn suspicious. “Why?” I shrug, still nervous. “Because. I thought, if you guys don’t have any other plans set in stone, you could come stay with me for a few weeks. To Kurain Village.”

Nick draws back slightly, startled; Miles raises an eyebrow at me. “Isn’t it cold there this time of year, Maya?”

“Yeah, pretty cold,” I admit. “But the scenery is gorgeous.”

“I can attest to that,” Nick murmurs, trying to figure me out. “And it’s quiet. Usually. When Maya isn’t being framed for murder, of course.” I giggle at him, and he gives me a slight smile. It doesn’t translate to his eyes, though. If anything, his receding trepidation just washed back over him, a tidal wave of anxiety. Maybe asking them to come with me to Kurain immediately after the trial wasn’t such a good idea. Too late now…

“I was planning on taking a break as well,” Miles admits cautiously. “But considering my personal
history with the Fey family, I’m not sure…”

“You went to Hazakura,” Nick says pointedly.

“Only because someone was idiotic enough to attempt to cross a burning bridge and landed himself in the hospital,” Miles retorts.

Miles’ hesitation may be giving me the out I want, yet I still can’t take it. Not seriously, anyway. “Well, I guess we could always go to, I don’t know… Atlantic City?”

They both stare at me in wonderment. “New Jersey?” Nick asks blankly.

“Well… yeah. I’ve never been to New Jersey. Or a casino, for that matter…”

“Wouldn’t Las Vegas make more sense, then?” Nick says.

I shrug. “I dunno. Can’t we go to Las Vegas any time, though? I mean, it’s so close!”

“It’s also not in New York’s garbage bin.”

“If it’s between Kurain and Atlantic City,” Miles cuts in, “I’ll take Kurain.”

“You sure?” Nick asks, concerned.


I force a smile and clasp my hands together. “Then it’s settled!” I exclaim in what I hope sounds like enthusiasm. “I’ll let them know in Kurain that I’ll be bringing you two as guests when I return, ‘kay? ‘Kay. Man, am I hungry, what’s for dinner?”

We run out to my burger joint- and I thoroughly enjoy my grease bombs, and I can tell that Miles does too, in a way- and we laze around watching TV, and go to bed early. All of us are refreshed in the morning, including Nick; there’s no sign of his lethargy in the morning. Good news meets us first thing in the morning in the form of a phone call to Miles: he’s speaking in German, so I don’t understand him, but he sounds absolutely elated by the time he hangs up. “Vera Misham has pulled out of her coma,” he informs us happily. “She’s going to be okay.”

Nick’s relief is tangible at this. “Heh, wow. I got all my miracles for once. That is just… wow. Wonderful. Wonderful.”

He heads off for the day, saying he has a number of errands he has to run, but he’ll meet us at the party. At the office, of course, and he’s not sure of the time but he’ll call one of us to let us know. We kill time first by packing up; Miles helps me stuff my stuff back into my suitcase, and he tends to his own as I call Kurain to let them know the three of us will be driving into town in a few days. Iris and Pearly are absolutely beside themselves; they watched the whole thing on TV, and cheered, loudly, when Klavier accused Kristoph of planting his forged evidence on Nick.

I don’t actually have the heart to tell them that he was not exonerated. Not legally. Everyone knows what happened now, but without that letter, there’s no proof. And surely Kristoph destroyed the letter when he caught Nick trying to sneak away with it.

Still, anyone would have to be a fool not to see that Nick is innocent now. That seems to be enough for him.

That done, Miles and I head over to the mall the three of us are always hanging out at. It seems
weird without Nick here with us. Weird, but enjoyable. Miles bribes me with an ice cream cone to
tell him what’s on my mind; I make something up. Well, not “make up”, but what I tell him isn’t
the thing that’s worrying me the most. I can’t very well tell him that, can I? “It’s just… it feels like
Nick’s distancing himself,” I confide. It’s true. It seems like Nick’s never around anymore, if we’re
not working together; even if he’s with us, he’s not entirely there.

“That’s a trick of the mind,” Miles says. “He’s also been the busiest and most stressed of the three
of us. I’m sure now that this is done with, he’ll be dragging us both in every store in this place
whether we’re interested or not, just because he can.”

Miles’ voice is affectionate as he reassures me. I just wish I bought that explanation.

It’s over. I can breathe again.

My faith in Maya wasn’t misplaced. She was holding this secret for all the reasons I thought she
was: protecting us. I don’t quite know if Miles’ niece is doing better, but he doesn’t speak of her
and his spirits are good when he talks with Franziska on the phone, telling her of my
“exoneration”.

Which actually isn’t, legally, but there’s absolutely no denying it now. I’m out of the woods. All
that’s left to do is attempt to rebuild. Whether the state Bar Association will let me retake the exam
now or not is still an unknown variable, since I wasn’t proven innocent. I’m not sure I want to do
that anyway. It’s not the music that bothers me about my current profession; it’s the pay and the
employers, so if I can find another job along those lines, it’s a choice I can stomach. Another route
I want to consider is private investigation, since I seem to be good at it.

But all of that can wait. Maya’s finally ready to come clean. Finally. I don’t know what’s waiting
for us in Kurain and that terrifies me. Will they know who I am? Who Miles is? How will he react
to this? How will the villagers react? How will the twins react?

There are so many unknown variables, I can’t begin to predict how this will go. And now I realize
that I, too, need to own up to my own part in this mess. I’ve known since my accident. If those twins
are Miles’, I’m going to have a lot to answer for. Regardless of who fathered them, though, I won’t
let Maya go through this alone. Or Miles. They didn’t let me go through this nightmare alone. I
won’t abandon them now, either of them.

It’s time to open a new chapter. Start a whole new life, even.

Looking at it that way even makes me feel optimistic. That’s a feeling I haven’t had in eight years.
Maybe the darkness is truly lifting now.
Miles picks up a book at a bookstore as a congratulations gift for Nick. It's a text on how to study for the Bar Exam. I didn't know such things existed and Miles just smirks at me as he pays for it and we leave, heading back to his place for a bit. Nick's already called and told us when to be at the office; we still have some time to kill.

When we get back, Miles packs the book away in a backpack like Nick's, along with three of his own: two tomes on law in different countries and a cheesy romance novel similar to those Nick rightfully accused me of liking. In that backpack, I see Steel Samurai and the Deep Night and immediately, reflexively, object. "Uh, I don't think it'd be a good idea to bring that," I say.

He looks at me with a surprised expression. "Why not?" he asks.

*Because I don't want your seven-year-old finding and unwittingly watching porn, that's why.* "Just... the villagers in Kurain tend to be a little on the conservative side," I explain, ignoring the way he smirks at me as I say that. "This will be your first visit there. If someone other than the three of us sees that-

"Maya, if you grew up in a conservative village, why are you so liberal?" he cuts me off, amused.

I'm not sure I understand what he means and just stammer, and then huff at him. "That's beside the point! And besides, you try being Nick's assistant for three years and not have your moral compass take a bit of a beating!"

At this, he laughs outright. As long as we've been friends and lovers, it still surprises me when he laughs. "Don't worry about it, Maya," he tries to reassure me- and fails, considering the real reason I don't want that DVD to enter the village. "It's... a bit asinine, but it's kind of special to me."

Did he just imply that a pornographic DVD was a security blanket for him? Well, I guess I can understand to a point, considering what that DVD spawned. Heh. No, I can understand completely, actually. It *is* asinine, and yet makes perfect sense. I sigh and shrug, trying to hide my grin.

"Alright, fine. You can bring your security blanket with you."

"It is not a security blanket," Miles informs me dourly, zipping his backpack shut. Despite knowing that's very much the wrong reaction, I laugh at his sour attitude and end up spending the afternoon working as hard as I possibly can to get back in his good graces. I think I have by the time we leave for the party.

It looks like it's been going on for quite some time before we arrive; we seek Nick out and he grins apologetically, sipping a glass of purple liquid. Probably grape juice. "Sorry," he says sheepishly. "I was ambushed. Grab a drink, go socialize. And if you love me you'll try to keep Brushel out of my hair for five minutes."

We do as he requests, and Brushel seems just as happy to talk to us as he would be talking to Nick. "Phoenix Wright: From the Ashes, end quote!"

"Stick with food articles, Mr. Brushel," Miles says mildly, chuckling at the proposed headline.

"Oh, I'm sure I will, once this big scoop is done," Brushel replies, hitting himself in the head with his toothbrush. "But first, do you mind asking a question? I totally understand that this is supposed to be a fun party and everything, so I'll limit it to one."
"How considerate of you," Miles replies, and I can tell he’s barely able to stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Shoot."

Brushel looks from one of us to the other. "My sources tell me that you two are very... close... to Mr. Wright. Do you have any comment on this?"

My insides twist painfully. Is this Brushel guy really going to do this to Nick? Is he trying to drag his reputation through the mud again? Much to my astonishment, after thinking for a moment, Miles answers him. "We are indeed very close to Mr. Wright. Aside from Trucy Wright and Apollo Justice, I would venture to guess that we may be the only two people who know who the real Phoenix Wright is. Considering just how much betrayal he's experienced, I doubt anyone can blame him for drawing particularly close to those he is sure genuinely cares about him."

"Beautiful, Mr. Edgeworth," Brushel says, scribbling furiously on a notebook—one of Nick's old notepads, I notice. He probably took pity on the man from writing on his arm. Nick had to jot a note or two down on his hand a few times and he hated it. "That's touching. 'Miracle worker turns to loved ones for miracles', end quote."

"That's not quite what-" Miles shuts up as Brushel's already moved on to seek others to speak to, and I notice in amusement that he manages to corner Apollo. The poor man looks desperately to Nick's daughter for escape, and she merely flits away with a laugh. In that moment, even though they're so different, Apollo reminds me so much of Nick at that age that it almost hurts.

The party progresses; Nick's drinking, but it's paced, so that he maintains a mild high without getting drunk. The three of us are talking about various things; the music, the fact that the doctor Nick referred Lamiroir to was able to restore her sight, how excited he is to see Pearly in a few days. Being scolded for not sending photographs. Miles talks about Leah, excitedly; she's getting better by the day still, and if she continues progressing, she can come visit in the States by this time next year. Depending on how the visit in Kurain goes, he's sure she'll want to see it as well.

Yeah. Oh boy.

But throughout our conversation, Nick is watching Apollo and Trucy like a hawk. Initially, I think it's just Nick being an overprotective father. However, the third time he blatantly interrupts the two, who are clearly trying to have a moment, I mention it to Miles. "I don't get why he's doing that," I say with a grimace. "It's not like Apollo isn't a criminal defense attorney or anything. Pretty sure he knows that Trucy's jailbait."

"I actually doubt that's Wright's issue," Miles says, watching as Nick wraps an arm around Trucy's waist from behind, lifts her up, much to her chagrin, and turns her around, putting her down facing the other way. They have a brief conversation, heated from Trucy's end, and Trucy flounces off, leaving Nick shaking his head and Apollo wide-eyed. The two men exchange words, and Nick returns, grinning. "Wouldn't it just be easier to just tell them?" Miles asks, eyebrow raised.

Tell them what, I wonder, and then I remember that video from when Nick was arrested for Shadi Smith's murder. Oh. Oooooooooooh... Nick smirks. "Have I ever done anything the easy way?"

"Touché."

It seems that after Nick’s last intervention, Apollo and Trucy have gotten the hint and are honoring the concept of personal space. Trucy’s embarrassed about her Daddy’s behavior, but Apollo just shrugs it off as understandable.

A little later in the evening, Nick’s phone rings. He answers it, and his sleepy contentment shatters
abruptly. “Why? What do you—… Alright. I’ll meet you downstairs.” Nick hangs up, apologizes, and leaves the apartment. Trucy and Apollo see him leave and come over, looking worried. “What’s up with Mr. Wright?” Apollo asks bluntly. A flush across his youthful face implies that he’s been drinking a bit more than he probably should.

“We don’t know,” Miles answers, still staring after him. “He didn’t tell us.”

After only a few minutes, Nick returns, followed closely by Klavier, the younger man holding a motorcycle helmet under his arm. They’re speaking in hushed tones, somehow managing to slip through the crowd of the party without much notice. Into the office they go, but the door is left open. The four of us approach it cautiously, although I intentionally make a noise to make sure they know we’re there. They look up from where they are at Nick’s desk— he’s booting up his computer—but don’t pause their conversation. “This may be what does it, Herr Wright,” Klavier says, his voice tense. “But it’s also my last shot.”

“I hope you can use it,” Nick replies gravely, “but I don’t know. There are problems with it.”

“Let me judge that,” Klavier murmurs. Nick leans back to give Klavier a better look at the screen, as Kristoph’s and Nick’s voices come from the speakers. They’re discussing the letter. Klavier nods firmly. “You’re right, there are a lot of problems with this,” he says finally.

Nick’s hopeful expression falls, although he says, “I expected as such. He’s going to get away with it, isn’t he?”

Klavier flashes that brilliant, rock-star smile. “Giving up a little easily, aren’t you, Herr Wright?”

“Wh—”

Nick’s cut off as Klavier reaches into a jacket pocket with a gloved hand and produces a little plastic baggie full of something yellow, flat and gross-looking. “I said he tried to destroy it,” Klavier explains, still smiling. “I didn’t say he succeeded. According to the guard, he ripped it up and flushed it down the toilet as soon as you left. Fortunately, no one listened to my insistence that he have a functional toilet and it clogged; rather than tell anyone, he figured he’d just deal with it himself once things were settled down. He wasn’t counting on me ordering a search of his cell when I called him to the stand.”

Nick gapes at the baggie, and then sighs. “I doubt that even your best people in forensics will be able to put that back together, though,” he says. “You’re still in the same position—”

“Turn your brain back on, please, this is tiring. No, I’m not. Not with your video. Neither holds up alone. Together, though… I hear the sweet, sweet sound of ‘Guilty’ playing on the airwaves for Brother Dearest.”

“And ‘innocent’ for you, Mr. Wright,” Apollo says, standing beside me. Nick’s blue eyes focus on us; I’ve seen that expression before. He’s trying to figure out if he’s dreaming or being pranked because he’s tired of his hopes being dashed. After swallowing hard, Apollo adds, “You were wrong about it being too late for you.”

We’re silent, the sounds of the party seeming so far away— if not for Lotta Hart’s voice yelling that she needs pictures of everyone— and Klavier laughs. It’s a boyish, joyful and relieved sound, and he covers his eyes with his free hand, letting his voice rise slightly before gasping back further peals of laughter. He brushes his fingers over his eyes before looking up, seeing that we’re all staring at him now, our expressions ranging from curious to concerned. “I am just so happy,” he says, a break in his voice barely detectable, “that this nightmare is finally over.”
“It’s over,” Nick repeats, thoughtfully and more to himself than any of us. Then, with a deep breath, he sits upright again, turning his attention to the computer. “Making you a copy should only take a few moments,” he says. “I’m going away with Edgeworth and Maya tomorrow- or the day after, depends on how hung over we are,” he corrects, flashing a grin at the two of us, “but if you need me to testify, I’ll come back. Just make sure you give me enough time to.”

“I shouldn’t need your testimony,” Klavier says, sounding sure of himself. “Besides, what can you say on the stand that isn’t said in this video? This is kinda like a testimony itself. Plus, I’ll have Ms. Misham. She’s been… talkative.”

Nick’s grin smooths into a smile. “I’m glad,” he says quietly, ejecting a CD and handing it to the prosecutor. “I’d wish you luck, but I don’t think you need it. So, uh… congratulations, I guess?”

Klavier laughs again, taking the CD. “Thanks, I guess,” he replies, removing another plastic baggie from his pocket and slipping the CD in it. “So, is there room at this party for one more?”

“The more the merrier,” Nick says, standing. “Guys, out of my office,” he says to us, finally. “It’s far, far too small for six people. Out, out!”

After that, Nick’s demeanor changes completely. All semblance of reservation or bittersweet relief is gone. He’s happy and he parties hard enough that I worry that it’s a bad influence on Trucy.

“Stop your worrying, Miss Maya,” she comments to me in passing, grinning. “I can’t see any of the signs that he’s sad anymore. It’s weird not seeing that after seven years but I’m glad I don’t. So take my word for it- he’s okay.”

“Well, I wasn’t worried about him,” I chuckle, but I drop my concern. She’s not a child; she’s nearly a grown woman. She deserves to be treated as such.

“What are you worried about, then?” Trucy asks, putting her chin in her hand and propping her elbow on the end of the couch. "Something's been bothering you for a very long time, for as long as I can remember, actually. What's up?"

I swallow hard and shake my head. "I'm sure your Dad will tell you soon," I tell her. It's true. After he's done chewing me out, he'll probably call Trucy and tell her that she's got little siblings.

By midnight, both "men of the hour" are unconscious, sleeping soundly on the couch, and Miles and Trucy chases the partiers out with thanks for coming, and the two of them settle down in various parts of the office to doze through the night. We're going to have to put off our departure another day; Miles is driving, after all, and probably won't be able to drive hung over and exhausted.

This is fine, because all of us sleep through most of the day, leaving us completely refreshed- and awake- in the late afternoon. There's a discussion between the five of us if we should go to Kurain tonight, and the consensus is that we should. As Nick and Miles agree that it would probably be best to do that, I can feel my throat getting tight; both Apollo and Trucy see my spike in nervousness, that's almost bordering on panic. As Nick is giving them both firm instructions to behave themselves and he does have eyes in the walls and will know if they're misbehaving, Apollo fixes me with a look as he's informing Nick rather haughtily that he is an adult. That settled, we all get up to pick up around the office.

Apollo corners me as I'm collecting some empty bottles. "Ms. Fey? Are you alright?" he asks me.

"I'm fine, Apollo," I reply smoothly, smiling at him. I'm so practiced at it just from tonight that the lie rolls off my tongue.
He doesn't look convinced; he looks even less convinced than anyone else had. "Are you sure? Because you looked almost afraid to go to Kurain. Is something going on? If there is, you really should tell Mr. Wright. I'm sure that if you really are that scared to go home, he can help with whatever-"

"It's not like that," I cut him off, waving a hand. "He'll probably tell you pretty soon after we get there." It's what I told Trucy, and even though the chances of it actually happening now are a little slimmer, since we're probably going to get there late in the evening, it's not by much.

Apollo keeps his worried gaze on me for a moment longer, and then says, "You're scaring Trucy."

I sigh, and smile at him, trying my best to look confident. "I'm not meaning to. This is a bit scary for me, but everything will be okay. I've just got to keep telling myself that. I have to believe it."

The young attorney nods slowly. I can see him thinking, doubt in his eyes, and I guess that his internal debate is to tell Nick about the weird vibes I'm giving him. But Nick already knows why I'd be doing that, so it's okay. "Alright," he says finally, with a firm nod. "But if you get into trouble, promise you'll tell one of them."

"I promise," I say. I've been in trouble for the last seven years. I can't get in much more trouble than this.

We leave in a few hours, the radio on low and the three of us chatting. The chatter lasts only for the first hour; Nick is asleep in the front passenger seat soon after we fall silent. I feel awkward. I didn't call Kurain to tell them we'd be coming. I couldn't get away. I fake having to go to the bathroom to get Miles to pull off into the next rest stop, and pull out my phone as soon as I get into the ladies' room. "Pearly!" I say, as she answers the phone.

"Mystic Maya! Hey! How goes it?"

I smile at her slang. High school is loosening her ultra-polite tendencies a bit. "It goes," I inform her. "We're about an hour and a half away from the village."

"Mr. Edgeworth is driving?"

"Yeah. Pearly, I still haven't told them."

She gasps. "Mystic Maya," she says sternly. "When do you plan on telling them?"

I cringe, although she can't see it. "I don't," I answer. "I plan on letting the twins' existence speak for itself."

Pearly gives an exasperated sigh. "That is not the best way to handle this, Mystic Maya. And you know it."

"Yes, I know it. But I can't see any other way. I really can't tell them. It just won't come out of my mouth. So, could you, uhm... make sure they don't come running out as soon as we arrive? Please?"

There's a moment of silence. "Fine," she answers finally, defeated. "But you will tell them about the twins as soon as you are settled in. They will be told tonight. If you don't, I will. I can't stand to lie anymore."

I swallow hard, wondering if Iris is as close to the end of her rope, too. "I can't not tell them, Pearly," I answer. "That's why I'm bringing them to Kurain. They're going to meet the kids
eventually if they're right there."

"... I'm choosing to believe you. I believe you. This last time, I believe you. Please don't let me
down again, Mystic Maya. Please."

"I won't," I say firmly. "This is it. No more broken promises or lies."

"Good. Did I just hear a toilet flush?"

"Ah... yeah, I'm kinda in the bathroom..."

Pearly laughs. "You better get off the phone if they think you're going to the bathroom."

"Yeah. See you soon. Bye."

"Bye. Have a safe trip."

There are concerned questions when I leave the bathroom- "Are you okay?" from Miles and "Did you fall in or something?" from Nick- and we feed and water ourselves and hit the road again. Nick's consciousness restored, the two of them talk while I pretend to be asleep. Just staying still with my eyes closed feels like rest, anyway. And it seems to make the time pass quicker, since before long, Miles is pulling up to the village gate. He's not worried about the safety of his vehicle-this is out in the middle of nowhere and there are what, forty? Fifty? villagers who could potentially vandalize it. Should that actually happen, he's confident he can catch the culprit.

We stride through the village to Fey Manor, speaking in hushed tones. It's really not that late, but it's dark, invoking a need for quiet. We enter the manor, and the boys set the backpacks they bought with them down against a wall- they'll go back in the morning for the rest of our belongings. We're still speaking quietly about sleeping arrangements when I hear a crash and Pearly yelling, "Nicky! Misty! No! No, come back here this instant!"

My stomach twists in dread as a chorus of, "MAMAAAAAA!" echoes through the quiet room, and two bed-dressed little people come flying out, their arms simultaneously wrapping around my waist and hugging me eagerly. Pearly stumbles out of the winding way, her expression stricken as she lays eyes on the scene before her.

I look up in time to see Nick put a hand to his mouth as he stares at the kids. "Oh my g-"

His oath is interrupted by a heavy thump beside him. The twins scream, and Phoenix kneels next to Miles as I hustle the babies out of the room and Pearly darts forward, yelling for Sister Iris.

That could’ve gone worse…

The twins know that something about them seriously upset my friends. I want to yell at Miles for fainting like that, but I guess that’s not a reaction you can prevent. Having only known him to pass out during earthquakes, I don’t think he could have stopped it even if I’d chosen to tell them, as Pearly and Iris wanted me to.

I don’t try to reassure them yet. They’re both too upset to hear me. I will when one of my cousins comes back to tell me Miles is okay and awake. That will do more to comfort the twins than anything I can say right now.

And they both do stop crying the moment Iris returns and informs me, formally and almost coldly, that Miles has regained consciousness, and that they want to talk to me. Now.
I take a deep breath, my mind racing. I knew there would be a fight but it absolutely cannot happen in front of the children. I ask Iris to stay with the babies while I go handle this; she agrees and I kiss them both on the forehead before walking at a funeral pace to the room Miles was moved to.

Pearly is still there with them; she’s red in the face, nestled under Nick’s arm and leaning against him. She’s been crying. He quietly asks Pearly to leave us be as they all look at me. She does so, and as soon as the door is closed, I say firmly, “I hope you didn’t take this out on her. She had absolutely zero say in how I chose to handle this and I swear, Nick, if you hurt that girl’s feelings because of what I did.”

“Relax,” he snaps at me. “I didn’t yell at her or anything. I just wanted to know why she went along with it. I know you’re the only one who can explain this.”

I’m a little reassured. A little. She always did cry when Nick was disappointed in her, or even if he wasn’t and she just thought he was. “I think this explains itself,” I reply, my voice softer than it was.

Nick shakes his head, looking stricken. “No. It doesn’t. It absolutely doesn’t.”

“What is going on?” Miles demands through gritted teeth, hands in tight fists in his lap.

I don’t sit down. This is awkward. They’re both furious with me- all four of them are, actually. I know I don’t deserve sympathy but it would be nice for someone to understand that this was the best I could do. “That… wasn’t how I wanted you to find out,” I say finally.

“Yeah, well… you know what they say about the best laid plans,” Nick replies, his voice carefully void of emotion. “Maya, I… There’s no gentle way of saying this. You betrayed us. Both of us.”

I look up, startled, and I can’t help but laugh. I was expecting the first attack to come from Miles. “Why are you so surprised, Nick?” I demand. “You looked into this. You knew those twins were mine.”

“What?” Miles says, turning on Nick. Nick ignores him and shakes his head. “I told you, I stopped investigating at that revelation.”

“You knew about this- this-” Miles is getting worked up.

Nick looks at him now. “I knew that she was their mother and the father’s name wasn’t given on the birth certificates,” he answers. “I knew that it had to be one of us, because the alternatives were too horrific to consider. I had no idea that- is this even possible?”

I shrug. “That’s… what I was wondering, when they started looking like both of you.”

“Do you know for sure?” Nick asks me. Misty obviously isn’t his daughter. He’s hoping his original conclusion was correct.

I nod. “They are half-siblings.”

Nick curses softly and Miles explodes. “How can you be so calm about this, Wright?!?” he yells.

I cringe as Nick raises his own voice very slightly, telling him to lower his own. They argue about his volume for a second, before Nick shouts at his level, “They’re already terrified, Miles! For god’s sake, stop it!”

Miles takes a deep breath, understanding Nick’s objection. Seeing that Miles is trying to calm
down, he answers, “I’m calm because I have to be. Those children did nothing wrong, nothing to deserve having to listen to their mother being yelled at. As much as their mother may richly deserve it,” he adds with a slight scowl at me.

“I’m evil. I get it,” I mutter under my breath. I know Nick hears me, because he shakes his head, muttering something else, and Miles looks from one of us to the other incredulously. “So how long have you known that Maya was hiding our children from us?” he demands.

“Since my accident.” As Miles starts cursing again, Nick says, “Miles, wait—”

“No, Phoenix, no. You’re just as guilty as she is!”

“As are you!” Nick snaps harshly.

Miles laughs in mirthless surprise. “You’ve got to be kidding me! I did nothing—"

“Exactly. You did nothing, that’s exactly my point. I get disbarred, break it off with the two of you. The very, very next day, after you sleep with her, you take off for Germany and I don’t care how good a reason you had for leaving the woman you spent the night with only a note and an e-mail and then refused to talk to her for four years, Miles!”

“I couldn’t,” he replies through gritted teeth. “I didn’t have any contact information.”

“Don’t even try it,” Nick hisses, pointing at him. “You had regular contact with me for almost two of those years. I could have given you the manor’s phone number. I could have given you an address. I offered, even, and you turned it down. Speaking of being remiss in maintaining contact, the one of us who was most capable of affording long-distance phone calls was you. Even overseas. And yet, as soon as I lose my ability to e-mail, poof! Contact goes bye-bye for two more years until you drop in just as suddenly as you left.”

I’m surprised that Miles was quiet through that whole diatribe. His face is unreadable now, as Nick waits for a response that isn’t forthcoming. Realizing this, he says, “She was alone, Miles. A nineteen-year-old girl, pregnant, not knowing who the father of her kids is, and unable to call on either for support. She was alone.” He takes a deep breath. “I happen to know how that feels.”

Miles still doesn’t answer. His expression has gone stony. I want to tell Nick to stop, that this isn’t helping, but I can’t speak; my throat’s too tight. Without my warning, he says, “There are two people in this building who are innocent, Miles, and you aren’t one of them.”

At this, Miles gets up abruptly and strides towards the door. As I cry out for him to stop, Nick says his name sharply. "I'm not leaving," Miles throws back at us, over his shoulder. And then the door bangs open and shut.

I don't know if I can believe that he's sticking around or not. And then the absurdity of that question makes me shake my head in disgust at myself. So we're back to this: believing each other to be liars.

Well, at least Miles has good reason to. And thinking about this isn't productive. "Thank you," I say finally, my voice low and sad.

Nick shakes his head, turning away. "I didn't do that for you," he replies, his voice absolutely dripping with venomous contempt. "And you, lady, are most definitely not an innocent party, either.”

"I know."
"Whether Miles was here or not, you could have told me. You should have told me."

"I know."

"We missed just about all of their childhood. I have a son, and I have no idea what his first word was, what-"

"I know!" I scream at him, breaking down. Oh God, the kids are definitely going to hear this, but I can't stop myself from crying. "Do you think this has been easy on me, Phoenix?!" I demand through my tears, barely able to understand myself. "They didn't question it, you know. None of the other kids have daddies, why would they? Well, because Mama is an evil, cowardly demon-"

"Stop," Nick snaps at me. "Do you want them to hear you talking like this?! Stop thinking about yourself for a change-"

"Fuck you, Phoenix."

He's startled into silence as I swear at him, using a word that I say maybe once or twice a year, and to actually refer to the act, no less. I've never used a vulgarity as a weapon before, and I've never aimed truly hurtful words at him. "I hid this for seven years for you," I snarl back. "You and Miles! How was this beneficial to me, in any way?!"

"You get to play the martyr, like you are now," he says darkly.

I have an incredible urge to hit him in that moment. "That's a really, really pathetic reason to deny my children their fathers for seven years," I reply, my tone just as tense and threatening as his. "That's a really pathetic reason to go through a pregnancy alone. Really, really pathetic to do everything in my power to hide this from you. Even beating a Magatama."

At this, Nick puts a hand in his sweat jacket pocket. After a moment, he removes it, his expression softened slightly. I guess he saw what I knew- no Psyche locks. "Maya, I did mean it when I said that I understood how being alone felt," he says finally. "And," he adds, "I understand your logic. You were dead wrong, but I get it. But that doesn't make it okay. It doesn't."

"I'm sorry," I finally manage, although I'm still crying.

At this, he comes over and puts his arms around me. "I'm sorry, too," he says, hugging me tight. I don't think this is over on his end, not by a long shot. But it's comforting to know that he hears me, that he still cares enough that he's willing to try to comfort me, even if I don't deserve it.

Our moment is interrupted by a hysterical Pearly and an equally hysterical Iris. Iris and Nick's eyes meet for only a brief moment, and I feel his body tense as they do, but it's quick and Iris has something much more important to worry about. "Maya," she cries. "Misty's gone!"

"What?!" I say, abruptly pulling away from Nick. "How?! Where could she have-"

"The window's open," Pearly cuts me off. "She must have climbed out it. Nicky won't let us look at the window and won't tell us where she's gone."

"Oh god," I say, the stress of the night threatening to turn the contents of my stomach out. "Oh god." Did my daughter just run away? "Oh god." Miles-! Did he have something to do with-

"Maya, calm down," Nick says tensely, grabbing my wrist and heading for the Winding Way. "Let's go. Where is their room?"
Iris and Pearly lead us both to the twins' room, and Nick immediately strides up to Nicky and kneels. That's something I'd seen him do with Trucy when she was around Nicky's age; I'll have to ask him why he does that. "Nicholas," he says, firmly but quietly. "I hear your sister is missing."

Nicky stares at Nick, this strange man who just decided to come up to him and talk to him who seems to be interested in his sister, and shakes his head. "I know where she is," Nicky replies. "So I hear."

"So she's not missing."

Nick chuckles. "You're smart, Nicholas. I know you know better than that."

Nicky eyes him suspiciously. "How do you know that? We didn't even properly meet yet."

"Because you used the word 'properly' right," Nick says dryly. "Nicholas, your mother is scared. You don't want that, do you?"

At this, Nicky scuffs a foot. "No, sir."

"So c'mon. Tell us where Misty went. Please?"

"She came out to find me."

We all turn at the sound of Miles' voice, in time to see him put Misty down and she scurries over to me. Miles straightens, and says with a slight smile, "They saw me leave the manor and they were afraid I was leaving without meeting them. So they decided that one of them should try to stop me. Misty is, apparently, the cuter one of the two."

I snuggle my daughter in relief. "Thank you, Miles," I say, genuinely relieved and grateful. Then, to Misty and Nicky, I say, "I'll deal with you two later. Please, for the love of everything holy, behave yourselves for one more hour. And no more climbing out of the window!"

I also order Pearly and Iris to plant themselves in this room and not move for anything, and the three of us make our way back to the main hall. "She is... precious," Miles says softly. "I... You've done well."

I swallow hard at this, not really knowing what an appropriate response to his compliment is. He doesn't seem to expect a response, though, as he says, "We're focused on the wrong thing here. The children are here. We were ignorant of their existence for seven years. No amount of fighting is going to change that. We need to start acting like adults and figure out what's best for Nicholas and Misty."

That's what I've been trying to do- and failing at it- since they were born. Perhaps with two people who made careers of solving complex puzzles, I can actually make a decent choice for them for once. "Well, how about we start with the obvious," Nick says. "They need us in their lives. Both of us."

"Yes," Miles agrees immediately. "Maya, do they know who we are to them?"

I shake my head, feeling that old familiar heat of shame rising to my face again. Another part of my plan down the drain... "I was going to tell them in the morning, after discussing it with you two tonight," I tell them.

"Bad idea," Nick says immediately. "We're complete strangers to them. All they know of us is that..."
we're your friends. I'm not sure they'd be able to wrap their minds around the concept that they have different fathers, either."

"We have to inform them at some point, and soon, though," Miles says thoughtfully. "Definitely not before they get to know and trust us. I doubt the scene we made when we arrived lent itself to that part of it."

"No, probably not." Nick looks around at us. "So, step two: we have to stick around so that they get to know us better. Where do the three of us stand?"

If I was holding a Magatama, I'm sure I'd see Psyche locks slamming down around Miles. This is confirmed by Nick when he tilts his head slightly, looking at Miles curiously. He then shrugs, and says, "Okay, none of us want to answer that question. I get it."

"I don't think we can," I reply, unable to keep a bleak note from my voice.

"Alright," Nick says, leaning back against the wall. "Let me rephrase that to be a little blunter, then: how much love is still between the three of us?"

"I love you," I answer immediately. "Both of you."

"Miles?" Nick asks; I can feel the trepidation radiating off of him. Miles has already threatened to leave us once.

"I'm disappointed that you have to ask," Miles replies uneasily. "That is neither up for debate, nor is it really the point. Love alone isn't enough."

Heh. Trust Miles to say "I still love you" without actually saying it. As much as it hurts to say it, I agree with him. "Staying in an unhappy relationship for the sake of the kids usually ends up doing more harm to them than good."

"But we don't know if this is going to result in an unhappy relationship."

Nick's in devil's advocacy mode. Miles snorts. "I don't know what's going on in your head, Phoenix, but I'm pretty unhappy at the moment."

"There's a key phrase in there," Nick replies. "'At the moment'. I'm unhappy at the moment, too. If you'd heard the way Maya was talking earlier, you'd know that she's utterly miserable. Feelings like these can be pretty temporary."

"So I guess your question wasn't how much love is still between us, but rather, is there enough love to try to work this out."

"Right."

I stay silent. I don't feel I have a right to voice my opinion here. I expect Miles' answer to be a sad, but unwavering "no". "... I don't see why we can't try," he says finally. "We need to let the children get to know us better. We have to be around them to do that. Given the circumstances, in order to be around them to do that, we need to be here. If we have to be here, then there's little reason to close that door."

Relief floods me amidst the pain. If not for the fact that he wants to be a father to his daughter, he wouldn't want to do this; but the fact is that he does want to be a father to his daughter, so he's going to. Miles prompts Nick for his opinion, and Nick gives a lopsided grin. "How stubborn am I, Miles? Of course I want to try to work this out. But..."
"... yes?" I say, relief freezing in my heart.

He looks at me. "We start at square one," he says softly. "No intimacy beyond what we'd show other friends. This relationship has pretty well been decimated. We need to build it back up, if we can. And if we can't, we need to agree to stop before it gets nasty. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Nick," I say quietly. Miles nods silently.
My world just collapsed.

I cannot breathe. I cannot think anything but to get away from this place. The thought to call Franziska, seek her council- seek her chastisement since I know her council will be to dispose of the diaper and deal with the consequences of my actions, a fact that I cannot deny... Phoenix is right. They are innocent, both of them. Fleeing, as I want to, will be punishing Maya’s children. They do not deserve to be punished for this. It was not their responsibility. I need to tread carefully, but anything I can do to Maya as a reprisal will also hurt-

-what the hell is wrong with me?! Reprisal?! What am I, twelve? Good god...

"Excuse me, sir..."

The sound of a tiny voice, one that I find that I instinctually know, even not having heard it clearly a single time until this moment, interrupts my panicked thoughts. My daughter stands before me, slippered feet pointed inward and rubbing together nervously, hands clasped behind her back. She’s shivering.

My daughter.

I have a daughter.

“You... you’re not going to leave, are you? Because... because me 'n Nicky... we... we really wanted to meet Mama’s friends, and then you got all sick and Mama made us go to our room. We haven’t even properly met yet.”

I force myself to respond, to break the freeze of fear that comes over me. “No. I am not leaving.”

“Good. Because then I would cry.”

“I don’t want that.”

She beams at me happily, and holds out a little, shaking hand. “I’m Misty Fey. It is a pleasure to meet you.” Her tone is adult-like and mature, and it is endearing.

I take her hand gently; the shaking is her shivering, it seems. Her hand is cold. “My name is Miles Edgeworth,” I say, mimicking her formality, although I lack the chill I usually give when such introductions are made. “The pleasure is all mine, I assure you.” Misty giggles and blushes, pulling her hand away to wrap her arms around herself. “It is cold out,” I say. “Your pajamas aren’t nearly warm enough, are they?”

“I’m okay! Really!”

She’s not very good at lying. “Do you want to go inside?”

“Only if you do. I will keep you company until you do.”

“Then come and sit next to me.” She eyes me doubtfully at that; “It’s alright. I don’t mind either way.”

For some reason, my words reassure her and my daughter climbs up onto the bench next to me.
Truly a child, she snuggles against me while trying to appear nonchalant, and I suppress a laugh. “So does your mother usually let you wander about outside in your bed clothes?” I ask.

Misty shakes her head. “No. We’re not allowed outside after dark at all, unless we’re with Mama or Mystic Pearly or Sister Iris. They’re our big cousins.”

I nod in acknowledgement. “I know and am friends with them both,” I reply.

She looks at me, stunned, and puts a hand to her mouth, a gesture that strongly reminds me of Pearl. “Really? You know Mystic Pearly and Sister Iris?”

“I do. Wright-Phoenix, that is- knows both of them as well. Phoenix is your mother’s other... friend. He’s even closer to them than I am.”

“Wow. That’s so neat!” she gushes.

I sit with her for a moment longer, before saying, “So if you are not permitted outside after dark, why are you out here now?”

A shadow of shame crosses her precious face, and she drops her eyes to her lap. “Because me ‘n Nicky saw you leave the manor and we didn’t want you to go,” she said sadly. “So we said that since I’m cuter I would climb out the window and stop you when Sister Iris left the room.”

“I see.” A plot boiled up by children, no question about it. “Let us go back inside. You are cold and tired and I am sure you have been missed by now.”

She looks up at me once again. “You’re not mad?”

“I am not. I’m touched, actually, that you would risk getting in trouble for my sake.” I smile at her.

She nods. “Yeah. Mama gets really scared if she can’t find one of us and then she gets really mad when she finally does. I don’t like making her scared or mad, I love her.”

“She gets frightened and angry because she loves you too, you know.”

“Oh, I know! Mama loves me and Nicky so much!” Misty’s bad mood instantly lifts. Mine is slightly less dark, as well. Fears that I didn’t know I harbored until having this little chat have been eased, and my fury with Maya is lessened as information from this precious child trickles through it. Misty gives a hearty yawn and I ask, on impulse, “Would you like me to carry you?”

That is foolish and I acknowledge in the next moment that even should I be unable to forgive Maya I can never, ever just leave. I’m already head over heels for this child, and rejection will hurt. Fortunately, she does not reject me. “Are you sure? Because Mama said I’m too big for her to carry anymore. She isn’t strong enough.”

“I am plenty strong enough to carry you,” I reassure her.

She smiles, again. “Okay. I’m really, really tired. And you’re warm.”

I laugh as I stand, lift the girl from her seat, and head back into the manor, my daughter in my arms.

In the awkward silence that follows, I just focus on breathing. I haven’t lost them. We’re hanging on by a thread. Finally, Miles says, “I believe you promised them that you’d go talk to them. I
suggest you do so. Misty told me that she was tired when she found me; that is why I was carrying her, actually.”

I nod and take my leave, stopping in the winding way to catch my breath and steady my hands and footsteps. I make a mental note to ask Nick if I can borrow his books on anxiety and finish the short walk to my children’s’ room.

They are, indeed, very sleepy; I only have enough time to tell them that, up until the window stunt, no one was mad at them. Mr. Nick and Mr. Miles know that they got off to a bad start, but tomorrow’s a new day, and the problems that the three of us had when we arrived have been settled. They needn’t worry.

Misty’s comforted by my explanation, and promptly falls asleep. Nicky holds on for long enough to tell me that he really, really likes Mr. Nick and it’s weird how he felt like he should obey him, even though he doesn’t know him. Kinda like he feels like he should obey me, but doesn’t, most of the time. He’s used to me.

"I love you too, buddy,” I reply with a bit of a snort, ruffling my son's hair. He mutters a protest as he falls asleep as well.

With that, I lock the windows firmly, making sure the kids can't open them— it's October, for crying out loud, there's no reason for the windows to be open— and I head back into the main area with Iris and Pearly. Our conversations about sleeping arrangements resume, going in an entirely different direction than it had hours ago. I take selfish comfort in the fact that Nick and Miles' bond is fractured enough that they are adhering to Nick's "friends only" demand as well. We bid each other good night as Iris shows Miles to his room, and Pearly takes Nick, and I head to my own quarters. Tomorrow is the start of a new phase. Tomorrow, I can start proving that I'm not selfish and yes, I do love them both. Tomorrow will be better.

I wake up, my heart still heavy and a painful twist in my stomach. I hear the noises of morning activity and conversation, though, so I swallow my fear and shuffle out to the kitchen area. Nick and the kids are talking enthusiastically while Miles just listens thoughtfully, offering a few words every once in a while or when he’s asked for his input. “Good morning, Mama!” Nicky says brightly.

“Morning, Mama,” Misty greets, as well. Before I have a chance to say anything, she asks timidly, “Are you still mad?”

I shake my head groggily. “I’m not mad anymore, Mist-mist,” I reassure her sleepily, “but you still have to be punished for what you did. You scared all of us. Nicky, you too. That wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“Aw, go easy on them, huh?” Nick says, leaning back so that the front legs of his chair are off the floor. I cringe; looks like I’ll have to reel in his behavior, too. I can’t believe that he’s setting that kind of example. “It was late; they were confused and scared by the adults acting funny.” At this, he looks over at Misty and winks; she giggles and blushes and Miles frowns at him. “I’m sure they’d have shown better judgment if things weren’t so upsetting. Right, guys?”

“Right,” Nicky agrees, with a firm nod of his head.

“Regardless,” Miles says, “they shouldn’t have done what they did. The manor has a perfectly good front door.”

“And their mother and friend standing in front of said door. Would you have gone that way?”
“Nick,” I say in my best begging voice, “please stop encouraging them to do the wrong thing. Including leaning back in a chair that’s not meant for it.”

Nick lets the chair fall on all fours, making a face at me. Nicky and Misty laugh. I mutter about him already making me regret this and go for the coffee he made.

Fortunately, the kids accept their punishment without much protest - it helps that Miles supports me, and even Nick tells them to “man up and accept responsibility - you broke the rules, you deal with the consequences. Sorry, guys, but that’s how it is.” Things between the three of us are very awkward, and Miles and Nick seem to be happy to just let me take the lead with the kids, something I’m grateful for.

As the weeks pass, they both gently get their hands in raising them as well. Past that first morning, Nicky seems more interested in Miles and Misty has a fascination with Nick’s hair. I’m reading up on some advanced spiritual techniques one afternoon in a sun room in the manor; Miles is attempting to show seven-year-old Nicky how to play chess, and Nick’s just kind of sitting there, letting Misty climb on him. I start to tell her to get off Mr. Nick, when he cuts me off with a wave of his hand. “It’s okay. Trucy used to do this. I kind of miss it, actually.”

“Trucy?” Misty asks, pausing in her Nick-climbing to look at him, arms around his neck.

He nods. “My daughter.”

“You have a daughter, Mr. Nick?” Nicky asks, turning around in his seat.

“Indeed I do,” Nick confirms with a smile.

“How old is she?” Misty asks curiously.

“Fifteen. Wait… Yeah, fifteen.”

“Wooooow… she’s old.”

Nick laughs, and even Miles chuckles. “We must be ancient, then,” Miles says in a teasing voice.

“Yeah, you are,” Nicky says with a shrug, as if that statement wouldn’t normally be extremely insulting to most adults our age. “All adults are. Even Mystic Pearl, although she insists she isn’t.”

“Mystic Pearl isn’t an adult,” Nick contradicts, looking and sounding bemused.

“Yes, she is!” the twins inform him in unison.

He laughs in surprise. “Okay, okay! She’s an adult!”

Misty giggles, and asks, “Can we meet her too someday, Mr. Nick?”

“Of course! She wants to meet you guys, too. And her big brother.”

“She has a big brother, huh?” Nicky says thoughtfully. “Like me and Misty?”

“What are you talking about?” Misty snaps, twisting in Nick’s lap to glare at Nicholas. “I’m older!”

“Mist-mist, we’re twins. We have the same birthday.”

“Yeah, but I was born first!”
“Well, I’m more mature than you,” Nicky sasses, and accentuates his point by sticking his tongue out at her.

“More mature, or more stuck-up?”

“At least I’m not acting like a baby!”

“At least I’m not acting like a-”

“No fighting!” I shout over them. Silence descends as they turn back to their respective play partners. Then, in a stage whisper, I hear Nicky mutter, “Brat.”

Miles frowns at him. “Nicholas,” he says in a threatening, behave-yourself kind of tone.

At the other end of the room, Misty retorts, “Baby.”

This time, Nick picks up my job for me. “Misty, stop it. Now.”

Silence again. I resume my reading. “Nicky,” Miles says after a few moments. “Why are you only moving your pawns?”

I look up in time to see my son shrug. “The little ones, right?”

“Right.”

“I can’t remember what to do with any of the other ones. So they’re all just gonna chill back here and guard the castle for me.”

Miles laughs. “Maybe this is a bit too advanced for you.”

“Maybe!” Nicky agrees, shrugging and spreading his hands. “I’m only seven, you know.”

“Is there another game you like to play?”

“Chutes and Ladders!”

Miles makes a face, although he does his best to hide it. “Oooh, I wanna play too!” Misty says, abruptly sliding off Nick’s lap and running over to them. In desperation, Miles looks at me for salvation, and then Nick. Nick chuckles, straightening his beanie, and joins them. “Tell you what, Miles,” he says. “I’ll play too.”

“Oh, that is exactly what I wanted. Thank you.”

The dry sarcasm in Miles’ voice goes way over the twins’ heads; they really believe that Miles wanted Nick to play with them. “You too, Mama!” Nicky demands.

At first, I want to say no. But then Misty looks at me with her best “Pleeeeeease!” face, and Nick joins in with an exaggerated puppy-dog eyes look, and I close my book, giggling. “Don’t look at me like that, you guys,” I say, standing. “I’ll play too.”

I laugh at the jubilant cheers from the kids - that Nick joins in on - and go to retrieve the desired game while Miles and Nick puts away the chess set. I return, help them with their clean up, and we start Chutes and Ladders setup, which isn’t nearly as complicated and Nicky and Misty insist on doing it themselves. We watch them, and out of the blue, Misty says thoughtfully, “You know, I think I’m jealous of Mr. Nick’s daughter and I haven’t even met her yet. Does that make me bad?”
“Of course it doesn’t,” I say. “But why are you jealous of her?”

“Well,” she says, sitting cross-legged on her chair, “because. It must be wonderful having a neat daddy like Mr. Nick. Me and Nicky have none.”

Her tone is painfully sad; in an effort to get away from the blatantly accusing glares Nick and Miles are shooting me- oh man, if looks could kill- I glance at my son in time to see him wince. “Misty, we’ve talked about this,” he says tiredly. “No one in the village has daddies. They’re all so selfish that they all leave. We’re better off without them.”

“Hold it,” Miles says urgently, to get their attention. He looks from one twin to the other as he says, “Did someone tell you that? That your daddy left you?”

“Daddies,” Nicky corrects, and I choke, “and no. But I asked Mystic Pearl when me and Misty talked and that’s why she said her daddy left. He was selfish.”

“Nicky,” I say nervously, “why do you think you and Misty have more than one daddy?”

“Because look at her!” Nicky replies incredulously. “Her hair is all light and there’s no one in the village with hair that color and we don’t look anything alike but we’re twins and she’s a girl.” He takes a deep breath, and then adds, “I think she’s adopted.”

“Nicky!” Misty wails, as Nick says, severely, “That was outrageously mean, Nicholas. Apologize right now.”

Nicky’s face flushes with shame. “Sorry, Misty,” he mumbles. “I don’t really think you’re adopted. I was just joking.”

Misty sniffles, wipes her nose with her hand, and buries her face in my skirt. I whisper a reassurance that she is most definitely not adopted. That bit settled, Miles clears his throat and says a bit uneasily, “But you don’t know that’s why your fathers aren’t here. Sometimes things happen that adults can’t control. I’m sure that’s why they aren’t here, Misty.”

Miles’ daughter looks up at him. “Are you sure, Mr. Miles?” she asks with a sniffle. “Because that’s what I want to think, too. But if everyone else’s daddies aren’t here because they hate them…”

“That is absolutely false,” he replies, a bit harsher than he intends. After grimacing, he softens his voice and adds, “I am one-hundred percent sure that your fathers love you both, very much.”

“He’s right,” Nick adds, his voice cracking slightly. I’m not sure anyone but me notices it. “And even if they don’t, well… they’re idiots, then, and you two have us, right?”

Nicky smiles brilliantly at him. “Right! Mr. Nick and Mr. Miles love us just fine.” He reaches over to pat his sister’s hair lightly, trying to comfort her. “So cheer up! They’re as good as the real thing, right?”

Misty nods, returning her brother’s smile. I excuse myself, ignoring their protests, lock myself in the bathroom, and try as hard as I can to keep my sobbing to myself.

Talk of missing fathers is done with. That night, we discuss if we should tell them now. Much to my relief, they agree that we shouldn’t. Now, the issue is that they won’t understand why I never told any of them. It’s like I’m lying to Nick and Miles all over again, except this time, it’s their children.
The thought that we had each fathered one of the kids never crossed my mind. Of course, it’s not a common occurrence. If I’d known this was the case I would have definitely called her out, right then at the hospital, even with Ema still in the room with us.

But I didn’t know it was possible and I didn’t call her out. I have to deal with that.

The first time I got a good look at Nicholas- when I knelt to be at eye-level with him, an easy way to make kids more comfortable with you, it helps them feel less intimidated if you’re at their level instead of towering over them- I knew for a fact that the whole village knew I had a kid. Every person in this village...

I order myself to knock it off. I can’t change what happened no matter how angry I get and getting angry is going to have absolutely no positive effect. I need to focus.

The kids take to me and Miles very well; the morning after the big revelation, we run into each other in the hallway, heading for the kitchen for breakfast. He’s mad at me still, I know. That’s fine. I’m just as mad at him, I realize. He abandoned us, both of us, and only came back when he was running away from a perceived failure on his part. If his brother-in-law hadn’t shot his niece he wouldn’t be here. Our value is on the same level of a psychopath he hates.

That stings.

“We need to talk,” I tell him as we walk.

“Yes, we do,” he replies quietly.

I plan on broaching the subject, telling him how I really feel about him leaving and his self-righteousness- we all handled this badly, including him, and I’m not sure he understands that he’s just as much at fault for the situation we’re in- but the kids are already up.

We seem to agree that they’re more important than our gripes with each other and we can’t talk about it in front of them, anyway. So we engage them in conversation until Maya gets up.

The incident while we’re playing with them shakes me and reminds me that yes, one of us is guiltier than the other two. Maya knows it. She bears the brunt of this situation, but as much as we both want to remind her, we both also know she doesn’t need to be reminded.

The next day, I pull Miles aside as we’re talking about me calling home. I didn’t tell them about the twins’ existence. The only thing I told my kids in the city was that something was a huge deal and I was still trying to come to terms with the way things changed. I do need to tell them about the kids, I just need to figure out how to do so. But Maya’s attitude… “What is it?” Miles asked me.

“She’s drowning, Miles. This hasn’t helped her at all; this has made it worse on her. We’ve at least got to cull the dirty looks. If you don’t like that prospect, then we need to anyway for the twins. They’re catching on that we’re mad at her and that’s not a conversation I want to have right now.”
Much to my surprise, Miles agrees. “I know. I intend to speak with her in private, actually. I wasn’t sure if you’d noticed-”

“Yes.”

“But I’m afraid for her at this point.”

“Me too.”

He sighs. “We’re both parents as well, Wright. Remember that. We both know what it means. They are and have always been her number one concern. I do not think she will harm herself when they are still so dependent on her.”

“Point. Still, since you were going to anyway, talk to her, please.”

“I still intend to.”

“Good.” The sound of my son banging in the front door, yelling for us to join him and his sister in the gardens so he can show us what he can do, breaks my concentration and automatically shifts my focus onto him. “We’re coming, Nicky!” I shout back. “You get Maya, we’ll meet you outside,” I tell Miles.

He goes without question as I join Nicky. He reaches up as I approach him and takes my hand and my breath away at the same time. I wonder if he’s already figured it out. He looks almost exactly like me, after all.

By the time Miles comes back into the room to inform me that Nicholas wants our undivided attention, I already see Nick out the window, standing at the tree and kneeling on the ground, talking to the twins. “After this, I think we need to have a talk. You and I,” Miles tells me.

He doesn’t sound angry, but he’s good at hiding his feelings. “Oh god, what did I do now?”

He looks surprised. And alarmed. And like he’s questioning something he previously held as true. “You’ve done nothing,” he replies, uncharacteristically defensive and very worried. “I just want to talk.”

“Alright,” I say, as we get out to the courtyard. I put my trepidation away and smile a big smile for the babies, as Nicky runs up to me.

After a brief conversation, I now know that the kids have been practicing climbing the tree they always play by, and Nicky wants to show us how high he can go. My immediate reaction is to tell them that it’s not a climbing tree and I never want to see or hear of them climbing it ever again, but Nick cuts me off, “Okay. We’ll be right here if you need help!”

I don’t like it- in fact, I’ve got a really nasty feeling about this- but I don’t rebuff him. I want Nick and Miles to get comfortable parenting them. And I want the twins to understand that they both have full authority to do so; therefore, I’ll take Nick on about giving our son the okay to do something dangerous later, when they’re not within earshot.

Nicky climbs. He stops and looks at us when he’s a little higher than Nick’s head. “Good job!” Nick croons. “Is that the highest you’ve gone so far?”

“Yes!” my little acrobat chirps happily.
Nick holds out his arms. “Awesome. Here, I’ll help you down.”

“No no, Mr. Nick. I’m gonna go higher now!”

“Nicholas-”

But Nick is too late, and so am I. Nicky’s climbing again. “Nicky!” Misty whines. “You’re gonna get hurt!”

“No I’m not! I’m not afraid!”

“It’s not a matter of being afraid; it’s a matter of being smart!” Miles returns. “Stop it! If you go any higher, the branches won’t be able to hold you!”

Nicky ignores him and Nick makes a grab for him, but he’s already gone too high for that and trying to force him down could very well result in him falling. “Oh, please be careful! Come back down, Nicholas! Please!” I plead.

We all watch in dread as my son ignores me, laughing jubilantly, his elation a stark contrast to the dread we’re all sharing at that moment. Nick repeats my plea for him to stop and stay where he is when he’s near the top- he’ll get a stepladder and help him down- and my heart stops as Nick’s plea-rapidly-becoming-demand is cut off with a sharp crack.

Nicky doesn’t even have time to scream as he scrambles for a hold on another branch. I do scream, though, and Miles immediately grabs me and hisses for me to stop. Misty’s started crying and if I get hysterical, she will as well. Instead, I kneel and tell Misty to go get Sister Iris, quickly.

Meanwhile, Miles and Nick have been discussing in quick, quiet tones what the best way to get my now-trapped son down is. They seem to have come to a consensus- “Nicholas!” Miles shouts up. He’s still trying to pull himself up onto the branch he’s hanging from. “I’m going to maneuver beneath you! When I count to three, let go and let yourself fall! I will catch-”

“No!” Nick screams, abruptly. “Do not let go, Nicky!”

“What?” Miles looks at him, bewildered. “But we just said-”

“His scarf! His scarf is tangled in that branch-” he points- “and it looks like he tied it to keep it out of the way as he climbed. If he lets go he’s going to hang himself!”

The scream that issues from me this time is involuntary. My baby boy! Oh god, please, my baby-

“I’m going to go untangle his scarf,” Nick cuts off my frantic thoughts, yanking his jacket off.

“Don’t be stupid, Wright,” Miles snaps. “If the branches can’t hold a 60-pound boy they’re not going to hold a 160-pound man!”

“I’m not staying up there,” he retorts, “I just need to get his scarf free.”

Miles continues arguing with him; I do not. Nick is right. If he’s not freed, he’ll hurt or kill himself when he looses his grip on that branch, or when it breaks; we have to get him down quickly. Nick knows what he’s doing. I have to believe that.

While Nick is climbing up to his son, Misty returns with Iris, who has a ladder. A small stepladder. “Oh my. This isn’t going to do us any good,” she says, paling.

“Get her back inside,” I tell Iris tensely. She drops the stepladder, picks up Misty, and retreats back
into the house, shouting for Pearl.

Fortunately, we don’t distract Nick from his task. He’s close enough to Nicky to get at his tangled scarf by the time Iris and Pearly drag out the big ladder, more than tall enough to reach them. He works quickly, and I can hear his voice, although I can’t hear what he’s saying, but it seems that Nicky is relaxing a bit.

And then the branch that Nick is standing on snaps; he drops, hanging onto the branch Nicky is on, and a second later that one breaks as well. As they fall, Nick manages to grab our son, and he twists around; when they land, Nick is underneath Nicky, his maneuver intended to break Nicky’s fall.

It happens so fast that by the time I comprehend that Nick is lying unconscious on the ground, and Nicky is crying, grabbing at his shoulders, it’s already done and Iris and Miles are already at his side. Miles orders Nicky away, and my son runs to me, sobbing, shaking. That it’s difficult for me to lift him by now is no consideration as I snatch him up and carry him into the manor.

I don’t bother hiding my terror. He’d be able to see it anyway.

“I don’t believe it.”

“I do.”

Nick is probably the only one of us in truly good spirits. We’re all relieved, of course. His god-like luck has pulled though again, and now he’s sitting in my bed, swollen, bruised and twisted ankle elevated. That looks like it’s agonizing, and the only sign of it on Nick’s face is in his eyes; he’s grinning stupidly as the village midwife fusses with it, trying to set it. He grunts at a yank on it from her; she’s being as gentle as she can, but it’s going to hurt. There’s nothing she can do about that.

“You realize something, right guys?”

Miles shrugs. “I realize a lot of things. What specifically are you referring to?”

“I finally broke it.”

We stare at him. I consider asking her to check his head again, or maybe call in the medical doctor who makes visits when it’s something our midwife can’t handle. He stares back, and realizes that we have not a clue what he’s implying, and he says, “I think that was the last of my lives. Gotta actually be careful from now on, right?”

I can hear the pain in his voice, even if I can’t see it on his face. I am also aware of two little sets of eyes watching this, one horrified and the other ashamed. Nick knows they’re there, too, and when Miles and I say nothing in response to his cavalier attitude about this- he could have been hurt much, much worse, and so could have Nicky, and to make cat jokes…

Nick beckons to Nicky. My little boy shuffles in, shame-faced, nose stuffy and red and eyes still wet. “Mr. Nick, I’m so sorry,” Nicky says, and if I know my boy, he means it, more than he’s ever meant an apology before.

“You should be,” Nick replies evenly, keeping eye contact. “We all told you not to keep climbing.”

“I know,” Nicky says miserably. “I know. I’ll never disobey Mama or you and Mr. Miles ever again.”
We all know that is a promise that he is never going to be able to keep, but the sentiment is real all the same. “I’m sure we’ll all appreciate that,” Nick replies. Then, in a fit of worry that finally shows on his face, he asks, “What about you, Nicky? Were you hurt when we fell?”

“No sir,” he said, with a shake of his head. “You saved me.”

I find myself hustling the kids out when Nick tears up at that. He can talk to Nick later. It’s not like he’s going to be doing much of anything for a while.

Nicky’s punishment is determined almost wholly by Nick. I approve of it; it’s not what I would do, which is ground him for life, but it’s an appropriate punishment and serves more purpose than just behavior modification.

Since Nick is immobile until his ankle heals enough to bear weight in an orthopedic boot- he insists on a trip to the city the next day to have it x-rayed and get that boot, since he utterly refuses to use crutches- Nicky is to keep him company. That is, Nicky will do his lessons in my room, with Nick, and get him things he needs. Nicky reads his literature lessons out loud to him, and by the time Nick has the okay to walk around in the boot, it doesn’t seem like this is much of a punishment at all; regardless of whether or not it feels like a punishment, Nicky is indeed atoning for hurting Nick. It’s fascinating.

Of course, Trucy needs to be notified of her father’s injury, and in the evening, before dinner, Nick calls her to let her know. This results in Trucy, as well as Apollo and Klavier, on our doorstep mid-morning the next day; Apollo wouldn’t let Trucy go alone and wanted to make sure Nick was alright, and Klavier didn’t want two young people traveling so far without an escort.

Yeah, okay. He just wanted to see the village. Regardless, he is welcome here, and he brings Detective Skye, Detective Gumshoe and Maggey Byrd’s regards and well-wishes, which is nice.

But Nick’s relationship with Trucy is immediately strained.

I am absolutely aghast that he never told her about the twins. Of course, like everyone else, she knows Nicholas is his son the moment her eyes fall on him. Apollo does, too, but he not only sees Trucy’s poor, but hidden, reaction, he sees how tense Nick is.

The first fight is that evening over dinner.

Afterwards, I’m sitting alone, in a meditation chamber, not meditating, once the dust clears. Miles is the one who interrupts my not-meditation. “Are you busy?”

“Not really.”

He comes in and sits cross-legged in front of me, mimicking my pose. He seems to want to say something, but can’t find the words. I’m tense from the events with my son still, and from Nick’s rather loud fight with Trucy at the dinner table. Finally, whether this is what he intended to say, he says it. “Things are settling down.”

“Okay.”

An awkward pause. “Apollo’s venting to Pearl,” he tells me. “Trucy’s with Klavier, Wright is with Iris, and the twins seem to be consoling each other.”

“I see.” I don’t miss the subtle change in his tone when he says that Nick sought solace with Iris. I don’t like that, either.
“We might need to talk to the twins.”

“Probably.”

Another awkward pause. “Please say something.”

“Something?”

“Maya… You’re frightening us.”

That actually gets my attention. “Why would I be scaring you?” I ask him, bewildered by this revelation.

I get the sense that this was what he wanted to talk about. “You’re depressed,” he said, wagging a finger at me. “I’m not talking about just being upset or down. You’re starting to act like you did after—”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll—”

I don’t get my threat out, as Miles snaps, “I don’t need to, since you just made my point for me! Maya, I…” I shut up when he yells at me. Fear almost overwhelms me, an overpowering sense that the delicate tension I’ve painstakingly maintained for the last seven years is about to snap and I can do nothing about it. “I was angry. Very. I still am, I still am very angry. But I care about you just as much as I did before. And the fight between Phoenix and his daughter? Not your fault in the slightest. He did to her exactly what you did to us, and that’s his to own. Trucy isn’t angry with you. Neither is Apollo. I don’t blame you for this issue, and Phoenix cannot.”

“Whether or not I’m directly responsible,” I say quietly, “this wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t done what I did.”

“And that wouldn’t have happened if my brother-in-law hadn’t tried to murder my family,” he replies, “or if Kristoph hadn’t destroyed Wright’s life. Of course, we wouldn’t have kids if Wright and I had used a lick of common sense when we made love with you and that would not have happened if Sal Manella hadn’t produced an adult movie of his pet project—how far back do you want to play the blame game, Maya? I’m sure I can keep going.”

“That’s not necessary. I get it,” I say, brightening slightly. Very slightly. He probably truly doesn’t blame me for Nick’s issues with his daughter now, and that makes me feel better, that for once, someone’s really on my side in all this.

He reaches out to me, takes my hand, scoots closer. He changes the subject. “This has made me remember an obligation I have of my own, that I have forgotten,” he says. “I must tell Franziska. She will want to know all about both of the twins, and will consider herself their aunt. I can foresee that trip to California she wants to take with Leah happening much sooner now.”

The thought of Franziska knowing about this makes me cringe. “She’s going to hate me for this,” I moan softly.

Miles maneuvers himself so he is sitting next to me, and puts his arm around my shoulders. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” he says dryly, and I have to wonder if he really wants to call her—he must, but does he want to? It doesn’t sound like he does.

I am exhausted. I am going to fall asleep while I’m on the phone with her if she doesn’t stop soon, but I dare not interrupt her. One does not simply interrupt Franziska von Karma when she is
furious.

And furious she is. I knew she would be, but I wasn’t expecting to be castigated for forty-five minutes. She has broken a record for how many times she’s used the word ‘fool’ and its derivatives in a single paragraph, I am sure. But finally, I snap, “What do you want me to say, Franziska? You were right! I should have called! What do you propose I do about that now?!”

“I want you to turn back time and call her when I first urged you to, so Maya Fey wouldn’t have to bear the burden of having two children alone! So both you and Phoenix Wright wouldn’t miss the most critical developmental years of their lives! Do you realize that if you’d been in their lives right from the start that you wouldn’t need to earn their trust- you’d have it, you fool! But no, you absolutely, utterly and foolishly refused to-”

“I can’t do that,” I cut her off through gritted teeth. “Stop telling me to!”

She stops, sighs. “I know,” she says finally, sadly. “I know.”

“Don’t you think I don’t regret that I’ve missed those years? That my daughter doesn’t even know that I am-”

“What?”

“…”

She manages to pull it out of me that we’re not telling the twins that Phoenix and I are their fathers just yet. And off she goes again, although this time Phoenix and Maya are targets for her ire as well. Even though this is a private phone conversation, I feel less alone knowing that she’s now pissed off at them, too.

I finally cannot listen to this anymore, and I snap, “I would appreciate it if you did not criticize our parenting so fiercely.”

She laughs, harsh and disbelieving. “Miles Edgeworth, after all the foolish things you three fools have done, do you seriously have the foolish gall to foolishly demand that I respect your foolish idea of parenting?”

“Yes,” I hiss vehemently. “We are doing what we feel is best given the circumstances. If you really think you know two children you’ve never met better than me, Phoenix, and the three women who have raised them, you are more than welcome to come here and tell them yourself.”

If she tried I would protest, of course. Fortunately, my point is made and she quiets. “Very well,” she says quietly. “You do know better than I how they would react, of course. But be aware: I believe you are making a grave mistake. I believe you fools are making a foolish, grave mistake. Although not by blood, those children are my niece and nephew. I expect you to do everything in your power to help and care for them.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” I inform her. “One is my child by blood, the other by virtue of who his parents are. I have no intention of doing anything that could possibly harm them.”

The skeptical noise she makes tells me that she wants to argue that point, but she settles for just the noise. “Give Phoenix my well-wishes.”

“I will.”

“And you simply must get back to me about a visit. I want to meet these children, and I do miss
Now she is getting ahead of herself. “Perhaps,” I reply, “but we will handle one thing at a time. Let us deal with the crises on our slate right now before we begin planning a Tours de Grande of Germany.”

“Fool,” she says, but this time her voice is affectionate. “I did not mean right this moment. Phoenix Wright would hardly be able to enjoy himself with a broken ankle. Go give him my wishes and keep me informed, little brother.”

“As you wish, big sister.”

She laughs at me, scolds me for being pert, and we hang up, both of us in good spirits. There is no reason to delay passing Franziska’s message to Phoenix, and so I make my way to his room. As I approach, I hear Sister Iris’ voice: “… tell them about this.”

“No, I agree, you’re right,” Wright replies, and I stop in my tracks. “As much as I want to at this moment, I know it’s momentary. At the very least, I need to be absolutely sure-”

“Precisely. I don’t blame you in the least for being impulsive right now, but-”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Yes. But we really mustn’t tell them of this. I can’t imagine either of them taking it better than Master Maya did all those years ago.”

“Yeah, definitely not. Except this time, they’d have cause to worry.”

“Feenie…”

I walk past his room, feeling sick and afraid. I can wait to give him Franziska’s well wishes. He’s not going anywhere.

A month or so passes. The three of us continue to try to reestablish the bonds between us. It’s hard. More than once, I break down; the last time I do, during a fight that didn't seem to have any start point, it just kind of was there suddenly, I cry at Miles, “I just want us to go back to how we used to be!”

“That can’t happen,” Miles replies, just as upset as I am. “I’m not trying to be stubborn or difficult but with everything that’s happened, that’s impossible! All three of us are entirely different people now! We can’t just go back to the way things were!”

After that argument, I avoid all four of them for several days. It’s the middle of November, and they’ve begun decorating for Christmas. I study. First, Nicky and Misty come to me, asking me to come out to the main hall to help them decorate. I refuse.

Half an hour later, they send Nick. “C’mon, Maya,” he tries to wheedle me. “You loved decorating the office, you know you did. Come help us out, huh? It’ll be fun.”

I shake my head. “No. I can’t. I think I’d just get in the way, so I’d rather not risk it. You guys keep
going. I’ll take a picture of your handiwork when you’re done.”

Nick’s face falls, but he leaves as I ask him to. Only a minute later, Miles strides in. “Maya Fey, you get your backside in the Main Hall and help us decorate right this instant,” he says severely.

I frown hard at him. “I already told Nick I’d rather not.”

“You’re being an idiot,” he accuses, and I bristle at him. “I am not! You guys are having fun! Why am I going to go out there and spoil it for you? Why should I have to?”

“You’re spoiling it by not joining us,” Miles bristles right back. “Or are you still angry with me? It’s been days, Maya, let it go, for crying out loud!”

I blink in surprise. “Wha- I was never angry with you to begin with.”

“What?”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“… no. I was frustrated, but never angry.” His voice is softer, still demanding but not harsh. And then he adds in amusement, “Every time I wonder why I try, you remind me.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, setting my paperwork aside.

He shakes his head. “Nothing, Maya. Nothing. Now that our communication issues have been cleared up for the time being, will you please come help us decorate? I'm warning you- we're sending Pearl in next.”

I chuckle. Pearl's taken to punching me in the arm in a similar fashion to her assaults on Nick, and I don't particularly feel like being abused today. “Fine, fine,” I say, keeping my voice light and whimsical. “I'll come help decorate. But you have to accept my ideas without complaint!”

“If it gets you to stop brooding, I'll accept almost anything,” he mutters, holding me by my upper arm and almost dragging me out of the room.
Chapter 27

I need to ride this out with Trucy.

The explosion itself didn’t surprise me, just the intensity. Of course she’d be angry that I didn’t tell her right away. Apollo is angry, as well, to a lesser degree; although he is less so with me and more with Maya. When he prepares to say something, though, Klavier, who doesn’t appear even the least bit surprised, pulls him aside.

I need to ask the prosecutor how to get Apollo to speak quietly, especially when the discussion is heated. Regardless, by the time their conversation is finished, Apollo is much calmer and doesn’t say boo to me about it. In fact, he’s trying to help calm Trucy.

When she explodes at dinner, I realize I’m walking a very, very thin line. Do I really have a right to condemn Maya? I know who Trucy is to Apollo; I have come to love him like a son, as well. I know their mother is alive and well. I’ve justified it to myself since Zak’s murder; at first it was because their mother was missing. When I managed to figure out who she was, it was because I had no way of contacting her. When that opportunity cropped up, it was because she didn’t know them.

Now that her memory is back, it is because she is still not willing to take responsibility for them, and I promised to keep mum on it until she is.

Too bad the fact that I now know fully how Maya’s felt the last seven years doesn’t override my hurt for what she did. And I know it will do me no good when Thalassa finally gives me the green light to talk to my kids.

“Feenie?”

I look up from my place on the bed; when Trucy flipped and having a peaceful dinner was officially impossible, Klavier and Miles helped me here. While Klavier went to go see to my daughter, Miles went looking for Maya. I wasn’t expecting anyone to speak to me.

I’m glad that if someone’s going to, it’s her. She’s empathic to a fault, reluctant to condemn anyone for anything. I know she’s gotten better with boundaries, but I can be sure she’s not going to upbraid me more. “Hello,” I say, my tone almost shy.

Iris enters my room, wringing her hands. “How is your ankle?”

“Painful,” I reply honestly, with a rueful grin.

“Do you want me to get you some medicine?”

“No. It’s not intolerable. I might want something before I try to go to sleep, though.”

“Alright.”

There’s an awkward silence between us; she breaks it by coming and sitting in the chair next to my bed. “I just wanted to let you know,” she says, “that I understand, even if no one else does.”

I shrug. “Miles and Maya understand,” I say. “Maya’s a hypocrite if she doesn’t.”

“I agree. But she certainly does understand. I think the young prosecutor does, as well, and I think he explained it to Mr. Justice in a way he gets, too.”
“So just about the only person who doesn’t get it is Trucy.”

“Yes. And she adores you, Feenie. She’ll come around. I’m sure of it.”

“Thanks, Rissy.” I look down at my hands, not sure what to say or do.

Iris says, “Feenie… You know, you can talk to me. I won’t go tattling on you.” She smiles brilliantly at me, almost lovingly. A wave of nostalgia crashes over me abruptly, reminding me of when we were college students so deeply in love that we made our friends sick with our public displays of affection.

I abruptly want that back. It was so simple, so pure. At least, it appeared pure. I knew nothing about the lie, nothing about the dark secret my Dollie was hiding.

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Iris.” The statement comes out of my mouth without a thought. “I’m tired. I’m keeping things from all four of my kids, Maya spent seven years lying to me and Miles, Miles lied about his situation in Germany, I lied to Miles for a year about what I knew- I’m sick of the lies. I just want to pack it up and just… go.”

“Don’t say that. Please.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“No, it isn’t. I know it isn’t, and you know it isn’t.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It is. Right at this moment, it is. Right at this moment, I resent them all- Maya, Miles, those kids, Trucy and Apollo, Pearls- even Iris. And I tell her that. I hate myself for it, but it’s honest.

She flinches. “I understand why. Phoenix, you… you’ve been through a lot. But it’s not nearly as black and white as you seem to want it to be.”

“Oh, believe me,” I retort, “I’m damn well aware that this isn’t black and white.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t want it to be.”

“You are absolutely right. I want it to be completely black and white so I know exactly what the right thing to do is,” I tell her, frustrated. “What do I do about Miles and Maya? I’m the only one in this that didn’t betray the other two.” Before she can protest, I say, “And what about Trucy and Apollo? I’m betraying them if I don’t tell them what I know. I’m betraying Thalassa if I do. I just want everyone to stop pulling me in fifty different directions! This whole mess is tearing me apart and no one seems to care.”

Iris takes my face in her hands, and looks directly into my eyes as she says, very gently, lovingly, “I care, Phoenix.”

“I have no idea how much I want to kiss you.” The desire is so sudden and strong that I almost do it instead of say it.

She doesn’t release me or back away when she replies, with a sad smile, “I believe that’s what you want to do. I also believe that you know that this is a black and white issue.”

I swallow hard. “Yes, I know. But that doesn’t change that I-”

“It does change it. You’re upset, and you’re lashing out in a way that’ll get their attention. I won’t
be used that way.”

Her words might as well be a slap in the face, as I realize that she’s right. This conversation alone has made me want her again, although I’ve felt it since the first night we’ve been here. But is it real, or is it as she says—acting out, in a way that will get them to understand how much I’m hurting? “I’m sorry,” I say, honestly.

Iris pulls away from me at that, nodding. “Feenie, I… I know that you and the others have agreed to utter truthfulness. Regardless, I don’t think you should tell them about this.”

“No, I agree, you’re right,” I say sullenly. “As much as I want to at this moment, I know it’s momentary. At the very least, I need to be absolutely sure-”

“Precisely. I don’t blame you in the least for being impulsive right now, but-”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Yes. But we really mustn’t tell them of this. I can’t imagine either of them taking it better than Master Maya did all those years ago.” She’s getting upset at the mere thought of dealing with that fallout.

I still can’t stop myself from implying, again, that I want her. “Yeah, definitely not. Except this time, they’d have cause to worry.”

“Feenie…”

There’s silence between us, but now it’s uncomfortable. Finally, she says sternly, “They do not have cause to worry. I will reject any advances from you, Phoenix. I mean it.”

“I know you do. And, you know? That… kind of makes me feel better. How sick is that?”

“It’s not sick. It’s a relief to know where exactly your boundaries are.”

There’s something sad and bitter in her tone. I consider prying, if only to get my mind off my own worries. Her comment about boundaries strikes me, though, and makes me pause. “You know, Rissy,” I say cautiously, “despite that show of… whatever that was… I do honestly care about you, too. If something’s on your mind…”

She shakes her head. “It’s a long dead issue,” Iris replies. “You’ve got enough of your own current events to juggle without dealing with my ancient ones.”

“My problems don’t make yours any less important.”

Iris smiles at me again. “Thank you, Feenie. Perhaps after things have settled down a little more.”

“Alright.”

We’re interrupted then by a timid knock on the door. Trucy’s standing there, face poking in the room, and looking scared and very contrite. “Can we talk, Daddy?”

“Of course. Always.”

As she enters, Iris stands. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

I nod to her. “Thanks for keeping me company.”
“Anytime, Mr. Wright.” As she passes Trucy, she lays a hand on her shoulder and squeezes it, and I smile, despite the bitter feelings that brought up. She’d have made a good ‘new Mommy” for Trucy.

Trucy sits next to me, hands in her lap. “Daddy, I’m... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have exploded like that.”

“It’s okay,” I say, and then backpedal. “Well... it’s not okay, but it’s understandable... I did something pretty idiotic. You were right to be mad at me. Plus, you’re a teenage girl. Everything’s a big deal to you right now.”

She makes a face at me. “No, it’s not!”

“Don’t lie. I wasn’t born in my thirties, you know. I had to go through all that hormonal crap too.”

“So you’re letting me off the hook because I’m in puberty? Neat!”

“No, you’re still on the hook,” I tell her. “Your behavior was unacceptable, nothing changes that. I would like to know why you blew up so... spectacularly, though. I don’t think you’ve ever been that angry.”

Trucy’s face flushes, and she looks away. “I really don’t want to talk about it. I just... Please, don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not,” I reassure her. “And it’s okay to not want to talk about it. Whenever you do, I’m here.” I hold out my arms to her, and she scoots closer to lay on me in a tight hug. Everything seemed a bit brighter. Trucy’s hugs were amazingly healing. If she was okay, everything else would be.

Festive and decorated, the Main Hall becomes our strange family's meeting room. Nick’s ankle is healing nicely; by the end of November, the midwife has to practically chase him around with that orthopedic boot. It isn’t much of a chase; he can barely bear weight on it without the boot, and it hurts him to walk. But he’s not supposed to be walking without it yet and so, every time he emerges from his room, limping along, someone goes to retrieve the boot and if he won’t put it on, we get the midwife.

“You know, it’s a shame that Mr. Nick can’t walk very well,” Pearly observes one afternoon. We’re all together in the Main Hall; it’s late in the afternoon, and I’m relaxing, conserving my energy. I’m supposed to be doing some hard-core training tonight. I’m a little uneasy about it; Misty, who is currently snuggled in my lap, has been feeling poorly since she woke up this morning and she’s beginning to run a fever. I have been reassured by the midwife, however, that all is well with here; it’s nothing more than a cold.

I know my daughter. I know what she’s like when she has a mere cold. I don’t know what’s wrong, but I do know that Misty does not have a cold. Regardless, this training is important enough that I cannot delay it without very good reason, and Misty having a cold is not a good enough reason.

The conversation is continuing, even as I’m worrying about my baby girl. “Why’s that, specifically?” Nick asks from where he’s sitting with his foot up.

“Well, I mean, you’ve seen all of Kurain,” Pearly replies. “I was looking forward to showing everyone around the training grounds. The one Mystic Maya’s going to tonight, especially. It’s beautiful at night. But you can’t go, and if we take everyone else, you’ll get left out.”

Nick grins at that. “That’s so sweet of you, Pearls,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of studying to do. I can
see it when my ankle’s better.”

“Yes, but that’s no fun. Besides, you’ll still be lonely.”

He laughed. “Pearls, I’ll be studying. That’s a one-person activity, most of the time.”

“Besides,” Iris added, “I’ll be here. Someone’s got to be here in case Misty needs help. I’ll keep him company.”

Nick smiles at her, his countenance grateful. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. I’ve seen all of the training grounds more than enough over the years. I can go with when Mystic Pearl takes you to see it when you’re better.”

“So there you have it,” Nick says to Pearly. “I’ll have Iris to keep me company. You guys go on, and have fun.”

“I’ll stay as well.”

Every head in the room turns to Miles. His tone is mild, quite, and bland; only Nick and I know him well enough to hear just how hostile that statement is, although it gets Apollo and Trucy’s attention, as well. “You’re welcome to, of course,” Nick replies, trying to play off Miles’ aggravation. “Although it will probably be pretty boring around here. I’ll be studying and Iris and I will just be talking. Probably about Kurain business.”

“Be that as it may, I am an attorney and can help you study, and might I point out that I am becoming as vested in Kurain’s wellbeing as you. And, might I add, I can be of assistance with the twins as well,” Miles replied. His tone is conversational, but I hear the anger underneath. Nick’s pissing him off and I have no idea why.

Nick can see it too, as can Trucy and Apollo, again. And Nick seems confused at Miles’ hostility. “Like I said, you’re free to hang around if you want,” he replies, trying very hard not to become defensive. “I’m just saying, you might have more fun with everyone else.”

“You mean you will.”

“Miles! What is your problem?”

“I think you know what my problem is.”

Nick regards him grimly for a moment. “Guys? Could you all leave the room?”

Worried looks are exchanged; Miles gazes at Phoenix coldly, incensed and hiding it well. I adjust my hold on my little girl as I stand; Nicky follows me out with the rest of the group. They’re speaking softly as soon as the door closes. “Well,” Pearly says with a sigh. “I guess I’m not showing everyone your training ground tonight, Mystic Maya.”

“Let’s not count them out quite yet,” I reply, carrying Misty to her room. She’s so out of it, I don’t think she realizes that she’s being moved. Right now I’m more worried about my daughter than I am Nick and Miles’ disputes or the Trials and Tribulations of Tour Guide Pearly. “Would you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Go run and get Mystic Ellie for me.”
Pearly comes up next to me, and that’s when I notice that Apollo is with us, as well. “Oh my… She really doesn’t look so good.”

“I know.”

“I’ll go with you,” Apollo says to Pearly; his concern is apparent in his voice.

They run off, and I carry Misty into the twins’ room, Nicky still trailing behind me. As I lay her down in her bed, Nicky crawls up next to her. “Mama,” Misty whines in a weak voice. “It really hurts.”

“What hurts, baby?”

Misty rubs her lower abdomen. Now I feel a little sick myself; that’s not a cold. “You’ll be okay, sweetie. We’ll have the midwife have another look at you, and you’ll be okay.”

She nods and snuggles up against me and Nicky; he’s stroking her hair, his serious little face so, so worried. I know how he feels.

After a few minutes of waiting, Pearly and Apollo return with Mystic Ellie. She’s considerably more concerned now than she was three hours ago. Mystic Ellie examines Misty again, and then takes me out of the room. “I’m not sure,” she tells me finally. “I don’t think it’s serious. It might be, though. A stomach bug, or gallstones, perhaps.”

“If it’s gallstones, doesn’t she need to be seen by a doctor?” I ask, wringing my hands.

“Not necessarily. She may pass them naturally. If she’s still ill or discomfited in the morning, though, we need to take her to the doctor immediately.”

“Alright. I’ll tell Mystic Sarah that I need to reschedule this training, and-”

Ellie cuts me off. “That really isn’t necessary, Master. I don’t think action will be necessary until morning, if even then. I doubt it will be necessary at all.” When I don’t seem conviced, Ellie says, “Mystic Maya, there are some who are concerned that you’re not taking your responsibility seriously.”

Her words sting and they insult. “What? I’ve been nothing but dedicated to this village-”

“I meant no offense,” she cuts me off again. “Neither are those who are concerned. No one’s questioning your dedication. What’s being questioned is if you’re suitable to be the Master-”

“That doesn’t sound any better.”

She winces. “And it wasn’t intended how it sounded. Master… What is meant is, we all have strengths, and we all have weaknesses. You are extremely loyal, and dedicated, and no one’s questioning whether or not you are mature, or care, or anything of the sort. What is being questioned is whether or not you have the leadership ability to be the Master. It is neither negative nor positive, in terms of your character. It just is.”

I regard her grimly, not quite sure what the consequences of what she is saying are. “For what it’s worth,” she adds, “I do not agree. But I do know that Mystic Sarah will take this as another sign that you lack appropriate leadership skills.”

“For choosing my daughter over training?” I ask incredulously.
“She will be fine, Mystic Maya. She will have Sister Iris and Mystic Pearl, at least. And myself. If anything at all happens while you’re training, we will deal with it.”

“I don’t like this.”

“I understand. Completely. But they will be fine. Did you think your little hurricanes got no scrapped knees or tummy aches while you were off revolutionizing the world?”

She’s smiling at me as she says that last; it’s not hostile in the least, not blaming. But it crushes into me. While I was off being a hero for a grown man. That’s what it was. Yet another reminder of how I screwed up, and it wasn’t even intentional.

But I put on a smile and agree with her. And then I go to my private meditation chamber, and sit. I’m utterly still. I know crying will relieve the tension in my body, let me actually meditate and prepare, but I cannot.

Maybe she’s right. I haven’t been able to focus on my training since I came back. It’s then when I realize that Nick didn’t force the darkness away at all. It’s in me, now.

Not even that is enough to make me cry.

Wright and I talk, in private, for hours. At first, he’s furious that I eavesdropped on him, especially when he couldn’t get away from it. Then he understands that my intention was to wait for a break in their conversation so I could politely interrupt and give Wright Franziska’s well-wishes instead of merely barging in. Intention matters in criminal proceedings and little else, but he does understand that I was not spying on him and his private conversations.

That done, I discover something rather distressing: half of his anger at this situation is directed at me. I’m appalled at what he tells me he’s reasoned out. I cannot even begin to imagine how he thinks he and Maya mean as much to me as my murderer of a brother-in-law. He should know better. Maya does.

“Does she?”

I curse at him for that.

But he’s right. And I’m scared now. I’m not as sure that she wouldn’t consider suicide an option anymore. That is part of why his conversation with Iris- although absolutely nothing happened, according to Wright, and he is so adamant that I believe him- has angered me so much. If Maya and I have to suffer through the pain and tension this situation has caused us, and being unable to seek comfort, how dare he even consider it?

Our whole conversation is like that; working off of each other’s impressions and feelings, and untwisting the anger and jealousy and distrust. By the time we fully understand each other, Wright confesses that he is glad he did not attempt to initiate relations with Iris, I am glad I spoke up to trigger this conversation, and we both feel a little better about the situation we are in.

And then we talk primarily about Maya.

We’ve long, long established that Maya does not see her actions as justified, that her guilt and contrition is genuine. However, we alarm each other greatly when we both make the same observation: her guilt has become shame, and it is toxic, and it is poisoning her psyche. Wright tells me that Pearl confided that some of the older Mystics are beginning to become impatient with Maya. I’ve participated in a conversation about Maya’s ability to lead. No one’s opinions are
based in ill-will, but in concern for her and the village as a whole. That doesn’t change the fact
that Maya’s poor judgment and inability to lead have nothing to do with not being competent in
leading and everything to do with being depressed, and they’re going about trying to pull her out of
it in entirely the wrong way. They’re just adding to her stress load and she’s about to break.

We need to do something. Talking to her together will make her feel ganged up on. Talking to her
one at a time will make her feel the stress of the situation twice. Maybe we need to get her away.
Take her back to the city for a while, so she doesn’t have the pressure of trying to manage a whole
village when she can’t manage her life. Maybe take the twins with us, get the DNA testing done
needed to have their birth certificates fixed, and tell them.

Nothing can be done tonight. We’ve talked long into the night and Maya’s already begun her
training. Phoenix is mentally exhausted, as am I, and we know we need to be the ones making this
suggestion. If she does, there will be problems. There might be problems even if we make it clear
this is not her idea.

But it needs to be done. She needs to have some downtime.

I’m heading back to my own room when two things catch my attention. The first is the fact that
Pearl and Apollo have just arrived, and appear to be attempting to sneak in. The other is the sound
of retching from the twins’ room.

At first, Apollo and Pearl seem stricken when they see me. However, they quickly notice I’m
focusing on something else, and then Pearl hears it too. “Oh no,” she says, a hand pressed to her
mouth as all of us realize what’s happening. Misty most certainly does not have a mere cold.

I go into their room. It is the first time I’ve been in that room since we arrived; I’m not sure how
they’ll react. Nicholas and Misty are huddled over their trash can; I catch the end of Nicholas
telling Misty that he’s going to get an adult. “No, Nicky,” Misty croaks weakly, “you can’t leave
me alone, don’t leave me-”

Nicholas sees me. “Mr. Miles,” he says in a low, urgent voice, “Misty’s really sick! Please help
her!”

“I intended to,” I say as I approach. Misty looks up at me with big, grey-blue eyes that are clearly
pained; I kneel between the twins. She’s thrown up more than once, based on how much is in the
wastebasket. The room smells of it; she’s been this sick for a while. “What hurts?” I ask her. It
should be obvious but there may be something that tells me clearly what’s wrong.

“All over,” she whimpers.

That is probably from the strain of throwing up. “Anything hurt more than everything else?” I
prompt, hoping being more specific will allow her to focus more. Misty leans back from the
wastebasket, and touches her lower left abdomen, and I can feel the color drain from my face as
she does so. I put a hand there, as well. “I need you to tell me whether it hurts more when I push,
or when I let go,” I instruct her.

I feel her little body tense, and she nods. Her face is determined as I apply pressure to the spot she
indicated; she winces, but when I ask if that hurts much, she shakes her head. When I let go,
though, quickly, my daughter screams. “Appendicitis,” Apollo says immediately.

“She needs medical care immediately,” I state, picking the girl up.

“But, Mr. Edgeworth,” Apollo says nervously. “You’d have to take her to the city!”
“That I do,” I acknowledge, carrying her out.

My three companions follow me; Nicholas is crying. “You can’t!” Apollo continues. “Her mother is in training! Pearl says it can’t be interrupted!”

“Maybe not,” Pearl says firmly, “but he can do whatever he wants with Misty.”

“Pearl…”

“She’s right,” I say, going to my room and wrapping Misty up in a blanket. I grab the keys to my car and my own wastebasket, and head out for the village gate. “I know her mother would give me the authority to make these decisions and she would rather it be done.”

“Absolutely, but you don’t have any legal authority-”

“Do you think that the doctors at the hospital will question me, given her state?” I challenge Apollo.

“No, but what if they do?”

“I’ll go with,” Pearl offers. “You take Nicky back up to the manor and wake Sister Iris, tell her what’s going on. That way, he only has the one he definitely has a right to and someone from the village is with them as well.”

“A-Alright,” Apollo says, reaching a hand down for Nicholas as I’m strapping Misty in the car; she’s fallen asleep, or passed out. I can’t tell which.

Nicholas has other ideas. “No!” he yells, yanking away from Apollo. “You can’t take Misty and leave me behind! I have to go with her!”

“Nicky-” Pearl starts, but Nicholas raises his voice over her. “No! She’s my sister! I have to go with her! I have to protect her!”

I’ve made sure the wastebasket is secure, within easy reach of Misty and that she will see it immediately upon waking if she needs it. I kneel, and put my hands on Nicholas’ shoulders. It is absurd, in a way, that I am doing this, but he is as much my child as Misty is; I need his respect and his trust. “I will protect her,” I say solemnly. “I promise. Your mother and Mr. Nick need you, as well. Will you trust me to take care of Misty, please?”

The boy stares at me, clearly torn. Finally, he nods. “I will never forgive you if you don’t protect her,” he informs me gravely.

“I understand.” I will never forgive myself, either, although I do not say that. “Now, hurry, go back to the manor with Apollo and tell your cousin what has happened.”

“Yes, sir.” Nicholas turns as I release him, reaches up for Apollo’s hand and grasps it only long enough to tug it before running back towards the village. “Call us as soon as you get there,” Apollo says; it’s directed at Pearl.

“I will,” she replies. Their gazes linger on each other, and I imagine that in other circumstances, I would find that intriguing enough to have a talk with Apollo, ensure he is familiar with certain laws. As it is, there is no time to waste on such things, and Apollo takes off after Nicholas, as Pearl slides into the passenger seat of my car.

I’m already shoving the key in the ignition, and turning it hard to keep my hands from shaking. The
undercurrent of fear is abruptly magnified when the engine makes a low, revving sound, and fails to turn over. Fighting down outright panic, I try again; the engine sounds even weaker than it did the first time. I curse, and try again, to no avail.

“The battery died,” Pearl says beside me.

The fact that Pearl knew something that, according to everything I know about the youth, she should not know, flies right over my head. “When’s the first train?” I ask her.

“Five,” she answers me, “but why would we take the train?”

“That’s too long. She needs-” I cut myself off, the delay in processing her question finished. “Because we have no other way to get there? My car is dead.”

“Mine isn’t.”

“Pardon?”

“Mine works. I make sure to start it every other day, even if I’m not going anywhere,” she says. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think to suggest-”

“You have a car?” I cut her off incredulously.

My shock and disbelief seems to marginally lighten her mood. She smiles as she says, “Mr. Edgeworth. After all the times I ran to the city to help out, and walked all around Los Angeles with Mr. Nick and Mystic Maya, did you really think I wouldn’t get a car?”

“The thought never once crossed my mind,” I inform her bluntly.

“Well, I did. I saved up all my money and I got a license and a car, and we better get going. We can talk about me getting a car later.”

“Agreed.” We get out of the car again; Misty makes an unhappy noise at me as I pull her and the wastebasket from the back seat. I whisper an apology as I follow Pearl back into the village proper, and along the lumber fence to a side gate that has escaped my notice until now. Pearl gets right in the driver’s seat; never having been in a car with her before, I strap Misty in the back and slide in beside her. I notice that it’s a manual as she’s pulling out of that gate. “I should’ve known you’d choose a manual over an automatic,” I comment wryly, off the top of my head.

She stops, looking back at me, an expression of total shock on her face. “What do you mean, ‘automatic’?”

We stare at each other for a few seconds. The absurdity of that question would be hilarious if not for the gravity of this situation. Finally, I hide a smile by looking askance at her and say, “We can talk about cars later.”

“Right, sorry!”
The hurricane, surprisingly, doesn’t start until after I’m out of training. All is calm, and I believe that everything went smoothly through the night. I’m going to sleep until noon, after I get let out of the waterfall chamber and check on everything. Since my training ends at dawn and it’ll take me about an hour to check on how the night went, that means I’ll only be getting a few hours of sleep. That’s okay; that was intense- very intense- and I wouldn’t be allowed to train again for another hundred hours anyway- and I do plan on training again, as hard as I can. Nick and Miles can handle the kids. I’ve had it up to my neck with people demanding so much of me. Despite being physically demanding and generally unpleasant, training gives me a feeling of satisfaction, like I’m actually doing something right.

It’s only until whatever this pain is passes. And I know it will. It’s familiar. I felt it when my mother died, too. The feeling of being absolutely, completely and utterly alone, despite being surrounded by people one loves. Except this time, I’m not feeling any love back. My mind is consumed with how horrible I am, how much I’ve hurt the four people I never should. Again, it’s similar to when my mother died, but there’s a difference. I am at fault this time. I, and only I.

Despite the inner storm, I’m calm when I emerge, as calm as the village. Klavier is the one waiting for me; I’m surprised by this. I know Nick can’t meet me. He can barely walk. I was expecting Miles. Regardless, I don’t question it. I have no right to; perhaps I’d done something last night to upset Miles. It wouldn’t be a new situation.

I’m barely listening when we get to the manor. Nothing new, of course. “And Herr Edgeworth took Misty to the emergency room last night.”

“I s- what?”

Klavier seems a bit nervous now. “Fraulein,” he said, “she’s alright. She had a case of acute appendicitis-”

“What?!”

“- but Herr Edgeworth and Mystic Pearl took her straight to the hospital from here, she got out of surgery several hours ago and she’s going to be fine now!” he finished quickly. “There’s absolutely no cause for concern-”

That’s when the hurricane hits.

There are several people I tear new assholes, although I’m careful not to direct my wrath at any of my guests. There was nothing they could do about our stupid rules. It takes Nick hobbling out of his room and begging me to calm down, and just help him get ready to go to the city. I glower at the Mystic I’m upbraiding that blocked Nick’s attempt to have me notified last night, and follow him to his room, where I discover Nicky hiding under Nick’s blankets. He’s never seen or heard me this angry and it’s terrifying to him; I put my rage away and just work on getting us together, quickly.

Nick is subdued the whole time we’re on the train to the city; Nicky’s excited, though, after we get on it. He’s never been on the train. And he’s never been at the city’s train station. And he’s never been in a taxi, and he’s never been in the city oh my god Mama look at that! That building is so big!
That’s about when Nick starts to relax, and answer Nicky’s questions about what he’s seeing. I stay quiet. Once again, I’ve hurt them; I scared them both. I’m horrible…

We get to the hospital, Nicky declares immediately that he doesn’t like it as I tell the reception lady that I need to see Misty Fey, I’m her mother, and we get our visitation badges. Our trek is slower because of Nick; I pick up Nicky, because once we get to the elevator, Nicky is outright scared of this place and he’s walking slower than Nick. Soon, we won’t be able to coax him to continue at all.

Fortunately, being as Misty is a child and therefore, she is in a children’s unit, the grim, sterile white and sickly sea green of the rest of the hospital drops off into colors and cheerfulness, and Nicky’s fear drops off as well. As we’re approaching Misty’s room, Nicky asks me to put him down; he doesn’t want Misty to think he’s a baby who needs to be carried.

Miles and Misty are both fast asleep when we get there; Miles is sitting at Misty’s side, his head buried in an arm resting on the bed next to Misty. He awakens as soon as we’re all a step inside, looks up, and smiles sleepily. “She’s okay,” he tells me immediately. “They’re going to release her tomorrow.”

The sound of Miles’ voice wakes Misty, and she looks around blearily. She’s confused for a second, but remembers why she’s there pretty quickly. “Mama,” she says, very quietly and very weakly, but pleased, “I don’t feel so bad anymore. They took away the part that was making me hurt.”

“Wow, you went to sleep really fast,” I reply.

“Yeah. Why did the lady want me to sleep?”

“Because she had to go into your body,” I explain. “That would hurt a lot if you were awake. So she put you in a deep, deep sleep so you wouldn’t feel it.”

“Okay. I get it.” She sits up a little to get a better look at Nicky. Nicky looks up at her. “Hiya,” she says.

“Hi, sis. You don’t look like you feel good.”

“I don’t. Didn’t you hear? The doctor lady had to go inside my body. That can’t be too good. I mean, she’s an adult! I’m just little, I don’t get how she fit!”

I glance over at Nick, and then to Miles; I can’t begin to describe how relieved I am that I’m not the only one fighting not to laugh at that.

We get as far as the DNA tests and applying to correct their birth certificates before Kurain interferes. That part goes perfectly fine; once Misty is out of the hospital, we take her to the clinic I took them to when they were infants. I’m surprised that the doctor who did the test back then is still there. I was even more surprised that he remembered the three of us. “I’ve always wondered how you were doing,” he says as he gets samples from Nick and Miles.
We tell Nicky and Misty, for now, that this test has to do with Misty being sick. It’s not entirely a lie. For one, we’re all lucky the hospital didn’t question Miles when he told them he was Misty’s father. We’re all positive the hospital would not have let a little girl suffer and possibly die because the man who brought her in wasn’t listed on her birth certificate.

But, Miles, being the passive-aggressive man that he is, regales us with stories of wrongful death lawsuits in which a hospital decision maker sacrificed someone’s life for a really stupid loophole or another. So, that became our first reason to do this as soon as possible.

The second reason was that, in the event that something happens to her and we’re not right there, the hospital knows that if they can’t reach me, they need to get a hold of Miles, or Nick if the problem is with Nicholas. This will give them official rights to make decisions for the twins, if something were to happen to me. That is important; as it stands in Kurain, there would be a dispute about who is responsible for them. That has always been Iris; however, Pearly has been gaining support, even though she has no intention of being the Master.

Pearly, of course, cannot make any decisions for herself yet, let alone two children who aren’t her’s. But she’s rapidly approaching the age at which that will change. She fairly recently turned seventeen and I’ve learned, through the twins, that a year isn’t all that long a time. She could refuse, of course, and she would try to. But, put between a rock and a hard place, she would cave to them, regardless of her own opinion.

And, unless they have the legal right, the Elders wouldn’t let Nick and Miles do it. It’s nothing against them. They both have the whole villages’ highest respect, as much respect as men get, anyway. No one yet has questioned if they’re good fathers. Everyone knows that their absence was my fault.

But they’re men. And men have a habit of not sticking around. And taking their children with them, if they can. No one in the village is too eager to make that feat easier for fathers, when it’s hampered by something.

I have to wonder if that is what they’re trying to prevent me from doing when I get a call from Mystic Ellie. “Please, Mystic Maya, you’ve never been away from the village over the holidays,” she begs, at the dénouement of the conversation.

I am utterly exhausted by this point. I’ve been arguing with her for fifteen minutes. It isn’t a hostile argument; there is no ill will between us, at all. We’re just at odds about this topic and we’re both dead set on getting our way. “Look, Mystic Ellie,” I say tiredly. Is this worth it? “I know, I’ve never missed a holiday. Except that one Christmas when I was helping out Nick.”

“And we’re all grateful you did.”

Her acknowledgement that it was important that I was here that Christmas, ten years ago, is comforting. I can tell it’s genuine; she really is glad I was still that immature little girl who told her point-blank that I was having too much fun with Nick to come home quite yet. I heard from Aunt Morgan when I finally did come home, after Miles’ trial; oh, did I hear from her.

Fortunately, despite ostensibly being the woman in charge at the time, her opinion was unique, once I’d told them about the trial. And Ellie was one of my biggest, most proud supporters, which is why I’m baffled as to why she’s trying to force me to come home now. “So, you know nothing terrible is going to happen if I stay here,” I say.

“But the twins have never even been away from the village, for any reason!”
“They are now,” I reply dryly.

We’re at an impasse again. I’m about to ask her why she’s so dead set on the twins coming home; perhaps I can ease her fears, somehow. She beats me to the punch. “Mystic Maya… why is it so important to you that you stay there over Christmas?”

“Do you realize this is the first Christmas the boys have had with the twins?” I prompt.

Mystic Ellie is silent for a moment, before saying, “Of course I do. I just never considered how important it is. My goodness, how foolish do I feel…”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel foolish-”

“I know, dear, I know.”

“But it’s just that, this is important. Very. And, being as we had quick access to paternity testing, we went ahead and did that and filed to have their birth certificates corrected. So, we should get the new ones soon, and what better Christmas gift could we give them but their fathers?”

I can tell by Mystic Ellie’s silence that she doesn’t think this is as good an idea as we do. And I frown, hard, anticipating whatever stupid reason she gives me for not telling my babies who their fathers are. I mean, they both already clearly trust them, and-

“Mystic Maya. I understand your logic, truly, and that’s a very good reason to want to stay. But, you know… Misty’s just had a major illness and surgery, Nicholas went through quite a bout of separation anxiety because of it, and you’re going to disrupt their world even more, and when they’re away from the home they’re familiar with if you do this.”

“… Oh.” Actually… that isn’t stupid at all…

“That is just my perspective,” Ellie says. “I mean this sincerely; this is your choice. No one can tell you how to raise your children, and I will support you whether you decide to do it your way, or come home. Unconditionally. But… I don’t think this path is wise. I know there’s no simple solution, and I commend you for searching for one, but I don’t think this is the right one.”

I am sure I’m bright red now. I didn’t even consider that. Their stability has been completely thrown by Misty’s illness and I was going to, as Ellie said, cause even more upheaval for them. How in the name of Ami did I not consider- “I’ll talk to Nick and Miles,” I say sullenly.

“Thank you, Mystic Maya. Please call me back once you’ve made a decision.”

“Of course. Talk to you again in a bit.” We say our goodbyes and I hang up, my head in my hands.

Good lord, I can’t believe I didn’t think of that…

It doesn’t take long for the boys to return with Nicky, his little face and hands absolutely sticky with ice cream from a cone that he lost control of. I question all three of them about that- Ice cream? In December? Hey, that’s what he wanted. My little scientist wanted to compare ice cream from the village and ice cream from the city and determine which was better. His verdict? The ice cream from the village tastes much better but it only comes in a few flavors- vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and apple, and strawberry and apple are seasonal- so the city wins on choice, hands down.

And they brought Misty some, too. Bubble Gum flavor. Nicky picked it out. “Do you even know what bubble gum is?” I ask him, my frustration with myself momentarily forgotten in my amusement.
“No, but it sure sounds interesting!”

“You don’t know what bubble gum is?” Nick asks, horrified.

Before Nicky can reply, Miles interjects, “And he doesn’t have to know what it is, unless you don’t appreciate his good dental health.”

“You’re no fun, Miles,” Nick practically whines at him. I notice Nicky go into the kitchen as he talks, little brown bag in his sticky hands. “One piece isn’t going to rot his mouth out. Don’t you want him to be a well-rounded individual?”

Nicky comes back out with a spoon, and heads to the spare bedroom where Misty is resting. I watch him go, my amusement growing, as Nick and Miles continue to argue over bubble gum. “I hardly think the experience of chewing on a piece of elastified sugar is one required to be a well-rounded individual.”

They’re not even paying attention to the kids. I poke my head in Misty’s room; Nicky’s rousing her, offering her the little cup of ice cream and asking for one little bite. The part of me that knows how messy they can get wants me to intervene. The part of me that knows that Nick and Miles should know how messy they can get simply by how sticky our son is wants me to let Miles have to get those sheets dry cleaned. The latter wins out and I turn my attention back to their argument, which has now turned to whether “elastified” is actually a word and Miles’ incredulous disbelief that he called chewing gum elastified sugar and all Nick has to say about it is that elastified isn’t a word.

Although, I’ve decided by now that perhaps the issue with where we’re spending Christmas is slightly more important than whether or not “elastified” should have been Nick’s first concern when Miles claimed that bubble gum is literally nothing but elastified sugar. “Hey, guys. I called Kurain while you were out.”

“As expected,” Miles said, seemingly grateful for the reprieve from his disagreement with our boyfriend. I’m puzzled at that, and so is Nick; Miles started that one… “So, they are aware of our plans?”

“Yes. And they’re in disagreement.”

“Oh, fuck them!”

Miles says Phoenix’s name sharply in reprimand, informing him that the kids are just in the other room and to watch his language, even as I say over him, “No, actually, Mystic Ellie made a good point. I didn’t think about this and I don’t think either of you did, either.”

Although he scolded Nick for his language, Miles is just as annoyed by this as Nick is. “And what point is that?” he asks, as he crosses his arms over his chest.

I explain Mystic Ellie’s reasoning to them. As I do, both of their expressions change from incredulous and upset to embarrassed and upset. Once I’m done, they look at each other in bewilderment, and I smile sadly. “I’m glad to see I’m not the only one who didn’t think of that.”

“Well… Well.” Miles is trying very hard to find a way to refute Ellie. “We are at least staying until the birth certificates come.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. We’ve still got what, three weeks?” Nick says. “We’ll be fine.”

“We can’t wait right up until Christmas Eve,” I say nervously, wringing my hands. I’m caught in
another bad situation, and this time it’s not entirely my fault. If I give into the village, I’m going to alienate my lovers. If I side with my lovers, it’ll be seen as blowing off my responsibility to the village.

“Well, I mean, my other kids are still in the village,” Nick says. “Pearl is here, but, I think she’d probably want to be in the village for Christmas.” I just want to scream at the top of my lungs that I can’t handle this anymore.

“Not to mention Gavin.”

“Gavin invited himself.”

“That may be true, but he did it to assist you and your kids. It’s certainly more convenient for all of us to return to Kurain. If we haven’t received the birth certificates by the time we’re set to go, I can always stay another few days. Or I can ask Gumshoe or Skye to stop by and then make the trip when they arrive.”

I mean, there’s only so much I can take. And now I’m in a catch 22, and no matter what I do it’ll be the wrong thing! Maybe this is cosmic punishment for not doing the right thing right to begin with, although it’s pretty shitty of the universe to hit me with the karma shovel seven years after the fact… “I think Gumshoe would like to visit Kurain again, actually. I don’t care for leaving you behind, though, and I don’t think Maya likes that idea much either.”

“Perhaps not. Well, Maya? What do you think? Should I stay here and wait for the birth certificates, or should I simply make Gumshoe deliver them to Kurain?”

“I think everyone needs to stop demanding so much of me!”

I didn’t mean to snap. But I did. And, as Miles and Phoenix are gazing at me in hurt, bewildered consternation, I realize that I was not in that catch 22 I thought I was in. Nick and Miles worked it out and they’re fine with going back to Kurain, and I feel horrible.

It must reflect on my face. “Maya…” Nick says, his voice quiet. He means to say more, but he stops, chagrined. He doesn’t know what to do anymore.

“What is wrong?” Miles picks up his thought. “You were indeed horribly quiet through that whole conversation. Did you actually hear any of it?”

I feel my face get hot, and I don’t want to talk. I want to go cuddle my babies and pretend that I’m not cracking. “I heard it,” I say quietly. “I just…Guess I didn’t actually understand it, until just now. This is… this is my problem. I need to do what’s right…”

“It is not your problem,” Miles contradicts, gently. “It is ours. And it isn’t even much of a problem. We will go back to Kurain as soon as Misty can handle the travel, and we either have their birth certificates or we cannot wait for them any longer. The only thing you must decide is if I will wait for the documents, if they do not arrive in time, or if I will have Gumshoe bring me my mail. That is all, and there is no ‘wrong’ answer.” Almost as an afterthought, he adds, “No one will be angry with you, regardless of your decision.”

Nick’s expression is blank. They were just discussing his opinion. “Nick?”

“How do you want to do, Maya?”

My heart sinks. I don’t want to make this decision. Or any decision. I want someone to do it for me. I feel like a little lost girl as I say, in a small voice, “I don’t want him to stay behind. I want
him to come back with us.”

They both nod, in unison. “That’s what we will do, then,” Miles says smoothly, smiling at me. I return it, ignoring the horrible knot in the pit of my stomach. That was the wrong choice, I just know it.

Then again, I never make the right choice anymore. No matter what I do, it will always go wrong…

“Hey, where’d Nicky go?” Nick says abruptly, looking around.

The suddenness of him realizing that his son is nowhere to be seen breaks through my bad mood. It’s actually kind of funny. “Oh, he helped himself to a spoon and went into the bedroom to give Misty her ice cream,” I say, my grin genuine.

“Bubble gum ice cream in those sheets,” Miles mutters, and quickly goes to the bedroom door. I can hear him suppress a groan of dismay, and Nick and I peak in. Sure enough, we have two very sticky, bubble-gum scented children, and the sheets certainly need dry cleaning. And our kids just look back at us, faces smeared with bubble gum ice cream, eyes bright and quite confused as to why we find this scene so interesting.

I’m the first one who laughs; Miles and Nick follow in short order, as do Misty and Nicky, after a few moments. The twins have no idea why we’re laughing, but it sure makes me feel better to hear it. As long as they’re okay, I will be okay. I have to be.

We’re not worried about the stupid birth certificates anymore.

Neither of us sleep that night when Maya does. We wait until we’re positive that she actually is, and then we motion for each other to carefully and quietly climb out of bed and head for the living room. Miles looks in on the twins and Pearls, briefly, before joining me. “What now?” he asks bluntly.

“I don’t know,” I say, running a hand through my hair. We’re both silent for a second, and then I say, “I’m terrified now.”

“I am as well. Phoenix-”

“I know, Miles, I know.” I start pacing, my mind racing through what I know and what I don’t. “Alright. Okay, we’re smart guys, we can figure this out. We know that she’s depressed.” I ignore Miles’ protest of understatement and continue, “We know that it’s in part because of us and our grudges. It’s in part because of the elders and council and their big mouths and ignorant opinions. Post-partum depression?”

He shakes his head. “It’s been too long- assuming that she was mentally healthy when they were born, of course.”

“Post-traumatic stress from the Hazakura incident.”

“Precisely.”

“But she got help for that!”

“She did not!” Miles snaps back, although I know his aggravation isn’t with me. “She went to a few sessions with a professional social worker and then used a stupid self-help workbook!”
“Hey, those stupid self-help workbooks really helped-”

“Focus, Wright, focus! We’re not talking about you, we’re talking about-”

“Quiet down, both of you. You’ll wake her or the twins.”

We both turn at the sound of Pearls’ quietly scolding voice; she is dressed, has her backpack that she bought in the city with her acolyte’s uniform. She grabs her coat and starts to pull on her leather gloves as she speaks. “You have a week here, right? Focus on making Mystic Maya feel loved and relaxed; see if you can get her to stop bottling her feelings like she is. I’ll deal with the Elders and get them to shut the heck up for a bit.”

Pearls grabs her car keys, and I protest. “You’re leaving now?”

“Yes. I took a nap earlier so I’d be able to drive. This has to be done, Mr. Nick.”

“But how are you possibly going to get them to stop putting so much pressure on her?” Miles asked, just as dumbfounded by this show of assertiveness as I am.

She pauses, looks away, at the curtained window. “They’re training me to be the Master behind her back.”

“What? Pearls, why would you-!”

“I’m not, Mr. Nick. I don’t like this, not one bit,” she says bitterly. “I’m keeping it quiet because she’s got enough troubling her without this ridiculous coup d’état they’re trying to pull. And they’re out of their blessed minds if they think I’m really going to have anything to do with this.” She straightens, and looks at us both square in the eyes before saying, “But if they’re going to give me authority, I’m going to use it, if it means helping Mystic Maya. After all, if they can’t trust me to direct them to do something as simple as stopping their mutinous chatter, how can they trust me to direct the village, let alone the whole clan?”

“Won’t they think that becoming absolutely silent about their plans and ceasing to attempt to guide Maya away from that path is dishonest, in a way?” Miles asks.

“Let them think that. They’re not helping by pushing her like this. Maybe by telling them to stop it and just pay attention, it’ll take enough stress off of her that she can start making sound decisions again. She wasn’t always like this, Mr. Miles. Not even after the babies were born.”

“Very well. We trust you,” I say. “Good luck, Pearls.”

“Good luck,” Miles echoes. “Make sure you call the moment you are home.”

“Of course.” She smiles brilliantly at us. “I might need luck, dealing with these women, but I know you won’t need it to do your parts. See you in a week. Bye bye!”

We stay there in the living room until we can’t hear Pearls’ old clunker of a car anymore. “I pray this works,” Miles says quietly.

I don’t agree with him out loud; he knows I do, too. Instead, I say, “Let’s get to bed. If she wakes up and we’re not there she’ll know something’s up.”

“She’ll know something’s up when she awakens and Pearl is no longer here.”

“True, but do we need to rush it?”
“That is a point, and I am tired. I’m not sure why I’m arguing.”

I grin at him. “Because you’re Miles Edgeworth.”

He smirks back, and puts his hand on my back in affection. “Let’s go back to bed.”
Chapter 29

Pearly is gone in the morning, when I wake up; Nick and Miles tell me that something came up and instead of waking me, she went to deal with it. Iris is my second-in-command, so to speak, but Pearly has some clout, and has since she hit seventeen. She handles it gracefully and well, and I wonder out loud why I haven’t been forced to abdicate to her yet.

At which point, my lovers look at each other in blank, grim courtroom faces. Oh.

I don’t have time to ask them what that was about- although I can guess- because the twins join us in the kitchen, whining at us that Pearly isn’t there anymore. Nick and Miles give them the same explanation, which gives me some comfort that they are telling the truth. They wouldn’t blatantly lie to the twins. I’m present, and that may be reason for them to, but they’re just barely past eight years old. It would be easy for them to dodge questions from them, especially regarding Pearly. The babies may know that something is wrong with the explanation, but they would assume that Nick and Miles don’t know her well enough to know that, too. I would know, but they’re not talking to me, and the thought wouldn’t cross their minds.

So, I know they’re not lying, when they answer the twins directly, instead of dodging.

Once I’ve gotten the kids fed and shipped them back to the spare bedroom to get dressed for the day, my boys tell me quickly that Pearly has issued a strict command for me to not worry about Kurain; she and Iris will handle the problem. It isn’t so important. I am to focus on relaxing for the next week, focus on having fun with my family. It would be more fun if she was here- she’s always been like a little sister to me- but I understand what she means, and the boys are relieved when I admit that yes, I’m in desperate need of some serious downtime.

I’m not sure I want to spend it with any of them. That fact frightens me, so much.

Of course, it’s temporary. Nick and Miles think it’s a good idea to let them watch our silly samurai kids’ shows- they are about the age that Cody was, so there’s at least a bit of evidence that it’s age appropriate. The three of us drink tea and talk while they watch the shows; we’re quiet enough that we can talk about the birth certificates.

We decide that, regardless of whether or not we have the certificates on Christmas, it is time to tell Misty and Nicky who Miles and Nick are. We need to start from the beginning. We’re going to start from Miles prosecuting me for their aunt’s murder, and go from there. They need to understand everything, and being young children, the lengthy storytelling will either distract them from the fact that we- I- hid this from them all their lives, or make them lose interest. We’re banking on the latter. They’re absolutely fascinated with Nick and Miles, and want to know everything about them. They’ll be thrilled to hear about how we met.

And, with any luck, they’ll realize how complicated the situation is. Nick and Miles are both saying that they need to make sure the twins understand that none of us are at fault for their absence, or, if fault must be assigned, that it is done equally. I don’t like this idea. I know damn well that they’re doing it to spare my feelings. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I hear Iris scolding me, telling me to have a little more faith in them, and perhaps they’re saying this because it’s true.

I tell “Iris” to shut up; at the very best, it is so that the kids don’t hate me. Perhaps, “Iris” is right and they feel they have some responsibility for this mess, but even so, there’s no possible way it should be equally distributed.
Regardless, I am grateful for them being so willing to make a united front with me. I don’t deserve it, but I don’t protest it. They deserve for me to just shut up about everything.

After that conversation, we mutually decide that letting the television babysit our kids is not something we wish to do, and go out to watch with them. After a few moments of sitting with them, the questions start: Why is the Evil Magistrate called Evil? Why isn’t the Steel Samurai evil? Does it matter who he’s fighting? He’s still fighting. Why would the Steel Samurai want to team up with a girl? Shut up, Nicky, that’s so mean, you always team up with me and I’m a girl. No, you’re not a girl, Misty, you’re a Misty- I am too a girl! Mama, make him stop! Mama, Misty’s getting mad for no reason, make her stop!...

Eventually we get them to just watch the cartoon, but they get snappy with each other in the next episode, and then the one after that, and Miles informs them that if they can’t get along while they’re watching the movies, they won’t watch the movies anymore. That gets them to shut up for another episode, and the moment they start fighting during the one after that, Miles makes good on his threat to turn it off, resulting in two very disappointed, very contrite children.

Misty’s exhausted by now, anyway, and Nicky’s cranky, so I know he needs a nap as well. We put them down and agree that, since it is his half that is infirm at the moment, he will stay at the house with them while Nick and I go shopping. Our first stop is for burgers, for me; Nick pays, and we banter.

It’s forced from my end, and I think he knows it. I’m not sure if I appreciate or resent the effort, either.

Our lunch done, Nick picks up a paper to find out the forecast for tomorrow. It’s a little too chilly for the zoo, so he suggests we take the kids to the aquarium. I agree readily, and we get five tickets, three adult and to children, for tomorrow. And then we hit the toy store. Initially, I object; my kids have always played with simple toys they either made themselves or were made by the toymaker in the village, and I don’t want them expecting that poor lady to start turning out giant plastic robots.

But what Nick wants to get, I have no objections to: workbooks that double as cute activities, on various subjects, as well as a nice set of crayons. Those things will melt as soon as summer hits, but for now, I let him spoil them. He deserves to, and I’m glad someone else is so interested in their wellbeing. It makes me feel a bit better.

When we get home, we inform Miles that we’re going to the aquarium tomorrow- which goes over very well with him, of course- and the kids are already awake, drowsily having a snack of cheese, crackers and milk.

They are super excited about the workbooks and crayons and can barely contain themselves when we tell them that we’re going to the aquarium. After their snack, we let them color in their books, and then, half an hour before their bedtime, Miles suggests that they can try to watch the movies with us again, since they’re getting along so well now. They jump at it, and not ten minutes into the episode we left off on, both of the twins are sleeping on us.

Into bed they go, and we stay up, again, discussing what possible questions the babies will have and how to answer them. When we go to bed ourselves, I’m feeling better than I did when the day started. Not totally by a long shot, though, and I know I don’t really deserve to feel better.

By the time the boys are asleep, I might be in worse shape than I was when I got up this morning. I’m starting to think that I’m never going to get better anymore.
Despite my determination to stay as unhappy as humanly possible, Nick and Miles manage to drag me somewhat out of my depression while we’re at home. I believe, now, that they truly do think that they share an equal part of the responsibility for our mess, and that they want to make it right, with me, as a team. I also feel loved by both of them, for the first time since I first brought them to Kurain.

In our conversation about that, Nick reassures me that he, at least, always loved me. Miles doesn’t confirm or deny his own feelings, but he frowns skeptically at Nick when he says that. I wonder, strongly, what that is about. I don’t push, but later on I hear them talking. The conversation is heated, but not angry.

Again, I don’t push. Whatever that was, whether it was truly about me or not, it is none of my business. If they want me to know what that was about, they’d have that conversation out in the open. It might not even be about me. I’m trying to keep that in mind, whenever I feel like they’re walking on eggshells with me. Everything isn’t about me.

When we get back to the village, I’m surprised to discover that the atmosphere isn’t nearly as oppressive as it was. Not a single Mystic insidiously asks me how my training is coming, or suggests that since I was away for two weeks that I start training again right away. Things that higher-ranking Mystics were going to Iris or Pearly about first, are now coming straight to me. It’s almost as if they suddenly figured out that I’m still the Master, whether they like it or not. It’s somewhat refreshing to not have to deal with harsh, disapproving tones that I use with my kinds when they’re behaving especially badly.

I don’t know what’s brought about this change of heart but I do suspect Pearly has something to do with it. The only time I suspect a Mystic is about to give me a hard time, Pearly clears her throat and glares as fiercely as she can. The next thing I know, the Mystic before me is apologizing for her attitude and adjusting her phrasing to be a respectful request, instead of a condescending demand.

Again, I’m not sure I know how I feel about that. Part of me is grateful for the reprieve. The other part is dreading what will happen if whatever the three of them is doing doesn’t work, and the village still turns on me.

I’m starting to panic, which is the exact opposite of what they’re trying to do for me, I know that for sure. I’m getting all kinds of images in my head of being forced to live in Hazakura while Pearly is forced into the role of Master, a role that I know she doesn’t want, and that I’ll never be able to see my kids again, and no. I’m panicking, I know I’m panicking, and it’s going to do me exactly no good to do that.

Instead, I decide that I need to use the reprieve of pressure on me to focus on proving myself to the village. I can be a good Master. I’m every bit as powerful as my mother and sister were. More powerful than Pearly? Maybe not. But, I know Pearly wouldn’t abandon me, and she wouldn’t let the village do the horrid things I’m imagining. And even if she did, I know Nick and Miles wouldn’t.

I believe that with all my being. I have to. It’s the only thing giving me the strength to not give up trying to prove myself.

Other than my own sense of urgency, and the burst of resolve to make the most of this reprieve, there are other trials, and lazy, quietly contented days. At one point, Nick is flirting with Iris. I don’t look twice, but Miles gets extremely upset. When I find out why, I get upset as well; this has been a concern for Miles since Nick broke his ankle. The three of us have to sit and talk it out; it seems that this is the third time for the boys.
I find myself defending Nick; what was said was harmless, and I trust Iris. I have to ask him, for Miles’ sake, to stop flirting. Nick thinks it’s ridiculous. Iris, having heard us discussing it and joining us, tells Nick that he’s ridiculous.

This sparks an argument between the two of them, which Miles and I watch in bewilderment. She finally shuts him down by saying, exasperated, “Phoenix! You have a son with Master Maya! The very least you could do is keep your childish, ill-tempered crushes to yourself!”

By the way Nick flounces off, I fear that Iris may have done more damage than good. Iris grimaces, apologizes quietly for losing her cool, and leaves me and Miles alone. “Am I the only one trying?” Miles murmurs.

I turn to gape at him. “Of course not!” I reply, flustered. “I’m trying, too!”

“Are you? Because I could have sworn you saw nothing wrong with Wright’s conduct.”

I frown hard at him. “What was wrong with it was his refusal to stop because it bothered you,” I reply, a little snippier than I mean to be. “That flirting barely was. I’m saucier with Apollo than he was with Iris just then.”

“You don’t have a history with Apollo, and by the way, while we’re still working on things, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from such activities as well.”

I can tell he expects me to protest. I want to. He’s being petty and it’s frustrating and aggravating. And if I do protest, he’ll accuse me of being a hypocrite.

At this point, I’m already making plans in my head. I need to get away from them and their manufactured drama and I haven’t trained since we got back and it helps keep me focused. I’m already planning tomorrow morning- Christmas Eve- in my head as I say, “As you wish. If it bothers you, it’s reason enough to stop, no matter how innocent it is or how ridiculous it is that it does bother you.”

Miles smirks tightly at me. “Fine,” he says. “I appreciate the sensitivity.”

He turns and walks away from me, stiffly; my refusal to play his game has angered him. Oh well, I think savagely. I’m so over bending over backwards to suit those two. I’m going to be myself and to hell with them if they don’t like it!

I know I don’t mean that second sentiment. Well, I do, in the moment- I won’t in the morning. I may not even mean it in ten minutes. I go back to my own room, and pull out one of my maps of the training grounds. I don’t want to do heavy training tonight; it’s the middle of winter and that kind of training here, unsupervised, would be life-threatening. I don’t want to die.

But in the morning, it should be okay. It starts to warm up quickly, and while I’ll be very uncomfortable, the temperatures rise above deadly shortly after midnight. I also don’t want to train very hard; this is simply to re-center myself, to get the nastiness this little tiff has instilled in me. I have enough darkness in my soul right now. I need to expunge anything else until I can deal with the crap I can’t seem to dislodge.

I choose a training ground quite a distance from the village. It’ll be quite a hike, but it’s small, warm, and not very intense. In other words, perfect for what I’m planning on. And if I time it right, I can be gone, trained, and back before anyone even wakes up.

My plans made, I turn in to sleep. I plan on getting up very, very early; I need to be rested.
I feel horrible after the fighting is over, and I’ve had time to think it over. I am justified in being discomfited by Wright’s shenanigans, but Maya was right- it was innocent. It was done right in front of us; and I read very, very deeply into it. Wright’s only trespass this time was refusing to honor my wishes.

I apologize first to Wright. He accepts it surprisingly graciously, and issues his own apology, and a promise not to engage in behavior that disturbs me. “She was right,” he says ruefully. “I’m going to apologize to her in the morning.”

“Tomorrow? It will appear more sincere, the sooner you do it,” I say. “That’s why I’m going to apologize now.”

“Oh? What’d you do?” I tell him of my own argument with her, and Phoenix shakes his head. “You know better, Miles.”

“I do. That is why I’m going to apologize for my conduct. Perhaps we can go together.”

“Not tonight,” he says.

I quirk an eyebrow. “And why not?”

“She’s already in bed.”

“Ah. So you did try to apologize tonight. Why is she in bed so soon?”

He shrugs. “Pearls told me that Mystics go to bed early if they’re planning a pre-dawn training session.”

“What? But it’s Christmas Eve tomorrow, and she’s training?”

“If that’s what she wants to do…” Phoenix’s voice trails off. “In any event, Mystics who train that early generally are done and back to the village in time for breakfast. Who knows, maybe we won’t even miss her.”

“Perhaps… I suppose I can wait until morning to apologize for my conduct, then.” Since he’s there, I ask, “You have the twins’ birth certificates?”

“On standby,” Phoenix replies with a lopsided grin. “I’m so excited; this is like a Christmas present for us, too.”

I smile at his enthusiasm. “They are two of the most mature eight year olds I’ve ever encountered. Hopefully they will be mature enough to understand something as nuanced as what we will reveal tomorrow.”

He nods. “Even if they don’t get what’s taken the three of us so long to do this, I think they’ll understand that it’s a bunch of complicated adult things that maybe they’ll understand later.”

“That might be a more realistic outcome to hope for. Unfortunately, the most likely outcome is that they won’t understand and will become upset,” I reply. “But, that is the risk we must take. We’ve gone in circles with this issue long enough. Maya’s noble reasons, no matter how absurd, have long run out of justification, and I fear that we two are manufacturing reasons to keep quiet.”

“I’m pretty sure we are,” Phoenix says sheepishly. “I mean, we don’t want to change their dynamics again if we can’t get along. And so-“
“We’re finding reasons to fight each other,” I finish his thought for him. I smirk, just as self-conscious of this fact as he, and say, “Perhaps Maya isn’t the only one of us who could benefit from professional mental help.”

“No doubt. I need to go talk to Trucy and Apollo. I waited too long to tell them that we’re going to tell the twins who we are tomorrow, speaking of letting things go for far too long. Miles… I am sorry for what I did today. Really.”

“I know, Phoenix,” I reply, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. “I’m sorry for not being able to just get over it.”

“We’ve all got our own reasons for why we’re acting like we are. It’s alright, as long as we actually deal with it.”

“I agree. Good luck with your kids. At least we know their minds are capable of wrapping around the situation.”

“Right. I’m going to play that like there’s no tomorrow. Goodnight, Miles. Sweet dreams.”

Phoenix takes his leave of me, and I return to my room. Three hours later, I still find myself unable to sleep. I make a short phone call to Franziska, to wish her a Happy Christmas and notify her of our plan for the morning. She thanks me for the sentiment, scolds me for being up in the middle of the night, and declares that she is pleased that we’re taking this step with our children. She wants to discuss bringing Leah to the States for a visit, so she can meet her cousins- and she means to include Trucy and Apollo in that- in the morning. After I’ve slept. And my foolish self better go to sleep now, or she’ll come and whip me to sleep right this moment.

And I try to sleep. I truly do. I’m utterly exhausted by the time I hear motion outside my door; I’m thirsty, anyway, so I get up to see who is awake. I’m surprised to see Maya, wide awake and dressed a bit warmer than she usually is. Oh, yes. She was planning on training today…

“Happy Christmas,” I say hesitantly.

She turns at the sound of my voice. “Merry Christmas,” Maya replies quietly; I see a slight smile on her face. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“You did not. I couldn’t sleep.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence between us. “Well,” she says uneasily, “I guess I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“You’re seriously going to go train on Christmas Eve,” I say flatly.

“Well, yes.”

“Why?” I ask, suddenly suspicious. The feeling is abrupt and completely baseless, but I feel as though someone just walked over my own grave. If she is training today, of all days, because the Elders have decided this is enough time for her to recover from her emotional problems, so help me, I’ll-"}

But she seems completely unpressured, if a bit nervous. I wish I had the Magatama as Maya says, with a shrug. “Because I want to.”

My sense of alarm inexplicably increases. “You want to train? Since when?”
“Not all of the training is boring and horrible, Miles. I’m just going to go meditate for a bit, clear my mind. I’ve just, I’ve been really upset the last day or so. I just need to get away from it for a bit. Catch up to the world, you know?”

“I’m quite familiar with that feeling,” I say. I don’t know why, but I sincerely don’t want her to leave right now. It is more than just my objection that it is a holiday intended for family to be together, that I felt hours ago when I spoke to Phoenix; it is a sense of absolute dread, pure urgency that I stop her from going. To that end, I add, “Maya, if this is stemming from my poor behavior yesterday, I am sorry for it. I intended to apologize yesterday, but by the time I had calmed down and thought the situation through, you had gone to bed already and I didn’t want to wake you. I feel like a fool for how I acted and it will not happen again, I promise you.”

She smiles, a bit sadly. “Thank you,” she replies quietly. “That is why I’m going to train right now, but it’s okay. I haven’t trained since we got back. I don’t know why they aren’t harassing me about it but I’d rather not abuse the situation by just not doing it.”

“I see. I understand that, as well, but I wish you would reconsider. It’s Christmas Eve, after all.”

Maya’s smile broadens. “You’ll barely notice I’m gone, I promise,” she replies in a soothing tone. “Just, try to sleep- you need the rest, Miles, we can’t have you sleeping through the festivities- and you won’t even know that I left. I’ll be back before you wake up.”

“I’m holding you to that,” I respond.

“Feel free,” she says, her tone playful. She starts walking away, and says over her shoulder as she goes. “Have a good sleep. Goodbye.”

I numbly go to get my water, and lay back down to sleep, as Maya wishes. I do not sleep. I cannot, now. I have the sick feeling that, if I do, something unspeakably horrible is going to happen. I cannot let myself fall asleep. It is an irrational belief, but incredibly urgent. I cannot sleep. I cannot go to sleep.

And yet, through the undercurrent of panic coursing through me, somehow, I do. And when I awake, everyone else is as well.

And Maya is not there.

I head out to my chosen training ground early, before dawn, as I had planned. It is the smallest waterfall we boast, a bit of a hike from the village. I bring a Poptart with me. I know Nick is going to harass me about having eaten, and it’s best to do so before training, but not when you’ve got a mile walk uphill ahead of you. Fortunately, the footpath up to the training ground I’m heading for is easy to navigate, because that uphill incline gets pretty steep.

My conversation with Miles is running through my mind as I head up the mountain. I got a strange sense of satisfaction from it; I’m genuinely glad that he seems to see how stupid he was being, and I do believe his apology. But he almost seemed frightened, as if he feared that I wouldn’t accept that apology. That I’d decided I was through with him.

I feel horrible about it, but after all of his damning me, I can’t help but feel vindicated. He behaved horribly, and now the shoe was on the other foot. He now has a little taste of how I’ve felt since April. Maybe now, his judging will stop. Maybe now, he’ll see that he isn’t all that innocent in our problems, and that they’re not all my fault. Now, I just have to get Nick to see that.

It takes me only an hour to get to my destination; in good conditions, it would take me fifteen
minutes. But it is cold- still below freezing, although the air is still, so there is little chill, and about fifteen minutes after I leave, I’m sweating in my jacket. It gives me a sense of satisfaction- exercise and meditation in one package.

It is also dark out, which further hinders my progress. By the time I get to the mountain I’ve almost slipped on invisible ice more than once. However, the sky is lightening and I can feel the temperature going up; it won’t be an issue in a few more hours, and my trip back to the village will be smooth sailing.

As I arrive at the top of the incline, at the entrance to the waterfall, something catches my eye: the edge of the path is eroding. It used to be a pretty big ledge, big enough to be able to move around comfortably without fear of falling off. However, it has definitely lost ground over the years; Misty's going to start training soon herself. Erosion or not, I muse as I walk to the edge and gaze over it- damn, that's high- I should probably have some sort of railing put around the ledge. If someone were to fall off of this... ouch.

I'll have to drag Iris up here to get her opinion the day after tomorrow. Right now, though, it's Christmas Eve, and I have a family to get back to. I smile at the thought, despite the ill feelings I have at the moment; they won’t be there in twenty minutes. I turn back to the entrance of the training ground, intent on getting this over with as quickly as possible.

And then, I'm suddenly in a desperate struggle to catch my balance, my foot slipping in a patch of ice I didn't see. My flailing is in vain; a scream rips from my throat as I tumble backwards, even though I know no one is close enough to hear me.

The fall is a lot farther than I thought it would be.
I’m not all that concerned when I wake up at Maya’s not up yet. Training is hard; she’s probably sleeping.

Miles and I have been given license to help ourselves to whatever we want in any part of the manor since forever, so I get up, and start making breakfast, for everyone, Miles’ ridiculous tea and toast included. Only he knows how to make his tea just so, and exactly how much butter and jelly goes on each slice, and every time Maya or I try to do it for him, we invariably end up Doing It Wrong.

Doing It Wrong has never stopped me from trying, though, so he’s getting imperfect tea and toast that he’ll grimace and eat anyway because it was a show of love and he’s not going to reject that and risk hurting my feelings, and especially not on Christmas Eve.

Maya’s covered; I know whatever I make, she’ll eat. That’s how Maya rolls. She may whine about it the whole time, but she’ll clean her plate. And if Miles dares to ask her why she’s eating it if it’s so bad, she’ll upbraid him for being rude to me and, “Besides, there are starving children in Africa!”

“Then let him send it to Africa!” he’ll retort.

And I’ll tell him that was funny the first time he said it, and not one time after that, when actually it’s still hysterical. That’s how it goes. That’s how it always goes when I make breakfast, and thinking about it makes me smile.

I wonder what the twins like to eat. This’ll be my first time making breakfast for them, and I don’t know what they usually have. And then what I’ve dubbed The Twinge hits. When I realize there’s something critical about my own son that I don’t know, and it hurts and pisses me off at the same time.

My knee-jerk reaction to it is to screw breakfast for those two, I’ll make for myself and for the twins, once they’re up and can tell me what they want, and that’s it.

And then I remember why that totally isn’t fair. The first day we were here, Miles made the kids breakfast. I bet he knows what Nicky likes. It’s my own damn fault for not paying attention. Besides, it’s Christmas, and I know I’d regret it if I snubbed them like that.

So, I make breakfast for five. It doesn’t take long for Pearls and Iris to awaken and start helping me, something I’m quite grateful for.

The next up are the twins, which is quite surprising. I wish them a Merry Christmas, which they sleepily but excitedly echo back at me, and dig right into the breakfast we made for them. I’m glad I managed to have my coffee and eggs I made for myself before they got into the kitchen, because it is apparently now Questions with Mr. Nick hour.

Miles wakes up after about ten questions from them, each, and asks bluntly, “Where’s Maya?”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” I reply wryly.

“Hmph. Happy Christmas. Where’s Maya?”

My, he was fixated on Maya today. If this was an indication of how the rest of the day was going to go, I was going to go back to bed. “Um... She decided she would train a little bit last night,”
Pearls offers, so I don’t have to. “She’s probably still in bed.”

“She is not.”

There’s a bit of alarm on Miles’ voice, and Iris and Pearls look at each other. The twins have abruptly gone quiet. “Well,” Iris says slowly, “the kind of training she was to do is very relaxing. Perhaps she merely lost track of time. She’ll be back as soon as she realizes the sun is up.”

Miles accepts that, and we go about finishing breakfast. Then we entertain the kids with the “regular” gifts we managed to purchase for them in the city; they give us their gifts. Miles gets a blue sweater with purple trim and I get a red one with purple trim. They’re ugly and not quite suitable for any kind of wear, but we both immediately fall in love with these lumpy, scratchy things and put them on enthusiastically, much to the twins’ delight.

Lunch comes and goes. I’m starting to get a little angry; I defended her, and she’s not here. Iris, Pearls and Miles are worried, and by late afternoon there’s a tense silence, and I’m starting to wonder if concern is actually the proper emotional response to this. We’re all staying calm, for the twins’ sake.

Finally, Iris clears her throat. “Nicky, Misty,” she says, sweetly. “Would you mind going and getting some milk from the market? I think we’re out and Mr. Miles might want some for his tea.”

Miles doesn’t put milk in his tea. Fortunately for Iris, the twins haven’t noticed that yet. “I don’t think we’re out,” Nicky says slowly, trying to look and sound grown up as he puts a finger to his lips and rolls his eyes up to the ceiling in an adorable fashion that almost makes me forget of worried I am about his mother, “but we almost are. Do you mind going out to the market with me, Mist?”

She smiles. “Not at all! Can we get some sweet cakes, too, Sister Iris?”

“Absolutely.” Iris gets a purse out of one of the drawers in the kitchen, takes a sheet of paper out, and hands it to Misty. “I think we need some truffle oil, too.”

“Sweet cakes, milk, and truffle oil. Got it,” Misty says, as she takes the paper and slides off her chair. “Come on, Nicky!”

“Coming!”

I smile a bit as they retreat out of the house, although my smile is hampered by how obvious it is that they’re quite scared now. “Is the market going to be open on Christmas Day?” Miles asks.

“No. That’s exactly why they’re going to get service,” Pearls replies. “Mrs. Arnold will realize that something is wrong if we’re sending them out of the house and she’ll keep them busy. Besides, they’re transparent. They’re terrified. Getting them distracted is the best thing we can do for them right now.”

“Did she tell any of you what waterfall she was going to?” Iris asks, cutting right to the chase.

Miles and I look at each other as we ponder this question. “She told me that she was going to do some very light training, that was more like meditation,” Miles answers. That’s similar to the explanation that Pearls gave me last night, when I questioned her about why Maya was already in bed, so I merely nod in agreement.

Pearls and Iris look at each other, clearly contemplating this information. There seems to be some kind of unspoken communication between them, and then Pearls said, “That’s all she told me,
“She didn’t mention—”

“She didn’t. She could be at... wow, at any of the grounds, really...”

That statement fills me with horror, as I fully understand what’s going on. Maya’s missing, in the middle of winter, during training, and we don’t know where she is. Miles sees my abrupt attitude change as the information I was fighting not to integrate forces itself on me, and frowns, sharply. “How many training grounds are here?” he asks.

“Over fifty,” I answer flatly, “spread out over about two hundred acres.”

Silence.

Pearls is the one that breaks it. “Okay. First, we need to keep calm, and we need to keep this quiet,” she says. “We don’t know yet that anything is wrong. Let’s organize a couple of small search parties, and if night falls and we haven’t found her, issue an open call to search.”

Iris nods, and is about to say something, when, suddenly, all the color drains out of Pearls’ face, and she hugs herself, gasping. “Mystic Pearl?” Iris says, alarmed, putting a hand on her back.

“S-someone- someone’s trying to- to force me to channel-” she gasps, and then cries out in agony. Iris yells at us to get Mystic Ellie as Pearls staggers to her feet, but before either of us have done more than just stand, Pearls’ hazel eyes open wide. “Mystic Mia?” she whispers.

The panic I flew into when Pearls said that someone was trying to force her to channel subsides as she closes her eyes, and I realize that my fear was that it was Maya. As she begins to channel my late mentor and Maya’s older sister, I realize that she might be a harbinger of news just as terrible...

I don't feel the impact. I can barely open my eyes when I come to, but I force myself to, even though the world is still spinning, threatening to make me throw up on top of- of what? I don't even feel all that much pain. My head hurts like nothing I can remember and there's a low ache in my abdomen, but that's about it.

The sun still hangs in the winter sky, but it's hazy, the colors of the sky darkening and shifting. It's late afternoon, at best, and oh god- I told Nick and Miles I wouldn't be out here this late! I take a deep breath that doesn't feel nearly deep enough, and I try to sit up.

The surge of pain in my stomach and chest almost really do make me throw up. I fall back to the ground, gasping and trying to wrap my arms around myself and I discover that I can't. My left arm won't obey my commands. I can't move it at all. Not only that, now fully aware of my situation, I'm aware that the back of my head is wet, damper than it should be than just laying on the ground. I manage to lift my right arm and gingerly touch the back of my head. I bring my fingers back around and, upon seeing them, let my arm fall back to my side, and I close my eyes, already exhausted. They were covered in blood.

Can't get up. Can't move half of my body. No one knows exactly where I am, and the sun is going down. If I'm not rescued, I'm going to die tonight. I might freeze to death, if my injuries don't do it first, but I'm going to die. Well, it's been an interesting life... the kids... they need... well, no, they don't. They have their fathers now, two men who are better parents than I ever was.
Who the hell am I kidding, they do need me. Miles has the emotional IQ of a three-year-old and Nick wouldn't have been able to ensure that Trucy wears matching socks if she wasn't already in the habit of doing so when he got her. Now that I think about it, I don't quite buy that Trucy does wear matching socks...

Focus, Maya, focus. I need to get help. How can I get help in this condition? I wrack my brain, trying to think of a way to get Nick's and Miles' attention. How? ARGH! If only I could talk to either Nick or Sis, they'd have this figured out the moment I woke up-

Wait. Sis. I can talk to Sis. Indirectly. I won't be able to leave a note telling her what happened, but it won't take much brain power at all for someone to figure out that I need help. Channel her, and my condition will do the talking for me. Right?! Right!

As I'm calling on that inner power, I wonder if I have the strength to. Ah, too late now; I've already started calling her. If I can't do it, I can't and we're back to dying tonight. But I must be able to; I abruptly find myself in that weird floaty sub-space that I go to when I'm channeling someone. I never noticed before how warm, safe and pain-free this place is and I don't want to leave.

But I do, abruptly. I'm back in my own body. I have no way of knowing how much time elapsed from channeling Mia to her leaving me; I don't think it could have been more than a few minutes, but I can't be sure. I'm left on my own, fighting to stay conscious. Falling asleep right now could be deadly.

It has been a while since I’ve seen Mia Fey- not since October- and seeing a forced channeling is extremely distressing; the process was agonizing for Pearl, until she ceased her struggle to maintain control.

Mia barely waits until she has full control of Pearl’s body before she says, loud and frantic, “Maya! Maya’s hurt, badly, you have to find her!”

“Where is she?” Phoenix asks urgently, even as I start to lose my head already. Maya’s hurt. How long-?

“I don’t know. She’s near a training ground; I could hear a waterfall, but I didn’t recognize the area at all.”

“How big was the waterfall?” Iris asks, keeping her calm, as well. Am I the only one who understands that this situation is critical already?!

“I don’t know,” Mia repeats; it sounds as though she’s getting frustrated. “I couldn’t see it, I could just hear it. That’s how I know she’s near a training ground, but she’s not at it. She’s in a wooded area. I couldn’t move when she channeled me; the pain was excruciating.”

“I think we have our justification for alarm,” Phoenix says. “Mia, we need to talk to Pearls now-”

“Yes. I need to let Maya know that you’re on your way. I’ll be back as soon as I figure out how to do that.”

“Alright. Give us at least ten minutes to confer with Mystic Pearl,” Iris says.

“Will do. Talk to you in a few minutes.”

Then, as quickly as Mia came, she’s gone, replaced by the teenage girl Mia appropriated. Phoenix and Iris quickly fill in Pearl, and she takes control of the situation immediately, ordering Phoenix
to go to the Master’s Chambers, find and retrieve the maps of the village and its properties, and bring them to the Main Hall; I am to rouse the rest of our party and then help bring the tables and chairs in that turns the Main Hall into a meeting place, and when Phoenix gets the maps, we’re all to confer and try to rule out areas that Maya cannot be at. Iris needs to go get the twins, immediately, we need them— for what, no one answers me- and she is going to unlock the channeling hall.

Within minutes, the manor is busy with activity; Iris and Pearl beckon me and Wright to follow them. Two very serious-looking children meet us there, waiting patiently. Pearl kneels before them, looking from one to the other. “This is very important,” she tells them. “I need you to stay calm, and listen and obey me, okay?”

They nod, and Nicholas says, “Something’s happened to Mama.”

“That’s right. We’re working hard to find her, but we need you to help, okay?”

Misty nods, again, and says, “You need us to use our spiritual power, right?”

“Our?” Phoenix interjects, confused. That doesn’t seem right to me, either, based on my limited knowledge of spiritual power.

“I’ll explain later,” Pearl tells us, and then turns her attention back to the twins. “What I need you to do is use your spiritual power to find your mother’s, and then hold onto it. Understand?”

They nod, and they both turn and go into the channeling chamber. We follow, and the twins kneel by the altar, facing each other. I can’t help but feel, as they link hands, bow their heads and close their eyes, that we need to be doing something more useful, more productive. This isn’t going to do anything but keep them busy, which is important, but for god’s sake, do all four of us need to be here?

And then, as I watch, a sense of peace comes over me. Everything in the room becomes starkly clear; more than seeing them, I’m aware of the twins’ presence. And of Phoenix’s.

After a moment, I’m also aware of Maya’s.

“Monitor them,” Pearl orders Iris, and she motions us for us to leave. Once the doors to the chamber are closed, she explains, “Misty has very, very little spiritual power, on her own. With Nicky, though, she’s the most powerful medium we’ve had in a very long time—possibly since Mystic Ami herself. It’s like he’s a lightning rod for her.”

“So she can do more than just channel spirits,” Phoenix says.

“Much, much more,” Pearl confirms. “Iris and I have been training the two of them in secret; she’s due to start normal training next year, but when we noticed that something was odd about her power, we took it on ourselves to make sure she can control it. And make sure her loyalty would stay with the Master.”


“If that’s how you want to see it.”

Phoenix protests what he knows is coming, but I pay him no heed. “I expected you to know better, Mystic Pearl,” I reply, a bit angrily. “I don’t like the idea of anyone brainwashing my child—”
“Mr. Edgeworth,” Pearl cuts me off, crisply, and with more authority than a seventeen-year-old has the right to wield, and especially not a seventeen-year-old as meek as Pearl. “I was used as a pawn against my family, because of my power. I absolutely will not see your child endure the same. And the moment the Elders know she is that powerful, that is exactly what the Master’s detractors will try to do. Indoctrination in favor of her mother, or used as a tool against her mother. Which do you think will do less damage?”


As quickly as Pearl’s sternness comes, it goes again, leaving the meek child I’m familiar with, her hazel eyes reflecting grim determination beneath the quiet obedience. “It’s alright. This is a really scary situation. You don’t have to worry about Misty, Mr. Edgeworth. We both love her and her brother, more than words can express. I would never do anything that would harm her. I swear that.”

“Now that we’ve got that resolved,” Phoenix says in a flat tone, “perhaps we could go back to trying to find Maya?”

“Yes, of course. The twins should be able to keep her going at least until we determine where she is. Come on.”

After some time, I feel my sister tugging at my spirit. I give in to her, letting her fall into my broken body, and letting myself fall out of existence. Again, I can't estimate how long I'm channeling her, but when she releases my body, the Master's Talisman is open, and I'm clutching one of the photographs I keep in it. I raise it weakly to examine it in the dying sunlight.

The picture of me and the boys. Somehow, I understand what Mia was trying to convey by taking out this photograph. Nick and Miles know. They're coming for me. It's just a matter of time. They're both geniuses, they'll pinpoint where I am and rescue me in time. Now it's just a matter of time, a matter of staying awake until they get to me. To that end, I start softly singing to myself, every song I know. The love song I left for Nick and Miles one time when I had to go back to Kurain. The Steel Samurai theme song, the Pink Princess theme. Some of the ditties from Jammin' Ninja. Back to love songs, and I discover, to my embarrassment, that I know enough of the Gavineer's songs that they provide a distraction, as well.

Soon, I start to feel more awake, and I feel less pain. At first, I think I'm freezing to death as the cold doesn’t seem so stark anymore, but I’m not getting sleepier. A sense of absolute, unconditional love comes next, a childlike urging for me to pull through.

It doesn’t last, though; it starts to fade, after a while, shortly after I can see the moon and stars. I cling to it, desperate, not wanting to let it go, but soon I’m in agony once again, struggling to stay awake, and the cold stings the parts of me that I can still feel.

I'm half-way through Atroquinine, My Love, when I realize that the trees I'm staring at are actually just Charley. The pain is gone, and I'm in the office, lounging on the couch. It's neat and tidy, and Trucy- who's that?- hasn't gotten to it yet. “A bad dream,” I murmur, sitting up.

“You're awake.”

There's something odd about Nick's voice. It sounds strained. I look over at him, grinning a bit. “Yeah, sorry,” I say. “I guess I'm still worn out from training.”

What?
Instead of teasing me, like he usually does, his serious expression darkens. “I'm not paying you to sleep on my couch, you know.”

His tone shakes me. “N-Nick?” I say, suddenly frightened. “I- I really am sorry.”

“Well, I am, too.”

He walks towards me, and I'm getting more afraid with each step. He kneels on the couch next to me, that dark expression intense. “I'm sorry to have to do this, Maya,” he says softly, venomously, “but you've left me no choice.”

And with that, fear becomes terror as he's on me. I scream, as I realize in only a few moments that he intends to rape me. I'm fighting him as hard as I can, and oh god he's hurting me, but he won't stop!

Only a few minutes into the assault, I feel myself relaxing. Haven't I wanted this since he almost sacrificed himself to save me from a murder charge? Since he laid everything on the line to defend me again, and even risking his life on a burning bridge? Why am I fighting him? He laughs, hard and cruel, his movements becoming rougher and jarring. Rather than do what he wants me to—continue to struggle— I lean up and kiss him, hard. His mouth yields to mine and our tongues meet, passionate and forceful and bitter, and—

I've kissed Nick before. His mouth has never been bitter.

I break off the kiss, coughing. “What- what is-”

He leans down close, his voice sensual and throaty. “Atroquinine, my love...”

“You... poisoned...”

“It takes a while to work,” he informs me coldly. “I would just finish you off, but this is too much fun.”

“Maya! Wake up!”

It's dark out. Miles is sitting on the edge of my bed, his hands on my shoulders. “You were having a nightmare,” he tells me, sounding worried. “Are you okay?”

I swallow hard, wondering what the dream was. It's already fleeing me. “I- I think Nick tried to hurt me-”

Miles' expression turns to sympathy. “I'm so sorry, Maya,” he says gently. Too gently. For some reason, I'm positive this isn't Miles. “The dreams can't hurt you, and neither can he. He's gone, and he'll never harm or threaten you again.”

I'm not sure I want to know, but... “What... happened...?”

He sighs heavily, patiently. “He shoved you off a cliff side. You almost died; his conscience got to him in time for us to get to you, though.”

That's a lie!

I must have spoken the protest, because Miles laughs, his demeanor shattered, and he shifts and reshapes before my eyes, to a blond man, around their age, glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, an evil glint in his blue eyes. “Ms. Fey. I'll ask you once more.” I'm shocked and alarmed to
discover a gun in my hand; behind Kristoph, Phoenix is lying on the ground, broken and bleeding, unconscious. “Kill him. He shall never walk again, and I believe Dahlia's idea of erotic asphyxiation has destroyed his mind, anyway. You claim that you love him? Shoot him. Put him out of his misery.”


“Then join us,” a familiar, feminine voice says from behind me, slender arms wrapping around my shoulders and the blade of a knife pressed to my throat. “Join us, Maya Fey. You are the same as us. If you won't end his pain, torture him more. We all know you both love it.”

“D-Dahlia-”

“Join us,” Kristoph hisses. “We can make this a game, the three of us. A game to see how thoroughly we can shred his soul. You can see it already, can't you? The darkness gouging his heart? That disgustingly optimistic, pure heart of his... help us break it.”

“No,” I repeat, struggling in my dead cousin's grip. “No!” The next is a scream, fighting to break free of her. “NO!”

“Miles Edgeworth!” Dahlia drawls, her mouth right by my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “What do we do with her? Your command?”

I can't see him, but I can hear him. “... kill her.”

Pain blossoms from my throat as she dashes her stiletto blade across it. I fall to the floor, blood pouring out of the wound, a veritable waterfall in and of itself. It won't stop! The blood just flows, and flows, covering the floor, covering Nick, soon I'm swimming in it, I'm swimming in my own blood. Everything around me melts into it; Kristoph is laughing, laughing as he turns red and dissolves, as everything turns red. The walls begin to bleed as well.

The red is all I can see. The red of Miles' suit. I liked magenta better. I also liked it better when he and Nick weren't both making out with Iris. Out of nowhere, two little children, one with coarse, pitch black hair and the other with light, sandy-silver hair, dash past me, chanting, “Mama! Mama!”

And their arms wrap around Iris's waist. The three of them greet the children by name- Nicholas and Misty- and then look at me, drawing even closer to each other. Staring. Smiling. Smug smiles. Iris cackles as I scream in horror and heartbreak. Nick looks somewhat contrite, and starts talking, although I can't understand what he's saying. Abruptly, the scene before me disappears, and I find myself in an odd limbo, like I'm trying to channel someone. I can't see, but I can hear, very little: “... quickest way... exactly how she ended up...”

The voice is familiar. I've heard it before. The next voice is Nick's. “... time... every hour, chances of... falls... after dark...”

“... find her tonight... might... too late...”

“No!” The first full thought comes from another beloved voice. Miles... patient, sweet Miles... “... alive. She has... can't... -eep searching!”

Abruptly, I realize what's happening and recoil sharply. The pain returns, almost more than I can bear, but I can't pass out again! My little cousin's presence fades from me as sharp, tiny gasps of sobs escape me. Even though they make my chest ache almost beyond tolerance, I can't stop my
tears. Pearly was trying to channel me... and almost succeeded. I just narrowly escaped death.

I'm dying. I'm dying, and from what I could tell from that partial channeling, they can't find me.

My children. What have they been told? Tears threaten to overwhelm me, but if I let myself cry any harder, the sheer pain will do me in.

I force my eyes open. I'm not cold, but it's dark. Tiny points of white swirl down above and around me, and I can't believe it. I manage a tiny, private smile, all for me. It's snowing. On Christmas Eve. I've always wanted to see it snow on Christmas Eve.
Chapter 31

Within hours, Gumshoe and Ema have joined us. We had already sent search parties out to each waterfall that was surrounded by trees, to no avail, when they arrived.

Klavier started getting nervous after nightfall. We all did; it never got very warm during the day, and now the temperature would drop like a stone in water. With the injuries Mia described, there was no way of knowing how long she’d survive in such bitter conditions.

It wasn’t until he started talking about not sending out another party, and changing the operation to a recovery, that we actually started panicking. “But she’s not dead!” Miles protested immediately.

“How can you be so sure of that, Herr Edgeworth?” Klavier challenged, disbelieving and aggrieved. “I don’t want to believe it, either, but the chances that she’s still alive are-”

“Trust us,” Pearls interjects. “She’s alive.”

“But-”

“She’s alive, Mr. Gavin,” I interrupt.

Klavier shuts up, pitying us and frustrated with us at the same time. But Pearls seems disturbed by something, now. “I’m going to go check on the twins.”

I follow her, as does Miles. We get to the channeling chamber, and the twins are still there, exactly as we left them. With one exception; they now look distressed. Nicky whimpers as soon as I notice that. “What’s going on?” I ask Pearls.

“I don’t know,” Pearls whispers back, approaching them cautiously. If she breaks their concentration, they’ll lose their hold on Maya and God only knows the consequences if that happens. Thus, she stops when Misty says, low but very clear, “No, Mama, don’t...”

“Mama!” Nicky echoes, frightened.

Something doesn’t feel right, aside from how distraught the twins are. It almost seems that they’re in pain, and the atmosphere in the channeling chamber is charged with an unpleasant intensity that makes me want to scream. “We have to stop them.” It’s out of my mouth automatically. My focus has shifted from Maya to keeping the twins safe, at least for the moment.

“But-” Pearls starts to protest. Miles cuts her off, agreeing with her. “Stop them.”

“Mystic Maya is-”

“Pearls!” I snap at her. “You have to stop them! Something is wrong, you know it is!”

She makes a frustrated, torn noise. She does know that something’s wrong. If she stops the twins, we’ve lost our ‘hold’ on her. If she doesn’t, something very well horrible may happen to the twins. She’s in a no-win situation now.

Pearls’s resolve hardens abruptly when Misty starts crying, pained and terrified. “Leave,” she orders me and Miles in a firm tone. We obey, frightened by what’s happening.

Klavier joins us. “What’s going on?”
“We don’t know,” Miles replies quietly, leaning against a wall, hands balled into white-knuckled fists. If I wasn’t so good at poker faces, I’d probably be in his condition by now, too.

As if on cue, the door to the channeling chamber is nudged open, and a very frightened little boy peeks out. “Mr. Edgeworth,” he says, in a shaking voice.

Miles tenses further, pushes past me and my son and into the channeling chamber. I’m at the entrance myself when he cries, pained and terrified, “Misty!”

I dash inside, ordering Nicky to stay with Mr. Klavier. Klavier, behind us, looks in as well, as Miles gathers Misty in his arms; she is utterly limp, like a ragdoll, and my heart freezes. No, no, no…

“She needs medical attention,” Miles says desperately.

Pearls interjects, “Mr. Edgeworth, this situation is different. The Master- her mother- is completely indisposed. No one’s able to interrupt her in case the worst happens, and I-”

She’s completely overwhelmed, near tears and almost as frantic as Miles, as he goes past her. “I don’t care! Someone has to take her-”

“I can’t! Mr. Edgeworth, please-!”

“Then I will!”

“Herr Edgeworth-” Klavier says, his tone warning, and I can’t believe this is happening. I cut the younger prosecutor off angrily, “A child needs help and you’re all going on about legal right-”

“I am her father!” Miles bellows over me. “I will get her medical attention!”

None of us have ever seen Miles this enraged, this emotional, and it successfully scares all of us into silence. All of us except Nicky, who gasps, putting a hand to his mouth as Pearls often does.

He looks down at her. “Yes, Misty. Really.”

“Wow. I’m happy.”

I have to assume she lost consciousness again, because Miles looks back up at Klavier, pained. “Let me get her help.”

“Can’t stop you,” Klavier says with a shrug. I’m almost grateful he leaves off the ridiculous air guitar he has a habit of doing when he’s giving in.

Pearls looks at the girl, in Miles’ arms, and then back up at him. “Please let me get the midwife first,” she says. “She can make sure Misty’ll be okay to make the trip. If she can’t, we might hurt her more by moving her. Mystic Ellie will know how to get a medical doctor here in hours. Much faster than just taking her. Please.”

“Do it,” Miles replies, exiting the channeling chamber with his daughter in his arms.

Pearls dashes off, and I notice Nicky is leaning heavily on me as we walk. I bend to pick him up. “He needs to be looked at too,” I say. It’s not as urgent as it is for Misty, but he’s clearly injured in some way.
“I’m okay,” my son says quietly. “Take care of Mist…”


He grins, the expression almost a grimace of pain. “I’m gonna be like you,” he informed me, “and just make sure she’s okay first. Like you did for me.”

“You don’t want to be like me, kid,” I contradict, my heart breaking. “Please-”

Nicky, despite the gravity of the situation, seems almost playful as he demands, “Make me.”

Well, Miles is outed… there’s no point. “Young man, I’m your father and you will do as I-”

He cuts me off by hugging me. “Finally…”

I look up at Miles. How the hell…?

There isn’t time to ponder what this implies. Pearls comes running back with Mystic Ellie and she takes Misty from Miles’ arms. She asks one of the young Mystics who is doing her best to help out to take Nicky and carry him to her home, so she can look at him. The girl gently takes him from me, and he goes willingly, still smiling happily. It’s undercut by the fear he holds for his mother, but it’s there.

“I wonder how long they’ve know.”

I turn to face my daughter; I didn’t even notice her come to the great hall. She’s somber as she says, “Neither of them were surprised. At all.”

“Smarter than the average tyke,” Klavier murmurs. And then it’s back to Maya; Miles is clearly torn between following Ellie and staying. I’m calmer, and more present, so Klavier speaks to me. “We’ve got the maps all spread out. All of the search parties are back, and she’s not at any of the waterfalls surrounded by woods. Let’s get back to the maps, and try to figure this out. Quickly.”

Miles, much to my surprise, chooses to join us. Misty’s in Ellie’s hands, and she has the situation with the twins under control, as much as possible, but he’s hopelessly distracted and I don’t think he’s going to be any use whatsoever. Pearls is focusing on something, rather hard, as we talk. “The quickest way to find her is to figure out how exactly she could have ended up wherever she is,” Klavier murmured.

I resist the urge to issue a ‘No duh.’ Instead, I examine the maps. “Did we send search parties out to every waterfall?”

“No, just the ones by wooded areas.”

“Bad move. If things aren’t as they seem-”

I stop, choking, as my eyes focus on a particular part of the map. A huge part. Part that covers almost the entire goddamn boundaries of Kurain. “What is it?” Klavier asks me. And I point.

He swears, loudly. There are only a few waterfalls surrounded by woods, but every place not occupied by a waterfall, path, or portion of the village, is woods.

“Alright. We need to comb the area,” I say in grim determination. “Restructure the search parties to fan out on ground level instead of through the trails. We have to find her now, we’re running out of time. Every hour, the chances of finding someone lost in the wilderness alive drops, and it starts
falling exponentially faster after nightfall.”

“I agree, and you’re correct,” Klavier says grimly. “We must find her tonight. I fear it might already be too late.”

“No!” I’m startled by Miles’ outburst. “She’s alive! She has to be, she can’t die! We have to just keep searching!”

Klavier stares at him, grim-faced. And then he focuses on Pearls. “What are you doing?”

I look at her, again. I know what she is doing. I’d seen her do it many, many times when I was a lawyer; even now, when she is a young adult, it still looks the same. She is trying to channel someone.

Klavier’s question breaks her concentration; she was really working at that… “I was trying to channel Mystic Maya,” Pearl replied quietly, averting her eyes. “Without Misty and Nicky holding her down, so to speak, she could die at any time. She may have died the moment I broke their connection.”

“She didn’t.” That fact gave me a tremendous amount of hope. Pearl failed to channel Maya. That meant she was still alive.

“No, she didn’t die. But she is dying.”

Her matter-of-fact tone sends chills through me. As I stare at her grimly, our task suddenly much, much larger than it was before, and Maya in critical danger, Klavier sighs, glancing out the window.

A cry of utter horror issues from the blond man, and Pearl and I both follow his line of sight to see what has upset him so suddenly, and I choke, a feeling of absolute dread and hopelessness rising in me.

It’s snowing.

Time continues to pass. It’s getting harder to keep my eyes open; I’m more frightened of those nightmares than I am of dying, I think. I count to stay awake. I try to sing again, when that has the opposite effect, but I can’t. My voice is gone, my throat on fire. I feel sick, my sinuses clogged. Just my luck to catch a cold, on top of everything else.

Didn't Nick catch a cold when he fell off the bridge? Oh. Okay. Everything's fine, then. He was fine, so I will be, too.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. The snow gets harder, recedes, returns with a vengeance. I wait. I can’t do anything but, after all.

I almost start crying when disembodied voices start calling my name, eerie and broken in the night. I've fallen asleep again, damn it! I don't have the strength to fight back this time... not that I did the first time... Images swim in my vision and I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the voices to stop.

“Ms. Fey! Can you hear us?!”

Yes, Apollo, I can hear you. The dead can hear you and your precious Chords of Steel.
My eyes fly open as I hear the cry repeated, followed closely by the sound of Miles' voice, screaming my name with an already worn-out, strained throat. Pearly's voice joins the scream in the night. They're close-! I open my mouth to answer and-...

...  
...  
...  

I... can't... I can't speak...

Desperation sets in. Apollo's eyes are really good, right?! That's probably why he's here! He will see me! He has to see me! “Were Mr. Wright and Mr. Gavin wrong?” Apollo asks, his voice laced with suppressed fear. “Did she come to this waterfall?”

“... Pearl.”

“Yes, Mr. Edgeworth.”

“Try to channel her again.”

“... yes sir.”

Channeling! Desperately, I claw at my sister's spirit once again, yanking at her, screaming for her. With a rush, I disappear, praying what I was hearing was real and not a trick of a mind about to die. All at once, I'm back in my own body. “Mia!” I hear Miles gasp.

“She's close!” Sis says urgently. “She can hear us from where we are. Clearly! We're practically on top of her!”

“Where did you hear our voices from?!” Apollo demands, hope breaking my heart. It's too late... it's too late... it's too late...

A pause, the sound of movement. “There! Over there!”

Footsteps, heavy and running. “Maya!” Miles screams. There's motion beside me; what sounds like an explosive going off. I see a bright light, arching above us into the snowy sky. Whatcha call those things? Flare gun. Apollo has a flare gun.

Neat. Too bad I'm never going to be able to see it...

I close my eyes, swallowing. Someone kneels beside me. Familiar presence, familiar scent, familiar voice. I can feel his breath on my lips, his forehead against mine, and something hot, almost scorching, hits my face from above as I hear him repeat the same phrase over and over again. He's done that before. I didn't listen to what it was then and I can't understand him now. Wait... two phrases. Three syllables, three words. Three syllables, two words. Three syllables, three words. Three syllables, two words. A whole bunch of syllables and words- wait, what? Go back to what you were saying before, please.

His hand, warm, alive, wrapping around my frozen fingers. Three more voices: Nick. Iris. ... Klavier? Someone pinches my toe, asks if I can feel it. If I could move my legs, I'd kick you for that.

Chaos is around me, shattering the calm of the night. A heavy gust of wind wraps around us, a
noise so loud I can barely stand it is close by. More voices, all unfamiliar. More hands. Nick, Sis
and Miles are pulled away. Miles screaming for me as hands slide something hard underneath me,
wrap something warm around me, and suddenly I couldn't move if I wanted to. I'd panic if I had
the energy, but I don't, as I feel like I'm being lifted.

And then I know nothing more than a steady beep... beep... beep... beep... beep... beep...

I should have figured that out. I should have figured that out much, much faster than it was figured
out.

The village tries to block our attempts to bring the twins back with us to the city. Like hell we’re
not going to do that. Their mother is near death from her injuries, pneumonia set in between the
time we found her and the next morning, and I will not- will not- allow them to take those children
hostage.

When I inform them that Wright and I are taking the kids to the city to be near their mother,
whether they like it or not, and they object rather strongly, Klavier intervenes. We have corrected
birth certificates in our possession. That means that we have been legally declared their fathers,
and if the village wants custody of the twins, they can file for it as in every other child custody
dispute. But right now, we are their legal guardians and our wishes stand.

One of the older mystics fires back that maybe they should try filing for custody, if we will be the
ones to hold the children hostage. At this Pearl intervenes as well, confused by the sudden hostility
between us all and reassuring both sides that there will be no custody battle because there is no
need and we will take the twins with us into the city.

And then this mystic, one of the Elders, questions Pearl’s authority.

At first we’re all too stunned to say anything, including Pearl herself. We’ve all seen how much
clout the villagers have given the teenager, and how she’s tried to wield that power carefully and
fairly to everyone involved. But she is a teenager, younger than Maya when she took the title of
Master, this power has been foisted on her against her will, and Pearl breaks down.

At this point, all I want to do is take my family- Pearl included- leave, and never look back. Even
Maya won’t be coming back here, if I have a say in it. I’m just trying to ignore Pearl’s sobbing
argument with the Elders- who have now ganged up on her- and gather my belongings and
anything of Misty and Nicholas’ that they will need in the short-term. I will have no problem with
provide anything else they will need but my desire to get out of there and get to Maya has
overridden my need to be thorough and thoughtful.

I’m about done packing for the twins when I hear Iris’ voice, loud, commanding, and quite
surprising, “That’s enough! I’ve listened to you bully my little sister long enough!”

“Sister Iris, surely you of all people understand.”

“I understand your position; however, I do not understand why you’re applying my situation to
Mr. Wright and Mr. Edgeworth! Neither one of them is my father!”

“Definitely not her father,” Wright adds in a low, angry voice, as I enter the room again.

“Seriously,” Apollo adds, as Pearl cries quietly into his chest, his arms around her. “Even if
you’re right and Misty will never regain her powers, that fact is irrelevant. This is her home. Mr.
Edgeworth and Mr. Wright would never try to take them away from here. That would be really
freakin’ traumatic for the twins. You’re not the only ones who care about them!”

At last, it seems the Elders are thinking rationally; Ellie speaks up. “This isn’t the time to air our concerns about Mr. Wright and Mr. Edgeworth. Keep in mind that they’ve taken the children to the city before, and brought them back without any question or argument. Furthermore, Mr. Wright has never, ever tried to force the Master to stay away from Kurain. Right now, the Master needs to be our first and foremost concern, and we need to trust Mystic Pearl. Young and naïve she may be, but she is the next Master, if the worst happens. There is no one else.”

“Thank you, Mystic Ellie,” Pearl says, her voice nasally from crying.

“Mystic Ellie,” one of the Elders says. “I ask you to go with them. Pearl needs guidance, and someone needs to be there to help deal with Master Maya’s… final arrangements, if it becomes necessary.”

The thought makes a sharp pain lance through my chest and takes my breath away. Although I know there is an unspoken motivation for this— that is, to keep an eye on Phoenix and I in the event that we attempt to bar the twins from returning— this is necessary. While Pearl is a minor and cannot legally make funeral arrangements for Maya, she will indeed be the next Master, effective immediately upon Maya’s passing. She should be the one to make the decisions about it, even if she must pass the actual legwork to someone else.

All I can do now is pray that it doesn’t come to that.

The trip into the city feels like it takes days. By the time we arrive at the hospital Maya has been airlifted to, she’s crashed and been revived twice. The doctors don’t even want to allow us to see her; the children certainly can’t. I don’t question this judgment on the part of the doctors. She was broken when we found her. Letting the twins see her right now would only terrify them.

They let Phoenix and I see her first, one at a time, then Mystic Ellie, and, if we decide it is alright, Pearl. Phoenix agrees to let me see her first. Steeling myself, I enter the ICU room.

She looks even worse in the light. She isn’t breathing on her own, and the beep of her heart monitor sounds ominous and threatening. I sit next to her, speechless. How did this happen?

My only thought is attempted suicide. The waterfall she’d have gone to, based on her location at ground level, was nowhere near the edge of that cliff. There was little reason for her to be at the edge that any of us could discern. The only reason I can think of was to throw herself off it.

And that means this is my fault. Mine, and Wright’s. We let her fall this deep into despair, that the only way she saw out of it was death. I don’t know if I can live with that.

Just as I’m pondering my own failure to help her, the beeping of her heart monitor falters. In the next moment, another high-pitched alarm-like noise sounds, and her heart monitor ceases its rhythm, instead giving off a horrible, single unbroken tone.

Oh no. Oh god, please no…

... This isn't my idea of spirituality, just so you know. But you take comfort where you find it, at times like this.

Who is speaking?

And I find this verse particularly comforting.
... W-Wright... Phoenix Wright...

*And now, these three remain: faith, hope and love.*

... My sister's student.

*But the greatest of these is love.*

The man who saved my life, days ago.

... *I know that Mia would have my head for quoting the Bible at her funeral.*

One of the men most important to me.

*Or perhaps not. Mia was, after all, the embodiment of these three qualities.*

... The other man closest to my heart, is here too... although I don't know that he is this important to me at this time.

*Her faith in others, and herself, was a sight to behold.*

His expression is stony, but I can see it: I can see the sadness in his face. I don't think anyone else can. I didn't, at the time.

*Hope. Until the very end, we had to have hope that things would work out. Hope kept her going when it seemed all was lost.*

My face is wet with tears; I'm grateful to Phoenix. Nick. That's right. He took over the eulogy for me when I couldn't continue.

*And love. I... don't know anyone who loved as strongly, as completely and unconditionally as the Chief.*

I do.

*Faith, hope and love.*

Nick. Maya. Miles.

*Although Mia is gone... these three remain.*

... do they?...

beep... beep... beep... beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee... 

I'm relieved when the beeping stops. I have no idea what it meant, but it was annoying.

And now, I’m aware of my surroundings. I've been in this place before. Dark, floaty, safe. When have I been here before?

“Ah! Nice of you to join me, Maya!”

I somehow manage to turn to my companion in this nothingness, and my breath catches in my throat. I'm staring at myself. Her hair falls over her eyes, and she's wearing the simple, modest black dress I wore to Mia's funeral. “You look like something the cat dragged in!” Maya says, laughing derisively.
“Wh-what do you want?” I ask fearfully.

She tilts her head. “Come now, Maya, you're smarter than that.” She sounds amused. “I want you to die, of course.”

I swallow hard. “That's- that's stupid. You're me, aren't you?”

“Ah, yes. That's the crux of the issue, isn't it? I am you.” Maya puts her hands behind her back and starts pacing around me, circling me. “Selfish, hedonistic, self-absorbed Maya Fey. That's me. That's you.”

I want to refute her. I can't. Somehow, I can't. She's me. I can take anything she says at face value.

“Oh, can you?” Maya asks, reading my thoughts. Of course she can, if she's me. “After all the lies you've spouted, can you really take anything I say at face value? I could tell you, for example, that you heard and understood every word Miles said to you when they found you. Can you believe me?”

I shake my head. “No. No, I didn't. I didn't hear him. How could I have? I was half comatose!”

“Ah-ah-ah... bad Maya.” Maya smirks. “More lies. You even lie to yourself, hm? How is it that I heard him and you didn't?” I keep silent, gritting my teeth. “Do you want to know what your precious Miles said to you? Do you?”

“No,” I answer immediately.

Maya laughs coldly, and snaps her fingers. Abruptly, I'm on the ground again, pain is all I know, pain throughout my whole body. I can barely breathe. “Maya!” Miles screams, running towards me and sliding to the ground beside me. As Apollo fires the flare gun, to tell any other search parties that I've been found, Miles puts his forehead to mine, whispering to me feverishly as his tears fall and land on my face. “I'm sorry. I love you, I'm sorry. I love you! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Maya, please, don't die! You can't leave me like this!”

I am somewhere between elated and heartbroken, happy and horrified. He was crying. Miles Edgeworth just doesn't cry.

“Oh yes he does.” Maya corrects me, and I wonder why I should bother to speak. “Normally it's private. You've heard him cry before, although you had the tact to convince yourself that you were wrong.”

We're back in that darkness. Maya peers at me thoughtfully. “I think it's obvious,” she says softly, “that despite the pure evil you inflicted on four people, Master Maya, that Miles has forgiven you. Phoenix has as well. He loves you just as much as Miles does, and... well, he has his own spiritual talents. A little more mundane than yours, though- empathy. He needs to learn to deflect it a little better,” she adds thoughtfully. Then, to me, she continues coolly, “That's why he has such masterful control of the Magatama, actually, despite having very little spiritual power. How can he stay angry with you when he can literally feel your love and remorse?”

“Like Apollo and Trucy?” I ask, curiously.

“No. They see the body's reaction to emotion. It's entirely different than being able to feel what another is, and stop changing the subject.” She narrows her eyes at me. “The point is that they've forgiven you, and each other, and want to move forward from here. You haven't. You're stopping them, you're holding them back.”
“I am not!” I protest. “They've done nothing.”

“You just keep telling yourself that. By the way, you have about two minutes.”

I don't want to know what I have two minutes for. I don't. I grit my teeth. “Okay. Maybe I was angry at them for leaving me to fend for myself. Still, I've forgiven them for it.”

“Again with the lies! Can't you be honest about anything?” She's getting angry with me. “You clearly don't know the meaning of forgiveness. You just traipse along life, making it your duty to protect the people who hurt you, convincing yourself that you deserve to be hurt. So you spout lie after lie, telling yourself it's so that the people hurting you can avoid being hurt themselves, comfortably ignorant about the amount of agony you're leaving in your wake. You don't even acknowledge your own motivations! How the hell can you forgive anyone else?!”

I stare at her. I've been hurting people. Nick. Miles. Nicky and Misty. Pearly and Iris. I can probably stretch it to include Apollo and Trucy, considering how acutely aware they are of their guardian's distress. Of course I've been hurting people. But I was put in a position that I couldn't stop that hurt!

“Less than a minute now,” Maya says softly. “They're about to stop trying to revive you.”

I was in a position that I couldn't stop the hurt... but I contributed to it...

“Forty-five seconds. My god, it's hard to kill you.”

... but I did the best I could! I made wrong choices, yes, but hindsight's twenty-twenty... it's so easy to... to... con... demn... when...

“Can you feel it, Maya? Can you feel your brain shutting down? Let go. You can't save anyone, let alone yourself. Accept defeat.”

It's difficult to move. I feel like I'm falling, like I'm ceasing to exist. With the last of my strength, I stumble over to my other self, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and leaning heavily against her. “Wh- what are you-”

“I... for...give... you...”

My doppelganger shatters. I'm aware of precious oxygen flooding my aching lungs. The sounds of relieved doctors and nurses, someone sobbing in relief.

eeeeeeeeeepbeep... beep... beep... beep... beep...
Chapter 32

After that, I lose any concept of time. I can hear what's going on in the room clearly, metered by that steady, strong beeping. Nick's scheduled to retake his bar exam. I better be awake to celebrate his first day as a lawyer or he's never going to forgive me.

Apollo has more cases. He's had the unpleasant experience of realizing that his client was guilty as sin, but they were too far into the trial to do anything about it. Nick's advice: fight. This trial is in the jurist system. They'll see through it. Do his job and fight for his client. Apollo doesn't think he can do it. He wishes I could hear him. Talking to someone who can just listen might help, which is why he's here. But I clearly can't hear him.

Trucy's frightened. Now that Daddy has a child of his own... will he still love her as much? Nicholas, as much as she adores him, is a threat. She's ashamed, but she can't stop feeling this way about him. She begs me to forgive her for resenting my son, begs me to wake up for just a second to give her some advice, I can go back into my coma after that if I want to. No? Well... okay. She'll just try to imagine what I would do. What I would tell her. The conclusion she comes to: Talk to Daddy. He'd want to know. He can reassure her that he loves her as much as always, and only he can do that. Thanks... Mama.

Klavier just wants to let me know that I've inspired him enough to pick up the guitar and write a song. He wants to play it for me, acoustic, before he puts together a demo. If his producers like it, he might try his hand at a solo project. The doctors say that I can probably hear everything, so I shouldn't feel pressured to wake up. The body goes into a coma when there's so much physical trauma it needs to shut down to heal, ja? So wake up when I'm good and ready. He'll play it for me anyway, and then again when I'm awake. And I better wake up eventually. That's an order.

... Miles is leaving. If they'd found me faster, they might have prevented this. He was too paralyzed with fear to help them narrow down where I could have been. He was useless; my current state is partially his fault. Again, he can't stand to see someone he loves so much, kept alive by machines... not sure where he's going. Germany's out. Maybe the United Kingdom. Or Austria or something.

I know something is up the day Maya crashes and then stabilizes. We all react to her near-death in different ways: Pearl throws up shortly after we’re told that she made it through that flatline. I can’t stop shaking, and the twins are sobbing in my arms as I try to calm them.

Miles withdraws.

He was the one in the room when she crashed. I expect that he’s probably quite a good deal more traumatized than the rest of us; he saw her almost die. He was frozen against a wall as the doctors and nurses surged around him, working to save her life, watching and unable to move for fear of getting in their way and causing them to lose crucial seconds.

When it was over, he cried. I have never, ever seen Miles Edgeworth cry. But cry he did, clinging to me and his face buried in my shoulder. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit shedding more than a few tears myself.

Once Miles had a hold of himself, and we told our anxious companions that she had pulled through, I talked to Miles without anyone else there. She needed us to be strong now, I said. She wasn’t out of the woods yet. We had to hang on just a little bit longer and then we could both let it out, but right now too many people needed us to be their rock. Miles agreed with me.
And then he shut down, emotionally.

That wasn’t what I intended, but if that was the best I was going to get, I was going to take it. In the meantime, I made a few phone calls. I hadn’t forgotten how off Miles was before he decided to ‘chose death’ and this situation was right up his alley in terms of Things That Will Depress Miles Edgeworth.

The first, most immediate call I made was to Detective Gumshoe. He, Ema and Klavier had stayed in Kurain for the rest of the night to help keep order, if necessary. I was quite relieved to hear that it was not necessary. They were back in the city, along with Trucy and Apollo, and I told Gumshoe what had happened, as well as Miles’ current apparent frame of mind.

“Yeah, sounds like he’s gonna give us some trouble. I’ll keep an eye out. Thanks, pal.”

“No problem, Detective.”

With that confirmation, I called Franziska. I really didn’t need this. I really didn’t. But I loved Miles just as much as I loved Maya and I wasn’t going to risk losing them both. Franziska knew how to deal with him when he was in this state better than I did, any day.

She answered her phone almost immediately. “Franziska von Karma.”

I smile, despite the circumstances. This is the first time I’ve spoken to her in nearly eight years and it’s a comfort that she’s as abrupt as ever. “Franziska. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Fool,” she replies immediately, but there’s warmth in her surprised voice that belies the insult. “After all these years, you still don’t know how to properly greet someone on the phone, Phoenix Wright.”

“I never was one for proper etiquette. I’m surprised you recognized my voice, though.”

“Believe me, Phoenix Wright, you are quite unforgettable.” Her tone now was dry, and the warmth cooled ever so slightly. “Enough chatter. I know well enough that you would not make this long distance of a call if there wasn’t a dire need, Phoenix Wright, and I know you wouldn’t count seeing if I recognized your voice to be a dire need. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“The short answer is that Maya’s on life support and Miles feels responsible,” I tell her. “I’m afraid he’s going to run.”

“… I’m afraid I must ask you for the long answer.”

She listens silently as I talk. I’m afraid that we’ve been disconnected by the end of my story, but when I say, “And that, Miss von Karma, is why I am calling you,” I get a response: “I see.”

Franziska says nothing for another few moments. When she finally speaks, her voice is heavy. “This is positively awful news, Phoenix Wright. What is her prognosis?”

“Pretty dismal. It doesn’t look good, but if she survives the night, her chances of survival shoot up to sixty-five percent and keep going up every hour she’s alive. Whether or not she’ll ever wake up, though…”

“I see. How dreadful.” She means that, wholeheartedly. Her next words are spoken in a quieter voice, and I get the impression she’s talking to herself and not me. “Like it or not, Miles Edgeworth is his own person and can make his own decisions. But… You’re right, he’s in no position to leave; that would be extraordinarily selfish of him. He needs to be there for his
children. At the same time... would he really...?"

She starts speaking at a louder volume, telling me that she’s solved her internal debate. “Very well. I will help you keep him in the United States. He does not sound to be in a rational frame of mind, and it would be unfair to Misty, to put it lightly. I will inform you immediately if he makes me aware of any plans to leave the country.”

I breathe a little sigh of relief. “Thank you, Franziska.”

“You are quite welcome, Phoenix Wright. It would behoove you to get Scruffy in on this, as well. He is quite a bit more resourceful than he appears, and Miles trusts him.”

“Already done,” I replied. “Larry’s next on the list to call.”

“Why?”

She’s so blunt, sounds so confused, that I have to fight not to laugh. “Larry’s his friend. He might be mostly useless, but he can help me keep Miles here, if it’s necessary. If I’m right, we’re going to need all the help we can get in this.”

“My god this is almost painful, but I must admit that I believe that you are right. Very well. I will allow you to tell that fool Laurice Deauxnim of this situation.”

I’m not sure which amuses me more, the fact that she’s still using that silly pseudonym of his or that she just “gave me permission” to talk to him about it. Either way, there’s no point in poking the tiger so I just say, “Thank you, Franziska. I’ll keep in touch with you about the situation.”

“Thank you. I shall start preparations to come, as well. You sound calm enough but I’ve seen you panic under pressure. Someone has to be there who will assuredly have a calm head.”

Despite all the years, I hear what she means: she’s worried and wants to be here to help. I’m grateful. “Thanks, Franziska. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

In most circumstances, Franziska would probably insult me and sarcastically inform me that I’ve been without her and I, as a result, completely screwed up my life. The gravity of this situation prevents her from doing so, though, and she merely says her goodbyes and I move on.

Larry’s at the hospital within minutes of my phone call to him. He’s calm, very worried, and eager to help. I’m able to ignore most of the stupid things he says; none of it is important, none of it is endangering. In fact, some of the stupid stuff turns out to be pretty useful when arranging who will watch the kids and when. Still stupid, but useful.

I don’t leave the hospital. Miles comes and goes, and he spends more time here than not, but he’s more hands-on with the kids than I expected him to be. Miles is not the type to like to spend time around children, be them young children like our twins, or teenagers like Trucy and Pearl. Something’s wrong. There’s a reason he’s choosing to spearhead the efforts to monitor the kids instead of spending time at Maya’s side. I can almost guarantee it is neither driven by maturity or by a like of being around the kids.

I get my answer in the form of a frantic phone call to the phone in Maya’s room. “Phoenix!” Franziska’s voice says, higher than normal from her urgency. She speaks over me as I try to tell her to calm down. “He’s leaving. He just sent me an e-mail telling me so! Stop him!”

I drop the phone. I know Franziska will understand that I’m not trying to be rude. He just a few moments prior left Maya’s room; if he gets out that hospital door, there’s nothing I can do. I have
to catch him.

As I barrel down the stairs- it’s much faster than the elevator- I just pray I get there in time. I’m not thinking about what I’m going to do when I get down there, if he’s there. I dash into the lobby, and he is; Pearls and Iris are both there, blocking his escape, as the receptionist and security guard look on in dumbfounded confusion and morbid curiosity.

“Edgeworth!” I scream his name, approaching him at a fast walk. Miles turns to face me, and I ball a hand into a fist and punch him, hard. Both Pearls and Iris yell at me, and the security guard is approaching, but I don’t give a shit. “You coward!” I holler at him. Miles stares at me, hand to his face, as the security guard grabs me and Iris and Pearls both protest the action. “She’s up there in a goddamned coma and you’re leaving?! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Wright,” Miles says, his tone slightly pained; I hit him hard. “You don’t understand. I should have figured out that we were looking in the wrong—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, get the hell off the cross!” I shout over his explanation. “Just stop it! No one cares about your need to be a martyr but you! No one expects you to be a martyr but you! The rest of us- your daughter- expect you to be here when we need you, but no! Things didn’t go exactly as you want, they didn’t go perfectly to stroke your oversized goddamn ego, so you’re running away! You coward!”

By then, there are two police officers as well as several more members of security. I don’t resist at all as one of the cops cuffs me- I assaulted a man, I deserve to be arrested. “Wait,” Miles says, stepping forward as I shut up long enough for them to tell me my rights. “Please, don’t. I don’t want to press charges against him.”

“It doesn’t matter, sir,” the cop who cuffed me says. “He committed an assault in public, he gets arrested for it.”

“Officer, do you know who I am?” I almost grin at that. The cop seems a bit taken aback, though. He hesitates for a moment, searching his memory, and then replies, “Of course, Mr. Edgeworth. But my statement stands. You are not the one pressing charges, the state is. You know this.”

“I do. I am asking you, as his victim, to please release him. He did nothing that I didn’t deserve.”

“Mr. Edgeworth, sir, all due respect, there are laws against punching people in the face for a reason.”

“I understand that. And in this case, the person doing the punching was perfectly justified in doing so,” he insists. “Again, he did nothing that I didn’t deserve.”

The cop sighs. “Then you can tell the victim’s advocate that, sir. I really can’t release him.”

Pearls speaks up now. “Please!” she begs. “His lover is here in a coma, and he’s got a little child, too- if you take him away, we might not—”

“Miss, calm down,” the other cop says, although he’s getting frustrated. “The charges against him will be minor. If it’s this important that he not leave, someone can post bail and he should be in and out of booking. There’s really nothing else we can do.”

Iris starts to speak, now, and I cut her off. “Iris, don’t. They’re right. I shouldn’t have hit him.” I turn my gaze to Miles. “Just wait a second before you take me downtown, please. Miles. When I
get out, you better still be here.”

“I will be,” he replies quietly, averting his eyes.

“Promise.”

“I swear.”

“Pearls. If you could call Apollo, I’d appreciate it.” With that, I let the cops lead me out to their car. They seem sympathetic and we talk about what’s happened on the way downtown. One of them gets a call from the station, informing them that Miles Edgeworth has already posted bail, and to let me know my attorney’s on his way. With that, they start booking me, promising to make this as quick and painless as possible.

Miles isn’t leaving and Nick’s been arrested for simple assault against him. Pearly and Iris got between them before Nick could do more than give him a black eye, and Pearly, Iris and Miles all tried to stop his arrest, but Nick punched him in the middle of the hospital lobby, and continued yelling at him how much of a coward he was until security showed up. There was no helping it, really. But Apollo is confident that Nick’ll get off with an admonition that physical altercations aren’t the best way to handle such circumstances. After all, the victim said nothing to the police but that he deserved a lot more than he got. He should be thanking Nick for going easy on him.

Pearly and Iris update me on the village. Everyone is praying as hard as they can for me; and they hope I understand, but they’ve already started the training Pearly will need to be the Master. Just in case, mind, but I’ve been in a coma for a while now. Please, please understand; Kurain needs a leader. Plus, if she’s declared the Master and then I wake up, Pearly has every intention of yielding to me again, so it’s okay, right?

Finally... They're scared. They haven't seen me in so long. Not since before Christmas. They drew me a picture, together. See? That's me... and Nicky and Nick are there, and there's Misty and Miles, and Iris and Pearly off to one side, and Apollo and Trucy on the other... see? See, Mama? Wake up... please, please wake up... we miss you... wake up...

“... I'm afraid we just traumatized them for nothing, Phoenix....”

I hear Nick curse. Irritation coils in me. “No,” he whimpers. “Damn it, Maya, wake up!”

My voice sounds scratchy, unearthly and unreal in my own ears. “Don't you dare teach my children those words, Phoenix Wright.”

“M-Maya!”

I clench my jaw, willing my eyes to open. “Mama!” Misty yells throwing little arms around me. Nicky does the same, and Nick and Miles join them at my bedside, laughing and crying all at once, both of them. I'm vaguely aware of Miles reaching over to hit the call button on my bed, and then he joins the group hug. He gets a hold of himself long enough to ask, quickly, “How do you feel, Maya?”

“Like I've fallen off a cliff, broken half the bones in my body, and lay in the same position for weeks,” I mutter at him in a whisper. It's all I can manage.

Nick laughs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “That sounds about right,” he says dryly.

Our conversation comes to an abrupt end when a doctor and several nurses sweep in and orders
The next two weeks are the a couple of the busiest I’ve ever experienced. There’s a lot we need to take care of before Maya’s release. The elders, upon hearing that Maya has woken from her coma, insist on coming to the city. I was the one to pick them up, although I had to rent a van to do so. This wasn’t an issue for me, as Maya would have a wheelchair for a while after her discharge from the hospital.

A group of seven elderly women—Ellie was already there—wearing black robes cinched at their waists with lengths of rope, and three of them carrying staves, hopping out of a handicapped-accessible van and tottering into the hospital, through the halls, and finally piling into a single room was a sight to behold indeed, and I was glad I got to see it, even if seeing it meant having to stifle a smirk and a snicker the whole time. Wright and I had to reassure the poor nurses that no, there was nothing alarming about this sudden congregation of elderly, black-clothed, staff-wielding women.

I wasn’t entirely sure of that statement; but I feared this situation for a different reason than Maya’s nurses did, and so I kept quiet about my concerns. Wright shared my concern; I could see it in his blue eyes as he told Mystic Amber, the eldest of them, that we were to be present during this discussion. “I mean, we didn’t want to leave at all when she woke up,” he amended his statement. “She’s a third of our world. I think I’m going to stay when Miles take you guys for lunch and to your hotel, actually. I don’t think I ever want to let her out of my sight again.”

“Don’t trouble yourself over it,” Amber replied, and I could see that she believed Wright’s excuse about as much as he meant it. “I’m sure we can all empathize with that sentiment. It’s been a terrifying three weeks for us all.”

Now that we are in Maya’s room, with Amber seated at her side, she talks gently, smiling genuinely, and after a few moments of idle chat Amber says, “Tell us of your ordeal, Master. It must have been quite harrowing.”

“Oh, it was,” Maya confirms, her voice haunted. She launches into the story of how she ended up in the position she did, interrupting briefly after she tells of her fall to emphasize that the Elders absolutely must get a contractor up there to install some manner of fence to prevent anyone else from falling from that cliff.

Her story doesn’t take very long to tell; there really wasn’t much to tell. She went to the waterfall to do some light, calming training, and when she arrived she noticed that the cliff had eroded. She investigated to determine whether or not the erosion rendered that particular training ground unsafe, and slipped on a patch of invisible ice that edged the cliff. When she came to and realized the extent of her injuries, she channeled Mia in an effort to alert us.

The rest we knew, from our perspective. Mercifully, Maya chose not to divulge the details of the long hours between that contact from Mia and our discovery of her. She doesn’t appear to want to talk about it and neither Wright nor I want to hear it. I do not know Phoenix’s hesitation for that description, but mine stems from feeling guilty enough about my part in this situation. Some of my guilt is assuaged by the fact that this had been nothing more than a horrible accident. I’m not sure how I’d be able to live with myself and my actions had she made an attempt on her life.

By the time she’s done all the talking she’s going to do, Maya is clearly fatigued. We wish her a restful sleep and pile out; Amber orders the other Mystics to go back down to the van, and then turns to Phoenix and I. “Mr. Wright. Are you still in possession of Mystic Maya’s magatama?”
He produces it as he says, “Yes, of course.”

“Did you see any dishonesty in her tale?”

Phoenix narrows his eyes at her. “No. Why?”

“Just that, if the had tried to take her own life, we’d have to take a much different path than we’ve agreed to take.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, will you stop it?” he snaps; he has absolutely no patience for this nonsense. Neither do I, for that matter, and I cross my arms over my chest, prepared to help him tell her off.

Amber frowns at him and his tone. “And will you stop assuming the worst of us, Mr. Wright!” she snaps back. “The path we would choose if she’d attempted suicide was simply to install Mystic Pearl as the Master Apparent and when Maya was in a clearer frame of mind, give her the choice to continue in the position or to step down! At no point were we considering merely removing her!”

“Bullshit!” Phoenix retorts. “You spent a great deal of time considering her removal!”

“But not because of this! Because she was ineffectual as a leader!”

“She was an ineffectual leader because she was depressed,” I interject, annoyed. We’ve been over this! I cannot believe we’re having this conversation again!

Amber nods to me. “And that is why this alternative path had been discussed. It was only when we considered that this was an attempt to kill herself that we made that connection. Mr. Edgeworth, we still must insist on her getting psychological help, regardless of this incident being an accident or not. However, the placement of Pearl as a temporary Master would only be made if her mind were so clouded that she thought suicide was an acceptable escape. That is not the case. She will retain full power while she is being treated for both physical and spiritual wounds, and we will see what effect such treatment has on her leadership. It is our hope that this will resolve those issues.”

That was what Phoenix, Pearl and I had been urging them to do since the criticism first cropped up. I want to inform her of this, gloat over being right. It will do Maya no good to do that, so I hold my tongue. They see it now, and they’re willing to work on helping her now, instead of ordering her up by her bootstraps. If they want to pretend it was their idea, let them. It matters not who “gets credit” for it, as long as she gets help.

Instead, I nod slightly. “Thank you. And I apologize for assuming the worst, as you said. She truly needs help more than anything else. We simply feared that you hadn’t seen the issue we had.”

Amber’s demeanor changes, indignant anger draining out of her. “It’s alright, Mr. Edgeworth. We’ve assumed the worst of everyone in the last two months, and now we get to see the results of such disparaging behavior. Perhaps it’s time to start having faith in her.”

Amber’s last statement strikes me, hard, and I feel as though something I’ve not understood at all these past seven years is suddenly crystal clear. With that final revelation, everything falls into place, the last piece of this puzzle of why we just couldn’t seem to work things out fitted snugly into place. It is simple and beautiful and my god, do I feel foolish for having missed it all this time.

I can only assume Phoenix feels the same as I do as he says, sheepishly, “That’s something we could all stand to do, I think.”
“Master Maya herself included,” Amber adds thoughtfully. “She’ll need help to have faith in herself after all this.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” I say, and I mean it.

Amber smiles at us. “Thank you. Now, I expect you to be down at the van shortly, Mr. Edgeworth,” she orders crisply. “Several of us have never been outside of the village. We’re eager to see the sights of the city. I suspect it would be quite jarring for you to discover that we’ve chosen to do so without you.”

The threat of these ladies wandering around Los Angeles unsupervised is rather jarring, and a scenario I don’t particularly wish to see the results of. “I’ll be there shortly,” I reply. “I need a few moments to speak with Wright.”

“Alright, Mr. Edgeworth. But just a few moments. Mr. Wright, chase him out if he takes too long, won’t you?”

“Of course,” Phoenix replies. As Amber leaves us, he looks back to me. “Well,” he says with a sigh, “that was a heavy-handed life lesson, wasn’t it?”

“I’m just glad this is over. There is a lot of healing to do still, but with everything on the table, it will be easier.”

“Yeah. You better go take care of the Elders. I’m not sure if Mystic Amber was serious about that or not.”

“Indeed. Although I’m sure they can take care of themselves, they clearly want me to, instead.”

“I think some of them see this as a vacation, now that they know Maya will be alright,” Phoenix muses. “I’ll see you later, Miles.”

“See you later. Give Maya my love if she awakens before I return.”

“Will do.”

I take the fire escape down, as I usually do, and as I descend, I feel that perhaps the three of us finally have the happy ending we all were praying for, after all.

I'm released from the hospital in two weeks. It's already half-way through January; almost a full month since my fall, and I'm still in a lot of pain. A shattered arm and clavicle, severe concussion with some minor brain damage (my doctor claimed I wouldn't even notice it, and I hadn't really yet- I was thinking a little slower, maybe, but me thinking slow was nothing special), six broken ribs, broken pelvis, and a leg broken in three places and some damage to my neck and spine- yeah, I am going to hurt for a long while.

Nick has to postpone his bar exam. I apologize profusely when I realize my release date is the same day as his exam. He smiles wistfully and shrugs. “I've waited eight years. Another month isn't going to kill me.”

I find out that the kids know who Nick and Miles are now. They had to tell them. After all, lies beget more lies, and at the time, they didn't know if it was an accident or attempted suicide. If it was the latter, those lies could have possibly taken a life; “We couldn't lie to them about what was happening,” Miles told me. “They knew only that Phoenix and I were panicked, that there were police officers and people they didn't know coming to the village, and that their mother hadn't
come home when she should have. There were several people we had to convince that we had the
authority to make decisions regarding the twins. Telling the truth was the quickest way to do that.”

“We had a nice long talk with them both once you were stable and out of danger,” Nick adds. I get
the feeling that they’re both leaving something super important out, but if they’re not telling me
about it yet, I’m not going to pry. I’m too exhausted to. I’m too exhausted to think about how mad
my babies might be with me for lying to them.

They're not mad at me, though. A little confused as to why the secret was kept so long, but Nick
settled that one: “Adults can be really, really stupid sometimes.”

“I'll say,” Nicky reportedly replied dryly as Misty nodded, eyeing them in mild disbelief.

After I failed to respond to every stimulus they tried to bring me out of the coma, Nick and Miles
brought the kids to the hospital, in hopes that having my children there would help. Neither
actually believed it would work, but they were desperate and it worked anyway. That said, Apollo
and Trucy had taken in Pearly while Iris and the babies stayed with Larry. Larry, it seemed, had
finally gotten his life in order and had an apartment big enough for them. Two bedrooms; Larry
sleeps on the couch, Iris in the spare bedroom, and the twins in his. For a moment, I worry for
them; “Don't,” Nick says, laughing. “We inspected his place before agreeing to it. It's fairly
spacious, clean, and not a drop of alcohol in the joint. He did a really good job of cleaning himself
up.”

“We might have to worry about Iris still,” Miles says dryly. Nick comes as close to giggling as I
ever heard him and I shake my head. He probably only turned respectable in hopes of getting laid.
Still, Iris knows better than to go for a man like Larry.

When I'm released from the hospital, Nick and Miles explain that everyone is under strict orders to
keep their distance for a few days; the exceptions are the twins, and only if they request it, and then
one of them will come pick them up and bring them to Miles' home. This is so that I can sleep
whenever I need to; I'm not healed yet, and I'll probably tire very, very easily for a while still.
Better to be able to control any visits that happen.

The first thing we do when I'm released, though, is go to my favorite burger place. I order the
grueziest, most unhealthy thing on the menu, plus a good deal more. I'm hungry.

Next stop is candy. I can't go in myself, obviously, unless the boys get the wheelchair the hospital
gave us out of the trunk and I hate that thing. Miles and I wait in the car while Nick goes in and
comes back with a little something for all of us. He still knows exactly what kind of candy we both
like.

And then home, since I fell asleep in the few minutes Nick was in the candy store. I rouse myself
as Miles pulls onto his street; Nick carries me while Miles gets the food. I'm settled down on the
couch, and Nick goes back out to the car to bring in the medical supplies they have: wound
cleansing solution and dressings for the more severe cuts I sustained, medications, and even brings
in that stupid wheelchair. “I'm not using that,” I inform them stubbornly.

“We're not carrying you every time you want to move,” Nick retorts.

“Actually, she might have a point,” Miles says thoughtfully, gazing around his living room. “There
isn't a whole lot of room in here. There might not be enough space for her to use it in here.”

I grin at him. “How much weight can you bench, Nick? And you're worried about lil' old me?”
He snorts in response, sitting down carefully next to me. “Yeah, well, you did lose a lot of weight. Eat up, you're a stick right now.”

The discussion is mundane. The quality of the grease bombs, how Miles and Nick lost quite a bit of weight as well, wondering if I feel up to it tomorrow, if we should go visit Larry, since he's been worried... and what to do tonight. “Whatever it is, it has to be here,” Miles says mildly. “We can't leave Maya unattended.”

“Of course not. It's just... I've never seen you with any board games or anything. Wanna play cards?”

“Oh please god, no. I'm still sore from last time.”

“How about we watch a movie or something?” I offer timidly.

They both look at me, curious. “Aren't you tired?” Nick asks.

The question makes me want to yawn. I suppress it; if I do, they'll put me to bed and I'm not really sleepy. “Not really,” I say. “I've done nothing but sleep and get tests for the last month or so. I'd like to do something fun for a change.”

Nick and Miles smile at me, a bit of relief passing between them. When I ask Nick about it later, he will tell me that they feared the brain damage could have altered my personality; that moment was when they realized that fear was unfounded. For now, though, Miles says, “I have an idea.”

“Well?” Nick asks expectantly.

“Don't hit me for it.”

“I won't.” The answer is tired and exasperated. “I might tell you it's a bad idea, but I won't hit you for it.”

“Steel Samurai and the Deep Night.”

I laugh, hard. It hurts my chest but oh god, that suggestion, coming from Miles, is just painfully funny. “Bad idea, Miles,” Nick says. “That is a very bad idea and you should feel bad.”

“I'm serious,” he says indignantly. “Might I point out that it's been almost a decade since I purchased that DVD and we still don't know how it ends? I'd like to finally get through this blasted movie before the next major upheaval, if you two don't mind.”

“Watch it yourself!” Nick exclaims incredulously.

“No, actually, I kind of agree with him,” I say mischievously. “It was funny. It'd be nice to take advantage of the lull in life-altering events and the absence of severe thunderstorms and just... find out how it ends.”

“All right, fine,” Nick says, throwing his hands up. I see through it. He wants to see the end as badly as we do. That decided, Miles gets up, retrieves the DVD, and places it in the player. “We were at the fake Pink Princess sandwich scene, right?” he asks.

Nick sputters. “Didn't we go through this last time?” he demands. “It's been years! Start it over!”

“No,” Miles refuses firmly, scrolling through the scene selection. “I am not starting it over just to have it be interrupted at the same place for a fourth time. We're starting it from that scene.”
“Uh... technically, we were interrupted before that point once,” I offer meekly.

“Hush. We were interrupted at that point four times. We're starting it there.”

It starts at the beginning of the scene. Despite my best efforts, “For great justice!” makes me giggle, and Nick's own laughter is held valiantly in check until Miles loses control of his own chuckles. “I don't think that'll ever get old,” I joke. The boys murmur agreement, and we watch as the Pink Princess doesn't get fucked by both the Steel Samurai and the Evil Magistrate. It's amazing, but even knowing the fact that they really are acting and despite my physical condition, the scene is still arousing to me. Ah, well, that's what porn is for, I suppose...

My jaw drops a few times at position changes, Nick cringes once and goes, “Oh, ow” and Miles snorts in amusement. “Is that even possible?”

“Look at how he's got her-”

“Oh dear lord, that's sick.”

“And yet, it's turning you on, Wright.”

“Sh-shut up! That's what it's supposed to do!”

“We're making you laugh?” Nick is incredulous enough that he tears his eyes away from the television screen to look at me with a bemused, wide-eyed expression.

Miles isn’t incredulous enough to look at me, though, as he informs me in a deadpan, eyes glued to the screen, “You're paying attention to the wrong thing, Maya.”

This continues until the end of the ridiculous scene, and the three heroes collapse in a sweaty, sated cuddle-pile, sound asleep. “Man. Awesome final battle,” Nick says coyly. “Wonder if they won.”

“Hush. I think we're about to find out,” Miles says as the screen goes blank.

We watch with bated breath as we're treated to the obnoxious buzzing of an alarm clock. The Steel Samurai- I can't remember any of their names anymore- reaches over and hits the snooze button. From somewhere in the darkened screen, a woman's voice says, “Craig... it's Saturday. Why oh why did you set the alarm?”

“Because he's a freaking idiot, that's why,” a third, masculine voice claims; we can see his silhouette sit up on the other side of the bed, and the names come rushing back to me as my jaw drops. “Greg?” Miles and I say in unison, dumbfounded.

Craig gets up and turns on the light. Yep. There's Amber and Greg in Craig's bed, all three of them stark naked and looking absolutely normal. “Guys, you won't believe the dream I had last night.”

“It still is night,” Amber says irritably.

“We were these action characters, and me and Amber were characters who were normally heroes, and as it turns out, Greg was a completely misunderstood villain, and-”

“Craig,” Greg cuts him off hopefully. “It's six-thirty in the morning, on a Saturday. Can we listen to your goofy dream later? I'd like to go back to sleep.”

“No! This isn't goofy! It was really epic! There was this incubus, and-”
As Craig relates the details of the dream, I'm still staring at the screen slack-jawed. Miles and Nick have both been struck speechless. “You mean... that was supposedly a dream?” I say incredulously.

It's Craig that answers that for me, breaking the fourth wall in incredible fashion. “Surprised? Surely you didn't think anyone actually believed that Incubii functioned in that fashion, did you?” And with that, Craig collapses on the bed and is set upon by his lovers, and the end credits start rolling.

“Th-that... that was...”


“Do not even consider breaking that DVD,” Miles says in his best “obey me,” voice. “It's a collector's item since Manella passed away.”

“Sal Manella died?” I ask, startled. No way!

The boys are both surprised. “What kind of Steel Samurai fan are you?” Nick asks incredulously. “He died almost a year ago!”

“Well, excuse me!” I protest, “but didn't we have something a little more important to do? Like getting your butt out of trouble?!”

“That's-”

“That's exactly right,” Miles says smugly. “Considering the seriousness of the situation, I'm surprised that you know that Sal Manella died.”

“But-”

“You know what this means, right Miles?” I say smugly.

“What's that?”

“Nothing!” Nick snaps, trying to stop this conversation.

It doesn't work. I smile sweetly at him. “It means that he's a Steel Samurai fan!” I sing.

"OBJECTION!"

I nearly black out from the pain of laughing. But oh man, was that ever worth it.
Marriage for tax purposes. Maya wants to know, Is that even legal? Yes, Miles and I inform her. It's perfectly legal. Whether it's ethical or not is an entirely different story, but the three of us have never had a firm grasp on ethics and besides- they do love each other, so it's not like it's purely for convenience.

Am I okay with this? Not really. I know what this means. No matter how hard they fight it, I'm going to be cut out of the relationship. It won't be immediate. It won't be sudden. It might not even be dramatic. It may just be. But it will happen. The instant two parties in a three-way relationship get married, that's the beginning of the end for the threesome. That's just how it is.

But I tell them I am okay with it, and try to believe it. This is what they want. This will make them happy. Their happiness is the second most important thing to me, and if this makes them happy, it makes me happy.

As the best man at this thing, it's up to me to give a little speech. I've always hated public speaking if it wasn't in court, and I'm pretty uncomfortable now. Fortunately, I've had a few by now and the alcohol makes this a bit easier. "As mostly everyone in this room knows," I say, raising my voice so I can be heard by everyone, "I can't go to a party without making a complete ass of myself at least once. So, to get it out of the way, let's see a count of hands: Who expected me to be the one sitting where Miles is tonight?"

I laugh as every hand in the joint goes up, including the bride and groom's. "See? You guys suck for doing this to me." Much to my relief, there's a smattering of laughter, and both of them laugh as well. "But there are no two people who mean more to me-"

"Daddy!" Trucy interrupts indignantly. I hear my son issue his own protest, and my other "daughter" tell them both to be quiet, they're being rude. I smile and accept the correction. "There are no two people who are closer friends than you are. And no two friends of mine that I want to see happy than you two. If anyone deserves a 'happily ever after', it is you, Mr. and Mrs. Edgeworth."

They're smiling brilliantly at me; it looks like Maya's about to cry. I hope she doesn't. Iris informed me that her makeup was a little difficult to do. "So, in short," I wrap it up, "You guys suck, I'm looking forward to many years of continued, deep friendship with you, and I love you both."

We raise our glasses to my toast, and take a drink. I step back to let Mia, being channeled by a medium from Kurain, do her Maid of Honor toast. "So. Miles Edgeworth." She sounds like she's about to give him the upbraiding of his life, and he chuckles and bows his head, his face flushing. "First you humiliate me our first time in court. Yes, I know I wasn't the only one, but you don't count, you're a prosecutor." There's a smattering of laughter, and someone objects. Mia's smile gets bigger. "Then you prosecute my little sister- and then my best friend and subordinate- for my murder. And now you're marrying my little sister, right out from under my best friend's nose." She shakes her head. "I'm speechless. One thing's for sure, you have fabulous taste in women. I wish I could say the same for Maya's taste in men."

I chuckle with everyone else at this. "But I suppose that's okay, as long as you keep her happy. And you better keep her happy. Because Phoenix has my blessing to steal her from you if you don't." I'm sure I'm blushing now, and the smatterings of laughter get a little louder. "I love you, Maya. And... eh, I guess you're okay, Miles." She grins around the room, and then laughs herself. "Okay, okay! I
love you too, Miles. I wish you both the greatest of happiness.”

There's another toast, and the reception resumes. I make a few off-color remarks about no one having a clue, and I wander off to find a dancing partner once I have Maya and Miles laughing. The first offer actually comes from little Misty, and I graciously accept.

Misty gets bored from just standing on my feet, though, and goes off to do whatever she and her half-brother do when they're the only kids their age around. I've no doubt that they're well supervised; there aren't many people in the room whose hearts they haven't unceremoniously usurped at some point or another. I manage to catch Mia's attention, asking in goofy fashion for a dance and wishing the DJ would play something other than slow songs.

She accepts, and as soon as we've got a decent rhythm, she drops The Question on me. "Are you okay with this, Phoenix? Really."

I chuckle wistfully. "I don't have much of a choice now, do I?"

"Well, no. But I know you. If you thought this would make them happy, you'd go along with it, no matter how much it breaks your heart." I'm a little too drunk to hide my wince, wondering at how she still knows me so well after so many years. "That's exactly what you did, isn't it?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Oh, Phoniex..."

"It's okay, really," I say quickly. "I mean, it's not like they're telling me to get the fuck out. And they've both reassured me that this isn't the end of us. It's just for tax purposes."

"So why are you so depressed?"

"I'm not."

"Stop lying, Phoenix. I did talk to certain other members of the bridal party."

I chuckle at this. Of course. Apollo and Trucy'd know. There are only a handful of people who know the true nature of my friendship with Maya and Miles, and they're two of them. As far as I know, the rest of the world believes that the twins were the result of youthful iniquity and that stopped ten years ago. "The chances of them being able to follow through with their promises are slim, at best," I tell her. "There's nothing they're going to be able to do about the inequity now. Other than divorce, and then we go from inequity to resentment. Either way, I'm screwed. Better to let it happen than to put up a fight and make them just as miserable as I'll be."

"You're so silly, Phoenix." Mia sounds positively amused. "You don't know it'll be that way. After the things the three of you have survived, you think a convenience marriage is going to break you up? Please."

"You do have a point there..."

"Of course I do." The song ends, and we back away from each other. I bow goofily to her, and she gives me a tipsy curtsey, and she adds, "Besides, you have me!"

"I don't think they'll let me marry a dead woman, Mia. Or sleep with one. That's a crime in most states, you know."

She laughs, loud and long, as she wanders away from me.
Larry is the next person to approach me, slinging an arm around my shoulders. "Hey, Nick!" he says, loudly. "Wanna dance?!"

"No, Larry. Not with you."

"Aw, come on, man!" he whines. He's drunk. Drop-dead drunk. "Iris went to the bathroom and-"

"And she's not going to come back?" I cut him off, raising an eyebrow.

He grins sheepishly. "It's been a while."

"How long?"

"About a minute."

I roll my eyes. Patience was never Larry's strong suit. "I'll tell you what: I'll keep you company until she comes back, 'kay?"

"Oooookaaaaaay..." I sit with him at his table, watching the party-goers. Trucy flirting mercilessly with Klavier- that was fun. Klavier's wedding gift to them was a song he wrote specifically for their first dance. It was beautiful- and Apollo and Pearls dancing together, very little space between their bodies, their faces inches apart. "Should we worry about that, dude?" he asks, indicating Apollo and Pearls.

I shake my head. "No. She'd make him wait for marriage even if she didn't believe in it," I answer, chuckling. I can't see either of them having sex, honestly, ever, and even if they end up happy with kids, I'd insist they're both virgins 'til the day I die.

Iris returns, and Larry drags her onto the dance floor again. She protests, but she's laughing and looks like she's having the time of her life. I'm left alone at the table.

But not for long. "May I have this dance, Mr. Wright?"

I turn to the sound of her voice, smiling broadly. "The pleasure would be all mine, Mrs. Edgeworth."

Maya is beautiful, the most gorgeous, breath-takingly enchanting woman I've ever laid eyes on. Her hair falls in soft curls around her face, and the dress she's wearing looks like something out of a fairytale wedding, the peasant girl finally getting her happily ever after, and just about everything is laced up. Miles and I are going to have a bitch of a time getting that off her tonight.

"See something you like?" she says, smirking at me as we dance.

"Plenty," I reply. "Have you been told how beautiful you are tonight?"

She shrugs. "Oh, not much. Just every male in this place and half the women, too."

I chuckle. "Well, you're about to hear it again."

"Oh please. If you have to compliment me, give me a unique compliment. Please."

I shrug. "Okay." And then I lean close to her ear, whispering so that anyone who is close to us can't hear what I'm saying. "Oh. Oh, oh my. Nick, behave yourself. We're in public here."

I pull away, smirking. "You wanted a unique compliment, didn't you?"
"Not that unique..."

We laugh together, and I just enjoy being with her. How much longer I can claim to be her lover, even in private, I don't know. If there's one thing that I've learned, it's to savor the moment. Unfortunately, the moment's going to end a little quicker for me than them, but it's the only way for us to pull this off without getting caught.

The song ends; we part, noticeably reluctant. I give her a kiss on the cheek, and she whispers, "Thank you," to me.

"I told you before," I say, bowing slightly to her, more serious than I was with Mia. "The pleasure was all mine." I turn and walk away before I have a chance to tear up. They made me be best man, and be a stand-in for the father-daughter dance- we danced to a song about close, unbreakable platonic friendship- and now Maya's getting mushy on me. Damn. I better find a chance to escape quickly.

My own body gives me the excuse I need to leave the reception. The strain of high emotion and keeping some certain emotions in check, in combination with more drink than I can ever recall consuming in one night, have given me an incredible headache. I'm in a discussion with Klavier and Miles when I put a hand to my temple, grimacing. "Are you feeling alright, Herr Wright?" Klavier asks.

I nod, even though I'm not. "Just a headache," I tell him.

Miles reaches over to me and hugs me around my shoulders. "It's pretty late," he says. "Why don't you call it a night? It's okay, I still have Larry."

"Larry's wasted, Miles."

"...Okay. I still have Apollo. Go lay down, Phoenix. You can always come back if you feel better before the party's over."

"Right. Congrats again, Miles. You finally beat me." He laughs at my remark, and we exchange proper hugs, instead of his half-hug, and I seek the bride out, who is locked in firm discussion with our kids, all five of them, if I count Apollo and Pearls. I let them know I've a headache and I'm going to my room, and I remind the children to be good for Mr. Larry and Miss Iris while they're in Kurain. Hugs and kisses and "I love you"s are collected.

As I'm saying good night to the kids, Maya wanders over to her husband. I catch them shooting furtive glances in my direction, talking about something. It's not my headache. We agreed that would be my excuse to leave early, it just so happened I actually got one. They have a secret that I, apparently, am not to be party to. It's already starting. Oh well... I guess it can't really be helped. My good nights said, I take my leave.

My headache recedes almost the instant I'm away from the stuffy hotel ballroom. By the time I'm in the elevator and heading to the suite floor, I already have my key card to the room out. I had a great time reserving this suite. The poor clerk didn't know what to make of the request for three key cards, and then the statement that I, the best man, would be staying in that suite with the bride and groom on their wedding night. It took all of my willpower not to try to screw with the poor girl's head more.

Most of the reason I'm to leave the reception early is so that no one will see me go to this room instead of the one I occupied with Apollo last night. A small fraction of that reason is to make sure everything is in order. This being a wedding suite, normally there are only two wine glasses and
enough champagne for two people; the request for three glasses and an extra bottle probably threw them for a loop. Extra wine glass, check. Two bottles, check. Extra set of pillows, check.

... who the hell asked for the Steel Samurai dark chocolate bar?

Ah, whatever. Whichever one of them it was is going to be pleased that it's here.

My run-down of the room complete, I settle in and wait. Part of our stealth plan is for Apollo to hand off my backpack to me in the morning. Therefore, I don't have the book I'm reading at the moment, and I have little to do but wait. And watch TV, although I'm not particularly interested in TV right now.

I start to doze a bit, and I'm startled awake at the sound of a thump outside the door, and Maya laughing far too loud for the time of night. "Will you wait three minutes, Maya?" I hear Miles protest. "I- Maya, I cannot open the door with you- just wait. I promise I'll make it worth your while to keep your hands to yourself for another ninety seconds."

I can't help but laugh as Miles opens the door and half-drags an utterly blasted Maya through it. "Phoenix, help," he says plaintively, and I get up and help him pull her upright again. She giggles and smacks me on the shoulder, her face flushed and captivating still. Even as drunk as she is.

"We are going to have lots of fun tonight," she informs me, trying to sound seductive. The alcohol makes her fail at this, but I give her points for effort. "You and me and Miles and... Miles!"

"Yes, Maya?"

"You have it, right?"

"Oh! Oh, right. Yes, I do."

"Well, hurry it up! I want to get laid! Hurry it up and give it to him! Hurry hurry!"

I raise my eyebrows at her eagerness to bed us, making a mental note to get her drunk more often, and wondering what it is that Miles is supposed to give me. He digs in his tux pocket for a second, before pulling something small and round from it, something that glints off the soft light in the room.

I gasp as he holds it up for me to see. It's a ring. It's a wedding band, made of white gold like theirs is, in the same design as theirs. As Maya clumsily grabs my left hand, I feel like I'm going to cry. "You guys..." Maybe I won't be shoved to the side after all...

The romantic moment is shattered when we discover that it doesn't fit. It's not that they're too drunk and clumsy to get it on my finger, it's just too small. Miles frowns as Maya squeaks in disappointment. "We wanted to surprise you," he tells me, sounding disappointed as well. "We knew your fingers were a little more slender than mine, so we guessed at your size. Looks like we guessed wrong."

"Looks like it," I reply, taking the ring from him. "That's okay. That's why you can get them sized, after all."

There's a moment of companionable silence. And then, abruptly, it's broken when Maya playfully shoves me, and then Miles, onto the bed, and crawls on herself. "Hey guys? This thing is heavy. Help me get it off?"

She doesn't have to ask either of us twice.
In Which Nicky and Misty Refuse to be Watched by Mr. Larry While Their Parents Go on Their Honeymoon...

Chapter Notes

This was originally written at the prompting of a friend. I thought it should be included here... just for completion's sake.

Misty and Nicky. Wow, are they like their daddies or what?

I still can't believe that Edgey and Nick had twins with the same woman. That doesn't seem like something that any of them would do. Well... Nick, maybe, he's a bit of a womanizer, although he won't admit it. He always just insists that it's projection when I try to call him out on it, whatever that means. And, Maya, well... can't honestly say she wouldn't, as long as she was with people she trusts. And since Edgey and Nick are two of the most trustworthy people to ever live...

But Edgey? Naw. I still can't believe Misty's his kid, or I wouldn't, if not for the fact that she looks just like him. Going by looks alone, if I let my mind wander, I could think that Edgey somehow spontaneously divided and Misty was the result. Then again, Maya insists that Misty's her daughter and she'd know where the girl came from- she was there for it, after all.

The problem facing me now, though, is the fact that the twins don't seem to get the purpose of a honeymoon. Beside me, Iris attempts what I've so far failed to do: "Nicky, Misty... sweethearts... it's not that your parents don't want you with them. It's just that this is something for adults, and-

Nicky cuts her off. That's something else that's puzzling, Nicky tends to act more like Edgey than Nick, and Misty is the other way around. As Misty's biting a lip and trying not to cry, Nicky demands, "But miss Iris, you've said that me and Misty are almost like little adults! Why can't we go with?"

Iris and I look at each other. Even though, over the last three years, Nick, Maya and Edgey have insisted that we all be absolutely honest with the kids, and each other, I wonder about how wise that is in this situation. I might not be the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree lights, but I doubt that telling them the truth- that they can't come with because Mama and Papa and Daddy are expecting to be able to walk around bare-ass naked all day in their honeymoon suite and fuck whenever the mood strikes- would be very appropriate here.

Instead, I try a different tact. "Look, you guys are pretty mature," I say, "but there are some things that you need to be big for, too."

"We are big," Nicky replies bluntly. "We're not babies!"

"No one said you are, sweetheart," Iris says quickly. I take the brief break to glance at my watch. We better wrap this up, and quickly. All four of us still have things we need to do and I'm supposed to be in an entirely different room. If they don't settle down soon, I think Maya and Edgey will be short their flower girl and ring bearer. "Still," Iris continues, "there's a difference between adults and kids-"

"We're not kids!" Misty snaps at us, her steely eyes flashing. Oh man... "You're not!" I concede
quickly, as quickly as I can, waving my hands. Oh man oh man, what I wouldn't give to have Nick here right now, but Nick's the best man. He has to stay with Edgey. "But you're not grown like we are. When you get older, you can do the things that Mama and Papa and Daddy get to do." I cringe, wondering if I just gave my best friends' kids permission to have wild, porn-driven, drunken and unprotected threesomes. Dude, not even I would do that... Iris would behead me. Twice. "They're not trying to be mean or leave you behind. I promise."

Misty shuffles her foot, and Nicky crosses his arms over his chest. Again, the way that they seem like each other's fathers, instead of their own, is striking, and Misty says, "But Mama was away for so long. What if she decides to stay away even longer this time?"

"Nope," I answer immediately. "Only a week."

"And you'll get to talk to them every day, too," Iris says pointedly.

"Plus, you'll have us to have fun with," I add hopefully. "And, guys, with your parents away, I can let you have ice cream and brownies every day!" They, thankfully, ignore Iris' insistence that no, I cannot let them have ice cream and brownies every day, and they both lose the protective, standoffish stances they have. "So c'mon," I say, wheedling. "How 'bout it? This is a special day for everyone and you guys have very important jobs to do. Almost as important as Mama and Daddy's."

Iris will, later, ask how the flower girl and ring bearer are almost as important as the bride and groom. However, that seems to be the last bit of encouragement they need, and they both smile at me. "Okay," Misty says finally. "I guess we'll let you watch us..."

"But only for the week!" Nicky adds. "After that, we're gonna go find Mama and Daddy and Papa if they aren't back. Deal?"

"Deal," I say, further disturbing my girlfriend. "Go find Mystic Pearls so you can finish getting ready, okay?"

"Kaaaay!" And off they run. I watch them go, rubbing the back of my head in relief. "Man. I hope you never want kids, babe."

"You and me both," Iris replies dryly. "Go see to Miles. I better go make sure all is okay with Maya."

"Yeah. See ya on the flip-side, girly!" She giggles at my pet names for her and dances off to help the bride get ready for one of the biggest days of her life. And she's marrying Edgey. Not Nick. Edgey.

Man, things got strange in a hurry... of course, that wasn't particularly strange itself or anything. Especially not with those three. With that thought, I gather myself up to go scold Edgey and Nick for telling their kids that they're almost like little adults. Complete honesty indeed.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!