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**Crisscross (Streets Akin to Veins)**

by Pseudthisyafucks (collettephinz)

**Summary**

Felix was a little stupid at times— one of the reasons why his family believed he’d become a cop in the first place— and had failed to take into account that New York wasn’t like Boston or Philadelphia. It wasn’t a familiar monster in different skin. It was facing down the Megalodon after swimming with great whites.

Now Felix has to stumble through the sordid crime of New York City while trying to figure out how he’d captured the attention and even affections of a violent Mob Boss.

*(On indefinite hiatus-- very sorry)*

**Notes**

look guys

the epilogue for scifi is nearing 40k and my brain is fried

i wrote this in two days
have'at thee

See the end of the work for more notes.
Clothes You Crossed Over

Act I

The first day on the job was always going to be rough, Felix had known this since the last two “first” days he’d had on varying police forces across the United States in the past eleven years. Starting out in Boston had been a good way to dip his toes into the bloody mess that was the underlying gang violence and petty crime that plagued most major cities around the world. Moving from Boston to Philadelphia had been like meeting the same monster in a different skin. Both of his “first” days had included a violent overdose and some horrible car accident. Felix had expected that his third “first” day would be largely the same.

Except Felix was a little stupid at times— one of the reasons why his family believed he’d become a cop in the first place— and had failed to take into account that New York wasn’t like Boston or Philadelphia. It wasn’t a familiar monster in different skin. It was facing down the Megalodon after swimming with great whites.

New York was beyond a violent city— it was a cesspool of crime that was only undermined by the likes of Chicago and Detroit. And Felix had promised his family that he would never dive into those waters, but he may have also promised to never work in New York either, and simply had forgotten along the way. Nevertheless, Felix was here now, and his third “first” day hadn’t even started before he’d put himself in a firefight.

Felix wasn’t supposed to report for duty at the Midtown North Precinct House until tomorrow at 1600 hours. Felix already had his badge and police issued Glock 19, radio, mace, taser, and flashlight, all of which were secured in the small safe underneath Felix’s barely-assembled bed back home. He was actually scouting out his own area now, meandering around his new townhouse that was honestly way too big for him, but he’d loved the red exterior too much to let it go when he’d first stumbled upon it. Now Felix had to relearn an unfamiliar area— that wasn’t even in his damn jurisdiction— and his first order of business was finding someplace that could fuel his caffeine addiction, as he was a second shift officer and needed to stay up late. The downside of being considered a relative greenie in this place was that he didn’t have enough seniority to get any of the good shifts.

Luckily, on the same block, Felix found Think Coffee Flatiron and promptly fell in love because it was quiet, it was clean, and it was damn good coffee. He knew the place would likely be rampant with students from the nearby Xavier High and flooded with people working a regular 9-to-5, but Felix’s schedule had never fit the norm, and it looked like he was going to luck out when it came to beating the crowds. It was also fair trade coffee, which Felix could definitely get behind. They had espresso, drip coffee, teas, they had—

Holy shit, they had a drink called the Red Eye. It was a medium-dark roast with two shots of espresso on the top. Felix was in love.

He walked out of the coffee shop with a 20oz cup full of that amazing concoction, eyes alert and moving up and down the busy street. Most of his view was obscured by the cars parked along the road, but he could still see faces. He could still track movement. Felix stepped onto the sidewalk and readied himself for the short walk “home” when he caught sight of a man that looked more than a little out of place.

He was about Felix’s height, though maybe a bit shorter. He had dark, rowdy hair curling atop his head, but shaved on the sides. Weirdly pointed ears like something out of a fairytale, a strong
jawline, 5 o’clock shadow, dark clothes, and dark bruises under his eyes. He was also loitering, trying to look innocuous about it, but obviously just as alert as Felix was. Felix almost thought this guy was a fellow officer until he saw the cigarette burns on the man’s collarbone. Not that police officers didn’t carry their fair share of scars, but they definitely didn’t like to showcase the weakness. Then there was also the haircut. Definitely not standard.

Felix didn’t like to profile people, but it was sadly part of his job. And his instincts were telling him this guy was either up to no good, or nothing good was coming for him. Possibly waiting to buy or sell drugs. Felix stalled, observing the man through his peripherals a moment longer than he’d normally allow. He watched this raggedy man light up a cigarette and blow the smoke into the air. It could have been some sort of signal, but the nicotine made the man’s shoulders slump in relief. Maybe less of a setup and more of a bad habit. Movement behind the man caught Felix’s eye, and he turned his full attention beyond he name, taking in the details with practiced clarity.

A yellow Pontiac turned the corner at high speeds and barreled down the road, mindless of the pedestrians jaywalking. As it zoomed down the street, the back passenger window rolled down. A bald man wearing sunglasses stuck his head and arm out and pointed a handheld with a silencer on the end at the man Felix had been staring at.

Felix dropped his coffee and darted forward, screaming for the crowd to get down. The man looked to Felix, then heard the Pontiac backfire. He turned his head in time to stare down the barrel of the gun. Felix dove and tackled the smoking man to the concrete just in time for a bullet to zing over their heads. Shots rang out and people shrieked, dropping to their knees. Felix dragged the man behind a parked vehicle and pulled out his cellphone, calling 9-1-1. He craned his neck around his cover, but was only able to catch the four digits at the end of the license plate.

“Are you alright?” Felix demanded of the man he’d tackled, who was slumped against the minivan Felix had dragged him behind, and staring at Felix with the most peculiar expression. In fact, it was so odd that Felix’s racing thoughts stalled.

Normally, any citizen targeted by a drive by would be panicking regardless of any sordid activity they’d taken part in to earn themselves a target on their head. They’d be babbling or shaking or losing their head and trying to escape to somewhere safer than the open streets. But this man was calm. Alarmingly calm. And, dare Felix say, curious. The man was looking Felix up and down with unhindered interest, his expression relaxed in a way it hadn’t been before. Who the fuck got zen after being shot at?

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

The operator’s voice startled Felix out of his staring contest with the bizarre civilian. He quickly turned his focus and persona to his not-yet-job, giving the operator his location, the part of the plate he’d caught, the description of the Pontiac and the shooter, and then the civilian. The operator informed him she’d be sending officers his way. Felix hung up quickly after that, standing and looking around for any viable witnesses that could have seen anything about the driver.

“Are you a Guard?”

Felix was surprised to hear the light Irish accent in the man he’d tackled, but not extremely so. Many Irish had immigrated to the East Coast over the years. But he wasn’t exactly familiar with the slang.

“A what?”

The man grinned, barring white teeth. “A cop,” he specified, letting his lips pop on the “p” playfully.

“Did I just get my arse saved by a cop?”
Felix had no idea what to make of this man. But he pulled out his badge and showed it to the citizen regardless, so very used to following the command from just about anyone.

“Officer K-jellberg.”

“Kjellberg,” Felix corrected thoughtlessly.

“Jhellburg?”

“Kjellberg. Like a sea-shell.” That was the easiest incorrect way to say it.

The man grinned even wider, something akin to a wolf. ‘Thank ye’ fer the assist, Officer Kjellberg. I owe ye’.”

“Are you an officer?”

Felix’s attention was drawn away momentarily by a mother with a baby carriage telling him she thought she’d seen the driver’s face. Felix quickly listened to her description, then asked her kindly to remain. “Officers will be on the scene soon, Ma’am, and they’ll need your account.” Felix then turned back to the man, intending on asking after his wellbeing again, only to see he’d disappeared. Felix wasn’t supposed to curse when civilians were aware of his badge and stature, but—

“Fuck.”

. . .

“Sergeant Morrison wants you in his office.”

Felix had known this was the going to happen considering he’d thrown himself in front of a bullet’s path out of uniform and possibly injured a civilian in the process. The man he’d saved had completely disappeared on him and Felix had been caught up in the rush of reporting to the 13th Precinct officers and getting checked out by the EMTs that had arrived. It really wasn’t hard to imagine that the man was some blue-line hater, had left the scene to go to a hospital, and had wanted Felix’s name to report him for whatever injuries he’d sustained. It wasn’t like it hadn’t happened before.

Felix readjusted the collar of his uniform, grimacing at the tight fit. He’d probably fucked up the washer settings when he’d cleaned it the other night and shrunk the damn thing. It made for a restricting sensation around his throat that already had him on edge. Now he was going to face down the Sergeant for getting in trouble before he’d even been on the job. It just fell into the regular rhythm of Felix’s terrible “first” days.

He stepped into the Sergeant’s office and laid eyes on his superior for the first time. The man was tall and broad and his eyes were stern. But he also had a teddy bear on his desk along with a travel mug covered in bright stickers. He stood huge behind his desk, looking out the huge windows that lined the staged left side of his office that showed the busy streets outside. Felix thought it was rather dramatic, but didn’t let himself snort a laugh. He stood by the door after letting it fall shut and crossed his wrists behind his back, widening his stance in rest. “Officer Kjellberg reporting as requested, sir.”

The man startled, then furrowed his brow. “This ain’t the military, kid.”

Actually, the NYPD had around thirty-eight thousand officers, making it the largest police force in the US, and definitely larger than some foreign countries’ military forces. And that wasn’t even counting the civilian employees. But Felix let that go, because his sergeant was trying to make him relax.
“Take a seat,” Sgt. Morrison requested, going to the other side of his desk. Felix sat on the opposite end and eyed the teddy bear with skepticism. Sgt. Morrison smiled easily. “You’ll find we get a lot of frantic people in here, and sometimes frantic kids. They appreciate the little things. Give them this to hug, and they’ll have an easier time. This little bear’s even been bestowed with his own official name and Instagram account.”

Felix was now staring at the bear even more.

“So, I heard you got yourself into a little firefight the other day,” Sgt. Morrison said. “And I wanted to extend my gratitude to you from your fellow officers at the 13th precinct. That was a bad situation that could have gone a whole lot worse. Thanks to you, no civilians were injured and we were able to get some information on the guilty party, along with a decent description of that bald man, who we’re pretty positive is a hitman tangled up in some mob activity we’ve been having a problem with these days. Along with that, several civilians were able to get sight of the vehicle and some of its passengers. And with your professionalism, the entire matter was dealt with in a matter of hours and we didn’t have to round up witnesses or anything and, again, no one was hurt.” Sgt. Morrison smiled even wider. “Good job, Officer.”

Felix narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“On that note, I think we can spare you our regular hazing tradition,” Sgt. Morrison continued. “Normally, we’d be having you drink car bombs until you could stand straight, but I think we’ll go easy on you. Maybe just two or three, depending on how good your alcohol tolerance is. Expect to be hounded to the bar tonight. Do you live far?”

“I’m not in trouble?” Felix asked, unable to let this go.

“Why would you be?” Sgt. Morrison asked. “You saved a civilian from getting shot and kept others from getting injured with your quick thinking. Forensics recovered five bullets from that scene, and any one of those five could have been dug out of bodies if you hadn’t yelled for people to get down and acted when you had. I did hear you spilled your drink, though, so should I punish you for littering?”

There was a twinkle in the sergeant’s eyes, like he was telling some stupid joke that Felix couldn’t wrap his head around because, somehow, he wasn’t in trouble for acting in the name of the law before he’d even officially been sworn into the precinct.

“Look,” Sgt. Morrison sighed after he saw Felix wasn’t going to budge. “I’m not gonna try and say the trope that New York isn’t like all the other places you’ve worked. I know you know it isn’t. You’ve got an amazing list of recommendations from your fellow officers and higher ups and you’ve got a fantastic track record of doing the right thing when crunched for time. And what happened yesterday was an example of that. You weren’t thinking about keeping yourself out of harm’s way or following rules. You only saw a gun, saw innocent people, and acted to protect them. That’s what we need here, Felix. We need officers who want to keep people safe, not because it’s their job, but because it’s their instincts. And, from what happened yesterday, I can confidently say that that’s you. The only reason I’m not giving you a medal is because you technically hadn’t started work yet, and you also didn’t get shot in the process. People like praising the dead more than the living.”

Felix nodded slowly along as he took this all in. He wasn’t about to get thrashed for doing the right thing. He actually really liked the sound of that.

“But, there is one downside.” Sgt. Morrison pulled a file from underneath others on his desk and slapped it on Felix’s desk. “Working out of the badge and jurisdiction requires a shit ton of paperwork. After the stress you went through the other day, HR is requiring me to keep you out of
the streets for at least one day. So you’ll be doing this for your shift.”

Felix made a face. “Seriously?”

Sgt. Morrison shrugged. “It’s this, or two weeks of therapy sessions with the lovely on-sight psychiatrist. To me, that sounds more boring than paperwork.” Felix couldn’t agree more. “You’ll get to meet your partner regardless. Muhammad Osman, though he makes us call him Sive. This precinct is actually low on manpower, so you won’t be in the same car, but you’re partners in spirit. He’ll be the closest to your beat, so he’ll be your most reliable backup. He’s already gone out, but he’ll be back in periodically because he prefers the in-house vending machines than bringing his own damn lunch. Do you need someone to show you around?”

“I’d rather just get this over with,” Felix said, picking up the folder that was condemning him to hours of boredom. “Wouldn’t want to have to talk about my feelings.”

St. Morrison laughed and the sound was huge. It echoed off the glass windows had surprised Felix with the strength of it. “Jesus christ, K-jellberg, get to your desk. Am I saying that right?”

Felix honestly didn’t care to correct him. He stood and bowed his head in lieu of thanks. “I’ll get this finished by tonight. Any other work you have for me?”

“Not me, but don’t be surprised if people try to hand off write-ups to you. Don’t let them bully you. They’ll get it through their heads that the new kid ain’t exactly a cherry soon enough. On another note, are you unpacked? I could always direct you to some friendly faces that could make your move-in a little smoother.”

Felix was nowhere near to unpacked and he had several pieces of furniture to still put together, books to arrange, a TV and computer to hook up, and most of his kitchen appliances weren’t even plugged in yet. But he didn’t know any of these people. And he didn’t know his own home well enough yet. He’d rather manage it on his own, even if it would take months considering how worn out he would be after his 10-hour shifts. Felix shook his head. “I’ve got it handled, Sergeant Morrison.”

“That’s a fucking mouthful— just call me Sarge. And even as you say no, you should know that people will be happy to help after what you did. Word spreads fast around here, Kjellberg, and you did a good thing. I feel lucky to have you on the force.”

Felix had to leave quickly before the sergeant saw his smile. Praise had never been given easily at his other precincts. All in all, maybe the pattern of bad first days had never existed in the first place.

Felix never ended up meeting Sive, but he did get that awful load of paperwork done, and had then done a few for his desk buddy’s— who was the absent Sive— and had relieved the man of his overload of traffic violation write-ups. Felix absolutely hated paperwork, but he liked to get as much done as he could when forced to do so, and he felt like that had been a good way to introduce himself to his pseudo-partner. But now the joints in Felix’s fingers were tired from ten hours of typing and numbing his brain and the streets were cold. He hadn’t turned on his heater, so Felix dreaded stepping foot into his dreary, messy, dark apartment. But lingering on the steps to his new home was also a stupid thing to do. Anyone could call the cops on him.

Felix sighed and pushed his key in, unlocking the door and shoving himself inside, bracing for more cold. When he was met with a pleasant warmth, Felix almost stumbled. Then he moved further inside and actually stumbled, because there was a fucking rug in front of his door. A rug that was not
Felix stared down at the rug for a long moment, begging his brain to start working. He flicked on the lights for a better look, but only saw more evidence to add to the mystery.

All of the furniture in his living room was assembled and arranged pleasantly in front of him with way more sense than he could have managed. The dining room table was also put together and the table was even set with gorgeous Polish pottery dishwater that Felix didn’t own. All of his kitchen appliances were—they were updated. His old microwave and coffee pot were gone and replaced with new, expensive pieces of equipment. Fucking hell, there was even an espresso machine. He didn’t even know how to use an espresso machine.

Instinct kicked in and he pulled out his firearm, holding it at the ready as he flattened himself against the wall. He scanned the rooms he could see, then moved further into the townhouse, opening the storage closet in the back with his weapon raised. Nothing was inside except for board games that weren’t his. He grimaced and then turned back to climb the stairs with extreme caution, gun pointed aimed his head over the stairwell.

The second floor was just like the downstairs. All of the furniture—including his television and PC—were unpacked, assembled, and even clean. His bedroom now sported pleasant pieces of photography depicting various locations around New York. All of his clothes were hung in the closet. All of his clothes were hung in the closet. Even his bathroom, which he’d only brought toiletries for, now boasted a gentle aesthetic of pastel blue and yellow. The office room had an oak desk that looked like it was with two months pay and not something Felix could ever own. The third floor was empty and untouched, thank god, but that was how Felix had intended to use it.

Felix stood in his bedroom in stunned bewilderment after checking to make sure his safe hadn’t been tampered with when something caught his eye. This was a feat within its own nature, considering his entire house had been bogarted and transformed into something actually resembling a home. Back in his bedroom, on one of the throw pillows—his bed now had a huge comforter and the entire room was a gentle combination of off white and light brown—was a slip of paper.

Felix picked it up and saw someone had left him a note.

thanks for the save officer XO

Felix’s jaw dropped. Then he noticed a bottle of wine on his desk. It was some weird brand called the Screaming Eagle Cabernet, year 1992. Felix quickly googled the label on his phone, figuring it to be some sort of clue, but only discovered, to his horror, that it was a bottle of the most expensive wine he had ever heard over. The bottle cost five hundred thousand fucking dollars. There was a note attached to it as well in the same handwriting as the first.

welcome to the big city doll XO

His jaw was on the fucking floor at this point.

This bottle of wine was worth more than his fucking life. Basically the same price as his fucking home. How the fuck had—

Felix hadn’t thought the guy he’d tackled the other day had looked anything like someone who was absolutely fucking loaded, but that was what he got for trying to profile civilians. And that explained why he’d been so dead set on getting Felix’s last name right. God, but this also meant someone had broken into Felix’s home and put together all of his shit. Fucking christ, someone had broken in and the lock hadn’t even looked scraped. This was professionally done.
Felix looked warily around the room. He knew what he had to do next.

It was midnight, but Felix spent the next four hours searching his apartment for any sort of surveillance, video and audio. Felix wasn’t paranoid, but he was a police officer. He’d made plenty of enemies in the name of trying to make the world a safer place. What if that guy had some sort of affiliation with people Felix had arrested? What if there was a hit out on Felix that he didn’t know about? He hadn’t done anything worthy of getting a bounty except for a few large drug busts, but being an officer in any big city was dangerous. Fucking christ, what if that bottle of wine was poisoned?

Not that Felix was going to drink it. He couldn’t stomach the idea just chugging down 500-K, even if he sorely did need some sort of alcohol. His home was now in shambles thanks to his feverish search that had turned up nothing. Felix was exhausted by the end of it, and it was 4AM. He needed to get some rest, but someone had made his bed and the idea of a stranger touching his sheets and clothes had his skin crawling.

Felix curled up on his sofa and made do with what he could. He didn’t rest well, but he at least got any rest at all.

...  

“I’m Sive.”

Felix shook the hand of his partner and took the offered cup of coffee. He’d already had a 20oz Red Eye this morning after that awful night, but he would never turn down the caffeine.

Felix had woken up with a crick in his neck, an aching spine, restless legs, and the distinct impression that he was being watched. It had crossed his mind that he should contact the authorities, but there was nothing stolen, so there was nothing to report, and the cops wouldn’t be able to help him at all unless there was illegal activity. As nothing like that had happened, Felix had no one to turn to until things took a turn for the worse. That feeling of helplessness was leaving him in a sour mood. Coffee was one of the few things that could lift his spirits.

“I saw you did those red light runners for me,” Sive commented as he sat down at the desk opposite of Felix’s. “I really appreciate that considering I fucking hate paperwork. The screen hurts my eyes.”

Felix nodded. “Where are you from?”

Sive raised a brow. “Racially profiling, are we?”

“No, I mean your accent.”


“Sweden, actually, but my parents moved us here when I was, like, three, so I could never tell the difference.”

Sive nodded, looking like he was filing away the information in a series of folders in his head. “You struck me as a fuckin’ Swede.”


“More like doing my paperwork for me. I’m gonna guess Gothenburg, right?”

Felix hated that he was right. “Shut up.”
Sive smirked even wider. “How you likin’ New York? Heard you got a taste of the violence already.”

“It’s actually…” Felix paused, then realized this would be his best chance. “The man that I saved from getting shot fled the scene, right? But he got my name and thanked me. I talked to some civilian, turned around, saw he was gone.”

Sive nodded. “Pretty typical for anyone involved with drug activity. Possibly a sell gone wrong.”

“Exactly. But the odd thing is, I go back to my place last night, right? And I find all of my furniture and all of my things unpacked and arranged around my house like something out of HGTV studios. And a bottle of wine that’s half a million dollars. All of this with a note saying ‘thanks for the save officer. welcome to the big city.’”

Sive’s brow shot up into his cap. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit.”

“You got yourself a drug peddling sugar daddy on your first day? Impressive.”

Felix made a face. “That’s stupid.”

“Yeah, but, here’s the thing— stupid is second nature to most of New York. It could very well be that guy trying to get into your pants. That, or he doesn’t like owing people. Especially not a cop. Or maybe he’s trying to buy you off.” Sive pursed his lips. “I’m gonna go with the latter. He’s selling drugs, right? He can afford to buy crazy expensive shit when it’s needed. And he knows how to break and enter without leaving a lot of evidence, aside from the obvious house renovations. He’s probably trying to buy you off. If you arrest him in the future, you can be held in contempt for bribery since I’m going to assume he didn’t do any damage? Meaning this can’t be reported. This guy is trying to get you caught up in his shit so you can’t be used to prosecute against him.”

Felix frowned. “This doesn’t explain why he was being shot at by a notorious hitman. Why use someone that high up for just some drug peddler?”

Sive shook his head, stumped by that as well. “Maybe he pissed off the wrong people. Maybe he stole some goods. Maybe he fucked some bosses’ girl, like the Bisognin daughter.”

Felix didn’t necessarily agree with that one considering the man had called him “doll.” Most macho drug peddlers didn’t really leave flirtatious evidence like that if they weren’t already conspicuous. Something about the dangers of losing street cred. Felix didn’t like being called doll either. It made him feel like he was some sort of object that this man could break, like he was trying to tell Felix, even when purchasing his trust, that Felix was just some toy to him that could be crushed under his foot. It didn’t seem liked something an ordinary drug peddler would do.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Felix sighed. “Because it seems too nice.”

“Maybe that’s the point?” Sive suggested. “Maybe he wants to sway your opinion of him into a more positive light so you’re less likely to assume he could be into bad shit. Maybe this is a trick.”

“Maybe I should move back to Philadelphia,” Felix bemoaned. “At least crime was fucking dumb there. None of this underhand, Ty Pennington shit.”

“Good show,” Sive hummed. “Whatever it is, you should tell Sarge what happened. Even if you can’t officially report it or prove breaking and entering, you can at least get it on record that you didn’t consent for this to happen. Just in case the guy ever slips up and ends up in court.”
That was smart. Felix thanked him quietly and took a gulp of the coffee that was still too hot to drink. His back hurt and his home was already compromised. He couldn’t even sleep in his own damn bed. Sive’s expression washed with some sort of sympathy. “You said the dude touched everything, right?” Felix could only nod. “How about, on our lunch, we get you some new towels and shit. Who knows whose DNA could be on your shit now. Let’s toss that shit out and get you some clean stuff.”

Felix couldn’t keep the grateful relief from his expression. “I haven’t really been able to find a good place for buying that stuff.” And ordering anything online didn’t seem very safe either, considering his mail could be under some sort of threat as well.


Felix laughed softly, some of the anxiety unknotting in his chest. “Thanks, Sive. I appreciate it.” Sive just waved him off and went back to whatever was on his screen. Felix was just grateful to know he wasn’t going to be alone in whatever web of mystery this was. It was just like himself to get caught up in the most complicated messes. At least he wouldn’t be alone.

His patrol route was actually rather easy on the surface. Felix’s precinct was one of the more luxurious parts of Manhattan. A good portion of his patrol included Central park and the luxury buildings surrounding. Rich people didn’t often get into trouble that would be caught by patrol officers and Felix didn’t deal with many deadly things for his first couple of weeks. This portion of Manhattan was a lot safer than his own. But lots of the wealthy had kids and lots of people were drawn to this area, so that was where a lot the trouble really began. The rest of the trouble centered around the fucking Mafia. Specifically, the Irish Mafia.

When rich people needed something done, they went to the people they could afford. Since the Irish Mafia— specifically the McLoughlin Family— was the largest crime web in this city, the rich tended to get themselves mixed up in a lot of sordid shit, and then stupidly relied on NYPD to clean up the mess of their own making.

That was how Felix ended up chasing down some fucking petty thief that he was supposed to believe was only that. In reality, Felix had typed in the guy’s name and found him to be a debt collector for the McLoughlin Family. The guy had showed up at some fucker’s penthouse and the resident had called the cops, claiming he’d been robbed of a very specific amount of cash. Felix knew what was really going on, but calling a civilian out on their bullshit wasn’t his job. Catching the supposed thief was.

William “Bill” O’Riley had been working for the McLoughlin since he could run. And running was his strong suit. Felix was on pursuit on foot, pushing through the crowded streets, trying not to trip himself. Bill was a stark redhead, making him easy to track, but he was also known for being incredibly fast on his feet, and he wasn’t weighed down with equipment like Felix. Felix watched the fucker round a corner into an alley.

Felix followed, ignoring the voices on the radio. He needed to make sure he didn’t tear anything in his ankles. Bill darted down the alley to a vehicle on the other side, a big, black SUV with tinted windows. Felix kept up his pursuit, but took note of every bit of cover in this alley. He was in a shooting gallery. He was an easy target. But he had to catch this guy.

“Just give the fuck up!” Bill shouted on his shoulder, Irish brogue muddling his threats. Felix was close, so fucking close. Felix leaped the final distance and caught the guy by the calves, bringing him to the ground. Bill shouted in pain as his jaw clacked hard on the asphalt. But then Bill started to
kick, getting Felix across the cheek with the soles of his shoes. He was up again and running, shouting at the SUV to start the engine. Felix cursed and got back up, running for the vehicle as well.

Felix got into the street as Bill was about to get in the car. Felix was about to grab the guy again when he heard squealing tires further down the left of the street. He also saw the guy—the same guy who’d been shot at and had fled the scene and had put together Felix’s fucking house—turning on his heel to see a yellow Pontiac barring down on him. The guy didn’t have time to run.

Felix was faced with a decision he didn’t have time to make, so he acted on his gut. He abandoned his pursuit of Bill and turned on his heel, running for the mysterious man. Felix took him by the collar of the black peacoat he was wearing and tore the man out of the path of the Pontiac. They both gracelessly hit the wall of the skyscraper Felix had run them both into, momentum carrying them too quickly to be painless. The Pontiac veered and lost control, running a trashcan into scrap, before pulling back into the street and peeling away. Bill got into the SUV and disappeared.

“Fuck!” Felix shouted, pissed at himself for losing his target. “10-0, suspect escaped in Black SUV with dealer plates, possible code purple. Currently 10-62-B, attempted 480.” The dispatcher responded in kind, saying Sive was on his way. Felix scowled and cursed again, then looked back to the man.

The man who was still slumped against the wall, watching Felix with hooded eyes. “Officer Kjellberg?” he asked in a low voice. “Ye’ look better in a uniform than I’d thought.”

Felix hackles raised. “You broke into my house.”

“Consider it a thank ye’. You saved my life, after all. And now ye’ve done it again.” The man smiled, slow and feral. “Maybe I should hire ye’. Could use a protection detailed as reliable as you.”

“You broke into my house.”

“Did ye’ like the wine?”

“That thing is worth more than my academy tuition ten fold!”

The sly smile became tinged with disappointment. “So ye’ didn’t like it.” He hummed and pushed himself off the wall. There was an aloofness to the way he stood, like he knew he was attractive and held it like a badge. Wait, attractive? Did Felix think he was attractive? This was too fucking much to handle. “I’ll find a way t’ make this latest life saving endeavor up to ye’. And I’ll definitely have t’ get on someone for what’s happened to yer lovely face.” He turned on his heel—but only after dragging his eyes up and down Felix’s body in a way that could only be described as hungry—and started to walk down the street.

“Wait!” Felix called out after him. “You have to give a report!”

“Seeya around, officer,” the man sang over his shoulder, giving Felix a lecherous wink. A car pulled up—a black SUV with tinted windows—and the man swung inside. It made an illegal U-turn and Felix read the plate before it sped away.

There were sirens and then Sive was running to his side. “Jesus, did the guy assault you?” Only after Sive mentioning the kick did Felix realize how badly his face was throbbing. He touched his cheek gingerly with his fingertips and could only hear the way the guy had said he would punish someone for what had been done to Felix’s face.

...
The next day, William “Bill” O’Riley’s body was found in a dumpster. He’d been shot twice in the back of the head and had the calling card of the McLoughlin family tucked into the back of his trousers—a snake with a severed eye between its jaws scribbled onto the back of a Jack of Hearts from a popular brand of playing cards.

Felix opened that bottle of wine after being the one to find the body and finished it off in one night.

“...”

“So he saw you got hit across the face after you saved his life, and then the dude who hit you wound up dead?” Sive winced. “This ain’t looking good, dude.”

“I need to tell Sarge,” Felix replied. They were both sitting in Felix’s squad car, eating hotdogs from the best hotdog stand near central park. Felix had relish while Sive had chili. The food was warm in Felix’s hand while the world outside was freezing.

“What I wanna know is how you got out of mandatory therapy. Usually Sarge is quick to put people in the chair, especially after finding a fucking corpse. How did you manage that?”

The truth was, Sarge had called Felix to his office, softly asked him if he needed to talk to a professional, and had easily accepted Felix’s denial. “This wasn’t the first time I’ve seen a dead body,” Felix explained. “Far from it. More like the fiftieth or something.”

Sive let out a low whistle. “You that unlucky?”

“You could call it that. Maybe lucky would be better, though. The murderer has always been caught.”

“Bill was a debt collector for the biggest mafia web in the city and that mafia was the one to put him down. You’re not bringing those guys to justice. NYPD has been trying that for generations, since the Irish first came here.” Sive sighed and shook his head. “If only the potatoes hadn’t died.”

“That is the most ridiculous non sequitur I have ever heard to explain gang violence.”

“They’re not a gang, they’re a mob. Gangs are violent and quick. Mobs are organized and subtle. You found that body because they wanted you to. It was a message. And I’m starting to think Ty Pennington was the guy who wanted you to get it.”

“Then what does that mean for a profile?” Felix asked, referring to the profile they’d been privately building between one another on who this guy could be. “This goes beyond some fucking peddler, if the wine wasn’t reason enough. He’s got sway. Maybe someone in the inner-workings? Maybe a friend of the family?”

“Maybe he’s a Capo,” Sive posited. “Or even a Consigliere? But definitely not some ordinary soldier, though he is definitely a made man. That’s the only way he could influence the death of one of their best debt collectors. Bill was a fucking snake, you know? We’ve never been able to catch him. You’re actually the first person to even manage to keep up and get your hands on him. We’ve never managed to arrest him because we’ve never managed to catch him and get some sort of fight going to get him charged with assaulting an officer. Not much else we could pin him for since he doesn’t rob people and no one ever presses any real charges. The dude was apparently selling that new drug on the streets, the one that’s causing a lot of ODs. They found it on him. And you nearly took him down.” Sive shook his head. “You’re not even a month in this city and you’re already making waves, Felix. That’s fucking dangerous.”

“I’ve always been quick on my feet,” Felix said, trying to brush this off.
“Did you run track?”

“No, I played tennis.”

Sive made a face. “Man, that’s rich people sports.”

Felix snorted and took another bite of his dog. “You’re not wrong.”

“You grew up rich?”

“Kinda. My parents were CEOs and shit, but with the taxes in Sweden, that doesn’t mean much. They wanted me to go into business but I didn’t care for it.”

Sive nodded with a thoughtful expression. “Who died?”

“What?”

“Your tragic backstory. All rich kids have that when they become first responders instead of following in Mommy and Daddy’s footsteps.”

Felix snorted another laugh. “Sorry to disappoint, but my backstory is tragedy free.”

“Too bad.”

Felix hummed an offhanded agreement. “If I come across the guy again, I’m gonna cuff him.”

“Without any reason to hold him? That’s illegal, Kjellberg. And if he really is some sort of Capo or something, then that could ruin our chances of getting him to court. You know that.”

Felix sighed because he did know that. He was just frustrated. He had all of these questions and no way of answering them because he couldn’t legally keep the guy he needed around. Sometimes he could see the merits of vigilante justice, even if he hated the idea of Batman. “He broke into my house, Osman.”

“And it was fucked up and you have every right to be freaked out. But we can’t just head in with eyes wide shut. We need to be smart about this.”

Sive was right and Felix hated it. He glared out into the park, at the people milling about in the cold weather, stubbornly bundled up as they went one dates or walked pets or children. It was nearly 7 and Felix was only halfway through his shift, yet he was already exhausted.

“We’ll figure this out,” Sive said with confidence Felix knew neither of them actually felt. “Just keep the Sarge involved and everything will be fine.”

...  

Two days later, five kids were found dead and everything was not fine.

“The drug is called Lovecraft,” Sarge informed the officers gathered at the debrief at the beginning of the second shift. “A new psychoactive drug that creates intense hallucinations and ecstasy. Like LSD meets E, but with a higher probability of cardiac arrest. Your blood gets pumping beyond its capacity from the doubled effects. A good sign of the OD being from Lovecraft is bleeding from the eyes. It’s called Lovecraft for the psychedelic hallucinations it inspires. People report that they feel like they’ve been brought into another dimension.”

“Didn’t think criminals were scholarly,” Sive commented idly from beside Felix.
“Didn’t think we were underestimating the intelligence of criminals anymore,” another officer shot back. Sive flipped her off, and she wadded up some paper to throw at his head.

“ Enough,” Sgt. Morrison sighed. “We got our best sample off of Bill the other day. The odd thing is, McLoughlins aren’t actually peddling the drug. It’s coming from the warring family, the Bisognins. We have no idea why or how Bill had the shit. This could mean the McLoughlins and the Bisognins are putting aside their differences to get this new shit everywhere and split the profits.” The room became somber as Sgt. Morrison grimaced. “I don’t think I have to tell you all why that’s the furhest we can get from a good thing.”

“Do we have any other evidence that they’re working together?” that same female officer asked.

“Nothing. Which is why we’re holding onto hope and praying they’re not working together. Mob wars are the least of our worries with this drug on the street. It’s simple, easy to manufacture, making it cheap. It can be bought by just about any high schooler that’s working at McDonalds to appease their parents. And it’s, reportedly, ‘fun.’ There’s a huge appeal for many people and it’s affordable. Basically a worse case scenario.”

“Not to mention the name making it extremely covert,” another officer pointed out. “Are the kids talking about drugs or their English Lit homework? Who fucking knows.”

“It’s a bad situation that can only get worse,” Sgt. Morrison agreed. “We know the supplier and manufacturer is the Bisognin family, but we don’t know where or how.”

“And how do we know that?”

“The sample had the Bisognin crest,” Sarge said. “It comes in a small tablet, about the size of your average Tylenol and it has the bear across the center of it. The closest thing to a calling card we’re gonna get.”

“Fuck.”

That was Felix and all heads turned to him. He winced and slumped in his seat.

Felix knew a lot about mafia wars and the violence that came with it, along with the endless, unexplained deaths. It was messy shit that left a lot of mourning families and absolutely no way to trace it back to the culprits themselves. It was difficult and a headache and Felix wasn’t excited for any of it. But that didn’t mean he could just say shit without giving anything constructive. So, “Billy was picked up in that SUV. Did surveillance get any plates? Maybe we can connect it to either family.”

“Unfortunately, all surveillance for that incident is missing.”

Of course it was. It wouldn’t be mob crime if there weren’t a few government employees on the payroll. Felix wondered if any of the officers had accepted bribes from the McLoughlins or Bisognins. It would make sense why that guy had been so sly about his own attempted bribery of Felix. He shouldn’t have drank the fucking wine. He could have at least turned in the bottle for prints. Instead, the bottle was miles away in a dump at this point.

“Can you remembering additional details in your pursuit?” Sgt. Morrison asked Felix. Felix had already given his stellar report on the incident, including saving that fucking guy, so Sgt. Morrison didn’t look surprised or disappointed when Felix shook his head. The plates of that secondary vehicle had turned up absolutely nothing except where it had been purchased from and the false name it had been purchased under.
“Then all that’s left is to review what we know of the families,” Sarge said, bringing up a powerpoint. He went through the lowdown of the Bisognins first, detailing the mob boss family and lower tiers. Felix knew a lot of this already, as he’d done his research. He’d always thought the best way to infiltrate the Bisognins would be through the daughter of the boss, Maria. They didn’t have any pictures of her. They didn’t have pictures of anyone. The Bisognins focused mainly on drug manufacturing and drug peddling, which would explain the emergence of Lovecraft being their doing.

The McLoughlins were next, and they were just as illusive. The previous mob boss had died about half a decade ago and his son had stepped up. The McLoughlins dealt with weapons and arms dealing, making them complicit in just about every violent crime that happened in this city. But they’d become even harder to track since the son had come into power, meaning he was an even more formidable opponent than his father.

“I’ve got one piece of good news,” Sarge said. “We were recently able to gain photographic evidence of the new boss—Jack McLoughlin.” A lower murmur of awe passed over everyone in the room. Felix waited with near-excitement as Sarge clicked to the next slide to show the boss’ face.

The excitement dropped into horror.

Staring into the room, into all of them, into Felix, was notorious Mob Boss and violent criminal Jack McLoughlin, leader of the Irish Mafia, peddler of murder, and the man Felix had saved from a yellow Pontiac twice.

Felix couldn’t help it.

"Fuck."
“So you’re telling me that not only have you spoken to Jack McLoughlin, but you’ve saved his life twice,” Sgt. Morrison repeated slowly as he sat back in his chair across from the desk from where Felix stood in a tense parade rest. Sgt. Morrison’s expression was dammingly neutral. “Anyone or anything to corroborate this?”

“Both were reported incidents,” Felix replied evenly, having been prepared for this question, at least. “The first was before I’d even started working, that firefight that I got into? Which was taken and documented by the 13th Precinct. The person I was rescuing, who I only got the description of and no name, was Jack McLoughlin. Then, the pursuit of William O’Riley. I was interrupted in an attempt to keep who I’d thought was a civilian from being run down by what I now suspect was the same yellow Pontiac from the first incident. Turns out, the civilian was Jack McLoughlin.”

Sgt. Morrison nodded slowly. “What year was the Pontiac?”

“1969.” Felix had done a little search of his own after having to write up the report for the O’Riley incident. “Yellow car, two black stripes over the top. Very Hollywood.”

“A United States brand car,” Sgt. Morrison said.

“Yes,” Felix affirmed. “Meaning there’s very little mob affiliation we can assume from that. But, I can also assume that if a car gets sourced into the States from the UK or Italy would be too expensive for these people to want to risk damaging the frame.”

“You really seem to underestimate how rich the gangs of New York are,” Sarge sighed.

“I don’t underestimate, sir,” Felix corrected. “I just assume their nationalism is more extensive than just inbreeding.”

Sgt. Morrison choked on a laugh and quickly schooled himself with mirth tugging at the corners of his lips. “You’re probably right,” he agreed. “And they wouldn’t hand those cars to any drive by lackeys. But that still doesn’t help us identify who could be behind—” Sgt. Morrison cut himself off.

“I do believe the Pontiac belonged to the Bisognins,” Felix posited quietly, knowing Sgt. Morrison was on the same train of thought. “Because no one else would be stupid enough to target the McLoughlin boss unless it was for a very specific reason, like gang affiliation.”

“But why is Jack McLoughlin walking the streets?” Sgt. Morrison asked. And Felix had no answer for that. Any mob boss wouldn’t be caught dead without some sort of protection detail, especially in the crowded streets of New York. “His face isn’t publicized,” Sgt. Morrison said. “Even the Bisognins don’t know what he looks like, or so we thought. The only reason we know that’s him is because we got a hit on facial recognition thanks to age-enhanced sketches of the guy when he was a fucking kid— who refused to give his age— after being in the hospital.”

“He was put in the hospital?”
“He put *himself* there. Kid had multiple broken bones and a concussion, but he walked himself to the nearest hospital and checked himself in. The staff got a few photos because they thought they were dealing with some abuse or bullying, but the kid went missing before they could even get him in for an MRI Brain Scan. We only found out it was him after the fact after the staff put the name through the system and then tipped us off. And that was two decades ago.”

“I can imagine the McLoughlin family wasn’t very happy about that,” Felix murmured, his brain working quickly. If the family wanted to keep the child’s identity that closely kept of a secret, it astounded him that the boy had walked himself and admitted himself for injuries. Was it bravery or stupidity? Felix didn’t know. “We can’t know for certain if it’s actually him, can we?”

“We can,” Sgt. Morrison said. “Because we got a few people under our thumbs that know some faces and want us off their backs. We got their affirmation.”

“Could they have been lying?”

“There’s not much point in lying behind a bars, especially when we could easily let it slip to the other inmates how they ended up with such a short sentence.”

Felix nodded. Rats weren’t rare in mob families, though it seemed a little sad that the kid had been betrayed. Felix stiffened as he realized he was sympathizing for Jack McLoughlin. The man was a violent and notorious criminal, why did Felix feel sorry for him?

“If I may ask,” Felix hedged gently. “Could I get some more— in depth information on the McLoughlin dealings?”

“What I can give you is only recent by five years ago.” Sgt. Morrison said as he rounded his desk and went into a filing cabinet. “The McLoughlin family went practically silent after Jack’s father kicked the bucket. No one even knows how he died, we just had a body in the street and people swearing it was an accident with a little too much confidence for none of them being witnesses. After Jack took over, all of their crimes went so under the wraps that we can’t trace any of it. He’s his father’s son, but a hundred times smarter. We can’t get anything on what they’re doing. So, unfortunately, this is all I have.”

Then Sgt. Morrison pulled out the box inside the filing cabinet and dumped it on his desk. The weight of the box shook the foundations of the desk and Felix almost thought he felt it through the floor. Felix raised a brow. Sgt. Morrison smirked.

“This is just the stuff that you’re authorized to see,” Sgt. Morrison specified. “You should see the shit the violent crimes unit has on them.”

“But nothing on Jack?”

“Nothing concrete. Just circumstantial evidence. A body appears where he might have been, somebody drops a name. But nothing that we can book him on, if we could ever find him.” St. Morrison shook his head. “That’s what I’m struggling to get my head around. No one has actually seen him, seen Jack. The person who took that photo from the debrief? He was shooting a shot of someone else, of a consigliere. Jack just so happened to be in the photo. You’re the first person I’ve heard of to actually meet him face to face. And you’ve done it twice.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Felix said.

“You saved his life,” Sgt. Morrison said. “And you said he fixed up your apartment? Gave you wine?”
“Yes sir.”

“Maybe we can get him for bribery.”

“I drank the wine after O’Riley turned up dead.”


Felix hung his head, knowing Sarge was right. He shouldn’t have drank the fucking wine. “If it helps, I can promise you I won’t be getting a bottle of wine from him again.”

“But if you do, you’ll report to me immediately, yeah? I’ll let this slide because you didn’t know who the guy was until this morning, but I hope you won’t make the same mistake twice. Hopefully it won’t come up if we ever get this guy to court. We can plead ignorance if we have to. You won’t fuck up like that again, right?”

“Of course not, Sir.”

“Good.” Sgt. Morrison paused. “You can take the files if you want, I’ve got copies, and you’ve got a stalker. If you get anything on him, you come to me. This guy is fucking dangerous and I want him off the streets. Don’t keep this to yourself. If it escalates any more, I want you to alert me immediately, and we’ll work out something with the detective unit to get you protected. got it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Hit the streets, officer, your patrol misses you.”

Felix nodded and ducked his head, taking his leave quickly and unable to push away the feeling that he’d gotten off way easier than he’d deserved.

... 

The thing about Felix and what made him such a good cop was his inability to ignore a cry for help. The thing that made him a bad cop was that he’d never really learned to cry for help himself. So when he walked back to his place at three AM, one arm holding his brown bag of groceries, and the other scrolling through local news reports on his phone, he didn’t think to start running when heavy footsteps sounded behind him. And when an arm went around his waist while another wrapped around his mouth to silence him, Felix didn’t even think of screaming. He only struggled, thrashed out, turned, and found himself to be heavily outnumbered. The bottom of a baseball bat was thrust between his eyes and Felix blacked out for a moment, long enough to be dragged into the empty alley nearby.

He came back to his senses on his knees, being held down by two men, surrounded by three more, and staring down the barrel of a gun by a sixth.

“Fuck,” Felix said, before sitting blood to the asphalt. His entire torso ached. He’d probably been banged up while out of it. His mouth was iron. He more than likely had severe bruising and maybe even some sort of internal bleeding. He spat more blood. It wasn’t dark, wasn’t arterial. Thank god for that. “Okay,” he wheezed, trying to think clearly as an ache slowly roused itself in his lungs. “Someone wanna tell me what I did?”

“Some people say they’ve seen you cozying up with McLoughlin,” the guy with the gun said with a thick, New York accent, which meant Felix couldn’t exactly assume anything from it. “What you got on the bossman?”
Well, no need to profile shit, this guy was handing out the information for free. “I don’t have shit,” Felix said, spitting out more blood. It was pooling in his mouth, making him think maybe it was from a cut within his mouth itself rather than internal bleeding. That would be the only way to explain the speed at which the blood was collecting. “I didn’t even know who he was.”

“Bullshit,” the man sneered. “You’re a fucking cop, you know exactly who he is. What do you have on him?”

“Jesus christ,” Felix wheezed. “You’re fucking retarded. I don’t have shit.”

The man scowled and swung his leg back to drive it into Felix’s stomach. Felix gagged and bent forward, held up only by the rough hands on his shoulders, keeping him on his knees. “Oh shit,” Felix choked out, finding it hard to breathe. “What the fuck.”

“We had to wait until you’re out of uniform,” the man said idly. “Had to make sure we wouldn’t get charged with assault of an officer. So we’re not fucking retarded, alright?”

“You’re shining examples of our country’s education system,” Felix rasped, spitting more blood. “I am so sorry for calling you fucking retards. I shouldn’t have insulted the mentally disabled in such a way.”

Another foot to his stomach, more blood. Felix was pretty sure he was gonna die from blunt force trauma rather than the gun pointed at his head. “I don’t have shit on your boss,” he said, struggling to get the air for the words. “I didn’t even know who he was. I just saw someone about to fucking die and I acted. I don’t have shit on your boss.”

“Just like a cop to lie through bloody teeth.”

Felix lifted his head to stare down the barrel of the gun, past the metal death sentence, to the man holding it. “Your fucking boss is the one hanging onto me,” Felix gasped, narrowing his eyes, because he was pissed that he was going to die over such a colossal misunderstanding. “I don’t know shit!” he cried out, desperate for them to understand. “I don’t have anything on him! Just don’t fucking—”

The man’s expression suddenly washed clean into pale terror, making Felix fall silent.

“I’m sure ye’ got the memo,” said a strong, Irish accent behind the gunman, familiar to Felix in a way he hated. “He’s off limits.”

“If he’s got something on your head, boss, we can—”

“When I kill ye’, it’ll look like more of an accident than yer birth”

The gunman was terrified and the threat was more than likely a promise. He slowly lowered his gun and stepped aside to reveal—

Jack McLoughlin, standing tall with a gun of his own in the back of the first man. Jack was wearing the same black peacoat with a two-piece suit beneath, no tie and untucked, the buttons of the white undershirt undone at the top. The bags under his eyes were just as severe and his dark, curly hair was wild. The only new thing for Felix to notice was the rosary wrapped around Jack’s hand with the metal of the crucifix crushed and unrecognizable.

He also had the most arresting blue eyes that Felix had ever seen, far more severe than Felix had remembered them being. And those blue eyes were trained on Felix, seeing into him. “Are ye’ hurt?” Jack asked him.
Felix spat blood and scowled. “You’re a fucking piece of shit,” Felix told him. “Fucking criminal. If I’d known who you were, I wouldn’t have saved you.”

Jack smirked. “Of course, darlin’,” he drawled. Jack didn’t believe him, seeing right through Felix. Jack turned to the rest of his men, particularly the ones holding Felix. “Did ye’ not hear me?” Jack asked, blue eyes going cold. “Felina is off fuckin’ limits. You don’t watch him. Don’t follow him. Don’t touch him, and definitely don’t fuckin’ hurt him. Was Martin the one leading this shit or was it a group effort?”

None of the men answered, shrinking away in fear. Jack’s eyes narrowed. Felix suddenly remembered the glassiness of the eyes of O’Riley’s corpse. “Let him go,” Jack ordered, a low growl in the back of his throat. “Report t’ me by midnight or else I’ll hunt the rest of ye’ fucks down myself and make sure the consequences are even more deadly.”

The men let go of Felix and he collapsed, unable to keep himself upright with the pain in his diaphragm. He held himself up with shaking arms, wheezing and spitting that horrible copper taste onto the ground below. There was the scuffle of feet, then shoes within Felix’s line of sight. He looked up to see Jack was crouched front of him, brow knit. “You need an ambulance?”

Felix sneered at him despite the pain. “You’re a fucking criminal.”

“And you’re a cop,” Jack replied. “I’d like to extend my aid in apology for my rather aggressive foot soldiers. Do ye’ need an ambulance?”

“Fuck off.”

Jack shook his head. “Stupid.”

“I saved your life twice, the least you can do is fuck off.”

“Stupid.” Jack stood, waved his hand for his men to leave the alley. They didn’t even hesitate. Felix tried to memorize the faces in case he came across their bodies later in the week. It seemed like Jack’s gut reaction for anyone that fucked up Felix’s face was to put them down. “Ye’ won’t let me help you. Why won’t you let me help you?”

“Because you’re a mob boss and I’m a cop.”

“Yes, Officer Kjellberg, we’ve been through this. It’s like Romeo and Juliet in this shit, can ye’ be any more original?” Jack sighed unhappily and sat back on his haunches. “I’d like t’ think we can move past our career differences and just focus on the things we have in common. Ye’ didn’t like the wine, maybe something else? Vodka? Whiskey? Or maybe no alcohol. What’s your favorite food?”

“Why the fuck does it matter?”

“Because I gotta know where t’ take ye’ to dinner.”

Felix felt like he’d been slapped across the face as Jack grinned wolfishly at him. “Yer namesake makes me think ye’d like Swedish food, or at least Scandinavian. Or, we could break stereotypical boundaries and get American. I know a fantastic diner down the way. Or maybe Greek? Are you a man of culture, Officer Kjellberg?”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Felix demanded.

“Cause I don’t know the rest of yer name.”
“What, you didn’t fucking dig into my identity?”


“Why are you doing this?” Felix asked. “What are you getting out of it? I’m not about to be a fucking mole for you. I can’t be bribed.”


“You’re fucking insane.”

“Nah, just curious. What about Turkish? Mongolian?”

Felix wanted him to shut up. “Italian,” he spat, hoping to trigger some animalistic violence in this fucking sociopath.

But Jack only grinned wider. “Italian it is. This Friday?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Go see a doctor, Officer,” Jack said, looking him over with an almost motherly eye. “My goons are stupid, but well trained. They know how t’ hit and how t’ make it hurt. At least take a good soak tonight, yeah?” Jack stood, gave Felix one last once-over, before turning on his heel and leaving the alleyway. “Seeya Friday, Officer Kjellberg.”

Felix watched him go, stunned into being unable to read the plates of the expensive black sedan Jack slid into the front passenger seat of and drove away in. Felix looked around the alley, his brain hazy as the adrenaline faded and pain returned with a vengeance. He groaned when he saw his groceries were stomped on and wasted on the dirty ground.

“Fuck,” he coughed, tired of the taste of his blood. “I need a fucking break.”

... 

The next day, after Felix ended his shift where he’d spent most of the day as a speed trap to keep from aggravating the injuries he was hiding, he came home to a pantry and fridge packed full of groceries and a handle of whiskey worth 460 thousand dollars—a Macallan 1946—on his table with a note reading: You seem more of a whiskey than a wine xo.

Felix had groaned and denied himself a taste. He hated that Jack had gotten such a good read on him. This wasn’t fucking fair.

His neighbor, a widowed old woman named Helena Smith, had told him all about the “handsome mysterious stranger that had brought in these bags of food!”

“He was such a lovely boy,” she cooed after she’d caught Felix for a small chat on his way to work. “Even offered to help me with a few chores once he was done unloading the groceries he’d picked up for you! I’d mentioned having trouble moving my piano and he said he could help, but I didn’t want to take anymore of his time. Such a handsome boy. Already has a key to your place, does he? I do hope he treats you as well as he seems to.”

Felix was pissed. “I can help you move the piano.”
“No, no, my grandson is coming. And you’re always so tired at the end of your day. Be safe out here tonight, dearie! Come home in one piece.”

Felix was still fuming even as he left with a homemade dinner, courtesy of Mrs. Smith.

The fucker had a fucking key.

...“You’re busy?” Sive frowned from outside Felix’s squad car where he was leaning in through the window. They were parked outside a skatepark and basketball court, keeping an eye on the kids during their lunch, making sure none of that Lovecraft shit was getting around. Sive had invited Felix to go out with him and his girl and his friends on Friday for drinks and debauchery, but Felix had declined and Sive knew something was up. “Don’t get me wrong, but I’m pretty sure I’m your only friend in this city. Who the fuck is taking up your time this Friday?” Sive waggled his brow. “Is it good ol’ leftie?”

Felix narrowed his eyes. “I have a date.”

“Yeah, leftie.”

“Jesus christ, do you really think I can’t get any?”

“No, no, with a face like yours, I know it wouldn’t be a problem. It’s the whole ‘married to your work’ thing that keeps me from think you’d be any good at relationships. Hell, the only reason I’m your friend is cause I’m part of work.”

“I like you plenty without work,” Felix huffed.

“I know, it’s my charm.” Sive paused. “Who’s the lucky girl?”

Felix scrambled for a lie. “Her name’s Helena.”

“Oh, Victorian. Sounds classy. Did you meet her in your neighborhood or the beat?”

“If you think she’s classy, why would it be in my neighborhood?” Sive grinned. “Good boy— you’re learning.”

“She plays piano,” Felix said, wracking up details to make the lie a little more believable. “Silver hair. She’s a good cook, too.”

“Wife material,” Sive said.

“I cook just fine,” Felix defended.

“Then you should prove it and come with me and my friends Friday.”

“I told you, I have a date.”

“Mate, all the love, really, but, I honestly don’t believe you.”

Felix bristled. “Her name is Helena, she can play the piano, but a ton of other interments as well. She likes writing music and short stories and novels. She listens to jazz and Lou Reed and she makes jewelry. We met at a coffee shop.” Felix had just described a favorite song of his. He prayed he would get away with it.
Sive sighed dramatically and hung off the window. “Fine, fine, but you owe me a homemade dinner, mate. Me and my girl are both arse at cooking. I’m dying for something that isn’t takeaway or microwaved.”

“How about it?” Felix said. “Just not Friday.”

There was a knock on Felix’s window, the other-side, the car window that was shut. Behind it, a boy with dark skin and wide eyes waved desperately for his attention. Felix and Sive were both back on alert and rounding the vehicle to the boy, spurred into action by what was possibly fear in his eyes.

“Kid, what’s the problem?” Sive demanded as Felix pulled his radio from his chest and readied himself to make the appropriate calls.

But then the kid said, “Our fucking ball is stuck in between the backboard and the rim! Can you get the firemen here, but, like, not actually call them? I don’t wanna go to jail, man, you get arrested for false emergency calls and shit.”

Sive and Felix both stared flatly at the kid. Then Sive started laughing and Felix groaned. “Just show me where it is,” Felix told the kid. “What’s your name?”

“Arthur,” the boy replied. “My little brother threw it up there, man, and now he won’t stop crying. Can you just help me out? I don’t wanna call my mom, she’s sleeping.”

“How the hell did you manage that?” Felix asked.

“Mama says not to fucking swear!” one of the kids shouted.

“Shut the fuck up, Andrew!” Arthur spat. “This is your fault!”

“I ain’t that tall, mate,” Sive said. “How are we gonna do this, Tennis Prince?”

Felix’s eyebrow twitched at the nickname. Then he took a running start and leaped into the air, dislodging the basketball easily with a good nudge from his knuckles. The basketball fell to the concrete, bouncing noisily as the kids and Sive let out oohs of awe.

“How the fuck did the white dude beat you?” Andrew asked Sive. Sive sputtered gracelessly.— “I’m fucking Puerto Rican!”— as Andrew picked up the ball and shot Felix a wide, toothy grin. “Thanks, Mister!”

“You jump that high,” one of the other kids said. “Can you shoot?”

And that was how Felix ended up playing basketball for the rest of his lunch. At least Sive stopped asking about Felix’s Friday plans.

...  

He couldn’t tell Sive what was going on, Felix knew that.

Not only was Felix ignoring direct orders from his sergeant, but he was also risking the integrity of his badge and he didn’t want Sive to be shoulderled in as an unwitting accomplice. Then there was the fact that Felix was going to be fraternizing with a mob boss— maybe even on some pseudo date as a form of cover?— and he likely wouldn’t get out of this unscathed. Felix had spent a disgusting
amount of money on makeup to cover up the bruises from his scuffle with those fuckers in the alley way, and that had only been his first official meeting with Jack fucking McLoughlin.

Now Felix was apparently getting Italian with him? He didn’t know how, unless Jack intended to pick Felix up from his fucking doorstep. But that would put both of them in danger, and Jack surely had to understand how important it was for Felix to not be compromised considering his line of work. Unless Jack found him worth the risk?

Unlikely. Jack was doing this for information, Felix knew that for certain, but he also had to know that Felix could have information worth that kind of risk. Maybe he was trying to be smooth with blatant interest and badly worded flirtation? Maybe flirtation, Felix wasn’t sure, but even though Jack said he hadn’t dug into who Felix was, Felix didn’t believe him. And since Jack had undoubtedly dug, Felix knew he had seen the long run of girlfriends Felix had had— and only that. Felix had never—

It didn’t matter. Jack wanted information, Felix wouldn’t give it up, but he also couldn’t afford to ignore this. Jack was going to get him Friday no matter how skeptical Felix as, and then Felix would get to the bottom of whatever the fuck Jack wanted. And the only way Felix could feel confident about any of this in any way would be doing some digging of his own.

The file Sgt. Morrison had given him was extensive regardless of the clearly omitted information due to Felix’s lower rank. Some parts of documents were erased or even just marked over with a thick, black marker, but Felix could infer enough and fill most gaps with google searches of dates and names. In the end, Felix spent a good portion of his Thursday off reading up on the McLoughlin family and ended that day with an overloaded brain and too many unanswered questions. But at least he wouldn’t be falling into the deep end with his ankles and wrists tied.

To begin, while some Irish-Americans could have lineage dated back to colonial years and rising Irish population in the 1820s due to horrible living conditions in Ireland, the largest chunk had immigrated to the US during the Great Hunger in 1845. The surge of Irish immigration had caused an influx of Europeans so great that it was one of the major factors to New York being “the city of immigrants.” For example, Bay Bridge in Brooklyn, once meant for the wealthy of Manhattan, had become an Italian-and-Irish community. One of the largest Irish communities was in Manhattan, Hells Kitchen. The Irish community was large and healthy for a majority of New York’s history and not all of it was sour.

The Irish had developed a reputation for joining Police and Fire Departments and Felix knew quite a few Irish patrol officers on his beat, but—

Carney McLoughlin, Great-Grandfather of Jack McLoughlin, had started out in the Dead Rabbits back when Irish gang violence had first been emerging in the 1880s. After reaching rivalries with both Italian and Jewish gangs, most of the Irish gangs had formed one large gang, specifically to combat against the Morello crime family. But Carney had split off, done his own thing. He’d focused mainly on weapons imports and exports from the get-go, building an empire from that while most other gangs and mobs focused on the importation and exportation of drugs and people. Carney would eventually dive into drugs just a little, of course, that was the only way to ensure any sort of allies in this place, but as Carney operated solely out of Manhattan and seemed to prefer to deal with only Manhattan, he’d dealt only with cocaine— the rich man’s drug. It helped that cocaine hadn’t been banned until 1922. With a black market price ranging up to $300, a neat $30 per gram, it would be stupid not to make such easy money.

But it looked like Carney had mostly stayed away from unsavory things, like prostitution, match rigging, money laundering, organ trafficking. Felix didn’t want to say there was a such thing as a
good mob boss—especially one that sold illegal weapons—but Felix would put this guy below the Morellos or Bisognins. Sure, there were quite a few deaths that could be roped around his fingers, but nothing concrete. Felix had learned early on how to choose his battles.

Carney had a late death, dying in his sleep in 1935, a feat not achieved by many people involved in violent crimes. After that, his son Redmond McLoughlin, or just “Red,” had taken the reigns. He’d been a different kind of boss than his father. Coming from the popular story in Northern Ireland of the Robin Hood (named Redmond O’Hanlon), Redmond himself had been a front-lines, play-dirty-with-his-rich-buyers, make-the-family-name-about-charity sort of villain that Felix couldn’t help but begrudgingly respect. McLoughlin drug dealing reached all time lows with the struggling people of lower economic status, while Redmond bled his richer addicts dry.

Redmond ended up being enlisted for World War II during the first draft on October 16th, 1940. Unlike most crime families, Redmond didn’t try to buy his way out of enlistment. He served through the entirety of the Second World War, mainly the Pacific Ocean theater, and had walked away with missing fingers after being a rare surviving POW of the Imperial Army. Upon returning home, he’d gone back to swindling the rich out of their money and making sure that the kids of the poor streets knew that crime didn’t pay.

Fuck. Felix really liked this guy for a Mob Boss.

Unfortunately, Redmond would fall terminally ill in the summer of 1986 and his son, Seamus, would take over the McLoughlin Crime Family. While Redmond survived long past his expected death date, he met his end in 2002, reportedly alone in his bed.

From there, things went decidedly downhill. Seamus was nothing like either of his predecessors—he was aggressive but cowardly, sending men to do bloody deeds for him while he sat away in the various warehouses around the city that he would literally call his “kingdoms.” Whatever respect his father and grandfather had felt for the city was lost in this man’s war mongering. He started fights with the Bisognins and was likely to blame for mob violence between the families today. He’d apparently tried to marry a Bisognin girl and had blatantly cheated on her with some rising Broadway actress. He’d shamelessly peddled whatever drug would make him the most money and had a reputation of taking glee in executions of people he didn’t like, making them “public” by having them set up and arranged in his various kingdoms like it was some sort of party. He was a fucking monster.

And just as smart as his predecessors. Not a single crime could be put to Seamus’ name.

Seamus died back in 2013 under mysterious circumstances, and Felix was neither surprised, nor sorry for it. No one had reported anything about his death being anything but natural, except the police had found the body crumbled on the ground in the city streets beneath Seamus’ high rise in 740 Park Avenue. Police had ruled it a murder in the beginning, but Felix was sure someone had slipped some money under the table, and the cause of death had been changed to a suicide or an accident. The McLoughlins either hadn’t wanted it to get around as a murder for the sake of their name, or they just didn’t want anyone looking into the death, which would imply it was of their doing. It was the only reason why they would prefer the death being a possible suicide. Felix wouldn’t blame the underlings for killing the man if they had.

Immediately after Seamus’ death, Jack McLoughlin had been thrust into the spotlight. But that was it. The only information that was gathered on Jack was him being instated as Boss, and then nothing. While Jack’s predecessors had been obviously smart, Jack was a fucking genius. From what the force could tell, the weapon imports and exports hadn’t slowed, the cocaine dealing hadn’t slowed, and the calling card of the McLoughlins hadn’t disappeared from crimes that fit the MO, but that was
it. All circumstantial and assumed evidence. Even the weapons that were taken from McLoughlin warehouses were absolutely clean. Hell, it was like the weapons didn’t even exist at all. Ghosts in their hands, no serial number present. It was horrifyingly genius.

By the end of Felix’s dive down the rabbit hole, he was left drained and a little afraid. The McLoughlin Ghost— as the detective and drug and violent crime task forces would call Jack— wanted to take him out to dinner. Felix had no way of protecting himself from anything that could happen. He was about to fall into the lion’s den for a bowl of spaghetti with a genius psycho that had a penchant for grossly expensive alcohol.

“Fuck,” Felix said to himself, sitting on his living room floor, surrounded by cold cases and lacking descriptions and photos of corpses. “I need coffee.”

He grabbed his jacket and trekked through the dreary evening to Coffee Flatiron, needing the Red Eye again, because he wanted to fill in some blanks by reading news reports through the years on the McLoughlin family. He was going to be wholly unprepared regardless of what he did, but Felix wasn’t the type to give in and go belly up in the face of hopelessness. And if Felix was going to keep digging, keep scrabbling for purchase, keep looking for some way to keep his head above water without getting anyone else involved and in danger, he was going to need coffee to keep himself awake for the long night ahead of him.

He was officially a regular at this place. Felix knew the faces of all of the employees, and all of them knew him, so when he burst into the coffee shop out of the slowly drizzling rain, the sight of someone new at the register had him stalling in his tracks.

“Felix!” cried out Jenna from the espresso machine. “Didn’t think you’d be here so late. I’ll get your order started. Marzia, ring him up for a Red Eye with room for cream.”

“Cream with espresso?” Marzia—a gorgeous brunette with gentle features and a playful glint in her eye— started tapping away at the screen of the register. “What odd taste.”

Felix didn’t move from his spot at the door for a long moment, thrown by the new face and the added homework. Not that he did background checks on people, but he knew how to use a search engine and he didn’t like coming across surprises with people he saw somewhat regularly in his day-to-day life.

“Anything else, sir?” Marzia asked, pleasantly unperturbed by Felix lingering in the doorway, the door itself still open and letting the misty rain seep into the small shop. “Maybe a cookie or a pastry?”

“Are you trying to upsell me?” Felix asked, broken from his thoughts by her question. He finally let the door fall shut and went up to the register, pulling out his wallet. “I’m good, I’m good. Just needed something to keep me up.”

“Pulling another all-nighter, Officer?” Jenna asked with a teasing grin. “Always nice to know New York’s finest is constantly dead on their feet from sleep deprivation.”

“I’m not on the clock, I can do whatever I want,” Felix snorted. He tried to keep discomfort from his expression. He didn’t like random people knowing that he was a cop. It was a dangerous business these days with the public carrying wide ranges of opinions. He didn’t know who he could trust to not spit in his face or twist a knife in his back. But he couldn’t stop Jenny from running her mouth either.

“You should take better care of yourself,” Marzia told him with this unflappable and transparent concern that left Felix with memories of his sister picking him up after school and telling him five
hundred reasons why he should have a jacket next time. “You can’t afford to be sloppy when other people are counting on you to keep them safe.”

It would have been solid advice if Felix didn’t have a thousand other things going on right now aside from his job. So he just smiled stiffly and said, “Thanks,” and then paid. Marzia sent him a pitying look as Jenna handed Felix his drink.

“Stay safe out there, Officer,” Jenna said with a wink. “I know better than most that the absence of your badge doesn’t keep you from trouble.”

“Why is that?” Marzia asked curiously. Felix grimaced. Jenna had actually been one of the employees working when Felix had first come here. One of the shots had shattered the window of this place, embedding itself in the coffee bags that were on the wall behind the barista bar. It had been long since repaired, but Jenna had been standing right where that bullet had hit. She always told the story of how Felix’s loud shouts of warning had saved her life. Again, Jenna was one of those people that he really couldn’t shut up if he tried.

“Felix saved my life,” Jenna said with a proud grin, ever predictable. But she made a damn good cup of coffee and Felix couldn’t begrudge her for being happy to be alive. “He saw a drive-by before it happened, saved the guy that was gonna get got, and his panicked shouting got everyone to duck.”

“That was you?” For her words, Marzia did not look surprised. Odd. “Well done, Officer.”

“Jesus christ, I just wanted a drink,” Felix sighed. Back at the drive-by, he hadn’t even considered the dangers, hadn’t thought twice. That was what made him a good cop. Being able to make the best decision under pressure and having the guts to stick with it to the end. Civilians came first— of course he would think about keeping them safe. It was his job. “I didn’t think about it— it was just the right thing to do.”

“There’s not a lot of that these days,” Marzia replied simply. “Have a good night, Officer.”

Felix just grimaced, bid them goodbye, and ducked out of the shop.

Friday came and Felix realized, with more than a little anxiety, that not only did he have no way of knowing how the apparent meeting would take place, but he would also have no feasible way of tipping off where he was going to anyone that could help him if he went suddenly failed to show up for work.

“Fuck,” he said to himself as he stood in front of his closet in a crewneck he’d had since the academy and some well-worn sweatpants. Felix was trying to figure out which clothes he should wear that would give him the best chance of concealing a weapon. He could very well be walking into his death with this. He should probably ensure that he left behind a nice looking corpse.

What did you wear when meeting a god damn mob boss of a crime family? A three-piece suit with an Eldridge knot? Felix didn’t know how to tie a tie like that. He didn’t even own a three-piece suit. Hell, he wouldn’t even know what colors to coordinate. Didn’t blue suits need brown shoes? Or something. He could call his mother, but that would only cause her to raise questions. Felix shouldn’t care so much about his appearance when meeting this guy. He didn’t want to give the wrong impression, the impression that he thought this was anything but what it actually was— his fucking death sentence.

Maybe he could wear just regular, business casual. A button up, and pair of nice jeans, boots.
Something he would wear when he was trying to blend in with the ground. But the shirt would have to be baggy enough for him to conceal a handheld in the back of his pants and he couldn’t think of anything business casual that would give that kind of build. He considered a thigh holster, but his pants were way too tight, unless he wanted to wear his uniform. That would defeat the purpose of carrying a concealed weapon, of course. And since he was going to be carrying a concealed weapon, he would need to have his badge on him to show he was allowed to have said weapon. Otherwise he’d just draw more attention to himself along with a shitload of legal trouble.

Felix dragged a hand through his hair and breathed out hard through his nose. He had so few options. He just had to keep calm, right? That was actually the only option he had. Jack had a fucking key to this place, so it wasn’t like Felix had anywhere to run to. Hiding with what few friends he had here would only put them in harm’s way, which was the exact thing Felix wanted to avoid and why he’d lied to Sive about having a date in the first place and why he couldn’t tip Sive off to maybe keep an out for Felix going missing. He wasn’t about to get others dragged into his mess and he wasn’t about to risk his entire career if this turned out to be nothing except some vicious prank by a kid that had been given power a little too early.

There hadn’t even been a fucking date of birth for Jack McLoughlin. He was the mafia’s best kept secret up until five years ago, and then he’d only become more of an enigma. A fucking ghost. Ghost Jack. Felix had to try to find something funny about the guy before he had a fucking panic attack. But every time Felix tried to think of something that was at least a little humorous, his brain reminded him of fucking William O’Riley, rotting in a dumpster for Felix to find.

God.

The blood—

Felix shuddered and ran his hand from his hair to his face, covering his mouth like he could block out the memory of the smell of rotting flesh. Two shots to the back of the head, execution style. The guy had probably known what was coming, but his expression had been serene. Then again, that was how most execution victims looked. Felix didn’t know the science of it. The bullets likely went through the parts of the brain that reigned over fear.

Maybe Felix would be expressionless when they found his corpse.

There was a clatter downstairs, unexpected and out of place. Felix dropped down to his knees and went for the safe under his bed, pulling out his Glock 17, training his ears on the floor below. When he heard nothing, he crept out of his bedroom, ready to sweep the place just to put himself at ease.

Everything was as it should be, not a thing out of place.

Except the front door was open.

Felix was given a split second to feel the cool air of outside on his skin before a thick cloth bag was thrown over his head and he was knocked over the head, out like a light. His last moment of consciousness was overwhelmed with the knowledge that he was being knocked out and kidnapped in a fucking ratty crewneck and sweatpants.

What a fucking corpse he’d leave.
The bag was torn off from over Felix’s head after he’d been sat down in a plush seat and his hands secured behind his back. He’d had his weapon taken immediately, but had been touched no further. His vision was suffering after being thrust back into the light, but adjusted quickly thanks to the dim lighting of wherever he was. Felix squinted and looked around, taking stock of his surroundings slowly to keep some semblance of control.

He was in a restaurant, low light, dark, gilded design, cloth covered tables, a huge ceiling. There were countless people surrounding, every table full or close to it with at least two patrons each, and a low murmur swept the restaurant, private conversations amongst people that were dressed like they bathed in money.

“I told ‘em not t’ rough you up.”

Felix looked to the person sitting in front of him at the table Felix had been deposited at and gaped. Jack McLoughlin knew how to clean up. The suit he was wearing had to be worth more than Felix’s house. His hair was pushed neatly to the side, tamed by a subtle product rather than twisting wildly into the air like normal. The ruined rosary was still wrapped around his knuckles, but he was also wearing two rings, both gleaming with a priceless gem in the center, one green and one white like an opal or pearl. The dark bags under his eyes were played down by their dark surroundings, making him look more extinguished than exhausted. He was sitting aloofly, but his expression was pinched with distaste. Felix thought it was his clothes.

“I’m in sweatpants,” Felix deadpanned, unable to move past how much fucking money was in this place and how badly he failed to fit in. “Jesus fucking christ, couldn’t you have had your goons kidnap me in something a little less fucking ghetto?”

“They weren’t supposed t’ kidnap ye’ in the first place, they were t’ pick you up.” Jack scowled at something behind Felix. “No kidnapping involved in the slightest. So imagine my surprise when they dragged ye’ in here with a fuckin’ bag over your head.” Jack sighed, obviously unhappy. “Swear t’ god, he never listens.”

“Where are we?” Felix asked.

Jack shrugged. “It’s Italian.”

“It looks like it’s worth more than my life measured in doctor bills,” Felix replied. “Where is it?”

Jack shrugged again. “Del Posto.”

Felix would have done a spit-take if he’d had something in his mouth. Instead, he just ended up choking on his tongue. “F-fucking Del Posto?” he repeated, eyes wide. “What the fuck, Jack, I can’t fucking afford this!”
Jack made a face as he took a sip of his wine. “You’re joking, yeah?”

“Jesus christ, I’m in fucking Del Posto in fucking sweatpants,” Felix wheezed. “Oh my god, and there are so many windows. My back is against so many windows. There’s someone fucking behind me, I saw you looking at them. Jesus christ, literally anyone can kill me.”

Jack rolled his eyes, then snapped his fingers. Footsteps rounded Felix as a man stepped into view to stand beside Jack. He was some sort of mixed-Asian, graceful slanted eyes a little dissonant with the facial structure and broad shoulders. He was dressed just as richly as Jack, but his suit was a little looser at the limbs, meant for better movement. There was a bulge on his hip. A bodyguard of sorts.

“Are you the fucker that kidnaped me?” Felix demanded, his voice cracking a little. “Couldn’t you have let me change first?”

“You were standing in front of your closet for ages,” the bodyguard replied dully.

“I was trying to decide how to best decorate my future corpse!”

“It was nearly thirty minutes.”

Felix couldn’t believe he was being judged by his fucking kidnapper.

“Why aren’t ye’ trying the wine?” Jack asked with a frown. “Wait, are his hands fuckin’ tied? What the fuck, Mark.”

The bodyguard—Mark—heaved a soft noise of something before rounding Felix again. There was the snick of a knife being released from its sheath, and then Felix’s hands were freed. His first instinct was to run, except then Mark went down and underneath the table to zip-tie Felix’s ankles.

“Mark, really?” Jack asked in exasperation. Mark didn’t bother to defend himself and went to stand at Jack’s side when he was done. “I apologize, Officer Kjellberg,” Jack huffed, sipping more of his wine. “He’s a bit overzealous when it comes t’ his job. Take a look at the menu. We’re doing the Captain’s Menu with an appropriate wine pairing, so choose eight courses.”

Felix looked down at the menu and saw that what Jack had ordered for their evening was going to total over three hundred dollars. “I literally cannot afford this.”

“I’m fuckin’ paying, christ.” Jack took another fucking sip of his wine, but there was something playful at the tug of his lips now. “It’s proper etiquette, after all. I was the one to invite ye’ and I chose this place. Of course I’d pay.” Jack finally set down his wineglass, and with it, an air of propriety, to say, “Ye’ look good.”

“I’m in fucking sweatpants,” Felix repeated.

“Ye’ make sweatpants look good,” Jack replied.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” Felix demanded.

“Ain’t it obvious?”

“What you want from me is literally the least obvious thing in the world,” Felix said. “And also, do you have a fucking death wish? Walking through the streets, being so fucking obvious about your schedule that you can be targeted by a simple drive-by? Turning your back to a street? Walking into fucking alley ways that have multiple areas for sights to land on you from above? Fucking huge and crowded restaurants?” Mark was nodding subtly along with everything Felix had listed, like he
agreed with Felix that his employer was an idiot. “You’re the most careless Boss I’ve ever fucking heard of and I’m absolutely certain you want to die.”

Jack pursed his lips, unhappy. Then he raised his voice and asked, “Are ye’ armed?”

For a moment, Felix thought Jack meant him, or Mark. But then there was a chorus of clicks, the sound of weapons being loaded and checked, slides being drawn back. And the sound was everywhere.

Felix looked around their table and saw that literally every single person in this fucking restaurant had silenced their conversations to turn towards Jack and Felix’s table with small arms up and at the ready, expectant of orders.

Felix went back to gaping at Jack.

“I ain’t that fuckin’ stupid,” Jack chided. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m gonna have a panic attack,” Felix deadpanned, hyper aware that he was surrounded by guns being carried by people he didn’t trust. He was surrounded by armed criminals and he was a cop. “I don’t want to die in sweatpants, that was the whole point of me spending thirty minutes in front of my fucking closet.”

“You seem confused,” Jack said. “Ye’ seem t’ think this is some sort of business meeting? Or maybe even a setup? Ye’ think you’ve come here t’ die and that I’m gonna be the one t’ do the killing. I thought you were smarter than that, Felix.”

Felix bristled, because he was fucking smart, dammit, he was. Even though Felix didn’t want to admit it, Jack’s taunt had him thinking a little more closely about this.

There was no reason for Jack to bring Felix to such a swanky, public restaurant if his intentions were to kill him. Not only would that be too much of a risk, but bloodstains weren’t easy to clean up, and any prolonged closure of this place to clean up after Jack’s dirty deed would be too suspicious. Plus, there was no way the owner of this place would allow that to happen since there was no surmisable way that the man would accept any sort of payoff as they likely didn’t need it, considering the success of this restaurant. Jack had obviously worked out some deal to allow him to buy out this place for the night and arrange for so many armed patrons under his thumb. But the waiting staff and kitchen was still operated by normal employees who weren’t freaking out from the small arms, meaning this wasn’t underhand and the staff was very much aware of what was happening.

Along with that factor, there was the additional risk of Jack putting himself in front of Felix in such a vulnerable way. Mark had apparently been watching Felix for quite some time, but that didn’t mean he knew everything that Felix had up his sleeve. Felix hadn’t been frisked after being kidnapped, so he could be wired or have some sort of extra defensive weapon on him. Mark had even agreed to freeing Felix’s hands.

Then there was Jack’s insistence that he wasn’t after anything from Felix except for—

Felix paled. “Is this a fucking date?”

Jack smirked. “See, Mark? I told ye’ he was good.”

“I’m not gay,” Felix blurted out.

“So?”
“So…”

Jack shrugged, cutting his eyes away. “So. Not everything is about sex. Though, I must admit, yer uniform triggered something of an awakening in me. Never liked cops very much— what else would ye’ expect?— but you in that blue? That’s fuckin’ art. You’re quare good at that.”

Felix’s world was tipping on its axis. “You don’t want information from me.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t need ye’ for information,” Jack replied. “Anything I could need would be above yer pay grade. I just wanted t’ see ye’ again.”

Felix sputtered to get out his most important question. “Why?”

There was a pause from the other man before Jack frowned, mainly to himself. Then, he smirked. “Does it matter? I just think you’re a kind person with a good look t’ ye’. Don’t men like being flattered?”

“You’re evading.”

“Absolutely. What’re ye’ gonna order?”

The menu was too fancy for Felix to understand. He’d grown up in a well-off enough family, but they’d preferred spending their money and time on activities rather than food. Even his sister, who had spent most of her youth pretending she liked the rich life with rich friends, preferred activities over extravagance with her son. Now Felix could operate a sailboat like a wizard, but he could not decipher this menu. “What counts as a course?”

He expected Jack to laugh at him, but was surprised when Jack let out this snort and said, “I’ve no fuckin’ clue. Waiter?” The waiter approached, an unperturbed man that was completely unfazed by who he was serving. Jack sent the man a charming smile. “What do ye’ recommend?”

The waiter gave a patient smile— likely stifling disdain to protect his life— and that was how Felix ended up with eight courses of food he couldn’t pronounce.

“So how do ye’ like the city, Officer Kjellberg?”

“No,” Felix said. “We are not pretending this is normal.”

“Ain’t it?”

“My fucking ankles are tied together.”

“So? Mark won’t let me have ye’ completely untied.”

“You keep calling me Officer Kjellberg.”

“I don’t know yer name.”

“You’re a fucking liar, you know my name. I know you did some sort of background check.”

Jack pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes at Felix. “I don’t fuckin’ appreciate the accusations, sweetheart. And no, I genuinely have not looked ye’ up. Mark has, but not me. I don’t know shit about ye’. I’d appreciate some extension of trust here.”

“You’re a fucking mob boss.”
“You’re so hung up on that.” Jack huffed unhappily. “I’d like t’ think I’m more than my title. I’m also a pretty face.”

“And I’m in sweatpants.”

“You’re hung up on that too. How’d ye’ feel if I told ye’ you look damn good in just about anything?”

Felix scowled, sitting up, trying to squirm his ankles out of the bindings. They were fucking zip ties, he was going to walk away with bruises after this. “I don’t trust you,” Felix said firmly as their first course was laid out in front of them and new glasses filled with the appropriate wine. “I don’t fucking trust you, so I’m going to say this—I’m not gay. I’m not into you. I don’t want you in my house. I don’t want you killing people for me. I don’t know why you’re interested in me and I don’t know why you think I’ll just bend over for a violent criminal, but I refuse. I’m not going to surrender to you. I’m not going to cooperate.”

Jack paused. “… What if I promise ye’ something in return?”

“What?”

“Will ye’ see me if I give you a reward? An incentive.” Jack smiled placidly, though it didn’t appear to meet his eyes. “I’ll buy your time if I must, Officer Kjellberg. I’ve no shame. But listen here—” Jack leaned forward, candlelight casting foreboding shadows across his face. “I don’t want anything sinister from ye’. Not yer badge, not yer loyalty, not yer submission. Why would I want that? I can get that from anyone, anywhere. This ain’t a ploy for money. This ain’t an info grab. I ain’t lookin’ to get myself another officer on my payroll. Ye’ say you’re not gay, so what? I’m interested in ye’. And I’m confident I can change your mind.”

Jack sat back and started to nibble at his appetizer, fluke with purple artichoke. He’d said he didn’t know a damn thing about ordering at a place like this, but he’d confidently chosen the correct silverware and was using it with grace Felix wouldn’t be able to replicate. “What d’ya say, Officer? How about ye’ let me show you a good time.”

Felix looked down at his own appetizer—some sort of bruschetta with tomatoes and ricotta and mint—and swallowed hard. He took a gamble with his own silverware—chose incorrectly judging by the waiter’s expression—and looked back up to see Jack was smiling at him with this gentle fondness. Felix was a little amazed that this hardened criminal, this dealer of death, was so easy to read. Felix was even more amazed that he was giving in to the other man so easily. “I refuse to eat veal,” Felix said, refusing any other admission to his surrender.

“Good on ye’,” Jack said. “I just hate how they treat those poor things.”

So Jack McLoughlin had a heart. Color Felix surprised.

“My name is Felix,” he said. “Don’t call me Officer. Especially in public.”

For a moment, Jack’s expression was washed clean with this gentle shock, like he hadn’t expected to be given the information. And in the shock was a touch of—of something. Something Felix couldn’t understand. It was almost melancholic, regretful. And it didn’t look like something Felix expected to see on a Boss’ face after just giving him his name. Maybe Jack hadn’t expected to be told? Or maybe he’d just done his digging incorrectly and there was another Officer Kjellberg within the NYPD that wasn’t Felix. Whatever it was, the expression was there for an instant, and gone in a flash. Jack went back to his appetizer with that same, gentle smile.
“Felix,” Jack repeated, tasting the name more than the food. “Glad t’ meet ye’.”

Sadly, Felix couldn’t say the same.

. . .

“I can get a cab,” Felix said for the seventh time, watching Mark sharply from the backseat of a black sedan Mark was using to chauffeur Felix home. “Seriously—you can just drop me off at this corner, undo my fucking ankles, and I can catch a cab home. You don’t want to be driving me, I don’t want you to be driving me. It’s a win for both of us.”

“Jack will kill me if he knows you went home without an escort,” Mark replied, sounding bored.

“Jack’s not omniscient.”

“He’ll know.”

“I won’t tell him.”

“He’ll know.”

Felix slouched in his sheet and started to kick the back of Mark’s chair. He was pissed about still being bound. Glaring into Mark’s skull hadn’t helped, so Felix was forced to resort to childish tactics. They were stuck in traffic and Felix was fucking tied up. He was almost tempted to place his face to the glass of the window and signal for some sort of help.

The rain was pouring down outside and kids were mingling about, sticking mainly to well-lit places, while wiser people scurried about with umbrellas. It was never hard to see in New York City no matter the time of day because there was so much oppressive light. Felix wasn’t sure he’d even ever seen the moon since coming here, as he rarely got out of between the skyscrapers during his shifts and had never gone into the park at night.

For a moment, Felix’s chest felt dragged down by this odd sort of sadness, that lingering thought that the city was detaching him from the real world. It didn’t feel right, being a human that was unable to see the moon and stars. Felix had never really lived outside of any sort of city, but he’d seen what the sky could be like in the moments that he’d vacationed, camping with his family. He remembered looking up at the sky once and thinking he could see the Milky Way and taking a huge comfort in how small he was.

The car stopped. Felix belatedly noticed they were in front of his house. He grimaced, anticipating fumbling to grab his spare key inside the doorbell casing in the pouring rain wearing only sweatpants. Wearing wet, lazy clothes felt like pulling on a secondary, disgusting layer of skin. “Thanks for the ride,” Felix grumbled before pulling the lever of the door and—

Mark wasn’t letting him out.

Felix tried the handle a few more times, just to make absolutely sure he was being kept captive in this fucking car. “Are you gonna shoot me?” Felix asked. He looked and saw Mark was watching him in the rearview mirror with a dead gaze. “Oh god, you’re gonna shoot me.”

“Do not hurt Jack.”

Felix sputtered, bringing his knees up almost reflexively, fumbling to defend himself because it was a hard thing to do with bound ankles. “He’s a fucking mob boss, I can’t even touch him.”
“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh, you mean him being fucking obsessed with me? I’m not into guys, I’ve fucking said it. I can’t hurt him inside a relationship because there isn’t going to be a relationship. Don’t saddle me into some bullshit punishment just because your boss doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

“You misunderstand.”

Mark turned, twisting around, and there very much was a gun in his hand, pointed at Felix’s torso. Felix was so fucking tired of guns. He wasn’t looking forward to getting in uniform together and strapping a gun to his waist, but at least it wouldn’t be directed on him.

“I know you don’t want him,” Mark told Felix slowly. “I know you’re well into what you desire and you are rigid in this self-identification. I know that you’re almost positive that you’re just being targeted and threatened and that you will never, ever want him back. I am here to tell you that you are mistaken.”

“Jesus christ, do you want me dating your boss or not?”

“He’s not my boss,” Mark corrected. “And I don’t want you anywhere near him. But he doesn’t want you anywhere else. And I also know that Jack is probably the most deviously charming and charismatic person in fucking existence on this god forsaken planet, and you will not be able to keep yourself above water. So when you do inevitably fall for him, I want you to lie. I want you to keep staying away from him. I know that weak minded people like you get drawn in uncontrollably by Jack and I know it will happen to you and I am telling you that, when you do fall for him, if you try to start anything or meet him in the middle, I will make sure nobody finds your body.”

“Fuck,” Felix whispered, frozen underneath the severity of Mark’s unwavering stare and genuine threat. Felix had been threatened countless times during his career and he had never, ever believed someone’s promised intentions more than he believed Mark right now.

“Get out of my car,” Mark said.

“It’s locked, it’s locked,” Felix babbled, wanting nothing more than to do as told. The way Mark’s dark eyes were boring into him was awakening some animalistic instinct of flight. Mark looked like a predator toying with prey. “I can’t get out, it’s—”

His frantic pulling at the handle finally gave him relief and the door swung open. Felix fell out onto the concrete, splashing onto the grimy sidewalk, landing hard on his hip. His torso ached from old healing injuries and he looked like a floundering fish in his panic. There was a snick of a knife and then Felix’s ankles were suddenly freed, the zip tie falling uselessly onto the ground. Mark pulled the door closed behind Felix, showing just enough of his face to see that Mark was smirking—he was laughing at Felix as much as he could laugh.

As the car pulled away, Felix felt nothing but shame and disgust with himself for letting that asshole make him so afraid.

...  

Felix still didn’t know what Jack had meant when he said he would pay for Felix’s company, but the opportunity rose soon enough.

On Felix’s next shift, he found—

Something terrible.
It had been a regular house call, some neighbor reporting screaming from the apartment next door. Felix had talked to the neighbor and learned it was a respectable family next to them, that they likely thought it was some sort of fight or whatever, but wanted to make sure because the daughter had been rather moody lately, and things are so tense these days, and school can be so tough on these poor kids, and so on and so forth. Just a regular concerned neighbor that was maybe a little nosier than most, but New York was cramped and Felix didn’t think anything of it.

“They’ve been working so hard,” the woman had simpered, sounding sorry for them. “After getting out of that awful gang, the father has been trying so hard to get his life back under control, and he’s been working so much. He’s such a good man, they’re such good people. Please check on them?”

Felix knocked on the door of said apartment with the concerned neighbor peaking her own head out of the door behind him, watching closely. No one answered, so Felix knocked again. “NYPD!” Felix announced. “Can you come answer the door? I just wanna talk.”

There was still no answer. Felix frowned and trained his ears, listening carefully for any movement behind the door. “NYPD!” he called out again, a little harsher this time. “Open the door! You’re not in trouble! I just got a call reporting some noises!”

Still nothing. Anxiety rose in Felix’s chest. He looked back to the neighbor and gestured her to get back in her apartment. “Lock the door,” he whispered to her sharply. The woman squeaked in fear and quickly slammed her door shut. The click of the lock helped ease some of Felix’s concerns. Felix angled the radio on his shoulder closer to his mouth, allowing him to whisper.

“What is it?”

“10-65, this is a code 10, requesting 10-24.”

There was nothing.

Then a lock clicked.

Felix whirled around, almost expecting it to be the nosy neighbor again, but her door was still shut. There was a creak behind him. Felix pulled out his firearm and whirled to face the door of the suspicious apartment, watching in muted horror as the door slowly swung inward.

He saw blood.

He saw an arm covered in blood.

“10-65, this is a code 10, requesting 10-24.”

There was nothing.

Felix was alone, if only for this moment. At least he’d gotten the address out before losing the signal.

Felix squared his stance, took off the safety, took in three short breaths, and then shouldered the door open, aiming down the sights for any adversary.

The smell of death hit him like a wall and Felix stumbled back, gagging.
In the center of this homely, small apartment, was a pile of four bodies, all of them hacked to death with some gruesome blade. It was the only explanation for the limbs being detached from bodies, the horrifying amounts of blood pooling on the wooden floor, the features cut away from faces. It was a woman, and man, and two—

Two children.

Two girls, twins, their stomachs opened up with guts spilling out like a torn sack of wet flour.


Felix lost his footing— slipped in blood— and fell back against the wall, his hand covering his mouth to keep from vomiting and compromising the crime scene. And somehow, amidst the grotesque gore and ruined faces, something stuck out to Felix that wasn’t a dismembered limb. Atop the four bodies, all twisted together like the parts had been tossed into a bonfire, was a playing card. Felix couldn’t see the face of it, but he could see the snake devouring the clover drawn onto the back.

. . .

Felix was sent home from his shift early after a grueling three hour debrief that left him feeling less than human. He was done with work, but he wasn’t done working.

Felix didn’t know how he was supposed to reach out to Jack, but he knew he was likely being watched. Felix looked out the window of his bedroom— Mark had mentioned watching Felix stand in front of his closet for thirty minutes— and scanned the buildings and rooftops across the street. Just because he couldn’t see anyone didn’t mean no one was there. Felix scowled, then grabbed a leaf of paper, scrawling “I NEED JACK” across it in bold lettering. He taped it to his window, letting the message face outwards. He was counting on those bastards seeing it.

Felix turned away from the window, disgust turning his stomach. He went into the bathroom and stripped his uniform, tossing it carelessly to the side. While glancing down in the process, he noticed he’d tracked blood into his home. It was all over the tiled floor of his bathroom and would likely be around the rest of his home. How had he missed that? How had the blood lingered on his shoes for so long?

Felix pulled off his boot to inspect the bottom and saw a mound of flesh was caught in the wedge of the grip.

Felix stumbled to the toilet and dry heaved, losing his balance and pitching forward with the force of his sickness. It seemed to go on forever, and when his stomach finally decided there was nothing left in him worth getting rid of, Felix was left exhausted and pale. He flushed down the mess, tossed the shoe out of the bathroom, made a mental note to call Sarge and inform him of the evidence he’d accidentally stolen, and then turned on the shower. He needed to scrub away everything that had happened today.

Felix stood underneath the heavy spray and tried to think objectively. No matter what, he had to keep his heart out of this.

Jack’s calling card had been in the center of a murder worthy of the most depraved of horror films. Jack, who had spent so long keep his work under the dark, was suddenly making big decisions and letting his actions be known. He was changing his MO and Felix didn’t know what that meant, didn’t know how the man that had sat across from him and told Felix he looked good in sweatpants, could be capable of something this horrible. There had been two girls. How could Jack—
Felix punched the wall of his shower, angry with himself.

Jack was a mob boss.

He could be capable of fucking anything.

Felix needed to get that though his head before anyone else got hurt.

Except—

Felix shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself. The back of his eyelids were red with the corpses and he wanted to throw up again, but knew he wouldn’t be able to. He had a shoe in the middle of the hallway with someone’s flesh stuck in it and his house had footprints of blood everywhere at this point, there was no way there couldn’t be. The calling card had been Jack’s but—

Innocent until proven guilty.

Felix finished his shower and shut it off. He went into his bedroom, found a change of comfortable clothes, knowing he would probably have some mandatory therapy waiting for him tomorrow and that self-care would be the best way to ensure he could put himself back together before said shift and get out of the therapy. He pulled on his Police Academy crewneck and a pair of fleece pants, stepping into slippers and avoiding his reflection. Felix knew he would bear the weight of what he’d seen well into the next day. As he left his room, he noticed that the message was no longer taped to his window.

Felix wished Sgt. Morrison hadn’t confiscated his firearm before Felix had left the precinct. He wasn’t a suicide risk, but he definitely had some sort of target on his head. Felix prayed that Jack had seen the message and he wouldn’t be walking downstairs to his death. Then again, maybe it was smart Sarge had taken his firearm, because Felix definitely wouldn’t mind a bullet in the head right now to erase the images of the dead twin girls from his memory.

He trudged down the stairs, rounded the corner and looked into his kitchen and dining room. Sat at the table where Felix’s work bag was tossed was Jack, sitting back in his seat, comfortable and at home where he definitely shouldn’t be. Mark stood just behind him, watching all of the entrances and windows. When Felix stepped into view, Mark’s sharp gaze went to him. Then the gaze turned into something else. And when Jack saw him, the confident aloofness Felix was starting to associate with Jack bled into concern, moments before Jack threw up some emotional wall that turned that concern back into disinterest.

“You look terrible,” Jack commented. The offhandedness of Jack’s statement had Felix’s emptiness become overwhelmed by fury.

Innocent till proven guilty his ass.

Felix stomped forward, reached into his work bag and pulled out the photo he’d taken from evidence. He slammed it down on the table in front of Jack, letting him see the picture of Jack’s calling card lying atop a mess of limbs and covered in blood. “Wanna tell me why you fucking murdered a family of four?” Felix demanded, not bothering to keep the hatred from his voice. “I know I kept saying shit about you being a Boss, but this is fucking disgusting, Jack. I never thought much of you in the first place, but I never thought you’d be capable of this.”

Jack frowned and leaned forward to look at the photo. He slowly took it in, looking more and more like he wasn’t thinking anything at all. Then Jack sat back, picked up the photo, and handed it off to Mark. Mark took it, looked it over quickly, then turned away and made a phone call. He spoke too
quietly for Felix to hear, and Jack wasn’t saying anything, sitting in the chair with a far away look in his eyes.

“So?” Felix demanded. “Are you gonna tell me why you would sanction something like this?”

Jack looked up at him with a storm in his face, but didn’t respond.

Felix scowled, bristling under the silent treatment. “There were children, Jack,” he snarled. “Two girls, fucking twin girls, both of them twelve. Their heads were switched, Jack. You fucks cut the heads off and switched them.”

Jack watched Felix coolly. “I didn’t kill ‘em.”

“No, you just got one of your fucking goons to do it for you.” Felix sneered. “I don’t even want to know what kind of monsters you employ that are capable of this shit.”

“I didn’t kill them, Felix.”

“No, because you’re a fucking coward, just like your fucking father!”

Jack stood suddenly, in Felix’s face and on the offensive. His eyes tore into Felix, accusatory even though Felix should be the one who was accusing Jack. “I didn’t kill them,” Jack repeated slowly, drawing out each word like he thought Felix was having a hard time understanding.

“And why the fuck should I trust you?” Felix spat, not backing down even when Jack was only a breath away from him. Oddly, even though Felix knew this man was a fucking murderer, he wasn’t afraid of him. “Of course you wouldn’t confess to the crime, I’m a cop. You’re not stupid. Why the fuck should I take your word for it?”

“I don’t hurt kids,” Jack snapped. “Adults? Who gives a shit. All of them are greedy, nasty things, taking what they want and stepping all over others t’ get it. Adults are a dime a dozen and we could do with a huge chunk of adults in this world dead and gone. But I don’t hurt kids, Felix. I don’t touch ‘em.”

Disturbingly enough, Felix’s gut believed Jack.

He knew why. Didn’t like the implications of it, either. Felix had dealt with a lot of victims in his life, and most of them had this way to their speech, this pattern to their actions. Jack was talking like a victim in his defense of never hurting a child.

“Fuck,” Felix said between them. Jack startled at the word, like he was suddenly aware of how close they were. Jack took a step back and sat back in the chair, bringing his wall of indifference back up. “If not you, then who?” Felix asked. “Your calling card is rare. It’s not public.”

“That’s what I’m tryna find out,” Jack said. “I’m fuckin’ serious, Felix, I don’t—”

“Hurt kids, I gotcha.” Felix almost felt bad now for accusing Jack. But why should he? All of the signs had been there, and Felix had had no reason to believe otherwise. Hell, he had no reason to believe Jack’s impassioned statement of contradiction. For all Felix knew, Jack could be a really good liar. But Felix’s gut was always reliable as hell. Now Felix just needed to find some new culprit to hate. And now that it wasn’t Jack, Felix was left exhausted and sick again.

“I’m sorry,” he said as an afterthought, losing his energy to stand. Felix slumped into a chair across from Jack’s. Mark was still speaking quietly into the phone, his stance giving nothing away. “I didn’t — I just saw the bodies and then your card and I didn’t—”
“You were right to assume,” Jack replied, his voice a little too steady. “‘S what makes ye’ a good cop.”

“You’re right,” Felix agreed, because he had been right to assume, fuck Jack for making him second guess himself. All of the clues were there. Felix hadn’t even actually acted on it yet, he’d made sure to talk to Jack first and get his side of the story. Felix was a damn good cop and he shouldn’t feel guilty because he’d done the right thing and taken the right steps.

“There’s blood in your flat,” Jack said. Felix looked up to see the other man was watching him.

Felix grimaced and squirmed in his seat, uncomfortable under the stare. This was his own house. Fuck Jack for making him feel scrutinized in his own house. “Yeah, I, uh.” Felix cut his eyes away, disliking being vulnerable in front of this man. “I stepped in some of the shit at the scene. I guess some of the bodies got stuck in my shoe and either no one noticed or no one had the heart to tell me.”

Jack nodded. “I’ll send a cleaners.”

Felix made a face. “Fuck off. Don’t. I can clean it up on my own, I know how to get rid of bloodstains.”

“It’ll be faster and more effective if I send a cleaners.”

“I’m not taking your fucking bribery.”

Jack sighed heavily. “… Ye’ know, I’d thought you’d want t’ see me, Felix.”

Felix made a face. “We saw each other yesterday. In your fucking psychotic mind, why the fuck would I be looking for a second date— which I never will— so soon?”

“I dunno.” Jack shrugged. “Just thought ye’ excited.”

Felix couldn’t believe this man. “There were bodies, Jack.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Are you— are you pleading ignorance to explain why you thought I wanted a fucking booty call?”

Jack shrugged again. “The message said ye’ need me.”

Now Felix definitely couldn’t believe this. “You’re insane,” he said. “People don’t turn gay over night.”

“I dunno, Felix, I’ve been told I can be quite the charmer.” Mark’s words, not his.

“Are ye’ going to work tomorrow?” Jack asked.

“Oh course I am,” Felix replied. “We have a gruesome murder, it’s all hands on deck. And I have reports to write and my speeding quota isn’t full yet. Plus, I’m supposed to be playing ball with Andrew tomorrow. And then Sive is gonna be on my ass about my date.”

Jack’s brow was scrunched together.

“That was a lot of info really fast,” Felix admitted. “My bad.”

“You told a cop about our date?”
“We didn’t have a date,” Felix replied thoughtlessly until he understood what Jack was referring to. “Oh! No, no, see, he invited me to hang out on Friday, but I told him I couldn’t because I was on a date with a girl named Helena.”

“Yer neighbor? She’s 81.”

“I lied to get out of it,” Felix huffed. “Sue me. I couldn’t very well tell him I was meeting the Boss of the McLoughlin Crime Family.”

“I mean, ye’ could have.” When Felix gave him an incredulous expression, Jack shrugged _again_. “He wouldn’t believe ye’, and he’d likely drop it cause he thinks ye’ just wanna avoid meeting people. Antisocial behavior is widely accepted these days, Felix.”

“Why do you say my name so much?” Felix asked, eyes narrowed. “You keep repeating it like you think I won’t answer to it or you might forget it. Why do you keep saying my name?”

Jack _shrugged again_ and said, “Because ye’ told it t’ me.”

Felix was speechless.

Mark ended his phone call and bent over to whisper something in Jack’s ear. Jack’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes did. And so did his hand. The hand that was sitting atop the table slowly became a white knuckled fist, the slow scrape of nails across the wood before disappearing to dig into the palm. Jack was pissed.

“I’m sure you’re tired,” Jack said, his tone cordial and a stark difference from how he’d been talking before. “Get something t’ eat, Felix. Mark and I will be heading out. Thank you for bringing this t’ my attention.”

“Do you know who did it?” Felix asked, sitting up. “Do you have someone? Any drops?”

“If I didn’t I wouldn’t be tellin’ ye’,” Jack said.

“What the fuck? Why not?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“I’m a cop, Jack.”

Jack leveled him with an unimpressed look and a raised brow. “It’s dangerous.Fuck off.”

Felix bit his lip, trying to think of how he could get something, anything. And then— “If you tell me, I’ll go on a date again this weekend.”

Behind Jack, Mark looked ready to murder. But Jack— Jack looked like he was really considering it. Jesus christ, did Jack— _did Jack actually like him?_ Felix was still operating under the assumption that Jack had some ulterior motive, but the temptation of a second date had—

“You could get hurt,” Jack said, looking like admitting this pained him. “I’m sorry, Felix, but I can’t.”

Felix scowled. “Then what good are you?”

For a moment, Felix thought Jack looked hurt. “Get some rest, Felix,” Jack ordered, his tone harsh now. “If I had a say, you wouldn’t be going into work tomorrow. Not after what ye’ve seen.”
Felix couldn’t clean the anger from his expression. “If you know something, you have to tell me. It’s obstruction of justice! If it ever gets out we know each other, you could go to jail for this.”


Felix bristled. “Get out.” He was at the end of his rope. Jack wasn’t giving him what he needed and people were dying. He was tired and his stomach hurt. He had blood to clean. “Just, just leave.”

Jack only nodded and passed him on light footsteps. “Get some rest, Felix.”

Felix slammed and locked the door behind them, then put a chair under the handle for good measure. He looked around and saw blood tracked everywhere on the floor. Instead of cleaning, Felix went to sleep.

“…”

“What are you doing here, Kjellberg?”

Felix didn’t respond immediately, focused on scrubbing the blood from the sole of his shoe.

He hadn’t cleaned the floors last night. Hadn’t cleaned anything. He was wearing a newer uniform and different boots, but he’d brought back the boot with the body in it to show Forensics and Collections and see if they wanted what he’d accidentally taken home. They’d all given him these looks of horrible pity and told him that it was useless after he’d tracked it all over the city. Felix had assumed that would be the case, but—

Maybe he was better off not knowing who’s flesh this was. The murder was all over the papers, plastered over every single newspaper and news site, on display for everyone to see and revel over. Felix had always hated death, but he hated the way cities handled it even more. Sensationalization and disturbing descriptions to terrify and sell their goods. It was like the appeal of a horror movie. People loved being scared. Felix just wished people would stick to the theaters to satisfy their depraved cravings for gore and not give in to those who exploited death for their own personal gain.

“Hey.”

A hand came into his field of vision, pushing Felix’s own hands away from where he was clutching the sole of the boot and scrubbing with one of these toothbrushes Forensics had given him to help him clean off the gore.

Sive tapped his fingers against the mirror in front of Felix after getting Felix away from the boot. Felix was in the men’s bathroom, almost manic in his scrubbing. He probably didn’t look very good either. He hadn’t slept well— hadn’t cleaned the floor, god dammit— and had really just tortured himself with ways he could get the information he wanted out of Jack. Jack knew something, he had pertinent and vital information that could bring the criminal to justice, and the only ways Felix could think of to get what he needed was selling himself to Jack. And he knew that wouldn’t be any good for either of them, but—

“Earth to Major Tom, come in Major Tom.”

Sive was now just snapping his fingers in front of Felix’s face. Felix huffed and turned to give the other man a halfhearted glare. “What?” he asked dryly. “Can’t you seem I’m doing something?”

“What, you mean attempting to bleach the dye from your shoes with brute force alone?” Sive snorted. “You shouldn’t be here. Sarge is already making a grumbling ruckus about you denying the therapy shit. I know you hate talking about these things almost as much as I do, but… Maybe it
would actually help.”

“I’ve seen dead people before,” Felix said.

“Yeah, but I don’t think you’ve seen Full Metal Jacket I-R-L.”

“You think I’m gonna blow my brains out on a toilet?”

Sive laughed, short and loud. “This is my rifle, this is my gun,” he said. “And no, I really don’t. But I do think that what you saw is— fuck, mate, I saw the pictures. I wouldn’t be coming to work for a week after that.”

“I need to keep my head on target,” Felix replied. “Work makes it easier.”

“Work yourself to the bone so you can sleep.” Sive shook his head, but he’d gotten the nail on the head. He understood what Felix was doing and why he needed it. “Man, we don’t get paid enough for this shit.”

“Would you rather be a firefighter?”

“Fuck those assholes.”

They both shared a grin and Felix finally looked at his boot— really looked— to see the blood and the gore was long gone. He’d been scrubbing at nothing for a little too long to be sane. Felix grimaced and pulled the boot from the sink, shaking off droplets of water carelessly onto the floor. As his psyche slowly recovered, he became more aware of where exactly he was. Specifically, the man that was singing boisterously in the public shower just beyond the bathroom stalls. And what the man lacked in talent, he made up for in gusto.

“How long have I been in here?” Felix asked.

“You missed debrief. Sarge didn’t care much, seemed to hope it was a sign that you’d actually gotten wise and gone home.” Sive smirked, casting a glance. “Hopper’s singing alone would be reason enough to ditch. Plead PTSD.”

“You not a fan of Opera?”

“Are you kidding me? I live in New York, I have to at least stomach Opera. What I’m not a fan of is the sound of a man choking on his own throat.”

“He’s not that bad,” Felix said.

“My ears are bleeding, Felix.”

“Hopper!” Felix called out. “You in a choir?”

The singing cut off abruptly for their coworker to shout back, “this ain’t a free show! You boys better intend on paying me for this once in a lifetime opportunity!”

“I’ll buy you lunch!” Felix replied, actually laughing a little. That weight in his chest from the waning psychosis was finally lifting. “C’mom, Sive, let the guy have his fun. You and I have a ball game today.”

“Right, like I’m keen on some kids kicking my ass,” Sive griped. “You’re definitely coming over for dinner this Friday. I’m having a ton of friends over, and it’d be good for you to have some sort of positive human interaction. I promise, you’ll have a good time.”
“You just want good food,” Felix griped.

“Can’t blame me, you sold a lot of talent for yourself.”

Felix nodded. “I’ll see you out there. Gonna grab my lunch from the fridge and then I’ll meet you up front. Head out together?”

“I sure as hell don’t want you going alone,” Sive replied. “You’re bad luck.”

Felix wished he could disagree, but at least his boot was clean. He had an arduous task ahead of him once his shift was over and he wished he’d had the fortitude to just get it over with last night, but he couldn’t really blame himself. As of right now, his main task was to listen in on anything about the murders he could and find out how Jack was involved. For now, though, he would just focus on his shift ahead of him and try to let out some of his anxiety in the form of giving his all.

But god, he almost didn’t want to go home. . . .

Felix went up his steps and unlocked his door with excruciating care, wanting to prolong the inevitable.

He could see it in his head, the blood tracked all through his house, the obvious trail through his kitchen, up his stairs, into his bedroom and bathroom. He still wondered how it had still managed to bleed after so much walking on Felix’s part, but he assumed the wetness of the outdoors had probably made things worse. He was glad Forensics decided not to take the flesh and ID whoever it was. If it had been one of the girls—

Felix pushed through his door and steeled his jaw for—

Completely clean carpet.

More clean than when he’d bought the place, plush and shampooed, and the entire place smelled faintly of a pleasant lavender. The stairs were also clean, from what he could see, and Felix would assume the upstairs was widely the same as well.

Sitting on the end table in the foyer, next to the coat closet, with a bottle of whiskey— please don’t let this one be worth his house— and a note.

Except it wasn’t a message, it was a long string of numbers. Felix squinted at the numbers, trying to surmise what they could mean, until he flipped the paper and saw call me XO written.

Felix glared at the piece of paper, willing it out of existence. He sure as hell wasn’t going to call Jack and he sure as hell wasn’t going to drink this fucking whiskey, no matter how much he yearned for the soothing warmth of alcohol. He had work tomorrow and he’d told Jack not to clean his fucking—

Fuck.

Felix was too tired to fight.

He refused to use the number, but he went to his kitchen for some looseleaf paper, scrawled a short thank-you, and plastered it over his bedroom window before dropping into bed and passing the fuck out.
Felix woke up abruptly and out of his control, voice hoarse from what was probably screaming into his empty house, to find his house wasn’t actually empty.

Mark stood at the end of his bed, his expression giving nothing away, and only barely visible in the streetlights behind him. Felix wanted to accuse him of being a huge fucking creep, but he had a feeling Mark had been the one to pull Felix from his awful, awful sleep. Felix sat up and ran a hand through his hair, breathing steadily to calm himself down.

After a moment, “Should I count on having someone stalking me for the rest of my life?”

Mark didn’t answer immediately. “… Jack wants eyes on you for the next week, until he sorts out the Hemmerson ordeal.”

“The what?”

“The butchered family. The one I assume you were dreaming about.”

Felix grimaced. “So, what? You were watching me across the street and just happened to notice I was getting a little too frisky in the sheets all by myself?”

There was another pause, and then, “I heard you screaming.”

Felix wished he could disappear. He was sure nightmares weren’t a rare thing in the mafia considering the terrible things they did, but he didn’t want Mark knowing about the dark corners of Felix’s thoughts. This guy was a fucking menace and likely wanted Felix dead, if only to protect his precious Boss. And there was something humiliating in another man catching him in the midst of a nightmare, like an unwitting admittance to being weak to the evil of the world, regardless of the strong face Felix put on in the daylight. It was even worse that it was a man Felix didn’t trust.

“You better not say a word of this to anyone.”

Felix could just barely make out the sneer that pulled at Mark’s lips. Felix ignored that and got out of bed, heading to the bathroom. He turned on the light and glanced back, hoping to have blinded Mark a little, but the man didn’t flinch. And his expression was complete stone. “Are you even human?” Felix asked. “Like, maybe half human? Are you some sort of cyborg?”
Mark didn’t respond and Felix sighed raggedly. He was shaking, but not badly. Having someone to talk to and take his mind off of the nightmare helped. “I should say that you shouldn’t be coming into my house,” Felix told the guy. “No idea who could be watching. Wouldn’t want to make people think your Boss is cozying up with a cop.”

“He’s not my boss,” Mark said.

“How did you wake me up?”

“You were disrupting your neighbors.”

Now Felix felt even worse. “Did any of them see you come in?”

Mark shook his head. “Took the roof.”

He could get in through Felix’s roof? Felix had never bothered to really check out the upstairs, but he felt like he should have noticed a roof entrance. God, now Felix had yet another part of the house to sweep upon returning home. He was going to be exhausted. He should probably get a good lock on that thing. “Which neighbors?”

“Mrs. Smith,” Mark replied. “And the little boy next door. He woke up and went to his parents, complaining of a ghost.”

Felix felt like absolute fucking garbage. “Maybe I should move.”

“They’re fine,” Mark said offhandedly. Then, awkwardly, “Would you like, uh. To talk about it?”

“Human doesn’t suit you,” Felix said with a snort. “Go back to being Mr. Robot and we’ll both be better off.”

“You seem oddly comfortable with me in your home.”

“I’ve given up on thinking you’ll leave me be,” Felix said. “I have no fucking idea what Jack wants from me, but the only choice I have is to wait it until he either grows tired of me, or realizes whatever he wants can’t come from me. And until that happens, I have to just roll with the punches. It’s not like I can hurt any of you. I’m a cop.”

Mark raised a fine brow. “Odd that you would give in so easily.”

“Not giving in would require illegal activity,” Felix said. “And regardless of whatever you saw tonight, I really fucking like my job.”

Mark nodded. “I am going to have to give Jack some believable reason as to why I came into your bedroom at night. Otherwise, he may accuse me of fucking you.”

Felix choked on his tongue. “What the fuck?”

“He seems to think you have some sort of electric attraction to you,” Mark replied in deadpan. “An attraction that no basic human or animal is able to deny. He believes you to be… universally irresistible.”

“I thought Jack was supposed to be the charmingly irresistible one,” Felix hedged so he wouldn’t have to actually think about what Mark just told him.

Mark gave him a placid smile. “Jack can be rather obtuse about more basic things.”
“You’re so fucking cryptic,” Felix complained. Mark’s smile became even more flat. “I’m fine, now,” Felix said, wanting to be left alone in the face of Mark’s rather aggravating nothing. “Just tell Jack I had a fucking nightmare, I don’t care.”

“If I tell him that, he’ll insist on seeing you.”

Well shit, Felix suddenly cared. “Tell him I slipped and had a bad fall.”

“Oh, he’ll definitely come see you then.”

“Why is he so fucking obsessed with me?”

Mark made a show of dragging his eyes up and down Felix, like he was appraising goods. Felix’s hackles rose and he readied himself to get pissed or fight Mark off, when Mark drawled, “I honestly have no idea.”

“Fuck you,” Felix snipped, somehow offended.

“I’d prefer not to, but thanks for the flattery.”

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

Mark gave a graceful dip of his head and left the room, going upstairs. Felix watched him from the second level, taking note of the hatch— literally a hatch, like what would lead into and attic with a ladder coming down from the bottom— that Mark went up through so he would know how to seal the thing shut.

But as Mark disappeared, something tugged at Felix, something he didn’t like.

Jack was having people check on him, sure, but he was also having Felix be actively watched after the bodies that Felix had found, meaning Jack had reason to believe that Felix was in some sort of danger. Had—

Had Felix somehow been the intended person to find the bodies?

That would take a lot of work on the culprit’s part. There were so many officers under the Middle Precinct and there would be no way to guarantee Felix would be the one to get that particular call. Except the dispatcher had gone silent when Felix had needed her, could it have been—

Felix shut down the thoughts, knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink if he started considering some sort of deep infiltration of the malevolent kind into his precinct. He couldn’t afford to jump at shadows and fail to trust the people who held his life in their hands. He knew that the mafia always had some rats in the police force, it was a Hollywood trope based on legitimate tragedy and stubborn problems, but if it was someone Felix knew— If it was someone he’d once thought he could trust—

Felix grit his teeth and pulled his gun from the locker, deciding that it had been a good while since he’d given the thing a proper cleaning, and the last thing he would want was for it to fail on him when he needed it most. As he cleaned the weapon with methodical zen, he decided he was going to work on getting rifle certified as well. It couldn’t fucking hurt.

. . .

After the last incident, Felix became paranoid about leaving his home, especially when buying groceries.
It didn’t seem like a bad thing to be paranoid about. The last time he’d try to buy groceries, he’d been targeted by some Irish Mafia fuckbags and beaten in an alleyway, only for the mob boss to show up and ask him on a date. Felix didn’t have the wherewithal to survive that again, at least in terms of his sanity.

He had a fucking protection detail for some swanky charity gala for a bunch of fat cats for his shift tomorrow and he wasn’t looking forward to standing out in the cold and patrolling some fucking museum while people debated giving the needy their wads of cash like they would need to hold onto it for some reason. Who the fuck needed a party to convince them to be a good person?

Felix wasn’t excited for any of that, so he was getting groceries at this new market place in the opposite direction of his home just to avoid being mugged again because tomorrow was going to suck and he was out of eggs. And coffee. And those “bake-for-one” mug cupcake and if he was gonna have a shit day, he was damn well going to come home to a red velvet cupcake in his favorite mug. He had spent the majority of his day in the range, since active duty law enforcement shot free, and he had been riled up with energy from the kick back of his gun. Now he needed something more to do, and— groceries.

Felix had all of his groceries bagged and in his arms and the moment he stepped out of the market, it started to rain. Rain in New York in September wasn’t outlandish, but it wasn’t pleasant either. He glared up at the dreary, East Coast sky and hated that he’d left his bus pass at home because he’d wanted to have a pleasant walk today. The thing about having a pleasant walk was that he should translate some work paranoia into the real world more frequently and check the weather.

As his paper bags became sullied by the rain, Felix noticed a woman crossing the street who was struggling with her own groceries. She had far more than she could carry on her own. She was petite, Asian, well-dressed, meaning she probably had come to the store from work. Her shoes were meant for the office and not for puddles. Her hair, while probably once nicely kept, was frizzing in the rain, and one of her bags kept slipping from her hands.

Felix hesitated, only because he didn’t want to woman to think he was some sort of predator. She looked like she could be around the same age as Felix’s mom, maybe younger, but Asians aged gracefully, so Felix couldn’t be sure. It wouldn’t matter regardless. Her bag was slipping and she looked tired. Felix stopped hesitating and jogged in her direction, taking the bottom of the slipping bag before it could hit the ground and likely get whatever was inside ruined.

“Sorry, sorry, I thought you could use a hand,” Felix said, immediate apologies because he wasn’t in uniform and strangers didn’t usually help people. He readied his defense, not wanting to get the cops called on him for some sort of harassment, but was cut off by an excited sound from the woman.

“You caught that so fast!” she gasped. “Daeback, my cuts would have been ruined! I don’t know why those butchers insist on using paper around cuts, the fat soaks through anyways! Thank you so much, young man.”

Felix blinked three times to redirect his thoughts from defense to one of the things he enjoyed most—helping people. “Can I walk you home?” he offered. “You have a lot here.”

“Jinjja? I would never turn down such an offer from a handsome, young man! Please, please, follow me. I don’t usually buy so much, you know, but my son is coming over for dinner tomorrow night and I wanted to make him his favorite foods!”

Felix followed the stout woman, impressed by how quickly she could walk in such uncomfortable heels. And she had accepted his help so quickly. Felix would always be astounded by the difference between people who lived in Yew York versus Philadelphia. “I’m Felix,” he said, figuring he should
offer up his name. Philadelphia sucked, but New Yorkers were a gamble, fifty-fifty at best.

“Min-Seo,” she said with a bright smile. “Call me Mama Bach!”

Felix’s brow shot up at such a familiar title, but figured he should go with it. Names were a big deal in asian cultures and Felix didn’t want to piss her off. “Alright, Mama Bach,” he said with a small smile. “Please don’t tell me you do this often.”

“Every Friday, every Friday,” she said with bobs of her head. “I used to do it every Saturday, when my son was free to help me and he would come and have dinner after. But he’s so busy, you know? And I don’t want him to give up his day off helping me, so I just do my shopping on Friday and then tell him the next day that it was fine, I got a lift from a friend after work. I don’t want him to worry, you know? I want him relaxed and happy.”

Felix nodded. He understood the worth of a day off. “What does your son do?”

“He is FBI!”

Felix’s brow shot up. “That’s impressive.

“Very, very!” Mama Bach affirmed, smiling wide and bobbing her head even more enthusiastically. “My other son, eh. He doesn’t have much. He hangs around a bad friend all the time, really puts him at odds with the other. But they love each other and that’s all a mama wants, you know? And I’m proud of them both.” She turned to Felix, having to look over her shoulder back at him because she was still somehow keeping steps ahead of him. Felix had taken two of the bags from her, leaving her with three of her own, but still— Felix had no idea how she was walking so quickly in those shoes. “What do you do?”

“Oh,” Felix replied dumbly. “I’m a cop.”

Seemed like nothing in comparison to Mama Bach’s son, but the way her eyes went wide and soft seemed to say she thought otherwise. “Geuraey? Everyone so dark these days,” she tutted. “If only they stopped and talked to people, they’d see good men and women doing the right thing even in the bad times.” She smiled brightly at Felix, and he was instantly reminded of his mother. “You’re doing a good job! Keep up the good work and be safe!”

The walk to Mama Bach’s place was actually a good two miles from Felix’s own house, but he didn’t mind. She enjoyed talking and her favorite thing to talk about was the food she made. Felix was secretly envious. As a perpetual bachelor, Felix could cook rather well on his own, but there was nothing like eating a homemade meal that you didn’t make. He found himself very jealous of her FBI son— and even the other one, with the bad friends.

“Here, here!” Mama Bach exclaimed, stopping in front of a very nice townhouse that was very close to the library. Felix wondered how much more this place costed than his own. Mama Bach must have noticed his expression, because she grinned even wider. “My son, you know,” she told him. “FBI pays well. And since he doesn’t live in town, he doesn’t need the big price for places to live, so he helps me. He’s a good boy, good boy.”

Felix wondered if his own mother talked about him with the same pride Mama Bach had for her sons. He doubted it. Felix followed her into the neat little town house and pieced together from all of the art and furniture that she was Korean and Felix couldn’t read a lick of Korean. He helped her pack away the groceries and gently denied her offer for coffee or tea. “I have to get back home,” he told her with a small smile. “But, uh.”
Felix hated the idea of this woman carrying those groceries all by herself. Felix went to her fridge where there was a notepad and a pen—likely for making lists—and scribbled down his name and number. “You don’t want to bother your son cause he has two days off, right? I have three. So feel free to call me next Friday and we’ll do this again.”

"Heol!" Mama Bach exclaimed, happy and excited. “We make it a date! A grocery date! We can shop together and everything, it will be so much fun. You will stay for tea next time! I will accept no other answer!”

Felix just laughed and accepted her terms easily. His own groceries were probably ruined, and the eggs would likely be questionable, but the bake-for-one cupcake was a powder and that was all he’d really wanted. “Call me whenever you need me,” he told her. “Your sons are busy. I promise I’ll come as soon as I can, even in uniform, okay?”

“You’re such a sweet boy,” Mama Bach said, reaching up to actually pinch Felix’s cheek. “Go home, go home! I’ve kept you so long.”

Felix didn’t really care, but he bade her goodbye regardless and began his arduous walk home. By the time he did get back, he was soaked to the bone and sniffling. But his eggs weren’t as fucked as he’d thought they’d be and he ran himself a warm bath, bringing his body temperature back up with a smile he couldn’t get rid of.

Deep down, Felix knew he’d become a cop because he liked helping people, and that was it. There were always awful things, the gang violence and the robberies and murders, and he hated all of that and wished it would stop, but his favorite parts of his job were the small opportunities he had to help a parent find their vagrant teen, or give directions to tourists, or helping that one lost little boy in the park find his mom. Felix liked making the small differences because he knew, from experience, that the small differences changed entire worlds.

Of course, that didn’t mean he wanted to guard a fucking charity gala.

Felix sunk into the water with a groan and blew bubbles to make himself feel better. At least he had a bake-for-one cupcake.

. . .

Felix literally pulled the short straw for postings during the gala and ended up in the frigid rain, standing guard at the steps of the building hosting the gala and making sure no one tried to rush in with a bomb or something awful. But he wasn’t allowed an umbrella because he wasn’t allowed to let anything occupy his hands and the poncho covering his uniform couldn’t do shit for the cold. Also, his police peaked cap wasn’t waterproof.

Felix grumbled and kicked at the concrete, begrudging Sive, who was inside the warm Metropolitan Museum of Art—the Met—sampling canapés and other fancy shit. Felix was only vindicated in knowing that Sive would have to actually deal with the rich folks, unlike Felix, who was freezing, yes, and soaked, but he didn’t have to talk to anyone.

He was the only persons stationed in front of the Met, most of the other outside guards standing around back and side entrances, where bad people were more likely to try to slip through. Being out front gave Felix the glow of the party behind him and the busy streets out front. He was leaned against one of the pillars, next to the red carpet that was probably going to be thrown away after this for mold risk. The fountains had been shut off to avoid risk of flooding, and most of the street lights weren’t able to overpower the golden glow from inside. And it was quiet. Peaceful. Boring as fuck.
Felix hated protection details and guarding, but it was part of the job, and better than traffic control, so he wasn’t going to let himself complain too much. Felix crossed his arms over his chest in some effort to keep in his body heat and kept his eyes peeled.

The door behind him opened, and Felix straightened out into a professional parade rest, but didn’t really care. He was only supposed to be watching the street, not the guests. He didn’t even know which society the charity gala was for. He didn’t care. Footsteps sounded behind him and he suppressed the agonized sigh that threatened to burst out of him at the prospect of having to talk to some loaded fuckass who thought his or herself important just because they had a few more zeroes in the bank than him. Whoever it was stopped to stand beside Felix and Felix readied himself to say something when he was beaten to the punch by an easy, Irish accent.

“Didn’t think ye had this shitty of luck,” Jack said, sounding amused. He was holding a flute of champagne in one hand, and a to-go coffee cup in the other. “Then again, maybe I should have guessed. Yer luck is few and far between, Felix. Maybe ye’ need a touch o’ the Irish.”

Jack waggled his brow at Felix while Felix just gaped, at a complete loss of words. When he didn’t get a reaction, Jack huffed in annoyance. “Cat got yer tongue?” he pressed.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I saw ye’ standing outside all toy soldier and thought you could use the company.”

“No, what the fuck are you doing at a charity event?”

Jack shrugged. He did that a lot. He shrugged so much that Felix was starting to think it was a sort of defense mechanism, or a learned habit to make himself seem more likable or aloof or even human. “I’ve money. I don’t necessarily wanna spend it. I’m part of a rich family, Felix, old money, too. I’ve got t’ be at these things.”

It had never occurred to Felix that Jack was actually part of high society. It made sense, but that didn’t mean it was something Felix could have assumed of the crass Irishman that was involved in illegal arms dealing and murder. Then again, most of the people in attendance probably were involved in that illegal shit too, one way or another. Why wouldn’t Jack be part of the better half?

“Huh,” was all Felix said.

“I hate these things,” Jack confessed. “But it has a good purpose. They’re all so competitive, y’know? I know all their names and I know the ways t’ get ‘im. So I just kinda show up, chat a little, mention the disgusting amount I’m donating, and those fucks can’t help but ante up. They wanna be the most generous. They want the bragging rights. I personally don’t care for bragging rights, but I know these charities need the money way more than us.”

Felix didn’t know what was the most alarming to him—the fact that Jack actively attended these parties to challenge people into donating more money, or that Jack referred to the million and billionaires of New York as “us.”

“Plus, it’s a great cause t’night,” Jack continued, taking a sip of his champagne. “Funding the Untouchables. It’s an Indian thing, where they just scorn these people in their society for disfigurements and literally no one helps them. This charity is for funding missionary relief and helping those people out. Good shit. I can’t imagine what it must be like t’ be in a place that just—completely alienates a certain group of people t’ the point where ye’ don’t even let ‘em touch you. Untouchables. Such a nasty word.”
Felix squinted hard at the mob boss standing next to him and tried to figure out how such an evil person could have a soul. It definitely wasn’t the Catholic thing. Maybe the violent upbringing? Felix had no idea and his head was spinning.

“Oh well,” Jack said. “Here.” Then he held out the coffee cup to Felix with an expectant expression. When Felix didn’t move, Jack gently pushed it into Felix’s chest. Felix took a step back.

“Are you kidding me?” Felix asked.


“I know that. Why the fuck would I take it? I’m an on-duty cop, first off, I can’t just take shit from civilians like that. And you’re a mafioso. People will see.” How had Jack been swinging through a charity gala, unrecognized? There were multiple officers in there.

“No one knows that,” Jack said with a scoff. “Old money, remember? No one questions where old money comes from.”

“How has no one put your face together? Your last name is McLoughlin!”

“There are over ten thousand people in New York with the last name McLoughlin,” Jack snorted. “And that particular spelling only. There are ten Jack McLoughlins. And if ye’ mean my face, that photo your people snapped of me? A shite photo. I was shaven and wearing clothes I’ve never worn since and my hair was short and glasses. Plus, the photo itself was grainy as hell. You only recognized me was cause ye’ve come up close and personal with me on multiple accounts. But that’s it, Felix. None of your cop buddies know who I am.”

“Sarge will,” Felix replied.

“Who, Kenneth?” Jack laughed. “I just had a chat with him about funding your new uniforms for the next fiscal year!”

Felix’s jaw dropped.

“If it helps,” Jack said, looking like he felt sorry for being smarter than everyone else. “I don’t go by Jack with them. It ain’t my real name.”

Felix was going to have to see a doctor, because his jaw was on the floor at this point. “Jack’s not your— what the fuck is it?”

Jack winked at him. “Take the coffee, Felix.”

Felix did take the coffee.

And then he took off the lid and dumped the drink on the ground, before crushing the cup in his hand and throwing it into the nearest trashcan. Blessedly, he made the shot. “I’m not your friend,” Felix said with grit teeth. “I don’t take your drinks. I don’t have idle conversations and discussions with you. There is no camaraderie between us, there’s nothing. You’re implicit in brutal murders and you fund the wars of the city by giving everyone the bombs they need to blow each other up. You’re a fucking criminal and I am going to take you down.”

Jack’s expression hardened. “If that’s what ye’ think of me.”

“That and only that.”
Jack nodded. He paused, looked out at the streets. Felix only just noticed his suit was immaculate and expensive and now soaked from standing in the rain with Felix. “Then,” Jack began, shoulders lifting with a shrug. “I guess I’ll just have t’ change yer mind.”

“Not likely.”

“Never say never, Felix. New York spits in the face of that word.” Jack sent Felix a manic grin that didn’t meet his eyes. “I’ll see ye’ around, Officer. Stay sharp.” Jack turned on his heel and went gracefully down the steps of the Met. Felix watched the man foolishly flag down a nondescript cab and further solidified Felix’s suspicions that the man had an apathetic death wish.

Felix scowled and squared his stance, knowing this party had hours to go. Fuck Jack for being rich and awful and making an escape whenever he felt like it. Fuck Jack for being so up and down, confusing Felix at every turn. Fuck Jack for being Jack. Fuck all of it.

There was a crack of thunder.

Fuck the rain most of all.

. . .

By the end of Felix’s four-day shift week, there were two more dead families.

Along with the ill-fated Hemmersons, there was now the Taylors— family of three, a mother and father with a 15-year-old daughter— and the Fabbris— family of seven, two mothers with five adopted children— and Felix wanted to say he felt lucky for not being the one to find the other two families, but he’d been called in to help with keeping civilians from tampering with the scene, and Felix had seen enough dead people. He was just— he’d seen enough.

The calling card was the same, too, but the thing that Felix hadn’t known before was that the actual card used varied. It wasn’t the rigid pattern of always being a Jack of various suites. The Hemmersons had had the snake drawn on the back of a Queen of diamonds, the Taylors, an Ace of Hearts, and the Fabbris, a Ten of Clubs. Which meant that, while part of Jack’s calling card was known, it was becoming more likely that this was a partially-informed attempt at framing the McLoughlin family. But the detectives saddled with the case— two guys who hated the beat cops more than they hated each other— seemed to think it was McLoughlin just getting sloppy.

Except Jack wasn’t sloppy and he never would be. He wasn’t the one doing this, Felix was sure of that now. But Felix couldn’t tell anyone that without any solid proof without making himself seem suspicious. He couldn’t really tell anyone since he didn’t want people to know Jack was trying to cozy up to him. Jack hadn’t done anything that Felix could prove to be illegal yet, so Felix wasn’t exactly complicit to anything, but—

Felix liked his job.

He didn’t want to risk losing it.

But having his back to these corpses— these butchered shells that were once people— was fraying the edges of his sanity. He could smell the blood and the decay, and the quiet chatter of forensics was making him twitchy. The forensic themselves had sent him pitying looks upon arriving and finding Felix was standing guard at the latest murder scene. One of them had pulled him aside and said, “It’s not fair that you keep seeing these things. I’m sorry, kid. This is our job, not yours.”

This was three murders too many and Felix occupied his thoughts in knowing that Jack knew something and wasn’t telling. The only thing that kept Felix from screaming into the ceiling each
time dispatch sent him to such horrible places was the idea that Friday night was almost here and Felix had a plan.

... 

“Ya! You came, you came,” Mama Bach said, smiling sweetly as she waited by the produce for Felix to join her. “You seem so tense— nasty business with these dead, are you doing okay?”

Felix just smiled tightly. “Can’t talk about it, sorry.” He really couldn’t. It was an ongoing investigation and Felix was just a fucking foot soldier. He couldn’t say anything even if he knew something. “I wanted to ask— you got any recipes I could snag? I’ve been bored with the regular stuff I know.”

Mama Bach didn’t seem to linger on Felix having to keep secrets and launched into her various cooking secrets. Felix let himself soak in her excited chatter and tried to keep his mind off of his own anxieties for the night. But he did buy a rather pricey bottle of wine and a gift bag for it, saying some bullshit about having a date. She bought it easily and exclaimed about him being a handsome young man.

Felix would let her believe that lie and swallowed down the stupid idea that his choice of wine would be mocked just because he wasn’t able to afford anything worthwhile.

His insecurities were stupid.

Felix went home after helping Mama Bach pack away her groceries. He grabbed a piece of paper from his desk and wrote “The Breslin—7 O’Clock—be there” before pasting it on his window. Then Felix went to his closet, put on the nicest thing he owned that was formal enough for meeting the parents, but too casual for a funeral, and prepared himself for his stupid plan to fall into chaos because that was just his luck.

...

Felix had made the reservations a week ago, had dipped into his savings so he could afford this. The Breslin was inside the Ace Hotel in Flatiron and while it wasn’t the fanciest place in New York City, dinner sides were ten dollars and Felix wouldn’t have shelved out this much even for a legitimate date.

Felix was seated at the bar with the gift wrapped wine beside him, drinking the cheapest whiskey they had, feeling out of place because his clothes were nice, but they weren’t designer, and his shoes were wet from the rain. It wasn’t like the other patrons in here were regally dressed, but— Felix felt like he didn’t belong and that was all there was to it.

A bell rang as someone came into the gastropub and Felix looked up to see Mark sweeping the room with sharp eyes. Said eyes landed on Felix and only got colder. Then Mark stepped aside and Jack walked in just behind Mark. But when Jack saw Felix, his eyes somehow warmed. Felix turned back to the bar and tried to look like he wasn’t meeting a mob boss for questionable dealings.

Jack slid gracefully into the bar seat beside Felix’s, wearing a dark wool overcoat with the rosary wrapped around his ringed fingers. “Whiskey sour,” Jack told the bartender. Felix tried not to be alerted to how the bartender seemed to know who Jack was and had immediately abandoned a customer talking to him to give Jack attention. Jack eyed the gift bag, but didn’t say anything. “What’re ye’ drinking, Felix?”

Jack hummed and took the bag, handing it over to Mark. He looked over the menu in front of him. “Heritage Pork,” he read. “Are peaches still in season?”

“I need to ask you about the murders,” Felix said. He expected Jack to gripe about Felix using him, but Jack just sighed.

“I figured,” Jack said. “Not much other reason ye’d want t’ see me.” Jack seemed disappointed. “Thing is, Felix, what I said still stands. I ain’t saying shit. You’re in enough danger as is.”

“I’m in danger literally every time I go to work.”

“Yeah, but we ain’t friendly enough for me t’ suggest a career change.” Jack took his whiskey sour and threw half of it back with a contented sigh, relaxing in front of Felix’s eyes. “Gods, never underestimate the power of a good drink.”

“You’re obstructing justice, Jack.”

Jack groaned and slouched forward. “Felix, please,” he said. “I’ve so much shit t’ do, I’ve got an empire to run, I’ve got sordid actions t’ organize. I just wanted t’ have a drink with ye’ and have a good night.”

“There were two more dead.”

Jack sat up straight, searching Felix’s face like he thought Felix could be lying. He must have decided that Felix wasn’t, because his expression fell. “Fuck,” Jack said. “Fuck. Do ye’— it ain’t fair, but—” Jack sighed and looked away. He waved the bartender over. “What’ll ye’ have for dinner, Felix?” Jack asked.

Felix didn’t say anything for a long moment, trying not to let himself think about this too hard. It was probably a bad idea, but a show of faith could get Felix what he wanted, so he told Jack, “The Fabbris and the Taylors.” Felix turned his attention to the bartender and ordered the grilled trout. It took Jack a moment to understand, but once he did, he quickly beckoned Mark over and murmured the two names to his bodyguard. Mark’s expression hardened before he gave a stiff nod and disappeared to, presumably, make another one of his phone calls.

“And you, sir?” the bartender asked almost warily. He definitely knew who Jack was and was probably scared to interrupt.

“The Vinegared Poussin,” Jack ordered, the words just rolling off his tongue, through the huge smile he was wearing. When the bartend left, Jack directed that bright smile to Felix. “Thank ye’.”

Felix just grimaced. “You didn’t hear that from—”

“Sweetheart, I would never, ever endanger ye’.” Jack wouldn’t stop smiling.

“So, can I ask—”

“Felix, don’t ruin this.”

He scowled at the other man. “I just gave you something that would be considered illegal for me to tell any citizen. One of those deaths isn’t even in the papers yet!”

“Then why don’t you lower your voice?” Jack asked with a twinkle in his eye. Felix was five seconds for slinging his fist across the guy’s jaw. Jack ordered another of his drinks, sitting back in the barstool with something like triumph. “Tell ye’ what,” Jack said. “Trade off twenty questions.
You ask ten, I ask ten, two chances t’ veto a question. That way we’ll both get something out of this.

Felix really didn’t want to say yes because he didn’t know what kind of information Jack could be after under the disguise of an innocent game of twenty questions. This was a fucking date game, and Felix hadn’t really made it clear to Jack that this wasn’t a date. Jack had turned down Felix’s offer last time out of some misguided moral compass. Felix was worried Jack could be trying to glean passwords from learning Felix’s personal info, but—

Well, Felix was just going to ask about the murders, and Jack only had two vetoes. Unless Jack wanted to be a cheater, Felix would be able to learn something from this. It would be worth the risk. “Who goes first?” he asked. When Jack shrugged, Felix huffed. “Then I will. Do you have any concrete suspects for who committed the murders?”

“Tentatively, and yes,” Jack replied. “Are you a cat or a dog person, Felix?”

Felix squinted at Jack, trying to figure out what the fuck was his angle with that question. “Uh, dogs,” he said. “I’ve always wanted a dog, but I move around too much and my shifts are too long to be fair to some poor dog. Maybe one day, after they make me retire, if I don’t shift into detective work, I can get a dog.”

Jack smiled softly. “I love dogs,” he said. “I’ve always wanted one, too. I had one when I was a kid, but… well, it ain’t exactly a good life for a dog in its own way either.”

Felix tried to pretend he didn’t care. “Who’s your suspect?”

“I don’t have a specific suspect. It’s all tentative.”

“Then who is your tentative suspect?”

“It ain’t yer turn anymore, Felix.”

Felix scowled again and denied himself the urge to toss the last of his drink in Jack’s face. Jack hummed softly as if he was thinking and looked around the bar like he could find his next question written on the walls. “What did ye’ want to be when you grew up?”

Another fucking weird one. “I don’t know,” Felix replied. “I didn’t— no one asked me. They all assumed I’d be some CEO like my parents. I think, for a little while, I wanted to be a sailor. I liked sailing and shit, but the East Coast waters are so cold and I had bad luck with weather, so that didn’t really look like it was going to work out. Wanted to teach martial arts for a bit, but I suck at teaching even though I was good at fighting.” Felix shrugged, mostly to himself. “I really don’t know. I guess I wanted to be a good person, more than anything.”

“That’s so big of ye’, Felix,” Jack said with an almost dazed smile. And it was Felix’s turn, and he knew what he needed to ask, but he was also very curious.

“What did you want to be?” Felix asked, giving in to that curiosity.

Jack seemed surprised that Felix had turned the question back on him, but quickly recovered with another one of those huge smile. “A fireman,” he declared proudly.

“Fuck you.”

Jack laughed, showing bright, white teeth. “I always forget that the cops and the firemen have some bullshit fight. What’s with that shit? First responder rivalry? Is it like the military feud?” Jack’s eyes
Felix choked on a laugh of his own at how panicked Jack seemed at wasting a question. He felt weird for laughing because that wasn’t how this dinner was supposed to be. “It’s fine, it’s not your turn anyways. Why did you want to be a fireman?”

“Because I saw a fire,” Jack replied. The mirth bled away from Felix’s chest. “It was bad,” Jack continued, his voice softening. “I heard people dying, and all I could think about was that, if I were a fireman, I’d be able to save them. But I wasn’t a fireman. I was eight.” Jack paused. “I guess it’s silly, to put that kind of pressure in yourself as a kid. No one expected me t’ be able to do anything. It was just me expecting too big of things for myself, and that translated t’ me wanting to be something I could never be.”

Felix wanted to ask why Jack felt like he could never be a fireman, but it wasn’t his turn. He didn’t say anything, knowing all that would come out would be another question about something that shouldn’t be Felix’s priority.

Jack cleared his throat. “What’s your favorite book?”

Felix pursed his lips, trying to think about that. Jack had given him such an honest answer before, Felix felt like he owed Jack a little more thought in his answer for this. “Dune,” Felix replied eventually. “Just because it’s so extensive and I always learn something new when I read it. Plus. Duncan deserves better.”

“Never read it,” Jack said, though he seemed happy with the answer. “I read classics, never really been brave enough to dive into more modern science fiction. Any recommendations for me?”

“Not Dune,” Felix said. “It’s very complicated and reads like Game of Thrones, but somehow more confusing, and much larger. You’d probably get a little lost, and that’s not a good place to start. If you really wanna dive into modern science fiction, start with short stories, like Johnny Mnemonic.”

Jack snorted. “What a fun name.”

“It gets right into a lot of key elements you’ll find in sci-fi, like implants and crime and shit,” Felix explained. “And it’s short and not written in a lengthy style, so you should be able to get the concepts easily enough.”

“Ye’ think I can’t read, huh?” Jack shook his head. “I’m not dumb, Felix.”

“I figured you weren’t, but science fiction can be difficult to wrangle since it gets so fucking complicated with all of the world building.”

Jack shrugged. “Your turn.”

Felix needed to get back on track. “Who is your tentative suspect?”

Jack pursed this lips, good mood souring. It was almost like he’d forgotten why Felix had brought him here in the first place. Felix almost felt bad. “Well, I’ve more than one. So you’re gonna have to be more specific than that with yer next go. Now, Felix.” Jack sat back with a smirk. “Boxers or briefs?”

Felix didn’t even have to think about that. “Veto.”

“Oh, come on. It’s harmless!”
Felix flattened Jack with a glare as their meals were placed in front of them. Jack looked like he wanted to pout as he started to cut into his food. Felix didn’t know what to think of Jack asking something like that. It seemed so high school or like something you would ask a crush when trying not to come off as too strong and utterly failing. But Felix couldn’t let himself dwell on that. “Give me the name of one of your tentative suspects.”

Jack sighed raggedly. “Fucking christ, Felix, can’t we just have a nice dinner?”

“Answer me or that will count as one of your ten.”

Jack made a face. “… Giorgio Godino. He’s a hitman who usually works for particular people only, but can be paid to do just about anything if ye’ve the money. And he’s known as the Sweetheart Butcher, but—”

Jack grimaced after his pause. “Felix, I really don’t want ye’ a part of this.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Felix replied harshly. “Ask your question.”

“Eat your dinner.”

“Ask your fucking question.”

Jack didn’t say anything for a moment. “… Why did ye’ come to New York?”

“I move a lot,” Felix replied. “There wasn’t any real reason, I just wanted to leave where I was. When I leave New York, I’ll probably head to Chicago or Detroit. Follow the crime across the country. Maybe one day I’ll end up in LA, maybe Seattle, I don’t know. But I leave places. It’s just what I do.”

Jack nodded. “Doesn’t seem very fun. Leaving people like that.”

“It doesn’t matter. None of them seem to miss me very much because none of them stay in contact with me across county lines.” Felix wasn’t very bothered by that either. It was less of a distraction if he left connections behind in the cities he left as well. “I don’t really need a lot of companionship.”

“No girlfriends.”

Jack had made a statement, not a question. He wasn’t wrong. “There have been a few,” Felix said, figuring he would throw Jack a bone anyways. “But most of them knew that my attention was always on my city and the work I did. I’m not a workaholic, but I have a hard time turning my work brain off. And most of them get pretty annoyed when I fail to give them a key to my place. I’m too paranoid to just hand that out, you know? So whenever they felt like the relationship needed to go to the next step and I failed to follow along, they dropped me pretty quickly.”

Jack nodded again. “Your turn.” Jack’s meal was almost halfway gone while Felix hadn’t even taken a bite of his own. It seemed like a waste, except Felix was the one paying, so it didn’t matter if he wasted his own money.

“Where can I find Giorgio Godino?”

“Veto.”

Jack’s response was so immediate and sharp that Felix almost felt like he’d been verbally attacked, even though that wasn’t the case. Jack didn’t even look at him when he vetoed the question, as if keeping Felix from meeting the Sweetheart Butcher was a kind of instinct. It would have been
touching if Felix wasn’t so aggravated with Jack’s stubborn evasion.

Jack took a bite of his chicken. “Have ye’ really never been with a man?”

A flush spread to the tips of Felix’s ears at the question. It didn’t seem appropriate for the public setting but Felix didn’t want to waste a veto on something that shouldn’t cause him any strain to answer. “N-no, I haven’t,” Felix said. “I’ve never really wanted to. I’m straight, okay? I just never felt an attraction to, to men.” He cleared his throat, embarrassed that Jack would look down on him for that for some bizarre reason. “I just— I never felt the urge. And I never really considered…”

Felix shut up just because he didn’t want to give Jack an in. Jack already had one anyways.

“That’s too bad,” Jack told him. “Women are nice, yeah, but haven’t ye’ heard the argument that it’s best with a man cause no one knows the body of a man better than a man himself?”

“Drop this or that’s counting as a question.”

The grin Jack gave him was lecherous. “Your turn, Felix.”

Felix counted six questions from him and Jack respectively, so he had four left. They both had a veto available. Felix needed to be smart about this. “Is Giorgio part of the McLoughlin family?”

“With a name like that?” Jack cocked a brow. “Hate t’ break it to ye’, Felix, but mafia families tend t’ be superstitious. Can’t very well have an Italian in an Irish mob.”

That didn’t exactly answer what Felix wanted. He’d hoped to sort of trick Jack into telling him who Giorgio belonged to, but that looked like it would have to be Felix’s eighth question.

“Do ye’ have any siblings?” Jack asked.

“A sister,” Felix replied. “Fanny. That’s all you’re getting.”

Jack nodded. “I’m gonna assume she has a family, then, and ye’ wanna protect them.”

Felix narrowed his eyes, pissed Jack had seen right through him.

“I won’t dig,” Jack said, lowering his voice. “I promise. I didn’t dig into you, and I won’t dig into her. Mark ain’t even here. He’ll never hear the name, ye’ have my word.”

Felix just frowned and asked, “is Giorgio a Bisognin?”

Jack knocked his knuckles on the bar three times. “… Yes.”

Felix was surprised Jack hadn’t vetoed that question, but it was the lead Felix wanted. He hoped he could get the other tentative suspects from Felix, but this lead could be enough.

Jack finished off the last of his dinner. Felix’s was untouched and cold. Jack smirked. “How old were ye’ when you had your first kiss?”

Felix considering vetoing this, but kisses were harmless. “I was eleven,” Felix replied. “It was a truth or dare thing at some friend’s birthday party. The parents were in the kitchen and we thought we were big kids. It was one of my classmates, a girl named Desiree. I have no idea where she is now.”

Jack nodded. “Your turn.”

“What’s the name of your other tentative suspect?”
“R.”

“R?”

“Is that another question?”

Felix scowled. “Fine. R it is.”

Jack leered. “How old were ye’ when you lost your virginity?”

Felix sputtered out, “veto,” as harshly as he could past the way he was choking on his own tongue. He should have known Jack wouldn’t shy away from a question like that, but it seemed fucking ridiculous that Jack would ask it regardless. Jack didn’t seem phased by Felix’s veto. It was time for Felix’s last question.

Felix paused to think. He needed this one to count. “… Why are they killing these families?”

Jack took a slow breath. “Veto.”

“Fuck you.” Of fucking course he would veto the one thing Felix really cared to know.

Jack shrugged. “Have ye’ ever been in love?”

Felix didn’t have any vetoes left. He’d practically fucking wasted one on the boxers or briefs question, it had been an entirely harmless question about Felix’s fucking laundry. Why had he cared so much about Jack no knowing? You couldn’t do shit with that except tease. Fuck, how was Felix supposed to get out of this?

“Ye’ve always moved,” Jack said. “Always left the girl behind. Makes me wonder if ye’ve ever really been in love with someone.”

Felix couldn’t get out of this. “I don’t think so.”

“Really?”

Felix nodded, feeling weak for the admission, until Jack said, “Me neither.”

Jack pulled out his wallet, but Felix stopped him with a wave of his hand. “You bought last time,” Felix explained when Jack cocked a brow at him in question. “It’s my turn, it’s only fair. I was the one who brought you out here, to a place so below your usual standards.”

Oddly, Jack smiled sweetly. “Thank ye’, Felix. That’s real gentlemanly of ye’.” Jack slid from his stool and tapped twice on the bar with the nail of his pointer finger. “I’m taking my leave just cause I know I pissed ye’ off with my answers,” he explained. “Just know that I only did that because my last intention is t’ ever get ye’ in more danger than you already put yourself into.” Jack glanced over his shoulder to see Mark come back inside and was waiting by the door. They were ready to leave.

“Thank you for dinner, Felix,” Jack said softly. “It was lovely.”

Felix watched the man leave and tried not to linger too long on the gentleness of Jack’s voice. He didn’t have the answers he wanted, but he had enough to start his search. Felix had to be happy for that, even as he tried not to balk at the bill the bartender gave him.

... 

The next day, before work, found Felix pissed off.
Jack had been a fucking cheater, evading his questions, giving such bullshit answers. There had been nothing on Giorgio, not even in the files on the McLoughlin family related to any deaths. Felix made a mental note to ask Sarge for anything he was allowed to have on the Bisognin family, because this was just an empty hand of bullshit.

And then R.

What the actual fuck was R?

Jack had done nothing but waste Felix’s time while also delving into Felix’s personal life in a way that left Felix so angry that his hands were shaking.

That anger was what drove him outside for something to do and drove him to saying yes.

“You come in here so often,” Marzia said. “And, I don’t want to assume, but, I’m very interested in you.” Jenna was over Marzia’s shoulder, giving thumbs up of encouragement, like she was some sort of wingman to them both. “Would you please, just, consider getting some lunch together sometime? Maybe breakfast? A movie?”

Marzia was sweet, she was a cute little thing with fiery wit and Felix felt like she made his drink the best, even though she judged the cream. Felix didn’t necessarily think he wanted a relationship—Jack asking if he’d ever been in love echoed in his skull— but Jack had also sounded like he didn’t think Felix was capable of love. Fuck Jack and what he thought.

Felix was human, unlike Jack. He could fall in love. And this anger with Jack was why Felix said yes. He had a date with Marzia the coming Wednesday, and he wasn’t excited, but he was fucking stubborn and he wasn’t about to lose to Jack.
why were ya'll so mad about the bee movie in the last one that movie is a blessing

“We have an ongoing 211A at 309 West 49th Street, requesting all officers in the immediate vicinity to respond, culprits are reported armed and dangerous.”

Felix dropped his sandwich into the nearest garbage can and radioed his call number in, heading for the scene. He was literally down the road, he could hear break-in alarms wailing if he actually trained his ears. Felix turned his sirens on and peeled down the streets, eyes alert for anything suspicious, like cars fleeing the scene, or panicked civilians. He saw nothing until the building came into sight, three stories tall and stone with no defining company title. There was nothing off about it except for the ringing of the alarm. Felix was the first person on the scene and he tried to make sense of this, tried to see if there were hostages or injured parties, anything he could use to help make his next decision. He wasn’t SWAT, he was just a beat cop. But there was nothing.

Felix had one job, then, which was to keep people from getting close. He got out of his squad car and pulled out the yellow tape, setting up a perimeter and keeping civilians from getting too close. Most of them knew better, thanks to the alarm, and Felix was sure he could hear more sirens approaching with people who were actually qualified to handle something like this, but—

The double glass doors burst open and three people strode out of the doors with balaclavas covering their faces. At the very same moment, a fire lit up behind them inside the building, easily visible from the outside. Felix was almost too stunned by the sudden entrance of the transparently guilty men that he didn’t think to round on them, because there was also a fucking fire. And in that split second of hesitance, a fourth man came out of the building in a black trench coat that billowed about him menacingly with a skull on his balaclava.

What kind of fucking DC villain shit was this?

“Don’t move, officer.”

Felix looked away from the hokey villain to see one of the original three men standing in front of him with a gun pointed at Felix’s chest.

“Put your hands in the air.”

Felix knew that voice. He couldn’t believe he knew that voice. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Felix was sure Mark would be smirking if he could see beneath the balaclava. Felix had so many questions, like what the fuck Mark thought he was doing? Robbing some innocuous place that wasn’t even a fucking bank. The balaclavas were too on-the-nose and they were wearing gloves, but that didn’t mean they didn’t leave something behind. Except none of the people had carried anything out, either, leaving Felix confused as to what had been accomplished.

“Don’t move or I’ll shoot,” Mark threatened like he didn’t care either way. “You don’t want to be a
part of this. Put your hands in the air.”

Felix absolutely refused to put his hands in the air. “I’m not fucking afraid of you,” he snapped. “You think I’ll just let fucking assholes like you run amok in this city?” Hell, Felix was so confident Mark wouldn’t shoot him that Felix drew his own gun and aimed it at Mark’s knee. “Kill me,” Felix challenged. “I fucking dare you.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Mark said.

“Halfbaked, come on!”

The voice that called Mark was extremely Irish and just as familiar as Mark’s, and for a second, Felix met eyes with the skull-clad perp. Those blue eyes were immediately recognizable for Felix in a way that he hated. Felix didn’t move his sights from where they were aimed down at Mark because Mark still had his gun on him. For a moment, though, when Jack and Felix kept their eyes locked, something soft passed between them. Some sort of gentle understanding that Felix didn’t actually get.

Then Jack broke the moment by hitting the top of the car with a demanding fist three times. “Halfbaked, let’s go,” Jack repeated before sliding into the car. The fire alarm suddenly blared to life alongside the first alarm, flames flaring in one central area in the lobby. That was when Felix realized Jack knew Felix wasn’t going to chase them. “There are civilians tied up, Officer. Best get in there.” Jack definitely knew Felix wasn’t going to pursue.

Fuck Jack.

Mark walked backwards, gun still aimed at Felix’s chest with Felix’s still aimed at Mark’s knee. Mark slid into the black car— no plates, no defining marks with tinted windows— and the car pealed away. Felix wanted to chase them. More than anything, he wanted to prove Jack wrong, that he was going to put that fucker in jail, but—

He could see people inside. The fire wasn’t encroaching on them, yet, and Felix didn’t even know what was burning, but there were people inside a building that had a raging fire within it and Felix held their lives over his vendetta. So once the car was gone and Felix had made sure he couldn’t make out any special details about it to inform the other officers, Felix just called in the black vehicle fleeing the scene with four armed and disguised men inside, and then bounded into the building. The sirens were finally close enough to suggest he was finally getting some backup, but he didn’t pay it any mind. He only recklessly bound into the building to get those civilians out of there.

...“Not only did you let one of them get a gun on you, but you stared them down, had an aggressive conversation according to a few witnesses, and then pulled your gun on the perp even with the one already on you!”

Sarge sounded pissed. In hindsight, he had a pretty good reason.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Kjellberg?!” Sgt. Morrison demanded. “You can’t just stare down a fucking gun, especially in front of civilians! Those people were terrified, and you acting like a suicidal idiot didn’t instill any sort of confidence in them!”

“I knew he wasn’t going to shoot,” Felix said, because that was the only defense he had. Beside him, Sive stood, looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here. They were gathered at the scene, dealing with the fallout of what had turned out to be the weirdest heist Felix had ever heard of.

Nomura Securities was a Japanese financial services group and global investment bank. This
particular branch was mainly investments, since most of New York was built on the rise and fall of the stock market. This facility mainly took calls and accounts and managed peoples’ money and investments and tried to bring back the most profit. In other words, this wasn’t a physical bank and there was very little reason for a physical attack to be made on the place, as anything of worth could be more easily gotten through a computer. There was nothing to steal here, nothing worth the risk.

That being said, it begged the question as to how Jack had managed to find 2.8 million dollars in this facility to burn in the lobby.

That money should not have been there in the first place to be burned and Jack had somehow known it would. And instead of stealing, he’d burned it all. Felix was positive nothing had been taken for three reasons. One; Jack and his goons hadn’t had anything on their persons except for low-caliber weapons; two; the McLoughlin family had never, ever had a history of robbery or heists and made its money mainly through illegal match setting and arms dealing; three; Jack wasn’t the type. Felix hated that he was so certain of the fact, but Jack just wasn’t that kind of person. Now all Felix had was a bunch of questions and the knowledge that, if he reached out to Jack for answers, he might not even get them. But by god, was he gonna try.

“Kjellberg, are you even fucking listening to me?”

“I knew he wasn’t gonna shoot,” Felix repeated.

Sarge narrowed his eyes. “And what made you so certain that you were willing to bet your life on it?”

Well, Felix couldn’t very well say he knew the guy and knew the boss of said guy would kill said guy if he hurt Felix, so—

“They were much more high profile than your average criminal,” Felix explained, flying by the seat of his pants. “Even though they were dressed like failed thespians, they knew what they were doing. They had planned the whole thing to be in and out before the normal time for first responders to make it to the call and they also correctly estimated how long it would take for the fire to set off the alarms as well. That all suggested that they knew what they were doing well being your average theft.

“They were also robbing a place— with no actual robbery— that was not meant to have any sort of cash or funds to steal. They had ulterior motives that were not money or hurting people. If they wanted that, they’d have shot people and the shots would have been reported. Or, they would have stuck to getting into the system electronically and taking S-S-Is that way. Instead, they set fire to money that shouldn’t be there and left without taking a thing. This told me that they are much more than your average thieves and they were making a statement more than anything.

“Anyone making a statement and burning nearly three million dollars is doing it only for the statement and with no intention to get caught or get into any more trouble than they’ll already be in for Arsonry. They’re smart. They’re not about to bring down the fist of NYPD on them for shooting a cop.”

Sarge scowled, but Felix could tell he was impressed. “You came up with all of that in the few seconds it took for you to get a gun aimed at your chest?”

It had only taken Felix a few seconds just now. “Yes.”

Sgt. Morrison gave a sharp nod. “You’re going in for a pysch eval after your shift tonight, no arguments.”
Oh, Felix had quite a few arguments. “Excuse my French, sir, but what the fuck.”

“Anyone ‘brave’ enough to stare down a gun isn’t so much brave as stupid or suicidal. I don’t know if you’re a latent risk or not, so you’re going to get an evaluation and you’re not going back out on the streets until I know you’re not a risk to yourself or those around you.” Sgt. Morrison’s glare dared Felix to keep arguing. “In my eyes, you’re getting off easy for that stunt you pulled today. Take the loss in the best places.”

Felix scowled as Sarge walked away. “Fuck.”

“You got off easy, mate,” Sive told him. “I would have been told to turn in my badge. He likes you.” Sive’s grin was not enough to make Felix feel any better. “Tell me more about this date you’ve got Wednesday.”

“What, you wanna talk about my date rather than the armed fucking arsonry?”

“We’re beat cops, we don’t look into this shit beyond the civilians’ safety,” Sive said, brushing off Felix’s curiosity like it was nothing. It didn’t matter if Sive didn’t care. Felix was going to get his answers from Jack regardless. “Is it Helena again?”

“No,” Felix replied stiffly. “Marzia.”

“The barista at your favorite coffee place? That’s dangerous, Fe’, if you don’t hit off, you can never go back again.”

Felix made a face. “What did you just call me?”

“Fe’,” Sive shrugged. “Your name is a mouthful and there’s not many nicknames. Fili suit you better?”

“I fucking hate that one,” Felix spat. His sister called him that whenever she wanted him to feel like an idiot.

“Fe’ it is.” Sive thumped him on the back. “Evals ain’t so bad. They sit you down in a nice chair and they talk about your upbringing and how much you hate the world. If you manage to convince the lady that you only hate bad people, then you’ll probably be cleared for your shift tomorrow. Just, uh.”

Sive paused, standing still. They’d both been heading back to their squad cars after finishing up cleaning the scene and getting civilians back on track. The detectives would handle the rest, and Felix was legally required to finish off the rest of his lunch.

“Mate, you’re my friend,” Sive said. “And I don’t— staring down a gun, that’s—”

Sive couldn’t finish the thought, but Felix understood. “I’ll be more careful,” he promised. “I swear, I don’t want to die.”

Sive grinned, but there was something pained in his eyes. “Sure thing, Kjellberg,” he said. “You owe me a homemade meal.”

Cooking dinner would be getting off even easier than the eval. Felix quietly agreed and hoped he wouldn’t be forced to break that promise within the next week.

...
“Calling Mr. Skull Face” was the note Felix left in his window that night.

His psych eval had been bullshit and transparently easy. Felix felt that even if he were suicidal or too reckless to be safe, the psychiatrist wouldn’t have been able to tell. She’d sat across from him with kind eyes and asked him about his childhood. Felix really didn’t think she could gleam his current suicide risk from what happened to him when he was ten and fell off the swing and his mom didn’t notice. All of that bullshit wasn’t going to save anyone. He understood how unfair it was for a psychiatrist to have to judge suicide risk from a single session, but jesus christ, he’d had mandatory therapy once, and that woman had seemed way more put together than this one. And she’d actually been able to recognize Felix’s omnipresent sarcasm.

It was why he was already super fucking annoyed by the time he put that note on the window, which made him in an even worser mood when an hour passed, and Jack hadn’t shown up. Felix wanted to know what the fuck the guy’s problem was. Sure, he was a crime lord, but what the fuck could he be doing at one AM? “Crime doesn’t sleep” was the old saying, but people fucking did. And Felix was sure he still had eyes on him, because there had been a light on in the house across the the street that was supposedly still for sale. Utter bullshit.

Felix was about to call it useless and try to get some fucking sleep considering he still had work tomorrow when there was a tapping at his door. Immediately, his brain shot into paranoid overdrive. He grabbed his firearm from the safe and held it at the ready, safety off because fuck his life, it seemed like anything could kill him at this point. Felix crept down the stairs and to the door, being sure to keep his body from the door itself in case someone decided to shoot through it. He stretched his neck to check the peephole, and saw only a dark figure with their back to the door.

“Fuck,” he whispered to himself, before throwing the door open and then holding the pistol securely in both hands, pointed at the floor, but ready to fly up and get the guy in the shoulder. “Who are you?” he demanded. “Turn around and show me your face.”

There was a pause, then the man turned slowly. Felix could visibly see the disbelieving expression across Mark’s face. “What the fuck are you doing at my door, Mark?”

“Are you that fucking paranoid?” Mark asked, ignoring Felix’s question. “Jesus christ, you’re acting like I’m here to try and kill you again.”

Felix sputtered.

“You wanted Jack, I’m bringing you to Jack,” Mark huffed. “God knows why that man is giving in to your every inane demand. You keep calling him to you like a dog, like he’s your fucking pet or something. Disgusting.”

Felix sneered and reached out too quickly for Mark to react. He yanked back Mark’s hood so it fell from his head and the man’s hair was nearly instantly drenched in the pouring rain. Mark was not amused. “That was childish,” he accused in monotone. “How old are you?”

Felix glared at the other man as he followed Mark into the rain and to the black car with no plates
that was parked in front of Felix’s house, engine still running. “Do you guys just have a deal with Detroit or something and that’s why all of you drive Chryslers with no fucking plates? How the hell do you get away with driving without plates? We’d pull you fuckers over in a second if we saw you.”

“That’s why we make sure none of you see us,” Mark replied as he slid into the driver’s seat. Felix rounded the car and dropped into the front passenger seat, first turning on the heated seat, then buckling in. “Yesterday was a fluke,” Mark told him, eyeing Felix’s priorities with disdain. “I have no fucking idea how you showed up that quickly.”

“I was on my lunch down the street,” Felix said as Mark started to drive. This wasn’t exactly sensitive information, so he didn’t care about telling Mark. “You fuckers just chose the place that’s nearby a park. Don’t fucking hold up places near parks, man, not only is that a likely place for a cop to be taking a break and doing reports while keeping an eye on things, but it’s also putting those kids in danger. If something goes wrong and you run into a fucking park, no one’s gonna think twice about getting sniper sights on you to keep you from hurting a kid.”

“You’ve been playing ball with those grade schoolers for weeks, Felix, Jack has already banned anyone from going anywhere near parks because he thinks you have a soft spot for children.” Felix made a face of horror and Mark raised a brow in question. “What?”

“He shouldn’t need me liking kids to keep him from hurting them!” Felix cried out, ignoring Mark’s aggravated cringe at how loud Felix was. “Just don’t hurt kids! Don’t hurt kids. Jack’s already told me he doesn’t hurt kids.”

“It’s not always that simple,” Mark said.

“Shut the fuck up,” Felix interrupted harshly. “Don’t hurt kids. And don’t say anything else on this or I’ll fucking hit you and you’ll crash and that’ll be bad for both of us.”

“At least you know how to acknowledge the repercussions of your stupid actions,” Mark huffed. “Now shut up and let me focus.”

“Focus on what? Being an asshole?”

Mark’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. “The only reason I’m not rolling my eyes into the back of my skull is because I don’t like to take my eyes off the road.”

Felix scowled and sat back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest, trying not to act too much like a preteen that didn’t get asked to homecoming. Mark didn’t even do the polite thing and turn on the radio, he only let Felix sit and stew in silence, a parent sending their kid to the corner. After a while, Felix failed to recognize where Mark was taking him, and he knew he should be nervous, but he was mostly just still fucking pissed off, and he also knew that, as Mark hadn’t shot him today, he wouldn’t be taking Felix to his death.

Still.

They entered what Felix would call a “bad” part of town, “bad” being relative to the nicer areas of New York City that they were still in. And even then, the bad parts of New York City paled in comparison to the good parts of Philadelphia. And Felix hadn’t even been to Chicago yet. Let alone Detroit.

Felix watched a drug deal happen in someone’s front lawn and tried not to laugh about it. Mark brought the car to a stop in front of some huge manufacturing building that looked entirely
abandoned, save the lights that came from the windows along the sidewalk, meaning there was a basement and someone inside it. Mark got out of the car and went to the side walked, waiting expectantly. Excuse Felix for not being excited to get out of the car and approach the villain-esque building and stand with the guy who had leveled a gun at him the other day. But then again, no one had ever learned anything important by playing it safe. The understanding of electricity took flying a kite in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Felix got out of the car and glared at Mark. “If you’re bringing me here to kill you, I’ll be really fucking pissed.”

“Jack would be so upset with me,” Mark said in a way that made Felix think Jack really wouldn’t care at all. For all of Jack’s apparent obsession with Felix, Felix knew, without a doubt, that Mark would come above Felix in the end. Mark was just a bodyguard, but Felix didn’t know how long Mark had been a bodyguard. He almost wished he could ask, but that would come too close to caring. “Follow me.”

Mark started to walk, rounding the building. Down the street, Felix heard gunshots and neither of them flinched, because it was expected in a place like this. He knew he wouldn’t be able to help anyone. This wasn’t his precinct and he had no jurisdiction. Mark brought him to stairwell alongside the building that went down.

“Alright,” Felix said. “This is where I draw the line. This is a fucking murder house.”

“If I made a murder house, you would not know it was a murder house,” Mark told him. “It would be pink with a manicured lawn and the shutters on the windows would be real. I would pay actors to play in the front yard, two children and a dog, with a woman that would water the flowers out front. Another actor would be scheduled to come home every day at a specific time with a briefcase. They would leave on weekends, presumably to visit a grandmother up in the Catskills. If I had a murder house, you would not know it was a murder house until you went past the foyer and found yourself diced tighter than Gordon Ramsey’s fresh garlic for a lemon and capers, oven-roasted salmon recipe.”


“Get down the fucking stairs, Felix.”

“The only reason I’m gonna is because I don’t see any shutters on this warehouse,” Felix replied, going down the steps with a new kind of confidence because Mark was a fucking storyteller. Bounding down the steps led to a solid, metal door. He could just barely make out a thumping base beat from inside that shook the door at its hinges. There was a secondary slide within the door at eye level. Felix had seen this shit in the movies, but he didn’t want to press his luck. He took a step back and let Mark go in front of him, knocking on the door. The slide was thrown back with a grating noise and dark eyes peered expectantly through.

Mark heaved a huge sigh and said, “I love pineapple on pizza.”

The man behind the door snickered and unlocked the door to let them in. Felix made a face. “That’s the fucking codeword?”

“For me,” Mark replied, sounding annoyed.

“Couldn’t anyone say that?”

“No one in their right fucking mind likes pineapple on pizza,” Mark replied.
Felix actually had to agree, but now he just had another question he couldn’t ask, because stepping into this horrifying basement made his thoughts stall.

It was a gym— a boxing gym. There was a ring in the center, punching bags along one wall, gloves hanging from the walls with punching mitts, bench presses and different workout equipment on the other side of the ring. There were speakers along the top of the walls, shouting out some aggressive rap, a guy saying “hot it up” over and over like the words were being punched from him. And in the center of the room in the ring, was Jack with another, older man, bare fisted and fighting like his life depended on it. Felix watched, unable to not be impressed, as Jack executed a perfect overhand punch and sent the guy sprawling to the ground, down for the count.

“Good, good,” said another man who was watching from where he was leaning against the wall. “You widened your stance that time, keeping your balance better and letting the power of your swing come from momentum rather than your strength. But you left your face uncovered. If he’d been able to predict that punch, you would have taken it to the jaw.”

Jesus christ, Jack could throw a fucking punch and he was only learning how to throw them better. Jack looked annoyed at the coaching, like he wanted his accomplishment to be acknowledged a little more than what was wrong with it. The man Jack had hit wasn’t even getting up. Jesus christ. Felix was so busy staring at the man who couldn’t fucking stand after the hit Jack had given him that Felix didn’t notice when Jack noticed him. It took a long moment for Felix to finally drag his eyes away from the seemingly unconscious man to look to where Jack was learning over the ropes, watching Felix with dark eyes. Jack was wearing tight, spandex shorts that went down to his knees with a black wife-beat that clung to his surprisingly curved hips. The look he was giving Felix was downright sinful and Felix wanted to punch that smug look off his face.

“Impressed?” Jack asked, exuding cockiness.

Fuck off, Jack. “Why the fuck were you burning 2.8 million dollars in the middle of an investment building?” Felix demanded, refusing to let his eyes go any lower than Jack’s face. “And why the fuck did you let yourself get caught by me?”

“You really weren’t meant t’ catch me,” Jack said, sighing unhappily. “Seriously, I’m fucking—I don’t know how ye’ did that. We were listening t’ every channel, you weren’t supposed to be that close.” Jack got off the ropes and shook his head, unwrapping his knuckles. Felix wondered if he used makeup on them, because Felix had never noticed the bruises that would have to come with Jack boxing without mitts. “You really are the best cop I’ve ever known and it gets t’ me.”

Felix tried to be offended, but he didn’t know why. Who the fuck did Jack thinking he was, saying shit like that? “Why did you burn 2.8 million?” Felix asked again. “Did you take a good chunk for yourself and burn the rest so no one would think you stole? That money wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place, no one would report missing any size of it because they’re already in hot water for illegal shit. Was this secretly you ending a money laundering agreement and covering it up with burning a good portion of the money to keep suspicions from rising against you?”

Jack gaped at him. “Jesus christ, you’re fuckin’ smart.”

“So that is it,” Felix said with a scowl.

“Sadly, no,” Jack replied. “Though I wish it were, fuck me. Mark, write that shit down, we could use that.” Mark didn’t move, only continued to stand by Felix, looking very unimpressed. “We weren’t doing anything sordid, Felix, trust me,” Jack said. “If anything, I was being the good guy. If ye’ knew what was really up, you’d be thanking me.”
“You’re not a good person and I’m not going to thank you,” Felix snapped. “Tell me what the fuck was going on. You owe me.”

“I’m sorry, he owes you what?” Mark asked.

“I don’t owe ye’ shit,” Jack huffed.

“I gave you the names of two families, you gave me two completely useless leads. I’ll be nice and say you only owe me one favor, but you owe me something regardless.”

“And if I don’t pay up?”

“Then the next time I call for you, I’ll have three other officers waiting with me.”

Jack scoffed. “Ye’ wouldn’t do that.”

Felix couldn’t imagine double crossing Jack. For whatever fucking reason, Felix couldn’t imagine double crossing Jack. What he had with Jack was pretty ideal considering Felix had never expected to have such reliable access to such a high profile criminal. He wouldn’t waste it so early on just to try and threaten Jack into handing over information. But Felix didn’t have many other options.

Felix heaved a despondent sigh, hung his head, then looked back up at Jack and said, “Please.”

Oddly, the single word seemed to do something. Jack straightened, something like surprise coming across his face. Felix hadn’t said the word like it was anything other than a plea for some sort of help. Jack couldn’t read into it too far, but he could see it for what it was. Felix needed his help and that was all there was to it.

“Look,” Jack said after a moment of thought. “It wasn’t— there’s shit going on that’s a little too complex fer me t’ just tell you. But I could—”

“Seriously, Jack?” Mark interrupted. “He bats his eyelashes and suddenly you just bend over?”

“Fuck off, Mark,” Jack said. “Look, Felix, present company doesn’t allow me t’ say much. Don’t really want my coach complicit in anything really bad, yeah? He’s good at what he does and I’d rather not risk sending him t’ prison for the shit I do.”

Jack paused. Then he gave a sharp nod, and the man at the front door and the coach went into the ring to pick up the still-unconscious man and carry him out of the room entirely. It left only Mark, Jack, Felix, and a strange man Felix didn’t recognize coming into through the door the others had disappeared through. He had broad shoulders and dark hair and a stone cold expression of nothing. Felix spared the man only one wary glance before deciding he was just guarding the door to keep anyone from coming in. But he was also, apparently, high up enough on the totem pole to be part of this scheme. Felix filed away his face in case he would need to remember it later.

Jack slung himself under the ropes and moved towards Felix. Jesus christ, the way he fucking walked was cocky, the sway of his hips and the way he had his shoulders were squared and held back. Felix bristled, instinctively wanting to start a fight because Jack was too confident and Felix hated it.

“What do ye’ know of the Bisognins?” Jack asked.

“Jack, really,” Mark groaned. “You can’t be serious.”

“I told ye’ t’ shut up, Mark,” Jack said. “Felix— what do ye’ know of the Bisognins?”
“They’re the main rival of the McLoughlin family,” Felix said. “But while you sell death, they sell drugs. They’re Italian, you’re Irish. Pretty sure you’re the older family, but who the fuck cares about that. I don’t know. There’s not much to know.”

Jack nodded. “What do ye’ know of Lovecraft?”

Felix narrowed his eyes. “If you’re peddling that shit, I really will have officers waiting for you next time we see each other.”

“I’d never sell that,” Jack replied. “Ye’ think I sell death? You don’t know what that Lovecraft shit can do. People are already dying from that garbage. They’re trying to push it into more vulnerable areas of this city and I ain’t having that shit. That 2.8 mill? That was theirs. Nomura was working with them t’ hold some of their funds in a safe, unexpected environment. Since they’re old school, they like cash. In return, Norma gets a sizable donation from the Bisognins every month that they turn around and invest into their own company, which they then also pay a good portion back into the Bisognins. It’s a solid plan and one of their main sources of economic income, especially since the deal is with the New York branch only. All records stay within the city and none of the funds get put into the company at large. It all stays local.”

“And you burnt it.”

“Yes,” Jack affirmed. “Because fuck those guys and what they’re doing.”

Felix stared at Jack. “You’re gonna start a gang war, Jack.”

Jack shrugged. “There’s been a cold war between us for ages. I’m just tryna’ bring it into something a little quicker.”

“Jack, a gang war.”

“The thing about war,” Jack said softly. “Is that there’s usually a victor that comes out on top and rewrites history. And that victor? That’s gonna be me.”

Felix was talking to a madman. “People are gonna die, Jack.”

Jack smirked. “Not my people.”

“You could die.”

Jack shrugged. “The best innovations are paved with death, Felix. How many people died in the machines that mass produced the most basic of amenities? How many soldiers died in the name of a better, safer world? How many martyrs does it take to start a revolution? And also—” Jack stepped back, gesturing to the ring. “Didn’t ye’ see how hard that guy went down? I’m gonna be fine, Felix. No need t’ worry about me.” Jack paused. “Wait. Are you worried about me?”

“I took an oath,” Felix said. “On top of everything, I’m meant to protect and serve the people of this city. That’s my duty and that is my purpose. You’re a civilian regardless of what you do, and it’s my responsibility to keep you safe should you be endangering yourself in any way.”

Jack nodded slowly. “What’s the oath?”

Felix paused. “You can google it.”

“I won’t.”
“Then why do you want to hear it?”

Jack shrugged. “Humor me.”

There was something in those blue eyes, a guarded depth that said he wanted Felix to do much more than humor him. Felix didn’t know what he would be giving into by telling Jack the oath, but he had no reason not to. “On my honor,” Felix began to recite from memory, softening his voice in a kind of reverence, because the oath was one he held with the utmost importance in his life. “I will never betray my badge, my integrity, my character, or the public trust. I will always have the courage to hold myself and others accountable for our actions. I will always uphold the Constitution, my community, and the agency I serve, so help me God.”

Jack nodded. “Do ye’ believe in God, Felix?”

“No.”

“Then why swear on him?”

“Because countless people in this country do believe,” Felix replied. “And I want them to trust me just as much as they would trust anyone else.” When Jack didn’t immediately respond, Felix had to ask. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Believe. In God.”

Jack’s expression twisted tellingly and beside Felix, Mark shifted his stance into something almost defensive. What was Mark going to defend Jack from? Felix or the harmless question? “Maybe once,” Jack said. “Irish, y’know? Catholic by blood. But I ain’t been t’ church since I was a child and I ain’t prayed to anyone in years.”

Felix really wanted to press. He sunk his teeth into his bottom lip to keep from asking any further, knowing it wouldn’t be welcome. Felix wasn’t blind, he knew the terrible happenings of organized religion, specifically the Catholic church, and if Jack was any sort of victim—

“Ye’ve a question,” Jack said, interrupting Felix’s thoughts. “Ask it.”

“I’d rather not,” Felix said.

“Why? Aren’t ye’ sworn to keeping your courage?”

Felix refused to give in to the goading. “You wouldn’t tell me the truth. I have no reason to ask if I know I’m going to be given a lie.”

Jack sent him a crooked smile. “Look at ye’— learning so well.” Jack turned his back on Felix, heading into the ring. “I’m touched,” he said. “Truly, I am. Ye’ preach hating me and what I do, yet ye’ say so readily you want t’ keep me from harm.”

Jack swung himself gracefully into the ring, and spun on his heel to face Felix with an enigmatic grin. “But as you can see, Officer Kjellberg,” Jack continued, drawing out Felix’s last name like it was some sort of taunt. “I can take care of myself. I can break a neck with my thighs alone, I think I can keep myself from gettin’ ganked by some fuckin’ amateur hitman sent for my head. I can defend myself with my bare hands better than you ever could with an upgraded arsenal.”

Felix scowled at the obvious jab at his abilities. “Just because you can do some fancy throw and
knock a guy out doesn’t mean you can survive a gang war.”

“Are ye’ kidding me?” Jack spread his arms, exuding confidence again. “Look, I know I ain’t bulletproof, sweetheart, but I definitely ain’t made of glass either. And as someone who exports guns, I can tell ye’ I also specialize in the exportation of gun defense as well. I’ve the latest bullet proof armoring technology and all the money in the world to mass produce it for my own needs without anyone batting an eye. The nice thing about always being part of the manufacturing of war is that no one is expecting ye’ to start one on your own turf, and all the signs that say you would are the same as your everyday business.”

Jack was practically sauntering as he stepped into the center of the ring, underneath the dim light of the dingy, overhead chandelier. Felix only just now noticed it, this touch of luxury in the middle of a grungy basement that had flecks of blood on the floor. “I appreciate the concern, Officer,” Jack drawled. “But I can protect myself far better than you ever could.”

“You have a bodyguard for a reason.”

“I’m not his bodyguard,” Mark sighed.

“Mark ain’t my bodyguard,” Jack affirmed.

“Then what the fuck is he?” Felix demanded. “Just some pretty face you keep on your arm? I thought that was my role.”

Jack’s brow shot up at the disdain in Felix’s voice, but he didn’t rise to the bait any more than Felix had refused to earlier. “Me thinks the lady doth protest too much,” Jack said. “I know the training the NYPD’s Finest get here cause it’s in my best interest t’ know what my men are up against. I know yer training. Ye’ can’t fight me. You can’t protect me.”

Screw not rising to the bait. “Fuck you,” Felix spat. “I can take you down.”

Jack threw his head back and laughed. “Ye’ think you can take me?” Jack repeated incredulously through his mocking laughter. Felix clenched his fists at his side and denied himself the pleasure of marching up to Jack and laying one across his stupid face. “Sweetheart, I was born with a silver spoon under my tongue and brass knuckles in my hand!”

Beside him, Mark was moving a tiny bit. Felix glanced in his peripherals and saw that Mark was stifling a laugh. Whether it was at Jack’s over exaggeration or Felix’s insistence he could take the mob boss, Felix didn’t know. He didn’t really fucking care either.

“The only person who I’m confident can take me is Mr. Scheid over there by the door,” Jack was saying. “And maybe Mark on one of his good days while I’m at one of my worst. Mark’s always been better with bullets than fists, but I know ye’d never be able to take Mark down on the best fuckin’ day of yer life, which means there’s no way in hell you’d ever be able to stand up against me.” Jack leaned against the ropes. He wasn’t even challenging Felix, he was just trying to prove he was better. Or maybe just convince Felix that he knew he was.

“Look at ye’,” Jack said almost fondly now. “So fuckin’ skinny. You’re good at running, maybe a few hits when darting round corners, but not much else. Ye’d never be able to stand toe’ toe with me and come out on top. I’d kick yer cute little ass all over this fuckin’ city. Don’t even try t’ defend yerself, Felix. Go limp, play dead. Ye’ can’t measure up to me.”

Felix had had enough. He dropped his jacket to the ground, and then he strode forward, took the ropes in his hands, and swung up into the ring. Jack’s brow shot into the air as Felix went to the far
corner of the ring to grab the bandage roll and started to wrap his knuckles. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m gonna kick your fucking ass,” Felix told him. Jack laughed again, but this time, he sounded a little less confident. Good. Felix was wrapping his knuckles with expertise that he knew Jack wouldn’t miss. Felix knew what he was doing. He knew how to fight and he wasn’t about to let Jack think he was better than him. Felix finished off, tearing the strips with his teeth, piercing Jack with a glare the whole while. Then Felix shook off his hands, twisted his neck to loosen up, and waited. “Come at me, you Irish fuck.”

If Jack had been a little surprised before, he was stunned now. “Ye’ sure you wanna do this?” Jack asked, approaching slowly, flexing his arms, apparently forgoing any protective wraps. That was how badly he was underestimating him. Felix wasn’t going to be offended now, he was just going to put that fucker in his place. “I ain’t gonna go easy on you,” Jack hedged as Felix started to round him, looking for an opening. “I’ve been fighting since I could walk, Felix, you can’t—”

Felix sprung forward on light feet, took Jack by the left arm, twisted his foot around so his back was to Jack’s chest, and flung the man over him, swinging Jack over and into the air so Jack would land on the mat on his left side, hard. Then Felix twisted Jack’s arm around, immobilizing him at the risk of dislocating the shoulder, and planted his knee in Jack’s chest hard enough to knock the wind out of him, pinning Jack to the mat with his body.

Jack stared up at Felix with wide eyes of absolute disbelief. “That was a fluke,” Jack sputtered after regaining his breath.

Felix scowled and stood, stepping away, giving Jack the space again. “Prove it,” he challenged, testing his own shoulder. Flipping Jack had put a little strain on it. He probably should have stretched before this, but Jack had been asking for it. A sore shoulder would be worth making Jack eat his words.

Jack was a little more careful now, his feet firmly planted, watching Felix carefully. They circled each other in the ring like wild animals looking for a chance to tear out the other’s throat. Jack seemed to spot an opening that didn’t exist, Felix purposefully showing too much of his left side. Jack went high, feinting a punch when he was really going to be bringing his elbow into Felix’s gut. Felix saw through the ruse and dropped to the mat, completely out of the range of Jack’s arms. He pressed his stomach to the mat and braced himself, swinging his leg around sharply, knocking Jack down, who was in the midst of the momentum of his failed swing.

Jack toppled over and Felix deftly rolled atop him, twisting Jack’s arm again behind his back, elbow open and easy for Felix to break if this were a real fight. Jack growled and tried to struggle, but every attempt put too much strain on the elbow. Felix smirked, barely even winded. “Let me guess,” Felix said. “Another fluke, right?”

“Fuck off!” Jack snarled, before throwing his own leg back, nearly connecting with Felix’s skull. Felix was momentarily stunned by the show of ingenuity, but was easily able to bend backwards, out of reach. He rolled onto his back, legs over his head, putting distance between him and the other man. Jack went up on his hands and knees, glaring death into Felix. “How the fuck are ye’ so bendy?”

“I thought it was a fluke,” Felix nearly sang. He was grinning now, the adrenaline of proving Jack wrong making the blood in his veins sing. “Sure I can’t take you?”

Jack had a temper, Felix always knew it was there, but now Felix could see it fully on display when Jack reared up and went low, tackling Felix with arms around the waist. Jack put all of his weight into the move and slammed Felix into the mat, trying to knock Felix’s head and daze him. But Felix
had been ready. Before he even hit the mat, he wrapped his legs around Jack’s torso, and once he was on the mat, he grabbed the ropes and twisted his hips with all of his might, flipping Jack over using Jack’s own momentum against him, and pinning Jack to the mat a third time with his elbow in Jack’s neck and his knee in Jack’s stomach.

Felix smiled breathlessly down at Jack. “A fluke.”

Something dark flashed in Jack’s eyes and he started to move despite the elbow in his neck. Felix braced himself, thinking Jack meant to smash his head into Felix’s face to try and throw him off. Felix didn’t have time to move with how close they were, so he clenched his jaw and relaxed to avoid whiplash, but instead of Jack surging upwards to crack his skull into Felix’s chin, Jack surged up to kiss Felix hungrily.

Felix slammed his fist way too hard into Jack’s mouth and scrambled away, his lips numb. Jack groaned as he rolled over with the hit. Jack spat blood onto the mat, and for a moment, Felix was scared he was going to be shot by Jack’s goons. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he babbled, hands going up in the air like he was surrendering. Mark had a gun and he didn’t. Even though Felix wasn’t sure why he had to apologize— Jack had fucking kissed him— Felix didn’t want to die for the folly of it. He’d hit Jack way too hard for the skirmish they’d been having. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“I deserved it,” Jack choked out from where he was bent over on the mat, waving his hand in the air as he struggled to regain his grip on himself. Felix had hit him way too hard. His fist was hurting. “Don’t, don’t apologize. I deserved it.”

Felix looked to Mark, wary regardless, but Mark looked more pissed at Jack than Felix. “He deserved it,” Mark agreed in a low, threatening voice. By the door, the man— Scheid?— nodded his agreement. “Get the fuck up, Jack.”

“I’m up, I’m up,” Jack said, pulling himself up by the ropes. “Mark, take Felix home.”

“I’m sorry,” Felix said again even though he felt horribly off-kilter. He hadn’t been ready for it, hadn’t thought— God, Jack had fucking kissed him. Why?

“Come with me, Felix,” Mark said, his tone deadly. He was staring into Jack like he wanted to hurt him. “It’s late. You need rest.”

Felix wanted to argue, but— “I’m sorry.”

Mark sighed and shook his head. “Come with me, Felix.”

Felix shakily darted past Jack and swung down, following Mark with an obedience he wouldn’t normally give the other man. His hands were trembling and he felt stupid and weak for it. Felix didn’t look back at Jack as Mark led him out of the gym and out of the basement. Around them, the rain soaked Felix to the bone because Felix had left his raincoat back with Jack.

He didn’t want to go back for it regardless of the freezing rain.

“I’m sorry,” Felix said again as Mark opened the car door for him. He didn’t know why Mark was suddenly being so considerate of him, but he couldn’t bother to think about it. Jack had—

“You need rest, Officer Kjellberg,” Mark said with a foreign tint of kindness. “Let’s get you home.”

Felix couldn’t argue. He only ducked into the car, buckled up, and focused on not thinking for the rest of the night.
Jack had kissed him.

As Felix’s hands shook in his lap and his stomach rolled over, Felix decided didn’t want Jack to do that ever again.
Marzia had a sweet smile and a sense of fashion that Felix’s mother would love and Felix’s sister would laugh at. It wasn’t a bad sense, but it was much more put together than your average young adult would care to do. Felix’s sister had always insisted that any girl that put a huge amount of effort into her everyday clothes either had someone to impress, or just had a very high opinion of herself. Felix didn’t think Marzia was trying to impress him, so he was sure the woman was nothing but confident. And damn— did she have every right to be.

Felix’s mother, Lotta, was a CEO of a fashion company, which meant Felix knew how to judge someone by their clothes whether he wanted to or not. Even if he didn’t dress to his ability, he understood what it looked like when someone spent a lot of money and time on their clothes.

Marzia looked like she belonged on a runway, showing the latest street-wear fashion like the clothes were meant to be showcasing her. Stepping out of the cab, she wore a pastel-blue cashmere, single-breasted coat that went beyond her hips over a white button with a Peter Pan collar that was beneath a deep, navy blue sweater, and canary yellow, tapered slacks that cut off at the ankles, with tanned, wedged ankle boots to finish off her look. Her hair was wavy at the ends and carefully sculpted to flow with the angle of her ears and her makeup was subtle and immaculate. Felix almost wanted to snap a photo for his mother.

Then he thought about the price tag.

“I got us reservations,” Felix told her after she’d joined him outside the restaurant with the grace of a princess. Felix felt a little floored by the way she carried herself, the confidence in her walk and how she seemed to instinctively know she would turn heads. She definitely was, too, people peeking over their shoulders at her to see if she was someone they would recognize from the television. Marzia certainly carried her self like she belonged in Hollywood. Seemed to be able to afford it too. “Uh, are you okay with this?”

Marzia looked past Felix to the restaurant they were to be dining at— Tavern on the Green. It was an iconic Central Park restaurant and even pricier than what Felix had taken Jack too, which was very much the point Felix had wanted to make for himself. But then again, fucking everything in New York was probably more than he could afford.

“It’s perfect,” she said softly, pulling her eyes easily from the restaurant to give Felix a smile that was so serene and like it was meant only for him. Like Felix was the only person in her world.

Felix stiffened under her gaze and cleared his throat, scratching at his nose because that was what he did when he was nervous. “Hope the ride here wasn’t too bad.”

“Traffic is never good,” Marzia told him with a sigh. “But I made it on time, didn’t I?” He smile became quirky. She offered Felix her arm. “Let’s go inside. It’s September, my ankles are freezing.”
“Well, you look fantastic,” Felix said. “Like, holy shit. Way better than me.” He was just wearing some easy button up and a suit jacket with black jeans. He felt horribly underdressed. “My mom, uh, she’s CEO of this company,” he told Marzia as they headed into the restaurant, figuring that was what you did on dates. You talked about yourself, right? “She knows a lot about fashion and clothing and it all kinda fell on me and my sister by default. She would be very impressed by what you’re wearing,” He winced. “Not to be superficial. Sorry.”

Marzia giggled into her hand, a dainty gesture that had Felix grinning along with her. “I’ll be sure to impress next time we see each other, then.”

Felix had made sure to specify wanting a table by the window and the view of the small lake beside them was gorgeous in the candlelight from their table. Marzia looked out the window with this longing expression. “Something wrong?” Felix asked.

“I wish it weren’t so cold,” Marzia said. “I’d love to take a boat out.”

“We still could,” Felix told her, eager to please.

“I can’t swim,” Marzia told him.

“It’s easy,” Felix assured her. “Really. Instinctual, if you don’t let yourself panic.”

“I never understood the joy found in swimming,” Marzia told him. “It doesn’t seem very fun. We made a sport out of not dying. Isn’t that just so human of us.” She took a sip of the glass of water the waitress had put down for them while they looked over the drink menu. “It’s like we’re laughing in the face of evolution or death. Our bodies are not meant to be under water, even in the water for long, and yet we play in the water for fun. Like children seeing who can drink bleach the quickest.” Marzia shook her head, still looking out at the water. “It’s silly.”

Felix had no idea how to respond to that. “Uh,” he said intelligently. “What kind of wine do you like?”

Marzia hummed softly in thought. “I do love a white.”


“Borgogne,” Marzia repeated with a smirk. “Sounds more Italian than French.”

“The countries are so close, it would be impossible to avoid similarities.” Felix looked down at the main menu and tried not to be daunted by it. At least it labeled his courses. It felt odd, because he’d done this once before with Jack. Tried to meld himself into high society and pretend he belonged. But with Jack, he hadn’t felt judged or stupid for not knowing. He hadn’t been that self-conscious, even though it had been obvious Jack knew so much more than he did. Yet here, with Marzia, someone who Felix had thought was of the same economic class as him, he was terrified of looking like an idiot because he knew she wouldn’t like him if he did. That probably meant that he really liked Marzia. And that was good, right?

“So what is work like, Felix?”

Felix tore his eyes from the menu to give her the deer-in-the-headlights stare. “Uh.”

Marzia giggled at him—at him—and dipped her head. “Your work. As a cop. How is it?”

“It’s fine,” Felix replied with a shrug. “We, uh, have some weird shit happening, but nothing that’s actually all that out of the ordinary. Just robberies, drug addicts, disorderly conduct, people pissing in
the middle of the streets.” Probably not dinner talk, but Felix’s job wasn’t pretty and he would never pretend that it was. “Not anything that sticks out.” That he was allowed to talk about.


Felix didn’t know how to hedge round this without coming off as rude, or accidentally letting slip that he knew way more than anyone could have said in the papers. “It was one of the weirder things,” he admitted. “But I don’t really know much. I’m just a patrol officer, I don’t deal with the bigger things. That’s detective work.”

Marzia nodded again. “And would you ever become a detective?”

Felix paused. “… Maybe? Maybe not. I don’t know. Detectives get pretty disenchanted. I like being able to help regular people with mundane things and have a hand in the bigger stuff only sometimes. Plus, it’s a lot of work to become a detective. I’d rather try out for SWAT.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

Felix shrugged. “No more dangerous than what I already do, you know? I mean, yes, it is, but the danger increase is met by the defense increase. I’m allowed to defend myself in a way I can’t as a beat cop, because the force I’m using will be equal to what the perps are giving. And I’ll be saving people, if I’m good at it. I don’t know.” He grimaced. “It’s not really— it’s not fun to talk about, I get that.”

“I’m interested,” Marzia reassure him. “I’ve always kept an eye on cops.” The wink she gave him was playful, and Felix relaxed a little. “I did have a question, though, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve been hearing about this thing,” she said. “This— drug. Lovecraft?”

Felix stiffened. “I know next to nothing about that.”

She nodded. “I understand. I’ve just heard a lot from customers. Many of them say that they think it’s the McLoughlin Family.”

Felix was stock still as a statue at this point. “You know of them?”

“It’s hard to live in this city and not know of its less than finer qualities,” Marzia said with a wry twist of her lips. “I know of that family and I know the dangerous things they do. But dealing to children.” She shook her head with disapproval. “Kids are so impressionable. Selling to them is like taking oxygen tanks from the elderly. They can’t do much to defend themselves except look to others for help.”

Jack had said they weren’t dealing Lovecraft— weren’t dealing anything at all— but—

Jack could lie.

And he would be very good at it.

Anything to get in Felix’s pants, right?

Because that was what Jack wanted, Felix was sure of that. Maybe he also wanted Felix for something else, but he really had meant wanting to get to know Felix, and by getting to know him,
Jack had meant he’d wanted to get to know Felix’s body. The kiss from the other day had been testament to the fact. Jack wanted to fuck him and Felix—

“I just never understood how people can be capable of these things,” Marzia sighed, breaking Felix from his thoughts. “Taking advantage of people, taking their money, taking away their futures. It’s disgusting.”

At Felix’s silence, Marzia ducked her head, looking sheepish. “Sorry,” she said. “I feel pretty strongly about these things.”

“You’re not wrong,” Felix told her. “It is a horrible way to be.”

Marzia smiled at him again as the waitress came for their order. Felix had barely been looking. He’d been caught up in the conversation, teetering between the edge of nervous and paranoid. People normally took interest in his job when they found out he was a cop, but he’d never known them to be so in-tune with the depraved parts of the city. Marzia knew her shit and Felix would have normally found that admirable if he wasn’t still so frazzled by what Jack had done. His lips still felt numb when he thought about it.

Now Felix had to order at random because he couldn’t turn his work-brain off or keep his thoughts off of Jack. Marzia deserved better than that. “I’ll have the daily soup,” he said, going with what was at the top. “And the, the Scottish Salmon.”

The waitress raised a brow at Felix, letting him know he’d done something wrong.

“The cocktail shrimp to start with the Chablis,” Marzia said, smiling tightly. Shit, Felix really had done something wrong. He ducked his head to keep the two women from seeing the shame that was making his cheeks red. Again, his thoughts went to Jack. At least Jack had played along with Felix’s stupidity. Or maybe Jack had only been laughing at Felix on the inside. “I’ll have the Tuscan salad for first,” Marzia continued in an even, knowledgeable tone. “The vegetarian entree of the day, and then we’ll share the stone fruit crème brûlée with a glass of the Madeira each to finish.”

The waitress gave an agreeable affirmation to Marzia’s order and left. Felix felt like he had to apologize, but worried it would only make him look even more incompetent. He hated first dates because he always screwed it up.

Marzia didn’t say anything after the waitress left, leaving Felix to stew in his complete and utter idiocy. He wondered if Marzia was rethinking this whole thing, if she’d thought he would be of some higher class that would be more befitting of her. He wondered if she felt sorry for him.

“I’m not good at this,” he said, trying to recover somehow. “I’m not— I never knew how to do this.” With Jack, Felix hadn’t felt like he was lesser than the other man. But here, he could see how terribly out of his league Marzia was. He just wondered why such an upper class girl was working at a coffee shop.

“I thought your mother was a CEO?” Marzia asked.

“She is,” Felix replied. “And my father, too, of a different place. But we never—” He grimaced and squirmed in his seat. The last thing he wanted to do was insult her. “We lived well, but we didn’t do lavish things.”

She nodded and primly reached for one of the glasses of wine the waitress returned to them with. “We don’t all have the same lives, regardless of matching bank accounts.” Felix was, again, unable to respond to her. “What was your family like? You said you have a sister.”
“Fanny,” Felix replied. “My twin sister. She’s older by a few minutes, won’t ever let me forget. She’s married, has a son.” Felix shrugged. “Not much else to tell.”

“You have a nephew,” Marzia said with a sweet smile. “What’s his name?”

“Arnold.”

“How old is he?”

Felix smiled a bit. “He’s six and he’s a vivacious little thing. He’s already broken his arm because the little stinker thought he could climb a tree ten times his height when Fanny was busy giving directions to some tourists.”

“Where do they live?” Marzia asked.

“She lives in Rhode Island, same place as my parents,” Felix replied. “Same place she’s lived ever since my parents brought us here.”

“Your parents immigrated?” Marzia seemed very interested in Felix’s family, which was a good thing. He couldn’t put his foot in his mouth when it came to his family because he knew them the best of anyone in his life, even though he hadn’t seen them in quite a few years. But he was hoping to change that, come this Thanksgiving, when he planned to invite them to New York City. “Where are they from?”

“Sweden,” Felix replied. “Fanny and I were born there as well, we moved here when we were three.”

“Cute,” Marzia replied with a smile.

Felix didn’t think “cute” was the word for it, but it didn’t matter. “Fanny’s thinking of moving into Canada,” Felix continued, happy to talk about something easy. “Toronto or Vancouver, depends on how far away she wants to get. She and her husband are looking for a bigger house, something more fitting for a kid that likes adventures like Arnold does. I’m hoping they choose Toronto, just because it’s closer.”

Marzia nodded. “Canada is a nice place.”

“I’ve never been,” Felix admitted. “Never been out of the U.S. since coming here, though I’ve wanted to.”

“Where would you go?” she asked. “First, that is. I’m sure there are countless options, but where would you go for your maiden voyage?”

Felix bit his lip, having to think about it. “Probably Sweden,” he said after a moment. “I have a lot of family back there. I’d like to meet them. And it’ll be nice to try and learn something new. My parents spoke Swedish, and they spoke it a little around us, but I definitely am not fluent. It’d be nice to learn and I’d like to learn about where I came from. What about you?”

Marzia paused, eyes sharp. “I already speak several languages.”

“Oh.” Felix hadn’t meant that, but, “That, that’s pretty cool. Impressive. I always wished I paid more attention in German.”

She just nodded and their food arrived. Marzia apparently didn’t like to talk and eat—which was pretty fucking logical and Felix felt weird about finding it weird—and their courses were brought
out in such a timely fashion that Felix was only afforded enough of a pause between courses to ask her if she liked her food. She smiled politely every time and said yes and Felix had no idea if he should believe her or not.

Marzia finished off her portion of the dessert with a prim dab at the corners of her mouth with an elegantly folded napkin while Felix’s left cheek was still bulging with his last bite. Not only did she know how to act at these places better, she also just knew how to eat better. Felix was going to have a stomach ache after this from having to eat so quickly.

“Would you like to go on a walk?” Marzia asked him. Felix nodded because he couldn’t talk and fished out his card for the expectant and impatient waitress. Somehow Felix’s fucking credit card offended her and she did this thing with her nose that had Felix wishing he could climb into bed and never show his face again. He wondered how this place still had business if customer service were this judgmental, considering there were quite a few people in the same social class as him with families eating around them. Why was Felix such a stain on this girl’s white shirt?

She came back promptly like she wanted them gone and Marzia was touching up her makeup across from him in a small hand mirror. Felix didn’t know where to go from here since everything he’d done was being studied under a knife by this fucking waitress. God, Felix wished he was with—

“A little early? Felix didn’t know why he was suddenly in third grade all over again, but holding hands was this step forward that seemed way too soon for them. But Felix wasn’t about to discourage Marzia and her brazen lack of embarrassment, so he took the hand she offered and prayed his hands weren’t clammy or sticky from dinner.

Marzia brought him down the sidewalk and they moved further into the park. It was dark out and the streetlights were the only thing lighting their way, as they were still close enough to the city for their view of the sky to be blotted out by the artificial lights of the buildings. It was cold, but Marzia’s hand wasn’t, so Felix tucked the other hand into his pocket and felt inexplicably defenseless.

“I’ve always loved the park,” Marzia told him softly. They passed a woman jogging with her dog and Felix watched them with more than his usual wariness. “I had time to go out of the city when I was younger, up north into the Catskills, but I had less and less time the older I got. The only chance I have for reconnecting with nature is this park. And while it pales in comparison to what I once knew, it is better than nothing.”

She looked to him with those keen eyes. “What about you? You said you grew up in Rhode Island. What did you enjoy?”

Felix shrugged. “Sailing, mostly. And I did a lot of martial arts and shit just because it seemed practical. But sailing and tennis were the real hobby when I wasn’t kicking ass.”

“Are you good at it?”

“At sailing?” Felix smiled a little, nostalgic. “Yeah, I was pretty good. I even taught other kids over the summer, got a bunch of fun times from that. I loved sailing so much. Sometimes my sister and I would set out a weekend and we’d just go out on the waters and sleep under the stars. We both dated a little, but we agreed that we’d never go out with anyone that wasn’t one another on that boat. It was almost a sacred thing for us.”
Marzia nodded. “Sweet. But I was asking about the fighting.”

Felix wilted a little, feeling stupid for having misheard. “Oh, yeah, that,” he said. He didn’t really want to talk about it considering the last time he’d fought was Jack and Jack had—

“I was good at it,” Felix told her. “All of my teachers said I had a knack for it. They broke me of the rebellion pretty quickly so I didn’t get in trouble picking fights on my own very often, but I did get in a bit of trouble defending other people. I hated bullies. I wouldn’t let them get the jump on anyone that I knew and even people I didn’t know. I just— I hated bad people doing bad things to people who didn’t deserve it.”

Marzia nodded. “And then you became a cop.”

“Yeah,” Felix affirmed. “Just seemed like the natural progression. My parents weren’t very happy with it, though I’m not sure if it’s cause they don’t like me being in harm’s way, or because they lost a possible heir to one of their companies. I guess it doesn’t really matter, anyways. I became what I wanted and I’m happy doing this.”

“And you’re skilled in hand to hand as well as firearms?”

Felix frowned. “Uh, yeah. I kinda have to be.”

Marzia giggled sweetly. “Don’t be so paranoid! I’ve always been curious about these sorts of things. I wanted to take Tai Chi when I was little, but my parents had me taking tap instead. Now I can’t defend myself, but I can dance.”

“I can dance too,” Felix replied, happy to have something in common with her. “Had to take ballroom with my sister. From there, we were allowed to choose one style of dancing to go with it, like bribing us. My sister chose ballet and I chose swing.”

“Light on your feet, then,” Marzia said. “Did you do sports?”

“Not really, but I ran a lot on my own,” Felix replied. “Anything to brush off that teenage energy. Tennis was one, though.”

“Sharp reflexes.”

Felix grinned. “I guess everything I did led up to helping me be good at my job, huh?”

“So it would seem.” The smile Maria sent him then was anything but comforting. Felix wondered if she’d lied about being okay with cops and was just pushing past it because she liked him. It was appreciated, but Felix didn’t see them making it very far together if she hated Felix’s purpose in life. But Felix wasn’t going to call it quits just yet. If she was making the effort, then Felix would have to appreciate and return.

“What do you do?” Felix asked.

She shrugged and pulled him deeper into the park. They were getting further and further into the center, away from the city. “I’m just a coffee barista.”

“But are you doing anything else?” Felix asked. “Do you enjoy things, like camping? Or are you in school?”

“I’m in school,” Marzia replied quickly.
“What are you studying?”

Marzia paused like she was thinking, but it was only for a split second. “I’m currently attending Fit-N-Y-C, focusing on fabric styling at the moment. Then I’ll be onto business management.”

“You wanna be a fashion designer,” Felix said, unsurprised. “With the way you dress, I’d like to say you’d be a natural at it.”

Marzia shrugged. “I likely will be unable to pursue it. But I have the time and money to learn now, and I took advantage of it. Unlike you, I don’t have the freedom to fall out of the family business.”

“And what’s that?”

“They own a dry cleaning chain,” Marzia replied. “I was able to study fashion by promising I’d take business management as well, to better prepare myself for their line of work.”

Felix paused. “Look, I don’t want to overstep,” he said after a moment. “But the thing I learned about not following my parents wishes’ was the idea that they’re gonna die one day. Probably before I do, probably when I’m around fifty or something. That means that there will be at least another ten to fifteen years of me doing something I hate with them being gone. It’s a cold way to think about it, but it’s your life. You can’t shape it around other people. No one’s going to live your life but you, so it might as well be yours.”

Marzia was watching him talk with a heaviness in her eyes. When Felix finished, she smiled again—always fucking smiling—but it was sad. And it was odd, but the sadness seemed to suit her. Almost like it was real when everything else before had been a mask of propriety. “Maybe someday,” she said. “It’s why I’m taking the classes now. I’ll have the means necessary if I ever get the chance.”

“They’re your parents,” Felix told her. “They’d love you regardless.”

“They’d be upset.”

“You can love something and still be disappointed,” Felix told her. “But that shouldn’t keep you from doing what you have to do. Their happiness isn’t yours. All you can really do is make sure your happiness comes from yourself and what you want out of the world. They’re not gonna last forever. The only life that’s gonna match yours is your own. Everyone dies alone, even when they’re surrounded by family. Your last moments will be your memories. Make sure they’re the memories you want to have.”

Marzia was staring at him, and Felix winced. “Sorry. That was morbid.”

She shook her head, made herself smile again. “Take me home?”

Felix faltered, stumbling over his own feet. “Uh, what?”

“Take me home,” Marzia said. “Your home.”

Jesus christ. “That’s— fast.”

Marzia laughed into the cold air, her breath floating in front of her. “I want to see it. Not for that, but I would like to know what it’s like. And I’d like to watch a movie. Do you like horror?”

Absolutely not. “Sure.”

Marzia flagged down a cab in record time that seemed nearly impossible for New York city. Maybe
it was because she was a pretty girl, maybe because she was somehow recognized, Felix didn’t know. But they were heading to Felix’s place and Marzia was looking out the window, making Felix feel like he wasn’t allowed to talk. He rung his fingers in the front of his shirt and wished he had a jacket.

The cab pulled up in front of Felix’s place, and Felix got out first, darting around the car to open the door for Marzia. Marzia arched a graceful brow at him and then stepped out of the cab like she was heading out onto a runway. Not Felix’s tiny little house. Marzia sauntered up the steps and waited expectantly by the door. She looked like a million dollars and as if she was taking part in some artistic, grungy photo shoot. A rich outfit next to a poor house. There had to be a word for that kind of jarring aesthetic.

Felix fumbled with the key and opened the door, nervous about having Marzia in his house after the first date. He wasn’t the kind of guy to put out on the first date, never had been. Was Marzia? It was 2018, girls were encouraged to be however they wanted, and Felix didn’t necessarily look down on people for that, but he needed—

Marzia stepped into the foyer and frowned at something. For a moment, Felix was worried that he’d failed to clean up something when he noticed she was looking at a cake in a clear, plastic tin atop the end table that was in front of his door. For another moment, Felix wondered if he’d lost his mind while grocery shopping and had somehow bought this cake and left it there. But that wouldn’t explain the message atop the cake in icing, in an elegant cursive.

_Sorry for kissing you after you kicked my ass XO_

Jack had left this.

Felix stared at it and tried to figure out how the hell—

“What is this?” Marzia asked.

“Uh, a work friend,” Felix replied automatically, thinking quickly on his feet. “I was sparring with one of my coworkers and he got weird and kissed me. I’m not sure why, he felt awkward, so did I. I think he means this as a legitimate apology.”

“Sive kissed you?” Marzia asked.

“Sure,” Felix replied. “I mean, yeah. He did. It didn’t mean anything, he’s been with his girlfriend for years and all. It was just a weird adrenaline thing.”

Marzia looked oddly perturbed. She was staring at the cake like she could see through Felix’s lie. Then, “I have a few films I wish you to see,” she told him. “Where’s your TV? Can you connect your computer? I want you to see these.”

For the rest of the night, Marzia sat at one end of the sofa, and Felix at the other. They didn’t touch and Felix was relieved.

He wanted to say it was over, that there was nothing, but as Marzia left with a tired smile and soft features, she told him, “You should apply for SWAT. You’re a good man and you do good things. Sometimes the simple things aren’t what people need. Sometimes people need a hero that does the scary stuff they aren’t brave enough to do. It takes real bravery to be the person people need, even when people curse your name until they need you. And maybe, if you’re brave enough to try out for SWAT, I’ll be brave enough to work on my own future.”

Felix shut the door gently behind her after making sure that she had slipped into the cab. He stared
down at his feet, chided himself for still wearing his shoes in his house—the carpet was still so clean, he didn’t want to undo what Jack had done—and decided he would talk to Sarge about SWAT.

... 

“We’ll talk SWAT later,” Sarge told Felix. “I’m putting you on protective detail again. I know you didn’t bid for this, but I really don’t give a shit. Suarez called out because his wife is in labor, so you’re filling his spot.”

Felix knew better than to argue. Another charity gala, another stupid chance for the rich to throw their money away. At least this time, Felix could be indoors.

“You date,” Sive hissed as Felix left Sarge’s office. Everyone was dressing down, getting into the new bullet proof vests that they were being mysteriously funded for. Felix had a hunch as to who the NYPD had gotten the money from to afford these new vests, and he didn’t like what it could mean. He hadn’t reached out to Jack since the kiss last week and he didn’t intend to anytime soon. “How was the date, Felix?”

“Fine,” Felix replied. “I don’t know. She’s higher class than me.”

“So?” Sive asked. “Was she rude about it?”

“Of course not.” She just wasn’t awful to him either. She didn’t make Felix feel like he was lesser on purpose, but he felt like he was less than her regardless. Maybe it was because of how different Jack had—

God, Felix, stop thinking about Jack.

“We didn’t talk about a second date,” Felix said. “I guess when I get coffee next, we’ll have to find out if we want to. I don’t know. She seemed interested, asked a lot of questions, but I’m not sure if she’s cool with me being married to my work.”

“But did you like her?” Sive asked. And shit, did he? Felix wasn’t sure. He’d been so torn between comparing her and that asshole that he hadn’t really thought about her in her own way. It was hardly fair to Marzia, and Felix felt bad for it.

“She’s nice,” Felix said diplomatically. “And she’s pretty. My parents would love her.”

“That doesn’t sound like a yes, mate.”

That was because it wasn’t.

Felix sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

Sive nodded. “Well, whenever you figure it out, I’ll be here to pressure you for double dates.”

“Riveting.”

Sive grinned. “You got protection detail again? Tough luck, man. Sarge really is nervous to put you back out there, he seems worried you’ll just drive your patrol car into the water. He’s so concerned. It’s sweet.”

“It’s annoying,” Felix corrected grumpily. “I hate this gala shit.”

“You gotta wear your dress Blues,” Sive told him. “They want you looking nice. Class A’s all the
Felix was lucky he kept that uniform in his locker. “This is bullshit, dude.”

“Better than therapy!” And he was right.

Felix stood in his parade rest next to the refreshments table and tried not to fantasize about death from how bored he was.

The MET was full of expensive taste, people swinging around and mingling in clothes worth thousands of dollars. Felix was tasked with standing here and making sure nobody got a little too handsy after too much free champagne. The fundraiser was for the local Y and Felix was making a mental note of the faces he saw so he could do a little research into who was attending and what they had going on. If he was going to be put on more of these protection details for Sarge’s paranoia, he felt like it would be a good idea to know what he was dealing with.

But he wasn’t allowed his phone for researching now, and he was bored beyond ability to think.

“You clean up well enough.”

Felix froze and tried not to let anything show on his face. He knew that voice, knew he would turn to his left and see Mark standing there, dead-eyed and stone faced. Felix wanted to smash his own head into the marble floor just to escape this.

“What the fuck,” Felix deadpanned, unable to dredge up any of his usual on-the-job, professional demeanor. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Sadly, he’s not.”

A new voice, coming up on Felix’s right. He was surrounded. Felix checked out the man in his peripherals, recognized him as the Scheid guy from earlier, at the gym. The one Jack had praised the combat skills of, making him a viable threat. Felix grit his teeth and glanced around the room again, looking for Sarge. And he found him— talking to Jack, who was dressed to the elegant nines. Sarge threw his head back with a laugh at something Jack said, then pat Jack on the shoulder. Jesus fucking christ.

“Don’t worry about them,” Mark said evenly. “Your precious Sargent is just thanking Jack for his rather generous donation.”

“The vests,” Felix said, hating to know he had been right.

“Of course,” Scheid confirmed. “Couldn’t let his precious Felina get hurt in the line of duty.”

Felix frowned at the name, wondering who Felina was and what the fuck it even meant. It could be him, but—

“Shouldn’t you be with him, Mark?” Felix asked, letting the bite fill his voice. “Should be guarding him like a good dog.”

“I’m not his bodyguard,” Mark sighed.

“He’s not,” Scheid confirmed again. “I am.”

“Then what the fuck is Mark? A jilted ex?”
“Fuck off,” Mark said. “If you think I’m attempting to sabotage you and Jack for selfish reasons, you can stop your incessant whining. I don’t give a shit about Jack in that way. I’m not trying to get you to drop him for that reason.” Mark shook his head, visibly frustrated. “Still can’t believe Jack fell for a fucking cop.”

“I can,” Scheid snorted. “He’s always had a thing for superheroes.”

“Jack hasn’t fallen for me,” Felix denied.

“Are you stupid?” Scheid and Mark both asked that at the same time.

“He kissed you,” Scheid reminded Felix, like that moment hadn’t refused to leave Felix’s mind for days. “Big ol’ puckered smack on the lips. Totally not cool of him either, kissing you like that when your guard was down. The dude feels like shit for it, he had me on the phone for ten minutes, agonizing over what flavor to make the cake that you didn’t eat.”

“You’re the one watching me,” Felix said.

“Only on the Mark’s days off.”

Felix shut his eyes to breathe past the anger in his chest. “Okay,” he said slowly after taking that moment. “First off, no, Jack isn’t into me. He has no reason to be. I’m a cop, he’s a criminal, whatever. I’m not gonna use that trope as a reason. He’s not into me because he doesn’t know me. This isn’t Disney and there’s not such thing as love at first sight. He just thinks I have a pretty face, he thinks I’m hot, but he hasn’t fallen for me. All he wants is a quick fuck to satisfy the adrenaline rush and then he’ll be done with me.”

“You sound so sure,” Scheid hummed. “It’s cute how you think you know everything about Jack while arguing that he can’t possibly know anything about you.”

Felix bristled because Scheid had a good point. “He’s not into me.”

“He is,” Mark said unhappily. “He’s been into you since you put your own life in danger to save his without a thought. Jack’s not stupid, you ass. He knows how to read people just as well as you do, if not better. He thinks he sees something in you, thinks that you’re some sort of true hero. He fell for your selflessness first, then your face. So believe us when we say that Jack is genuinely into you and it’s fucking annoying.”

“He’s so gone for you,” Scheid said with a smirk. “Mark hates it, I think it’s cute. Mark thinks you’re useless.”

“And you don’t?” Felix asked.

“After how you threw Jack on that mat? Hell no. I’d love to hire you for his guard detail.”

Felix sneered. “Fuck that. I’m not going on his payroll.”

“Again with the payroll,” Mark groaned. “Jack doesn’t want you on the payroll, we don’t need you on the payroll, and if anyone asks, there isn’t a payroll.” Mark glared sharply at Felix. “Got that? None of this exists.”

“He’s not gonna sell us out,” Scheid said.

“And how the fuck would you know that?” Mark was right ask that, Felix was very curious to Scheid’s confidence in Felix’s loyalty.
“Call it a hunch,” Scheid said. “Call it folly. I don’t really care to call it anything, I just have a gut feeling, and my gut is never wrong.”

“Your confidence is astounding,” Mark drawled.

At that moment, Jack ended his conversation with Sarge as Sarge went on to another guest vying for his attention and turned to see that Mark and Scheid were with Felix in all but a split second. A myriad of emotions passed across Jack’s face, but he eventually settled on— absolutely nothing. Felix stiffened his stance, trying to make himself look as unwelcoming as possible, but it didn’t work. Jack made his way through the crowd.

He looked good. That was he frustrating part. Not only was he dressed well in a fit suit with his hair styled impeccably, but while Scheid had claimed that Jack had been beside himself for what he’d done, he looked like he was entirely unaffected. Blasé and untouchable, the bags under his eyes no heavier than normal.

When Jack reached them, he plastered on his enigmatic smile and looked between his men. “Fellas,” he said, his tone even. “Any reason why you’re bothering this officer? He’s just tryna do his job.” Jack’s eyes dragged up and down Felix, the smile being tinged with a frown. “And he’s not wearing a vest.”

“Standard Class A’s don’t allow room for protective vests,” Scheid said for Felix. “He wouldn’t be allowed to.”

Jack’s brow twitched. “Huh. Maybe someone should fund a more subtle vest, one fitting for all types of uniforms. Ensure protection on all accounts.”

“That would require funding a research team of sorts and then you’d have to mass produce it to avoid showing any sort of favoritism or putting a certain officer under scrutiny,” Mark told Jack.

Jack nodded. “Any recommendation for who t’ hire for the job?”

They were talking around Felix, not at him, which Felix appreciated considering his boss could look over and catch Felix in the act of fraternizing with the rich. Jack had said he wasn’t recognized as a mob boss, but Felix didn’t want to take the chance. He was just grateful that the men surrounding him had enough tact not to expect him to respond while on duty.

“I’m not sure I’d recommend that research,” Mark said.

“Don’t care,” Jack replied tersely. “Felina needs protection at all times.” Jack looked Felix dead in the eye as he said this.

Fuck Sarge not seeing, Felix couldn’t deny it any longer.

“Felina?”

Jack smirked, then moved his gaze from Felix to Mark. “Let’s leave the officer to his night,” he said. “He doesn’t need us talking his ear off. I want a list of teams and Uni’s that would accept the funding for the new vest on my desk tomorrow evening.”

They seemed ready to move along when Scheid suddenly stopped and pressed a finger into his ear. His expression shifted minutely. “They’re expecting you downstairs, boss,” Scheid told Jack. “Looks like the party is moving along ahead of schedule.”

Jack straightened with a slight frown. “Oh.”
Jack looked to Felix again. It seemed like he wanted to say something, but—

“Have a good night, Officer,” Jack said. “Stay safe.” He turned and left with Mark and Scheid both flanking him. They went down a hallway that as between a champagne tower and a group of well-dressed women mingling. And Felix was at his post, he wasn’t allowed to leave, but there was no way in fuck he was going to miss something like this. He knew that Jack had let Felix hear about whatever this suspicious something was and marveled over how he was apparently trustworthy enough for the others that worked underneath Jack to know Felix was allowed to be included in such sordid activity.

Felix had a crisis of purpose for a split second, knowing that he had to stay at his post, knowing he had to keep an eye on things, that slipping away would be obvious to the Sarge; but if there was some fucking illegal shit going down in this place, Felix wasn’t going to stand by and let that go down without doing some sort of investigation.

Felix eyed Sarge, waited for his back to be turned, then ducked and moved briskly towards and down the hallway. He saw the tail end of someone stepping out of view, around a corner and away. Felix pressed against the wall, wishing his Class A’s were a little quieter. Felix peaked around that corner and saw a door, just a random, innocuous door that didn’t have anything special about it. No guard, no camera trained on it. Felix wasn’t sure what was going on behind that door, but it couldn’t be anything that special if it wasn’t worth guarding.

Felix went to the door regardless, tested it, found it unlocked, and pushed it open. The door opened up to stairs that led down into what had to be a kind of cellar, as it was dark and dreary and felt colder than the rest of the building. He didn’t know how there was a cellar in the MET, but this was an employee way, that had to be all he could assume. Felix tested the give of the wooden stairs, found that they didn’t creak too badly, then went low, sliding down the stairs, testing the groan of each step.

He could hear voices. Gentle murmurs and then the sharp tingle of glass and the clatter of some sort of plastic. Felix went even lower, crouched with his butt almost sitting on the steps. The stairs went back and forth three ways. Felix got to the furthest part he could be before he would lose his cover. The voices were louder, the sound of movement sharp in his ears, and there was the glow of light. Then Felix heard a very familiar Irish drawl. He’d come to the right place, Jack was definitely down here. Felix took in a deep breath, ready to not breathe for a few seconds, before craning his head around that final corner and peering into the main room the stairs led to.

Poker.

Definitely poker, a round table with the green cloth atop it, cards and chips laid out, suggesting the people sitting at the table were in the middle of a game.

Jack was sat at the far end of the table, Mark and Scheid both standing firm at either side of him. They were the youngest people at the table, but also the most intimidating. Jack’s eyes were sharp and deadly as he looked around the table, though he wasn’t paying true attention to anyone but one man.

There were four other people at the table aside from Jack, one woman, three men, and they all looked like they were worth the museum collection combined, but the one Jack was watching had a Godfather vibe to him that had Felix’s instincts warning him away, lest he find a horse head in his sheets.

The man had tanned skin and dark hair with deep, brown eyes. His mouth was set in a grim line, wrinkles surrounding that suggested he frowned more often than anything else. His hair was slicked
back and flat on his scalp and his suit was tailored to every lean line of his body. He had golden rings on four on the fingers of his left hand, on every finger except for the middle. He was lounging back in his chair like it was a throne. There was also a Benelli MP 90S next to his stack of chips on the poker table. He was obviously Italian mafia, and as stereotypical as it got.

The woman let out a sigh as she looked at her cards, then folded them down and said, “I flopped a belly buster on a rainbow board.”

Felix had no idea what that meant. But he saw Jack raise a brow and look at his own cards like he was skeptical of whatever she’d said.

“And I have a dead man’s hand,” the Italian man said, his voice rich and deep, like something out of a movie. “So, young Jack—I’ve heard you have a new girl. Felina is her name?”

Felix tensed, wondering just what that word meant, if it applied not only to Felix, but whatever girl Jack had. And Jack had a girl? Mark and Scheid could eat their words at this point, there was absolutely no way Jack was doing anything but playing a game with Felix if he was with someone else. Something ugly twisted in Felix’s chest, and he tried to identify it as anger towards Jack for cheating on someone. But that just didn’t seem to fit.

Jack snorted a laugh, but he wasn’t smiling. The dissonance has Felix’s skin crawling. “Ain’t ye’ heard, Dante? Felina is the name of me dog. And I’m Irish, not Welsh. Ain’t nothing there but a new friend t’ play fetch with.”

“Is that so?” The Italian man, Dante, asked. “And there’s any particular reason you’re shelving out hundreds of thousands for the NYPD?”

“What, ye’ don’t see the merit in funding our boys in blue?” Jack splayed his hand out along the table, a perfect fan of the cards that drew attention to his fingers and away from his face. He was fibbing, but not for the game. “Those men and women deserve a little spoiling.”

“Spoiling in terms of defending them?”

“Now, Dante,” Jack drawled with a grin. “I thought the rules firmly stated that there ain’t no talk of work at this table.” He tapped his finger three times on the table, looking at the other man pointedly. “I don’t bring up your Lovecraft-ian complex, and you don’t bring up my new pets. Ye’ hear me?”

Dante scowled. “That word is banned at these events.”

“You started it,” Jack replied with a shrug. Behind him, Mark flared his nostrils and looked like he was very much done with his boss, but Scheid was hiding a smiling. Never had Felix ever seen such unprofessional bodyguards. The people flanking the bosses at the table were grim faced and empty, all dressed the same and their features schooled into nothing. But Mark and Scheid looked like they were as bored and uncaring as Jack. It made them stand out, made them seem like they were relaxed. And that made them look like the most dangerous people at the table, even more so than Dante and his gun.

“I just wanted to comment,” Dante continued, jaw set and strained, betraying his annoyance. “That it would be silly to bring a girl into your life with your line of work. Say what you will about my… reading material, but I don’t keep C-4 beneath my pillow. Poor Felina— well, you wouldn’t want to blow off her ears, would you?”

Jack narrowed his eyes, and his aloofness faded away for momentary defensiveness. Then that died away and was replaced again with a mask of boredom. “Felina ain’t gonna ever come close to
meeting you,” he said with confident calm. “She’s a doll in fur and you’re never even gonna know the color of her eyes.”

Dante hummed and lied down his cards, face up. “I lied. A straight flush, lady and gentlemen,” he said with a teasing smile. “I’d like to see anyone best that.”

There was a resounding groan from everyone at the table but Jack. Jack laid down his own cards. “Look at that,” he said coolly. “A straight flush of my own.” The smile on Jack’s face was downright deadly. “But the thing is? My king beats out yer queen. Ain’t that funny?”

Dante looked pissed, Felix could see it in the pinch in the corner of his eyes. Then he sighed heavily and passed down his chips, before reaching behind his shoulder. One of his guards pressed a piece of paper into his hand, just printer paper, folded into a little square, and he lied that atop his chips. The other players did the same, handing Jack their own little slips of paper.

These criminals were playing poker, and the winner got information.

“I’ll get you next time, Jack,” Dante said. “And your little dog too.”

Jack’s eyes shot to Dante. For a moment, Felix was worried the Irishman was going to launch himself across the table and strangle Dante in front of everyone. Whatever he’d said, that sly reference to Wizard of Oz, had been a trigger. And Jack was pissed off at whatever Dante knew.

“Fair’s fair,” Jack said through grit teeth. “Ye’ lost. Let’s keep the quips to ourselves, yeah? Books ain’t gonna save the world. And books ain’t gonna keep you from losing.” He ignored the chips and handed the slips of paper off to Mark. Then, inexplicably, his eyes went up to the stairs and landed on Felix.

For a moment, Felix couldn’t breathe. Blue meeting blue had him freezing, and he wondered if Jack would say he was there. If he would sell Felix out. There was no way Felix would be able to escape from this, dressed in his Class A’s and obviously a cop. These were criminals, he was a snoop, and they’d probably put two in the back of his head once Jack told everyone he was here.

Then Jack dragged his eyes away with completely nonchalance, and loudly announced, “We should head on out, friends. Wouldn’t want t’ lose our a chance t’ make some new friends.”

That was Felix’s cue to leave, literally given to him by Jack. He couldn’t think about it. He had to get back to his post before he got caught. Felix just sent a quick thanks to Jack in his head and then crept back up the stairs, back down the hall, and back to his posting. He didn’t see Jack come out of that hallway, but he did see Sarge watch him with a sharp eye.

Then Sarge gave him a cool nod of his head, and that was it.

Felix had gotten away with it. He hadn’t learned a damn thing. Jack hadn’t sold him out, but he hadn’t really helped him either. Felina was a “dog,” Jack was a cheating bastard, and Felix needed to stop sticking his neck out in case it get caught beneath an executioner’s ax.

That was it. That was all Felix was going to allow. He hadn’t learned a damn useful thing. Felix was done with Jack. He wasn’t going to reach out to him again, wasn’t going to let Jack find him, and he definitely wasn’t going to save Jack from any oncoming Pontiacs.

Felix was done.

He steeled his jaw and his stance, turned his eyes back to the crowd, and readied himself for the rest of the long, boring night.
He went home to find a bottle of wine and a note that read *a sneaky little thing aren’t you? XO*

Felix crumpled up the note, threw away the wine, and went to bed.
Brothers is Mad Pissed-- Accept It

Chapter Notes

daylight savings can suck my ass
also also i love this one
i mean i love all the chaps but this one
you done good my boi

Felix was cruising carefully around Central Park, keeping an eye out into the darkness, floodlight piercing between the trees and on the lookout for anything unsavory. There was nothing that he could see, just normal people doing normal things when out and about in the park at nearly midnight. Felix didn’t like to be a paranoid son of a bitch, but sometimes he had to, and sometimes people were stupid and thought that they could go into this park and walk out safe at night just as they would in the daylight.

Felix knew that was not the case.

New York wasn’t Chicago or Detroit or even Philadelphia, but it was just like any other city. After the sun went down, it was wiser to stay indoors, no matter who you were and what money you had, what part of the city you were in. Having such a huge conglomeration of people only meant that the number of bad people were higher than rural areas. It was a percentage, simple math. If one out of every hundred people was capable of stabbing someone in the stomach for their smart phone, that meant New York City’s population of nearly nine million had nearly nine hundred thousand villains. And most villains made up the nighttime population while the innocent slept. It was not safe to be out after dark, even with a badge. Felix’s job was to make sure as many people made it home as he could.

He peered around with his floodlight and spotted three boys, all of them dressed badly for the cold outside. He could just barely see them through a small knot of trees, down a slope and too far away from the lamplight around the sidewalks. They were all huddled around something in the grass.

There hadn’t been a curfew in the city since 2006, when three boys just like these kids were murdered. Felix didn’t want to be that stereotypical cop that doubled as a fucking killjoy, but there was something about the way the kids were cloaked in the darkness of the park, sparsely dressed, and undeniably vulnerable. Felix sighed and pulled out his stereo mic, turning it on and speaking into the microphone. “Move along, kids,” he said in his no-nonsense voice. He didn’t know what they were looking at, but it couldn’t be—

One of the kids turned, eyes wide and frantic even at this distance, and started to wave Felix down. His arms stretched above his head and swung wildly, with little control over the action itself. He was scared, Felix could see it easily. He also saw a little girl standing behind this first boy, less than ten years old and crying.

Felix turned on his flashers and parked the patrol car quickly on the side of the road, nearly tumbling out of his vehicle with how quickly he was trying to get to the kids. He had his hand on his firearm,
ready for anything as he approached. “Are you kids alright?” he asked. The little girl was crying audibly and cradling her hands to her chest. Was she hurt? “Are any of you—”

“Shh, shh!” The boy hushed Felix violently. All color had drained from his olive toned face and he took the girl by the shoulder to pull her behind himself, instinctively protective. Probably an older brother. The two other boys were staring into the trees, not looking any better off than the first. The three of them all looked to be high schoolers, and it was Monday night, meaning they had class tomorrow. Felix wanted to have any excuse he could to make them leave.

“Do you see him?” one of the boys whispered. Poor kid looked like he had seen a ghost.

Felix hadn’t looked to where the first kid was pointing yet, more focused on protecting the kids. “I need all of you going home,” Felix whispered urgently. “And if you don’t think you can make it home, get to my car. I’ll get the doors open from here, and you lock yourselves in the back, got it?”

“All kids need to—”

“Mister, look,” the first kid prompted, still pointing.

“Mister, he’s—”

“They want my tongue!” a horrifying voice screamed from the darkness. “They want my tongue, they want the sinner’s tongues! She told me I needed to bring it to them, but I didn’t listen!”

A man came from the darkness, dressed only in filthy blue jeans, thin and pale like a ghoul, foaming at the mouth, bleeding from the eyes. Felix whipped out his taser and stood in front of the kids, putting himself between the civilians and this—person. “Sir, stand down,” Felix ordered calmly. The man stumbled, trembling and scratching at every inch of his own skin he could reach. There were welts and gouges made by his own hands in his flesh, covering his torso and arms. He was having a bad trip. A very bad trip. “Sir!” Felix barked as the man continued mumbling and stepping towards him. “Stand down!”

“My tongue, my tongue,” the man babbled, voice shaking as he cried and bled. “My tongue, my tongue, on the alter, my tongue.”

Felix put his free arm back to have the kids move as Felix stepped away slowly to keep out of the man’s reach. Even though he was almost positive it was a bad trip, if it wasn’t, it could be a disease of some kind. He didn’t want to risk any bodily fluids getting on the kids. “Sir, I need you to get on the ground and get your hands above your head where I can see them, or else I will use force,” Felix warned, refusing to let his own voice waver. He cut his hand through the air, trying to warn the kids away again.

“You see them,” the man babbled, tears streaming down his face with the blood. “You have to see them too. Please, please, help me! She sent them after me! They want my tongue! They want my tongue! They want my tongue!”

“Ahh,” Felix’s aim never strayed, the taser trained on the man that was still approaching, still mumbling, still fucking bleeding. The man’s hands went to his face and he dug his nails into the skin, crying loudly.

“They’re coming for me,” the man sobbed. “They need you too!”

The man darted forward, going low, going for Felix’s middle. Felix reacted quickly, standing firm so he wouldn’t fall back into the kids, and firing his taser. The two electrode darts fired from the taser and imbedded themselves in the man’s shoulder. The man didn’t stop, though, the volts didn’t stop
At his gun.

Felix acted quickly, bringing his elbow up and driving it across the man’s jaw. The man fell back, moaning wildly about something terrible happening without having something to give them. Felix had his opening, though. He planted his knee in the man’s back, twisted him around, and pulled out his cuffs, securing them around the man’s wrists behind his back. The blood from the man’s eyes was warm on Felix’s face and the little girl was still crying as the man continued his senseless babble.

“The tongue, the tongue, the tongue.”

Felix groaned and sat back, feeling inexplicably exhausted. Then he grabbed his radio and said, “10-15M, 10-45B, 10-52.”

Dispatch confirmed, Felix gave them his location, and then he just kinda sat there on the grass, breathing slowly. He looked to the kids and wished the little girl would stop crying. “Wanna tell me what happened?” he asked.

“You can’t tell our parents we’re out here, man.”

Felix narrowed his eyes at the kids, hating that they had gotten into such trouble by breaking the rules. “Just tell me what happened and if any of you are hurt.”

“He was just out in the woods!” the first kid cried out. “Just walking around and screaming about his tongue, about seeing the faces in the trees and how they want something from him. He said his daughter sent him.”

“He was foaming at the mouth,” the second kid said. “Like he’s got rabies or some shit!”

“He fucking bled on you, dude,” the third said, sounding a little disgusted.

“Officer?” the little girl asked through her tears. “Are you okay?”

Felix wiped the blood from his face and made a mental note to get into one of those acid-grade showers and shed a layer of skin from the water pressure. “I’m fine,” he said. “I need to know what you know about the man.”

“All we know is that he was talking about needing things to give the trees or they’d take his tongue,” the first boy said. The was still standing in front of his sister, still protecting him with his body. On the ground, the man’s mumbling began to finally fade. He wasn’t even struggling, he just lied there on the ground like he’d accepted his fate. “He’s on some crazy shit, man, we don’t know anything else.”

Felix nodded. He couldn’t use the kid’s report because they were minors, and he wasn’t about to get them in trouble. There was no reason to bring them into this, for their own futures. “I’ll have another officer come and give you kids a ride home,” he told them. “And I hope I won’t see you out here after dark again, right?”

The kids all nodded their heads and the little girl finally was able to stifle her crying. Back by Felix’s car, two new pairs of flashing lights joined the first. The ambulance was here, along with another
patrol car. Felix was relieved when he heard Sive calling out for him, voice urgent. “That’s Officer Sive,” Felix told the kids. “I’ve got this guy— you kids get to him and home.”

As Sive came forward and herded the kids back to his own vehicle, the EMTs huddled around the man Felix had gotten cuffed and on the ground. Felix lingered, wanting to know what he was on, if they could tell, which meant he was there to hear one of the EMTs calmly announce, “This man is dead.”

“ Fuck.”

. . .

The file reading *Lovecraft* was extensive, but not nearly as in-depth as Felix wished it could be. It held a plethora of information on the people who had been harmed and even killed by the drug, but very little on where the drug came from and how it was made. All that was known was the fine line between having a good time and being good and dead. The body count credited to Lovecraft was extensive and Felix hated what he was seeing.

Not the death, death was always bad, that wasn’t problem. The problem was the fact that, with each death, less and less trace of the drug was found in the system. Which meant victims was either requiring less of a dose to kill them, or it was moving through the system quickly enough to be gone before anything could be done. Neither of those bode well.

Most of the overdoses were adults, but there were seven kids in this file, one of them under the age of ten, that Felix preferred not to see. He wasn’t sure what to expect from the information given, but there wasn’t actually much to be predictable in the first place.

The drug seemed mainly recreational. It was nonaddictive, substance-wise, but the majority of people who didn’t die from the drug reported missing the visions they saw and admitting they’d take the drug again if given the chance. Apparently it was in high demand with a limited supply, acting like the black market of diamonds. People weren’t hooked on the substance, but they were hooked on the trip, and they were willing to pay a lot just to have another one. They were hooked on the being that came to them and told them their future.

That was the biggest similarity to all of the reports.

An ethereal being would appear to the drug user and tell them something omniscient in nature, about their future or family or wellbeing. Like a psychic soothsayer that appeared as an angelic version of someone you trusted. Most users reported their parents or best friends or their own children, but that there would be something supernatural about them, enough so that the user would know it wasn’t actually that person. And then this being would give them words of wisdom, advice and predictions, help them make important decisions, or just give them gentle encouragement.

Small, almost religious followings were starting to pop up for Lovecraft, people that used it beyond recreational means and saw it as true insight into the world beyond. Most of the people filing into the religious uses reported far away loved ones or even the dead talking to them. Hearing from people they physically should not be able to. It was like a way for them to reconnect with someone they missed. The drug was taking these people beyond just the high, and into something much more addictive and dangerous.

Felix sighed as he closed the last user’s report and hated how even he could understand why these people were letting the drug control them, why they were willing to risk an overdose. Connecting with the people you loved and missed was more powerful than any addictive substance.
“Lovecraft is some scary shit,” Sive said from across Felix, at his own desk. “I had a friend get on it. The dude said his dead grandma showed up and told him to buy gold.” Sive shook his head. “Sometimes, it’s not the advice they go for. They just miss the dead. Estranged. People they lost, one way or another. It’s sad shit. Whoever’s peddling it is playing with people.”

Felix stared at his desk for a long while, wondered what good it had to be for people to be unable to get through the mourning process thanks to this Lovecraft shit. Dante, underneath the MET—Jack had implied he was one of the peddlers, probably a higher up one at that. Maybe Felix could talk to Jack about—

No, fuck that. Felix was done with Jack. He wasn’t a detective and and he couldn’t rely on a fucking mob boss to help him figure this bullshit out. If anything, Felix was sticking his nose too deeply into the muck and he needed to stop before he got himself into worse trouble.

He was done with Jack, for more reason than just one. He didn’t need that fucking cheater in his life, yanking Felix around by a chain on his neck like Felix was some sort of toy. Jack just wanted to play with him and enjoy the game that was Felix’s life. He didn’t want anything to do with the man.

“Don’t do drugs, kids,” Sive murmured. “They’ll make you see dead people. And you wanna know the crazier shit? The overdoses— they have those same dead people, but they’re wrong. That’s the scary thing. Those same people that gave them words of wisdom come back as monsters.”

“That’s what that overdosed guy said,” Felix replied. “Something about the trees wanting his eyes. That he needed to bring sacrifices or the trees would take him like his daughter told him to.”

“Now that’s just crazy shit.” Sive shook his head. “Tweaking out in the park, too. Those poor kids had to see him die. It ain’t right, mate.”

“Do the detectives have any real leads?”

Sive shook his head again with a grimace. “None. But if you ask me, our detectives? They’re not nearly as clean as we would want them to be. Who knows what the fuck they’ve got up their sleeves, y’know? They’re not under surveillance like we are. They could be doing all sorts of nasty shit in the dark.”

Felix didn’t respond, the idea of the plants in the force being so influential sitting poorly in his stomach. He wasn’t surprised, never was by this sort of thing, but it didn’t mean he liked it every time it came to be a reality. Felix sighed unhappily and rested his head in his hand, elbow on the desk. “Why does the world suck?” he asked.

Sive snickered. “Why do we have good people when it’s so easy to be bad?”

“Fuck off, don’t make me think about this.”

Sive grinned. “You still owe me dinner.”

Felix sighed heavily and nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“Good. You take requests?”

“I request you fuck off.”

Sive laughed and threw a pencil at Felix’s head. Felix dodged, put the folders and files away, and told himself he didn’t care. His job was simple— handle what came at him and don’t dig any deeper. He didn’t need to see Jack ever again.
Felix went out the week and ignored Jack and anything to do with him.

No messages on the windows, no sticking his nose into places he didn’t belong. No digging and no searching for information. He’d meant what he told Marzia, he intended on joining SWAT, not become a detective. Sarge had given him the lowdown on the testing process for SWAT and Felix was going to put his time and energy into working towards that, no solving some case that was above his pay-grade.

Marzia was sweet about the whole thing too, talking about how much she enjoyed the date the next Felix saw her. They set up a second date for the next weekend just because Felix felt like the first go wasn’t fair to her, since all he could think of was that particular fucking asshole. And he was looking forward to the date, he really was, but—

Felina.

Felix wanted to know who she was.

He wanted to know who she was so he could pull her aside and pick her brain and find out if she knew about him, if she knew what Jack did, if she knew the truth of the life he led and the terrible things he would pull her into. Felix wanted to know Felina so he could warn her of what she was getting into and maybe even let her know that Jack wasn’t faithful. If she knew, then she would leave.

Felix wasn’t actually sure Felina was her own person, especially since Mark and Scheid both referred to Felina like Felina was Felix. But Dante had seemed certain Jack had a girl, meaning there was an actual relationship out there to be observed by others, and Felix was not in a relationship with Jack, so it could only mean that he had a real girl and she was out there somewhere, none the wiser to what her boyfriend got up to in the dark.

Unless she did know and even supported it.

Felix couldn’t imagine that, but then again, he’d been very wrong about the morality of others before.

It made his blood boil, thinking of Jack with a devil woman as a partner, toying with the streets of New York and dealing death. What if she knew about how Jack was taunting Felix? What if she was in on the scheme? What if Felix really was nothing more than a pawn on a chessboard to them, and they were the King and Queen, sending him off as a sacrifice to catch a white knight.

Felix was sick with anxiety.

He’d never wanted this. He’d never would have saved Jack if—

That wasn’t true. Felix had acted on instinct both times, even the second, when he already knew that Jack was someone sordid and not just your average innocent bystander. Fuck, even before the first save, Felix had looked at Jack, standing on the curb, and known Jack was up to no good. Yet Felix had still done the “right” thing and saved his life and Felix couldn’t take that back. Refused to, really. Regardless of what Jack did, Felix genuinely believed in innocent until proven guilty, and only the court could prove someone to be guilty. It was Felix’s job to see everyone alive so the courts could make the decision.

But god, that didn’t keep Felix from feeling sick with himself and with Jack.
The kiss burned Felix’s lips, stained his memory. He couldn’t move past it no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t just ignore what had been done. Jack had looked so fucking open, barring his insides for Felix to see in that single moment. It had looked like Jack needed help—

Felix didn’t care what it looked like.

Jack was a bad seed, a bad person, and Felix couldn’t be around that. He’d already risked so much of his career and even his livelihood on Jack and he wasn’t about to sink any deeper. Felix needed to move on and he intended to never reach out to Jack again.

If only Felix could just forget.

He wanted to forget but he couldn’t. He hadn’t been kissed since—

It had been a long time. Far too long, if Felix was going to be honest with himself. He hadn’t had sex in probably a year and he’d had a certain dry spell when it came to getting himself off because he’d been too stressed over everything else to think about himself in that way. And now that he was all tangled up in this bullshit with Jack and the Irish Mafia and he’d been kissed—

His heart raced at the memory and he hated it. Felix hated what Jack had done to him, resented him for it. Felix knew he was just desperate for any kind of positive human contact, which was another reason why he’d agreed to the date with Marzia. He needed something and he’d be damned before he let Jack in for it. The fucking bastard had taken advantage of him, had done what he had when Felix’s guard was down. It had been wrong of him to do and Felix’s stomach churned with the memory that had his heart beating rabbit fast.

It wasn’t fair.

It just wasn’t fair that Felix had to feel so on edge on top of everything else. Jack had done this to him, made him so fucking paranoid and sick with it, made him look for the continuous worst sides in everyone. And Felix hated being this way, but he couldn’t stop. And it was Jack’s fault.

He just wanted to forget.

Felix was done with Jack— now all he had to do was erase Jack from his memories as well.

...

Felix had just come home from a grueling shift, ready to just drop into bed and sleep until his next bought of work tomorrow, when he noticed it.

It wasn’t anything new, and that was the most alarming thing about it. Some part of his brain recognized the tiny dark object at the base of the ceiling light above his bed and registered it as commonplace, even though Felix had never actually noticed it before. But now that he had, he couldn’t ignore it. He knew exactly what he was looking at.

Standard issue surveillance cameras normally ranged from the size of Felix’s head to the size of his palm, but Felix knew that some of the tech could be the size of his fucking thumbnail. And that was exactly what he was looking at. A tiny black camera along the edge of his ceiling light, placed at an angle that he normally didn’t look, but still managed to give a good view into his bedroom, especially the doorway and his bed itself. Felix also knew it was wireless.

For the moment, Felix felt absolutely nothing about finding the camera, and that was what allowed him to think clearly. He stood atop his bed and unscrewed the ceiling light, bringing down the porcelain to expose the bulb and the router that had the antenna that broadcasted whatever footage
was collected. Felix wouldn’t be able to find out where this was going, but he’d be able to put an end to the collection of footage. He pulled it down and dropped the camera and the router onto his bed and then set about searching the rest of his home.

He found fifteen cameras.

Three in his kitchen, four at the doorway entrance with varying angles deeper into the house, two in the upstairs, two in the living room, two in the two bathrooms respectively, and one on the third story, trained at the entrance that Mark had come through before Felix had put a lock on it.

With each camera Felix found, his rage slowly built.

He was being watched to an intimate degree. The cameras in the kitchen and various places around his home had been bad enough, but his bedroom and bathroom? His sense of privacy shattered. He’d been spied on and exposed to what could be countless prying eyes. The cameras in the main rooms had even had smaller microphones attached to catch bits of audio and Felix’s hands were shaking with how furious he was.

How fucking dare Jack do this.

Felix didn’t even bother with a message—he knew who owned that empty house across the street from him and he knew someone would be there. Felix stormed across the road in the pouring rain, the cameras all jumbled together in a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He went up to the supposedly vacant house and slammed his fist on the door.

When it opened to reveal Mark, Felix gave into the animalistic anger and punched Mark across the face.

“Take me to your fucking boss,” Felix spat as Mark stumbled back into the house, holding his jaw and looking to Felix with death in his eyes. But fury made Felix stupid, and Felix wasn’t afraid of this asshole like he had been before. He was going to do so much worse to Jack.

“Why the fuck would I do that?” Mark demanded, working his mouth around, testing whatever damage Felix had done. And Felix knew he’d done some lasting damage. His aching knuckles attested to the fact.

“If you don’t take me to Jack right now, I’ll get there on my own,” Felix growled. “And I’ll be a lot less friendly with him than I already plan on being. You care about the piece of shit so much? Do him a favor, look out for his best interest, and take me to him right. Fucking. Now.”

“What the fuck happened?” Mark demanded.

"Take me to Jack."

Mark scowled, but pulled some keys from his pocket and grabbed his coat from out of Felix’s view. “I’m in the Subaru,” Mark told him, sounding pissed. “You’re lucky I can’t fucking hit you.”

Felix didn’t care about whether or not Mark could hit him, he was going to make these fuckers pay.

Mark took him to the same warehouse as before and led Felix through the upstairs, passing men and women with guns, and paying them absolutely no attention. There was a low murmur that came over everyone whenever someone first laid eyes on Felix, but he couldn’t hear what they were saying over the roaring in his ears. His hands were still shaking, his teeth were grinding, and he wanted to fucking kill someone.
He thought over everything Jack had seen, every private moment that he had spied on and wrenched from Felix without permission. He wondered if Jack was really some sort of fucking pervert, getting off to the images of Felix stepping out from the shower, dripping wet and exposed. He wondered if Jack enjoyed watching Felix muddle around his home under the guise of being by himself. The things Felix did, the small habits that were private, the tiny moments Felix had thought were only to himself. Jack had taken all of those away from Felix and Felix felt fucking violated beneath his fury. He wanted to kill someone, and then die with them.

Mark led him into a manufacturing part of the warehouse, a huge, open room stocked with people and weapons and other things Felix shouldn’t see because he was a cop and these were all criminals. He couldn’t even think about how badly he was damning himself in having so many eyes placing him in this warehouse. He just wanted his hands around Jack’s throat.

Mark brought him up a set of stairs to a network of platforms that weaved above the huge room and brought them to an office that overlooked everything. Felix could see Jack sitting at the desk inside, talking to Scheid and two other men. Felix pushed past Mark and burst into the office, marching up to the desk and throwing the bag down onto it. The weight rattled the desk and Jack jumped, staring at Felix with a furrowed brow. Then he looked down at the bag as Felix unzipped it and blinked slowly at the mess of cameras inside.

“I always knew you were a fucking piece of shit,” Felix snarled, letting his rage broadcast in his voice. He had his hands on the desk and his knuckles were white as he dug his nails into the wood. “But I didn’t know you were this fucking disgusting.”

“What are these?” Jack asked, sitting up to get a better look into the bag. “Cameras?”

“Like you don’t know.” Felix grabbed a tangled mess of the wires and cameras and routers from the bag and dropped them onto the desk, in full view. Beside him, Scheid came around for a better look. “I can’t believe you would do this,” Felix barreled on. “It’s one thing to kiss me like you did, but it’s a-fucking-nother to spy on me. I thought better of you. How could I have thought better of you? And how could you fucking do this to me, to anyone? You put them in my fucking bedroom, you piece of shit.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “These were in yer house?”

“Stop playing stupid!” Felix shouted, raising his voice, shaking. “You god damn disgusting— even though I knew you were a criminal, I genuinely believed you were sorry for what you did! How could you do this? How could you sink this low?”

“Felix,” Jack interrupted, his tone startlingly gentle compared to Felix’s. “Felix, I didn’t bug yer house.”

“These fucking cameras prove otherwise,” Felix growled. “In my fucking bedroom, Jack, in my fucking bathroom. Did you get off on it? Knowing I didn’t know you were there, that I was defenseless? Or do you just like having the power of always being above me? Watching me, like I’m some animal in a zoo. You’re sick, Jack, you’re fucking—”

“Felix,” Jack interrupted, his tone startlingly gentle compared to Felix’s. “I didn’t bug yer house.”

“They are these—”

“I didn’t bug yer house.”

Felix searched Jack’s expression for a long moment and— felt numb. Jack was telling the truth, and that meant—
“You didn’t bug my house,” he repeated slowly. He was still shaking, but suddenly, not from anger. “Jack… who bugged my house?” He was going to be sick. Felix straightened and took a step back, looking down at the cameras in horror. “Who bugged my house?”

“Scheid,” Jack barked. “Get a team into Felix’s place and search it from top t’ bottom. We don’t know if he found all of them, we need to get that place clear. Tear open the walls if ye’ must. McKeown, get a cleanup detail to his place after and cover up whatever damage was necessary t’ make. After that, I want twenty-four hour surveillance on his home, at all times. Emmerson, take what Felix has already found and get whatever ye’ can from the routers. We need t’ know who was watching Felix and t’ what end.”

Felix wasn’t breathing right, that much was obvious. The air was short and tight in his chest, a jilted in and out that wasn’t really reaching his lungs. His vision was swimming with bright lights. He was about to have a panic attack in front of Jack and he didn’t—

“Felix.”

Fingers snapped in front of his face, and he looked up to see Jack was still across the desk, still enough distance from Felix to be comfortable, watching him with blatant concern. “Someone bugged yer place,” he told Felix carefully. “I’m asking ye’ if you have anywhere you can go t’ sleep until we figure this out. You’ve work tomorrow.”

Something twisted in Felix’s heart and his knees felt wobbly. He shook his head. He had no one he could go to without needing to give an explanation as for why he couldn’t be in his home, and no one was he willing to endanger with the truth. “Nowhere,” he croaked. “But I—I’ll get a hotel.”

“That’s not good enough,” Scheid said. “I won’t be able to keep reliable surveillance on him, it’s too public. We’d only draw more attention to him.”

“Anywhere at all?” Jack pressed, his expression strained. Did he actually care? Why would he care? Felix still couldn’t breathe, but the way Jack was looking at him, the way those deep blue eyes were gluing him to the ground, was somehow reassuring. When Felix shook his head, Jack cursed. “Mark, take him to mine.”

“Excuse me?” Mark asked.

“Surveillance there is already reliable and constant and no one knows of it in connection to me,” Jack said hurriedly. “Take Felix there.”

Felix’s brain worked slowly. And then it hit him. “I’m not going home with you.”

Jack looked pained. “I ain’t gonna be there,” he told Felix softly. “I’ve t’ catch in a plane in an hour, I’m leaving the city. I won’t be there, I swear, okay? Ye’ don’t have to worry about me being there.”

He looked like it hurt him to say that, but Felix couldn’t care. Someone had been watching his home and it wasn’t Jack. Felix almost wished it had been Jack, because at least Jack was only after Felix’s dick and not his life. “You need rest,” Jack told him. “Just go with Mark.”

“I punched him,” Felix said. Beside him, Scheid snorted a laugh, and Jack’s brow shot up. “I thought you’d done this,” Felix explained. He was breathing easier now, but he was still shaking. Felix wasn’t going to be killed tonight, though. Jack had a handle on the situation. That was the only reason Felix was letting himself relax.
“Mark, are ye’ hurt?” Jack asked. Mark let out this noise of indignation that had Jack smiling a bit, though it didn’t seem to meet his eyes. “He’s fine,” Jack told Felix. “Just go with him. I won’t touch ye’. He won’t touch ye’. No one will. Just until we clear out your place, okay?”

Felix nodded dumbly and started to turn to leave, having no other option but to agree.

“Felix?”

He dragged his eyes back to Jack. The other man looked eviscerated.

“I’m so sorry,” he told Felix. “I never wanted this t’ happen to ye’.”

Jack blamed himself for something, and for right now, Felix didn’t care to know what for. He was exhausted now and he just wanted sleep. He wanted this to be over with. Felix just nodded and turned to Mark, didn’t meet his eyes, and followed Mark once again through the factory.

If he had felt violated before, Felix now felt absolutely ruined.

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Jack’s place was just like everything about Jack—worth more than Felix could ever imagine and worth more than Felix himself.

432 Park Avenue was already a famous enough place in Felix’s precinct. It towered high above the majority of the scrapers in this part of the city, the second tallest scraper in New York City. Jack lived in one of the two-story high rise apartments at the tip top, boasting a view of the entire city at every angle, as Jack lived with the two floors entirely to himself, the elevator in the center.

The walls were all either windows or white stone and the entire flat was polished and dripping with subtle wealth, a modern, minimalistic design to the floorspace and the furniture. The bedroom overlooked Central park, the bed itself facing the windows so the view was all you could see. The bed itself was simple, with down comforters and huge, fluffy pillows, looking like it felt like a cloud. The color scheme of the bedroom was soft gray and white and it felt so peaceful, with the lights twinkling outside and the low, artificial lighting from the chandelier above the bed.

Felix took note of the bed and bedroom the most because that was where Mark immediately led him to and where he prompted Felix to stay. “Jack said you can take clothes from him, but I doubt you’ll do that,” Mark said. “The shower is just through that door, but there’s also a bathtub if you’d rather have something more relaxing. Just don’t make a mess of this place. Jack does all the cleaning himself because he doesn’t trust maids.”

“I’m sorry for hitting you,” Felix said as Mark made to leave the room as quickly as he could. Felix was still shaking, still so off-kilter after everything that had gone wrong in the past two hours. “I was just—there were eyes on me, eyes everywhere. They could see into my shower. I’d thought Jack had—” Felix cut himself off and lowered his eyes, ashamed. “I shouldn’t have immediately thought the worst of him. And I shouldn’t have hit you without first getting my facts straight.”

Mark paused. “You have people spying on you, naked in your own home, you have a mob boss watching you constantly already, and you’re apologizing to me?”

Felix winced, couldn’t really look up.

“Jesus christ.” Mark sighed heavily. “I’m starting to see why Jack thinks you’re just such a good fucking person and I hate it.” Mark came back into the room and went into the closet that honestly just looked like the rest of the white walls. He pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a shirt and Felix
belatedly realized that he was still in his blues.

He’d gone through Jack’s whole warehouse dressed as a cop.

Oh god, he was going to get himself killed.

“Jack was right,” Mark told him. “You need the rest. What you’ve been through— well, let’s just say I can’t really imagine how you have to be feeling right now. Just do us all a favor and get some good sleep tonight. If you get yourself killed tomorrow because you were too tired to watch your back, Jack will never forgive himself.”

“He looked like he cared so much,” Felix said, feeling a little dazed. “Does he actually care?”

Mark leveled Felix with a glare. “I’m not going to answer your stupid question. Get dressed, get clean, whatever you want. And I feel like I have to say this.”

Mark stepped forward, into Felix’s face, strong and foreboding and threatening. “If you ever dare imply that Jack would do something so inhumane as that breach of your privacy, I’ll fucking kill you.” He looked like he meant it.

Felix shuddered and backed off, instantly submitting to the threat Mark was trying to put across with his body as well as his words. He was too tired to fight and he was definitely too tired to defend himself. “God, why do you hate me?” he asked shakily as he took the clothes from Mark and turned them over in his hands, inspecting them for some sort of trap. Maybe a bobby pin pricked with poison, maybe a black widow sewn into a pocket. He’d tried not being paranoid outside of work before, and look where that had gotten him. Cameras everywhere in his home. Maybe the paranoia was what he needed to survive.

“I don’t hate you,” Mark said, sounding like he was lying.

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if you put the cameras in under Jack’s nose,” Felix thought aloud stupidly. “So you could find reasons to make Jack drop me. You would have been doing us both a favor, unless Jack found out about the cameras.” Felix slowed down his inspection of the clothes as the idea made more and more sense. Felix looked to Mark with a new kind of fear. “Did you do this?”

Mark, to his credit, gave nothing away. “I did not put a single thing in your home,” he told Felix slowly. “As I said literally seconds ago, I’m starting to see you’re a damn good person and while it pisses me off, but there is no way in hell I would ever do something like this. People like me and Jack— we can get whatever information we need in a way that doesn’t completely violate our target. If I want to prove to Jack you’re a piece of shit not worthy of his time, I won’t have to put surveillance in your home. I would get the footage from your body cam at work.”

Felix swallowed hard. “What if they’ve already done that?”

“Who’s they?”

“The people who did this— if it’s not you, then whoever it was. What if they’re tapped into me at work. My partner was talking about the detectives on the Lovecraft case being dirty. What if— what if I’m also under surveillance at work?”

Mark’s expression became drawn. Then, he took out his phone and started a call. “Get changed,” Mark ordered as he left the room. “I’ll handle this. Scheid.”

Scheid was on the phone, Mark was talking to him as he walked away and shut the door behind
himself, leaving Felix in the huge, plain room. There was nothing special about it except for the white, Egyptian long staple sheets folded atop the white comforter that looked like it was made with swan feathers. Felix remembered one of the few things his mother would ever splurge their money on was bedding. She didn’t care for pricey art or dishes, but she always said that a goodnight’s sleep was worth more than anything money could buy. Jack probably shared the sentiment. His bed looked so warm and comfortable and inviting but—

It was Jack’s bed.

Felix wished he could sleep on that couch he’d seen in the open concept living room, the blocky one that looked like it had absolutely no give. He would sleep like shit on it, but it wouldn’t be the bed that Jack slept in. Probably fucked in. Definitely masturbated in.

Felix’s cheeks flared and he cursed himself. He’d been so eager to open up and have something physically with Marzia simply from his self-inflicted, prolonged loneliness, but he knew he wouldn’t have the bravery to open up to anyone that wasn’t family after finding all of those cameras. He had no idea who he could trust in this city. His body was desperate at this point, but Felix wasn’t an idiot. He wasn’t going to put his life at even more risk now that he knew he was in such dire straits.

Thinking of Marzia brought about a possibility he wished to avoid. Felix dug his fingers into the clothing he’d still failed to put on, before setting the clothes on the bed and going to the door. He opened it gently, not wanting to startle Mark.

“If the detectives in charge of the entire case have already been bought, then I’m not surprised,” Mark was saying with a heavy sigh to Scheid. “But that makes it a lot harder for us to ensure the safety of Fe—”

“I let someone into my house,” Felix said, knowing there would be no good time to interrupt. He winced when those dark, ferocious eyes landed on him, but didn’t back down. “I had— I had a date. The week before. Aside from you and Jack, she’s the only person who’s been in my home that I know of.”

Mark paused, then brought the phone down to his chest, muffing the receiver. “What’s her name?”

At least he didn’t care that Felix had been on a date. Hopefully he wouldn’t tell Jack. Not because Felix cared about Jack’s feelings, but because he didn’t want Jack to suddenly turn on him out of spite. “Marzia,” he told Mark. “I don’t really know her last name.”

“You didn’t think to ask?”

“No.”

“What kind of cop are you?”

“The kind that tries not to bring my work home with me.”

Mark snorted. “Might want to change that. I told you to get changed. It’s nearly two in the morning, you’re going to have a hard time keeping yourself alert tomorrow.”

“I’ll get coffee.”

“At the same place Marzia that works at? That place you always go to? You’re not going there tomorrow, no way in hell. Whatever coffee you get will be from here. It’s the only place I can guarantee you won’t be watched and-slash-or poisoned. I’m escorting you to and from your shift tomorrow and until your home is cleared, and you better fucking believe I’m not making any
“She’s a good person,” Felix defended.

Mark rolled his eyes, put the phone to his chest again. “Are you saying that because you know she’s good or because you want to believe she’s good?”

Felix faltered. “Fuck.”

“Get changed, Felix. Sleep. I’ll keep my eyes on the door tonight.”

Felix was too tired to argue. As he went back into the room, the last thing he heard Mark say was, “Make sure Jack’s plane gets off on the right foot tonight. I wish I could have escorted the asshole. I’m trusting you to keep him safe all the way in my stead.”

Felix denied himself the instinct of the locking the door, because no matter how terrified he was of Mark, he knew the other man would have taken him out ages ago if that had been any sort of plan of his. And if something went wrong, Felix would definitely prefer Mark to have a straight shot to getting him up so they could run.

Changing into the clothes was—an ordeal. Not only because he was exhausted to the bone and wondering where he could best fold up his uniform without risking too many wrinkles, but also because he couldn’t brush the off the fact that these were someone else’s clothes. The only person he’d ever shared clothes with was his sister, and they’d been much younger. Felix didn’t trade shirts or anything with his previous partners, and not just because they were female and he wouldn’t fit into most of it. The idea of wearing the clothing of someone else was too much for his over-analytical mind. He kept picturing the sweat and skin that had to be inside the clothes and fought back a shudder. He wasn’t a clean freak, he just—

He was too tired for this. He was over-aware of his surroundings and his senses. His brain wasn’t going to shut down, everything was too risky to manage such a drop in his defenses. Felix was almost scared of what his brain would show him once he did manage to sleep.

But again, Felix wasn’t stupid. He knew he needed rest. So Felix pulled on the clothes, breathed past the hyper-sensitivity that was making his skin crawl with every part that the shirt and sweatpants brushed against, and climbed atop the bed. He refused to get underneath the comforter and sheets regardless of how cold his toes were. Felix curled up his knees to his chest atop the blankets, in the dead center of the bed, but twisted his torso so his shoulders were flat against the pillows and his head elevated. Uncomfortable, definitely bad for his spine, but he could see all angles in the room and even over the edges of the bed.

He was safe.

Felix had to keep telling himself that so he could finally fall asleep.
Felix woke up abruptly, all the air gone from his lungs with thousands of eyes peering into his skeleton in the back of his mind. He lurched up from the unfamiliar bed and his spine protested sharply at the sudden movement. A dark figure, impossible to recognize when backlit by the city, was at the foot of the bed and Felix’s first instinct was to lash out. The figure easily dodged the pillow Felix threw and spoke.

“This is the second nightmare I’ve woken you up from,” the silhouette said. Felix recognized the voice as Mark’s and didn’t feel any safer. “Fourth one I’ve witnessed. Do you have a problem?”

“Jesus christ,” Felix wheezed, running his hand over his face. It was still dark, but there was just the hint of the sun over the horizon. It was nearing October, which meant it was probably around five in the morning, maybe closer to six. He’d only got four hours of rest, at the most, and he wouldn’t get anymore after that bitch of a bad dream. “Why the fuck are you in here?”

“I heard you whimpering.”

Mark said the word like Felix should be ashamed of himself for having a moment of weakness. He was probably right. “I could’ve been jacking off,” Felix defended regardless.

“All the more reason for me to come and put a stop to it, considering you’re in Jack’s bed.”

Felix winced and looked around. Even in the throes of his nightmare, he’d barely disturbed the tightly made bed. He was somehow relieved by this. “Look,” he began, before cutting himself off to clear his throat. His voice was wavering and Mark was already judgmental enough. He didn’t want to give Mark more fuel for the flame. “Look,” he began again. “What do I have to do to make sure you don’t go reporting this to your boss?”

“You keep calling him that,” Mark said, audibly frustrated. “Don’t you ever get tired of forcing your fabricated hierarchy on others? He’s not my boss. He never will be my boss.”

“Then what the fuck is he?” Felix didn’t want to say he was tired of Mark’s cryptic bullshit, but he definitely was. “You said he’s not your boyfriend, but I can’t think of any other reason why you’d stick by someone like him without having some kind of hierarchy. Does he pay you well? Or does he do you favors?” He denied himself the temptation of specifying the kind of “favors” Jack could be giving Mark, all of which would be sexual in nature because Felix became a five-year-old when he was scared.

“Did it ever occur to you,” Mark said slowly. “That he could just be my friend?”

Felix digested that slowly. “You commit felonies for all your friends, or is Jack just special?”

“Haven’t you ever had someone in your life that you would die for?” Mark asked him coolly. “Someone you would give up everything for, in a non-romantic way. Someone you intend to be at the side of until the end of days.”
Felix paused. “Sure. Once.”

“Okay. Now let’s take this a step up— haven’t you ever had someone you would kill for?”

Felix shuddered at the weight of Mark’s words and shook his head. “No,” he denied, glad to know he was telling the truth. “Never. I would never do that for anyone.”

“Why not?”

“Because you shouldn’t ever kill unless you have to.”

Mark smiled, teeth white and dangerous. “Here’s the thing, Felix. I think you could very easily kill for someone. You said so yourself, just now, that you shouldn’t ever kill unless you have to. What if you have to kill someone trying to hurt that person? Death in defense of the person you’d die for. That makes them someone you would kill for. The only thing you’re missing is that very person, and I must say, it’s a shame. There’s nothing like the freedom of having someone who you would break every single rule for.”

“You would kill for Jack.”

“I already have. Several times. As he has done for me.” Mark’s smile sharpened. He moved from the foot of the bed to sit in a modern wingback chair that was by the window the bed was facing. “It’s a symbiotic relationship, if you will. He and I look out for each other, as we always have,” Mark explained, looking out the window to the city below. “Since the day we met, we’ve been at one another’s side, fighting off the bullies and the bad guys and the cruel masters. I knew where to hit, and he knew how to throw the punch. We were the perfect team. Still are.”

“Until you became the bad guys.”

Mark scoffed. “Your definition of ‘bad’ is a little too bleak for me.”

“Then what the fuck do you call murder?” Felix didn’t want to sound like he felt superior, but what Mark had said about finding someone he would kill for had shaken him in a bad way that the nightmare hadn’t. “If you really don’t see killing as wrong, then—”

“You’re like Batman,” Mark mused. “If only Batman knew how fucking stupid he was. Jason Todd knew a thing or two. After the Joker killed hundreds, his life wasn’t worth much anymore. The fucker should have ended up dead decades ago. Fear of falling to the darkness inside you is no excuse for letting innocent people die. Batman was a coward.”

Felix couldn’t believe he was being judged using a comic book reference.

“Surprised I know comics?” Mark asked with a raised brow.

“Surprised you can read,” Felix replied without thought.

Mark was silent for a long moment. “… Wow.”

Felix had a bit of an instinct to apologize, but ignored it. If Mark was going to be a dick, Felix would be a dick right back.

He swung his feet over the side of the bed, rubbed at his eyes, and tried to recollect his thoughts. Mark likely wasn’t going to let Felix leave this place for anything other than work if he’d been just as serious about keeping tabs on Felix as Jack had been. That meant that Felix needed to take stock of his surroundings, of this place, and adjust accordingly. He hoped there was some sort of washer-
dryer combo here so he could clean his uniform. He wondered if the cupboards were stocked. He wondered if Mark would be defensive about Felix cooking.

“Where are you going?” Mark asked him idly from where he was lounging in the chair, looking close to regal.

“I’m hungry,” Felix said. “I’m gonna see what your— friend has in way of food.”

“Jack’s got plenty of food,” Mark said. “Can he cook it? Hell no.”

Felix almost wanted to smile. He ran his hand through his hair and left the bedroom.

The flat itself was beyond impressive. Felix didn’t know what was on the floor above them, didn’t think he should risk looking. He could see the stairs next to the elevator in the center of the room. Mark had been required to input some code just to have the elevator stop at this floor. Everything in the flat was open, except for the bedroom and bathroom. The living room bled into the dining room, and the dining into the—

Holy shit, the fucking huge kitchen that was black marble and white wood and top of the line appliances. There were three ovens all stacked, and a fourth in the island that had stainless steel pots and pans hanging above it from a dark, steel rack. There was an espresso machine next to a drip coffee maker and the microwave looked more like a time machine than anything else. There were also two dishwashers. Felix was amazed.

He went into cabinet and found a plethora of food, canned and fresh and more than any one man could eat in a year. He checked the fridge next and found it was stocked with produce and meat and fish, all perishable within the next week or so. He doubted Jack was going to use any of it, especially since he wasn’t even in the city, apparently. Felix checked the front of the fridge and saw a couple sticky notes that were lined up perfectly with different dates and numbers and Felix could only make sense of one of them. A leave and arrival schedule with an address. The “leave” date matched when Jack had left for wherever he’d gone, so the arrival—

He took note of the arrival date, mind working slowly in his tiredness, but still working. He knew when and where Jack would be coming back. And Jack, for all of the ill feelings Felix harbored for him, was giving Felix his home for the time being while Felix’s was— compromised. Maybe Felix needed to return the favor, somehow.

As Felix searched around, he heard Mark start speaking, back in the bedroom, more than likely on the phone with someone, though Felix didn’t know who. He didn’t particularly care, either.

Felix went into the fridge again and pulled out the eggs and bacon he found near the front, settling for a simple breakfast. As he began meal prepping, his ears kept drifting to Mark’s voice. The thing was, he and Mark obviously didn’t like each other, but—

Felix sighed heavily and then added in some eggs, making enough for two. For whatever grudge he could hold, Felix liked taking care of people, and he was going to do the little things he could.

“You look like shit,” Sarge declared as Felix walked into the precinct in his clean uniform with bags under his eyes. “Any reason why you’re coming into work when you look like absolute garbage, Officer?”

“Trying to get rid of me?” Felix asked, his words a little slurred just because he didn’t have the energy. He wished he’d gone to the Flatiron because there was nothing like that redeye. “Thought
you’d want all the men you can have.” There had been another family murder while Felix had been off-shift, another one of the false playing cards. Felix was grateful that he hadn’t been around to see it, but that also meant he likely wouldn’t be able to ask after the name of the family without making himself look suspicious. Still. He’d figured something out and tell Jack. If anyone had any hope of figuring these evil deeds out, it would be the devil himself.

“I love having my forces full,” Sarge replied. “But you’re half a man when you’re like this.”

Felix scowled, then quickly checked himself and his attitude. This wasn’t Sive, who he could banter and argue with. This was the Sarge, his higher-up. He needed to show respect no matter what. “Just had a hard night,” he explained as vaguely as he could. He couldn’t very well tell the Sarge that his whole house had been bugged, inexplicably. Felix had long ago abandoned the advice Sive had given him in being transparent with Sarge about what was happening with the Mafia. Felix was in too deep as it was. No point in bringing anyone done with him.

“Well, leave your hard nights at home,” Sarge sighed. “You want SWAT, right? Tryouts are in a month. You can’t get your shot score up to par if you’re living off of espresso and adrenaline.”

Felix wisely chose to stay silent. Sarge was right, after all. Whatever goals Felix had were being lost to the mess he’d fallen into. If he wanted to make it into SWAT, he’d have to keep himself clean. And Jack wasn’t clean.

But Jack was also letting Felix stay in his home with limited supervision, this odd show of trust Felix knew he hadn’t earned from the other man. That seemed to be a common occurrence with Jack, being given things he either hadn’t earned or didn’t want.

“I’m working on it, Sarge,” Felix said after a moment. “I am. Just cut me a little slack, yeah?”

Sarge waved him off. “You’ve got someone waiting for you by your desk.”

Felix raised a brow. “You’ve got someone waiting for you by your desk.”

Felix wanted to roll his eyes, but denied himself the outlet. Instead, he went past the lockers and into the main area of the precinct, where the lackey desks and the detectives could be found. Sive was at Felix’s desk, talking to someone that was sitting in Felix’s chair, a brunet with long, perfectly styled hair and prim clothes and—

It was Marzia.

Marzia was at his desk with a tray of coffee, looking like a million dollars and laughing at Sive’s stupid jokes.

Felix was so fucking tired, but he felt something loosen in his chest when he saw Marzia, though. She was someone easy. Just a simple friend that might be something more. Felix’s paranoia had died a little from the day before. He knew she hadn’t been the one to put those cameras up because she had no reason to.

Felix approached his desk and smiled softly at the sound of Marzia’s laugh. Sive looked up to spot him and waved him down with a grin. “You never told me your girl was this god damn delightful,” Sive said, gesturing down to Marzia, who turned in her seat to send Felix one of those gentle expressions that had always helped soothe away the tiredness whenever he’d come to the coffee shop. Her kind face was no less comforting now.
“Didn’t know you’d be here,” Felix said, going to lean against his desk. Marzia hummed softly and handed Felix a drink. He took it, brought it to his nose for inspection, and praised whatever god was up there for him. “Good god, I needed this.” Marzia had brought him a redeye and she was his fucking savior.

“You didn’t come in this morning as you usually would,” Marzia explained. “So I thought I’d bring you your drink and maybe a few extras for your friends, as my shift ended relatively early today. I hope everything is alright?”

Felix wanted to tell her the truth, wanted someone to know what he was going through, but it was an unnecessary risk to the safety of others. “I just stayed over at a friend’s,” Felix explained. “My place has mold in the corners, I needed to get it fumigated.”

“Mold?” Marzia’s brow twisted in concern. “Are you sick? You don’t ever get better from mold.”

“Mold’s scary shit,” Sive agreed as Marzia handed him a drink as well. Sive took a sip and winced. “Holy shit, is this eight parts espresso? Is this what you drink, Kjellberg?”

“Every day I can,” Felix affirmed with a crooked grin. Marzia beamed up at him, like she felt it was some sort of connection between them that was being shared. “I really appreciate you bringing this,” Felix told her. “You didn’t have to.”

Marzia shrugged. “You told me something, on our date. About wanting to help people. It made me realize that it’s something I don’t do enough, and only try to reserve for grand gestures. I realized that helping people can be the little things too. And if everyone just did a little, the kindness would reach more people than just the large displays. It’s better to make a difference in one life every day than one hundred lives every year.”

Sive let out a low whistle. “Look at Kjellberg— making waves.”

Marzia stood from the chair and leaned in to place the softest of kisses to Felix’s cheek. Felix’s body warmed with a flush and he smiled stupidly, feeling his anxieties melt away from the simple little thing. Marzia giggled. “I feel like I just made your day.”

“You definitely did,” Felix agreed.

“I hope to see you tomorrow,” Marzia told him. “We need to figure out where to go for our date!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Felix said.

Marzia smiled wider and flounced away, drawing subtle glances from everyone as she left the room. Sive snickered and raised a brow at Felix. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world?” he repeated. “You’ve got it bad, mate.”

“So you second guessing is gone?”

Felix nodded. “Pretty sure I was using my cop brain without getting paid for it.”

His partner winced and nodded. “I’ve made that mistake,” he said. “Was meeting my sister’s family for the first time, got it stuck in my head that her brother was a drug dealer. I looked into this kid for nearly a year before she found out and tore me a new one. She was so pissed that I would think that of her family and be looking for shit like that behind her back. She was pissed because she was insulted to know that I thought I knew her family better than her.”
Felix grimaced. “How’d you get past that?”

“She forgave me,” Sive said. “And I backed off. But you wanna know the crazy thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Two months later, her brother got busted for running a small meth ring.”

Felix had no idea what to say.

“Sometimes, your gut ain’t wrong,” Sive said. “What makes a good cop is one that’s using their instincts. And instincts don’t come from work—they come from you. But here’s my other thing—my gut completely and totally trusts your new girl. There ain’t a bad bone in her body.” Sive smirked and sent him a wink. “You’ve got a good one there. Hold onto her.”

Felix breathed slowly in relief and nodded. “I intend to.” But what she said, about the kindness. There was a date in neon behind his eyelids. Felix turned his attention back to Sive and asked, “You know anyone that’s got a car I could borrow for tomorrow?”

. . .

Mark, oddly enough, didn’t stay after dropping Felix off at Jack’s penthouse for Felix’s second night. He gave Felix a sharp look before ducking back into the elevator and just—leaving. Felix didn’t really know what to do with himself. He made dinner, some concoction of beans and meat, because he didn’t want to use up too much of Jack’s food when it was just for himself, but that only took fifteen minutes, and he didn’t have work tomorrow, so he wasn’t really rearing to sleep.

Felix wandered around the place, eating from his bowl of food, looking over everything with a lazy eye. His brain was still working wildly and he had nothing to focus on, as he’d been denying himself digging. He’d been able to overhear a conversation between two detectives about the family that had been found this morning, the Jacksons with their limbs cut from their bodies and the playing card lied over a little boy’s mangled face. Felix had also been unlucky enough to catch a glance at some of the crime scene photos while discovering the cork board connecting all of the crimes like a serial killer web of red string. Felix wasn’t supposed to look into it and fully intended to give Jack the names whenever the moment arose, and his brain was working a mile a minute, which was good during a shift, but now—

Felix stalled in the living room, next to a row of low bookcase that acted as a buffer, separating the dining from the living. He sat down on the ground and looked over the books, reading the bindings. He doubted Jack actually read all of these. Some of the titles he recognized, others he didn’t. But there was an obvious pattern to the books, and it was that every single one of them was something wordy and expansive that you would find in a literature course. None of them really appealed to Felix in any way and he doubted Jack was the kind to read—

Felix pulled a book from the shelf. Twenty Trillion Leagues Under the Sea. He was pretty sure that wasn’t the title he recognized, but maybe it was some sort of code thing for Jack and his crew. He put it back, pulled out another title. It was the Wizard of Oz, and the book seemed about ready to fall apart in Felix’s hand. He held it gingerly, not wanting to ruin the thing. Felix looked back to the shelves, scanning the collection.

Animal Farm, Lord of the Flies, Frankenstein, Picture of Dorian Gray, Brave New World. No way in hell did Jack read any of these. But—

Felix put the Wizard of Oz back and pulled out Hamlet. He went to the uncomfortable sofa, gave it a
careful look over, then passed by it to sit in a much comfier arm chair. He set his food on the coffee table, made sure his fingers were clean, and then opened the book.

He’d always loved this story. Felix had envied Hamlet, the prince himself, jealous of the blatant purpose the man had found in his life. It was easy to find purpose when faced with the murder of your father at the hands of your uncle. It was an odd way to think, but Felix had always wished for a blatant motivation to his life, something as easy as revenge. He loved his life and he loved his job, of course he did, but there wasn’t much true purpose aside from help people and stop crime. Sometimes that purpose got muddled with the ever changing definition of right versus wrong. He wished he had the blatantly clear purpose of revenge just so he wouldn’t be confused by the gray areas of life. But then again, that clear purpose could be dangerous.

That was another reason why he loved the story of Hamlet. It was a warning to himself as to why he needed to steer clear of a harshly firm purpose, because sometimes having that singular purpose would be your doom. Hamlet had lost Ophelia to his revenge, and then his mother, and his own life. Countless people had suffered when Hamlet had only wanted the suffering of one. Felix wanted a singular purpose, but he would never make the mistake of giving himself one. He had too much to lose.

He lost himself in reading, in so much that when the elevator dinged to announce someone’s arrival, Felix jumped harshly in the seat and instantly reached for his sidearm that was, unfortunately, back in the bedroom. A redhead came from the elevator and raised a brow at Felix. “Making yourself at home, Felina?” the man asked in a disgustingly strong Irish accent.

Felix faltered at several parts of that question. “I am Felina,” he said.

“Sure are,” the man agreed. “Jack thought calling ye’ whatever yer name is would be far too obvious. What, did ye’ think he had a cat?”

“Thought he had a girlfriend.”

The man shrugged. “That’s fair. Be sure t’ put that back how ye’ found it. Jack’s got a very particular way of organizin’ his things. Ye’ best respect it.”

Felix was now positive the books were part of some weird code or combination. There was no other reason for it to be so neatly organized. “Who are you?”

“McKeown,” the man replied. “I’m the one that broke down the walls in yer place. Came t’ let ye’ know yer place is clean, as of two hours ago.”

Felix nodded, sitting up a little straighter, feeling oddly uncomfortable at being comfortable in someone else’s home. “Did you find anything else?”

McKeown paused. “Mics in the walls,” he said after his moment. “Five more cameras. Some censors in the doors, tellin’ someone when ye’ leave. And, uh. Well, we got a little paranoid, yeah? Took the liberty of really checking things out. Found some shit in your clothes.”

Felix balked. “My clothes?”

“Yessir. Radio-Frequency Identification devices, RFIDs, essentially trackers. Some were sewn into yer sleeves, others into pockets. Someone wanted t’ know where you were at all times. We took out what we could, but some of the clothing we couldn’t really risk taking out the RFID without ruining the clothes. Figured we’d leave those t’ yer discretion.”

“Burn them,” Felix said without thinking. “I don’t— get rid of everything with trackers. I can’t—“
He cut himself off, feeling too emotional for his own good. He didn’t want this guy seeing anything Felix wouldn’t let his mother see when it came to his feelings. And right now, Felix was feeling like some sort of science experiment for faceless scientists cutting him open in the shape of a Y.

McKeown nodded. “Wanted t’ let ye’ know. Also, your girl? Marzia Bellandi. She’s clean.”

Felix let himself take some sort of relief in that rather than ruminate on the horror of his clothes with tracking devices in them. “You sure?”

“Aside from a trespassing thing up in the Catskills, she ain’t done a thing wrong, with two parking tickets t’ her name.” McKeown smirked a bit. “You’re good t’ get with yer girl. She seems like yer average citizen, and I ain’t saying that in a paranoid way. She’s just like everyone else. Safe, as relatively as can be. So don’t worry about that.”

Felix nodded, slouching in a little in the chair. At least he still had that. “Is it weird that I’m nervous to go home?”

“Absolutely not,” McKeown said. “Ye’ got bugged. Scary shit. Just know we’ve got eyes on ye’ and yer place now. I know ye’d prefer no eyes anywhere, but I’d like t’ think Jack and us are the lesser of two evils.”

Felix nodded again, finally feeling tired.

“We want ye’ spending the night here,” McKeown continued. “Just t’ ensure that we’ve got a good handle on patrols for yer place.” Felix had no arguments there. He was warming up to being shadowed by Jack’s men, especially now that he had confirmation he was Felina and Jack was truly looking to protect Felix and not use him. Maybe Felix would be using Jack in this way, but he felt like he was owed something for what Jack’s interest in him had put him through. He wasn’t about to feel guilty about letting Jack make up for the bullshit he’d thrown Felix into. Jack apparently thought it was his fault, so Felix would only have to agree.

“Ye’ know, you’re a lot different than I’d thought ye’d be.”

Felix looked up, frowning a little. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

McKeown held up his hands in some sort of mock defense. “Nothin’ harsh, friend, just a little surprised, is all. Whenever Jack mentioned ye’, it’d be all about yer bravery and steadfast ways and yer quicktime decision making. It was all this praise and shite, and I ain’t saying ye’ ain’t deserving of it, I just— ye’ seem like ye’d be a little bigger.”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah,” McKeown said. “Like, buffer. Broader shoulders and shite. And plus, it always seemed like Jack would go for a big ol’ body builder or somethings like it. You’re lithe and shit. Ain’t bad, just ain’t what Jack usually compliments in a man. He likes it when the arms are bigger than his head.”

The grin on McKeown’s face was near lecherous, and Felix wanted to feel offended, but he wasn’t supposed to give a shit if he was actually Jack’s type or not. It shouldn’t matter to him. So what if he wasn’t some beefcake that could crush your head with his thighs? “I don’t have to be a steroid-shot jock to beat Jack in a fair fight,” Felix defended with a scowl.

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that. If ye’ wanted to get Jack thrown off yer scent, ye’ should’ve let him win that match. Now that he knows you can best him, he’s as good as gone for ye’.”

Felix’s scowl deepened. “The guy gets off on being beat up?”
“Nah, none of that,” McKeown said. “He just likes knowing he doesn’t have t’ watch yer back. That you can take care of yerself.” There was a pause. “And, maybe he likes a bit of manhandling. But ye’ didn’t hear that from me.”

Even as Felix was scowling, he pictured the Irishman in question being lifted off his feet and pushed into a wall, flushed and panting from either a fight or something a little less family friendly. Felix’s cheeks heated up. McKeown must’ve seen, because he started laugh. “Ye’ve a girl, remember? Ain’t gonna do ye’ any good t’ be thinking about roguish men.”

“Fuck off,” Felix said with no bite. “And thank you. For cleaning out my place.”

McKeown took a step back, shrugged and scratched at his cheek, like he was embarrassed by the gratitude. “All of us were right pissed, ye’ know,” he told Felix. “Even Mark. Jack may be a criminal, but he has some lines he won’t cross. Whoever did this crossed a lot of ‘em in grand fashion. Even if he weren’t sweet on ye’, if you knew us? We’d have helped ye’ anyways.”

Felix sighed. “It’s just…” He didn’t have anyone he could talk about this with and it was already wearing on him. But McKeown wasn’t exactly someone Felix would want to bare his chest to. “I don’t know,” he sighed. “It doesn’t matter. It’s over, and if it happens again, I’m gonna find someone to sue for emotional damages.”

“It’ll never come close,” McKeown promised. “Eyes on ye’ whenever ye’ ain’t at work. Might not be ideal fer ye’, but it’s probably better than what ye’ had going before. Cameras in the shower and shite.”

“Rock and a hard place,” Felix agreed with a sigh. “I—I don’t like the idea of being watched. But you’re across the street. That’s not so bad. But, uh. I have a request.” When McKeown arched a brow to say he was listening, Felix worried his lower lip, and said, “I don’t want Jack to ever be the person with eyes on me. I know that’s expectant and a lot to ask, but—I would feel a lot better knowing that the guy who wants in my pants isn’t also the person watching me sleep.”

McKeown scoffed. “Jack ain’t ever been on watch for ye’ before, ye’ big dummy. He wanted to, sure, he wants t’ make sure you’re well and safe, but he ain’t ever let himself do it. We’d goad him, say he should be the one watching since he’s the one that’s got such huge stakes in yer safety, but he always denied us and said it’d be wrong. So don’t get yer panties in a twist, sweetheart, he’s a step ahead of you. Ye’ really do think the worst of him.”

Fuck.

Felix wanted to bristle at the accusation, but McKeown was right. Even for all of Jack’s bullshit, he’d never done wrong by Felix. Jack had only ever done things to help him, like fixing up his furniture, buying him groceries, giving him good alcohol. Even though Felix didn’t like the intrusive presence Jack had taken in his life, the man hadn’t even treated him badly. And Felix had only ever been unfair to him, only ever expected the worst. Even though Felix called Jack the dick, Felix was the one really acting the part.

Felix was going to make it up to Jack, and he already knew how. It was just a little uncomfortable to know so many people saw how much of a fucking asshole he as.

“Thank you for cleaning my house out,” Felix said again, sighing, more than a little disappointed in himself. “And thank you for taking it so seriously. And just— thank you. And pass my thanks on to the people who helped you out.”

McKeown nodded. “Mark’ll probably be back in the early morning, so ye’ve got the place to yerself
tonight. Don’t do anything to raunchy.” McKeown winked. “It’s Jack’s place, after all. And while I’m sure he’d appreciate returning to a personal touch from ye’, I think it’d be best if ye’ didn’t get too scandalous in nature.”

Felix narrowed his eyes at the man, not at all appreciative of the insinuation against Felix’s character. “There’s some food still on the stove if you want,” he said dryly, standing and taking his now-empty bowl to put it in the sink. “I’m going to bed.”

“Take a shower,” McKeown said. “Jack likes clean sheets and we ain’t allowed to clean up his place for him, ain’t really allowed t’ be here at all, normally, so it’d be good t’ have him come home to relatively nice bedding.”

“I took a shower at the precinct.”

“Liar.”

Felix scowled. “Goodnight, McKeown.”

The man snickered and went into the kitchen, going to the pot on the stove, while Felix went into the bedroom. He looked to the bed, knowing it wouldn’t matter if he took a shower or not, because he fully intended on sleeping atop the covers again.

Still— the way McKeown had talked about Jack not wanting people in his home. It went beyond the simple implication that Jack was breaking his own rules to allow Felix a place to stay. McKeown had said they weren’t allowed in Jack’s place, weren’t allowed to clean things, which probably meant it was a don’t look, don’t touch policy all around. But here Felix was, closer to a stranger to Jack, being allowed to sleep on or in his bed. It was— weird. Felix didn’t know what to make of it, but he knew he’d have to make something of it eventually. He couldn’t just keep denying the obvious.

Felix groaned, unhappy with himself and just about everything. He dropped onto the bed, relieved he’d already changed into the clothes he’d borrowed from Jack the night before, and stayed atop the blankets like he had, but then got right back up. He went into the bathroom, grabbed a towel that looked more decorative than practical, and laid it over Jack’s pillows, where Felix would put his head. That would probably keep it relatively clean from Felix’s somewhat-oily hair. He wasn’t about to take a shower in Jack’s home, but he wasn’t going to blatantly disrespect him either. It was a compromise. Felix felt better for it.

He was nervous for tomorrow, but Felix refused to lose sleep over it. He shut his eyes and willed himself into exhaustion, knowing he’d need the rest for what he was going to deal with tomorrow.

Teterboror Airport, or KTEB, in New Jersey was apparently the most popular airport for private flyers, and boasted pretty high security in and out of the airport. Felix hadn’t really made his way into New Jersey yet, and he’d never really intended to, but this was the address on the sticky note and he didn’t have much of a say in the matter.

He drove up to the security guard booth that dictated traffic onto the blacktop. Felix realized that he had no fucking way of getting in, and the car he was driving— borrowed from Hopper— was a beat up, black Toyota, and definitely not what a person who could afford a private jet would be picked up in. But Felix had come this far, so he couldn’t turn back.

Felix rolled down the window and tried not to wilt under the disapproving look the guard was giving him from inside her booth. She obviously knew he didn’t belong here. “And you’re here for what,
“sir?” she asked, her tone tight, ready to send Felix away already.

“Uh, McLoughlin,” Felix said, not knowing how this was supposed to work.

“Your name?”

“Felix Kjellberg?” Felix hadn’t meant to make his own name a question. “I’m just—I’m picking someone up. McLoughlin. He kinda doesn’t know it’s gonna be me, it’s a surprise sort of thing.” As the judgmental security guard looked to her computer, it suddenly occurred to Felix that someone else was probably supposed to be picking Jack up, like Mark or Scheid. Fuck, and they were probably already here. Felix hadn’t wanted any of them to know. Felix’s plan was doomed from the start. He had also just wasted a tank of gas.

“Go on in.”

Felix startled at the permission given to him. The steel bars in the ground in front of him that were meant to keep people from careening onto the blacktop lowered into the ground, granting him access. Felix stared for a long moment, trying to process this.

“You hear me?” the lady asked. “You’re on the list, kid. Go on in, his plane is taxying. A-7.”

Felix didn’t even remember to thank her as he drove over the barriers and struggled to navigate the area. There were jets everywhere, all parked and being refueled and stalling. Felix was bent over the steering wheel, peering out at everything and trying to figure out where the fuck A-7 was.

Felix eventually found the lot and parked the car where a man with the weird mini lightsabers was waving him down. He got out of the car and looked around, feeling out of place. Overhead, the sky was dark and threatening rain. None of the workers paid him any mind, just going about their jobs. There was a tanker that probably had a shit ton of fuel in it and one of those baggage trolleys sped past. Felix crossed his arms over his chest, uncomfortable and horribly out of place.

The workers suddenly started exclaiming things and were quickly drowned out by the roaring of a jet engine. Felix stood straighter as a jet taxied into the empty spot the car was next to. Felix didn’t know a damn thing about airplanes or jets, he just knew that whatever Jack had looked expensive as fucking hell and was definitely personalized. He wasn’t renting this thing, he owned it. It was a coal black color with a streak of blue across the side, beneath the windows, and looked like something out of a spy movie. Felix was extremely intimidated by the wealth he was seeing and it settled badly in his stomach. He remembered the critical looks he’d received from so many people that were above him and felt like all eyes were on him, the penniless grunt next to the banged up Toyota, picking up someone that came from this disgustingly expensive jet. He felt awkward beyond belief but—

Some part of Felix was confident that Jack wouldn’t care that Felix didn’t belong here.

The jet came to a gentle stop and the workers all scurried around it, doing various tasks that Felix couldn’t even begin to understand. The weird door-thing pushed open and then swung down, the steps from the door hitting the tarmac with a thunk. The engine died down and the quiet had Felix feeling anxious and tense.

And then, down the steps came Jack, wearing a double-breasted black trench coat that flared behind him like wings. He had a leather messenger bag slung over his shoulder and a green wool sweater with black jeans beneath the warm, wool coat. He wasn’t looking at Felix or out at the blacktop in general, instead tapping at the screen of his phone, engrossed in something.

He was always wearing thick rimmed, black glasses that made him look a lot less intimidating and—
something that Felix couldn’t name.

Jack failed to look up from his phone as he effortlessly descended the steps and walked towards Felix, apparently knowing exactly where his pickup should always be. It gave Felix a moment to just look at the man and think, because for all of Felix’s asshole-ish assumptions, Jack really did just look like a normal person. It was hard for Felix to imagine this gentle looking man with the thick glasses every aiming a gun at someone and ending a life. He knew Jack had done that, there was no way he hadn’t, but see Jack like this now made Felix feel like he was being allowed a glance into who Jack was outside of the McLoughlin crime family. And it made Felix feel even more confused.

Jack opened his mouth to say something, looked up in the same split second, and then stopped in his tracks with his mouth hanging open when he saw Felix. A pregnant paused passed between them, Jack’s eyes darting from Felix to the car, then to Felix again. Jack’s brow furrowed. “Ye’ don’t own a car.”

Of course Jack would know that. “I borrowed it from a coworker,” Felix explained stiffly.

“T’ what end?”

Jesus christ, Jack was going to make him say it. “To pick you up.”

His cheeks flared when Jack positively beamed at him. He’d never seen a more sincere and bright smile from anyone in his life. The corners of Jack’s eyes crinkled with the force of it, and he looked like a kid who had been given his biggest wish on Christmas. Felix couldn’t stand the shine of that smile directed at him for too long, so he turned and opened the passenger door, expecting Jack to climb in. Felix rounded the car and got into the driver’s side, glancing around the interior of the car, over-analyzing the stained floor and the way the passenger seat was actually cut open and the inner stuffing was billowing out. The glove box in front of where Jack would sit was chipped and didn’t even look like it locked properly anymore.

“Sorry,” Felix said automatically as Jack sat down and buckled up next to him. “I just— I should have tried to rent or something. Get something nicer.”

“What?” Jack asked, like he didn’t understand.

Felix pointed around the car, at the weird spot on the ceiling above their heads. “I know you’re used to something a little— pricier. Sorry.”

Jack snorted. “Felix, I really don’t give a shit,” he told him. “I’m just happy ye’ thought t’ do this.”

Felix cleared his throat awkwardly. “Was no one else coming to pick you up?”

“Oh, Mark was supposed t’ be here,” Jack said, going back to his phone as Felix drove out of the airport.

“Shit. Should you tell him not to come?”

Felix looked up at Felix with a teasing smile. “Felix, ye’ know you wouldn’t have gotten in unless they knew what you’re up to. This place is really high profile, the only way you were able to get in is cause Tyler put yer name with the guard t’ give you permission.”

Felix didn’t know who Tyler was and it made him uncomfortable that—

“Tyler is Scheid,” Jack said quickly. “Don’t’ freak, yeah? Everything concerning you is a need-to-know basis, and only four people make that list right now. I promise, anyone else knows ye’ only as Felina.”
Felix pursed his lips. “So are you, like, a mind reader now?”

Jack laughed, and the sound had something loosening in Felix’s chest against his permission. “I just know how paranoid you can be,” Jack told him. “And with good reason. With yer job and this shit—ye’ve every right to be paranoid.” Jack looked back down to his phone. “Yer place’s clean, McKeown says. They had a hard time finding the right shade of blue paint t’ match your stairwell, so they just went with a whole new color. Hope ye’ like—” Jack squinted at his phone. “Uh, 764-Crystal Springs.”

“That sounds fucking awful.”

Jack snickered. “Sorry, McKeown’s colorblind like me. I’ll get a real painter team in there, let them fix it up.”

Felix’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. “You don’t have to do that, Jack.”

Jack paused, staring at his phone but not moving. For a second, Felix worried he’d said something wrong or pissed the guy off. The way Jack was sitting, his eyes vacant like he was deep in thought, put Felix on edge. He was about to say something to prompt Jack into acting like a human being again when Jack said, “I do. I do have t’ do that. And all that I’ve done. And then some.”

Jack breathed in and out heavily through his nose. “This is my fault, Felix,” he said, an odd show of vulnerability in the pinch of his mouth. Like he was unhappy with himself. “I-I took a liking to ye’, and a lot of bad people that want me dead took notice. I’d thought I could be discreet. It’s why I gave ye’ the nickname, yeah? You heard Dante, he knows of Felina. And I think people know who Felina is, too. It’s why yer place got bugged.” Jack’s expression was almost sorrowful. “I’m sorry, Felix. All this shit you’re going through, the people putting cameras, people making ye’ see awful shit. It’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

Felix processed this slowly, then bit his lip. “It’s fine,” he said, happy to know he meant it. “Honestly, I’m in New York. I should’ve known something crazy was going to happen.”

“All of this happened cause I was too stupid t’ tell Scheid where I was going,” Jack said, his voice strained. “I’f I’d just been smart, ye’ wouldn’t have had t’ save me. You got all of this awful shit coming down on ye’ just because you did the right thing and saved my stupid fucking stain of a life, and I’m sorry.”

Felix didn’t like what he heard in the way Jack spoke about himself. He shrugged. “I’d do it again.”

Jack looked to him sharply. “What?”

“I’d do it again.”

“Even—even now? Knowing what would come of it?”

Felix nodded. “I don’t regret saving your life, Jack,” he said. “Even though I’m stressed and tired and can’t feel safe in my own home, saving your life was worth it.”

Jack didn’t say anything. He probably couldn’t. Felix twisted his grip on the steering wheel, then sent Jack a small, genuine smile. “For all the shit you dropped me into, you’re doing your best to make up for it and pull me out. I save people and I saved you. I can’t change who I am, and you can’t change who you are either. Since I refuse to regret saving your life, all we’ve got left is to roll with the punches.”

Jack quickly looked away, out the passenger window like he needed to hide from Felix. “Thank ye’
for picking me up,” Jack said, tone strangled and telling a lot more than he probably wanted. “Ye’
didn’t have t’. It was good of you.”

Felix nodded. “You wanna grab something to eat on the way back?”

“Jesus, Felix, ye’ don’t have to be nice to me. You’re not in my debt.”

“Damn right I’m not,” Felix said. “By all accounts, I’ve saved your life twice, and you’ve only
halfway saved mine once. You still technically owe me. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t hungry.”

Jack turned back around in his seat and Felix couldn’t get a read on his expression. “Food,” Jack said
stiffly. “Food’s good.”

“What do you feel like?”

Jack chewed on his lip. “You’re still new t’ this city,” he told Felix. “Ever been to Remedy Diner?”

Jack gave directions that Felix did his valiant best to follow. He wasn’t used to driving in such a
crowded city. Nothing could compare to the bustling chaos of New York City and Felix really didn’t
want to have to drive ever again.

On a corner in East Village was Remedy Diner, a stone building with a red, neon sign above, and
warm, inviting lights inside. It was dark by now, and drizzling steadily. Felix hadn’t brought
anything in way of an umbrella, and Jack’s coat looked like it was real wool. But Jack didn’t seem to
care as he ducked out of the car and walked across the street without a worry for traffic, exuding
calm class with the coat billowing behind him like something out of a movie. Felix followed, almost
floored by the way Jack carried himself. Jack reached the diner first and pulled the door open,
sweeping an arm to gesture Felix inside with a stupid grin. They were seated at a booth with red
cushioning by the window, looking out into the streets that were beginning to fill with rainwater.
Felix actually let himself relax a little as they were given simple mugs of hot coffee.

“So can I ask where you went?” Felix asked as he glanced over the menu. He loved breakfast for
dinner. “Or is that a need-to-know basis as well?” When Jack didn’t immediately answer, Felix
looked up to see the other man was cringing.

“It ain’t exactly legal, Felix,” Jack hedged.

Felix sighed and flipped over the menu. “I’ve given up on keeping my nose clean if you ever get
taken to court,” he told Jack. “I stayed in your home, I’m as guilty as they come. If you don’t want to
tell me, then it’s fine, but I won’t be using the information in any way that could be detrimental to
either of us, and you won’t be doing me any favors. I’m already in too deep.”

Jack paused. “I was checking out a Bisognin manufacturing facility in upstate New York,” he told
Felix after he thought it out. “They’re making Lovecraft carefully, not binging on excess. They make
what they sell.”

“And you went there?” Felix narrowed his eyes. “You told me you’d never touch drugs.”

“I’m negotiating a business plan,” Jack explained. “They give me drugs, I give them money. It
doesn’t mean I have t’ sell the goods. I can’t act on the big picture as of now, not yet, so I’m tryna’
keep as much as I can off the streets. They don’t care if the goods make it to the market or not, so
long as they get paid, I think.”

“You think? That seems like a dangerous gamble.”
“Ye’ve seen my poker face. I’ve got it covered.”

Jack’s grin could only be described as charming and—false. Felix could see right through it all of a sudden, and the clarity had Felix sitting up sharply. “You’re putting yourself in danger,” he said. “Not just me or your men. Yourself, directly. Jesus, Jack, what if this gets you killed?”

The grin fell away. “It doesn’t matter,” Jack said. “Sometimes, doing the right thing involves throwing yourself in the path of a bullet. I learned that from you.” Felix couldn’t argue that. Jack looked down at his own menu and said, “I heard ye’ have a date.”

Felix froze. “I didn’t want to tell you,” he said. “I didn’t…”

When he trailed off, Jack sighed. “I’m not gonna hurt her just cause I’m jealous.”

“That’s not why,” Felix said, though he wasn’t sure of the real reason anymore himself. “I know you wouldn’t hurt he,” he stated. “I’ve been thinking the worst of you lately, and it’s wrong of me, in more ways than one. Believe me, I know you wouldn’t hurt her.”

Jack nodded. “What’s she like?”

“She’s—” Was it wrong to talk about Marzia with Jack? It seemed a little unfair, even cruel. But Jack had asked. “She’s nice,” Felix said, deciding that he would give Jack what he wanted. “She’s fun to talk to and she likes horror movies. I met her at that coffee place I first met you are, the Flatiron? She’s a hard worker and I’m trying to convince her to go into fashion rather than take up her family business.”

Jack nodded. “And this is the second date?” When Felix nodded, Jack asked, “How was the first?”

Felix hesitated. “It was—different.”

Jack frowned and took a sip of his coffee, black. “How’s that?”

“She’s rich,” Felix said with a defeated slump of her shoulders. “My family was wealthy, but we never lived like we were. She’s part of a whole different society than I am, and I think it throws her off. I guess it probably doesn’t, she wouldn’t have asked me out if she cared about that shit. But I felt — I felt like I was less than her the whole time and it wasn’t really enjoyable. Maybe I was just being paranoid again. Maybe I wasn’t. I felt like I was the dirt beneath her shoes and she never did a damn thing to imply it, but everyone around us sure as hell seemed to think that of me.”

Jack frowned. “Felix,” he said, his hand splaying out on the table and his pointer finger tapping three times on the faux-marble top. “You’re not less than anyone. Economic status doesn’t mean shit when it comes to who ye’ are and what you do. You’re a good person, far better than most people in this city. Don’t feel like you’re less than anyone when you’re worth more than the lot of them combined.”

Felix was blushing and he pulled up his menu to hide it.

Jack tapped three more times, then sat back. “Two Little Red Hens.”

Felix glanced up, still hiding his red cheeks. “What?”

“Two Little Red Hens,” Jack repeated. “They’re a bakery up in Yorkville, they’ve got the best cupcakes in the city. Brooklyn Blackout is their best flavor, in my opinion. They’re cute, which would be fitting for a girl who likes fashion, and they’re also not too expensive. They’d be a good gift for a second date and they’re also pretty even territory so it would be more of a food gift than an
economic gift.”

Felix gaped. “Are you giving me dating advice for your competition?”

Jack snorted mirthlessly. “If only I was that,” he said. “I know I ain’t even in the running fer your attention. I ain’t stupid, Felix. Chasing you is chasing a castle in the sky. I’ll never have ye’. I’m just happy with the idea of being your friend someday.”

Felix had never thought to call Jack his friend, but—

“I’ll think about it,” Felix said. Then, “Thank you.”

Jack’s smile was genuine, but sad. “Don’t feel like you’re less than anyone.”

“Except you,” Felix said, unable to forget the way Jack had walked across the street into the diner like he owned the city itself.

“Especially me,” Jack replied. “Especially someone like me.” Jack tapped his fingers on his menu. “Get the California Omelette,” he advised as the waitress made her way back to their table. “My best advice always concerns food. And I always give my best for the people that really matter.”

Jack turned his attention to the waitress and Felix was left sitting uselessly across the table, feeling like Jack had punched the air from his lungs.
Now You Listen to Me, Darcon

Chapter Notes

Bonnie Lopez squinted in disdain as Reilly O’Reilly played a despondent tune upon his delicately carved wooden flute. "Do you have to do that?" she asked with more than a little annoyance in her tone as she tried to concentrate on the task in front of her.

Reilly O’Reilly, though, failed to lower and cease his playing of the instrument, allowing only one moment's pause to despondently reply, "Aye, I'm Irish. It's how we manifest despair."

fair warning, there's some bad stuff about a bad priest near the end, though none of it is at all described or pictured, the word ain't even in there.

“All officers, we have a 10-71,10-72, four suspects are fleeing on foot towards the Hudson River, requesting immediate officer response."

“Officer Kjellberg, 10-4, in pursuit!”

Felix ignored whatever else was said and put his boots to the ground, sprinting after the four masked men that were fleeing the scene of the crime. Felix had heard the gunshots coming from the St. John Nepomucene cathedral long before the call had come in and was the first officers to respond. He had eyes on the suspects and he knew he was faster than them. Felix darted across the street, shouting after the men, telling them to stop and knowing full well they wouldn’t listen. The perps darted around a corner, down a pedestrian only street, as red and blue lit up behind Felix, signaling backup. Felix kept up his pursuit, keeping his movements tight, not wanting to get injured and lose the culprits.

As he followed them down an alley, he heard the dispatcher say 187, meaning whoever had been shot was declared DOA. Felix grit his teeth and threw caution to the wind, needing to catch these assholes now. He pushed through a small crowd, shouted for the perps to stop again, dug his boots in and sprinted.

They ducked down another alley and Felix followed. He was behind, but close enough to know that they were heading straight towards a fence they would have to jump. He grinned to himself as he exerted his final bits of energy, rounding into the alley and drawing his taser.

“NYPD, get on your knees!” Felix barked, aiming his sights down on one of the four men, the last one who hadn’t climbed over fast enough. The other three were on the other side of the fence and fled after a moment’s hesitation and a stiff nod from the fourth man left behind. Felix didn’t waver, knowing having just one of the men would be enough of a victory for today. Hopefully the other officers would catch the fleeing perps while Felix handled this guy. “Get on your knees,” Felix repeated firmly. The man had his back to Felix, a black balaclava covering his head. He was wearing a dark peacoat, blue jeans and combat boots. There was a splash of blood on the pale skin of the man’s exposed neck, suggesting the mask had been pulled on prematurely. Felix didn’t see a weapon on him. “Get down.”
The man slowly lowered himself down on his knees, linking his fingers behind his head. Felix moved forward quickly and pulled off the balaclava from behind, paying the brown hair that bounced up against gravity no mind in the face of the skull that was printed across the mask in Felix’s hand. He quickly rounded the perp and saw it was Jack.

"Fuck!" Felix shouted, lowering his taser so he could stomp his foot like a child and scream at something. Jack looked up at him from the ground, his expression resigned, mouth a grim line.
“What the fuck, Jack?!” Felix demanded, so fucking angry that Jack would put him in this situation. “What the fuck were you thinking?!”

“Just cuff me, Felix,” Jack said, his voice terse. He didn’t move, stayed on his knees, surrendering completely to Felix and his discretion. Felix hated the look on his face, how Jack had given up. He fucking hated it.

For a moment, Felix had a crisis on morality. He knew that the other officers would not be far behind him. Felix was sure that the only reason he’d caught Jack was because Jack had stayed back to get the other three men— whoever they were— over the fence first. And Felix knew who Jack was, knew what he did, knew what he sold, and he knew that there was a dead body in this crime, but—

He felt insane for thinking it, yet part of him insisted that whatever Jack had done had been for a good reason. Jack had been burning that near-3-million to stop money laundering, he was working to bring down a drug ring, he was doing everything with good intentions, however badly he went about it. And the shooting had been in a church. Felix remembered a conversation he’d had with Mark before, about Jack growing up Catholic. Such a violent crime against someone in a Catholic church by Jack could mean—

“Fuck!” Felix shouted again, kicking the chainlink fence.

“Just do it,” Jack said. His eyes were dark and drawn. He looked like he was awaiting his execution.
“You’re a good cop, Felix. Better than I’d ever thought.” Jack smiled and it was a wretched thing.
“Never been caught before. I’m just glad that, if I have t’ fall, it’ll be by yer hand.”

Felix sneered, threw the balaclava at Jack’s chest, and jabbed his finger at the fence. “Go.”

Jack startled, barely catching the mask while staring at Felix in confusion. “What?”

“Go!” Felix shouted. “Before they show up! Get the fuck out of here!”

Jack still didn’t move, brow twisting, his eyes darting from the fence to Felix like he didn’t understand such a simple order. “Felix, I don’t—”

Felix took Jack by the collar of his jacket and yanked the man to his feet, shoving him into the fence. “Fucking go!” he nearly screamed, knowing he was running out of time. “Go before they catch you!”

Jack stalled for only a moment, just enough time to say, “Thank ye’,” before he climbed the fence and dropped to the other side. He gave Felix a long look, something passing in his face that Felix didn’t have the energy to analyze. Then Jack pulled the balaclava back of his head and ran, disappearing from sight.

“Don’t fucking let me catch you again!” Felix shouted after the man, needing to have the last word, agonized by what he was doing. He’d never let someone go. He’d never betrayed his vow to the badge. He’d never let a murder go unsolved. Now Jack was making Felix do all of that. The first thing Felix did was take off his body cam and smash it against the ground, knowing it would lose the
last thirty minutes of footage. That was one part of the problem taken care of.

Felix cursed, paced, knew that he would have to make this look good. He’d caught up to the perpetrator, he would need an excuse for how the man got away. Felix squared his shoulders, stretched his neck with a twist of it, stared down the brick wall in front of him, and then ran into it with his head down, as fast as he could.

His skull hit the brick with a crack and—

. . .

He woke up in the back of a paramedic’s ambulance with a pretty brunette making his day suck by dabbing some part of his skull with alcoholic antiseptic, making whatever injury he had so much fucking worse. Felix didn’t cry for this sort of thing, though, so the tears stinging in his eyes were more confusing than waking up in an ambulance.

“Why am I crying?” he asked dazedly, reaching up into the air, looking for something he could grab to lift himself up. The paramedic tutted and gently pushed his hands back down to rest at his sides. “Why am I crying?” he asked again. “I don’t cry.”

“You have a concussion,” the paramedic told him with motherly patience. “The man you were chasing slammed you in a wall pretty badly. The officer that arrived on the scene almost thought it was your brains on the brick.”

“Was it not?”

“Of course not,” she said with another tut. “You’d be dead if that were the case. Your Sergeant is pacing relentlessly outside my door, they wanted you treated, but he doesn’t want you admitted into a bed until he’s spoken to you. Normally, I’d be a little upset by that, but all you’re going to need are some stitches along the crown of your head and you’re gonna want someone to keep eyes on your for the next twelve hours for this concussion, and that’s all. Whoever did this wasn’t trying to kill you, it seemed. They were just trying to knock you out.”

Felix was pretty sure suicide by running into a brick wall was the stupidest way to die, and he was glad to know he hadn’t come close. “Sarge?” he asked, sticking to as few words as possible.

“I don’t want him in yet, you just woke up.”

“Sarge, please.”

She sighed, looking put out. “Officer, don’t you think you should listen to your current acting physician above all else when lying on their exam bed?”

“Your name?”

“Does it matter?” she asked. “I know yours and I know I’m only three stitches out of five in your skull, and I know that you’re probably feeling a little too dizzy right now to keep up any sort of argument with me. Plus, I have never met a man or woman able to keep up a conversation while receiving cranial stitches.”

Felix wanted to challenge her, but his hand was suddenly in the air again, just reaching up towards the ceiling, not doing anything, and he almost wanted to just keep it there. He stared up at the limb for a really long time before remembering he was supposed to be defending himself here. “I’m fine.”

The paramedic didn’t laugh, but she looked like she wanted to.
“Your name?” Felix asked again, eyes still on his arm in the air, willing it to lower. It did, inch by inch, but he felt a little lightheaded the lower it got, so he decided he would keep it up for as long as he could.

“I’m Amy,” she said with a heavy sigh. “Look, at least let me finish the stitches.”

That seemed fair. Felix made a soft noise of consent to her terms and even turned his head towards her, figuring he would make her job easier. She just snorted and took Felix’s face carefully in both hands to turn his head back into the position it was before. She pulled out what looked like the nastiest fishing needle Felix had ever seen, and then his skull flared with pain. But Felix grit his teeth and bore the pain happily, because he’d honestly expected to break his nose while running himself into a wall, and he was happy to know he hadn’t, even though his nose did hurt just a little. He made another noise and the hand that was in the air lowered to feel around at the bridge of his nose. Amy stopped her current suture to smack Felix’s hand away.

“It’s not broken,” she told him. “Though there is a nasty gash, but a butterfly bandaid is more than enough for it. Look, when your Sarge comes in here, do me a favor and make as much affirmative noise to you being alive and well as you can. Head wounds tend to bleed a lot and you look worse off than you actually are.”

Felix made another useless noise.

“He’s probably going to ask you what you know about the guys you want after,” Amy continued, mostly talking to herself. Felix had never met a paramedic with such curiosity, but Felix couldn’t really blame her. “It’s crazy, I never thought they’d do this.”

“Huh?” Felix asked.

“Like, let you live. They just shot a priest. Did you know that? Shot a priest in cold blood through a confessional booth. There were other people in the church, that was how you guys got called so quickly. It’s insane. The guy was just dead in the office in the back, one shot to each eye. What kind of person does that?”

Felix needed to cling to the belief that Jack had a good reason. Amy stopped talking there, moving on to the final stitch. Felix couldn’t imagine how extensive the cut had to be to require five stitches, but he was pretty sure it would scar. He wondered if Marzia would be turned off by the scar.

The date the other night had been so much better than the first, spending their time together in the movie theatre, away from prying, judgmental eyes. Felix wasn’t rich, but he could afford movie theatre popcorn, and Marzia was a horror nut, so it was easy to take her to see the latest slasher film, even if all the blood had Felix cringing a little, see twin girls with their stomachs open and heads switched every time he failed to shut his eyes too late. Marzia had loved the movie date much more than the previous, had talked about her classes and what she loved about the school she was attending as they’d taken another slow walk around the park. By the end of the night, Felix had felt more comfortable in his skin around her and she’d leaned in to press a sweet kiss to his cheek before ducking into the cab Felix had flagged for her and going home.

The warm fuzzies from the memory of the kiss kept the pain of the last stitch at bay and Amy was telling him she was done and wrapping his head with gauze before he knew it. Felix wasn’t sure if the bandage around his head was necessary, but he was sure she knew better than him. “Sarge,” he said, a demand more than a request this time. He’d held up his end of the bargain, concussion and all. He already had a lie worked out in his head, brain functioning well to defend Jack and whatever righteous purpose Jack had had despite the head injury. He had to have some sort of faith, didn’t he? At this point, Felix almost needed to protect Jack to protect himself. He didn’t actually know if Jack
would sell him out for a lighter sentencing or not if Jack ever got caught, and that wasn’t a risk Felix was willing to take.

“Sarge,” Felix said again, mostly to himself, mustering up his energy. He felt so tired, but that was the concussion and nothing else. He’d had head injuries before and he knew he could handle this. Amy sighed unhappily, yelled out for someone, and then the ambulance sunk a little with the new weight coming inside.

Sergeant Morrison’s brow was creased with concern as he looked down at Felix. “You okay, kid?” he asked, blatantly worried. It was almost sweet and Felix wanted to smile, but he needed his energy.

“I did my best,” Felix said, his words slurring a little. “Sorry. He got away. Broke the cam to hide his face.”

“Kjellberg, I don’t give a shit about that. Your partner was about to get sick when I showed up. He said he thought your head had been cracked open. Thought it was brains to the wall rather than just a head injury.”

Of course Sive would be the one to have found Felix like that. He felt bad for putting the other man through what he had, but it had been a necessary pain. He didn’t know why Jack had pulled that stunt, had murdered a man in cold blood, but it wasn’t like Felix knew everything about the Catholic church, and it wasn’t like Jack hadn’t proven himself to be capable of making the right decision. Still. What if Felix had been wrong to let Jack go?

He couldn’t afford to think like that. He had to have faith in something eventually, right?

“I’m fine,” he told Sarge uselessly, words still a little slurred, though his brain was reacting a little more clearly and effectively as time passed and the ache of his nose chased away the fogginess. He tried to sit up, but Amy quickly pushed him back down with a sharp glare. Felix groaned. “I’m coming into work tomorrow.”

Sarge looked like he wanted to throw someone through a wall. “You’re not.”

“I am,” Felix said sharply. The ambulance was still spinning a little, but he was confident he could make it to someone else’s squad car and hitch a ride back to the precinct. “Look, like it or not, we’ve got a brutal murder and the four suspects got away. You’re gonna need extra people to make up for the cops you’re gonna use for damage control. Just let me come in. I’ll play speed trap, nothing else.”

“You’re giving me a heart attack,” Sarge deadpanned.

“Gotta keep you on your toes, Sarge.”

“He’ll be fine in twelve hours,” Amy told Sarge helpfully. Felix was surprised she was tentatively on his side, but she probably understood the importance of Felix’s job right now. “He’ll need supervision up until, but I can say he’s squared away for his shift tomorrow. There’s no injuries that will keep him from functioning properly.”

“Is the current acting physician really arguing for a patient to push himself when injured?”

“I live in the area, sir, I enjoy feeling safe in my home.”

Sarge grumbled unhappily under his breath while Felix denied to urge to go for a high-5 from Amy, because he could tell Sarge was already giving in. Was impulse control lowered with a concussion? He felt like he should know, considering that this definitely wasn’t his first.
“If you find someone who will put up for your ass until your shift starts tomorrow, I’ll let you come in,” Sarge said, sounding pissed that he was being bested, but knowing he couldn’t deny a citizen the safety they deserved to feel in their home. Amy knew exactly how to talk to a cop and Felix was grateful for it. “Get rest,” Sarge ordered. “Oh, and you can’t take Sive. You’re done for the day, but he isn’t. Find someone else.”

Felix’s first instinct was to say he always had supervision on him because his home was being creeped on by the fucking Irish Mafia, but he knew that was a little too creative for him to blame on the influence of the head injury. Felix’s first idea was to just get Mark or Scheid—Tyler?—and have them do the job Jack gave them, but he had an inkling that they were the ones to help Jack murder that priest, and Felix didn’t want to complicate things any further by hanging around murder suspects. He still didn’t know if Jack was truly deserving the relative innocence Felix had assigned him.

“I’ll call Marzia,” Felix said aloud, dumb and tired now that he knew he would be going to bed soon.

“What’s that?” Sarge asked with a raised brow.

“My—” Felix cut himself off, because he honestly had no idea what she was. “I think my girlfriend?”

Sarge snorted a laugh. “Don’t sound so unsure, kid. They can smell the fear on you from a mile away.”

Sarge left and Amy went back to tending the last of Felix’s injury, dabbing a cool, alcoholic smelling mixture to the stitches that made the ache from the stitches melt away. “Thank you,” Felix said.

“Just doing my job,” Amy replied. “Just like you.”

Felix hummed softly, knowing she was right, and finding a kindred spirit in it. There was nothing dismissive in what she said. Amy was doing her job, and her job was helping people, just like Felix’s. There were bad paramedics and there were bad cops, but no one ever joined their respective lines of work intending to become bad people. And hardly anyone ever joined this kind of work expecting gratitude for it.

“Call that girl,” Amy prompted, nodding down to Felix’s uniform pants pocket where his personal phone was. “She’ll need to be there once you get home, or else your Sergeant will have a loophole out of the deal.”

Felix knew she was right and sent Marzia text. The immediate reply had Felix smile softly, almost wistfully. He let his head fall back against the stretcher and let the smile split his face.

Yeah, impulse control was definitely down.

...  

“As your girlfriend, I would like to make you aware that I am very against the idea that you’ll be coming home from work injured like this.”

Marzia’s first words to Felix after Sive dropped him off at his home had Felix swaying on his feet. He’d been ruminating over what he and Marzia were becoming during the whole ride back while anticipating seeing her again, but having her state it so bluntly felt—

It was a little like when she’d taken his hand in the park on their first date and Felix had felt like things were moving too quickly for him to understand. He liked Marzia, he did, he could see himself
being with her for a long time, but he wasn’t—

He wasn’t ready. And Felix didn’t know if she cared that he wasn’t ready. This was moving at her pace, and while Felix would normally respect a woman that knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to try and take it for herself, he couldn’t help but feel a little out of his depth and out of control. And not in the fun way he normally was when in a romantic relationship.

Felix didn’t know why he was so nervous about and even against getting closer with Marzia, officially. Everyone in the McLoughlin family who knew anything about anything had said she was clean, and even Jack had given a pseudo sort of approval in recommending the cupcakes that Marzia had absolutely loved. Felix had no reason to be anxious about this. His gut had been wrong before, hadn’t it? Even if he couldn’t remember it ever having been wrong, except about Jack. But his gut had also been telling him to put a little faith in Jack too, so which was it?

“Go rest,” Marzia prompted, pushing Felix upstairs. “I turned the heating up so you should be nice and warm, but feel free to let me know if you need a little extra body heat.”

Felix almost tripped up his own stairs, knowing exactly what she was implying. Jesus christ, girlfriend and then this? Felix wasn’t the king of guy to just sleep with anyone that was warm and willing. He needed connection and he didn’t know if he had that with Marzia yet. Felix cleared his throat and tried not to sound like a scared little kid when he said, “Concussions mean no strenuous activity for the next twelve hours.”

Maria giggled, bright and happy. “You poor thing,” she cooed. “I just meant maybe some under the sheets cuddling and a movie. But maybe some other time? For the fun part.”

Of course she hadn’t meant sex, not right now. Look at Felix, assuming things of people again. He needed to stop doing that, needed to stop thinking he knew what everyone’s motivation was. He was obviously wrong, over and over. Felix sighed, let his shoulders droop, and climbed his stairs with less eagerness than before. He was looking forward to resting, but—

A glance to the window across his bedroom showed him nothing more in the house across the street than he normally saw. But Felix knew someone was there. He knew that if he needed it, he could plaster a note to the window, and someone would come. Oddly, that reassurance in knowing a plea for help would be answered comforted him more than having Marzia downstairs.

Felix changed lethargically but carefully in a blindspot in a corner of his bedroom and slipped underneath his covers, almost wishing he could have been brave enough to ask for Jack to watch over him. At least he knew Jack wouldn’t try to worm his way into Felix’s bed. He wished he could say the same for his—girlfriend.

God, the word didn’t fit right and he didn’t know why. Maybe he just needed to give it a little more time. Felix was going through a lot of different things right now, still wasn’t quite sure he actually felt safe in his home and only felt safe knowing the good guys were keeping an eye on him. And even then, those good guys were barely even good. His life had taken a turn for horribly complications and he knew he should have waited before starting a relationship, but he couldn’t very well pull back now. Marzia seemed invested in him in a way Felix wasn’t sure he actually deserved. He’d brought her cupcakes, taken her one two dates. She was acting like they were—

It wasn’t fair to speculate what she felt. After all, she didn’t have to be keeping an eye on him during the last dredges fo his concussion. Felix owed her for doing this, considering his only other options were Mama Bach and Mrs. Smith next door, and Felix wasn’t about to bother either woman with this shit. They had jobs too. Marzia worked mornings, she had the time to watch over Felix. It was serendipitous, and Felix wouldn’t repay her kindness with cruel assumptions.
“Do you want dinner?” Marzia called out from downstairs. She seemed like the kind of woman who would make a great nurse or caretaker, like Amy the paramedic. Felix wondered if she wanted kids. God, what if she wanted kids from him?

It was too early for him to be thinking about that, and also too early for him to risk any food, even though his stomach was protesting its emptiness. He burrowed deeper into the covers and didn’t answer, hoping she would assume he’d already fallen asleep. He was tired enough for it. He wished he could fall asleep, more than fucking anything. But his thoughts refused to let him rest, plaguing him and torturing him with his actions. His head throbbed and his nose ached. He hoped that injury on his nose wouldn’t scar either, because that would get his entire family pissed to all hell and renewed in their efforts to get him to quit being a cop.

What if he’d done the wrong thing?

What if letting Jack go had been a mistake?

But that couldn’t be it. Jack had done everything so carefully up until now, he’d never been caught by anyone. Jack was a criminal, but he was more like a dark knight or an antihero than anything. At least, that was what Felix wanted to believe. Was Felix choosing to let himself think good of Jack regardless of the facts that he saw? Or were the facts never what they seemed to be and Felix really did need to trust Jack?

He didn’t know. He was tired and his head hurt. Felix sighed heavily and shut his eyes. He wouldn’t fall asleep, he knew that, but if Marzia came upstairs to check on him, he’d like to be able to fake it.

...  

“You stupid fucking asshole!” Arthur shouted at his little brother. “Just throw it over his fucking head, god!”

Felix laughed breathlessly, though he was barely exerted. Playing ball with Arthur and Andrew and Jemaine had become a weekly thing for Felix, with or without Sive. Sive was handling a gas station robbery, which meant it was three-against-one, and Felix knew the kids hated it when he let them win. So now, he was enjoying himself knocking the ball from the air and practically skipping to the other end of the court. One day, the kids would beat him, and he looked forward to it. For now, he was enjoying himself listening to the kids fight and try to come up with a strategy.

“Jemaine, let me on your shoulders!” Andrew shouted. “This ain’t a fucking game!” he almost screeched when Jemaine sputtered and denied.

“Could’ve sworn it was,” Felix practically sang, spinning the ball on the knuckles of his left hand. Arthur shot up and smacked the ball away, bolting down the court and throwing the ball up and into the net. He let out a whoop of excitement, and Felix decided not to mention that the kid had failed to dribble and literally carried the ball across the court.

“That’s 1 to 8!” Arthur exclaimed. “We’re gonna get you, Felix!”

Felix meant to shoot back some witty retort about telling on Arthur to his mother— a lovely woman working two jobs who greatly appreciated knowing her boys were hanging out with a police officer and not joining some street gang— when he saw someone was leaning against his squad card that was parked next to the court. The figure was leaning against the car like it was fucking theirs, a bold move for anyone not in a police uniform. His hackles raised and his hand went instinctively to his hip, where his sidearm was unfortunately absent, but the fear died as he recognized the figure.
The murder had been only yesterday. Felix was surprised Jack would show his face in public so soon after, especially to the man who had caught him, albeit the same man who had let him go. Felix faltered, meeting Jack’s eyes. Jack’s expression was relaxed, but simultaneously stony. He was holding two coffee cups of something hot as he leaned against the passenger door of Felix’s vehicle. He gave Felix a tight nod, beckoning him over with that jerk of his head.

“Uh, give me a second, guys,” he said. “Have to talk to someone.”

“We’ll kick your ass when you come back!” Andrew shouted. Felix just waved them off, trying to act nonchalant as he walked back to his car. He knew that no one would recognize Jack for the notorious criminal he was, but that didn’t make him any less nervous.

Despite Jack’s stiff expression, the mob boss dredged up enough energy to plaster on a smirk.

“Surprised t’ see me?”

Felix shrugged. His body cam was powered down and in his vehicle, so there was no chance of anyone overhearing their conversation. No one had a patrol in this area, as it was Felix’s beat. No one was available to drop in and check on Felix unannounced. It should be safe to talk about what had happened. “Figured you’d be smart enough to lay low for a bit.”

“Normally, I would,” Jack said. “But then I heard about a certain action that was taken to ensure my escape.” As he said that, Jack gave the butterfly bandaid that was holding shut the sharp gash in Felix’s nose a pointed look, dragging his blue eyes up to the stitches along Felix’s hairline. “I’d rather have been arrested than have ye’ run yourself into a fuckin’ wall, Felix.”

“It wasn’t your decision to make,” Felix replied coolly.

“Felix, that’s gonna scar.”

“It’s hidden mostly by my hair,” and he was right, no one would really be able to see it unless they made a practice of looking down on Felix from above. And Felix was five-foot-eleven, very few people would manage that, and even fewer that he cared about the opinion of. “Though maybe it’ll change the pigmentation of the hair growth there. What do you think? A trauma white streak could be sexy.”

Jack snorted. “Marzia would love it, I’m sure.”

Jack talking about Marzia like he supported Felix being with her was— unsettling. Felix wasn’t sure why, he knew he should be relieved that Marzia wasn’t about to be targeted by a jealous mob boss, but having Jack accepting her so easily was too similar to how he’d looked on his knees, waiting to be arrested. Jack didn’t look good when giving up.

“What do you think?” Felix asked, just because he didn’t want Jack talking about Marzia, and not because Felix was concerned for her. “Give me a nice steak of white hair right there, like Jason Todd.”

Jack squinted. “Mark’s been waxing his comic book shit on ye’, hasn’t he?”

“Fuck off, I can know comics too.” He didn’t know comics, he had only perused google after Mark had made all of those obscure references. Felix really liked the Robins, but that was probably a huge bias of his own. Nightwing was a cop. Obviously, Felix had a soft spot for cops.

Jack shook his head, then held out one of the coffee cups for Felix. “I was tempted t’ just dump it for ye’, to save you the taxing energy. But I figured it would mean more if you were the one t’ do it. Ye’ like to make your grand statements of disdain for me.”
Felix snorted and took a sip of the coffee, just to spite Jack. It was a white mocha, a mite sweet and perfect for the chilly weather. He knew Jack was referring to the last time he had offered Felix a drink, and Felix had dumped it on the ground. But Felix had officially thrown in half his lot with Jack by letting him escape custody for murder. Felix may as well drink. “Next time, do me a favor and add a little extra.”


“I meant peppermint, jesus.”

“It’s October, Felix, we ain’t even had Halloween yet. Christmas can wait.”

Felix found himself almost smiling at Jack’s dry tone. He, for one, didn’t care for any of the celebratory stuff, but he loved a good peppermint white mocha. But Felix wasn’t here to talk about the holidays. “So, uh…” Felix trailed off, feeling like there was an elephant between them that Jack likely wasn’t going to be willing to discuss, not easily. Felix would need to open up this more sordid conversation with something a little— easier for Jack to develop loose lips. “There’s been another family murdered with your fake calling card.”

Jack wilted in front of Felix’s eyes, the energy falling out from him. Felix almost wanted to offer to open the passenger door and let Jack sit. “Who?”

“The Jacksons,” Felix replied solemnly. “Father and mother and son. It was bad, Jack. The murders aren’t getting any less gruesome and the people assigned to the case are floundering, though it doesn’t really look like they’re trying very hard, either. There’s nothing except your card and it’s not even you. They don’t know anything and people are dying. We don’t even have a pattern to try and protect anyone that could be targeted next.” Felix looked down at his shoes, making an offhanded note that he would need to polish them. “It’s awful, Jack. People are dying and we can’t do shit, even though it’s all we’re meant to do.”

Jack rubbed at the back of his neck and heaved a sigh. “…Charlotte and Marcus Jackson with their son Caleb. Donna, Michael, Sylvia and Sonja Hemmerson; Jason, Hillary, Carson Taylor; Luella, Antonio, Francesca, and Guillo Fabbris.”

Felix blinked owlishly. “That’s, uh. Impressive?”

“…Charlotte and Marcus Jackson with their son Caleb. Donna, Michael, Sylvia and Sonja Hemmerson; Jason, Hillary, Carson Taylor; Luella, Antonio, Francesca, and Guillo Fabbris.”

Felix blinked owlishly. “That’s, uh. Impressive?”

Jack shook his head. “I knew them all, Felix,” he said, voice tight. “I knew them all, personally. That’s how they’re connected to me. They all used t’ be part of one of the three other mafias. The Mingyün, the Bisognins, the Plague Writes.” Felix had no idea who the Plague Writes were, but he knew the Mingyün tentatively. Chinese black market ware peddlers, selling anything from stolen jade pottery to actual cadavers to fake a death.

“They were soldiers that I got out of service to those bastards, made men that wanted a way out,” Jack explained. “And I paid their way t’ new life. Help them afford the homes in the nicer places so they could restart and better themselves. I knew they wanted more, wanted safety, and I gave it t’ them. Anything to lessen the ranks of my enemy, yeah? But now someone is killing them, targeting the people I helped, and I… they’re attacking me directly, putting my calling card, so I know it’s my fault.” Jack shook his head, his voice failing him. Felix would almost think he was close to tears if he didn’t know any better.

“I don’t know how t’ stop it,” Jack said. “Because I’ve helped too many people. It’s been constant work these past five years, I have no way of knowing who’s next. There’s so many people that I’ve helped and now all of them are being targeted for fuckin’ brutal murder for it. And whoever is doing
it is calling me out.” Jack shook his head. “It’s all so fucked, Felix. I can’t save anyone.”

Felix didn’t know what to say, but he felt bad for ever having thought Jack could be the one behind these murders in the first place. He’d shoved that photo in Jack’s face like it was damning evidence, when he’d actually been showing Jack the dead bodies of a family he’d cared about. Jesus christ, Felix felt a little like a monster. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That this is happening. If I can help in any way —”

“Don’t ye’ dare,” Jack snapped. “I want ye’ as far away from this disgusting shit as I can manage.”

“I’m a cop, Jack, and these murders are in my jurisdiction. Half the time, I’m the one sent to guard the scene.” Felix grimaced, remembering the smell of the blood with far too much accuracy. “It’s unavoidable. But if you think you know anything about these murders that could help us bring the bad guys to justice legally, I’ll be sure the information reaches the right ears.”

Jack sighed heavily. “Ye’ haven’t asked about it.”

“Asked about what?”

“About the priest. The one I killed.”

Felix pursed his lips. “I figured I’d get you talking about this, and then that. More likely to get the truth from you.”

“I’m willing t’ tell ye’ everything about the priest,” Jack snorted. “After all, if it weren’t for you, I’d be in prison. Still can’t believe ye’ let me go.”

Felix didn’t want to explain himself, didn’t want Jack to know that Felix was starting to have such faith in Jack’s actions lest Jack abuse Felix’s newly growing trust. “I just thought you knew what you were doing,” Felix said. “And I also know that the church isn’t exactly any more trustworthy than you.”

Jack nodded like he understood. “The priest deserved it.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“No, Felix, ye’ don’t get it.”

Felix was sure he didn’t.

“I was an alter boy, growing up,” Jack said, and Felix’s blood ran cold. He felt like he couldn’t breathe for a moment, terrified of what he was about to learn. If Jack had been—

“Did he ever—”

Felix couldn’t get the words out, so Jack sighed again and took pity on him. “Not me,” Jack said, to Felix’s relief. “But a boy I knew, he was the priest’s… favorite. And I saw it happening, more than once, told my father. But the priest was an old friend of my da’s, and he didn’t give a shit. If I’d gone t’ the police myself, I’d’ve been whipped. It took ages, but I was able t’ convince the poor boy t’ tell his parents. He asked me over for it, I stood by him as he told his family. Then one of my da’s goons shows up, tells me I have to leave. And as he’s literally carrying me out of that house, the rest of my da’s men start t’ set the place on fire.”

Jack wasn’t looking at Felix, wasn’t looking at anything. “They died screaming and I made myself listen t’ every second of it. If it weren’t for me, trying t’ get that kid to tell his parents rather than the
police, they might still be alive. Instead, they burned alive for it, and the priest laughed about it later, saying the holy fire purified them of the boy’s blasphemous sins of— of sex out of marriage.”

Felix couldn’t fucking breathe. His hands were shaking, from either shock of oxygen deprivation. He wanted to hurt someone, but at the same time, he wanted to just hide and fester and pray that Jack was lying, because the world couldn’t be that evil. Felix stared at the man beside him and almost didn’t recognize him, not with what he now knew. “You wanted to be a firefighter,” he whispered between them.

Jack swallowed hard and nodded, adjusting his stance like he was uncomfortable baring his past to Felix like this. “I couldn’t help them. It was my fault. My da’ was so angry that night, when they brought me home.” Jack brought his free hand up to the part of his neck that wasn’t covered by the wool scarf he was wearing and tapped at his pules point three times, like the simple gesture grounded him and reminded his heart of the rhythm it was meant to keep. “I still hear them,” he told Felix, his voice breaking a little at the end. “A constant, damning reminder of why I can’t— I have t’ be careful. I can’t fix the world the right way. Not me. It’ll all just burn if I do. Like my friend did.”

Felix felt sick.

He didn’t know what to do, expect follow his instincts, so Felix reached out— ignored the way Jack initially flinched— and put his arm over Jack’s shoulder, pulling the man into a tight hug at his side. “I’m so fucking sorry,” was all he could say. Jack stiffened in his arm, didn’t relax a minute. Felix had heard people joke about not being hugged enough as a child. He felt like it wasn’t a joke for Jack.

Jack pulled away from the hug on his own, stepping away from Felix like he was even more uncomfortable than before. Felix couldn’t apologize, though. He didn’t trust his throat. “Didn’t expect ye’ t’ do that, Officer,” Jack said.

“Just because I don’t agree with how you solve the city’s problems doesn’t mean I don’t know you’re just as much of a victim as anyone else,” Felix defended, hoarse. “And what you just told me — god, Jack, no kid is supposed to go through that.” He remembered being told Jack checked himself into the hospital and knew he couldn’t ask. It just wasn’t his place. He just hated the conclusion he was unable to keep from reaching about the relationship between Jack and his father. But he couldn’t ask.

“I didn’t mean t’ bare my heart,” Jack said, frowning and not meeting Felix’s eyes. “I don’t— I don’t tell people shit. Don’t tell people about me. But look at you, Felix, surprising me at every fucking turn.” Jack didn’t sound happy about it. “You weren’t supposed t’ catch me.”

“I was near enough to hear the shots,” Felix explained, taking Jack’s request to change the subject. The other man seemed so much more fragile now that Felix understood what had made Jack reach for the right thing the wrong way. “It’s what makes me think the murder was spur of the moment. Normally you’re smart enough to check the scanner and see who is close by.”

Jack cleared his throat. “It wasn’t planned. But the priest called me there, wanted t’ talk his current relationship to family, wanted his normal dues. My father would pay him grotesque amounts of money, buying his way into heaven. That fucker expected me t’ do the same.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Fuck no. I wasn’t gonna give that devil a cent and he was pissed about it. Then he had the fuckin’ gall t’ remind me that I was still in his service. That I should’ve felt lucky my father was who he was, or else god would have made the priest set his eyes on me instead of the boy who burned.”
Felix’s eyes widened, disgusted by the threat of the priest on Jack’s behalf.

“Said I was such a pretty boy.” Jack sneered and kicked the ground. “So I put two in each of his eyes, so he could never look again. My only regret is that I couldn’t make it nice and slow. That I couldn’t burn him like he burned them.” Jack smiled and it was an ugly thing, but Felix couldn’t blame the way the malice twisted his face. “He deserved so much worse. I hope god ain’t as selfish as man. I hope he ended up in hell regardless of the payments he made for his faith.”

Felix couldn’t agree more.

“But ye’ need t’ be careful, Felix,” Jack said. “I can’t give ye’ anything on any of it, can’t give ye’ any proof that would damn the priest and make what I did out as some vigilante bullshit. You’ve a mole, somewhere big and powerful, and it ain’t one of mine. I don’t trust yer detectives.”

Felix frowned. “Me neither. So what?”

“No, Felix, we checked yer body cams, we know someone’s watching ye’ that ain’t supposed to be. We don’t know who, but someone. How else would whoever’s doing the murders know my calling card and how t’ emulate it? It ain’t public knowledge, ye’ve said that. Someone in your precinct, in my working area, is on the payroll of people I ain’t friends with. I… I know it’s a lot t’ ask, but I’d like ye’ to maybe get yourself out of work for a week. Take some vacation days and maybe forget to leave the camera at the precinct so we can crack it and see who’s in there watching ye’.”

Felix grimaced. It was a solid plan and probably a good idea, but— “No happening.”

“Felix—”

“No fucking happening.” Felix repeated. When Jack opened his mouth to start a fight, Felix barreled on. “I know you think it’s stupid and reckless, but this city is in the middle of some terrible shit, with the murders and the Lovecraft. Sarge needs every man he can get. It’s why he was so easy to bull over to let me take my shift today, even with this.” He tapped just below the stitches across his scalp like he needed to remind Jack of his injury. “I need to be out here. If only to keep an eye on the people that are just trying to live their lives. It’s more than just my job, Jack, it’s my purpose.”

Jack shook his head. “It ain’t safe, Felix.”

“When you and I met, you were a fucking high-level mob— person, and you were just standing by the street. The only reason you and I know each other is because you’re reckless and don’t give a shit about your own safety. You cannot talk about doing the things that keep you safe over doing what’s smart.”

Jack shook his head again. “That ain’t it, Felix. I’m out there with my head on the block because there’s shit going on that ye’ don’t understand. It’s all part of something, yeah? And if god strikes me down in the midst of what I’m doing, then I’ll die fighting the only fight I can. But you— you’re a good person. Ye’ need t’ stay alive to keep helping people. Don’t ye’ have anyone ye’d stay alive for, Felix?”

Felix faltered. Mark had asked him the same thing, or something similar. “Why?” he demanded of Jack, trying to avoid the question itself, as he wasn’t so sure of the answer anymore. “Does it matter? Do you want to know who they are so you can do something about it?”

“Felix, jesus christ, that ain’t it,” Jack stressed. “If you’re doing your job, running around in a blue target, going towards gun shots, following people in masks without fear, putting your life on the line, and ye’ don’t have a reason t’ come home, then you—”
Jack was cut off by a basketball flying to hit his hand and knock Jack’s untouched drink from his grip onto the side of Felix’s car. Felix looked to the kids who had still been playing ball and wished he could forget his role and yell at the kids. Then he looked to Jack, worried for his reaction, but Jack stooped over to pick up the ball and turned to the kids, shouting, “There ain’t any use if ye’ can’t fucking defend!”

“Fuck off!” Arthur shouted back, visibly relieved to know he wasn’t in trouble. “Another white boy thinking he can shoot. There ain’t no room for two of you!”

“Let me teach ye’ punks a lesson,” Jack said with a laugh, dribbling the ball with ease that impressed even Felix. “Call me what ye’ want, there’s an entire fucking movie for the Irish knowin’ how t’ ball.”

Felix scrunched his nose up. “That movie sucked.”

“Bite yer tongue, Felix.”

“Two against three,” Andrew said. “Maybe Felix can actually win this time!”

Felix was gonna tweak that kid’s ear. “They were losing before you showed up,” he told Jack. “He’s all talk.”

“I’m sure,” Jack snorted. He tossed the ball and spun it on his index finger, smirking down at the kids. “Ready t’ learn, boys? I’ve got a little luck on my side.” He smirked back at Felix, beckoned him with a crook of his finger, and then started the game anew.

As the kids started to lose 11 to 1, Jack finally convinced Jemaine to let Andrew up on his shoulders. They still lost, but it felt a little less humiliating for all of them. It also felt a little like a dream, playing alongside Jack, meeting every pass and watching Jack move fluidly with him, like they were of the same mind. Maybe Felix would’ve been uncomfortable to know they moved so well together before, but now he could only be happy for it because the kids were having fun and Felix momentarily forgot about every little thing wrong in this city. Felix needed to find out what Jack was going to say, but he had something more important right now. Everything boiled down the peals of laughter of the kids and the grin on Jack’s face that was anything but false.
Felix wouldn’t forget.

Couldn’t afford to, really.

Jack had been about to say something, suggest a sinister plan within Felix’s ranks, and while the boys had interrupted them and sidetracked the whole conversation rather skillfully, Felix refused to forget. If his workplace—his purpose in life—was the puppet of some murdering plot that was taking innocent lives, Felix needed to know.

He didn’t have time to find out until the coming weekend. His city was amok with Lovecraft, people suddenly overdosing on amounts that would have normally been recreational and relatively harmless. Sarge was loath to have Felix put on any sort of assignment, but he had no choice either. The butterfly bandaid was gone from Felix’s steadily-healing nose, but the stitches were still there and Sarge wouldn’t stop looking at Felix like he was waiting for him his limbs to fall off. Now Felix was getting off shift, barely avoiding overtime, and he was tired, but he needed answers. Felix changed out of his uniform into something much more comfortable and scrawled a note on looseleaf paper, plastering it to his bedroom window.

Felix yawned into his hand and went downstairs to make coffee, figuring he was in for a long night and knowing his guests would probably appreciate it. While he didn’t feel bad for demanding Jack’s presence so late—and he was looking for Jack, he had specified as much in writing “bring me your ‘boss’”—he did feel a little guilty for not having the chance to choose a better time.

The coffee pot was only just starting to drip when there was a knock at Felix’s front door. He grabbed his sidearm, just in case, and walked on light feet out of the kitchen, to the foyer. He checked the peephole before even thinking of unlocking the door, and was surprised to see Tyler—and only Tyler—dressed in what appeared to be a three piece, black and white suit with a silver vest. Felix opened the door with a frown and made sure there really was no one with Tyler. “What are you—”

Tyler smirked and pushed a garment bag that had been carefully folded over his right arm into Felix’s chest. “Get dressed,” he said. “Where we’re going, you’re gonna want to blend in.”

Felix frowned even deeper at the garment bag, wondering what was inside that would help him meld into wherever Tyler was taking him. “Couldn’t Jack just come here?”

“You can’t dog whistle for him,” Tyler replied with a snort. “He’s got things to do, you know. To be honest, if I told him you wanted him, he’d definitely abandoned what he’s doing right now, but we can’t really have that. Which is why I’m taking you to him.”

Felix arched a fine brow. “Does he know I’m coming?”
Tyler smirked even wider. “Let’s just say he’ll enjoy the surprise.”

Felix grimaced, not liking the idea of surprising a fucking mob boss, but Tyler would probably know Jack better than Felix did. He invited Tyler inside, pointed out where the mugs were for the coffee that was still dripping, and ducked into the downstairs bathroom to get dressed.

It was—a gorgeously complicated costume.

A very dark green, almost black, English cut suit jacket with a wide peak collar with a length nearly reaching his knees over a black, silk dress shirt with a tab collar underneath, an ornate gold and green embroidered vest atop that. The slacks were the same dark green as the jacket and the entire outfit was tailored to Felix on a professional level. Felix felt like a million dollars and uncomfortable in this getup and quickly tried to do something with his hair that looked more “regal” and less “police officer.” “How the fuck did you get my measurements?” Felix demanded as he stepped out of the bathroom, frowning at the dress shoes Tyler then handed him that were black and were Felix’s exact size. “This is creepy as all hell, Tyler.”

Tyler smirked as Felix stepped into the shoes and then passed Felix a green pocket square that had a gold, lace-like pattern printed on it. Jesus christ, Felix felt like it was Halloween already. “I guessed,” he said with a shrug. “Not that hard. I have keen eyes. It’s part of my job.” He then handed Felix a gold tie and Felix felt like he was going to die beneath all of these fucking layers.

Felix shook his head and folded the pocket square into the jacket before expertly knotting the tie with ease. Tyler looked vaguely impressed. “This is fucking ridiculous,” he said. “Where the fuck is Jack?”

“You’ll see.”

Tyler brought him out to the car and Felix gaped because why the fuck was Tyler picking him up in a Rolls-fucking-Royce? “It’s a Phantom VIII,” Tyler said with a proud smile when he saw the way Felix was looking at the car. “Known for being practically silent while also managing to bring all eyes to it. Where we’re going, you need to look like you can afford to be there. It’s all about appearances, and this will definitely make them think you belong.”

“I’m scared to get inside,” Felix said bluntly. “What if my poor-man DNA rubs off on the seat and it breaks down?”

Tyler laughed and opened the passenger door for him. “Your carriage awaits, Cinderella.”

“It’s Felina,” Felix corrected with a bit of a chuckle of his own, though it was mirthless. Tyler bowed his head gracefully at the correction and Felix hesitantly slid into the car. It didn’t immediately burn him to touch the interior leather of the seat. “Why the fuck does Jack have this?”

“It’s not Jack’s,” Tyler said. “It’s mine.” As Felix sputtered to ask how, Tyler grinned and explained. “It was my birthday present from Jack this year. He can’t really appreciate a good car, seems to stick with things that are a little more incognito, but he knew I’ve always wanted to see one of these. Did the step up and bought me one. I wanna be buried in this car.”

“Where the fuck is Jack that it would require an entrance like this?” Felix asked as Tyler drove through the dark streets of New York City with practiced ease. It truly was incredible—Felix felt like they were just floating, because he couldn’t hear the engine of the car at all. “If it’s a party, then couldn’t we just show up in normal suits and just some slightly less expensive car? If it’s another charity gala, then why—”
“It’s not a charity gala,” Tyler cut in. “It’s Dante’s birthday.”

Dante. The man Jack had been playing cards with, the stereotypical Italian. Felix winced and leaned back into the seat. Holy hell, it was so fucking comfortable. “How did you have this outfit ready for me?”

“We look at Jack’s schedule,” Tyler said. “See all the events he has and then planned for the possibility that you’d ask to see him during any number of them. We’ve got a whole wardrobe of shit for you in the house across from yours. Jack doesn’t know about it because he expects us to just ring him so he can ditch for you, but we need to keep him on track. So we compromised and prepared for anything.”

“How much did this suit cost?”

Tyler just shrugged and refused to answer any further. Felix almost wanted to take the damn thing off and show up to whatever swing this was in his dress blues so he wouldn’t be terrified of getting the pants scuffed. “Do yourself a favor and walk like you have somewhere to be,” Tyler said. “I don’t think anyone will bother you because they don’t know you and won’t exactly be eager to shoot the breeze, but they might end up mistaking you for someone they think they know, and then they’ll talk your ear off. Rich people, you know? They don’t have anything better to do.”

Felix wanted to ask after Tyler’s upbringing to know where the man stood with the upperclass. He didn’t want to profile, but Tyler didn’t talk like he belonged with the upper one percent, and his mention of wishing to see a Rolls Royce made Felix picture the little kids that looked at the flashy, expensive cars and dreamed of being rich one day. Felix imagined that if Tyler did have a surplus of money, the first thing he’d spend it on would be an expensive car, regardless of how impractical it was to own a car in the city.

Tyler talked about absolutely nothing as he drove them into the heart of the city, navigating the traffic with skill in this magic carpet of a vehicle. Felix began to recognize places more from movies than personal experience as they neared Town Square, and his heart started to race in nervous anticipation. The drone of Tyler’s voice was doing nothing for the anxiety the Felix felt as he recognized just how grand of an event he was being brought to by the surrounding location alone.

“Ever felt like you just don’t belong somewhere?” Felix asked, interrupting Tyler’s babble unapologetically.

The man didn’t seem to mind being interrupted and paused to purse his lips in thought. “I think it doesn’t really matter where you feel you belong,” he responded sagely after a moment. “As long as there’s someone who wants you there.”

Felix narrowed his eyes at Tyler. “Stop playing matchmaker.”

“Stop making it so easy.”

The man pulled up in front of a stage-lit awning that bore the neon title “Edison Ballroom.” There was literally a red carpet and paparazzi lining it, bulbs flashing on the Royce as Tyler brought it to a smooth park. Tyler smirked at the way Felix was gawking. “You think you’ll be dressed to the nines like that and not be in attendance to something like this?”

“Oh my god,” Felix wheezed. “I wanna go home.”

“I mean, I can take you back,” Tyler hedged. “But you seemed like you had something really important to ask him. Don’t worry, they won’t recognize you or anything, they’re looking for shots of celebrities, and once they piece together that you’re not someone overtly famous, they’ll toss the
photos."

"Why would they fail to—"

Felix cut himself off when he turned to face Tyler and saw the man was holding out an elaborate masquerade mask. It covered the left side of the face and crossed over the bridge of the nose to envelope and encase the other eye, flaring up the temple to burst out in the shape of half a rose. The mask itself was black and painted with delicate, golden lines, painstakingly hand-painted depictions of roses and vines following the curves of the mask and the face beneath it. It was gorgeous and Felix didn’t think it belonged on his face.

"Mark and I agreed it would make your eyes look nice," Tyler said as Felix took the mask with nearly shaking hands. "And we needed it to obscure as much of your face as we artistically could." Tyler then pulled out another mask, a simple Venetian that covered the entire face. It was half black and half white, with the painted lips mirroring the other color down the middle. The eye on the left was covered with a sheer black cloth, allowing the only thing visible from the face wearing the mask to be the right eye. Tyler smirked as Felix failed to clamp his jaw shut. "Bodyguards should be seen, not heard," he said with a wink, before pulling on his own mask. He nodded towards the one in Felix’s hands, encouraging him.

Felix looked down into the empty eyeholes of the mask and felt out of his depth. Then he placed it to his face and tied the silk strings around the back of his head. He denied himself the dissonance of looking in a mirror. He didn’t want to see the way his eyes would look like they belonged to someone else.

The valet stepped forward and opened the passenger door. The moment Felix was exposed beyond the tinted black windows, those horrible cameras flashed with violent repetition. Felix prayed Tyler was right and that the photographers would toss the photos once they realized they were useless. Felix tried to keep his steps confident and strong as he walked down the red carpet and ignored the horrible flashing lights, gritting his teeth and trying to save a face no one could see.

Two men opened the doors into the ballroom with sweeping arms of welcome after Tyler, at Felix’s side, held up a slip of paper that was likely an invitation that granted them access to whatever this was. Inside, there was a grand hallway leading into a huge, open room that was brightly lit with golden light and full of people in wide basque dresses and detailed suits and tuxedos, spinning around the center of the room to a skilled string band playing songs from what sounded like the Baroque period.

It was a fucking masquerade ball.

There were added details that keyed Felix into the nature of the celebration. Surrounding the dancing floor were circular tables that had place sets and finished dishes, the remnants of cake on the plates. There were streamers hanging from the rafters, not melding with the theme of the party itself. And there was a huge ice sculpture of a man’s silhouette with gifts piled high at the feet. It was a birthday party, though rather skillfully designed to be a masquerade on the surface. But the sculpture itself keyed Felix into the fact that Dante, the man of the hour, was likely a narcissist to the core. He wondered how Jack had gotten an invitation to this place, considering Felix had always felt like Jack hated something as selfish as narcissism. Was Jack only here as part of a scheme?

Tyler took Felix gently by his elbow, but still didn’t manage not to startle Felix. A few eyes were on him, looking him up and down with a cruel curiosity, judging him by the clothes. He felt like he was in some sort of disguise meant to fool, wearing the skin of someone else. One woman lifted her head and looked down at him from over her nose even though she was at least a foot shorter than him. But then another women, with a drunken, braying laughter, spun past Felix and exclaimed, "I love your
costume!” He relaxed a little then. Maybe Felix was in disguise, but it was a masquerade—everyone else was wearing someone else’s face too.

Tyler tugged insistently at his arm, and Felix allowed himself to be led through the ballroom, at the edge of the dance floor. He heard Tyler murmur something softly with a finger pressed into his ear, likely some sort of radio or communicate with whoever else was here with Jack. Felix’s money was on Mark.

One man tumbled into Felix as he missed a stepped. He caught himself on Felix’s shoulders, and laughed in Felix’s face wearing the mask of a rabbit and smelling like too much champagne. This party was well into its lifespan and most of these guests were likely inebriated. The man who had fallen into Felix pat his shoulder three times, rambled something in what sounded like Yiddish, and then went back to his dancing partner with a splay of his legs and a demented sort of crab walk in her giggling direction.

Tyler pulled Felix past the conglomeration of dancers and towards the back of the ballroom, up to a set of stairs that led up into a private balcony area. Tyler had to show that piece of paper again to a guard, who gave a graceful dip of her completely-covered head and stepped aside. Felix assumed everyone wearing a full Venetian mask was some sort of help, like the waiters and waitresses and guards.

Tyler gently pushed Felix up the iron spiral stairs and they came up to a lounge area that had much less of a crowd. Elegant men and woman relaxed in comfortable, renaissance-esque seating, holding their champagne flutes in dainty fingers, taking quietly amongst themselves. In the furthest corner of the room, back by the only set of windows Felix had seen in this place, stood two men. One of them was in a black and white tux much like Tyler with the same exact mask as Tyler’s. The other man had his back turned to Felix and was wearing a dark gray, woolen suit. While it didn’t fit the theme, the man wore it so well that he likely wouldn’t get complaints.

It was also Jack.

Felix wasn’t sure when he began to develop the ability to recognize Jack from all angles, but he would like to cop it up to his observational skills as a police officer and nothing more. Felix was hesitant to approach Jack, suddenly feeling like he looked ridiculous wearing the clothes of a rich man, even though it was perfectly tailored to every line of his body. By money’s rights, Felix should look good. But what if Jack laughed at him?

Why did Felix care about Jack’s opinion? Felix scowled to himself and dug his heel into the ground before crossing the lounge towards Jack with as much false confidence as he could muster. When he reached the other man and denied himself eavesdropping on the low murmur of conversation between Jack and more-than-likely Mark, Felix cleared his throat and waited for Jack to turn. “I need to ask you some things.”

Jack was wearing a black, lace mask that only framed his right eye and curved elegantly along into the air, following the style of his hair. The black lace made Jack’s ocean blue eyes stand out vibrantly against his pale skin. The black lace also emphasized the moment Jack’s eyes landed on Felix and went wide in shock. His lips parted in gentle surprise and he just—stared.

Felix shifted uncomfortably under the man’s gaze. “I know,” he said. “I look stupid.”

“That is the last word I’d use t’ describe ye’,” Jack said breathlessly, like the words had been punched from his lungs, “Jesus christ, where—” Jack cut himself off, looking to Tyler behind Felix’s shoulder. “Did you get him this?”
Tyler shrugged. Jack went back to his staring, eyes dragging up and down Felix in the fitted deep green. Felix squirmed, but at least he knew Jack wasn’t laughing at him. “I need to ask you about something,” Felix said again, wanting to get this back on track so Jack would stop ogling him. “You were talking about an untrustworthy detective earlier, before we got interrupted. I need to know what you were talking about, and specifically who.”

Jack tensed and finally pulled his eyes from Felix’s body to his face. His pupils flared dramatically in the dim lighting and Felix didn’t believe in such obvious tells, but jesus christ, he didn’t know what else it could mean other than Jack seeing something in Felix’s face that he really liked. “Stop fucking me with your eyes and focus,” Felix hissed.


Felix bristled and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m here for a serious fucking reason, Jack, and I’d appreciate you taking this just as seriously. Or do you not give a shit that my safety could be compromised in my own workplace? Need I remind you that this is kinda your fucking fault I’m in this mess at all.”

Jack flinched, but covered it up with a halfhearted glare. “Ye’ could’ve just let me get shot.”

“You know I couldn’t have,” Felix said, brushing him off. “Just tell me about this detective.”

Jack groaned and tossed back the last of his champagne. “I’m guessing there ain’t no way for me t’ convince ye’ t’ leave it alone? He ain’t after you, that I know of. He’s a Bisognin made man, he shouldn’t know your connection t’ me.”

“If said made-man is one of the detectives on top of a huge, critical case that’s involved the deaths of over one hundred people to this point, then no, you cannot convince me to leave it alone.” Felix wished Jack understood what it was like to be willing to put his life on the line for the greater good. Maybe then Jack would understand why Felix couldn’t let this go. “People are dying, Jack,” Felix said, softening his tone, pleading. “I’m not afraid to beg this of you.”

Jack grimaced, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “Ain’t exactly how I want t’ see ye’ begging, Felina.”

Felix startled at the title. “That’s not my—”

“When you’re in public, and publicly with me, depending on the present company, you’re Felina,” Jack sighed. “I’m not much of a fan of it either. I quite like yer real name. But it’s a dangerous game I’m playing, and I can’t have ye’ at risk in the slightest. There’s a reason why yer mask is so heavy, and I appreciate Half-baked and Shield being smart enough t’ get ye’ something that obscures so much.”

“You think I’m in danger,” Felix said. “Even at a masquerade, where no one knows who I am. I’m not part of this society, Jack. They won’t know me.”

“But they know me,” Jack replied softly. “And that’s the most damning way t’ be.” Jack pursed his lips. “I’ll send ye’ what I know about the detective— named Summers, yeah? Ye’ probably know him.” Felix did, he knew the man well. Didn’t like him one bit, either. “He’s a bit of a showboat about being made by the Bisognins. I wouldn’t doubt he’s got some paraphernalia t’ prove his status in his fuckin’ locker.”

“I’m not surprised,” Felix deadpanned. “He’s a bit of a dick.”

“Ye’ can’t approach him,” Jack told Felix firmly. “If ye’ confront him, he’ll squeal to the higher ups
and then a target will come on yer back regardless. I don’t know if he’s the one in yer camera or not, but I’m praying he ain’t. It doesn’t seem likely, either. His aptitude scores are high, but his actual technological intellect is lacking. We’ve still got Emmerson lookin’ into what ye’ brought us, but it’s hard. I don’t trust anyone with this except him, and he’s doing his best. It’s slow going. Just do me a favor and lay low, yeah? I don’t want ye’ getting into any more trouble than I can help.”

Felix nodded a false promise and planned out how he was going to approach Sergeant Morrison about the sordid detective and the best way to get proof of the man’s illegal dealings. He hoped Jack was right in Det. Summers keeping mafia paraphernalia at the workplace. That would make this much easier, considering they wouldn’t need any sort of warrant to search his desk. He internally plotted the different ways the conversation could go and knew he would need to place some sort of suspicion on an observation. Or maybe he could say he had heard something while on his beat? That could work, he would do that.

Felix came back to the conversation to see Jack was looking at him with dread. “Felina, don’t.”

“Felina?” came a deep, rich voice from behind Felix that was instantly followed by a stiff, yet warm hand on his shoulder. It wasn’t Tyler, though, and that had Felix instantly on edge. He didn’t know who the fuck was touching him. The look in Jack’s eyes said that whoever it was, wasn’t good. “So this is the famed Felina that I’ve heard so much about.” The hand moved down Felix’s arm as whoever this was moved to stand in Felix’s range of sight.

It was a man with dark, sweeping hair and a strong jaw with thin lips, vaguely familiar, but not enough for Felix to recognize, especially with the plague doctor mask that was hiding half his face. “I must say,” the man murmured in a sultry tone. “His eyes are rather blue for a mutt.”

Felix froze, suddenly knowing exactly who this was. The man Jack had played cards with beneath the MET, the Italian named Dante who had referenced Wizard of Oz and had Jack looking ready to kill. Dante was wearing a self satisfied grin as he looked Felix up and down with an appreciative gaze. “My, my, didn’t think our dear friend Jack here could afford someone like you.”

“Dante,” Jack greeted with false warmth. “Didn’t think ye’d be spending yer time up here with us average men. Don’t ye’ have some guests t’ entertain?”

“The champagne does the trick,” Dante replied, still not looking away from Felix. For all of his staring, Felix had the distinct impression that he wasn’t looking at Felix because he was attracted to him. Dante was looking at Felix because he thought Felix was Jack’s. “And after all, I never did get a birthday wish from you, Jack. Don’t you have a present for me?”

“It’s by your ice statue,” Jack replied. “I’m sure ye’ll love it.” Jack was watching Dante intently, and Felix could feel Tyler moving closer by his shoulder. Even Mark was on his toes. They all looked ready to do something, but Felix didn’t know what. He didn’t know what kind of danger he could be in.

“Well, while I do love a nice gift wrapped in a delightful bow,” Dante drawled. “I do think I prefer gifts with a little more of a… personal touch.” Dante lifted his fingers and dragged them down the line of Felix’s neck.

Felix suddenly couldn’t move. He didn’t know what was happening, but he had an idea, and it was making his stomach turn over. He wanted to run, more than anything, wanted to flee the fucking scene, but Dante did this little twirl of his fingers and suddenly there was something hard pressed into Felix’s back. Felix dared to turn his head, spotted a huge, terrifying man with a featureless, white mask covering his face, his arm low and angled like he was holding something into Felix’s spine. There was the soft click of a safety being turned off and Felix trembled.
“He’s so responsive,” Dante murmured, voice smooth as tar. The fingertips pressed into Felix’s neck, moved up and pushed into the vulnerable flesh beneath Felix’s jaw. “I’m sure you enjoy that the most, don’t you, Mr. McLoughlin? Dear Jack, how have you managed to keep something like this from the rest of us? How have you been so selfish?”

“Dante—” Something made Jack cut himself off. Felix looked to Jack, eyes wide and terrified. He had a gun into his back and a psycho tracing his fingers along his jugular like he wanted to rip it out of Felix’s body. Felix stared into Jack, trying to convey his call for alarm, needing help. But Jack didn’t move, didn’t continue his thought. He set his jaw and stood there.

Then Dante let out this pleased hum and the hand left Felix’s jugular to moved down Felix’s chest, tracing the intricate patterns of the vest and stopping to press into the spot between Felix’s hip bones, too close to the last place Felix wanted this man touching him. Another hand came up and knuckles traced along Felix’s collarbone beneath the shirt as Dante leaned in so close that Felix could feel his breath on his lips. Felix tried to pull back and only forced the gun jarringly into his spine.

“I must say, I’m pleased to see you slipping so well into the character you chose for tonight,” Dante murmured. His breath smelled like peppermint and Felix wanted to throw up. “But I do have to put forth a complain—a slender figure like yours doesn’t need this many layers.” The hand below Felix’s navel slipped up and threaded between the vest and shirt and hem of Felix’s slacks to slip down into Felix’s pants, playing at the rim of his undergarments. Felix flinched, choked on a noise of quiet panic, looked up at Jack and begged with his eyes.

Jack’s eyes were dark and deadly as he saw what Dante had done and took a step forward. For a moment, Felix was awash with relief to know Jack was going to put an end to this torture as those disgusting fingertips crept deeper into Felix’s pants, but then—

Mark put a hand on Jack’s shoulder and stopped him. And Jack— Jack didn’t fight the hold Mark had on his shoulder. He just closed his expression into something with ruined indifference. And then he looked away from Felix.

They were going to let this happen.

Felix felt a little like his world was collapsing as the hand slipped beneath the elastic and pressed into sensitive, untouched flesh, threatening to go lower. His every instinct was telling him to run, knock his head into this fucker’s and get the fuck away, but the gun in his back was forcing him into compliance and Jack— Jack wasn’t going to help him. Jack was going to stand there and watch this and let Felix suffer. He was going to let Dante ruin him. How could Jack be like that?

How could Jack do this to him?

Tears sprung in Felix’s eyes, hurt and panic twisting in his chest. He was helpless and the only person who could save him, the only person Felix felt like he could trust in this horrible, sordid world of crime and fucking evil was standing there, letting this monster touch him. So much for Jack saying he wanted Felix. So much for Felix being special. So much for Felix meaning anything at all.

“I must admit,” Dante purred into his lips. “I’ve never really found myself attracted to the harsher sex. But Jack seems so taken with you, so smitten. I honestly just want to know what the fuss is all about.” The hand down Felix’s pants started to push in bruises and Felix wanted to die. “There’s a lot about you to appreciate,” Dante hummed as his other hand pressed into Felix’s pulse point again, as if he was measuring the fear he was pumping into Felix’s body like medicine.

“Your lips, for one,” he began to list. “So soft and succulent. Makes you want to dig your teeth into them, see them a sinful red. Your body as well. You work hard for how you look, and I do love a
person who’s aware of the use of a good image. And your eyes— god, your eyes. They’re like ice. They reflect color and make it their own. I want to see what shades I can make your eyes. Maybe I could cut them out and run some tests of my own. But my favorite thing—”

The hand left Felix’s lower belly to slip up just a little, settling over Felix’s right hip bone.

“My favorite thing is this scar,” Dante murmured, dragging his nails along a thin, white scar that Felix had gotten when he was a little kid, a scar that sunk into his skin with age. “How did you get it? Appendix? I would assume so. You look so damn perfect, and then there’s this unassuming blemish. You have others, yes, more scars, but this one— this is my favorite.” Dante smiled and Felix felt like the devil couldn’t outdo him.

“I’d love to see this scar and this body laid out on my sheets,” Dante whispered. “The lights in your bathroom are dim— they don’t do you justice.”

Felix’s heart stopped.

Dante’s hand was snatched out of Felix’s clothes by Jack who suddenly had a vice-like grip on the man’s wrist, his knuckles white. “I’m gonna have t’ ask ye’ t’ stop,” Jack said, his expression calm, but his eyes roiling with turmoil. He still wouldn’t look at Felix, but god, Felix couldn’t feel anything but relief. Beyond Jack, Mark didn’t say anything, but Felix could see one of his eyes glaring into his boss. Felix didn’t care. Dante raised a brow at Jack.

“Is that a line I see you drawing right now, my friend?”

“In bright red if that’s what ye’ need t’ heed it.”

Dante smiled again. “I’d prefer some police tape.”

Jack swallowed visibly. Dante’s hand was still on Felix’s pulse, the gun still in his back. But maybe Jack could stop that too. “Please,” Jack choked out, the single word bringing vague sounds of surprise from nearly everyone.

“My my,” Dante murmured. “One of the great McLoughlins stooping so low as to beg? Not a bad look for you, Jack. Should I ask you onto your knees?”

“Is that what it would take?” Jack asked.

For a moment, Dante’s expression washed over with shock. Then, the most pleased, self indulgent, and cruel smile came across his devilish features. He pulled his hand away from Felix’s neck and nodded at the guard behind Felix, who pulled the gun from Felix’s back. “Happy birthday to me,” Dante sung softly. “I do hope you men are enjoying the party. Could I interest you in some refreshments?” Dante looked to Felix. “Maybe some fine whiskey?”

Jack grabbed Felix by the elbow, and Felix could finally move as Jack pulled Felix out of the lounge area and directly through the throng of dancers, pushing people aside carelessly in his haste to pull Felix along. Even as people were jostled and let out protests and insults, Felix couldn’t help but be grateful.

Jack pulled him through a door and Felix realized they were in a bathroom. There was one person in there with them, a man washing his hands in the sink. He looked up at their entrance and froze. Felix couldn’t see Jack’s face from standing just behind him, so he didn’t know what the stranger saw in Jack that made him so scared.

“Get the fuck out,” Jack snapped.
The poor man nodded and didn’t even finish washing the soap from his hands, fumbling to dry them on his velvet pants. The man left the bathroom and Jack grabbed a decorative bench to brace against the door and the handle, effectively locking everyone out.

They were alone.

Felix almost felt like he was safe.

He crumbled to the ground, sitting on the bathroom tile without a care. His breath began to come in short little gasps, each breath becoming less and less of what he needed. Felix tore off his suit jacket and tossed it aside, then the vest, then undid the tie. It was all too tight and he couldn’t breathe. His hands fumbled on the buttons of the dress shirt. He was shaking too much to undo them.

“Felix, stop.”

Felix slapped away the hands that were reaching towards him to help him, but latched onto the distraction. Jack was on his knees in front of where Felix was collapsed on the floor, his face twisted with ruin, like he was he one who had been—

“Dante put in the cameras,” Felix said, forcing himself out of his panic and pushing all of himself into the furthest corner of his brain, latching onto that second part of who he was that made him a damn good cop. He could freak out later. He needed to handle this now. “He put them up.”

Jack dropped back, bringing his hands closer to his body, like Felix’s weak slap hurt more than it could have. Then he dropped back onto the tile, sitting across from Felix, shoulders slumped. “How do ye’ know?”

“He knew about this.” Felix pulled up the dress shirt and pushed down the slacks so Jack could see the white scar in the soft flesh of Felix’s right hip. “He talked about it, said the bathroom lighting didn’t— didn’t do it justice.” Felix’s skin crawled, the panic settled in his chest again, but he forced himself to push past it. “He put the cameras up, I’m sure of it. That means he knows who I am.”

Jack stared at the scar on Felix’s hip, his gaze ages away. It was almost like his body was present, but his mind wasn’t. Felix couldn’t think about that right now, couldn’t lose track. If he let himself slip from this mindset, he would—

But the way Dante’s touch—

“It isn’t from appendix surgery,” Felix suddenly said. “Dante was wrong.” He was so happy Dante was wrong. Dante knew Felix’s body, he knew all of the scars and hidden places, knew Felix even better than the people Felix had invited into his bed because Felix preferred the lights off, but Dante had seen everything. He needed Dante to not know whatever he could.

“My sister followed me everywhere,” Felix began, needing someone to know more than Dante did, needing to put that evil below someone. “Even into places that weren’t safe for her. She’s older than me, barely, but she followed me like she was the youngest. And she was scared of heights, but one day she followed me when I climbed a tree and she got stuck.”

Jack pulled himself from whatever place he’d fallen into and looked to Felix with a deadness in his eyes. But he was listening. That was all Felix needed.

“She got stuck,” Felix said again. “And she started crying. She was so scared, all the way up there, stuck on this branch that wasn’t really able to hold her. So I climbed down a little and tried to help her, tried to get her down the tree as carefully as I could. But she was panicked, she was terrified, and people act like animals when they’re afraid. She ended up grabbing me and holding too tightly,
pulling me to her like she thought I could act as some sort of shield if she fell. But she didn’t fall, I did. She pulled me too hard and I slipped off my branch and I fell. The woods had so much underbrush and shit on the ground. I fell on my front and a branch on the ground went into my hip.”

Felix shut his eyes and let himself remember the pain of that moment, of the hole in his hip that had bled. He remembered being scared that he was dying in that moment. But— “My sister was brave enough to come down on her own to help me,” Felix said. “Seeing me hurt— it broke through whatever was keeping her from being able to move. She overcame her fear of heights for me.”

Felix shuddered and looked to Jack. “Why did you help me?”

Jack flinched.

“You weren’t going to,” Felix said. “I could see it in your face. You wanted to, I know you did, but Mark held you back. Why did you end up helping me anyways?” He really wanted to know why Jack had failed to come to his aid in the beginning, why he’d stood there as Dante had molested Felix’s body, but Felix felt like he would be asking after some bigger scheme he would never get a straight answer to.

Jack shook his head. “Ye’ looked so scared.”

That was all he said.

The parallel between Felix’s story of his sister and what Jack had done was too ironic for him.

“He had the cameras on me,” Felix said, pushing past this sudden instinct to help Jack, bring him out of that fear. “He knows who I am and he’s keeping tabs on me. I’ll bet he’s the one who’s in on my body cam to. He probably got access through that detective you were mentioning. He’s watching me. The only question I have has his why.”

Jack paled and suddenly stood. He turned away from Felix, facing a painting of what looked like Sicilian Italy. Felix could see his shoulders start shaking.

“He’s watching me,” Felix said, realizing Jack was useless and that Felix would have to figure this out himself. “I don’t know for how long, but I am confident none of those cameras were in my home when I first moved in, so it was definitely after I met you. He didn’t approach me for any sort of initiation or buying, which means he doesn’t want information from me and doesn’t want me for his ranks. This means that he’s definitely after me in connection to you.”

Jack shuddered out a breath. Felix still couldn’t see his face. “Felix, stop.”

“He’s doing this to me because he thinks he can get to you,” Felix barreled on, ignoring Jack’s plea in favor of what Felix needed. He needed to work through this and find a solution and find out what he would have to do to keep him from Dante’s clutches. Anything to not be touched by that monster of a person again. “Though he likely knows I don’t know any information about what you do, either, meaning I’m more of a tool than a well of insight. He thinks he can use me for something to do with you.”

“Felix.”

“It’s gotta be that,” Felix rambled on, his voice raising in volume as he neared his conclusion. “He wants me to get to you, it’s obvious. But to what extent? He seemed so confident that you weren’t going to stop him back there in the lounge, he touched me like he thought you weren’t going to intervene. But he talked about you drawing a line in the sand. Was it a test? What if he actually doesn’t want me, he just wants to see how far you’ll go for me? But why does it matter? If you’re
both working together in some way—which you must be, to be invited to his birthday party—then why does he need to test the limits of your attraction to me? Or is it possessiveness? And why does it matter? What can he stand to gain by—”

Felix cut himself off as panic suddenly threatened to choke him. “Oh god,” Felix whimpered. “He was testing the best way to hurt me to make you fall into line. He got you to beg. He made you surrender to him through using me. He’s learning how to make you complacent and cooperative and he’s going to use me to do it, he’s going to hurt you through me, he’s going to—”

Jack suddenly whirled around with a gun in his hand and pointed at Felix’s head. Felix froze, not recognizing the look in Jack’s eyes. “Please shut up,” Jack choked out, his gun shaking in the air. “Please. Shut up.”

“You’re not gonna hurt me,” Felix said, knowing that for a fact. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Jack shuddered and a wounded noise escaped his throat. “Ye’ should’ve let me die.”

Felix swallowed down his panic, pushed past the anxiety attack to say, “Fuck that.”

Jack flinched, the gun wavering as he trembled. It was still pointed at Felix’s head, but Felix knew for a fact that Jack would never, ever even think to pull the trigger. He was just a scared animal, trying to get Felix to stop. But Jack had drawn that red line for Dante to see. Felix knew he was worth something more to Jack and no gun in Jack’s hand pointed at Felix would ever be a threat. To prove this to himself, Felix took a step closer, letting the muzzle of the gun press between his eyes. Jack’s knees nearly gave out.

“You won’t hurt me,” Felix said calmly. “You’re just afraid. Afraid that whatever you feel for me is going to get me killed.” Jack whimpered and Felix almost thought he saw tears in Jack’s eyes. “Put the gun down,” Felix prompted gently. “We’ll figure this out.”

Jack trembled one last time before lowering the gun. “Ye’ should’ve let me die,” he said again. “Saving me wasn’t worth this. The good you do every day more than encompasses whatever good I’ll manage with the rest of the life ye’ saved. You should’ve let me die.”

“Fuck that and fuck off,” Felix said. “I need you to focus, Jack, I need you with me on this. Dante has found your weakness, he’s found your limit, and for some impossible reason, it’s me. We need to make sure he can’t use it against you.”

Jack shook his head, suddenly appearing so very young. “Ye’ should have let me die.”

“I am going to hit you if you tell me that again.”

Jack looked away, expression shuttering closed. He took in a shaky breath and dropped back to the floor, the gun useless at his side. “It’s all so fucked,” he said in a low voice, almost as if to himself. “It’s all so fucked, Felix. You were never—” Jack cut himself off and looked up at Felix with searching blue eyes. “He’d always warned me of this.”


Jack shook his head. “I don’t know what t’ do, but I’ll figure it out. It’s too late t’ just pull out of yer life. I know that sounds selfish, I know it’s probably what ye’ want, but if Dante knows who ye’ are, then there’s no chance of me cuttin’ ties with ye’ and having that work.”

“Why does it matter that it’s Dante?” Felix pressed. “Who is he?”
“That’s Dante Bisognin,” Jack said, his voice still so low. “That’s the brother of the Don.”

Felix paled. “Jesus christ.”

“It’s over, Felix,” Jack told him. There was a tremor voice, one he was valiantly trying to hide, but failing to manage regardless. “There’s a price on yer head. I don’t know how much, but I know it’s there. Dante ain’t like his brother, he’s paranoid and sly and a fuckin’ liar t’ the bone. He already doesn’t trust me. He wanted a leg up on me ages ago, bartering, a way t’ force me into line should he think I step too far outta the way. Now he’s got it. He’s got you.”

Jack paused, his eyes suddenly hazy like he was somewhere else. For a moment, he looked genuinely afraid. Then that moment ended and Jack steeled his jaw, resolve coming over him like a mask. “I’ll get Kon. He’s the best I’ve got, he’ll be yours twenty-four-fucking-seven. I know ye’ hate eyes on you, but Dante— Dante’s not like me, Felix, he’s not—”

Jack cut off again, straining for the words, pulling at his air. Felix couldn’t say much of anything, astounded by the side of Jack he was being shown. Beyond spitfire venom and aloofness, there was also this man, the one sitting on the bathroom floor in what had to be a three thousand dollar suit, trying to figure out how to keep some worthless cop safe from the Italian Mafia. Felix almost felt like he was seeing a stranger. He didn’t—

Felix sat down in front of Jack. “I’ll cooperate,” he said, softening his own tone. Jack looked up, obviously surprised, still a little too frantic to keep every emotion under the mask he seemed to prefer to show Felix. “I really don’t like being watched, but I like being alive more,” Felix admitted with a wry grin. “If you need me to fix certain habits or tell certain people where I’m going, I’ll do it. I hate this, okay? I really do. But I know that I’m officially in too deep to get out on my own safely. I’d be stupid not to take your help.”

He wasn’t going to let Jack off easy, wasn’t going to let the man think Felix was giving in to him in some way. Felix was pissed off, deep down, and he knew exactly who he could blame, but his life was officially on the line, and Felix didn’t plan on dying to the hands of a power-hungry mafioso. He’d always planned on dying in the streets, in his uniform, badge on his belt, and gun in his hand. Felix was not going to go down any other way.

“You owe me,” Felix told Jack firmly. “So don’t cop out on me now to whatever bullshit is in your head. If you lose focus, I die. Do not let that happen.”

Jack grit his teeth and nodded firmly. “I won’t let ye’ down, Felix.”

“Damn fucking right you won’t,” Felix told him. “You’re the dumbass who fell in love with a straight guy. Wouldn’t want me to wind up dead on top of everything else.” Felix’s joke fell flat, but Jack plastered on a fake smile anyways. “Get up off the floor,” he said to Jack. “It’s disgusting down there.”

“Kinda feels becoming of me,” Jack murmured. “But not you.”

Jack stood and strode to the mirrors with that familiar confidence seeping back into his bones. He ran a hand through his hair, tugged at the collar of his suit, then smirked at his reflection. Felix suddenly realized Jack was trying out the expressions that normally showed on his face, testing them out and making sure he could still wear them convincingly. Felix suddenly wondered which Jack was the real one of all the Jacks he had met.

“Shield will escort ye’ from the premises,” Jack told him with an air of command, leaving no room for Felix to argue. “You’re t’ follow him home. Kon will arrive tomorrow. I know ye’ tossed my
number last I gave it to ye’, so Kon will give it to you again. Please put it in your phone under some pseudonym.” Jack turned to Felix, his mask firmly in place once more, and looking like a different person. “Be safe out there, Officer,” Jack said with a sly grin that had Felix tensing and bracing for some sort of fight. “Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight till it be ‘morrow.”

With that, Jack gave Felix an offhanded, almost careless salute of two fingers from his brow and kicked away the bench keeping the door shut. He opened the door to reveal Mark and Tyler standing watch, resolute and still. Jack left and re-entered the throng of the party with Mark closely behind. Tyler just grimly took Felix by the elbow and pressed into his side, guarding Felix with his life as he brought him away from the prying eyes of Dante, who watched Felix leave from the balcony of the lounge with eyes like a bird of prey and paradise.
“You wash your carrots like you’ve never seen a carrot before,” Mama Bach tutted as she grabbed more potatoes from the bag Felix had bought with her and began peeling them. “Didn’t your mother teach you? Didn’t she teach you? Wash hard, wash hard! They have little, little insides. Cracks.”

“Grooves?” Felix offered with a grin.

“Grooves, grooves!” she exclaimed, excited to know the word. “They have grooves, you must clean in the grooves! You don’t want to eat dirt!”

“What if I like dirt?” Felix asked her, still grinning. It was easy to forget his worries when he was with the stout, no-nonsense woman. They’d met for their weekly grocery date and she’d asked Felix if he had plans for dinner. When he’d told her that he was cooking for some friends, she’d asked what he was making. And when Felix had told her he had no fucking clue, Mama Bach had happily volunteered her help, which Felix had then gladly accepted. Now she was bustling around his kitchen, helping him make her authentic chicken dumplings.

“They’re so good for the cold!” she insisted. “We are in Autumn, October is the coolest season of cold! Your friends will love warm dumplings. Mandu, mandu, best mandu.”

Felix was sure she was right and that her mandu really was the best. Felix had never had truly authentic Korean, as most places in New York were Chinese, thanks to the ever-famous China Town the ways away. He was excited to try something new, even though she told him she’d Americanized the recipe a little just to adapt to the spices and produce that were readily available here.

Felix’s kitchen was getting messy with the amount of bustling they were both doing, but Felix was undeniably having fun. He was enjoying having someone else in this home that was easy and free of any sort of sordid background. Mama Bach was just a regular working woman of New York City, one of the people Felix sought to protect. It made him relaxed to know he didn’t have to be on edge with her around.

“Your friends will love it, I know it,” Mama Bach mumbled as she sprinkled salt into the boiling water pot in front of her.

“Mama Bach, you are absolutely invited to stay,” Felix told her again. She hadn’t agreed last time, saying something about not wanting to cramp the young kids these days with her olden way style, but Felix was sure that she would cave if he pressured her enough. “My friends would love to have you around.” Truth be told, Felix as only having one friend over tonight, and then said friend’s friends, which would only mean strangers to him. Sive was coming over with his girlfriend and then Sive’s friend and Sive’s friend’s girlfriend. Felix was going to be outnumbered by strangers in the
home he still wasn’t entirely comfortable in. He would love to have just one extra person that he knew.

Among that, Felix was still reeling from what had happened Wednesday night. The birthday party with Dante’s hands on him, Jack’s near-break down in the bathroom, and the knowledge that someone very, very dangerous was also very interested in Felix.

Then there was the way Jack had been, how Jack had sounded, crumbled on the bathroom floor, looking every bit like his world had somehow ended. Felix couldn’t imagine the way Jack had to have felt, knowing that his way of life and his simple feelings had gotten Felix thrown into the sights of dangerous men and women. Felix didn’t know if Jack loved him, but if Jack really was attracted to him and invested in Felix to the point where he was revealing things about himself he wouldn’t reveal to anyone else, then the fact that his existence alone was the thing putting Felix’s life in danger had to feel terrible. And the way he’d talked—

Felix helped people, it was instinct. He hated the way people sounded when they were afraid, the tremor to their voices that they couldn’t completely mask, the way their hands would shake and hover in the air, searching for something or someone too cling to in their fear. Felix hated the way people talked when they were afraid, and Jack had talked like he was afraid. And all of Felix’s instincts had told him to do whatever he could to make Jack lose that fear, but with what he knew of Jack’s feelings for him, the way his brain told him to get rid of that fear wasn’t always something Felix wanted. Felix had always dealt with helping people in a “them, then me” fashion. He didn’t think of himself and what he wanted, he thought of only what the other person needed. And Jack would need someone to cling to to fight the fear and Felix was comfortable with that.

But what else could he do?

Felix paused in his tight dicing of cabbage, thinking. “Mama Bach?” he said softly. “Can I get some advice?”

Mama Bach hummed and nodded as she beat out dough and cut it into perfect little circles with a knife, as Felix didn’t have the necessary tools beyond the basics in his kitchen. Felix took her hum for consent to Felix’s request and swallowed around the knot in this throat before asking, “What do you do if someone’s in love with you and you’re not in love with them?”

Mama Bach looked up from her task with a knit brow. “Mworago? Is this about that Marzia girl?”

Mama Bach let out a soft noise of patient understanding. “And you are not into men.”

“Jinjja? Who’s the girl?”

Felix’s grimace deepened. “It’s, uh. It’s not a girl.”

Mama Bach let out a soft noise of patient understanding. “And you are not into men.”

“No,” Felix affirmed with a heavy sigh. “Like, nothing against people who are, I’m just not, and I never have been. Like, it’s literally just never piqued my interest, you know? Not even in movies or TV shows. I’ve never, ever been interested in men and I really doubt I ever will be. It would’ve happened by now, I’d like to think. And the point is, I’m not attracted to the guy who’s in love with me.”

“Is he pushy?”
Felix shrugged. Maybe Jack was a little insistent, but he’d never tried to push himself on Felix. “Not in the romantic aspect,” Felix said. “He wants to be friends. He says he’s happy being friends. He knows about Marzia and even gave me advice on things to buy for her cause she’s so different from me. Hell, he hasn’t even—”

Aside from the kiss, Jack hadn’t tried to bring up for his feelings for Felix in any sort of positive light. Jack treated what he felt for Felix like it was some sort of curse for Felix to avoid. The thought settled unhappily in Felix’s chest. Not because he agreed, but because it didn’t seem like a healthy thing for Jack to do.

“He loves you, you don’t love him back,” Mama Bach said carefully. “And as someone who holds the idea of love and loyalty in very high regard, you feel guilty for not being able to return the feelings.”

Felix had never thought he felt guilty, but now that Mama Bach introduced the concept aloud, Felix couldn’t agree more. He knew what it was like to love someone in vain and it fucking sucked. And the more he was starting to see how righteous and good of a person Jack was beneath all the bad, as he was starting to learn how much Jack had suffered, Felix hated to be just another reason Jack was hurting. It wasn’t fair to Jack and it wasn’t fair to Felix. Here was someone that needed help, and Felix couldn’t give it even though he knew exactly what was needed. Unless—

“Should I force it?” Felix asked, his voice small in the warmth of the homely kitchen. “He, he’s gone through some really bad stuff. Still is. I don’t know if he has a dredge of happiness in his life. What if I faked it? Just to help him.”

Mama Bach turned away from her task to look to Felix with an endless sort of sadness. “U-wa. U-wa. Felix, you are too good.”

Felix winced, having the feeling she wasn’t saying that in a nice way. “It would be worth it in the end, right?” he asked, still unable to drop the idea. Now that it had suddenly occurred to him, he couldn’t ignore it. “I mean, I don’t agree with some of the things this guy does, but he’s been through so much bad. He deserves something good. Even if I don’t feel the same, why couldn’t I just pretend? For the greater good.”

“You’re what happens when people push themselves too hard to fix the wrongs of the world,” Mama Bach told him sagely. “You’ve seen so many people turn a blind eye to evil that now you think you’re one of the few trying to change things for the better. You put too much weight on your shoulders.”

“You’re not telling me what I should do.”

“Ei! Don’t do it, you dummy! Fake love is no better than unrequited! You’d never be able to give him what he really wanted at the cost of hurting yourself. And if he loves you, the last thing he wants is for you to hurt like you would have to.” She went back to the dough, beating it a little more aggressively, shaking her head. “The world these days, this big bad world. Boys like you shouldn’t have to carry all this heaviness. Do not fake it. Whoever this man is, he will find someone else. Do not sacrifice yourself so heedlessly for someone who could just as easily move on.”

Felix wanted to believe she was right, that Jack would just eventually move on, but Jack made a habit of standing in open streets where a yellow Pontiac could run him down. “What if he doesn’t have a lot of time left?” Felix asked quietly. Jack lived a dangerous life, just like Felix did. Death was always waiting in the working hours. “What if it’s now or never?”

“Then never,” Mama Bach said firmly. “You both deserve better.”
Felix didn’t know if he agreed, but he’d solicited her advice, and he wasn’t going to start a fight over it. And she was right. “I don’t think I could fake it,” he told her, unhappy with the reality of his selfish self. “I just—I couldn’t ever imagine kissing him. Being with him. And I know he would be able to tell. Plus, like, I’ve already fought it so hard. He wouldn’t believe me if I suddenly just surrendered.”

There was a pause, then the hard smack of a wooden spoon to the top of Felix’s hands. Felix yelped and drew the hand to his chest, guarding it. “What the f—crap?” He asked, looking to the smaller woman in confusion. “Why did you do that?”

“Love isn’t surrender,” Mama Bach told him firmly. “If this man is asking you to surrender, then you run. That isn’t love. You run.”

Felix wasn’t sure what Jack was asking of him anymore. “Thank you,” he said, just wanting this conversation over now that he had been made aware of an ugly truth about himself. “I didn’t mean to dump this on you,” he told her. “Everything’s just been pretty stressful.”

“Geuro-kuna.”

Felix had no idea what that meant.

“You work such a hard job,” she continued. “Children like you seeing all of this bad. It skews your world view. There is much more good than evil, you just have the worst of it all thrown into your face. Hard to ignore, hard to ignore.”

“You seem to know a bit about the job,” Felix said.

“My husband was a cop,” Mama Bach told Felix, surprising him. “And he was very good, like you. But he was so good that bad people wanted him gone so they could keep doing what they wanted. And that was what got him killed.”

Felix stopped what he was doing, looking to the widow as his heart sunk. “… I’m sorry for your loss.”

She waved him off. “It’s fine, it’s fine, happened long ago. He died doing what he knew was right and doing what he loved. But I don’t want you doing the same, you hear?” She rapped his knuckles again with the wooden spoon, though a little more gently. “We need good people. If all of you keep dying for your cause, we will have none left.”

Felix grimaced at the truth to her words. “Is that why your son became FBI?”

“Yes, yes,” she affirmed. “He was there, you know, on a ride-along. Bad men shot my husband in his car while he was driving and it flipped. My poor son was upside down alongside his dying father, so he joined the FBI and now he busts bad people in the name of his father.”

Felix couldn’t help a small smile. “But the other one?”

“Aigu!” Mama Bach exclaimed in near exasperation. “That boy, I don’t know what to do with him! Hanging around with such bad people. He dealt drugs once, Felix! Drugs! My son, dealing drugs.” She tutted and shook her head. “I rarely see him even though he lives very close. Never has time for his mother.”

Felix shook his head in disdain along with the woman. How could anyone fail to see this delightful woman once at least once a week? Felix would take more time with her if he could afford it. “You take good care of your parents,” Mama Bach told Felix firmly. “Your mama and papa. Be
good to them when they’re as old as me.”

“You’re not old,” Felix chided, trying to brush past her order to stay with his parents. He didn’t think they would really want their danger-seeking son around when they were in their golden years, considering how much of a perfect pair of pacifists they were. He was about to start to cleanup all of the prep he’d finished for the dinner when his doorbell rang. “Oh crap,” he said. “They’re early.” he grinned at Mama Bach. “Guess you’re eating with us.”

She tutted and waved him off to the door. Felix grinned and ruffled his hair a bit, hoping it wasn’t sticking to his scalp from the heat of the kitchen. Sive and his friends weren’t meant to be here until five and it was barely after four, so he was going to have to give them some shit for being unforgivably early. Dinner wasn’t even close to ready and he had no idea how to entertain guests. That had always been his sister’s innate gift, not his.

He tugged down his shirt, felt some sort of excitement welling in his chest at actually having a normal night in the face of what had become normal in his life, and opened the door with a grin.

The grin fell away when he saw a mountainous, huge, bulky man standing at his door. The man was bending down slightly to avoid hitting his head on the porch light and Felix estimated he was nearly seven feet tall. He had a red, bushy beard, and unruly hair tied up into ponytail with tattoos crawling up his thick neck and covering his burly arms. He was wearing a simple pair of blue jeans and a white Henley despite the cold. He wasn’t exactly glaring at Felix, but he definitely wasn’t smiling.

“Oh,” Felix said, stumbling over his thoughts in the face of the brute of a man. “Hi.”

The man narrowed his eyes a little. “Con.”


“No.” The man then rolled his eyes before pointing to himself. “I am Kon.”

Felix’s eyes went wide, realizing Jack had made good on his promise. He’d said Kon was he best he could offer, but Felix hadn’t expected this Game of Thrones shit. The man’s heavy accent was beyond Eastern European and undefinable. Felix wondered if the guy used so few words because his accent made it impossible to understand the majority of what he was saying.

“I’ll be staying across the street,” the man told him gruffly, instantly shooting down Felix’s previous theory and letting Felix guess he was more North-Eastern European. “Permanent resident. Job is to watch.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Felix affirmed, slowly feeling oddly unintimidated by this fucking beast on his doorstep. Jack had promised this man for Felix’s safety, and Felix was really begin to trust Jack’s word, though it was likely because he had very little choice in the matter. Trust Jack or end up dead. That was how it was starting to look.

Felix thought of Mama Bach who was inside the kitchen and decided he wasn’t sure if he trusted Jack’s word to extenuate beyond himself. So he grabbed his coat from the rack and tugged it on, stepping outside to stand with Kon so they could talk. “Kon,” Felix said. “Is that short for Konnor?”

The man snorted, stepping back to give Felix space. “Konstantine.”

“Jesus christ,” Felix wheezed. “That’s a hell of a fucking name. Where are you from?” Konstantine failed to respond. Felix winced. “Look, dude, you essentially have my life in your hands at the orders of your boss. I’d kinda like to get to know you, considering you’re going to be watching my every move and I have to be comfortable with that. And I am, okay? I promise I’m fine with it. But I’d
kinda prefer to be stalked by an acquaintance than a stranger.”

Kon seemed to study him for a moment, like he was judging on whether or not he should give in to Felix’s quest. “My boss did not instruct me to get close.”

“Jack doesn’t understand the subtleties of what I’m going through,” Felix said. “He might expect you to keep your distance and not, like, be friendly with me cause he’s jealous.” Felix paused. He didn’t know if Jack was out. “Or, uh. N-not?”

Kon snorted again. “I am well aware of my boss’ infatuation. All of Redmond’s Bandits know. He never shuts up about his dear Felina.” There was a creeping edge of fondness in the way Kon complained that had Felix’s cheeks heating inexplicably. Did Jack really talk about him that much? Did every one of Jack’s people know Felix by association? And what the fuck were Redmond’s Bandits? What kind of Nickelodeon bullshit was that?

“I will admit,” Kon said. “He may be a bit jealous. But only in that way that makes him sick with himself after.”

Felix had no idea what that meant. “I’m having a dinner with my friends tonight,” he told Kon, deciding he meant what he’d said. He wanted to get to know this man who was going to be safeguarding Felix’s life. If he could get Kon to not hate him, then he would likely care a little bit more about not letting Felix die. “You wanna come in and eat with us?”

Kon raised a bushy brow. Jesus christ, his eyebrows were huge, they took up, like, half his forehead. “You are not what I expected.”

Kon was not the first of Jack’s goons to say that about Felix. He wished he could be a fly on the wall and hear just what exactly Jack said about him that gave people such specific expectations of him. “I’m gonna pretend that’s not offensive in some way,” he said. “Do you want to come in?”

“He talked about you like you are some big man,” Kon continued, unsolicited, almost smiling. “Someone like me. He always talked about being thrown around. A weird one, he is. But you—you’re so normal. So average. So small. Not at all what I expected.”

Felix glared up at the mountain man. “Look, I’m offering you a free, homemade meal. Do not ruin this.”

Kon grinned wide, showing that his teeth were unnaturally sharp.

“Jesus christ, do you file those?” Felix asked, slightly horrified.

“And use bleach teeth for permanent shine.”

“Are you human?” Felix asked. “Just to be sure.”

“All bet’s off.”

Felix refused to be freaked out. “Are you gonna come in for dinner?”

Kon shook his head. “I will watch. Keep curtains open. If you leave, you tell me. Give phone.” Felix automatically handed over his phone after unlocking it, because the man’s deep voice made Felix instinctually follow orders. Kon took the phone and tapped in some information. “I gave you me, under Cruella. Jack is in there, under Pup.” Felix sunk his teeth into his lower lip to keep from laughing aloud. Kon smirked, obviously seeing through Felix’s failed attempt. “Your friends arrive in thirty minutes, they are carpooling. Half-baked and Shield will be continuing their normal
surveillance, but I will be permanent eye. You need help? You call me.”

Felix nodded owlishly, looking at his phone after it was handed back to him. Kon’s number had no image, but Jack’s was a stock image of a black lab puppy with big eyes and a pink tongue. Felix almost wanted to show Jack the contact just to see if it would start shit. He found it oddly adorable. “He’ll hate this.”

“Don’t care.” Kon gave a tip of an imaginary cap. “You have a good night, friend. Expect Mark later tonight. He has things he wishes to discuss with you.”

Felix wasn’t afraid of Kon, but he was definitely some sort of something when it came to fucking Mark. Felix winced and tried not to let Kon see just how fucking intimidated he was by the prospect. “Did he, uh, happen to say what he wanted to talk about, in particular?”

Kon expression fell into stone faced nothing.

“Fuck,” Felix said. He tugged at his hair. “Look, since you’re protecting me, I feel like I should probably tell you the main reason why this night is happening. Like, yeah, I wanna hang out with friends, but I’m gonna be approaching my coworker about some possible illegal dealings within our precinct and it might get me into trouble. And since you’re gonna be the one dealing with me in trouble, I feel like you should be aware of this.”

As Kon narrowed his eyes in distaste, Felix felt a hint like a child being reprimanded. But he wasn’t going to change his mind. Det. Summers was a fucking asshole and Felix had never liked the guy from the beginning. He wanted to talk to Sive about the best course of action he could take while bringing up Det. Summers possible relation to the Italian mob to their Sargent. “I’m not gonna change my mind,” Felix told Kon. “I’m going to tell the appropriate authorities. Just felt like you should know.”

“Jack was right about one thing,” Kon said. “You are suicidal.”

Felix bristled under the harsh accusation. “I’m not going to let bad people get away with even worse shit just because I’m afraid of getting hurt,” he told Kon with a defiant look. “My job is to keep the people and this city safe and I take that job very, very seriously. Be sure to report back to your boss about that. I will not allow you to stop me.”

Kon paused a moment, then grinned again, showing those terrifying teeth. “Now I see it,” he said cryptically. “Now I see it.”

Felix ducked back into his home and dodged Mama Bach’s questions, saying he had just been greeting a new neighbor and it was nothing serious. Kon had apparently drawn a line in the sand of who he would know and who he wouldn’t. Probably for the best, at least in Kon’s mind. Felix was going to work on extending his trust to people he felt it was necessary to trust, considering how badly he didn’t want to die.
Sive showed up early still, as Kon had predicted, thirty minutes before five, and the second Felix opened the door, he announced his presence with a wild shout and hoisted a bottle of Riesling into the air. “About damn time you made good on your promise, Kjell-bitch!” Sive exclaimed. He was standing at the front of the small group, two girls and another guy. One of the girls was a goddamn gorgeous, dark-skinned woman, her nails painted a nice lilac to offset the pastel yellows of her clothes. She was hanging off of Sive’s arm like she belonged there, and Felix was absolutely certain she was out of Sive’s league, British accent or not.

Beyond Sive and the woman, there was the other couple. A lithe man with a nicely kept beard and a beanie on his head with a petit, dark-haired girl beside him. Felix looked keenly over the three people he didn’t know, automatically checking for any lumps in their clothes, any hidden weapons. He glanced over their expressions and judged they were just as wary of meeting a stranger as he was. Their smiles were friendly, but he could tell there was a tightness to the corners of their mouths and eyes. Felix realized he probably had people to impress tonight.

He was honestly used to melding into pre-existing friend groups. It was what he had to do since he moved around so much, between cities, making relationships where he could find them. He readied himself for the countless inside jokes and references and memories he wouldn’t be able to understand or fall in with. He always took solace in, at least, being able to talk about work with his cop buddies in a way their original friends and spouses couldn’t.

“I’ve got a second guest here,” Felix told them, inviting them in by simply opening the door and stepping aside. Sive was the first to bound inside, looking around with a sharp eye.

“So this is the work of your mob boss, huh?” Sive asked. “You ever hear from the guy again after that other shit? What was it? Whiskey? Did you drink the whiskey?”

“Pretty sure I did,” Felix said, trying not to let Sive stay on the mafia topic. He hated lying even though the outcome of his friend not falling into danger was preferable to the guilt. “It kinda felt mute to just hang onto it with everything that was going on.”

“I don’t really think I understand the story behind this,” Brad asked at the table, the man that had accompanied Sive here. He was also British, sounding like he came from somewhere around The West Midlands with that accent, but Felix didn’t really give the chance to ask. The girl that had been on his arm was Emma. Sive’s own girlfriend was named Rowena. They’d all apparently been friends for about six years, though Sive, Brad, and Emma had actually known each other their whole lives and moved to New York from the UK together. Felix knew he would never manage to wedge himself a place in this group and didn’t mind the fact. He just didn’t know why he didn’t mind, considering it had always bothered him when he could find a place he belonged in the cities he lived in. Felix didn’t have time to puzzle out why. He had to listen to Sive spin this tale and pray he didn’t get anything too right.

“So Felix comes into the city and goes for coffee, yeah?” Sive says, sitting forward in his seat. Everyone turns their ears to him, but Mama Bach is the one to press into the table, as if getting closer will key her in on some important details she’d miss otherwise. She was taking a break in teaching Emma the correct way to eat a dumpling for this. “And he’s just leaving the fucking building, minding his own business, when he sees this scrawny guy standing by the side of the road. And whatever, people loiter, but then a car comes round the corner with a gun out the window! And Felix, being the genius he is, grabs the scrawny guy who’s obviously the target and shells him from bullets with his body! Saves the man’s life! Turns out, the man’s a fucking mob boss for the McLoughlins, and that guy— Jack, right?”

Felix nodded and took a cool sip of his water, hoping he could get through this without saying a
“The guy is Jack Fucking McLoughlin!” Sive cries out, obviously very much into the story. The people at the table let out these little sounds and looks of disbelief. “He saves Jack McLoughlin’s life, and somehow, the fuck gets a crush on Felix for it. Which, mind you, the man is evil, but he has good taste. So he fixes up Felix’s place, helps him finish moving in by sending grunts to unpack while Felix is on shift, and buys the man groceries! It’s incredible!”

“Have you heard from him again?” Rowena asked, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Not once,” Felix said, the lie coming too easily in a way he hated. “Aside from a few instances after the fact, I continued to ignore him, and he stopped pestering me. I haven’t heard from him in months.”

“Too bad,” Brad said. “You could have wheedled some information from him.”

“And make myself a threat?” Felix felt a little stupid for making this argument, considering he was already a target of one more mafioso than he’d like. “I’m just a beat cop. There’s nothing special about me. Let the detectives handle that.”

“You said you wanted to talk about the detectives, though,” Sive said, popping a sliver of chicken into his mouth that had fallen from a dumpling. “Wanna give that a go?”

Felix grimaced. “Later,” he said shortly, hoping his tone was severe enough to imply that it was a private matter. Sive gave a duck of his head in understanding and quickly changed the subject.

“Brad, doesn’t your gram live next door?”

Felix squinted slowly, thought of Mrs. Smith with her grand piano he moved around for her almost once a week because her memory was starting to go and “the placement never felt right.” Felix tried to see any familiar relationship between her and the Brit with the beard across from him at the table. Now that he looked, the resemblance was uncanny. Felix blanched. “Please help me convince your grandmother to put her piano on wheels.”

“I’m trying to make her sell the damn thing,” Brad sighed. “What did she tell you, that it was his husbands? My granddad didn’t even play! She got it from the fucking house when she got it.”

“It needs wheels,” Felix insisted. “My back can’t take this forever.”

Brad argued with Felix well into dessert and Mama Bach somehow was able to interject, prompting everyone to let her teach them something like a children’s game from when she lived in Korea. It gave Felix the opportunity he’d been waiting for all night.

“Detective Summers is guilty of what?” Sive asked, keeping his voice low so the others in Felix’s living room wouldn’t overhear them. “Dude, it’s one thing to say that cops are dirty. Everyone knows some of them are, it’s an unfortunate truth. But saying one of the detectives on the biggest, most dangerous drug scandal and most awful murders of the century is a made man? You’re gonna need some real proof to back that up.”

“That’s the thing,” Felix sighed. “All I’ve got is my gut and some conversations I’ve overheard.”

“That’s not gonna fly,” Sive said. “Sarge doesn’t search desks for just anything. It’s technically not Summers’ property, since it’s at work, but Sarge doesn’t like breaching privacy. He likes to culminate the respect of his men, not dash it on the windshield.”
“People are dying, Sive.”

Sive grimaced and looked away. “I know that,” he said. “You think I don’t know that? With these murders and Lovecraft. God, I’ve been here for a while, but it’s never felt like this before. I want Rowena out of her. It’s not safe for a girl like her, but she won’t leave me.”

“If you want to make this place better for her, then you need to help me take Summers down,” Felix insisted. “I think he’s the one who’s putting the pattern to the families being murdered.”

“Fuck, Felix, that’s a fuckin’ accusation there, mate.”

“It’s what makes sense.” He couldn’t say Jack had told him to be wary of Summers, so Felix had to fabricated reasons. And if anyone would know the identities of people who had left various Mafias, it would be one of the detectives for said cases.

“Do you have some sort of pattern figured out?” Sive asked. “Something the guys in charge don’t know?”

“I think so,” Felix hedged. “I put together how they’re all connected, I think.” At Sive’s look of undeniable interest, Felix leaned forward to keep his voice even quieter. “They were all made men and women,” Felix told his coworker urgently. “All of them were part of various mafias and they all left, through inexplicable reasons. Maybe they were helped by some undercover part of the law enforcement, maybe they bought their way out.” Maybe another boss took pity on these people and brought them out and gave them good homes and tried to help them rebuild their lives. “However they got free, the thing connecting them is that they were part of the mafias of New York and got out. Now they’re dying for it.”

“Can you prove any of this?” Sive asked.

“Easily,” Felix said. “Background checks.”

“That does sound easy,” Sive murmured. “Which makes me wonder why the detectives didn’t do preliminary backgrounds checks in the first… place…” The reality dawned on Sive and he looked nervous. “Felix, I can’t help you in this,” he said. “I’m sorry, but, I have something to protect.”

Felix glanced back to Rowena, trying to clap along to the beat Mama Bach was trying to teach her. Rowena was tone deaf and couldn’t carry tempo for her life and she was laughing even as she failed miserably. Sive had been with her for years. “I shouldn’t have involved you,” Felix said softly. “I’ll bring this up to Sarge directly. Forget I ever told you.”

Sive sighed unhappily and sat back. “For what it’s worth, I admire you,” he told Felix. “Doing the right thing regardless. Kinda weird, too. Isn’t there anyone who would want you safe? Someone who would want you to stop putting your head on the chopping block for them?”

Felix shifted uncomfortably, thinking simultaneously of his nephew and sister and— and Jack. “I can’t let that stop me,” Felix said firmly. “I won’t listen to them. It doesn’t matter what they want, what people need is more important. Besides, they’d only care for a little while. They’d all move on.”

Sive winced. “Mate— maybe you need some therapy.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Felix defended harshly. “There’s nothing that will fix this without sacrifice. I’ll do my best to keep myself from getting killed, but I’m already in danger as is.” Dante’s touch was still fresh in his mind. Felix was never going to get out of this city unscathed. “If I’m gonna get hurt, it may as well be for a good reason. But I won’t bring you into this. I should have known better.” He
couldn’t involve just anyone in this. Sive was a beat cop, just like him. There was no reason to put Sive in harm’s way. “Consider this my apology for trying to drag you into my shit,” Felix said. “I was an idiot.”

“Felix, you’re trying to do the right thing.”

“But not everyone can take the same risks I can,” Felix argued. “And I should have realized that. It’s never as simple as doing the right thing, Sive. I know that. I was wrong to put you in this situation.”

Sive sighed again. “Just wish I could be your partner and stand with you. You’re gonna need it.”

“I understand why you can’t,” Felix assured him gently. “I get it. Just watch my back when we’re on shift and you’ll be doing your part.”

Sive nodded, still unhappy, but Felix doubted he’d be able to change that. He wasn’t sure how deeply Sive’s idea of partner-loyalty went, but he was sure it was near-Hollywood levels. Felix reached out and pat Sive on the shoulder, trying to placate him. “I know you’d be there if you could,” he told his friend. “I understand. Let’s just have fun tonight and not think about it.”

“If you get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive myself,” Sive told him.

“If I get myself killed, it’ll be my own damn fault,” Felix said firmly. “And I’ll have died doing what’s important to me. That’s gotta mean something, right?”

Sive looked horrified. Rowena called him over, and Sive only barely just managed to school his expression into something that wasn’t sick at the edges with what Felix had said. Felix understood Sive and how Sive needed to protect himself for the people he cared about, but Sive didn’t understand Felix. Very few people did and Felix was still struggling to live with the fact. He just didn’t get why people had such a hard time understanding him when understanding them was as easy as breathing.

“Felix!” Mama Bach cried out. “I’m leaving my leftover Gonggal-Ppang with you. Now come play, come play!”

Felix got up from the table and went into the living room, studying the appropriate hand gestures that lined up with certain words in the children’s song Mama Bach would sing. He struggled and failed, but he could sing, and it felt good to pretend to be a kid again, at least for a moment.

As everyone left for the night, Felix chanced a glance across the street. For the first time, there were lights on. Felix smiled to himself and locked up for the night, feeling like he could manage to sleep soundly tonight.

. . .

Felix woke up to the startling sensation of something heavy being tossed on his legs and shrieked when he saw a dark figure standing at the foot of his bed. Felix’s hand shot underneath the pillow for his firearm, which he had raised and aimed at the figure in the same amount of time it took him to draw breath to scream. The figure flinched back, but only slightly, obviously unperturbed by the gun, even as Felix clicked off the safety. His mind was still hazy with sleep. The figure wasn’t attacking.

“Who the fuck—” Felix babbled before he leaned over to switch on his bedside lamp, bathing the room in warm light.

Mark looked fucking pissed. Honestly, what else was new?

“How do you have my mother’s gonggal-ppang in your fridge?” Mark asked, his voice low and
deadly.

Felix stalled. “What?”

“My mother’s gonggal-ppang,” Mark repeated. “She uses a very, very special recipe mix, she
doesn’t follow tradition or boxes. She fucking stamps flowers into the dough with an actual stamp, I
can see the stamp on all of them. Why do you have my mother’s gonggal-ppang in your fridge?”

When Felix failed to immediately answer— his brain working rather slowly since it was only two
AM— Mark sneered and whipped out a gun of his own, some terrifying automatic that Felix was
pretty sure was illegal for a civilian to own. “Answer me.”

“Don’t point a fucking gun at me!” Felix snapped.

“You’re pointing one at me!”

“This is my fucking house!”

“Those are my mother’s gonggal-ppang!”

It finally clicked. Felix gaped. “Mama Bach is your mother?!”

“What the fuck did you just call her?”

Felix looked to the foreboding man in new light, instantly searching for any likeness. Aside from the
obvious Korean blood, there was very little, save the round head. He figured Mark took mainly after
his father. “You’re the ungrateful kid,” Felix said, instantly realizing that Mark was the troublesome
child Mama Bach mourned. “Jesus christ, your brother becomes FBI, and what do you do? Get into
selling illegal shit? What the fuck, Mark, why don’t you see your mother at all?”

Mark’s expression soured. “I’m not exactly safe to know these days, you jackass.”

“It’s your mother.”

“And how often do you see your own?”

“That’s beside the point, my mom doesn’t live in the same city as me!”

“She’s better off not seeing me,” Mark said firmly. “Put your fucking gun down and throw away the
gonggal-ppang.”

“Fuck you,” Felix huffed, now grumpy and tired and defensive of Mama Bach. “She made those for
me, I’m keeping them. She’s my friend.”

“She’s my mother.”

“So? You don’t ever see her.”

“You being around her is just as dangerous as me being around her,” Mark seethed. “You’re putting
her life and the lives of everyone you care about in danger because you insist on continuing to
fraternize with Jack and jutting your nose into the crime world.”

Felix rolled his eyes. “Are you still on me for being around your boss?”

”He’s not my boss.”
“You told me you were friends, but my observations say otherwise.” Felix figured he wasn’t going to sleep much whenever Mark did eventually leave, so he got up and out of bed, putting his gun away, only barely watching as Mark did the same. Felix moved into the bathroom to splash some water on his face and better wake up for this conversation. “You made it very clear in the beginning that you think I won’t be able to resist Jack’s charm,” he reminded Mark. “Not that I’m saying you’re right, but why are you upset about it something regardless?”

“I’m not deeming you with any sort of response,” Mark said. “Throw away the gonggal-ppang.”

“Dude, I can barely even pronounce it,” Felix sighed. “She’s a good woman. I got to know her because she changed her shopping days so her good son wouldn’t be obligated to help her on one of his few days off. We go grocery shopping every week now and she loves having me around. Making me stay away from her would just be another cruel thing you’ve done to her.” He watched Mark’s expression flutter minutely in the mirror and almost felt bad for the guy. He obviously still loved his mom, no matter what he did. Then again, what son didn’t love their mother? That wasn’t abused or neglected, that is.

“I’ve been careful,” he told Mark. “No one knows that I’m friends with Jack except for Dante, who damn well figured it out on his own, thanks to Jack himself. Your mother will not get dragged into this, okay? Why would she? They don’t need to use her to get to me, I’m an easy enough target as is, even with the muscle Jack’s got protecting me.”

“Kon can kill a man with one hand,” Mark said almost dully. He no longer seemed angry. He looked just as tired as Felix felt. “Jack had— I was told to check up on your personally.”

Felix made a face. “Does that happen often?”

“Only under very particular circumstances.”

“Is Jack hurt?”

“I swear to god, if you’re falling—”

“Jesus christ, can’t I care about a guy without having to say no homo?” Felix scowled at the man in the mirror. “I have a girlfriend, Mark.” Mark snorted a sardonic laugh. “And I’m not an asshole,” Felix defended. “I don’t cheat on people.”

“You’re playing basketball with a mob boss,” Mark said dryly. “Forgive me for not having confidence in your character.”

Felix’s scowl deepened. “Why are you such a dick? Like, I get why you hate me, but why Jack? You keep trying to double down on saying he’s your friend, not your boss, and then you say shit like this behind his back? Yeah, he’s a mob boss, but he’s doing a lot of good with a title he was born into. He’s using a bad situation to fix a bad problem.”

Mark arched a brow. “Careful, officer,” he said in a low voice. “One might think you’re being charmed by Jack. Same as everyone else.”

Felix threw a hand towel at Mark’s head. ”The guy had a hard life,” he snapped. “I would hope he could at least count on his so called ‘friends’ to support him, even when he’s not around.”

“Quit defending him.”

“I don’t understand you,” Felix bemoaned, shaking his head helplessly. “You talk shit, say Jack’s your friend, Jack talks about you like you mean so much to him, but then you act like this. And then
Felix cut himself off there, not wanting to go further and learn something he was better off not knowing. Back with Dante, at the ball, with Dante’s hands roaming Felix’s body, Mark had been the one to hold Jack back. Mark had been the one to urge Jack to let Felix be molested. Felix thanked god that Jack had broken the hold and intervened regardless. He knew Jack’s rebellion was one of the reasons why Mark was so accusatory to Felix now, but he didn’t care to understand why.

“Just go,” Felix told Mark, feeling that same sense of paranoia returning. Mark always inspired some sort of fear in him. The origin of that fear just varied. “I’m not leaving your mother. She needs a friend and I need to stay somewhat sane and normal. Don’t you dare threaten me or her for this.”

Mark sneered. “I would never hurt my mother. And that need to keep her safe is the reason why she feels so estranged from me.”

Felix felt that pity returning, but it fell flat in the face of how Mark talked about Jack when Jack wasn’t around. “You’re still a fucking dick.”

Mark heaved a bone deep sigh and said, “I know.”

Felix paused. The pity flared again, more like sympathy now. “Go eat the last of the gong-gal-pang,” he said, mispronouncing it horribly and not really caring. “If you really do avoid her, you probably don’t get her cooking all that much, which is a damn shame. Help yourself to any of her leftovers.”

When Mark didn’t immediately move or say anything, Felix met his eyes again in the mirror and tried to smile. “I miss my mom’s cooking a lot,” he told Mark gently. “She made these fantastic meatballs and I was never able to get the sauce quite as perfect as she can. I’d give anything to have her cooking again in the near future, but god knows that probably won’t happen until Thanksgiving, and even then, I’m not sure it’s safe to bring them up here. Just take what I’m offering, Mark. Don’t bother lying.”

Mark pursed his lips, then sighed again, his shoulders slumping. “I’m taking all of it,” he told Felix. “And you don’t get to complain because you offered.”

Felix just nodded along and Mark left his room. Felix heard the fridge open downstairs. He judged that as the end of the conversation and the end of his night. Felix slipped back into bed and shut his eyes, but sleep would be useless at this point. Now that he had brought the memory to the surface again, all Felix could feel was Dante’s hands on his skin and the coldness of Mark’s eyes as he kept Jack from saving Felix.
Act II

Felix knew he should have warned Kon or Mark or Tyler or even Jack about his intentions with Detective Summers, but he’d felt like it would be too much of a headache to convince them that they couldn’t keep him from going to Sarge. He didn’t want anyone or anything getting any further in his way than what he was already guaranteed.

Felix had gone to work with his usual order from Marzia, a little smiling heart drawn on the side and the warm memory of a kiss to the corner of his lips keeping him brave as he now stood in front of Sgt. Morrison’s desk, awaiting his boss in a nervous parade rest. The teddy bear smiled up at Felix from the desk, one of its dark eyes starting to come loose from wear and tear. Felix couldn’t remember its name.

The door swung open and Sarge took one step into his office before seeing Felix and faltering. Then his stride resurged and he walked to the other side of the desk, giving Felix a kind smile. “Officer Kjellberg,” he said almost fondly. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you today?”

“I need to talk to you about something important,” Felix said, hedging warily on the edge. He didn’t actually know if Sgt. Morrison was safe to talk to, didn’t know if he could also be on someone else’s payroll. But if it turned out that Sarge was just as dirty as Summers, Felix was sure he’d have enough time to raise some sort of alarm and a McLoughlin would come running. Felix didn’t like how he was beginning to rely on Jack, but he didn’t have much of a choice. He may as well take advantage of the shitty hand he’d been given. “One of your detectives is dirty.”

Sarge raised a brow, but he didn’t really look surprised. “And you have proof of this?”

“Uh, no,” Felix said. His proof would get him arrested as well. “Not exactly. But I have conversations. People suggesting things. I know it’s a lot to ask, but I’m pretty certain you’ll find whatever proof you need in his desk.”

Sarge didn’t say anything for a moment, before he dropped into his chair with a heavy sigh. “That’s a tall order, Kjellberg,” he told Felix, sounding tired as he looked out his window to the busy streets. “You know, it’s really dangerous out there. The only thing that seems to keep you men and women coming home in one piece is each other. I do my best to cultivate a feeling of trust between all of
you, the idea that you can rely on one another to watch each other’s back. I want all of my men in this precinct to know that we watch out for each other, no matter what.”

Sarge paused again. “… You’re throwing off my groove, Kjellberg.”

“I know,” Felix said, feeling sorry for it. “I know you want us to be able to trust each other, but you know as well as I do that the mafias of New York City are dangerous and bloodthirsty and don’t give a damn about what we want. At least one of your detectives is a made man and he’s using his current status to keep an investigation from being furthered. People are dying because of him.”

“I just want all of you to feel safe,” Sarge said softly. “I just want all of you coming home. I lost three of you last year, two of them to violent crimes they were trying to stop. All you men and women do is save people and all you get for it is a too small paycheck and people spitting in your face. You do the hard work, the shit no one likes, and you don’t expect anything in return. All I’ve ever wanted is to give you guys a home base and a collection of people inside that you feel safe around.”

“Sergeant Morrison, I—”

“If you can’t trust your fellow officers and higher-ups, you can’t trust anything,” Sarge continued, his voice in a low drone, like he was hypnotized by the darkness of his thoughts. “And if you can’t trust me or your fellow men and women in blue, you go to someone else. Someone stronger, someone who says they have a better foothold than us. And then you fall deeper and deeper into a trap, because the more powerful they are, the worse they’ve done to get that power. And then it’s all just downhill from there and I end up losing another officer, writing letters to a family that will never forgive me, and standing by a grave that gets slowly filled with mud as much as dirt as I listen to the melody of a three-volley salute.”

Felix was speechless to the vividness of the picture his Sergeant was describing. Sarge had a faraway look in his eyes, a thousand-yard stare. Felix had no idea what the other man had been through in his years on the force. He wished he could deny the truth of the reality he was bringing to Sergeant Morrison, but—if Felix didn’t do this, innocent people would continue to die.

“It’s Detective Summers, Sarge.”

Sgt. Morrison looked to Felix and then, somehow, smiled. “Well, why didn’t you start out with that?” he asked. “I’ve known that guy was a bad seed since the 10th precinct dropped his ass in my hands a few years ago. Guess it’s time for a surprise desk sweep, huh? Gotta make sure my men and women are keeping their places clean.”

Felix felt whiplashed from the one-eighty Sarge had just made. Sarge stood and bent over his desk, dialing a number on his in-office phone, likely to the other two sergeants in the building to catch them up to speed on what they’d be doing. Felix wasn’t sure why Sarge was believing him so suddenly after preaching of trust, but he didn’t have time to look a gifted horse in the mouth, no matter how suspicious it seemed. He had gotten what he wanted. Sarge was going to check Det. Summer’s desk and find something. Felix didn’t have time to be paranoid of why Sarge went along with it so easily when even Sive had emphasized Felix’s need for physical proof.

“To your station, Officer Kjellberg,” Sgt. Morrison told him after he’d had a short, quiet conversation with whoever was on the other line. “I’d like to make it look like you weren’t the one suggesting this.”

Felix nodded stiffly and ducked out of the room, returning to his own desk as quickly as possible. Sive was at the other side, sitting in front of his own computer, writing reports. He raised a brow at Felix. Then Sarge burst into the room, loudly announced, “Pop quizzes are the name of the season—
desk sweep!” and Sive’s eyes went wide with understanding in what Felix had done. Felix just tightly shook his head, prompting Sive to keep his mouth shut as Sarge and the other two Sergeants began to sweep the bullpen.

Det. Summers looked nervous.

The sweep came up with nothing at first, though there was a discovery of a box of magnum condoms in Hopper’s desk that had brought forth a chorus of teasing giggles, because everyone know that there was no way in hell those would fit him. The precinct had communal showers, after all.

Sarge made a show of checking every single desk for the same amount of time as the last, never showing any favoritism or suspicion. He went through Felix’s desk just as thoroughly as the last, talking idly to everyone as he and the Sergeants worked. “I know all of you think this is bullshit,” he was saying as he carefully checked the back of the picture frame of Rowena on Sive’s desk. “But one time we did this, we found an officer had been smuggling cocaine from the evidence locker. And another time, we found a female officer had been printing background checks on men, selling the information to people online who wanted information on current or ex-boyfriends. You wouldn’t believe the weird shit people do.”

Sarge slowly and carefully made his way through the desks, working casually, giving nothing away. But Felix could see the other sergeants were watching Sgt. Morrison carefully for anything he could find. They knew what this desk check was for. Felix wondered if Sarge had told them Officer Kjellberg was the one who had brought something suspicious to his attention.

Sgt. Morrison eventually got to the detectives’ office and seemed to be saving Det. Summers’ desk for something like middle to last, to make it really seem like they weren’t trying to single anyone out. And when Sgt. Morrison began to sort through the desk, with Det. Summers standing stiffly off to the side, Felix almost felt a moment of doubt in Jack’s word. What if Sgt. Morrison found nothing? What if Det. Summers was clean and Felix had proven himself to be a paranoid, untrustworthy cop who didn’t belong in Sgt. Morrison’s tight knit group of officers who all relied on being able to rely on one another? What if this was a setup for Felix?

Sgt. Morrison stalled in opening a drawer, then pulled out a small, round cylinder that Felix recognized as a cigar. At first, Felix expected another round of teasing, something about smoking killing cops faster than criminals, but then Sgt. Morrison’s expression fell into something tired. He then held the cigar up into the light.

“You know,” he began in a deep, almost sad voice. “The Bisognin family, while very careful, has a very specific and obvious initiation ritual. A little bit beyond hazing, though there is a few criminal acts that need to be done to get into the ranks. Anyone that wants to become a made man or woman has to do three things— steal a motor vehicle that’s within three years of new, rape a man or woman, and kill either a solider or a first responder. And once this is complete, there’s very little to show for it that most people will see. But there is a very special token given to those that complete the three tasks and become made in the Bisognin family.”

Sgt. Morrison held up the cigar even higher, showing it to Det. Summers. “A Gurkha Black Dragon cigar,” Sgt. Morrison said. “The most luxurious cigar in the world from Nepal, discovered in 1887, loved by British soldiers. The Bisognins give one of these extremely expensive cigars with their crest embezzled on the side in a very special, very rare ink, hand painted and not laser engraved.”

Sgt. Morrison stepped forward, closer to Det. Summers, and held the cigar in his face “Are you familiar with the Bisognin crest?” he asked the detective almost idly, like he was just quizzing a friend on the spot. Det. Summers, though, seemed frozen to the spot.
“It’s a bear,” Sgt. Morrison said aloud for everyone to hear, seemingly unperturbed by Det. Summers’ stony silence. “A Marsican brown bear, found mainly in Italy. The bear in the Bisognin crest is roaring rather violently with a wreath of grape vines beneath. Since the Bisognin family is Italian in nature only in New York, this seal is rather unique to only them. And very, very few people outside of local law enforcement know this crest. Meaning the fabrication of this crest for anything commercial is near impossible to a deceivable degree.”

Sgt. Morrison paused, then finally looked up from the cigar to Det. Summers. “I want the names of the lives you ruined to get this cigar,” he told Det. Summers in a low voice. “And I want you to know that you’re under arrest. I’ll read you your rights in my office so we don’t have to do this in front of everyone else.”

Det. Summers was white with fear. He all but ran to Sgt. Morrison’s office, who calmly followed with a promise in his eyes. As the door to Sgt. Morrison’s officer clicked shut and the lock turned, a deadly silence fell over everyone in the bullpen.

Across their desks, Sive looked to Felix with wide, scared eyes.

Now no one felt safe.

. . .

At the end of his shift, Sgt. Morrison invited Felix out for a drink. Felix wasn’t sure where they were going, but it was out of their jurisdiction and Felix had to take the subway to get to the address. Normally, he’d be wary about friendly outings with his boss, but he had just exposed a high-influence mole within their precinct. He felt like he owed Sgt. Morrison for the trouble he had caused, however righteously it had been done.

Death & Company was a dimly lit cocktail bar in the East Village that Felix had only heard of in passing conversations with other officers. The atmosphere was quiet after midnight and there were very few patrons aside from them. The bartender recognize Sgt. Morrison and brought him a drink immediately. Felix just politely requested a simple Jack and Coke and tried not to associate the drink with the man bearing the same name.

“I have to say,” Sgt. Morrison said once they were seated and had their drinks. “I never would have guessed I’d have one of those under my nose.”

Felix chose his words carefully. “You told me in your officer you’d thought he was suspicious all along,” he reminded his boss. “That kinda negates your current statement. Sir.”

“Jesus christ, Felix, we’re off the clock, I’m just Ken now.” Ken sighed heavily and threw back his entire drink in one go, then pushed the glass out for a second. “I should have known. Summers is one of the best detectives in the city, and yet he was making no progress with Lovecraft. I should’ve seen he was dragging his feet on purpose. I’d just never expected that, you know? If it was going to be one of my men in bed with the mafia, I’d thought it’d just be payroll. Never thought they’d be made.”

“It’s unfortunate,” Felix said as diplomatically as possible.

“That’s a word for it,” Ken agreed sardonically. “Fucking christ.” He paused. “Thank you for telling me.”

Felix’s eyes went wide as he nursed his drink. “Really?” he asked. “After I ruined your whole ‘we trust each other because we can’t trust anyone else’ vibe? I figured you’d be resenting me for telling
you this. Hell, I didn’t even think you’d believe me.”

“Let’s just say I trust you and your sources,” Ken sighed. And that wasn’t suspicious at all. “God. Summers. He killed and raped a returning combat vet to get in. A nice lady, with a good husband waiting for her at home. And you know what car he stole? Mine. My own detective stole my fucking car from my driveway. And I didn’t know it was him.” Ken shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder if we can even save this city doing what we do. It’s all so limited. The law holds us back just as much as it helps us. Sometimes it seems like the only people making a real difference are the ones we have to put in jail with the murderers themselves.”

Felix didn’t know what to say.

Ken sent him a wry smile. “Then again, I’m just a sergeant. What do I know about right or wrong?”


“Probably not,” Ken murmured. He threw back his second glass. “Come play darts with me. I wanna make sure you’re a good enough shot. SWAT tryouts is in two weeks, and I’ve got a betting pool to win.”

Felix had already shaken this man’s world— he made up for it in kicking Ken’s ass at darts.

The subway was nearly empty, save for some youth in dark clothes with a hood obscuring his face, and a kind looking woman that was half falling asleep across from Felix’s bench. The subway swayed as it sped through the tunnels, taking Felix back to his home, where he could collapse into bed and sleep away the stresses of today. His phone had several messages from Sive, all of them unread. The poor man was probably still reeling from what had been revealed today. Felix knew none of his fellow officers would feel safe in their precinct for quite a long while after this.

Felix didn’t have the energy to do damage control for what he’d done. It was likely cruel, definitely lazy, but he was probably going to hear a fair amount of backlash from Jack and his gang as well, as Jack had tried to get Felix to promise not to meddle. Now here Felix was, exposing a mole of a detective connected to the most deadly drug in the city. He’d been the one to start the avalanche and now he was taking a helicopter out of the carnage, leaving everyone else to be buried beneath.

He felt bad.

But he couldn’t change what he done. And Felix couldn’t regret it. Summers had been responsible for countless deaths. Felix knew Summers was the one who had failed to look into the backgrounds of the dead families. He was secondary lead with Lovecraft. He’d ruined a life just for a cigar. Felix couldn’t imagine what kind of evil had to exist in the mind of someone capable of that. And he couldn’t imagine Jack having a mind anywhere close to Summers’, regardless of what Jack had done.

Maybe that was foolish. Maybe Felix was willingly turning a blind eye to the evil that existed inside Jack just because he was being forced to rely on him. Like some sort of pseudo-Stockholm Syndrome. Felix had to trust Jack. He couldn’t very well trust someone he feared.

There was a lurch in the subway and the lights flickered. Felix looked up, checking his surroundings warily, seeing that the other two passengers hadn’t even moved. The youth was staring out the window into the nothing of the tunnel and the woman’s neck was going to have a crick if she kept sleeping like that. But Felix still felt his instincts come alive, his gut telling him to find somewhere
safe, for him to run. But he couldn’t. He was trapped.

The subway rattled again. The lights flickered again.

And then they went out.

Felix froze. There was the sound of quick steps across the linoleum floor, and then there were arms around his neck. Felix immediately lashed out, his fist connecting with someone’s solar plexus, a gasp of breathlessness coming from above and into his ear. But the arm didn’t let go and it was too dark for Felix to see. The assailant got the upper hand easily to put Felix in a chokehold, one he couldn’t fight because he didn’t know where his opponent was. In the passing flashes of light from the tunnel outside, Felix was able to see a hand raised his face, a needle glinting dangerously and hovering just above his eye.

Felix rammed his elbow back into the ribs and twisted away, his heart pounding with fear. The needle came down in the next bare moment of light and narrowly missed piercing Felix’s flesh. He squirmed out of the grip of the assailant and fell back, hitting the floor hard. A weight fell on him, pinning him to the ground. The needle was nearly into his neck.

Then the assailant froze, and the only thing Felix heard was this gurgle of pain, like someone was choking or drowning. The lights of the subway flickered back on and Felix looked up to see the woman who had been sleeping innocently across from him holding the needle poised above and with a combat knife imbedded in her jugular. Someone kicked her hard in the side and she dropped uselessly away, dying.

Felix looked up to see Mark extending a hand. “We need to leave,” Mark said firmly.

Felix didn’t hesitate in taking the hand and letting Mark help him up, stumbling a little on his feet, still reeling from whatever had just happened. Mark pushed him into one of the standing poles before going to the downed-woman and lifting her easily, dropping her into the seat she had occupied before. He reached into his oversized hoodie pocket and pulled out an innocuous scarf, wrapping it around the woman’s neck. She was still alive, still dying slowly. She batted weakly at his hands like she thought she could put up a fight until the very bitter end. Mark adjusted the scarf to perfectly hide the knife in her neck and the blood that was rushing weakly, thanks to the blade stopping the harsher flow. The subway slowed as they neared a station.

“There’s a car on the curb just at the end to the stairs leading out,” Mark told Felix. “Get in it.” The subway doors opened and Mark took Felix by the elbow, leading him through the empty station.

“The knife, the knife,” Felix said. “You need the knife, it can be traced back to you.”

“The McLoughlin family specializes in the manufacturing and exportation of ghost weaponry, guns and knives and bombs without serials or any defining materials. You think I just left a knife in there with my name and address on the side? The knife won’t help them at all.”

Mark tugged him more forcefully, as Felix’s steps had faltered with the panic slowly rising again. “Do not go into shock until you’re in the car.”

“Fuck off, I’m not in shock,” Felix told him. “Who was she?”

“Bai-Fa.”

Felix frowned, cataloguing the name. “She was hispanic.”

“She’s a special kind of employee for the Mìngyùn.”
Felix paled. “She’s an assassin.”

“What gave it away?” Mark asked dryly as he pulled Felix up the stairs. “The fact that she was trying to kill you or her résumé?”

“Fuck off,” Felix mumbled, his brain working a mile a minute. While he knew that he had a target on his head after that mishap with Dante, he knew that the Mingyûn hadn’t been involved in the beginning. There was only one thing that could have pushed the envelope and had an assassin sent after him, but it didn’t completely add up, as taking down Det. Summers had still been against the Bisognins, not the Mingyûn. The only explanation Felix had for that was the Mingyûn and the Bisognins were allies.

That would make sense on multiple accounts. Felix was sure that the mobs of New York worked together in multiple ways, and it would make sense for each mob to slowly begin to specialize in one specific area and help the other mafias through mutual benefit. The McLoughlins made the guns that the others used, the Bisognins made the drugs that encouraged the unrest and crime to keep a functioning illegal market, the Mingyûn did— whatever the fuck they did. And Felix had no idea who the Plague Writes were. But it made sense that the mafias would work together and rely on one another to certain extents. But if that were the case, how badly was Jack rocking the boat in his little war against Lovecraft?

Felix was startled from his thoughts by Mark grabbing him by the neck and pushing him into a car. Felix only narrowly avoided knocking his head on the frame of the car and tumbled into the leather seat. Mark slammed the door shut and rounded the vehicle, getting into the driver’s seat.

“First you eat my mother’s food,” Mark grumbled as he started the car and started to drive. “Then you get yourself a fucking fifty-k bounty. Jack’s losing his fucking mind. Do you not think about anything you do before you jump off a cliff?”

“Holy shit, how much?” Felix asked, steadying himself by holding to the door as Mark drove. He was taking corners a little more wildly than Felix remembered, putting a sense of urgency in the trip. “And why the fuck? Is it cause of Summers?”

“You outed one of the highest level made men in your precinct,” Mark told him harshly. “The Bisognins are not happy.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Felix replied truthfully. “How do I get rid of the bounty?”

“You don’t. Jack does.”

Felix scowled. “Jack’s not gonna clean up my mess. Tell me what to do.”

“The only reason why I’m not taking you to Jack right now is because he’s in the midst of a very difficult and very fragile plea for your life,” Mark told him carefully. “You have put your hand in a pile of shit and told yourself that no one else is gonna smell it on you. Jack is literally bartering for your life as we speak. There is nothing you can do.”

Felix— felt bad. He winced and looked out the window at all the lights of the city, watching stragglers and addicts while he tried to sort his thoughts. “… Is Jack okay?”

He could feel Mark’s glare through the rearview. Felix refused to give in to the man’s nonverbal threats. “I’ve already told you, I don’t give a shit about whatever distance you want me to keep,” Felix reminded Mark. “I can care about a guy and be his friend and I care about Jack.”

Mark paused. “… Jack’s your friend?”
Felix also paused, thinking it over for only a moment. “Yeah,” he decided. “I mean, we’re not besties, but I wouldn’t care about someone unless they were my friend.” The guilt he felt for how he had to have made Jack feel when Jack learned about that bounty settled uneasily in his gut. He tried to picture the look on Jack’s face and couldn’t. He tried to imagine Jack surrounded by criminals, trying to argue in favor of Felix’s life. He wondered how much effort Jack would put into saving him. With how he’d looked after Dante, during his breakdown in that bathroom, Felix couldn’t begin to suspect just how desperately Jack was fighting. God, he hoped Jack didn’t beg. He hated the way Jack looked when he begged.

“I feel bad,” Felix told Mark. “I’m not doing this to make his life more difficult.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Summers is delaying the investigation into Lovecraft and feeding the names of the family to the people killing them. It’s either the Bisognins or The Mingyùn, and I’m leaning towards the latter now that I know the Mingyùn are the hired killers. But then again, the Bisognins have some killers of their own. They sent one after Jack.”

Felix frowned at that whole new can of worms. “Why are the Bisognins trying to kill Jack if Jack’s working the angle of being a business partner?”

“The Don didn’t call those hits on Jack. Dante did.”

“And Dante’s a paranoid fuck,” Felix said, nodding slowly as he understood. “But now that he has me, he has a way to manipulate Jack. He won’t have to call hits on Jack as long as Dante has his sights on me. But he shouldn’t have those sights now, right? Because of Kon.”

“Kon watches you at home. He can do nothing when you leave.”

Felix grimaced. “Well that’s not very efficient.”

“Kon is only human, and you’re a walking suicide risk,” Mark snapped. “He has to watch your home when you’re away so we don’t have another installation problem. The only people who can keep eyes on you outside of your home is me and Tyler, and we also need to watch Jack. You’re just an added liability to Jack’s safety and it pisses me off.”

God, Felix felt like fucking garbage. “I can take care of myself,” he said. “Just watch out for Jack. He’s the one who needs it.”

Mark sneered at him through the mirror. “I just stopped a woman from injecting you with enough of something to stop your heart in the middle of a subway. You cannot take care of yourself.”

“If it helps, I never take the subway,” Felix huffed. “Like, I hated the subway. It’s stupidly exposed and brings me close to way too many strangers. I just had to take it because Sergeant Morrison wanted me to come to the bar with him.”

Mark paused. “… Your sergeant is the one who brought you onto the subway?”

Felix took a moment, following Mark’s train of thought. “No way,” he said. The thought had occurred to him before, but the quiet night in the bar with Ken rather than Sarge had convinced Felix otherwise. “Sergeant Morrison isn’t like that.”

“We have no idea what anyone is like these days.”

"Fuck."
“I’ll have Tyler look into him,” Mark said with a heavy sigh. “I’m taking you home. Jack’s going to be busy for quite a while. Please, do your best to not get yourself killed for the next couple of days. I need to keep Jack in one piece, and being torn between you and him is not helping.”

Felix just nodded, unable to argue. He’d already admitted to Jack being a friend to him. He didn’t want to lose a friend.

“He’ll want to see you,” Mark told him. “Once this blows over, he’ll want to be able to see you. Jack’s always been the kind of person to trust his senses above all others. He won’t believe you’re safe until he sees you.”

“He’s a good guy,” Felix said dully. “Still kinda wondering how the fuck I ended up catching his eye.”

Mark let out a low hum. “Not used to being the object of someone’s affections, are you.”

“It’s only happened, like, once,” Felix said. “And it was weird, because it was my sister’s best friend. That brought in a whole new problem, like if said friend was only friends with her to get closer to me, or if she was actually in love with my sister and just projecting her feelings onto me, since me and my sister looked so similar.”

“That doesn’t extend to siblings in general, so I doubt that was the case.”

“Yeah, but my sister and I are twins,” Felix said. “So we look a lot alike.”

Mark snorted a laugh. “A twin,” he said.

“A twin,” Felix repeated. “Maybe if I introduce her to Jack, he’ll forget about me and go for her. Too bad she’s married, though.”

“I really do want to let you know that Jack’s feelings for you extend far beyond just the physical aspect.”

Felix bit his lip, mulling over Mark’s words. “… Is Jack in love with me?”

“It’s not my place to say.”

Felix looked away. “I feel like shit,” he told Mark. He didn’t think Mark cared or even wanted to hear, but he felt confident on betting that whatever he said to Mark would be in one ear and out the other. “Having someone like Jack in love with me and being unable to return the feelings. He seems like he’s had so little happiness until me. Maybe that’s arrogant, though. Maybe he’s had a perfectly happy life and he just fell in love with the wrong person. But that doesn’t stop me from feeling like I should do something to help him feel better.”

Mark groaned softly. “I think what I hate most about you is how you’re a genuinely good person.”

Felix winced. “I’m not gonna fake it,” he told Mark. “Like, I won’t pity date Jack. He deserves better than that and so do I. I wouldn’t fake it for him because I don’t think I can. And your mom also chewed me out for it.” Felix hesitated. “And, uhm. I just wanted to say that— I’m sorry for what you went through. Losing your dad. I… I can’t imagine how that must feel.”

“I take it back,” Mark said. “What I hate most about you is how much you’re like my father.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not saying that in a nice way?”
“He was stupid,” Mark said, the words harsh like they’d been punched from his lungs. “All of you are. You keep fighting and dying for this fabricated cause called ‘the greater good’ and never think of who you’re leaving behind. You never seem to consider that we would rather live in crime-ridden worlds where you are alive. You never think of the people who love you, only the strangers who don’t care. It isn’t fair.” Mark’s grip on the steering wheel was white. “It isn’t fucking fair.”

Felix didn’t know what to say except, “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not,” Mark told him. “Because you’re just going to put your life on the line again, thoughtless and suicidal. And you won’t regret it if you die. So don’t fucking apologize about this unless you mean it.”

Felix winced. “If it helps, I don’t want to die.”

“It does not help.”

“No cop goes out there with a death wish,” Felix told Mark. “None of us want to be killed. But we know the risk we’re taking and we’re happy to take that risk so others don’t have to. Because for every bad person that we fail to put away, there’s a widow or a parent or a child waiting for someone to come home that will never be home again. And since we’re the ones to sign up for it, we’re better to be sacrificed.”

Mark sneered. “I fucking hate you for how you are. And I hate everyone like you.”

“Fair enough,” Felix said. “We’re kinda used to that, too.”

“I’m taking you home. You’re going to rest. And then you’re gonna answer Jack whenever he calls for you and you’re going to give him some sort of peace of mind because he’s losing sleep over the bullshit you do, and it’s starting to piss me off.”

“I can’t help what he does,” Felix sighed. “I can’t help what he feels and what he does with it. It’s fucking terrible and I feel like shit, but it’s him, okay? This isn’t on me.”

“Shut up.”

The car stopped and Felix looked out the window to see Kon standing, arms across his chest, looking like a disappointed parent. Felix grimaced and looked to Mark one last time. “For what it’s worth, I think your dad is a hero for what he did.” Felix didn’t know what he’d done exactly, but he knew that getting a target on your back meant he’d pissed off a lot of bad people. “And I hope I can be like him one day.”

“Get the fuck out of my car.”

Felix did as told and stumbled into Kon, grinning sheepishly up at the huge man. “I hope Jack’s paying you well,” Felix said. “Because I’m definitely gonna be giving you a run for your money at this point.”

Kon just let out this gruff noise and settled a hand on the back of Felix’s neck. “I have Felina now,” Kon said into an earpiece, talking to someone Felix wished he could name. “Securing precious cargo.”

“Fucking off, making me sound like some princess.”

Kon didn’t say anything, only brought Felix into his house and checked all of the locks. “With the Mingyün after you, there is very little I can do for your security except remain alert,” Kon told him.
“Please make me aware of whatever suicidal plans you have in the moment they happen, and not before dinner.”

Felix just waved off his critique and went upstairs. He could use a shower. There was a smidge of blood on the collar of his shirt and he wondered if he would be hearing about the dead woman in the subway during his shift tomorrow. Felix hoped he would. Maybe someone else would have answers as to why the Mingyûn and the Bisognins worked so closely together.

... 

Jack didn’t reach out to Felix for days and Felix wished it didn’t make him so worried. The thing was, Felix hadn’t been targeted for any additional assassination attempts, so he had no reason to assume that Jack had failed in bartering for his life and gotten himself hurt in the process. Could Jack even be hurt? He was human, but that didn’t mean people were willing to pull a trigger on him. Dante was brave enough, but Dante now had Felix. There was no reason for Jack to take so long to contact him if he cared so much. There was no reason for Jack to be avoiding him.

That wasn’t true. There could be several very good reasons— maybe Jack had changed his mind and had decided it would be safest for Felix for Jack to cut himself out of Felix’s life. Or maybe Dante had forced him into a deal that kept Jack away from Felix. Or maybe Jack had done something bad and was too ashamed to face him. The latter seemed the least likely— Jack had fucking killed a man for kicking Felix in the face— but Felix had to consider all angles and possibilities when confronting a problem. It was more instinct than habit. He really should consider detective work over SWAT.

Except fuck that. Felix had just outed a detective for being an absolute scum bag, at least the men in SWAT kept their normal beats. And few beat cops respected the detectives simply because of the “holier-than-thou” air the detectives usually nurtured. Felix would never want to become someone like that. He wouldn’t risk it.

But coming to this conclusion still didn’t solve his original problem— where was Jack and why was he avoiding Felix?

Maybe he really was hurt. Maybe Felix had gotten Jack into more trouble than the man could handle. The idea settled in his gut with a sickly feeling. What if Felix had gotten Jack hurt and now the man wasn’t able to see him because he wasn’t able? God, what if Felix had done something horrible?

He couldn’t sit still after reaching such a horrible possibility. Felix pulled on a coat, bracing himself for the cold weather of the city. He didn’t do this sort of thing often— hadn’t done it since moving here— but sometimes Felix didn’t have much of a choice. The nerves would settle in his limbs and keep him moving beyond his own will. His skin would feel feverish and his heart would race. Burgeoning anxiety kept him from staying in one place for too long and paranoia would never let him settle down. So whenever it became a little too close to the edge, Felix would take a long walk.

He sent Kon a quick text just to be courteous, but he felt oddly confident that he wouldn’t be targeted so quickly after the incident on the Subway. The death never reached Felix’s ears, so he assumed someone had cleaned up the mess before any of the authorities had been alerted. Felix almost felt bad for the woman, wondering if she would even be given a proper burial or if she had any loved ones that would be alerted. Maybe it was a little tilted, but Felix felt pity for his would-be-murderer. It was like she had never existed. He knew that if he told anyone that, they’d probably look at him like he’d grown a second head.

Felix grimaced and kept his pace brisk, wanting to make it seem like he had somewhere to be, people expecting him, if only to keep any suspicious persons from approaching him for whatever solid reason they had. He was legally able to carry his firearm on his person so long as he had his badge,
but Felix had foolishly left it at home and only had his basic mace. Felix didn’t think he was going to be attacked, but he could never be too careful. Not these days. Maybe he should have actually gone to Kon and asked to be tailed or something, just for an extra measure of protection. Or maybe he should have told Kon to tell Mark and Mark would be so dog headed to prove Felix was an idiot that he would tail Felix regardless of orders.

Why was Felix having all of these intelligent thoughts now that he was a mile away from his home?

It didn’t matter. He needed to move himself into exhaustion, and only then could he go home. The sun was beginning to set, hanging low in the October sky. Felix glanced at the clouds that were casted with gold and reminded himself that his birthday was next week. He wondered if anyone in the precinct knew the date and hoped none of them would plan anything. Felix preferred quiet celebrations with close friends and had no intention of attempting to survive a huge ordeal. Then again, it was arrogant to think that many people would care. Felix wasn’t necessarily unpopular in the precinct, and everyone greeted him kindly when he came in for the shift, but Felix didn’t like assuming his worth in the eyes of others.

Maybe he shouldn’t be so worried about Jack in the same respect, then. Jack probably hadn’t come to see Felix simply because he didn’t have time. Even if Jack was somehow in love with him, it wasn’t like Jack didn’t have much more important things to do. Felix was just some passing fancy. Jack would fall out of love eventually and he’d find someone better, someone who could return his feelings, who wouldn’t leave Jack in the dark alone.

There it was again, that guilt in being unable to give Jack was he seemed to want so desperately. Felix grimaced and rubbed at his eyes with his cold fingers, wishing he could figure this out in an expedited manner so he wouldn’t lose his sanity to all of the possibilities. Or figure it out so Felix wouldn’t keep feeling like absolute shit for being unable to help Jack. But here Felix was again, assuming his worth in the eyes of others. He had to stop doing that. Felix couldn’t risk making himself out to be anything important. Especially not to Jack. For all he knew, Jack would find someone new within the week, someone bigger and more fitting of his friends’ expectations, and Felix would be left in the dust.

Why did that make his chest hurt?

Felix hurried his pace a little more, sweeping his eyes up and down the streets. Traffic was worsening, as he was nearing the Brooklyn Bridge. He’d never seen the thing, save for the one time he drove across it to come into the city. Felix had never understood the tourist appeal to the bridge and saw it more as a safety hazard than anything else. So many people, both pedestrian and automotive, shoved together atop this feat of engineering. It seemed like a death sentence for anyone that wanted to do something terrible.

Felix entered on the Ari Halberstam Memorial Ramp, moving quickly up the ramp because he wanted to avoid being in the open for long. He had every intention to walk to the end of the bridge and then turn right back around and head home. He’d had his walk and his fingers were frigid despite being shoved into his pockets. His mind was a pleasant numbness despite the cold and Felix was confident all of that nervous energy had been worn from his legs. Maybe he hadn’t solved any of his long term problems, but the immediate was lessening and he would get some rest tonight.

Felix walked the bridge, looking out to the glistening waters, taking solace in the steady thrum of car engines behind him and the soft chatter of the very few people he passed. Almost no one was out on foot right now, as every had already turned in after their normal 9-to-5’s, and it was just on the side of too cold for people to be out for the fun of it. Stubborn New Yorkers or not, the cold was something most people fought against from the warmth of their homes.
Still, five or six people passed Felix on the bridge, heading into the city like he would be soon. He caught snippets of conversation, conversations between couples about work or dinner, quiet whispers of lyrics or humming along to songs played through headphones, tiny touches of humanity atop the stone bridge. Felix breathed in and out, stalling in one place for a long moment, looking out at the darkening water and just listening.

Sometimes, he liked to stop and take it all in, all of the people living their lives. Mark had asked him how he could be so stupid as to throw his life away and forget those who loved him. Felix wished he could take Mark onto this bridge, let him take in the people living out each day, and help him understand. Felix did what he did for these moments, where the city was safe and citizens could live without fear of the sky falling. Felix did what he did for the strangers passing him on the bridge and he did so happily. He wanted people to feel safe and secure and absent of the paranoia Felix lived in. These citizens worked hard. They deserved the peace of safety. It was worth it. Everything he suffered was worth it.

Felix took in a deep breath, ignored the burn of the cold in his lungs, and just took it all in. In this moment of silence, Felix heard a new conversation.

“And I will always love you and I will always miss you and I just want you to know that, no matter what, your mommy loves you and daddy very much, and that this wasn’t your fault.”

Felix’s head snapped to the right, where he saw a woman on a flip phone, crying as she spoke into the receiver. Her words ended there, and Felix assumed she’d been leaving a message on an answering machine. The woman set her phone on the railing in front of her and steeled her jaw, taking off her jacket, wearing only a flimsy sweater beneath. She had tears running down her olive-toned face and her lower lip as trembling. As she began to move, Felix ran over what he’d heard her say again and came to a startling realization.

It had almost sounded like a suicide note.

The woman climbed the railing and swung over it, moving to stand on the iron fence that edged the bridge. She looked out into the water, lifted her chin high in defiance or bravery, and swung her foot out.

Felix was beside her in a moment’s breath after scrambling up the ledge, taking her by the arm and holding fast, swinging dangerously over the freezing waters below with her. “Don’t.”

Her gaze snapped to him, eyes huge and white. She was afraid, Felix could see that. The wind whipped her unruly hair about her face and stung Felix’s exposed flesh. His fingers hurt in the cold, but he refused to let go of her arm. If she decided to swing off and down, her weight would bring Felix down with her.

“Don’t do it,” Felix told her.

“She told me to let her go.”

“Absolutely not.” Felix quickly took stock of the situation, tried to see if there was any way to wrestle her back to the solid safety of the bridge, but he would likely just send them both off balance and careening into the waters below. At this height, the water may as well be solid concrete. Neither of them were professionals—they’d either die on impact or die of organ damage. “What’s your name?” Felix asked her, seeing no other alternative than to talk her down.

She looked to him, expression guarded, tears still streaming down her face. “Let me go,” she said again.
“You have a child,” Felix said, thinking of the message she’d left. “A child waiting for you to come home. You can’t be out here. They need their mother.”

“Her mother can’t do a damn thing!” she shouted, understandably emotional. The way she’d swung her foot so readily and without hesitation had said far too much. “Her mother can’t keep a fucking job! Her mother can’t help her with her homework! Her mother can’t even fucking cook a meal without ruining something! She doesn’t need me in her life, she needs me out of it for good.”

Holy shit. “Okay,” he said. “My name is Felix Kjellberg and I absolutely, one hundred percent, do not agree with you.” He edged closer, tightening his grip. The woman twisted her wrist, testing the strength. Felix wasn’t going to let her go and she knew it. “My mother couldn’t cook for shit, right?” he said, trying to appeal to her maternal instinct. “She couldn’t cook anything except three different dishes and we had each dish at least once a week. She tried to branch out, she did, but she would always add too much salt or get a measurement wrong or dry the food out. But we ate her food every night of every week because she kept trying and we wanted her to feel like she could keep trying until she finally got it right. We were her family and we wanted her to do it for herself. So believe me when I say that your daughter doesn’t mind the food you make, good or bad. It matters that her mother made it for her.”

The woman’s expression twisted and she tore her eyes away from Felix. “Melinda,” she said. “I, I’m Melinda.”

“Melinda,” Felix repeated gently. “Tell me why you’re up here.”

She shook her head, clung to the iron of the fence a little tighter as a harsh gust of wind had them swaying. Felix’s heart stopped for a moment, terrified he would fall. The metal he was standing on was slick from the near-constant rain of the city in autumn and he knew he wouldn’t be strong enough to hold them both up if one of them lost their footing. But he wouldn’t go back to the safety of the stone bridge unless Melinda came with him.

“I got fired,” she told him, the words being wrenched from her lips. “I, I got fired because my fucking asshole of a boss decided he liked the pretty girl that applied for a position that didn’t exist more than me. And I can’t even make a claim for racism or anything because she’s black and I’m just Mexican. I wouldn’t win in the courts, but I couldn’t even pay the lawyer fees if I tried!” She sniffled and rubbed her face on her shoulder, still holding to the bridge. “I know it’s a stupid reason,” she said, almost a whisper, barely audible over the wind. “But this is my third job in two months. I can’t — I can’t keep them. I can’t keep the jobs! And my husband can’t work, he’s on disability, but the damn company keeps denying the disability payments because they say his injury was his own fault. How was a fucking bulldozer losing its brakes and running over both his legs his fault?!”

She looked to Felix like he could have the answers. “I can’t go home,” she said, shaking her head with the confession. “My daughter, Bella— she was so scared the last time I lost my work. She hid under her mattress. She thought we were going to lose the home and hid because she was so scared of what was going to happen. I can’t go home and tell her I lost my job again. I can’t do that to my baby.”

Felix could see so many options for her, applying for food stamps and unemployment, reaching out to nonprofits, contacting loved ones who would support her, Felix knew there were so many things she could do, but he also knew what it was like to drown under the fear of failure. He faced that fear every time he saw his parents and they tried to convince him he was on the wrong path of life. He faced that fear every time he made a wrong move on his shifts and understood the weight of a bad decision. Felix faced that fear every time he put on his uniform, because if he fucked up, he could get
someone killed, whether it be a civilian or a fellow officer. And sometimes, Felix almost couldn’t face that fear.

“I know what it’s like,” Felix told her, letting that same fear show in his voice so she could see he was genuine. “I do, I know how it swallows you up and keeps you from breathing. And I know how terrifying failure can be, how it beats you down and leaves you feeling like you don’t have anything left to help you stand. And I can’t— I can’t tell you it’ll get better.”

Her expression twisted and Felix almost wished he could lie. He wished he could tell her she’d go out and get a call about being hired at her dream job, that she would perfect that perfect Thanksgiving dinner, and that her husband would magically heal every broken bone in his body, but he couldn’t. Overhead, a helicopter swung by, loud and abrasive. Felix glanced to it, saw the Channel 5 symbol on the side, and cursed the media. Televising a possible jumper, and for what? More viewers? Felix couldn’t worry about that right now. He just needed to get Melinda back.

“I can’t promise it’ll get better,” Felix repeated. “I don’t know what’s going to happen from here. I don’t know if you’ll get hired somewhere else or if that company will stop being a dick and actually pay disability. I don’t know what’s going to happen except— except I do know that if you jump, your daughter will never be the same again.”

Melinda’s breath caught and Felix knew she knew he was right. There was no way of knowing what would happen with her job or her husband, but there was only one way this could go for Bella.

“She needs you,” Felix told her. “She does. Even if you can’t do her homework, even if you fuck up the meals, even if you get fired. Your daughter needs you. Her father can’t help her right now. They both need you. And maybe that’s unfair— maybe it’s a terrible thing to put so much on your shoulders, but sometimes the unfair things in life are what keep us going. And it sucks and it hurts and it’s scary, but it’s still the right thing. You brought Bella into this world. You made her a part of this crazy place. You need to make sure she can survive it.”

Maybe it was a cruel ploy, putting responsibility as her reason to live, but Felix needed her off this bridge. He was a stranger, he couldn’t heal her wounds. Her family would do that for her. All Felix had to do was bring her back to solid ground.

“Come off the ledge with me,” Felix beckoned. “Your life isn’t yours to take. You have people who need you, you can’t just leave them behind. The second you married your husband and decided you wanted to bring your daughter into this world is the second your life became more than just you.”

She shook her head, but her resolve was wavering. The helicopter passed again, so fucking disruptive, and Felix even glimpsed the camera that was taking all of this in. Felix knew the woman would likely face attempted suicide charges once she stepped down. Felix resolved to learn her last name and make sure she didn’t pay a dime to any lawyer because she didn’t need that additional stress on top of everything else.

“Come down for them,” Felix pleaded gently. “You’ll learn to live for yourself again one day, but for now, just live for them. They need you. I swear to god, they need you. No child ever wants to lose their mother and no husband ever wants to become a widower. Just come down and let them help you figure this out.”

Melinda’s grip on the fence tightened. She leaned away from the waters, the tears slowing in their endless stream. She looked up into Felix for a long moment, searching his expression, trying to find some hint of a lie. Felix knew she wouldn’t find a damn thing. He couldn’t imagine how horribly his life would have tail-spinned if he’d lost his mother.
Melina shuddered, though it wasn’t from the cold. Then she reached out with her second hand to grip to Felix. “Please help me down.”

A gust of wind knocked them both hard enough to send Felix reeling back and Melinda nearly pitching into the darkness. Felix cried out and held fast to her wrist, wrapping his free arm around the fence in a deadlock. Melina screamed and swung, scrambling for purchase with her leg that had lost its balance. A second wall of wind hit them, and for a sickening moment, Felix felt his own body swaying forward over the inky blackness of the waters. For a moment, he knew he was going to fall. He was going to drop that 1.5 thousand feet and his body would shatter upon impact on those unforgiving waters. The water was going to break him and consume him and his parents would live their nightmare of burying their son.

In that moment, when Felix was sure he was going to lose his grip and die, he only found himself thinking of Jack and hoping he found someone good to move on to.

Then Melinda got her footing back and Felix pulled her up to stand beside him on his beam of iron, he pulled her across the fence and back onto the solid stone of the bridge, where police officers and civilians crowed around them, civilians pulling Melinda away with words of comfort and a shock blanket to paramedics, cops pulling Felix aside because they’d recognized him and needed to check on they fellow officer while offering their standard issue jackets to help him combat the cold.

Felix’s fingers were frozen and his mind was suddenly a shaky mess after nearly falling, but he was surrounded by strangers that he knew he could trust, and Melina was down off the ledge. “Can someone take me home?” he asked after finally getting his head in the right place. “I’ll do a debrief tomorrow.”

There was chatter over the comms and then there was someone standing in front of Felix, a female officer with crows feet in her eyes and a brow twisted with concern. “Mrs. Overfield wanted me to give you this,” she said, slipping a piece of paper into Felix’s coat pocket. “We’ll get you home, Kjellberg.”

Felix was nothing if not grateful, his thoughts rising and falling in their chaos. He was going to have countless problems when going in to the precinct tomorrow on one of his days off, but he knew he would have to give the debrief as soon as possible, especially since the whole incident was apparently televised and it was a known fact that he was a police officer, out of uniform. Felix would have to explain how he’d been there, what had been his motive, why he’d gone out on the bridge instead of calling for backup. Why he didn’t have his firearm or badge. Fuck, he was going to have a lot to deal with, and Felix wanted a night’s rest before any of that happened.

Felix was carefully ushered to a squad car and he slid into the back, looking at the bars in front of him with half-interest. He’d been in squad cars for years and years, but very rarely in the back of one. The plastic seat was uncomfortable and the bars made him feel like he’d done something wrong. Pretty much the mindset he wanted to give anyone he arrested. Definitely now how he currently wanted to feel.

The drive home was given to him by an Officer Grayson and Felix fell into a quiet state of relaxation by the man’s unending drone of small talk. Felix stared at the window and realized just how far away he’d wandered from his home. No wonder it was so dark out. He grimaced and shifted in his seat as he realized just how hard of a time he would have convincing Sarge that he’d gone to that bridge just to walk. He couldn’t deny that he’d been acting skittish at work since outing Det. Summers. It had to look suspicious to some degree.

“And then there was the one time I got to train elephants when my parents—” Officer Grayson suddenly cut himself off as he pulled up in front of Felix’s home. Felix noticed the man didn’t unlock
the passenger door to let him out and was staring at something at Felix’s door. “You expecting any company, Officer Kjellberg?”

Felix frowned, looked to where Grayson was staring, and flinched. At his door, atop the steps, stood Kon with his arms across his chest, and Mark just beside him. Even though Kon towered over Mark and made the other man look inexplicably young, Felix knew exactly which of the two he should be more afraid of. “They’re friends,” he told Grayson, forcing his tone into something neutral. “They’re probably really upset that I did that.” Felix wasn’t sure why they were here, but he knew that some of the officers had been upset with Felix for going without backup. It likely wasn’t the same for Mark and Kon, but Felix needed a believable excuse, and that was the only one he could come up with. “I’ll be fine. Let me out and don’t worry about it.”

Grayson hesitated, but then there was the click of the lock being released. Felix slipped off the issued jacket one of the officers had slung over Felix’s shaking shoulders back on the bridge and gave Officer Grayson a small smile in thanks. “Have a good rest of your shift, Grayson.”

“Stay safe out there, Kjellberg.”

Officer Grayson pulled away once Felix’s feet were on the sidewalk, showing tact in not lingering. Felix looked up his steps at the stone-still Kon and Mark. He pulled on a sheepish smile because he was too tired to manage much else. “Am I in trouble?”

Mark gave nothing away. “Get in the car.”

Felix’s sheepish smile fell away into a wince. “Look, I’ve had a long night,” he tried, hoping to talk Mark out of escorting him anywhere. “I have to go in on my day off tomorrow for debrief cause of the publicity, I just want to—”

Mark came down the steps and stood chest to chest with Felix, his dark eyes flashing with near-deadly intent. “Get. In. The car.”

Felix shuddered in a small moment of fear and ducked back, stepping out of Mark’s space, essentially submitting and hating that he had. But he didn’t have much other choice when faced with the cold-nothing that was Mark. Mark gave Kon a sharp nod, who returned the gestured and disappeared into Felix’s home, likely to check on the state of the place in Felix’s televised absence. Felix hadn’t even considered the attention this would bring to himself. What if Dante saw it and found some sort of leg up on Felix? Dante seemed like enough of a piece of shit to hold guns to innocent peoples’ heads just to get his way.

Mark moved past Felix and opened the door of his red Subaru. Felix slid inside and kept his head down, feeling like a child being taken him to face angry parents. As Mark started to drive, Felix slowly worked out the root of the problem.

He’d had a target on his head, a bounty, and he had put his face on television. That was probably the stupidest thing he could have done. Now Jack, who had just been bartering for Felix’s life after Det. Summers, was facing yet another problem with Felix being a face in the local media. That was publicity to Felix, which could be tied to Jack, which could be tied to the McLoughlins, which could be tied to this whole fucking sordid mess of drugs and murder. This would be especially bad if Jack had decided to distance himself from Felix to bring attention away from the police officer. Felix had really, really messed up.

“Fuck,” he whispered quietly to himself as Mark pulled up in front of the same high-rise Felix had been taken to when his home had been bugged. Being brought to Jack’s home rather than the warehouse was— disconcerting. Felix almost felt like he was being brought straight into his parents bedroom rather than getting a stern lecture in the kitchen. When they reached Jack’s floor, Mark
stepped out of the elevator, nodded to the stairs that led up to the second floor Felix had never seen, and then stayed put.

“Jack wants to speak with you alone,” Mark told him. “Stop stalling.”

Felix was definitely stalling, but he wasn’t about to admit to it. As he moved through this lower level, he caught sight of the television and saw himself on the screen, holding to Melinda atop the bridge and losing his footing, nearly falling. He grimaced and went to the spiral stairs, climbing them carefully, yet with just enough jarring sound to alert whoever was upstairs that Felix was going to join them. He didn’t know what to expect on this mysterious second level. Maybe weapons? Maybe an office meant for scaring the shit out of any enemy of Jack’s? Maybe a jacuzzi tub in a demented sex dungeon of sorts? Felix didn’t know what to expect, but he was still a little stunned by what he found.

The entire second level was empty.

Not a piece of furniture, not a gun, not a jacuzzi, not a god damn thing. The wooden flooring was clean and reflecting the city lights, the walls were white and bare. Even the ceiling lights were turned off. The floor plan was open so there were no additional walls or sectioned off rooms to keep Felix from seeing that this entire floor was empty.

Save for a dark figure sitting on the floor, leaning against one of the many windows that looked out across Central Park.

Felix stood back, giving himself a moment to digest and understand. He could tell that was Jack simply by the unruly hair that reached up towards the ceiling. And he could tell the other man was exhausted by the slump in his shoulders and the way he didn’t even move now that Felix was on the same level. He looked—defeated. But maybe that was just Felix’s assumption.

Felix squared his stance and readied himself to break the oppressive silence that hung over this entire level like a steel blanket. “I know I fucked up,” he told Jack. “But I couldn’t just let that woman jump. I had no way of knowing it would be a televised fiasco and I had no way of knowing that many people would come onto the bridge. I get that you’re upset with me for putting even more of a neon target on my head, but I’m not going to sacrifice myself or my integrity to make our lives easier. I just— I needed to help her.”

Jack didn’t respond. Didn’t even move.

Felix hesitated again before taking a step forward, coming closer to Jack. “I get why you’re upset,” Felix lied. “Having to deal with all of this shit, having to barter for my life. I’d thank you for that if I didn’t think you were so pissed off about having to do so.” He was close to Jack now, just a few feet behind him. “I’m making things difficult, though I don’t think it’s entirely my fault since I never asked for you to have a crush on me. But I did save you from that fucking Pontiac.” Felix sighed. He was just behind Jack, able to see the man’s jaw over Jack’s shoulder. “Then again, I’ve told you how I’d never take that back, so we’re at square one again. I just— I’m not going to be able to change who I am just to make your life easier. I’m a cop and I help people. I feel bad about making you stressed, but I’m not about to sacrifice who I am just so you don’t have to expend a little extra effort with Dante. You could always just stop.”

He was at Jack’s side now. He could see clearly out the window, into the park. The park itself was as dark as the waters below the Brooklyn Bridge, in stark contrast with the brightness of the city surrounding. Felix’s breath caught and he felt himself falling for those few split seconds again, where he’d been sure he was going to die. For a moment, he lost himself in the unending darkness of those waters and again hoped he wouldn’t be missed.
Then there was a harsh hand on his shoulder, slamming Felix bodily into the window, hard enough to make the glass tremble and knock the air from his lungs. Felix looked to Jack with wide eyes, pinned to the glass by Jack and shaken to the core because Jack was crying.

“I’m sorry,” Felix blurted out, not knowing what he’d done, but knowing he had to fix it. “For whatever it is, I’m sorry. I’ll try harder. I’ll keep out of the public eye. I didn’t know they’d have cameras on us. I’ll try to keep that from happening again. I don’t— I don’t want to make things harder on you. I’m so sorry.”

Jack sneered, the tears offsetting the fury twisted his expression into something much more tortured. Every instinct in Felix’s body was telling him to reach out and fix, to take Jack and stop whatever was hurting him, kill it if he had to. Felix’s hands came up beyond his own will and wrapped around the arm that was pinning Felix to the glass. “I swear to god, I’ll be smarter next time,” Felix promised, knowing that, in this moment, he would say just about anything to make it better.

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

Felix flinched at the venom in Jack’s voice, the hatred he swore he could hear creeping into Jack’s tone. Felix had thought that there wasn’t really a “too far” when it came to him and Jack, but he must have been wrong. He’d pushed Jack beyond a limit, a tangible line that Felix had waltzed over with dizzying speed. Felix had pushed Jack too far and now he was going to lose something vital in the aftermath. “Jack, I’m sorry.”

“I hate you,” Jack swore, his words thick with his tears. “I swear I do.” Felix almost believed him. “You think I’m upset because of this fuckin’ garbage? Because it was on the tele? I don’t give a shit who saw ye’, Felix, all I care about is what I saw.”

Felix wracked his brain through those few precious moments atop that bridge, trying to save the woman’s life. Was Jack jealous? Was he upset because Felix had held onto that woman? Was he upset because— No, Jack wasn’t that petty, he wasn’t that cruel. “I-I don’t understand,” Felix choked out. “But whatever I did wrong, I’m sorry. I, I’ll do anything.”

At those words, something shuttered in Jack’s expression, something that broke away the anger and just left behind exhaustion. Jack was still crying as he furrowed his brow.

“I’ll do anything,” Felix repeated meaningfully. “I... Anything, Jack.” Felix reached out and meaningfully let his fingertips brush the exposed skin of Jack’s pale neck. For a moment, neither of them moved and Felix felt the raised flesh of those cigar burns he’d seen on Jack’s neck when they’d first met.

Then Jack was slapping Felix’s hand away and shoving him harder into the glass.

“Fuck you,” Jack choked out through the tears. “I hate that I love you. I wish I didn’t give a shit about ye’, because you obviously don’t give a shit about me!”

“You’re wrong,” Felix replied immediately, clinging to Jack’s arm again, if only to keep his footing. “I’m sorry, I-I shouldn’t have suggested something like that. You’re not a pity thing for me, Jack, I shouldn’t have— I shouldn’t have tried to use what you want against you like that. I’m sorry.”

“Ye’ don’t even know why I’m so upset,” Jack whispered, his voice failing him. “You don’t even know why I hate ye’ so much.”

“Just tell me,” Felix pleaded. “I promise I’ll do my best to understand.”

“You fuckin’ asshole.” Jack’s fist in the front of Felix’s chest tightened and twisted, pushing again
and making the glass shake. “How could ye’ not—“ Jack’s expression turned again with agony.
“You don’t get it,” Jack said. “You just don’t. You think you’re nothing, that no one would care if
ye’ didn’t come back from your shift, or if ye’ got murked in a subway, or if ye’d fallen off that
bridge with that woman. Ye’ think the world would move on, like it always does after losing a cop.
Ye’ think no one would care. Ye’ don’t give a shit because ye’ think no one would care!”

It dawned on Felix like the impact of a car. “You think I don’t care if I’ll die.”

“I don’t think, I know,” Jack bit out, crying again, crying harder. “You don’t give a shit. You don’t
give a shit! Ye’ think we’d bury you and move on! You think your parents would just turn their
attention t’ their surviving child! Ye’ think they’d hire a new body t’ fill the uniform! Ye’ think I’d
just brush past it and keep doing all of this evil shit that I can’t escape! You don’t fucking care!”

Jack tore himself away from Felix so suddenly that Felix’s legs wavered and nearly dropped him to
the floor. Felix only barely remained standing as Jack swung back into this horribly empty place,
turning away so Felix couldn’t see his face. “I know ye’ don’t feel the same,” Jack told him, his
voice ruined. “I know you never will. So I know I can’t ask ye’ t’ try and survive and come home
for mer. Just— please, Felix. Live for someone. If not me, someone. Anyone.”

Jack turned to face him.

Felix knew he’d do anything to take that wretched expression from Jack’s face, and it scared him.

“Go home, Felix,” Jack told him. “I didn’t even— just go home.”

“I’m sorry,” Felix said uselessly.

Jack shook his head and turned away one last time. “Just go home.”

Felix didn’t know what to do, but Jack was done with him. So Felix went back to those stairs, hating
how empty this room was, and trudged down them to find Mark waiting with anger in his eyes. But
Mark didn’t say anything and only brought Felix back to the elevator, taking him away from Jack.

Felix had saved someone— he had saved Melinda— but he couldn’t ever seem to help Jack, and it
destroyed him.
“You don’t usually come in this time of day,” Marzia said softly, passing Felix’s drink to him over
the counter with a little more care than usual. Felix wondered if she had cable. Her expression was
easily described as “downcast” and she seemed to have trouble meeting his eyes. Felix grimaced and
looked to the manager, making a silent request with a bob of his head and pointing to Marzia.

The manage nodded back. “Marzia, take ten,” he said. “Rush is over, we’ve got this.”

She looked grateful and immediately stepped out from behind the bar, following Felix to a rare
empty table. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, sounding like she meant it. “I just, I saw the news
yesterday and you—” She cut herself off, looking away from Felix as they sat.

Felix sighed. He was coming to the Flatiron to get some sort of relief after being chewed out by
Sarge at the precinct and avoiding the blatant worry exuding from his fellow officers. Felix was
facing desk work for the next week for his “suicidally self destructive stunt in front of thousands of
viewers!” Apparently, the higher-ups didn’t want Felix to reflect a foolhardy, ready-to-die mentality
among New York’s Finest. Now Felix wasn’t allowed his patrol for a week and was set for guard
details for the slowly-burgeoning holiday season and a shit ton of reports. He was, to say the least,
not excited. He just wanted someone to tell him he’d done the right thing in saving Melinda.
Apparently, no one agreed.

“I can’t change who I am,” he told Marzia quietly, almost sadly, but not apologetically. “I can’t
change that I’m going to leap before I look. I will always save the civilian before I even give a
second thought to myself. I will never change who I am.”

Marzia sent him a watery smile across the table and nodded. “I know that,” she said. “I just wish that
the world was different. I wish people like you weren’t necessary to have at all.”

Felix didn’t know if she meant to be abrasive or kind with her statement, so he just settled with a firm
neutral. “The world will get better,” Felix said. “Or at least, it’ll be easier to ignore.”

“Maybe I can hope for some sort of dementia,” Marzia replied despondently. “Then I can live in my
childhood again.”

Felix was officially at a loss.

“You need to be more careful,” Marzia told him. “Not because of what everyone else has told you,
about surviving and coming home. You need to be careful and survive because there are very few
people like you. We can’t afford to lose you when you’re one in a billion, Felix. Consider this—
survive these ordeals so you can partake in more ordeals in the future.”

And that was the first time anyone had ever made sense to him. “I can do that,” Felix said. The idea of making sure he could walk away from dangerous situations so he could help more people settling well in his thoughts and definition of himself. “I can definitely do that. And not at all because you’d miss me, right?”

Marzia smiled a little more solidly at his teasing and kicked him underneath the table. “Who said I would miss you, Officer Kjellberg?”

“Call it my cop instincts,” Felix replied with a cheeky grin. “I know how to read people.”

“Oh, Felix,” Marzia said with a fond sigh. “I’m so happy to know that that isn’t the case at all.” She then pushed Felix’s mug of coffee a little closer to him. “Redeye, just the way you like it, as always. Don’t let me efforts go to waste. I make your drink different from everyone else’s.”

“What do you put in it that’s so special?” Felix asked as he took a sip, letting the warm mix of coffee and espresso fill his veins.

“I add a dash of vanilla,” she replied. “You want cream, I think your cream with espresso is terrible. But the vanilla brings out and balances the bitterness of the bean roast, while also taking the edge off the sharpness of the espresso shots. It’s the best of both worlds and sweet as can be.” Marzia smiled at him and Felix was suddenly struck with how absolutely gorgeous she was. “I hope you know that no one else here will ever be able to make that drink as well as I do.”

Felix grinned. “I don’t deserve a girl like you, Marzia.”

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” she replied. Then Marzia tapped her fingers on the table, once with each nail. “Felix,” she said. “I’ve been thinking.” Felix kept sipping his drink, watching her expectantly. Marzia’s brown eyes were boring through him, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. He’d been around her enough for that early-on uneasiness to die away. His gut trusted her. Felix saw no reason not to trust his gut, in turn. “I’ve been wondering,” Marzia continued idly. “Why you haven’t tried to kiss me for real yet.”

Felix blinked owlishly from over the table. Marzia grinned and sat up, leaning over the round table to get in Felix’s space and push their lips together for their first, real kiss. Her lips were softer than any girl’s Felix had ever kissed, and she tasted like grapefruit chapstick. Felix remembered to push into the kiss, return it only halfway through it. Then a shy little tongue swiped out against his bottom lip before Marzia sat back with a pretty blush and dark eyes. Beyond them, the door dinged to signal the entrance of someone into the little shop.

“Was that okay?” she asked.

The door dinged violently shut, too short of a time span between the two jingles of the bell for it to mean someone had come inside. Despite the hammering in Felix’s chest and his tunnel vision for Marzia’s very existence, he glanced to the door and the front shop windows just in time to catch the tail end of a peacoat darting urgently out of sight on an arm that had a crushed rosary wrapped around his hand.

“Fuck,” Felix said. He looked to Marzia, eyes wide as he realized that he wanted— needed—to go after Jack. What was he doing here, returning to the part of the city where he’d nearly been killed? Had he been looking for Felix? Was there something going on, could Felix be in more danger than he already was? What if Jack needed his help?

What if he’d seen the kiss?
“I have to go,” Felix said. Marzia’s expression dropped, something vulnerable and instinctively angry. “Only for a second,” Felix rushed. “That was, that was perfect, Marzia, you’re perfect. I wanna keep kissing you until the day my heart stops, okay? I promise. But I just saw someone who should not be out there and I need to find out if they’re in danger.”

She looked barely mollified, but Felix was running out of time as it was. So he stood, dipped his head down to kiss her again— tasted more grapefruit, more of those impossibly delicate lips— and then ducked out of the shop with the most apologetic expression he could wear. He left his coffee with her for good measure, a promise that he would return, and Felix knew he would. Marzia was too good of a thing for him to risk losing. But Jack—

Felix caught sight of the man’s unruly hair through the thick crowd of mid-day New York City, and bolted after Jack without a thought. He weaved between people, doing his best not to shove, but his urgency to reach Jack was greater than his desire to not cause a disturbance. He got closer and closer to Jack, but then spotted a black car coming down the road towards them. Jack left the sidewalk to stand in the road, head towards the car like he was expectantly waiting. Felix still hadn’t seen the man’s face. He was running out of time. The car pulled up. Jack moved to get inside.

Felix grabbed the collar of Jack’s peacoat and yanked him back.

Immediately, Jack’s hand flew up with the intent to strike, but the second Jack’s blue eyes landed on Felix, the strike was aborted and his hand fell uselessly to his side again. Jack stumped from the force of Felix’s pull, glared at Felix with a weak kind of anger. And now that Felix had Jack, knew that the man wasn’t going to duck into the car and disappear, he didn’t know what to do. “Uh,” Felix said stupidly glancing into the dark-tinted car to see Mark sitting in the next seat, watching Felix with a cool expression that was more dangerous than Felix would have liked to bring upon himself.

After Felix failed to continue, Jack sneered and asked, “What the fuck do ye’ want?”

Now that was different. That tone of malice, the sharp bite to his words. Felix wasn’t sure if Jack was truly angry at him, angry enough to hold a grudge, or if he was hurt from seeing—whatever he’d seen. It felt a little stupid, but Felix’s first instinct was to apologize to Jack for kissing Marzia. And that was just a mite too fucked up, considering Felix should have every right to kiss his consenting girlfriend. But the fire in Jack’s eyes was too much for him to ignore because it wasn’t the kind of fire that kept you alive in a fight, it was a fire that burned you alive from the inside. And Felix couldn’t stand it.

“I need to talk to you,” Felix said firmly. He dropped his grip from the back of Jack’s peacoat to the sleeve of Jack’s arm. “I mean it,” he said firmly, before Jack could insist otherwise. “I know you’re busy, but I don’t like that look in your eyes. I need to talk to you.”

Jack’s sneer was wavering and he took a moment to think before giving Mark a sharp nod and shutting the car door. The car pulled away and Jack stepped back onto the sidewalk, looking anywhere but Felix. Felix didn’t really care right now, considering he needed somewhere moderately private to have this conversation and all he had was a dark alley and some bad ideas. Felix tugged insistently at Jack’s sleeve and brought him into that alley, hoping the other man wouldn’t think Felix was going to hurt him. Thankfully— or not— Jack followed him all too willingly. Once Felix had Jack in the relative security of the alley—the fire escapes twisting above their heads and the steady drip of bad plumbing down the way— he gently moved Jack to stand against the nearest brick wall and positioned his own body so he was between Jack and the crowds beyond. He had pulled Jack into a dangerous position and intended to make up for it through instinctual protection.

But instead of getting to business, Jack scowled and shoved Felix by the shoulder. “Don’t do this,” he snapped. “Ye’ ain’t my fuckin’ bodyguard. You’re just some suicidal fuckass of a cop.”
Jack wasn’t angry, Felix could see that now. He was hurt. Felix winced and ducked his head, standing his ground. “I’m sorry you saw that,” he told Jack.

“Saw what?” Jack asked sharply. “Ye’ mackin’ on that girl? Ain’t like it’s my fuckin’ business with who ye’ swap spit with, why should I give a fuck?”

Felix narrowed his eyes at Jack. “I get that you’re still pissed from last night and now, but that doesn’t mean you can treat me like I’m fucking stupid.” Jack wilted in front of Felix’s eyes. The fire died instantly and his shoulders slumped. Felix wished he could feel like he’d won the argument, but he only felt worse. Felix sighed. “I know that seeing that did something to you,” he told Jack. “Don’t think that I don’t know that, otherwise I wouldn’t have come after you. I just wanna make sure you’re okay, considering— well, you weren’t really in the best place last night either.”

Last night, when Jack had screamed in Felix’s face of his fear of Felix happily dying. He’d cried in that awful, lonely floor of his apartment and bared his chest to Felix and torn himself to pieces for Felix to see. And then he’d sent Felix away before he could even try to make things better.

“You’re back here,” Felix said softly. “Where you were nearly killed. I just— I wanna make sure you’re not about to do anything… stupid.”

Jack scowled again, but it was weak and his expression ached. “I ain’t like ye’,” Jack snapped. “I’m not lookin’ t’ die, Felix.”

Felix grimaced, honestly not agreeing. “We met through you not protecting yourself,” Felix reminded Jack, trying to be gentle with this. Jack was volatile and Felix didn’t want to make this worse for either of them. “Both times, you stood in the open, knowing full well there was a target on your head. The difference between you and me is that I’ve signed a waiver for my life. If I die, it’s covered by the government. But if you die, you’re just— you’re gone. And I don’t want that.” Felix took in a shaky breath. “You’re my friend, Jack,” he told the Irishman, letting himself smile when Jack’s gaze snapped to him in shock at Felix’s confession. “And I care about my friends,” he told him. “I keep them safe. I try to keep them from hurting. I just want you to be okay.”

Jack’s fight was gone again, and Felix was sure it was going to stay that way. He kept looking at the floor, looking at his toes, digesting Felix’s words. Then he looked up with a storm in his eyes and said, “I’m sorry for yelling at ye’.”

Felix shook his head. “It’s fine, I kinda deserved it,” he told Jack honestly. “Sarge was just as pissed. I don’t even want to tell you how upset off Sive was. What I did— again, I’m not going to apologize it, because Melinda’s alive and with her family, but I am sorry for how it hurt the people in my life. I never—” Felix sighed heavily. “In the other places I’ve worked, none of my friends were really so attached, nor did things like this happen often. I’m just not used to people caring so much.” He smiled sheepishly and scratched at the back of his neck. “I’m just not used to people really caring about me.”

“I love ye’, Felix.”

Jack’s words had Felix flinching, the guilt twisting in his chest. He looked up to meet Jack’s eyes and saw that Jack still meant it. Jack looked almost ashamed for what he’d said, but he wasn’t taking it back.

“I know you do,” Felix said after that moment passed between them. His heart ached and he was sure Jack was no better off. “I’m so sorry you had to see me kissing her.”

“It’s fine,” Jack said with a shrug. “I’ve heard she’s nice from what ye’ve told me. I’m sure she’s
“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Felix told him. “There isn’t, okay?” Jack still didn’t look up, even when Felix reached out to brush Jack’s shoulder, asking for his attention. If anything, Jack pulled away from the touch, his brow knit with something like confusion. “There’s nothing wrong with being in love,” Felix said. “I’m just sorry I can’t be what you want.”

“If ye’ changed, you wouldn’t be the man I love.” Jack glanced down the alley to the street. “Look, I-I didn’t come back here t’ catch ye’ or nothing. I’m not spying and I’m not— looking t’ get ganked by some shit Pontiac. I have a meeting t’ make, a schedule t’ keep. I was supposed t’ stand there and wait for a signal, then Mark would come get me and take me t’ the address given. It’s, uh.” Jack hesitated like he was thinking. “It’s a Plague Writes thing,” he said, lowering his voice, like he was telling Felix something he shouldn’t. “I’m workin’ with them for some other shite. And I need t’ make that meeting. We’ve things t’ discuss.”

Jack shuffled his feet, his expression apologetic. “I’m sorry fer yelling,” he said again. “And I’m sorry fer kicking ye’ out before you could say your piece. But I ain’t sorry for what I said. I don’t like how ye’ step blindly off cliffs and I don’t like how ye’ don’t care if you come back alive or not. And I can’t change that about myself just like you can’t change who you are. But by god, Felix.”

Jack shook his head, his voice cracking a little with emotion. Felix was suddenly struck with the urge to reach out and touch again. His eyes zeroed in on the cigar burns on Jack’s neck and wanted to fix this.

“If ye’ go out,” Jack continued shakily. “Uniform or not, I’m terrified. I know what happens out here in this city, I know the evil that lurks behind every corner, and it’s your damn job t’ find that evil and face it head on, and I fuckin’ hate it. I hate how brave ye’ are. I hate how good you are. And I hate that I love ye’ regardless, because I know ye’ can’t change. Ye’ can’t stop being brave and ye’ can’t stop being good and ye’ can’t love me. All I have is the hurt.”

Felix nodded and swallowed down the self-disgust he felt for himself in being so useless. “If it helps,” he said. “Literally every decision I make these days has a sub-paragraph on trying not to make you upset.”

“God, don’t tell me that,” Jack whispered raggedly. “Don’t ye’ dare give me hope. Don’t dangle somethin’ like that in my face without ever lettin’ me have the chance t’ have it for myself.”

Felix fucking hated himself. “I’m a cop, Jack,” Felix choked out. “All I do is help and I can’t help you.”

“Then don’t help me,” Jack replied. “I’m beyond it regardless. Ye’ save people, yeah? I can’t be saved.” When Felix opened his mouth to argue, Jack finally looked up to meet Felix’s eyes and spoke before he could. “I’m part of that evil lurkin’ behind corners. I’m selling guns. I’m dealing death. I’m working with villains and I’m one of them. Always have been, always will be. Ye’ can’t save me from that darkness, Felix, because that darkness is part of me. So just— stop trying. Just stop. We’ll both be better off for it, in the long run.”

Felix refused to believe that. “You’re my friend, Jack,” Felix told him again. “I’m not about to leave you to whatever awful fate you think you have in store. I’m not about to abandon you and I’m not about to let you, like, die or anything. I’m not going to give up on you. I don’t give up on the people pretty, t’ catch someone that looks like you. I didn’t see her face, but I’ll bet it’s a nice face.” Another shrug and Jack looked away again. Why did he keep looking away? Why was he scared of Felix meeting his gaze? What the fuck could he be hiding? “I shouldn’t be upset with ye’. You made it clear that there’s no way I’ve a chance with ye’, and I’ve always known that. I just— it hurts t’ see it more than anything. But it’s not your fault and I, I don’t want ye’ t’ change or fix it. It’s not anything wrong with you, it’s something wrong with me.”
I care about.” Felix sent Jack a sad sort of smile. “I’m not giving up on you.”

Jack grimaced. “Ye’ should. It’s a lost cause. Fuck, Felix, I’ve no business feeling anything for you. I know it won’t work, for far more reasons than just the one.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even worse. “I’ve kept ye’ too long,” Jack said with an air of finality. “Yer girl will want ye’ back, and I’ve a schedule t’ keep. But…” Jack trailed off, then Felix saw him start to bring his fingers against the burns on his neck, three little taps, in a rhythm. “Thank ye’ fer coming out t’ me,” Jack said softly. “I didn’t expect— I didn’t deserve it. Not after how I treated you. Thank ye’, Felix. Even though I haven’t learned anything better, it’s nice t’ know you care.” Jack swallowed hard. “It’s— nice t’ know ye’ see me as your friend.”

“Of course I do,” Felix assured him. “Go do your meeting. I, uh. I hope it goes well.”

“We’re setting a boxing match,” Jack said with an odd burst of honesty. “That’s off the record, too.”

“Of course,” Felix agreed. “Good luck, Jack. Thanks for not having Mark shoot me.”

Jack gave him some sort of sour look before hurrying out of the alley way. The car came back around and Felix met Jack’s eyes one last time before the Irishman slipped into the back passenger seat and spoke to Mark. The car drove away and that was it. Felix didn’t feel any fucking better for having spoken to Jack and he was left with the lingering sense that he could have done more if he’d just been as brave as Jack thought he was.

Felix went back to the Flatiron with that awful sense of failure. Marzia perked up when she saw him regardless and held out his unfinished drink. “Did you catch your friend?”

Felix nodded and took a sip. The drink had lost its heat and tasted considerably less than it usually did. Marzia was smiling at him, but it felt wrong for Felix to take pleasure in her presence when Jack was suffering. Then Felix met his internal dilemma once more— fake it to help Jack, or continue to put himself first in selfishness. Felix knew what he would do, but that didn’t make him any happier for it.

“Can I kiss you?” Felix asked, wanting to feel anything but awful. Marzia smiled brightly and leaned in to peck his lips, the grapefruit chasing away the cold. And then he felt bad all over again for feeling better. “Go on a date with me next weekend,” Felix beckoned. “We deserve a break.”

“Are you leaving?”

“I have to go shopping with a friend of mine.” Mama Bach had wanted to move their grocery date up in preparation for her own dinner plans. “I promise I’ll text you.”

Marzia hummed softly and kissed him again. “Be safe, Felix.”

Felix dully promised to do so and left.

. . .

“I know you hate protection details— I know you hate them and I don’t care.”

Sarge’s words were ringing in Felix’s head, a boring monotony on top of the even more boring-reality of his current assignment this shift. Standing in a ballroom in his dress blues, watching people mingle and laugh while wearing their money on their bodies. Another gala, another reason for Felix to bash his head into a wall. He distantly wondered if Jack were here, but knew that he wouldn’t seek the other man out even if he was. Jack was likely working an angle and Felix didn’t want to distract him. Didn’t want to put him in any sort of danger.
Felix bit back a weary sigh and readjusted his parade rest stance, glancing over faces inconspicuously, not even on edge. All of these people were too wealthy to care about him. He couldn’t be in any sort of danger and he doubted anyone would attack a charity for the starving children of Syria. No criminal was that much of a jackass.

He zoned out— for the millionth time tonight— and lost himself in the gentle string music of the orchestra that was playing. It was Vivaldi’s Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, L’estate, Allegro non Molto.

In the midst of the music, Felix reminded himself that he had plans to make— his date with Marzia was approaching fast, as was his birthday, only a week away. Felix didn’t know what he was going to do for his own birthday, but no one had dropped hints about having any plans, so maybe he was probably going to be lucky enough to avoid any celebration. Felix just wanted to buy some good whiskey and enjoy a good movie. He had taken the work day off, considering he was already getting paid for it whether he worked or not. Felix didn’t take days off very often, but he liked to give himself a break once in a while. Maybe he’d try to see Marzia. Or maybe even Jack, if he wasn’t too busy.

That was a weird thing to want, though. Felix wasn’t sure why, he just knew it was.

“Officer Kjellberg.”

The sound of his name had him sitting up and trying to look like he wasn’t absolutely bored to death. Felix glanced to his left and saw Sarge approaching him with a small Chinese women and two men in suits following him. Sarge did not look happy.

“I need you to escort Mrs. Yun to her vehicle,” Sarge told him with the corner of his mouth slightly pinched. “The valet is nowhere to be found and she has some urgent matters to attend to. She requested your help, specifically.” Maybe that was why Sarge wasn’t happy. Why the fuck would anyone know him to request him? “I’m sure she saw your heroics on the TV and figured you’d be a safe bet.”

This lady was either up to something or paranoid, because she already had bodyguards and had no need for some beat cop to escort her to the car. Regardless, it wasn’t like Felix was in any sort of position to turn her down, and it wasn’t like he wanted to stay where he was for another two fucking hours or however longer this fucking shitfest was going to last. Felix should be grateful for the opportunity to move around and do something. He gave Sarge a brisk nod and approached Mrs. Yun. He wasn’t sure how to proceed when escorting a woman with two existing bodyguards, so when Mrs. Yun reached out, Felix took it as a cue to offer his arm.

“My car is parked in the lower level of the garage,” she told him with a low, regal tone, her words stilted and pronounced harshly, as most who had Chinese as their mother tongue would. Felix nodded and mentally plotted the route down into the garage, knowing they’d be in the elevator for a while. “You must take me there.”

Felix still wasn’t sure if she was scheming or paranoid, but it didn’t matter either way. He’d be followed by cameras. Felix led her to the elevator and felt some weird motherly affection for the woman hanging onto his arm. He’d walk like this with his own mother from time to time, when he’d be back for holidays and his mother would cling to her normally-absent son like she was scared he’d disappear. On walks after dinner or early in the morning, she’d put her arm through Felix’s and let him lead, content to just exist at his side. Felix knew this woman wasn’t her mother, but there was something about her so suddenly, this scent that made Felix feel almost hazy.

“My name is Xiao-Zhi Yun,” she told Felix suddenly as Felix summoned the elevator. “Pronounced ‘ts-iao’ and ‘djur,’ if that helps. I am sure you understand my desire for correct pronunciation of my
name, as a man bearing an odd name himself.”

“I completely understand,” Felix affirmed as the elevator dinged its arrival and Felix brought her inside. The two bodyguards stood outside and Felix frowned, meaning to wave them in, before Xiao-Zhi Yun cut him off.

“They will take the next,” she said. “I would like to spend some time with you.”

Felix now wondered if he was being hit on. When the elevator doors shut and the box began its slow, trembling descent, Xiao-Zhi let go of Felix’s arm and took a step back, looking him up and down with a scrutiny that really reminded him of his mother. Felix stood still and kept his jaw stiff, almost uncomfortable by her gaze. He felt like livestock being accessed for an accurate price tag.

“Huā xīn,” she tutted beneath her breath. “You are not what I expected.”

Felix paused. “Come again?”

“You,” she repeated, gesturing at his body. “You’re slim. Small. Fast, maybe, also smart, but no mountains will you be moving. The strongest thing about you is your jawline. And you have sharp bones, all over you, sharp bones to cut. There is nothing about you that fits what I expected.”

Felix had heard several people say that about him, but only in a very particular context. He looked to Xiao-Zhi and remembered the woman that had tried to murk him on the subway had belonged to a very particular mafia group herself. Then he remembered the woman he’d seen Jack playing guards with beneath the MET.

“Fuck.”

Xiao-Zhi’s brow shot up before she started to laugh. "Yǎn pí dǐxià! Very smart, very smart, at least. Jack would be stupid to fall for someone who isn’t at least above slight intellect. But I must say, again, you’re scrawny! So small and thin! You could never withstand the firefights of our world. He made a bad decision in falling for you. Your bones are sharp and weak. They will break easily under our strength.”

Felix wondered just how the fuck he kept getting himself into this shitty situations. The elevator dinged and opened and Xiao-Zhi took his arm again. “Take me to my car,” she said. The elevator next to them sounded off as well and the two bodyguards stepped into view outside the elevator Felix was in, threatening him with their mere presence. Felix had no choice but to step out of the elevator and follow the gentle tugs Xiao-Zhi gave to his arm, leading him to a vehicle.

“Unlike Dante, I am not stupid enough to kill the object of a very dangerous man’s affections,” Xiao-Zhi said as she shuffled alongside Felix. Her feet were tiny and Felix was reminded of the feet-binding practice of the Chinese. He shuddered to think of the pain and wondered if Xiao-Zhi was anyone important in her mafia family or if she was just a special kind of soldier.

“Everyone is very split on you,” she said as they passed through this maze of cars. “They seem to think you’re either going to be Jack’s end or Jack’s beginning. Some are stupid enough to put targets on your head, others are biding their time and hoping you will— how do they say? Mellow him out?”

She smiled up at him to expose rotting teeth. Felix fought back another reflexive tremble of his body. The two bodyguards walking behind them were like animals stalking prey. He could only see them in the reflection of the car windows they passed, and both of them were always staring at his back so intently. Like they were seeking out the softest spot to sink a blade and sever his spine.
“I am on the side of those who refuses to weigh any weight on your existence, as it is,” Xiao-Zhi continued almost softly. Her heels echoed through the parking garage. Felix was wound up so tightly that he had to keep reminding himself to breathe naturally. “Dear, dear Jack has always been an enigma among us. He was against our doings at one point, then suddenly he wants in. Dante thinks it’s a trap, Vinny thinks he’s gotten wise, and I think he’s in love. I don’t know if he’s with or against us, truly, but I know you’re the key to whatever decision he has reached.” She glanced him over again, squinting. “I just do not know if he’s decided to be a better person or if he’s decided he’ll burn the world for you. Either way, I’m deciding on whether or not I’ll be one of those that must burn or if him being a better person means I’ll be happy to carry on my business.”

She glanced around. “And, of course, Officer Kjellberg,” she said, pronouncing his name perfectly. “Very few know this, but my business is people.”

She stopped. They were in front of an innocuous, black car that had illegally tinted windows. One of the bodyguards clicked something behind them and the headlights shone, the door unlocking. The other bodyguard opened the passenger door. Another one put something hard against the base of Felix’s spine—a gun.

Xiao-Zhi was still smiling enigmatically at him. “Please, join me for a ride, Officer Kjellberg. I am eager to get to know you.”

“Do I have a choice?” Felix asked, hyperaware of the gun against his spine and momentarily proud of himself for how his voice hadn’t shook. “Like, look, I’ve had a gun to my person way too much for this month already. Can we just put that away and trust that I’m not a suicidal head case and I won’t try to run?”

Xiao-Zhi laughed at him. “That is not what Jack seems to think.”

Felix bristled, hating the idea that these people were privy to the things Jack felt and laughed in the face of it. Jack had been ruined by what Felix had done, and here was this woman, throwing it around like it meant nothing. “I’ll get in your car,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Get rid of the fucking gun. You think I don’t know how this shit goes? I get that all of you want to intimidate me and prove you have the biggest balls in the city, but this song and dance is getting a little fucking old for me.”

Xiao-Zhi seemed momentarily impressed. “I think I see it.”

Felix was tired of people saying that shit. He scowled, spun on his heel to glare at the bodyguard with the gun in his back, then bent down to slide into the car without having to be forced. “Don’t know why most of you don’t just bother to ask nicely,” he complained. “At this point, I’m pretty sure I understand that I have to get in the car if I want to live. It’s always the same with you people.”

Xiao-Zhi laughed again and slid in beside him. “I will drop you off at the gala, please do not be concerned,” she said with an air of carelessness. “I do not want you injured. Like I said, I am not eager to become an enemy of the McLoughlin family. Not only do I greatly rely on their exports, but Jack is rather famous for his fits of blood thirst.”

Felix didn’t like the sound of that. He grimaced and tried to get comfortable, his dress blues a little too tight in the wrong places when sitting down like this, in this small car. The bodyguards sat in the front and the car rumbled to life, pulling out of the garage. The city lit up around them, bright enough to light up the interior of the car. Xiao-Zhi sat primly beside him on the bench, humming a tune under her breath that Felix didn’t recognize. When she didn’t immediately speak, Felix decided it would be fair to ask question of his own.

“Why do you want to know me?”
Xiao-Zhi shrugged. "It seems smart to know the lover of my... partner."

"I'm not his lover," Felix said. "I'm really— he likes me, but I don't have the same feelings. And it's messy and complicated and I would prefer it if you didn't rub it in his face next you see him."

She hummed thoughtfully. "You do care about him."

Felix only shrugged, not sure what he could give away about his relationship with Jack.

"I only say this because I know he cares about you," Xiao-Zhi continued. "Ever since Dante made your acquaintance, our little meetings have been—strained. Dante is very much a child despite his age, you must understand. He thinks he has Jack’s new favorite toy in his meaty palms and is doing everything he can to make sure Jack remembers this. It is quite annoying. We try to harbor peace in those little get-togethers, but Dante insists on pulling Jack’s piggy-tails. And it’s all very upsetting. Jack tries to be a big boy, but it’s obvious he cares for you in a very self-destructive way. I cannot tell you how often I see him holding himself back from strangling Dante in his seat."

Felix grimaced, unhappy with the implications. "I don't want him to get in trouble for this."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Xiao-Zhi said diplomatically. "After all, I’m sure he does not want his business plans to suffer as well in the face of falling for the wrong person. Quite sad, if you ask me. There are many legends of love in my country, many of the tragic. I’m sure Jack’s would fit in quite nicely."

Felix looked down at the floor of the car, to the clean carpet and his shined shoes. He didn’t like the temptation he was feeling to bare his heart to the woman. He didn’t know who she was or who she swore her allegiance to. The Mìngyùn, obviously, but to what extent? Was she acting under someone else’s orders, or just meeting Felix for her own fun? And should Felix be afraid that his face was becoming more and more well known amongst the sordid masses of New York City? He had all of these new questions and no chance of getting answers because he didn’t trust this woman at all.

"Of course," Xiao-Zhi said softly. "There is always the chance that Dante is right. That maybe you should be treated as a bartering system, a way to blackmail. Jack would do anything for you, just short of disowning his own family name and leaving the McLoughlin line to rot. Though I’m sure that shall be achieved as well, seeing as you lack the necessary parts to continue the line itself."

Xiao-Zhi looked him over again like he was cattle. "Or a brand. Show Jack that we will not take any suggestion of his betrayal lightly."

Felix’s blood ran cold. "Jack would never betray you," he said firmly, though it was a lie. He had no idea what Jack was capable of and what he was trying to achieve. "He’s loyal. Smart too. You know that. Jack wouldn’t turn on any of you."

Xiao-Zhi laughed. "You think Jack is loyal?" she asked. "Dear boy, Jack killed his own father. There’s not an ounce of loyalty in his veins. Not really."

Felix sat ramrod straight in his seat, piecing that new bit of information with what he already knew, and coming up with— a lot of sense. Jack had killed his father. Everyone knew Seamus’ death had been mysterious and unexplained and a total fucking coverup. Everyone knew that Seamus was a bad fucking person, bad for even as far as the Mafia went, but he’d worked well with the other families. Jack had killed Seamus. Jack had killed his father. Felix wanted to be disgusted by this, disgusted by patricide, but—

"Seamus McLoughlin abused his son," Felix said with more confidence than he should feel. He couldn't forget those burns on Jack’s neck, how Jack had checked himself into the emergency room
when he was only a child. Felix had never really considered the possibility, but knowing Jack and knowing Jack had killed his father meant only one thing. “Seamus hurt Jack and Jack killed him. Either out of self defense or revenge, I don’t know.” Felix took in a deep breath. “I don’t know why he did it, but I know Jack did it for the right reason.”

Xiao-Zhi seemed impressed again. “Are not our police meant to support justice coming from the court system?”

Felix knew she was right, knew that he was supposed to adhere to “innocent until proven guilty” like it was a lifeline. He was supposed to say that, abuser or not, Seamus deserved a fair trial and a fair sentence for his crimes. But Felix couldn’t forget the burns on Jack’s neck. “Sometimes the courts fail the victims.”

Xiao-Zhi laughed again and Felix realized he found the sound more grating than jovial. “It is true, it is true,” she said between little giggles. “Seamus hated that boy, hated him more than he hated the rest of his children. But no one hated Jack more than his mother. Why else would she abandon her youngest to the hands of a man who only knew how to curl his fingers into fists? I was there for Jack’s birth, all of us bosses were. I can tell you that since the day that poor thing came into this world, not once did I see him without a bruise. Seamus would say he’d done something to deserve it, and we never questioned. Seamus’ ruthless cruelty is matched only by his son’s bloodlust. Sometimes, I think dear Jack would wish we would help him, but why would we? Not only did we rely on Seamus as a business partner, we feared him. He knew that killing a boss would not come back to haunt him. Even our own ranks feared him too much to consider an act of revenge on our behalf.”

Felix felt sick. “You just let it happen,” he said, unable to keep himself from sounding accusatory. “You stood by and let Seamus beat Jack until it got so bad that he had to walk himself across the city to a fucking hospital to mend the broken bones. You just— you let it happen. You fucking let it happen.”

Felix didn’t need to explain the sudden and absolute hatred he felt for this woman sitting beside him. “How could you?” he asked, voice shaking with the anger he was trying to keep at bay. “How could you look a boy in the eye, a boy covered in bruises, and turn away? Have you seen Jack’s neck? The way he can’t let people touch him? You did this to him. How the fuck—” Felix cut himself off, wary of how close he was to getting himself killed by screaming his fury into this woman’s face. She’d said all the bosses were present for Jack’s birth. That meant she was the boss of the Mìngyùn. Felix should be afraid but he fucking wasn’t, he was just pissed.

“I despise people like you,” Felix was able to bite out after a moment to calm down. “The people that just stand there and let people get hurt. Say you’re being smart by not sticking your neck out while a kid is broken into pieces by his own father. You’re not smart, you’re just cowards.” Felix had the cigar burns on Jack’s neck burned into his retinas, the way Jack flinched or went like stone in his arms. Jack had been hurt and this woman was one of the people to sit by and let it happen. “All of you are just a bunch of cowards,” he spat. “And you want me to just hurt him all over again. It’s not happening, got it? If you try to hold me over Jack’s head, then I’ll get myself out of the equation before Jack can be manipulated by you disgusting excuses for human life.”

Felix was so upset his hands were trembling. “You’re the scum of this human race,” he told her, brazen in the face of wanting her to know just how against he was fucking disgusted her was with her over what she’d done. “It’s because of people like you that people like me are needed. I swear to god, if I learn of you trying to hurt Jack again, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you never make it to any sort of fair trial.”
Xiao-Zhi arched a fine brow. “Your birthday is fast approaching,” she told him. Felix wasn’t alarmed by this, as his birthday was somewhat public knowledge, until she said, “Did you know your sister bought plane tickets to come surprise you? Only two. Her husband, he must work, you see. But your nephew has done so well in school that she finds it worth taking the time off to come see his favorite, beloved uncle. It would be a shame if something were to happen.”

As Felix’s blood ran cold, Xiao-Zhi’s smile became deadly. “You can make all the threats you want, dear boy,” she said. “I’ve been dealing threats for much longer.”

Felix covered his fear with a scowl. “If you touch them—”

“Jack will likely be upset,” she admitted. “But I think what he wants from us outweighs the threat of revenge. And this isn’t about him. Now, if I know that you will keep from exposing our men in your workplace, your sister and nephew will make the visit and return home in one piece. But if you continue to get our hard-earned men arrested, I will be forced to go after you and your family, directly. And while I fear Jack’s brash willingness to outright murder, I do believe that he will understand why we retaliated.”

“You’re a fucking lowlife,” Felix snapped.

“Bottom feeders are the ones to survive the apocalypse,” Xiao-Zhi said wisely. “Please, Officer. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

The car pulled up in front of the gala and Felix didn’t wait for anyone to give him permission to leave. He burst out of the car and kicked the side of the door once he’d slammed it shut. His sister wasn’t supposed to— his fucking nephew— these pieces of shit had let Jack—

Felix went to the nearest payphone and dialed the number from memory. He almost expected his call to be ignored, so he was surprised to hear Jack’s voice on the other end after only one ring.

“Who are ye’ and how’d you get this number?”

“Xiao-Zhi of the Mìngyùn just threatened my sister and nephew,” Felix said, knowing Jack would recognize his voice. “They’re flying in for my birthday next week. I had no fucking idea and now that fucking cunt is saying she’s gonna hurt them or capture them or something if I don’t bend to their will and stop exposing their made men in the police force. I need you to help me keep them safe.”

There was a long pause, like Jack couldn’t believe what Felix was telling him. Or maybe he couldn’t believe Felix had called. Then there was a shuddering breath before Jack said, “I’m so sorry, Felix.”

Felix scowled. “Don’t you dare take the blame for this,” he told Jack, his voice low. “I’m the one who weeded Summers out. I’m the one who brought him to justice. I’m the reason those fuckers want to go after my family. The reason I’m calling you is because you’re the only option I have to keep them safe, not because this is your fault and you are required to do something. You—” Felix cut himself off, hating this next sentence, but knowing he needed to keep Jack from shouldersing any more blame. “If you don’t help me, I won’t hold a grudge. This was my action to make and my mistake. If you want to wash your hands of it, it’s only fair. I just—I really need your help. Please.”

The answer was immediate. “Anything, Felix.”

Felix absolutely hated the implicated of what “anything” could be, but he knew Jack meant it. “If they were able to find the flight, then so can you,” he said. “I want—if you can, please, give them an escort, someone to tag behind them. And get Kon as close as you can to my house when they’re
there. I don’t—I can’t lose them. They’re my family. I can’t let anything happen to them.”

“Consider it done.”

Felix trusted him. “One last thing, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

Felix took in a deep breath. “You did the right thing.”

There was another paused. “I don’t—”

“Your father,” Felix clarified. “You killed him and you did the right thing. I don’t normally— like, I hate murder, okay? Killing is wrong and bad, but sometimes people deserve it. Sometimes it’s necessary. Sometimes the police can’t do shit and people need to do the right thing on their own. And after what Seamus did to this city and to you? He fucking deserved it more than most. You did the right thing. So if you’re worried I’ll get on your case, preaching for the whole justice and court system, then don’t worry. I agree with what you did. I support it. I support you. You did. The right thing.”

Jack didn’t say anything for a long time. When he finally did, he sounded almost like he was crying again. “I’ll keep yer sister and nephew safe, Felix, I swear it on my life.” Then Jack hung up and Felix was left standing in the phone booth, a grimace pulling insistently at his lips. He wished he knew the right thing to say to help Jack, but he never did. It was starting to tear him apart, frustrate him beyond reason. Felix realized he was starting to go to once impossible lengths to try and make Jack feel something better than awful and he didn’t care what personal morals he would have to sacrifice in the process.

Felix had never been willing to sacrifice what he believed for someone else before. Now that he was encompassing on this new, ugly truth, he didn’t have time to ruminate and figure himself out. All Felix could do now was try to keep his family safe.
I'm the Gun Who Won that Old Wild West

Chapter Notes

this one's nearly 2k longer cause i have to tell ya'll that like miiiight not be able to post again until a week into january

i'm sorry i have family coming for the week of the dec27-jan3 and christmas is rough on me DX i'll do my best but i really don't think i'll be able to get anything up for the holiday season

if i do, then yay! but if not, i'm sorry :( thanks for understanding if you do! you can yell at me if you want

also, i wanna officially state Marzia does not know Jack and Felix are friends she has no idea Felix is involved in any of the mafia shit she does not know

The plan was simple and solid by the day before Felix’s birthday. Felix would finish out his shift in whatever relative level of severity it was while listening in on live updates through an earpiece he’d been given by Kon this morning. The real meat of the plan would be the tailing of his sister and nephew. Once she and Arnold arrived at the JFK international airport on a flight that had one of Jack’s men sitting three rows behind them, they would have a tail into baggage claim and then to the taxi that was planted to pick them up, with two additional nondescript cars to follow the taxi. From there, Fanny and Arnold would arrive at Felix’s place, where Kon and Mark would keep shifts to have constant surveillance on the home, Tyler actually camping out on the roof. Then Felix would come home from his shift, act surprised, and the surveillance would extend beyond, ending only once Fanny and Arnold had landed safely back in Rhode Island.

It was a solid and simple plan. Right now, Felix was driving through his patrol, on the way back to the precinct as his shift was nearly over and he needed to head in for the night. The only thing that had really happened some punk had tried super fucking hard to tear off the cuffs Felix had around his wrists and had knocked Felix around a bit. Felix had succeeded in getting the guy into the back of the car and to the fucking jail, where he belonged, but the man had knocked Felix hard enough for him to hit the ground, and Felix had lost his handcuff key. No big deal. He’d get a new set after he got back from his weekend, since taking his birthday off left his regular three days of rest immediately after.

Felix didn’t care at all. Even with the strain of the target on his head being passed onto his family, Felix was excited. He hadn’t seen Fanny since the holiday season last year and hadn’t seen Arnold in longer. Felix missed them. He’d spent the majority of his early life with Fanny and only Fanny. Growing up with someone who knew his thoughts better than himself wasn’t something he’d grown accustomed to losing. Having that closeness back, having that familiarity— Felix couldn’t deny that he was excited to have it again.

"I've got eyes on Birden," came Mark’s voice into Felix’s ear, way too close for Felix’s comfort. He’d never really worn an earpiece before, and having someone’s voice so deeply in his mind made his skin crawl a little. It felt— intimate. Very intimate with people he genuinely did not want to be intimate with. He tried to imagine Mark whispering in his ear to get as akin to this earpiece and
shuddered. He didn’t now want Mark close enough to whisper in his ear— the man would likely go for his throat in the same moment. “Birden and Crater heading into the home.”

Felix couldn’t keep from smiling at the idea of coming home to find his sister and nephew. Even for all the stress, for all the danger, he was so happy to see them again. He was so happy to be able to spend his birthday with them. He was just— he was happy.

“They’re— wait.”

Mark’s voice was suddenly harsh and urgent. Felix sat forward in his seat, attention only half on the road in front of him.

“They’re going to—”

“Why are they leaving—”

“Turn off Felina’s receiver.”

Mark’s order had the sudden rush of panicked conversation falling silent and Felix scowled, cursing that fucking asshole. God, was something wrong? Were Fanny and Arnold okay? Felix swore to god, if anything happened to them, Felix would—

He couldn’t do a damn thing. Felix knew that, knew that he had to put this in the hands of Jack’s men and— and Jack himself. He hadn’t heard Jack in his ear once, had almost awaited to hear from the man, only to have nothing. Felix had no idea where Jack was but— he knew Jack couldn’t be anywhere but where he needed to be. Even if it wasn’t on top of Felix’s crisis, Jack had a good reason to be doing whatever, and he’d put the best men he could on Felix’s case. Felix had to trust that, and he did. He trusted Jack.

Felix abandoned his leisurely pace to the precinct, though, eager to get back. He was still twenty minutes out, needing to follow the laws of the roads he was taking regardless. Felix’s grip on his wheel was white. He couldn’t stop thinking about the way the men in his ear had sounded confused. Wasn’t that just like Fanny to take whatever plans anyone could have and just turn them all upside down. He wondered what Fanny had done to throw everyone off. He wasn’t surprised, but by god, did he wish this shit could just get easier. Cut him some fucking slack. Felix was going to have a heart attack before thirty at this rate. He was turning twenty-eight tomorrow, Fanny didn’t have a lot of time left to put him in an early grave.

Felix pulled into the guarded precinct lot, handed over his keys, and burst into the precinct itself, ready to get home. He wasn’t even going to change out of his uniform, dead set on getting back and finding out what had gone wrong.

“Kjellberg!”

Sarge’s voice rang through Felix’s thoughts. Felix grimaced, knowing he couldn’t very well just bounce now that his boss was looking for him. Felix took a moment, glared into his locker, then shut it to bring Sarge into his field vision. Sergeant Morrison was smiling at him, arms crossed over his chest. Felix took in a deep breath. “Can I help you, Sarge?”

“More like, how can I help you?” Sarge reached out and took Felix by the shoulder, pulling him into his office. Felix’s chest started to twist into knots the further along he realized he wasn’t going to be able to get home any time soon. “I’ve got some big news for you, Kjellberg,” Sarge was saying as he shut the door. “Two pieces of it, both of which I’m sure will bring you a fair amount of delight.”

Felix stood in front of the desk, unable to forget the less-than-preferable circumstances of the last
time he’d been in here. He was happy that Sarge had no ill will towards him, but Felix still wished he hadn’t had to rock the boat so much. Especially now that Felix’s family was in harm’s way for it. Felix fell into a parade rest as Sarge went to stand at the other side of the desk. Sarge was still smiling as he handed Felix a patch. Felix took it. His eyes went wide.

“Welcome to New York’s ESU,” Sarge said. “More commonly known among the public as SWAT, but we prefer to use the technical terms when you’re part of it. Standing for Emergency Services Unit, the ESU only accepts the best of the best, as you have proven yourself to be.” Sarge reached across his desk to give Felix a clap to his shoulder. “Well done, Officer Kjellberg. I couldn’t be more proud.”

Felix gaped up at Sarge in disbelief. It wasn’t like Felix had done badly on the tests. He’d cleared out the building with perfect time, had scored higher on the marksmanship exam than he’d ever managed before, and had proven he was more than physically capable for even the most arduous of tasks. Felix had all but stunned the observers and the people he’d taken the tests with, but that didn’t always mean Felix would make it. They could have judged him inadequate or not a team player. They could have just decided they didn’t like the look on his face. Any number of things could have gone wrong. Felix didn’t know, but wrong seemed to be all he had these days. Except—

“ESU,” Felix said, looking over the patch, still unable to believe it was in his hand. “Holy shit,” he breathed. “When do I start?”

“I’ll debrief you on how it works,” Sarge told him. “I know you know, but I’ve still got to go through the rigamarole with you and you’ve still got eight months of training to shoulder through. You’re still gonna work your regular beat, but you’ll have a special channel, and you’re expected to come when you’re called. Could be anything, you know. From lizards to shootouts. But we all know you’re more than capable. You’re gonna do us right.”

Felix wanted nothing more than to live up to Sarge’s expectations for him. “I will do my best, Sarge,” he said. “I swear, I won’t let you down.”

Sarge wouldn’t stop grinning, and neither could Felix, at this point. He was stressed, he was overwhelmed, he was up to his eyeballs in crime and evil, but he had done this one thing right, and that was more than Felix had ever expected. He’d wanted to make SWAT, but he’d never believed he could. Not this early on in his career, not at such a young age. Felix knew he was good at his job, but good enough for this? Felix couldn’t— he’d never thought he’d be judged as good enough for this. Felix was just—

He couldn’t stop smiling.

“Fuck,” he said to himself. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Sarge replied. “You’re the one who blew away the expectations of everyone around you. You’re the one who made it. All the credit goes to you, kid. Don’t underestimate yourself ever again.”

Felix nodded, clutching the patch with that stupid smile making his face hurt.

“I ain’t done making your day, Officer,” Sarge said, rounding his desk again to take Felix by the shoulder. “You’ve been working hard, everyone knows that. Even though you’re getting yourself into a big ol’ heap of trouble, it’s never for anything less than the right thing. Good officers like you deserve a good thing or two every once in a while. And tomorrow’s your birthday, right?” At Felix’s sudden drop go his smile, Sarge laughed. “I’ve got your fucking profile, kid, of course I know! So why don’t you follow me out here and enjoy yourself a little birthday surprise.”
Sarge pulled him back to the door leaving the officer, grinning, always grinning. Felix was wary now, but Sarge seemed at ease. “Happy birthday, Felix,” Sarge said, pushing the door open with a sweep of his arm to reveal haphazardly thrown streamers, a banner with his name on it, and—

Fanny and Arnold standing next to Sive, shouting “happy birthday!” with bright, excited expressions. Felix was floored for a moment, unable to move. His fellow officers were surrounding and shouting and Fanny—who had always said she hated precincts and places like this—with tiny little Arnold. Not so tiny, though, Arnold had grown. His blond hair was longer and and tucked behind his eyes to show his endless blue eye. He was bouncing on his heels in excitement, held back by his mother’s arms. Once Felix finally recovered from the shock—and the sudden relief from his stress, because Fanny and Arnold were in the safest place they could be—he laughed and went down on his knees, opening his arms for Arnold.

“Go get him!” Fanny cried out, pushing Arnold forward. The little boy darted towards Felix, slamming into him and wrapping his scrawny arms round Felix’s neck to be lifted in the air as Felix stood.

“Geez, kid, you’re huge!” Felix exclaimed, pretending to wheeze and gasp. “So heavy! How old are you now? Three? Four?”

“Seven!” Arnold exclaimed, like Felix didn’t actually know. He had Arnold’s birthday marked in his calendar and bought the kid a gift every year, wishing he could be there for the moment in person more than anything. “I’m seven, Uncle Fili. And you’re gonna be twenty eight!” Arnold grinned, showing his teeth. “You’re old.”

“Watch your mouth!” Fanny chided. “I’m just as old as your uncle, are you trying to say that about me?”

Felix laughed and pressed his forehead to Arnold’s, soaking in the warmth of the child he’d known he would die for the moment he’d come into this world. Felix had been there for the birth, had been handed the child immediately after the father. He was Arnold’s godfather as well. He’d do anything for this kid. “Let’s just call me old and your mother younger than her years, and keep it between us,” he told Arnold with a wink. Then he put the boy down and strode to his sister, taking her in his arms for a tight hug. She hadn’t changed a bit, her own blond hair tucked in a delicate bun behind her head, slim and smartly dressed in a way that would make their parents proud. “Jesus christ,” he said only to her. “Why the fuck didn’t you say something?”

“And miss that dumb look on your face?” Fanny tutted in his ear. “Fuck that.” She pulled back, grinning so much like her son. “We’ve met your partner, Officer Osman? He seems pretty great. A lot better than you.” Fanny winked as Felix made a noise of indignation. “He’s gonna join us for the after party. Figured we’d catch you at the end of your shift, make it a family affair. Or are you not happy to see us?”

“Downright overjoyed,” Felix said. “But you know how I feel about surprises.”

“And you know I don’t care,” Fanny hummed. “C’mon, have a little fun. Then we’ll be home for the real party.”

This “little bit of fun” really wasn’t as bad as Felix had thought it would be. The other officers that joined the party were all just getting off their second shifts and were just as tired as Felix, so the party was a subdued sort of celebration with Tang in cups from the water tank and a cupcake for Felix with a copious amount of candles on it. Felix normally hated this sort of thing, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel anything less than a pleasant thrumming warmth in his chest. Arnold was all but climbing Felix’s leg the entire time, and Fanny was constantly pressed against his side, as they were
both won't to do whenever around one another. Felix easily forgot the strains of the end of his shift and just enjoyed himself.

It ended quickly as well. Rowena had driven up to join them for the last of it, and to also lend her car. Sive pulled them all into the small little hatchback, eager to get to Felix’s place for this famed afterparty. “She told me about it,” Sive said, looking to Felix through the rearview as Rowena drove and she held Sive’s hand idly on the center console. “How you guys would always celebrate on midnight, be the first people to wish each other happy birthday. I’d say it’s cultish if she hadn’t told me ya’ll were twins.”

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the company of your brother,” Fanny huffed with Arnold in her lap, trying to get him to sit still. “I’m excited to see this place of yours, Felix! We didn’t really get to see much when dropping off our bags, and that cabbie just booked it once we arrived. I figured I should have asked him to stay, but only after the fact. I had to call another one!”

Felix nodded along as things started to make sense. Fanny hadn’t planned on surprising Felix in his home, but at the precinct. She’d taken off and ditched Jack’s men without any warning and they, who had been settling in for a long watch, hadn’t been able to react in time. Felix was just grateful Fanny had made it to his home in one piece since she’d thrown her tail so easily. Honestly, that was par for the course. Fanny was really fucking good at doing her own thing.

Rowena pulled up in front of Felix’s house, and Arnold all but fell out of the car in his excitement to see “Uncle Fili’s house!” Arnold ran up the stairs, nearly tripping up the brick if Felix hadn’t caught him by the arm.

“Seven years old, and you still don’t know how to use your legs,” Felix chided as he righted the child and unlocked his front door. He wondered how Fanny had gotten in, until he noticed that there was the tip of a key atop the edge of the doorframe. That had never been there before—Felix would never keep a key to his home in a public place. But, if Jack had wanted to make sure that Fanny and Arnold would be safe indoors, it would make sense that they’d plant a key just for this purpose. It wasn’t like Jack didn’t have a copy for himself anyways. “Clean your feet,” Felix told Arnold as he opened the door. He didn’t want to ruin the lifetime of the carpet cleaning Jack had done.

Soon, his home was filled with light and laughter, much more than it was accustomed to. There was a real cake, a Swedish almond nut cake his mother would always make for their birthday, a recipe Fanny had done her best to emulate and had brought with her on the flight. It was less sweet than the cupcake and much more Felix’s tastes, and it also reminded him of his mother in its own little way. He hadn’t even gotten a phone call from either of his parents, but he figured they were still very upset with him for falling into New York. It didn’t bother Felix that much if he didn’t think about it too long. He just wanted to enjoy himself.

“This place looks nice,” Fanny said idly as they all went into the kitchen to grab plates. “Doesn’t seem like it’s your doing, if you don’t mind me saying.” Fanny leveled Felix with a knowing look that Felix tried to avoid. “Oh wait,” she continued idly. “I don’t care if you mind.” She gestured to the dishes—that Jack had bought him way at the beginning of Felix’s newly hectic life in the city—and Felix knew she was right to say they weren’t like him. They were dark ceramic and matte, smoothly curved and looking like something that belonged in some iron showroom. But the real giveaway was that all the dishware matched. “Got anyone I should know about?” Fanny asked. “Maybe a new, pretty face?”

Felix hesitated. “I’ll tell you later.”

“You better.”
Felix wanted to defend himself, but his doorbell rang. For a second, Felix thought someone from the precinct was stopping over, but very few people knew where he lived, and the only two people who knew who weren’t here were Sarge and fucking Hopper. Felix stood, ignored the queer look he was getting from Sive, and gave them all a brisk nod. “Set the table,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Felix went to the door, readying himself to see anyone, yet was still unprepared to see the last person he expected.

“Felix,” Jack breathed, clearly panicked, pushing into the house and taking Felix by the shoulders. “I heard, I heard, Kon said he lost ‘em. I’m so sorry, I’m doing everything I can to—”

“Felix?” came Fanny’s voice from the kitchen. Felix looked up to see his twin watching him and Jack with a critical look. “Is everything okay?”

Felix looked back to Jack and grinned so easily it was almost natural. “Fanny,” he said. “This is my friend. He was a little concerned because I usually text him after I get off my shifts, but I forgot to do so today with all the excitement in you showing up out of nowhere.” Felix clapped Jack on the shoulder while the other man looked a little—stunned. And Felix had a choice here.

He knew who Jack was, but no one else did. There was a slight possibility that Sive would recognize Jack as rich boy McLoughlin from the parties they’d guarded together, but that was the worst Sive would know, since the photo of the mafia boss Jack McLoughlin had been such garbage. Even Felix wouldn’t be able to recognize that photo now as Jack with how well he knew Jack now. And Jack looked so out of his mind right now, that weird wild glint to his eyes that made Felix worried for someone’s safety. It wasn’t like Felix’s home was unprotected right now. For all that Jack had done, there was very little risk.

“You don’t mind if I invite him to join us, right?” Felix asked Fanny. “He’s a good friend.”

Fanny snorted a laugh, told Felix to do whatever he wanted since it was his home, and Felix pulled Jack further into the warmth of the den. “It’s my birthday,” he told Jack, lowering his voice just so Jack could know Felix was talking to him. “Come celebrate.”

Jack’s eyes were still wild, but the panic was ebbing. He swallowed hard enough for Felix to see the harsh bob in his throat. “I ain’t exactly a fun person. Ain’t exactly the kind ye’d want around family, Felix.”

“Shut up,” Felix said. “Don’t you want to help me celebrate?” When Jack didn’t immediately answer, Felix sighed and relented. “If you really don’t want to be here, then you can go. But I would love to have you. That’s what birthdays are for, you know? Celebrating being alive with the people you care about.”

That seemed to be what did it, all the wildness melting from Jack in moments. He gave Felix a stiff nod, but then he took off his coat. Felix took it from Jack before he could put it on the rack and smirked at Jack. “Never knew I could so easily persuade you,” he quipped.

Jack shook his head. “Only you, Felix.”

“Who’s your friend?” Sive called from the kitchen.

Jack cleared his throat and pressed a finger into his ear, whispering quietly. Felix only caught the tail end, hearing Jack say, “I’ve Felina, all clear, stand down,” before Jack shouldered his stance and headed into the populated room.

“William,” Jack said, shaking hands with the people who offered. Sive and Rowena seemed easy
enough, but Fanny still seemed suspicious. Felix just wanted to know where the fuck that name had come from. “I, uh, I’m sorry fer bursting in,” he said. “Felix just tells me when he’s home, ye’ know? Thought something bad had gone down.”

“You care about my brother a lot,” Fanny said cryptically. Jack, to his credit, didn’t flinch beneath her blue eyes. It seemed like very little actually could faze Jack. He just looked owlishly around the room, taking stock of the cop that wasn’t on his side and the small child that was trying to collect all of the silverware he could in one hand. Felix wondered how this looked to a hardened criminal, someone who was accustomed to the terrible ways of everything. Felix wondered how his little, warmly lit kitchen, filled with easy-going people looked to Jack. If it was foreign or distantly familiar. Had Jack ever had a family? Maybe the people in— Redmond’s Bandits? Maybe they had little moments like this. Felix hoped so. He didn’t want Jack to be starved of the simple, happy parts of life.

“Have some almond cake, Will,” Felix beckoned, pulling out a chair specifically for Jack to sit in. “It’s my mother’s recipe, one of the few things she carried with her from Sweden. It’s the best fucking—”

“Felix!” Fanny snapped, quickly covering Arnold’s ears.

“Oh my god,” Felix groaned. “He’s in public school, he’s heard all the words already.”

“Not that one!”

“Gosh, fine.” Felix rolled his eyes as Jack looked between them like they’d grown heads. “Sit down, everyone, for, uh, Pete’s sake. I’m hungry and now I can’t even curse in my own home. That’s half my vocabulary, gone.”

“Ain’t that a shame,” Sive snorted. “Look out, Arnold, you may just have to arrest your uncle.”

Arnold gasped dramatically in his seat and looked to Felix with wide eyes. “Did you do something bad?” he asked in a low whisper. “Uncle, you can’t do bad things! You’ll get fired!”

Felix would have laughed if it wasn’t so on the fucking nose for how Felix’s life was going. “Yer uncle’s a good man,” Jack said softly from his seat. He looked uncomfortable and Felix wished he wouldn’t. At least he was talking. “He ain’t gonna be fired any time soon.”

“As much as I love giving Felix crap, it is half his birthday,” Sive agreed, smiling at Jack in a way that had Felix tensing. Not because it was a bad smile, but only because Felix was a little paranoid. “And I gotta admit— Felix is one of the best I’ve seen. He’d have to do something pretty bad to get fired.”

"And even then," Jack added idly. “Doubtful.”

Felix had no idea why Jack sounded so confident in that, especially since Jack knew better than anyone just how bad Felix was starting to be. Arnold dashed forward and all but launched himself into Felix’s lap, reaching up to play with the badge on Felix’s uniform, watching the way the lights glimmered. Fanny was cutting the cake, mumbling to herself about the time and how it needed to be perfect.

“I have a question then, for you, William,” Sive said. Felix peeled his badge off the velcro and handed it to Arnold to play with while watching Sive as surreptitiously as possible. Felix wanted to offer to help his sister, but he didn’t want Jack on his own for this either. He’d been the one to invite Jack into a glorified lion’s den. Couldn’t just abandon him. “How’d you and Felix meet?”
“His coffee place,” Jack replied instantly. “I was a regular and he became one himself. The place can get busy sometimes and he’d wanted a spot at my table since there was nowhere else. Then I saw his badge in his wallet and started askin’, cause my friend’s da’ used to be in law enforcement. He was rightly paranoid in the start, but ended up loosenin’ up. I’ve me ways.”

The Irish accent was a little stronger and the story was pretty faithful to how Felix would act to a stranger asking questions about cop work. Felix wasn’t sure why he’d thought he needed to keep an eye on Jack. If anyone could work through stressful situations, it was a fucking mafia boss.

“After a while, he finally noticed what I was always doin’,” Jack continued. “Saw the textbooks, saw the strain in me brow. Took a little pity, finally learned some manners, and then asked what I was studyin’.”

“What are you studying?” Sive asked.

“Forensic Anthropology,” Jack prattled off without a hitch. “Imagine Felix’s surprise in learning I aim t’ be a colleague. We became fast friends after that. I even got t’ ask some questions t’ help me with a few papers.”

“What is forensic anthropology?” Rowena asked as Fanny set down a plate of almond cake in front of her.

“Uh.” Jack’s eyes went to Arnold like he was concerned he’d say something wrong. “I mean— it ain’t exactly for friendly company. It’s all gruesome business, ye’ know, dealing with people after the crime gets too rough. What’s left behind.” Jack shrugged, then softly thanked Fanny for his slice of cake. He held the plate in his hands like he wasn’t sure what to do with it. Jesus christ, had he ever had birthday cake? “Let’s just say that I’m the one that handles the rougher things that Felix and the detectives investigate. Or at least, I will be.” He smiled a bit, a fake thing that only Felix knew was false. “I was never made for law enforcement, so I compromised.”

“That’s still good work,” Sive said with a smile of his own. “This city always needs more brave people like you.”

“At least you won’t be in the line of fire,” Fanny huffed. “I’d always wished Felix would have done something more along those lines. He’s so smart, after all, it’s foolish to have him as just a beat cop. And now he’s not even following detective line of work?” She shook her head and put down Felix’s plate. “Just seems like a waste.”

Felix sighed heavily, leveling his sister with a glare. She pursed her lips, but stopped talking. She knew what he was saying. There was no point in telling him what he could have done and would have done in her opinion. Felix was doing what he wanted and no one was going to stop him.

“Two minutes to midnight, Felix,” Fanny grumbled, sitting down across from him. Arnold was slouched in Felix’s lap, obviously tuckered out after the flight and the excitement and the late hour. “You got your birthday promise?”

“Yep,” Felix replied. His promise was far too revealing, even for himself, even for between him and Fanny. “Not telling you.”

“You’re darn right,” she agreed. “For those of you who don’t know, Felix and I have a birthday tradition. Celebrate on midnight exactly, since our parents don’t know the time that we were born, and then we each have a birthday promise. Kinda like a New Year’s resolution, but a little more sacred to us. And every year, we tell each other how our last promise went. My promise was to make sure Arnold got B or above in every class.” She winked at her son, who was nearly asleep in Felix’s
Felix hesitated. He definitely hadn’t done well on his promise. “Uh, I promised to… well, essentially, to stop getting into so much trouble at work with how often I run into things headfirst.” He winced and scratched sheepishly at his jaw, knowing that Sive and Jack knew very well he’d fucked that up. “Guess I gotta do a rollover.”

“No rollovers allowed!” Fanny announced. “You know the deal. If you fail to keep the promise, you eat the candle.”

“Oh my god, what?” Rowena asked, sitting up a little straighter. She’d been ogling her piece of cake. Fanny had done very well this year with the decorating, icing making delicate little flowers. It was a girly design and definitely more for Fanny than Felix. But she’d made the cake, so he wasn’t about to complain. “Eat the candle?”

Fanny smirked and bent over to reach into her purse to pull out an innocuous birthday candle. It was homemade and blue and Felix knew she had made it specially for him. He glared even harder at her.

“According to tradition, failing to make good on the promise means you have to eat the candle,” Fanny explained, handing Felix the candle across the table. “I made it blueberry flavored this year, so you won’t suffer too much.”

“Why a candle?” Jack asked with a raised brow.

“It was the worst we could come up with when we were five,” Felix sighed. “It was either a candle or dog shit— poop. Dog poop.” He patted Arnold’s head absently. The boy let out a tired little sound and turned over to rest on his side against Felix’s chest. “I’ll eat the candle later,” Felix said. “Can we just enjoy the cake?”

Fanny looked to her watch, then held up five fingers, which she slowly began to lower. Felix looked to the clock and caught the moment it went from 11:59 to 12:00, October 24th. And on the dot, Fanny dragged her finger through the icing of her cake and flicked it at Felix, the glob of sweetness landing on Felix’s cheek. “You failed your birthday promise,” she said in a low voice, akin to some ominous sage. “And you have failed yourself. Repent.”

“Can we please just eat our cake?” Felix asked in exasperation. “I get it, I suck. Now let me have some food.”

“It’s so weird being around twins,” Sive said. “Because you’re both so familiar with each other that it feels like every other word is some secret code no one else can understand.”

“Twins?” Jack echoed, brow knitting. He looked to Felix. “You’re twins?”

“Have you not caught on, with the sameness of the birthdays?” Fanny asked with a snort.

“I’d thought ye’d just had the same birthday, a year apart or something,” Jack defended weakly. “Felix always said you were older.”

“By eleven minutes,” Felix grumbled.

“I am older,” Fanny almost sang, preening in her seat as she started to eat her cake. Everyone else took it as a sign to start eating as well. Felix’s mouth watered with the first bite. Fanny had probably studied directly under their mother for this year’s cake. It was perfect. “And as oldest, I reserve the right to punish my dear little brother for his failures. And let me tell you, there are plenty of them. After all, as the oldest of twins, it means I was the only one of us that wasn’t a mistake.”
Sive and Rowena laughed, but Jack’s expression soured at the edges. While Felix was very much used to his sister’s rather aggressive form of teasing, Jack—who had proven himself to be doggedly protective of Felix—probably didn’t like her words one bit. Surreptitiously, Felix nudged Jack’s legs under the table with his phone foot, and sent Jack an easygoing smile once he caught the Irishman’s attention. His smile didn’t smooth out Jack’s expression, but it didn’t escalate either. Jack ducked his head a little and ate his cake, shoveling a slice into his mouth like he needed the cake in there to keep him from saying anything nasty. And for some weird reason, Felix’s heart swelled at the thought of Jack defending him, even against Felix’s own twin sister. Felix had to hide his growing smile in his next bite.

“Maybe he’ll redeem himself next year,” Fanny was saying, haughty in her chronological superiority. “He would really redeem himself if he actually moved back to Newport.”

“Newport?” Rowena lit up. “That’s Rhode Island, right? That’s where you’re from? God, I’ve always wanted to go there, the post cards are gorgeous. Seems like the perfect vacationing spot.”

“Also one of the richest cities in Rhode Island,” Sive said.

“We grew up there,” Fanny hummed. “And that’s where Arnold is going to grow up as well. Crime is pretty low, you know. It’s safe. Quiet. There’s plenty to do, with sailing and ice skating and just general little town events. It’s the perfect community to live and raise children.”

“It’s dull,” Felix added. Fanny looked up at him sharply. He knew she hated how he’d been so bored of the place, but Felix wasn’t about to keep back any punches. He knew he’d spend the rest of his life defending his decisions to his family. Felix shrugged off the daggers. “It is,” he insisted. “It’s why I went to Philadelphia and Boston. And then here. They didn’t need a cop like me in Newport. They called me paranoid and hungry for violence. A war mongorer, almost. Maybe they were right. That’s why I left.”

“Maybe ye’d have been better off in Newport,” Jack said offhandedly. Fanny looked to Jack, then, with one of those smiles of hers that said she was getting her way. But Felix knew better than her. “It’s a dangerous city, Felix, and you attract danger like a moth t’ flame. Maybe ye’d be better off in a safer place.”

“Maybe,” Felix agreed neutrally. “But then I never would have met any of you.”

“Awh,” Sive cooed while Jack quickly hid the faintest of blushed behind a forkful of cake. “That’s so sweet, Felix.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jack grumbled. “Sides, Newport ain’t all that safe, then is it? With them killer, stabbing trees and all.”

Fanny let out a sharp noise of indignation. “He told you that?” She scowled and crossed her arms on the table. “It wasn’t my fault! He was the one climbing too high!”

“I never climb any higher than I can reach,” Felix replied. “You’re the one that went past your ability.”

She huffed and then immediately started to pout. “I do feel bad.”

“I know,” Felix hummed as he ate the last of his cake. “After all, you probably cried longer than I did.”

“You didn’t even cry,” she said. “You just convinced me you wouldn’t tell Mom and Dad it was my fault while you were bleeding.” Fanny shook her head like she was upset about not getting in
trouble. “Swear to god, Felix, you need to move back to Newport. Dangerous places like this aren’t nice to good people like you.”

“I’ve heard that song and dance for years,” Felix sighed. “Let’s leave it at that, yeah? After all, Sive needs me.” He nudged Sive with his elbow, smirking at Sive’s grin. “This idiot would be dead without me.”

“Pretty sure it’s the other way around, Mr. Scarface.”

Fanny frowned and squinted at Felix’s face. It took her a long moment to see the new, light scar across Felix’s nose. At least she wouldn’t be able to spot the one at Felix’s hairline. Fanny groaned and leaned down to thunk her head on Felix’s table. “You’re gonna be the death of me.”

“Death of myself, more like,” Felix snorted.

“I absolutely hate that,” Jack mumbled.

“So do I,” Fanny agreed.

“Eh, it’s the way of the work,” Sive said. Rowena gave him a dark look, but he just smirked it away. “What can I say? Men like me and Felix—we know the risk. And we judge it worth the reward.”

“I swear to god,” Fanny groaned. “Let’s just beat the dead horse and decide that men like you are idiots.”

“I second that,” Rowena said.

“Third,” Jack said.

“Well, Sive and I both veto, so that brings you guys down to one,” Felix said. He kicked Jack’s foot again under the table, but was secretly pleased that Jack was, at least, bonding well with some of the people here. He found it almost comical that Jack was finding kindred spirits in dogging Felix and Sive for being foolhardy. What a fucking world it was. “Now let’s just stop being mommies and daddies and let me and Sive live our lives. Or I’ll start singing some bull-crap song about being born this way and then everyone will hate us.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Fanny hissed. “You know I gag on the Gaga.”

“Does that mean you hate her or you wanna bang her?” Rowena asked.

“I’ve never known,” Fanny replied.

“Let me get the dishes,” Felix said. He stood, carefully lifting Arnold with him, not wanting to disturb the kid. But Arnold stirred immediately and whined, stretching his arms into the air and then wiggling to be let down. It had barely been a five minute nap, but Felix knew it would be good for at least a thirty minute burst of energy. The second the kid’s feet were on the ground, he was running, bounding through the house. Fanny groaned and got up to follow him.

“He wants to explore,” she told Felix. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t break anything.”

“I’ll help you keep an eye on him,” Sive said. “I’m good with criminals.”

“I’m not a criminal!” Arnold shouted, way too loud for midnight. “I’m a good guy! I’m like Uncle Fili! I’ll fight you!”

“Go into the storage closet,” Felix told Fanny as he collected dishes. “There should be some games
in there that we can play to keep him from going Tazmanian.” Jack hadn’t moved from his spot, the only person left sitting at the table. He seemed unwilling to move from the spot, almost like he thought he wasn’t allowed to. Felix paused in bending down to take Jack’s plate, catching his eyes. “You good?”

Jack gave a little shrug of his mouth. He was tense again. Whatever easiness he’d gained from that conversation was long gone, replaced by some lingering anxiety in the corner of his expression. “I’m fine,” he said tersely. “Go have fun with yer family. I’m gonna head out.”

Felix opened his mouth to protest when Arnold came running back to them, waving Uno in his hands like a madman. “I found it, I found it!” Arnold cried out. “Uncle Fili, play with us! I’m the best at this game.”

Behind him, Fanny shook her head and made a cutting motion towards her throat. So it seemed like Felix was going to have to throw a game of Uno for his nephew. He looked down to Jack. “Just stay a little longer,” he beseeched. “After all, you gotta make sure nothing goes wrong, right?” He was trying to be playful, but Jack only looked worse off for the reminder. Jack stood and took the plates Felix was holding, going over to the sink. He started washing them, and Felix was going to protest—this was Felix’s house, Jack was a guest—but Arnold took him by the hand and pulled him back into his chair.

“I got this, I got this,” Sive said, taking the pack of cards from Arnold to begin expertly shuffling them like he belonged in a poker tournament. “See, the trick to playing a good game of cards,” Sive was saying as he mesmerized Arnold with all sorts of flips and spins of the colorful cards. “Is to make sure no one looks anywhere but where you want them to. Then, when you have their attention elsewhere—” Sive paused in his shuffling to reach behind Arnold’s ear and “magically” pulled a card from behind. “The real show begins.”

Arnold squealed in delight and even Felix was impressed by the sleight of hand. Sive grinned, proud of himself, before dealing out seven cards to everyone. Felix sat back in his seat, checked out his bit of the deck, then looked to Arnold beside him, who was scrutinizing his own cards and sticking his tongue out like he was trying to think. The hardest part about throwing games with his nephew was that Arnold was really bad at games, and sometimes Felix couldn’t lose even if he tried. Felix stifled a heavy sigh and tried to think of how he could make this look real.

Unfortunately, the order for Arnold was his mother, then himself, then Felix. And Fanny had apparently drawn a multitude of draw-two and draw-four cards. Poor Arnold was at fifteen cards in his deck while Fanny was down to three and looking like she hated herself. Arnold whined sadly when his mother had no choice but to skip Arnold’s next turn completely to adhere to the color of the deck.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she said. Arnold made this over-exaggerated whimpering noise. Then he sniffled. Felix looked down at his last four cards in disdain for himself. Even Sive and Rowan looked like they were wracking their brains to find a way to let Arnold win, but Rowena had already used up whatever drawing cards she’d had, and Fanny was still winning.

There was the scrape of a chair, and then Jack was sitting behind Arnold, looking over the boy’s shoulder. “I ain’t playing, so this ain’t cheating,” he told Arnold. Felix slumped in relief, knowing Jack would handle this somehow. It seemed like the most trivial thing to trust Jack in, but there was something about the way Jack was easily volunteering his help for Felix’s nephew. “Aye, I see yer problem,” Jack hummed as he looked at what Arnold had. “But here’s the thing— yer mom ain’t got many blues, yeah? No mathematical way she could, with how many she’s already played. She’ll have t’ draw if she goes next to keep with the program.”
“But Uncle Fili is next,” Arnold pouted.

“Ye’ can change that,” Jack said. “Here, play this,” he instructed, pointing to a particular card in Arnold’s hand. “She’ll go, and then she’ll have t’ draw at least one card, if luck is kind, which I doubt it’ll be. I’m bettin’ Felix ain’t got any draw cards or he’d’ve already played ’em, and ye’ve so many colors here that ye’ shouldn’t have a problem offloading them. Play this. And be sure t’ say something witty t’ yer mum.”

Arnold smacked down the blue reverse card and loudly proclaimed, “Oh no you cock-a-doodle-don’t, bitch!”

Felix got up from his chair and faced the sink so Fanny wouldn’t see the way he was struggling to contain his laughter. The kitchen became so deadly silent that he could have heard a pin drop. Felix was sure Arnold on half understood what he’d done wrong, but that didn’t mean he was going to get off easy for calling his mother a bitch.

“I swears, I didn’t teach ‘im that word,” Jack said.

“Oh, I’m sure you didn’t,” Fanny said in a low voice. Felix could hear the anger in her voice. “Arnold,” she said slowly. “That is a very, very bad word. And you do not use that word with your mother. You don’t use that word with anyone. Do you understand me?”

“But it was a good line,” Arnold whined.

“It was a very good line,” Sive said. Felix regained control of himself in time to turn around and see the heated look Fanny gave Sive. “Sorry, sorry, I should let the mother handle her son.”

“It was a bad word,” Fanny repeated.

“But it sounded good,” Arnold grumbled, apparently upset that he hadn’t wowed people with his line like he’d wanted. “Mr. William said I should make it witty, and it was! Malcom, in my class? He said it’s a good line. His big sister taught it to him.”

“Arnold,” Felix said, deciding he needed to put in his input. “Doesn’t matter how good it was, your mother doesn’t like that word, and you need to respect that. Listen to your mother. She’s giving you these rules so you learn what’s best for yourself. And kids that don’t listen to their mothers usually end up in the back of my squad car.” A slippery slope tactic that was just that side of dirty, but Arnold always listened when it came down to that breed of an ultimatum.

“I’m not a bad guy,” Arnold said, still sounding stubborn. But then, “I won’t say it again.”

Fuck yeah, success. “Good boy,” Felix said. “Now let’s kick your mother’s butt in Uno. Will's one of the cleverest men I’ve met. If anyone will get you the win, it’s him.”

Jack didn’t say anything for the praise, but Felix saw the way his focus heightened on the cards, like he wanted to prove himself or wanted to make sure he made good on Felix’s confidence. Felix just thought it was a little funny Jack was putting such serious stakes on a fucking game of Uno. “It’ll be fine,” Jack said. “We just need t’ account for the cards Sive has up his sleeve.”

“What, Sive has some good stuff?” Felix asked.

“No,” Jack replied. “He has actual cards up his sleeve. He had five last turn, yet now he’s down t’ three. He’s been hiding his cards in his sleeves.”

There was another round of silence. Then Rowena smacked Sive’s arm. “You dirty cheater!
“I can’t believe you’re cheating,” Felix huffed, throwing down his hand. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed Sive just stuffing away his cards. On the other hand, he could definitely believe that Jack had easily noticed. “We’re supposed to be setting an example! This is why people don’t like cops.”

“Arnold, honey,” Fanny began, ready to teach Arnold a good lesson about the worse parts of cheating. “The thing about what Sive has done is—”

Arnold stood up on his chair and made a gun out of his fingers. “Put your hands in the air!” he cried out. “I’m arresting you!”

There was another pause, then Sive squinted and slowly raised his hands in the air. “Under what charges, officer?” he asked, standing slowly from his chair and rounding the table to stand in the living room, squaring his stance like he was in some western film. “Just for a game of cards! You and I both know you’ve been after me for a long time. Longer than it takes to open a deck of Uno.” Sive pretended to spit chew and flexed his fingers in the air. “Me and my partner— Felix ‘Cow-Kicking’ Klootz— have been your obsession for the past twenty years. So why don’t you tell me… what this is really all about…”

Felix stood from his chair, knowing he was in this now thanks to Sive. He hovered his hands by his sides and eyed Arnold deviously, playing the part. Arnold made two guns with his hands and pointed one at Sive, then one at Felix. “Get your hands in the air!” Arnold shouted again. “I’m arresting you for, uh, stealing!”

“Oh, we ain’t stole nothing yet,” Sive said. “But since we’re going t’ jail for it, we definitely will now.”

Felix launched towards his sister and lifted her up. Fanny shrieked as Felix brought her into his arms and he cackled dramatically, carrying her away. “Arnold, Arnold, help me!” Fanny wailed, swooning dramatically as she looped her arm around Felix’s neck to ensure he wouldn’t drop her. Felix had an arm under her back and another hooked under her knees, she was fine, but try telling her that. Felix kept laughing evilly as he rounded the stairs, taking Fanny out of sight.

“Oh Slimy Sive!” Rowena cried from the table. “Why couldn’t you have kept your promise? Why couldn’t you have abandoned your evil ways for love? Why couldn’t you have put down your guns and taken up my bosom instead?”

Sive lost character for a moment when he sputtered on a laugh that he tried valiantly to stifle. Then he quickly brought himself out of it and threw his head back with an evil, barking laugh of his own. “You’re outnumbered, officer! Throw down your weapons and surrender your badge! This is my town now!”

“I need back up!” Arnold cried out. “Deputy William, help me!”

From behind the stairs, Felix couldn’t see Arnold and Sive, but he could see Jack still sitting in his chair, and was Felix fucking glad he could. It took Jack a moment to register the fake name, and even longer to understand what was being asked of him. The expression that came over Jack was beyond hilarious, this genuine look of confusion as he squinted and flitted his eyes around, trying to pinpoint how he ended up in this situation, playing the role of the cop while Felix was the criminal. It seemed a little too much of the Twilight Zone for Jack to comprehend.

“Deputy William!”

Jack glanced to his left and caught eyes with Felix. Felix could see how messed up he was by this. Jack pointed to himself, like he was asking Felix if Arnold meant him. When Felix smirked and
jerked his head, Jack sprang into action, his own two hand-guns being whipped out of his pockets. “Down on the ground, Slimy Sive,” Jack growled in a horribly overdone Western accent. “Or fighting us will be the last thing you’ll ever do.”

“You’ll never take me alive!”

From there, it was screams of chaos that Felix couldn’t make heads or tails of. Fanny was still in his arms, listening attentively for any sound of her boy being in legitimate trouble. All Felix could really discern from the mess of shouted “bang bang bang!” and “stop running from the law!” was Sive’s eventual gasping breath of agony and the broken statement of, “rose… bud…” before a body hit the floor.

Jack and Arnold swung into the den area, where Felix had Fanny, and aimed their fake guns at him. “It’s over, ‘Cowboy-Kicking’ K-kloontz?” Jack faltered at the name. He looked frazzled, but he was smiling, and Felix rather liked the look on him. “Put her down and we’ll make sure the jailer treats you well before you swing.”

Felix scowled, but lowered Fanny to the ground. “You killed my brother!” he accused. “You killed Slimy Sive!”

“And we’ll kill you!” Arnold shouted, gesturing his gun wildly. But Jack put an arm out.

“Hold up there, Sheriff Arnold,” Jack said. “As your deputy, I’ve an argument t’ raise. We seen enough bloodshed tonight. Leave this man fer the gallows.”

Arnold huffed, but then dramatically holstered his weapons, essentially shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’ll cuff ‘im. To the jail, Mr. Koontz!”

Felix marched to the jail he was led to—really just the railing of the stairs since they looked like bars—and sat on the steps, peering out at Jack and Fanny and Rowena through the wooden bannisters. For a brief moment, the adults all shared a fond smile, all of them relaxed and happy in the halcyon days of when they were children and playing games as well. Then Arnold came back from the dining room. Felix scowled again and shook his fist. “You ain’t heard the last from me!”

“Can it,” Arnold said, before clicking one end of Felix’s work cuffs around a bannister, and the other end around Felix’s wrist.

Felix stared at the cuffs.

And stared.

And stared a little longer, horror burgeoning.

“Fuck.”

“Felix!” Fanny snapped. “What did I tell you—”

“Wait, didn’t you lose your key on shift today?” Sive asked. When Felix looked up at him with wide eyes, Sive’s own eyes went wider. “Oh no.”

“What?” Fanny asked, looking between them and Arnold’s proud grin.

“Mom, I caught Uncle Fili!”

“Felix, why are we upset?”
“I lost my key when taking a perp in today,” Felix explained while trying to remain calm. There was no way he’d be able to get a copy that worked for this set from the precinct, as his set was outdated and they were in the midst to rolling out updated cuffs— thanks to that certain anonymous benefactor — that Sive already had a set of, meaning Sive’s pair wouldn’t match Felix’s. Felix knew Hopper was the only other person still with an outdated set, but no way in fuck was he going to give Hopper something to rag on him about. Felix tugged at the cuffs, panic growing whether he wanted it to or not.

“Calm down, calm down,” came Jack’s familiar Irish drawl out of nowhere. Felix looked up at the man and tried to keep anything close to anxiety from his expression. Jack himself looked oddly level headed as he smirked down at Felix. “Anyone have a bobby?”

Both women handed Jack bobby pins, two of which Jack took. “I’ll pay ye’ back,” he promised, bending one of the pins into a straight line, before bunkering down next to Felix on the steps and pushing the bobby pins into the lock. It was only a split moment of Jack’s body pressed into the side of Felix’s thigh, warm and alive and somehow a comforting presence. Felix’s cheeks heated from how close Jack’s face was to his hands— he could feel Jack’s breath on his skin. Felix was a paranoid person, he never felt at ease with people getting this close to him. But having Jack there felt, so close to his bare skin, Felix felt— safe.

Then there was a click and the cuffs were unlocked. Jack let out a small whistle of triumph and swung the freed-cuffs on a finger, releasing Felix from his prison. Jack stood again and looked down at Felix with a sort of haughtiness, but in a way that didn’t make Felix feel like he was beneath Jack. He just felt like the other man was happy to be of use.

“How the fuck did you unlock police grade handcuffs?” Sive asked incredulously, ignoring Fanny smacking his arm for the curse word. “I mean, normal cuffs, plasticuffs, sure. But those? Those are old too. Those ones are complicated. They’re getting rid of them cause even the key doesn’t work sometimes. How’d you do that?”

“I’m versatile,” Jack said simply. Sive didn’t seem to buy it, but also dropped the topic as Jack offered his hand to Felix to help him stand. “Let’s get ye’ up, officer.”

Felix took the hand and let Jack lift him, then decided to go a little further. Once he was standing beside Jack, he laid a hand on the other man’s shoulder, just a little closer to Jack’s bare neck than he normally would be, and let it stay there. Jack flinched at the contact, obviously unaccustomed to touching that wasn’t on his terms. Jack was tense underneath Felix’s hand, his eyes suddenly wary, like he was expecting Felix’s touch to hurt. Like he was expecting Felix to dig in and leave bruises. Felix didn’t tighten or loosen his grip, making a point of leaving his hand there for a solid moment. Felix then smiled gently. “Thank you for the assist, Deputy.”

He let his hand drop and Jack stepped back, putting distance between himself and Felix like he needed it. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I should be leaving.”

“So soon?” Fanny asked.

Felix startled and looked to his sister. He’d completely forgotten that he actually had someone here who would be able to read his actions for what they were in a way few others could. Fanny was staring at Jack like he was someone other than the person she’d first met tonight. And she didn’t seem happy.

Felix looked back to Jack in time to see walls of apathy slam over the man so hard that even Felix was left reeling. Jack suddenly knew that he wasn’t as welcome as he’d been before. “Yeah, I’ve got t’ turn in,” he told them. “But it was amazing t’ meet all of ye’.” Jack looked to Felix one last time
and gave him a stiff bow of his head. “More than I expected t’ ever have t’night.”

Leaving Felix with the cryptic statement, Jack gave one last hurried goodbye and grabbed his coat before disappearing out the front door.

Felix wanted to ask Fanny what the fuck her problem was, pleasant company or not, when she beat him to it by checking him with her shoulder and saying, “We need to talk.”
woooooooo hi ’m back and the next chap should also be up this wednesday i just wanted to give ya’ll this as an apology for my absence thank you for your patience!

Sive and Rowena left and Arnold settled into the guest room to sleep, his little body all tuckered out after the excitement of killing a criminal and arresting his uncle. It was almost 2AM and Felix was so very tired after his long shift, but his sister was demanding and had grown more tense by the night, the longer she’d been given time to think about Jack— or William, as she knew him. Felix still wondered about the name. Was it an old friend of Jack’s? Or was it the elusive, true first name Felix apparently wasn’t special enough to know? He'd considered asking Sarge what Jack's real name was, as he was sure rich-boy Jack didn’t go around with the same name as a mafia boss, but that seemed too underhanded for Felix to stomach. Jack would tell him when he was ready, right?

Felix shouldn’t worry about that right now, considering Fanny was on some sort of self-inflicted war path and seemed to believe Felix was her enemy of some social sort. She was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for Felix to make her tea. Felix hadn’t made tea in ages, but he had the necessary equipment and he knew how Fanny took it. He went through the steps mechanically and tried not to think about whatever she wanted to chew him out for.

It was Jack. It had to be Jack. The very idea had Felix grinding his teeth, unhappy with whatever she was going to say. Was it that Felix was an asshole for leading Jack along? Felix knew he was a piece of shit for that, but every time he tried to fix it, he only made it worse. He wanted to stop leading Jack along, he wanted to give Jack whatever the fuck he needed, but he couldn’t. Felix just wasn’t— he couldn’t. Felix couldn’t and he fucking hated himself for it and it wasn’t fucking fair that Fanny would be just another nail in the proverbial coffin for how much Felix wanted to—

“Felix!”

He looked up to see Fanny watching him with a stern expression, and only then noticed his white grip on the mug that was supposed to be filled with her tea. He wondered what his expression had looked like to make her so upset with him. “I’m fine,” he told her. “I just don’t wanna hear whatever bullshit you have to say.”

Fanny let out a noise of indignation and turned away, still sitting stiffly at the cleared table. Felix honestly didn’t care if he pissed her off right now. He was already pissed, and he felt like twins should be on the same page as often as possible. He finished stirring honey into Fanny’s tea and put the mug down in front of her before sitting in the seat next to hers. His kitchen and dining was quiet, and that was nothing new, but it felt oddly— colder. He wasn’t sure why, wasn’t sure how it had happened. He looked to his sink and saw dishes neatly stacked on the drying rack, then remembered how Jack had looked standing there, monotonously cleaning, lost in the mundane task. Felix hadn’t paid much attention to Jack in that moment, but he could see it clearly in his head now. Jack with his shoulders relaxed, expression calm, elbow deep in soap suds and completely at peace. Like he deserved to be— just a normal person, a normal guy, doing normal shit. No burns on his neck, no blood on his hands. Just— just Jack.

“I need to talk to you about your friend,” Fanny said.
“Then please keep in mind, he’s my friend,” Felix emphasized. “And you know I don’t like people talking shit about my friends, behind my back or to my face.”

“I know,” Fanny grumbled. “You punched me in the stomach just because I said one bad thing about that kid from grade school.”

“His name was Rodney, and you said about ten things,” Felix corrected. “One of which was hoping he would get hit by a bus. You’re an aggressive person, Fanny, and I’m not gonna stand idly by while you do aggressive shit. Watch your mouth. Got it? I’m not taking any bad word on Will.”

She glared at him, angry as she always was when Felix chose anyone over her. Fanny had this over-the-top idea about how twins should be, how they should choose one another over the entire world. Fanny always failed to remember the three times she’d ditched him just to go on dates with guys and girls that dumped her a week later. And he’d always been there for her to cry on his shoulder. Felix didn’t want her to preach to him about fucking loyalty.

“He’s gay and likes you,” Fanny said. “Hell, I think he’s in love with you. And since you’re so obtuse, I don’t think you’ve noticed. I’m telling you now because, one: I care about you more than I care about outing someone; and two: he could hurt you and I cannot have that happening.”

Felix made a face. “How the fuck could a forensic anthropology student hurt a fucking armed officer of the law?” He had a secret little laugh with himself on the inside. Even though Jack was much more than a student, Felix had proven he could best Jack regardless of Jack’s violent upbringing. Jack was not a threat to him in several scenarios.

“He’s a guy,” Fanny huffed. “I don’t know, aren’t most of your violent crimes committed by men?”

“It’s genuinely fifty-fifty,” Felix told her, inwardly reveling at the sour expression that came over her face. “Believe it or not, violence isn’t gender specific.”

“He’s in love with you and he’s going to take advantage of you,” Fanny insisted. “All men do.”

“You’re fucking married, Fanny,” Felix sighed.

“Because I was able to find the one man that isn’t a piece of shit,” Fanny replied.


“You know what I mean,” she huffed.

“I really don’t.”

“Will’s in love with you and you don’t know it,” Fanny insisted. “I think he’s using you for something. He’s taking advantage of how fucking dumb and blind you can be and getting close to you. Did you see how he was touching you when you were handcuffed? Will’s not like you, Felix. You’re a good person and there’s not a lot of people like you left. He’ll use that against you. You’re not safe around Will— you need to stop being his friend.”

Felix paused, looked at his sister for a long moment, and thought out his words very carefully. “Fuck you,” he ended on. Fanny reared back, jaw hanging in shock, giving Felix the moment he needed to continue. “You’re my sister,” he said. “My twin. Family. But you’re not part of my life. You haven’t been part of my life since you turned your back on me when I told you I was going to the Academy. You told me you thought what I was doing was wrong and that you wouldn’t stand by my decision or me. Believe me, I love you, Fanny.”
He reached out, lying his hand across her’s on the tabletop. She was staring at him with hard eyes, her jaw shut and stiff, expression tense. Anyone who didn’t know her would think she was angry. But Felix knew that she was just trying not to cry.

“I love you,” he said again. “But I need you to understand that this is my life now, and you’re not a part of it, no matter how much I wish you would be. You can’t tell me what to do. You can’t tell me how to live. And you definitely cannot tell me to abandon Will. He means a lot to me. Okay? He’s a very, very good friend. And I don’t care what you think I should do, I will not leave him. So many people already have. I’m not going to be one of them.”

“Felix,” Fanny said, her voice tight. “You’re not gay.”

“Congratulations,” Felix replied. “You’re the new Captain Obvious. That doesn’t matter. He loves me, okay? I know he does. But he knows I do not and will not feel the same and he’s able to respect that, and I trust him to respect me. You don’t know Will— not like I do.” It wasn’t like Felix actually knew Jack all that well either, but he definitely knew the man miles better than Fanny. “I’m not going to leave him and you can’t make me. Just make your peace with that and move on, because I will not have this conversation with you again. Will is a part of my life. I’m not going to let you drive me away from him.”

“I could drive him away from you,” Fanny said, chin held high. “I could. I have. I, I’ve done it before.”

“Jesus christ.” Felix removed his hand from Fanny’s to run it over his face. “You mean— you mean Joel, right? That kid from fucking grade school that wanted to be my friend? And you got so fucking jealous that you put peanuts in his lunch and nearly killed the fucking kid cause he was allergic.”

“I was nine.”

“You have fucking problems.”

“Will is not good for you,” Fanny insisted. “And I can prove it. He looks down on you. Don’t you see it? The way he undid the cuffs— which is very suspect! He could be a criminal for all you know. He could be selling drugs! Or he could be a thief!”

This was the closest Fanny had come to being right about Jack in this entire conversation. “He’s a student,” Felix lied, and lying well for once. “You think I don’t check out my friends? You’re the one who called me paranoid all through fucking high school.”

“You wouldn’t date anyone because you thought they were all out to get you,” she huffed. “That they wanted something from you.”

“Didn’t they?”

“They wanted sex, Felix, it’s not a crime.”

“It’s still wanting something that isn’t me.”

“Will only wants sex from you.”

“He doesn’t,” Felix replied, a little floored when he realized that he wasn’t telling a lie now. He knew Jack wanted him, of course he did. He’d made too many comments and sidelong glances to let Felix believe anything else. But Jack— Jack wanted more than sex from Felix. And that was what made denying Jack all the more difficult. If it was just a roll in the hay, Felix could do that. He could close his eyes and pretend he was with someone else, he could take a pill or something to keep it up.
But Jack wanted more than sex from Felix, and sex was the only thing Felix could feasibly give him. “Just stop making all of these assumptions,” he said with a heavy sigh. “They’re wrong. All of them are wrong and they just— they’re depressing me.”

Fanny sat back in her chair with an unhappy huff and crossed her arms over her chest, looking past Felix like she couldn’t stand to see him. “Will is a bad seed and I will not stop until you realize this.”

“And I will defend him,” Felix warned her. “So don’t you dare consider poisoning him.” More than just Felix’s fury would fall upon Fanny for that.

“A woman has her ways,” Fanny said snippily.

“The law is non-gender-specific,” Felix said. “And I will be forced to take legal action if you attempt to harm Will in any way. Do you understand me?” When Fanny looked to him again, he knew she was hurt, but Felix couldn’t let that stop his resolve. He wasn’t about to back down. Jack was his friend and he wasn’t going to fail to defend his friends. Fanny knew Felix would always love her, if only by default as they were twins. But Jack was someone Felix wanted to be at the side of, and he wasn’t going to betray his sense of loyalty to anyone just for some biologically-fabricated law. “Don’t try me, Fanny.”

Fanny scowled and turned away, gnawing on her lower lip. “If he hurts my son—”

“Arnold will be safe,” Felix said firmly.

“Arnold hasn’t been safe since you joined the force,” Fanny argued. “It’s one of the reasons why Mom and Dad and I argued against it.”

“Arnold wasn’t even alive when I joined,” Felix reminded her. “Just stop. Okay? Fucking stop. You won’t be able to convince me. You won’t be able to change me. You have never succeeded and you never will. Aren’t you tired of this? Aren’t you as fucking exhausted of this fight as I am? Just— just stop, Fanny. It’s useless and you know it.”

Finally, the fight fled Fanny’s bones and she slumped in her seat. Fanny picked aimlessly at the hem of her sleeve. “… Don’t let him try to convince you to put out or something,” she finally said. “You’re a good person and a pity argument would convince you. Don’t do it. It won’t help anyone.”

“Preaching to the fucking choir, sis.” Felix was so relieved she was done pushing the envelope— only for tonight, though. Felix couldn’t count how many times she had relented to Felix’s argument and called it quits, only to resurge with a vehemence within the month. Felix knew he’d be getting a text from her pretty soon after she returned to Newport about how he needed to move back home and become some sort of fucking teacher or inspector or whatever career she deemed comparable and even equal with law enforcement. Fanny just didn’t seem to understand that the only thing Felix would ever consider leaving the force for would be a military career in the time of actual war. She would never understand it. No one in his family ever could.

“As much as I enjoy you trying to control my life and my decisions again, I’m sorry to say that I’m going to have to end this conversation,” Felix said, trying to keep the exasperation from his voice. “And I’ll leave it at this— don’t you dare corner Will and try to threaten him or make him feel any sort of guilt for his feelings. He can’t help it. He just can’t. And he’s working on making his peace with what he can never have and I’m just trying to ensure that he knows he’ll always have me, just not in the best way. And I feel like shit for it. So just— just don’t even bother.”

Fanny looked pissed, but she nodded her consent to his request regardless. “This would be easier if he had proof that you’re not gay.”
Felix rolled his eyes. “I have a girlfriend.”

Fanny mimicked the arch of his eyes. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“Fuck off, I do,” he huffed. “And you’re meeting her tomorrow before you and Arnold fly back to Newport and you’re not giving her any shit either. She’s fucking great, okay? I don’t want you ruining that for me. Fuck it, how about you just don’t ruin a god damn thing? I’ve built a life here.” Albeit, a dangerous one. “I like how it is. I’ll sooner lock you in the attic before I let you fuck it up.”

“You make it sound like I make a habit of ruining your life,” Fanny grumbled. “It was only once.”

“Twice.”

“No, once.”

“It was twice, Fanny.”

“I told your date to the autumn ball that you still wet your bed. She didn’t have to believe it, you know. What fifteen year old still wets himself? It was partly her fault for even believing such a dumb lie.”

“Lucien.”

Fanny paused. Her eyes flitted about in thought. Then her cheeks burned a moment and she sat up straight, clearing her throat. “Okay, twice.”

“We can go to three if you want a few more names. You know me, Fanny, I don’t hold grudges, but I do take notice of patterns. And I fucking love patterns.”

Fanny looked away, pursing her lips in something akin to one of her childish pouts. She knew Felix was right. Fanny had always had a bad habit of meddling in Felix’s life and acting out of jealousy.

“It’s not really my fault,” she defended lamely, using the same argument she’d used for years. “You’re my twin, no one else’s. I can’t help it if everyone else likes you so much.”

Felix still failed to see how this was a bad thing. “Just stop,” he sighed. “I’m really tired of having to defend you to my friends after you treat them like shit. I’d love nothing more than to tell them you’re a manipulative jerk at times, but they all seem to think my loyalty to you should usurp any negative feelings. Twins, I guess.”

Fanny looked to him from beneath her lashes, puppy-dog eyes suddenly in full effect and almost foreign to him. She hadn’t used this stupid look on him in years. “Twins, Felix,” she said, her voice slurred in a childish way that had Felix wanting to punch a hole in his wall out of sheer annoyance. “Don’t you love me?”

“I do.” Felix sighed heavily. “But I also love my girlfriend. And I really care about Will. Don’t force me to contend those emotions just because you want to feel important. You probably won’t like the outcome.”

“You should never choose anyone over me,” she grumbled, the puppy-dog eyes melting away.

“Wouldn’t you choose your husband over me?”

She fell silent.

“We’re both building our lives,” Felix told her softly. “They’re not going to be identical.”
Fanny stood suddenly. “I’m going to bed,” she said. “I’m tired of arguing, I don’t know why you keep trying to drag it out into something longer.” She stretched her arms above her head and kicked the leg of Felix’s chair. “Can’t wait to meet that girlfriend tomorrow. Maybe you should give her a few good kisses in front of William so he gets the picture.”

Shame curled in Felix’s gut, ugly and black. He’d already done that on accident and still felt like dying for it. “I try not to be that cruel,” he mumbled. “Goodnight, Fanny.”

“Night, Felix.”

She went upstairs, leaving Felix in his kitchen, alone. The argument he’d just had was an old one with only a few new twists, and it wasn’t like he hadn’t expected some sort of petty argument to arise. Fanny loved her discourse in small, manageable doses. Drama was her favorite thing and she bred it among her group of friends, so long as it was deemed harmless enough. Fanny was always ready to argue and spit at someone and she lived for shouting in someone’s face, and never beyond words.

Felix wasn’t like that.

He didn’t like shouting or aggressive arguments or belligerent accusations. He knew that there were fights worth having, but if they were only using the mouth, then they weren’t that important. Felix could hold his own in any sort of argument thanks to Fanny’s twisted enjoyment of such things, but he never sought them out. If anything, he avoided it. It was why Mark set him on edge so badly. Felix didn’t like harsh words and sharp insults. It just seemed like a waste and another way to needlessly hurt someone. Felix had done a lot of violent things in his life, but he’d never regretted those actions like he regretted words he’d said in a petty fight. Not that he felt like he should, but people put too much weight on words. They acted like a jab to their person was like a stab from a literal blade. He couldn’t stand it. He hated arguing when it didn’t really matter.

Now Felix was left sitting at his table, drained and wallowing in more than a little guilt. Not for anything in particular and not for anything that was his fault— he just felt guilty for the expression that had been on Jack’s face as Fanny had stared into Jack’s soul and seen something she didn’t like. Fanny wasn’t a bigot, she wasn’t homophobic, but she was doggedly possessive of Felix and it was one of her worst traits. Jack hadn’t deserved the way she’d looked at him. Whatever Jack had seen in her and hurt him deeply and Felix hated his sister just the tiniest bit for it. Jack looked like he felt as if he was just another monster or threat. Like he wasn’t allowed in the private happiness of Felix’s home because he just didn’t belong. Felix was almost positive Jack genuinely felt this way, and he hated it because he didn’t know if he could fix it, how he could fix it, or if it was even within his right to fix. But maybe— maybe he could talk with Mark.

That thought was what had Felix moving, heading up the stairs after shutting off the lights and finally turning in after a long day. He was exhausted, but he’d known his body wouldn’t let him rest until he found some sort of solution for the problem at hand, the problem being the way Jack had looked before he left. No one deserved to be treated so coldly, even if it was only a look. Fanny may not welcome Jack, but this wasn’t her house. If Felix wanted him here, then he could damn well stay as long as he liked, and no manipulative sister would change it.

After glancing across the street through the blinds to make sure Kon had the singular light on he was meant to keep, Felix pulled out his phone and brought up Jack’s number, staring at the screen for a long time.

It was late. Jack likely—hopefully— was asleep. Felix shouldn’t call him, but he couldn’t get over the haunted look in Jack’s eyes, the way he’d been so abnormally quiet for most of the evening, just observing the party from the outside like he didn’t know how to be part of it. Maybe that had been
Felix’s fault. Maybe it had been wrong to invite Jack when Jack only knew one person out of five, two of them being cops. Maybe Felix had been cold-blooded to insist that Jack join him in such an estranged and foreign environment.

But the way Jack had smiled down at him, with those cuffs spinning on his finger—

Felix sent the text before he could second guess himself, a quick little message that would reassure Jack. Because while Fanny had acted like a fucking bitch, Felix had wanted Jack there. He’d wanted Jack in his home, celebrating the birthday with him. He’d wanted Jack to be a part of his life and he didn’t regret his decision to invite Jack, however heartless it was.

*thank you for coming— you’re welcome anytime*

An invitation that would mean so much more than the words that made up the phrase.

Felix went to bed with something like defiance in his heart, ready to do anything he could to make sure Jack never felt unwelcome in Felix’s home ever again.

... 

“Do you have to walk everywhere?” Arnold asked from atop Felix’s shoulders, where he’d insisted on being as Felix brought them all to the Flatiron. “Why don’t you have a car, Uncle Fili? What if you have to go far away?”

“If I have to go someplace, I get a cab,” Felix told the kid, keeping his steps as smooth as possible. He didn’t like the idea of jolting Arnold the wrong way and making the kid lose his balance. And if I have someplace really far to go to, then I just borrow a friend’s car.”

“You had a car in Boston,” Arnold said with a pout. “A good car. It was blue. I miss it.”

It had been a blue Hyundai Sonata, 2013, and it had run like shit thanks to the weather of Boston. Arnold had no idea how much trouble that car had given Felix. He was glad it was sitting on some lot, ready to make its next owner just as miserable as Felix had been.

“Good car,” Felix echoed. “I miss it too.”

The look Fanny gave him from beside them was enough to call him out on his bullshit. Felix didn’t care. He didn’t want to make Arnold unhappy just because Felix had bought a bad car off a used-lot. It didn’t fucking matter in the first place.

“There it is,” he said, jerking his head towards the coffee place so he wouldn’t have to let go of Arnold’s legs. The kid was enjoying being up so high, seeing above the small crowds of people milling about around them. He kept leaning back a little too far, staring into the empty blue sky that looked as cold as Felix felt. And every time he did that, he slipped just a little too much down Felix’s back. That was why Felix was wary to release his hold on Arnold’s legs. He wasn’t about to let the kid fall. “Marzia’s shift is almost ending, and so is the rush. We’ll be able to chat a bit.”

Fanny nodded. “Does she know we’re coming?”

That— was a good question. Felix belatedly realized he should have sent Marzia some sort of text, preferably an outright warning. Fanny was probably going to be at her best today, since she’d had plenty of practice at being the worst with Jack last night. Jack, who had yet to respond to Felix’s text even though it was at least ten hours later. Felix told himself it didn’t matter and that he couldn’t worry about that for right now. What he needed to concern himself with was guarding Marzia from Fanny’s worse traits. Jack was stronger than Felix sometimes gave him credit for. But Marzia—
Felix had no idea how Marzia would take Fanny.

“She’ll be fine,” Felix said. “I always come see her around this time of day, before my shift starts. She knows to expect me.” He set Arnold down carefully on the ground, as he didn’t want to height-check the poor kid on the doorframe.

Fanny just nodded again and approached the door to the Flatiron, pushing it open with an air of proprietary. Felix was sure Marzia and Fanny would get along to some degree— unlike Felix, Fanny knew how to wear the money that was in her family. She dressed as primly and expensively as Marzia, albeit a little more toned down, simply because she was married and a mother. But the cotton, pastel blue sweater with the white khakis and the sand-tan, long reefer coat made her seem far above Felix’s pay grade in a way only Marzia could match. At least they would have something in common on that end, though it did make Felix wish for the simpler taste he had in common with Jack. Felix felt less like a stain on a satin blouse when he was with Jack than when he was with his sister or girlfriend.

Speaking of blouse, Marzia looked fucking precious in the yellow blouse she was wearing beneath her apron with the tailored blue jeans. She looked just as perfectly put together as she always did, and as Fanny’s eyes swept over the employees to try and decipher which one was Felix’s girlfriend, her eyes did linger a moment longer over Marzia before moving on. A moment of hesitation— interest. Felix smirked to himself, knowing Marzia had already made a perfect first impression without even trying. That was one of the things Felix loved about Marzia: how effortlessly perfection came to her. She was like god damn royalty and even Fanny couldn’t miss it.

Then Marzia saw Felix at the door, and her special smile for the customers morphed into her special smile for Felix. She whispered a quick word to her manager— Jenna, who hopefully wouldn’t spill the beans about Felix’s rescue again— and then all but bounded out from behind the counter while undoing her apron from around her waist, beelining for Felix and taking his jaw in one hand to pull him in for a kiss.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“We had our date just a few days ago,” Felix reminded her, unable to keep from matching her smile. Seeing Marzia lifted his spirits in a way no one else was capable of. She helped him forget the stress and strain. And while the wasn’t always a good thing— stress was what kept Felix on his toes and alive— it helped him feel more human. “And I have—”

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry,” Marzia said, suddenly pulling away from Felix and looking to Fanny and Arnold with wide eyes. “I didn’t notice you both— am I in your way? How can I help you?” She was out of uniform, but still eager to do her job. Felix loved people like that because it just meant they were genuinely helpful, beyond the paycheck.

Fanny seemed impressed by it too. “I’m his sister,” she said, her tone sharp at the ends, but not in a way that had Felix on edge. “Fanny Kjellberg,” Fanny said, holding out her hand, which Marzia took to shake, her eyes going wider by the second. “And this is my son Arnold.”

Arnold was looking up at Marzia with wide eyes, speechless. Marzia waved awkwardly down at the little boy, definitely at odds with how she should be acting. For the sake of choosing sides and making it obvious, Felix put his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “I just thought it would be nice for us to sit together and have a drink,” he told his girlfriend. “Nothing more. She wanted to meet you and she’s more stubborn than me.”

“Impossible,” Marzia said before quickly slapping her hand over her mouth. “I mean—”
“Oh my god, Felix is the worst,” Fanny bemoaned. “I swear, there’s no talking to him on the best of
days.”

“He can be a bit obsessive, can’t he,” Marzia greed, quickly recovering and smiling again.

“I didn’t bring you two together so you could complain about me,” Felix huffed. “At least let me
grab us a table before you slaughter me behind my back.”

“It won’t be behind your back, Felix,” Fanny assured him. “You know me— I prefer to look my
victim’s in the eyes.

Marzia’s smile became tight before she gestured Felix to a table. “Go sit,” she said. “I’ll make your
drinks and then be over in a minute.” She moved away, pulling her uniform back on so she could go
behind the counter. Jenna spoke easily with her, maybe giving permission, maybe allowing her off
her shift early. Felix didn’t have time to analyze further because Fanny had pulled him away from his
line of sight to the table Marzia had waved them to. Arnold insisted on sitting next to Felix, and Felix
readied himself for his sister’s judgement. She was always quick to make assumptions for people
even after only knowing them for the barest part of a minute.

Felix faced Fanny and grimaced before asking, “Well?”

He braced himself for the worst and was surprised when Fanny leaned in and gushed, “I absolutely
love her. Did you see the way she went straight for you? Normally, that would annoy me, until she
so easily pulled back and noticed others around her. It says a lot, Felix, it says that she’s really into
you, but she refuses to let herself become dominated with you. That’s good, that’s good, she’s got a
strong personality, and she very easily admitted you’re stubborn. And did you see her shoes?” Felix
hadn’t. “Gucci suede ballet flats in black,” Fanny said, her voice low and almost dreamy. “I have
three different colors of that pair. She has good taste, very good taste.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re judging her by her clothes,” Felix groaned.

“What else is there to judge by?” Fanny asked. “I’ve barely spoken to her, all I have is the way she
looks. But damn, does she look good.”

“That’s a bad word,” Arnold said from his seat, the first thing he’d said since coming into the
Flatiron. Felix frowned at the subdued way Arnold was looking at the table.

“What’s wrong, kiddo?” Felix asked, nudging Arnold playfully with his elbow. “Is it too loud?”

Arnold shook his head, then looked up at Felix with his big, blue eyes. “You’re dating a princess,”
he said, sounding almost unhappy by it. “That means you’re gonna move away and I’ll never see
you again.”

Felix and Fanny both immediately had to stifle giggles and Felix was blown away at the sincerity in
Arnold’s words. He genuinely thought Felix was dating some sort of royalty and was heartbroken
for it. “Marzia would never keep me from seeing you,” he told Arnold with another playful push.
“ Heck, I should be worried that you’ll charm her away from me. She seems to like cute blonds with
blue eyes— you’re my competition, Arnold.”

“She’s more important than you,” Arnold huffed. “You can’t leave us for her.”

Felix felt his eye twitch and refused to let himself be offended. “Do you not like her?”

“No,” Arnold said, pouting again. “She smiles real nice.”
“Then why don’t you focus on that? If you keep that sour look on your face, she’ll think you hate her.”

Arnold sat up straight and started pulling at the corners of his mouth, resolutely trying to bring a smile to the surface. He managed it after a moment and grinned up at Felix, a little too much teeth and maybe a little manic. “She’ll like me more than you,” he told Felix. “And then you won’t have her so you can’t leave us.”

Felix suddenly realized that Arnold was absolutely his mother’s son. “Fuck,” he whispered quietly to himself as a whole new set of problems arose. Felix knew Marzia really fucking liked him, but Arnold was a charming little fucker. He swore to god, if Arnold tried to flirt with Marzia in a way only a seven-year-old could make look good, then Felix would have to deny his family visiting for Thanksgiving.

“I have drinks,” came Marzia’s musical voice from behind Fanny. Felix was facing the door, as he always did, but he’d still missed Marzia’s approach while being distracted by Arnold’s rather unique thought process. Marzia set down the four drinks she’d been carrying in her delicate hands and sat down across from Felix, between Arnold and Fanny. And Felix— didn’t like that at all, but what could he do? “I got a hot chocolate for the boy— Arnold?” Marzia smiled sweetly down at the kid and handed him his drink in a children’s size. “There’s sprinkles,” she told Arnold in a stage whisper. “Say nothing to mother.”

Arnold had fucking hearts in his eyes as he nodded slowly with Marzia. He drank from the cup and didn’t even flinch at the heat, even though Marzia looked momentarily startled that the small child was drinking freshly hot hot chocolate. But Arnold was apparently stupid in love and happy to burn his tongue so long as he looked cool.

Felix was suddenly upset with himself for being jealous of his fucking nephew. Fuck.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Fanny told Marzia as she took her own drink. “Felix hasn’t said much about you, but to be honest, Felix doesn’t really talk to his family all that often. It’s pretty sad, if you ask me, almost makes us wonder if he even still loves us.”

Felix wanted to roll his eyes at his sister’s pettiness, but he knew Fanny’s complaint would fall flat on Marzia’s ears. Marzia smiled politely, but when she met Felix’s eyes across the able, there was a moment of understanding that passed between them. Felix absolutely did not reach out to his family often and Fanny was showcasing all the reasons why, loud and clear. And Marzia was catching on quick. She was such a smart girl. Felix’s chest swelled with some sort of affection, and he drank his Redeye, reveling in the espresso and taking pride in the knowledge that it was made especially for him by his girl.

Something on the cup caught his eye. Felix pulled it back and saw Marzia had scribbled on the side of the cup in black sharpie. Nothing complicated, just a smiling butterfly with a little heart underneath Felix’s names.

Jesus fucking christ, Marzia was fucking adorable and Arnold had nothing on her.

“So Marzia,” Fanny began, eyes sharp. “What do you do? No offense, but what you’re wearing is a little pricier than the paycheck I imagine for this place.”

“I’m a student,” Marzia replied evenly, holding her head high. There was something new about her, something Felix hadn’t seen before. A certain way she was setting her shoulders, how she had steeled her eyes and expression. It wasn’t cold or detached, it was just— severe. Like she was suddenly, somehow, above all of them, even if no one else realized. Like a queen undercover.
Felix startled out of this observation and tuned in to the actual conversation. Fanny was practically *drilling* Marzia about fashion, but Marzia was easily holding her own, discussing the latest runway shows and exposes that Felix didn’t know the first thing about. Fanny was sitting forward, well into the discussion, her eyes no longer sharp, but bright. She was enjoying the conversation, enjoying talking to Marzia, who was still holding her head high while her smile was softening at the corners. She was relaxing in her seat and her voice was lowering and rising in a natural progression of interest. Marzia’s grip on her drink loosened and tightened the more passionate she became. Her lips were moving quickly, her English stuttering a little as her vocabulary failed her, but Fanny and Felix were both very used to helping their parents when their English failed them, and Fanny easily filled in the gaps and words Marzia couldn’t recall.

It was the most ideal way this meeting could have gone, and Felix felt like he was on cloud nine. He sat back in his own seat and just watched, tuning out the meat of the conversation to soak in the feeling of content. Marzia and Fanny were getting along swimmingly. The conversation was a discussion with hints of a debate, but not a single argumentative tone was present. Arnold was kicking his feet in his seat, watching the two women with childlike adoration. Felix ran his thumb over the heart Marzia had drawn on his cup and took a moment to reflect.

Felix was happy where he was. He knew that now. If he’d asked himself this question a month or so ago, Felix wasn’t sure he’d be able to say he was happy with the confidence he had now. But he couldn’t deny it and certainly didn’t want to—for all of the shit going down in his life, all of the stress and pain and paranoia, Felix was genuinely happy. He felt like he should owe all of it to Marzia, if not most, but—

Jack just kept coming into his thoughts.

A lot of the shit Felix was going through was his own fault. Jack had said it countless times, that Felix could have just let Jack die. And while the very idea made Felix sick to his fucking stomach, he knew Jack was right. It had been his choice to save Jack and Felix couldn’t regret it, so all of the ache and anxiety and violation was his own fault. He would gladly take the blame from Jack if he could. And while Felix wasn’t exactly in a safe place these days, he’d seen so much of the city in a way he’d never expected. The dark corners, the bright lights of upper society, the genius in the villainy that ran rampant. Even though Felix’s life was in danger beyond his normal work, he couldn’t help but feel grateful for the opportunities and insight he’d been given in knowing Jack.

And Jack was—

Jack was *good*.

Felix was certain of that, especially now, after seeing Jack in the small moments in Felix’s home, surrounded by a kind family. Jack hadn’t had a single harsh look or cruel word to say. There had been no sign of the mob boss in him, only a normal person who felt so far out of his depth that he could barely speak. And the idea that being in a mundane, healthy, functioning environment with a family was what put Jack so on edge and in the dark made Felix’s chest ache. He wanted to fix it. He wanted to help Jack. And he wanted to be Jack’s friend and the idea of being able to give Jack something good and something safe was part of why Felix was able to say he was happy.

“So Marzia, do you know Will?”

It took Felix a moment too long to figure out who this “Will” was, but once he did, he stiffened and sat up and tried not to look like he was internally freaking out. Of fucking course Fanny would bring Will up, she would never let this sort of thing go, even after last night’s conversation. Fanny loved beating that dead horse into a bloody fucking pulp.
“Will?” Marzia repeated curiously, looking to Felix for some sort of clue, which Felix couldn’t give because Will wasn’t fucking real. “Who would that be?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” Fanny asked, looking like she found that fact almost laughable. “I’m surprised Felix didn’t tell you.”

“I’m sorry, is there something wrong?” Marzia asked. She could probably see how Felix’s complexion was losing colour. Felix couldn’t fucking believe Fanny for doing this, pushing him into a corner with Marzia. It wasn’t like Felix could lie his way out of this one, he couldn’t very well tell Marzia that Will was no one. Will wasn’t real. What could Felix say? Marzia would be able to read a lie in him, and even if she bought it, Felix couldn’t rope Jack into a permanent charade as Will without his consent. And if Felix tried to get around Will being enamored with him, Fanny wouldn’t let him.

God, fuck his twin, what the fuck.

“Felix?” Marzia said. “Who is Will?”

Felix sighed heavily and was about to answer when Arnold interjected, just as wide-eyed as always. “Will is my deputy!” he crowed, all but bouncing in his seat. “He helped me catch Uncle Fili and Mister Sive last night! And we rescued my mom and then Deputy Will undid the handcuffs on Felix and freed him. He helped me win Uno! He’s super nice, I think he’s cool.” Arnold looked to Felix, his eyes impossibly blue. “Can we see him again? Before we leave?”

Felix’s heart sunk. One of his least favorite things was having to deny his nephew. “He’s busy,” he told the child with more than a little regret. Jack still hadn’t responded to his text, so there was no way in hell he’d manage a playdate just to satiate his nephew. “I’m so sorry, kiddo, we were lucky to have him over last night. He’s a student, you know? They have a lot of work to do.”

Arnold frowned. “But aren’t you his friend? Friends should make time for each other.” He huffed and looked back to his mother and Marzia. “What a bad friend.”

Felix wanted nothing more than to defend Jack, but he knew it would only make things worse, thanks to fucking Fanny. He just sighed and said, “It can’t be helped. But I’ll be sure to let him know that you really liked meeting him. It’ll mean a lot.”

“When does your flight leave?” Marzia asked, brushing past the Will topic as subtly as possible.

“A few hours,” Fanny replied. “Felix was going to show us some of downtown before we left. I don’t want to stay too long in this city, of course. It’s not very safe and my little boy tends to sniff out trouble with ease.”

“It’s not my fault,” Arnold huffed again. “I’m gonna stop the bad people, just like Uncle Fili.”

“You will never become a cop,” Fanny swore vehemently. “Over my grave, Arnold. Why don’t you try something nicer? You don’t have to be a cop to help people and stop bad guys. You could become a teacher. Or a lawyer. Or even a politician, so you can change the laws and the world to keep people safe. But not a cop, Arnold.”

Felix rolled his eyes into his drink while Marzia looked rather put out. “I think being a police officer is a fine job,” she told Arnold, despite the look of disdain that came over Fanny’s face. “As long as you’re smart and continue to care, you’ll be safe. Just don’t put your neck out too far, okay? But don’t be afraid of doing the right thing and following your heart, even if people are telling you not to.”
Arnold was staring at her like she was seeing god for the first time. Fanny looked furious. Felix, once again, couldn’t believe how fucking lucky he was in finding Marzia.

“Of course, you must be well prepared,” Marzia hedged. “There is a lot of work that goes into becoming a police officer, and a lot more that goes into becoming a good police officer. I’m sure your uncle can tell you all about it, of course. He works very hard, though, gives up a lot of himself for his work. You must be ready for that sort of sacrifice as well.”

“He’s seven,” Fanny cut in. “He’s a child, he doesn’t need to hear this.”

“It’s something he should think about,” Marzia reasoned. “He should always be thinking about how he will reach his goals. There’s no point in having them if he doesn’t know how to attain them. Maybe thinking about what it will take will make him change his mind.”

Arnold shook his head firmly. “I will become a cop!” he announced a little too loudly for the small store they were in. “I’ll become like Uncle Fili and then better! I’m gonna beat him and none of you are gonna stop me.”

Felix wanted to bash his head on the table. “He’s not getting his competitiveness from me,” Felix pointed out to his sister. “And your husband, Isak? He’s not like this. This is definitely a ‘you’ trait.”

“Shut up,” Fanny grumbled. “I knew Marzia was too perfect to be true. Now I have to deal with another wanna-be hero. Arnold, don’t you listen to them! The world is too dangerous of a place. There are thousands of other ways to help people that doesn’t include a badge and a bullet. You have plenty of time to discover all of the new ways you can help people.”

Arnold set his jaw like stone. “Police officer.”


“I don’t see him enough for any of it to be my fault.”

“I’ll make you pay, little brother. You still haven’t eaten the candle.”

“I guess it’s true— Elephants never forget.”

Fanny kicked Felix hard under the table as Marzia covered her mouth with her hand to giggle discreetly. For a moment, their eyes met across the table, and Marzia smiled at him.

Felix prided himself on his ability to read people. As one of the many things that made him a good cop, reading people and their motives from just a few glances was what allowed him to understand a situation and act quickly. But it also got him into a lot of trouble.

His past girlfriends hadn’t liked being open books. They’d wanted to cultivate an air of mystery to their figure, especially early on in the relationship. The girls he’d dated had expected him to be able to read their minds, but were always upset when it seemed like Felix actually could. He’d easily be able to figure out what he’d done to upset and annoy them and he’d do his due diligence to fix it, which only made them even more upset in the end. They liked being angry and Felix had taken away their excuse. Felix had a habit of running with bad luck. All of the girls before had wanted to be unreadable and were furious when they discovered they weren’t.

Felix couldn’t read Marzia.

Maybe it as because he was learning how to ignore his instincts and maybe it was because he actually wanted to be able to read her expressions, but for whatever reason, Felix could never
manage it. And maybe he should try harder, maybe he should look closer, because the idea of missing something important almost scared him, but he found he couldn’t be bothered to push too much.

Felix liked not being able to read Marzia. He didn’t want to make her upset in discovering her mysteries. He enjoyed knowing that she would forever be an enigma to him, and that he would never lose interest in struggling to solve the unsolvable.

Across the table, over the chatter of the shop and Arnold and Felix’s twin, their eyes met, and Marzia smiled.

Felix smiled back.
“Your family is safe,” Kon told him the next day as he stood beside Felix, waiting for the carpool to show up. Kon was holding the cup of coffee Felix had brought out for him, a mug with Minnie Mouse’s silhouette and one of her ears acting as the handle. The coffee had hazelnut creamer flavoring it and Kon looked extremely pleased and comfortable, this huge mountain of a man standing beside Felix. Felix’s neighbors— particularly Mrs. Smith— had grown used to Kon, thinking he was just Felix’s new friend. He no longer was an imposing image on Felix’s doorstep, and no one really suspected why this man was suddenly hanging around Felix. And Felix preferred it that way.

“They landed last night,” Kon continued. “Her husband, Isak, picked her and Arnold up. I assume that is your current brother-in-law? Marriage is strange. Regardless, they are safe, and the protection detail has been called back. There is no longer any risk to them, that we can ascertain, nor risk that the others would pose to them.”

Kon apparently read a lot during his free time when he didn’t have his eyes on Felix’s home, which meant his vocabulary would fluctuate in complication. He’d go from third grade ability to some sort of English professor. Felix enjoyed it. He finished off his own cup of coffee and handed it off to Kon. “Tell Jack thanks,” he told Kon. “I’m gonna try and tell him myself, but in case he’s gets squirrelly and refuses to see me, I want you to tell him for me.”

“You invited him to your birthday,” Kon said. “He was very surprised.”

Felix paused. “… Like, good or bad surprised?”

Kon shrugged. “Not sure. Only person who can read Jack well is Mark. But he came to me after his time at your house and he seemed— off. Off-centered.” Kon squinted into the sky, scrunching his nose. “I do not know. He was not very okay. But I do not know exactly what that’s like for him, so maybe I am wrong.”

Felix winced. “I feel bad,” he admitted. “I need to talk to Mark and try to figure out how to help him, because what I’m doing just isn’t fucking working.”

“You do not need to help everyone.”

“I’m not trying to help everyone, I’m just trying to help him.” Felix huffed and kicked his shoe to the ground, careful not to scuff them. He’d cleaned his work boots yesterday night and wasn’t about to mess up the job he’d done. “I don’t know. It’s just frustrating. My sister got on my case about some of that bullshit too and it’s just— a little ridiculous, considering how much other garbage I’ve got to worry about.”
“Seems very mundane,” Kon said. “Just emotions. That is all you two ever fight about. Emotions. Bah.” Kon spit on the ground and then drank more of his coffee. “Just find him new boyfriend and everything will be better.”

Felix grimaced. “You want me to try and set up your boss with someone else? Why? So he can get over me? I don’t think that’ll work because I know someone else would have done that for me already. Like Mark. Mark would have set him up with someone. Hell, maybe even himself. He’s obsessed enough with Jack, he would definitely do something like that.”

“Mark and Jack are no longer together, and they do not intend to bring it back up,” Kon said, startling Felix a little. “They were not good for one another.”

“What the fuck,” Felix deadpanned. “Jack and Mark dated?”


Felix still couldn’t believe it. “No fucking way,” he said. “Like, fucked. Actually fucked? All the way, fucked?”

“I am unsure if there is a language barrier we are meeting. Does fucking mean less for you?”

Felix just gaped a little longer, completely floored by the idea of Mark and Jack actually being together, for however short of a time. Had it been just fucking or had it been some sort of actual relationship? Mark had been pretty adamant on the idea of him and Jack only being friends, but had that been some sort of cover up? Maybe Mark was a kind of scorned lover and needed to tell himself that so he wouldn’t be tortured with being at Jack’s side endlessly, every day, taunted by what was no longer his. Maybe that really was why Mark hated Felix— because Jack had moved on from Mark, and Mark just couldn’t stand it.

Fuck, now Felix felt bad.

“I didn’t know that,” Felix admitted. “I just— I really did think they were only friends.”

“Who knows anymore,” Kon murmured, sounding almost annoyed by it. “All of you children— so complicated.”

Felix frowned. “How old are you?”

“I am thirty-one.”

“Fuck off, then I’m only a few years younger than you, don’t call me a child.” Felix petulantly kicked the floor again. His carpool was late, and he suddenly wasn’t enjoying this conversation. He’d thought the knowledge of Mark and Jack being a thing would have made him happy or at least a little less confused about Mark’s motives, but Felix only felt uncomfortable about it. Maybe he felt bad for meddling? Or maybe it was something else. Maybe Felix was just—

A car pulled up and Hopper all but threw himself on the horn, like Felix wasn’t standing on the curb. Felix rolled his eyes and shouldered his duffle, giving Kon a sharp nod. “Thanks for hanging with me this morning. I’m gonna try and reach out to Jack, but again, if he tries to avoid me? Tell him thank you for me.”

Kon gave a little wave and Felix jumped the few steps, getting into the car. Sive slapped at his arm a couple times as he slid into the seat beside his partner. “I didn’t get to see you eat any fucking candle, man! I wanted at least a video.”
Felix snorted a laugh and refused to admit that he’d gotten lucky and his sister had genuinely forgotten to press the candle issue in the face of Will. “I swear to god, you care about those traditions more than I do.”

“Because they’re fucking hilarious, and you failed.” Sive grinned and sat back in his seat, kicking the back of Hopper’s. Hopper yelped, shouted some bullshit about having to drive and that Sive was going to get them all killed by throwing off his groove. “You’re going five under,” Sive complained. “I hate when you’re the carpool lead.”

Hopper insisted on driving below the speed limit all the way to the precinct and Felix was about to lose his fucking mind if it weren’t for Sive’s endless chattering that served as a fantastic distraction. Once they arrived, Felix went through his regular routine, sinking into the normalcy with some semblance of peace. Even if his life was going to shit, his work was relatively normal.

“Kjellberg!” Sarge called from the office. “To me!”

Felix frowned as Sive snickered and “ooh-ed” softly under his breath, acting like Felix had gotten in trouble with the principle or some bullshit. Felix rolled his eyes and shoved Sive, figuring this was just about SWAT and nothing more. Felix finished doing up his boots and gave Sive a sharp nod. “See you in the bull pen.”

Felix ducked into the office and raised his brow at Sarge, who was looking out the window with a somber air, not looking at Felix. His back was to the door and his shoulders were slumped. Felix quickly reworked his idea of his being about SWAT. Sarge definitely didn’t look happy.

“Everything okay, Sir?”

Sgt. Morrison turned. His mouth was a grim, firm line and he looked like he hadn’t slept in a long while. Felix almost didn’t want to know what had caused such a change in him.

“Ever done a ride along, Officer?”

Ride alongs were a little bit annoying, a little bit bullshit, and a lot of a pain in the ass. Most any civilian could sign up for a ride along with a local beat cop, so long as there was no criminal offense on the track record, and even then, some criminals would be required to have a ride along if only to breed a new kind of sympathy with the police force to discourage some sort of revenge fiasco. Felix had done quite a few ride alongs compared to other officers, but only enough to count on his one hand. They weren’t all that common because most people didn’t know they were available unless they were affiliated with the police force. And giving a ride along to some kid in the academy was different than giving one to a fucking civilian. Felix prayed he would get a trainee.

“A couple,” he replied. “You should be able to see that on my track record. Am I getting the yoke today?”

“You are,” Sgt. Morrison confirmed, still looking somber. “I would have given this to another officer, considering your luck for getting into some violent shit, but you were, unfortunately, specifically requested by our guest.”

Felix frowned. “That— shouldn’t be allowed. No one has a say over the officer they get, aside from you. You don’t have to listen to them.”

“Sadly, I do.” Sgt. Morrison looked out the window again. “You remember what I said, Officer? Back at the bar?”

Felix hesitated. He did remember, but: “When we were off the clock?”
“You’re not in trouble for talking about it, Officer.”

Thank fuck. “You said you don’t think we can save the city with what we’re doing,” he recalled. “Which, in my opinion, is somewhat true? But there’s no possible way to ever save this city entirely. Even if we do take down countless kingpins and corrupted leaders, a new shit show will just come and take its place.”

“That’s a fair point,” Sarge admitted with a sigh. “But it doesn’t change the fact that we can’t do any good for the people who need us now.”

“You said that sometimes it seems like the only people that can make a difference are the ones we put in jail alongside the murders. Almost like you think we’ve got some sort of vigilante justice system happening in New York City.” Felix shook his head. “We don’t have those kinds of heroes.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Sarge agreed. “But we have someone else.”

“Who?”

Sarge shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. What does matter is my original point— we can’t save this city because the people we need to save this city from are stronger than we’ll ever be.”

“… Who will I be escorting today, Sergeant Morrison?”

Sarge sighed heavily. “I’m assuming you know Dante Bisognin?”

Felix’s blood ran cold. “Yessir, I do,” he replied, trying to keep his head above water. Fucking Dante? Not fucking Dante, how the fuck was Felix going to—

“He asked for you,” Sarge continued. “After your little bridge fiasco, which, by the way? I’m not sure if you knew this, but someone paid for a bunch of stuff for the woman you saved.”

“Melinda?”

“Yeah, Melinda,” Sarge confirmed. “As you know, jumping from the bridge? Or threatening to. That brings down a huge fucking fine and a bunch of other legal bullshit. Someone anonymously covered all of those costs and she’s know happily working as a temp at some insurance agency, answering phone calls. And look— I’m not trying to say you have eyes on you, but it’s something I want you to consider. I don’t know if it’s malicious or not, but I want you watching your back, because your fellow officers can’t always be there to watch it for you.”

Felix wished he could be comforted in knowing Sarge, at least, knew Felix was in some sort of shitfest, but he could only think about fucking Dante, specifically requesting him and being with him for the next ten hours in his squad car. How the fuck—

Dante knew who he was, knew Felix in a way he never would have consented to. The fucker had so many things to hold over Felix’s head, so many ways he could threaten and hurt Felix. He already had to worry about the fucking Chinese Mafia and he’d hoped Dante would have tuned his shit down once he had Jack’s loyalty, but it seemed like Felix wasn’t that fucking lucky, for fuck’s sake.

“Is there any way I can get out of this?” Felix asked. “At all?”

Sarge shook his head. “I’m sorry, Officer. He’s been stubborn. If you ditch for a sick day, he’ll just wait until you our of them and come back.”

“Fuck.” Felix ran a hand over his face. “Okay. Where is he?”
“Waiting in the lobby,” Sarge replied. “You won’t be going in the bull pen since we’re discussing things of a sensitive nature that civilians aren’t privy to. You’ll be given only complaints and low level calls today, as per the rules for an officer giving a ride along to a civilian. You’re also getting an extra thirty with your lunch hour to accommodate the second passenger.” Sarge paused at his desk, visibly thinking.

“I’m sorry you’re getting this, Officer,” he said. “I don’t know what you know about Dante Bisognin, but he’s not—he’s not good people. I’m sorry you’re the one getting this hand.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Felix couldn’t do a thing to change it and he sure as hell wasn’t about to involve Jack because none of them needed any more problems on their plates. Dante couldn’t feasibly do anything to Felix during the ride along, with the various camera and recording devices Felix was required to wear. Felix would just have to get through his shift and pray for the best. Dante couldn’t touch him—he could only talk. Felix would handle this on his own.

“I’ll go meet my civilian,” Felix said, steadying himself with a deep breath. He wasn’t prepared, but he knew he could do this. “Be sure to let Sive know what’s up because he’s expecting me.” He would have to let Sive know to tell the kids at the basketball court that he couldn’t make it today thanks to this hiccup. A lot of things in Felix’s day were about to change for the worse. “Thank you for warning me, Sergeant Morrison,” he said calmly. “I’ll be sure to give this guy the time of his life.”

“See to it that you don’t,” Sarge said. “And be safe out there, Officer Kjellberg.”

Felix gave him a sharp nod, then turned and left the office. He walked briskly past the other desks after grabbing his work bag and moving into the back lobby of the precinct, where officers would gather before heading out to the squad cars. Felix grabbed car’s keys off the rack and took one more moment.

Dante was standing in the center of the lobby, perfectly framed by the faux-marble pattern on the floor, facing outwards towards the rainy lot. He was wearing what was likely a kind of semi formal day suit with his back to Felix, the expensive clothing a coal gray and intimidating. His black hair was sleeked back elegantly and his hands were in his front pockets, the jacket tossed back over his hips with an air of carelessness. On the surface, there was no way he could have a weapon on him, but Felix doubted any officer had had the guts to search the man completely, and there were plenty of lethal weapons that could pass through the metal detectors of the precinct. Hell, there could be something embedded in the sole of his shoe for all Felix knew, and he wouldn’t actually know until it was too late.

Felix was, again, struck with the desire to reach out to Jack. Call him and beg, plead for Jack to find him some way out of this, but Felix knew Jack couldn’t and that Felix really didn’t want him to in the first place. He didn’t want Jack to feel like Felix was trying to pull favor after favor and he didn’t want to make Jack feel like he only meant something to Felix when he was useful. Jack was his friend and Jack didn’t owe him a damn thing. Felix could handle this on his own.

He squared his shoulders, pulled on his peaked cap, and strode past Dante, beckoning, “Follow me, Sir.”

Dante startled and Felix allowed himself the moment of triumph. He knew what Dante was expecting him—he wanted to see the same skittish, scared man that had stood like stone in the middle of a birthday gala with an absolute stranger touching a scar on his hip. Dante was expecting Felix to be submissive and afraid of him and there was no way in hell that Felix was going to give this bastard what he wanted. Felix wasn’t scared of guns in his back anymore. Why would he be scared of one man?
“We’re in car thirty-eight today,” he told Dante as he walked ahead of the man, leading him along and not even showing his face. “They gave us an SUV to accommodate your added presence, so be grateful. Most beat cops are in the smaller patrol cars regardless of needed physical accommodations. I will be expecting you to stay in the car when I’m on certain calls, such as when we’re on private property and known areas of risk, but you’re allowed to follow me into regular businesses and apartment complexes, depending on the work I will be undertaking. We will not be assigned high risk cases, nor any missing persons. We will not be pulling over down speeders. You will be seeing the boring side of my job and I better not hear a word of complaint from you.”

Felix got to his car and popped the back trunk, threw his gear in and then slamming it shut, not even waiting to see if Dante wanted to stow anything. He rounded to the front of the vehicle, kept his face away from Dante’s view, and slid into the front seat so he could set up his laptop. He heard Dante get into the seat beside him and spoke before he could.

“Regardless of what assignments they’re catering to us, my job is still dangerous,” Felix said. “I expect you to listen to me and follow every single one of my instructions, to the letter. I am not at all interested in returning you in a body bag, nor do I intend to come back from my shift tonight in one of my own, either. You will listen to me or I will bring you back here and no amount of complaining and whining and gerrymandering will get me in trouble, because my job is high risk and I have the right to return you to the precinct if I believe you to be any sort of liability to my person. You either listen to me or you go home. Got it?”

Felix finally looked up to see chiseled Dante for the first time since he’d been violated and hated the smile on that bastard’s face.

“Crystal clear, Officer,” Dante said, his words like honey. “Of course, I would never want to put you in any sort of danger. I just had a few questions. Curiosity, is all.”

“Curiosity,” Felix repeated skeptically. “For your information, I have three working cameras on this vehicle, two of which are trained on me. One in the rearview, one on the dashboard facing inwards, and then one on the dashboard facing outwards. I also have a camera on my chest. All of these cameras function and record the full ten hours of my shift. Do you understand?”

Dante’s smile twisted. “Oh, I do. Do you, Officer?”

Felix sunk his teeth into his tongue to keep from saying anything. A million insults and attacks ran through his head, his brain thrown into overdrive at the confidence Dante continued to exude even when faced with the fact that he couldn’t do a damn thing to Felix. Working around surveillance was child’s play for the mafia, but Felix couldn’t afford to think like that or he’d lose focus somewhere else important and get himself killed. More than anything, he just wanted to slam his fist into Dante’s fucking mouth and demand to know how he felt he had the right to touch Felix without his consent. Felix wasn’t anyone’s property—not Jack’s and especially not Dante’s. His skin crawled as he remembered the drag of Dante’s fingertips over the vulnerable flesh of his underbelly.

“I’ll say it again,” Felix said slowly. “You are under constant surveillance. You are intruding on a dangerous line of work. Do not try anything or I will not hesitate to return you to the station. I am not going to put my life below yours. I am not going to risk my safety for the sake of your curiosity. And if you do try something? I can promise you there will be consequences beyond whatever comes from the precinct.”

“You wear his collar rather well,” Dante hummed. “It suits you.” He sat back in his seat. “I know that we are under surveillance, but I would like to warn you that audio recording is much more finicky than visual.”
The hair stood up on Felix’s neck and he looked down at the blinking red light on his dashboard that proved the camera was indeed capturing image, but he had no way of knowing if it was capturing audio as well. “What did you do?”

“I just want to talk, Officer Kjellberg,” Dante purred, lounging in the passenger seat of Felix’s vehicle. “I’ve done so much already. I derive a sort of pleasure in taking something that once made you feel safe and making it, well— not. After all, there’s nothing more fascinating than a soft water fish being dumped into the ocean. The process of death is quite slow, that is true, but it is all the more satisfying when it finally goes belly up.”

Felix narrowed his eyes, quickly reformulating his entire day, watching Dante carefully. It didn’t matter if they didn’t have audio, Dante couldn’t kill him with words alone. He could say shit, but Felix had damn thick skin, and he knew better than to listen to the lies of a snake. And as long as Felix kept his expression clean, he could respond with whatever he wanted. “Fuck you.”

Dante laughed, throwing his head back and showing his perfectly white teeth. “Only my second time meeting you, and you’ve already become so confident! Tell me— did Xiao-Zhi leave that much of an impression on you or are you just naturally this stupid? I supposed I would argue the latter, as you did nearly let a woman carry you off a bridge a week ago.” Dante sighed and shook his head. “Such a waste of life— all of the interesting people in the world seem eager to die young.”

“You listen to me,” Felix bit out, jabbing a finger in Dante’s direction. “You can talk whatever fucking shit you want, but if you even try to hurt me or manipulate me or distract me in any way, I am carting your ass back to the station and writing a scathing report that will ensure you are never allowed to harass an officer of the law ever again. We’ve got no audio, which means they’re gonna trust my report over yours regardless of what bullshit you spin and how much money you throw at them. Even if you own half of the force, they’re not gonna deny an officer the right to ban a civilian from ride alongs because that’s too small of an issue that could bring too much attention. So use your fucking brain and shut the fuck up when I tell you to.”

Felix finally buckled in and started the car. “I’m not fucking afraid fo you,” he said, only telling half a lie. “You’ve already done your worst to me. I don’t like bullies and I don’t let them get away with anything. So sit still, look pretty, and try not to get me killed, because you will certainly die with me.” He grabbed his mic. “Officer Kjellberg, 218, 10-8.”

The first part of his shift was busy, as far as busy went, which was a blessing. Dante barely got a word in between Felix’s communication with dispatch, and whenever Dante could talk, he was at Felix’s side, listening to another civilian lodge whatever complaints they thought necessitated an officer of the law. Dante only had moments to speak directly to Felix when they were walking from his patrol car to the scene, and Felix made sure to lengthen his strides and keep Dante out of earshot. Maybe Dante could send some scathing report about Felix being rude, but no one expected police officers to be the most hospitable, especially in New York City. Dante had probably thought he would get to violate yet another private area of Felix’s life in getting into Felix’s patrol car, but he’d been mistaken. Felix had already lost so much to this piece of shit— he wasn’t about to let Dante take his job from him either.

The real issue was the hour and a half of downtime, also known as his lunch. Felix dreaded the moment, knowing Dante would have him all to himself, and Felix had no excuse to avoid him. While some ride alongs allowed officers to mingle and civilians to eat with a group of officers, he knew Dante wouldn’t want that and would explicitly request otherwise, a demand Felix likely couldn’t combat without getting in some sort of trouble. On the surface, it was such a minuscule little thing to ask for. Only Felix knew how Dante could use something as simple as an hour and a half to effectively ruin someone’s entire fucking week.
Felix was dreading his own existence when he called in, “Officer Kjellberg, 218, 10-7 extended lunch with Civilian.”

“I feel like American food,” Dante hummed, happy as a clam now that he knew Felix couldn’t keep up his avoidance any longer. “Have you ever had Bill’s Bar and Burgers?”

Felix hadn’t and he was a little upset that something as good as a well made burger was going to be spoiled for him thanks to Dante’s oppressive presence. The burger joint in question was near the Rockefeller center, which took Felix to the opposite end of town from his beat, away from the city and past—

432 Park Avenue.

Felix tried valiantly to keep his eyes from climbing the skyscraper, trying not to give anything away. Dante didn’t say a word as they passed the building, which didn’t make sense to Felix. If Dante were here because of Jack, he wouldn’t be able to deny himself the joy of slipping in a comment about the Irishman as they passed his home. But Jack had mentioned that his own place would be the safest in New York. Could it be that none of the other mafiosos knew where Jack lived?

Felix’s heart clenched painfully in his chest, but he kept his expression schooled. If no one knew Jack lived there, save those who Jack had told, then Felix sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to give anything away. He navigated to Bill’s Bar and Burgers and finagled himself a rare parking spot just down the street. It was still raining and Felix offered Dante the umbrella, only because it would look bad for an officer to expose the civilian to the rain. His windbreaker would have to make do in keeping him from being soaked.

“Let me buy, Officer,” Dante said, his tone saccharine and sickening. “My treat and personal thank you to New York’s finest.”

Felix fought back a sneer and crossed the street after making sure he wouldn’t be barreled over. It was just after 7PM, his lunch having been pushed back by a woman that refused to accept the ex parte restraining order from her battered girlfriend. Facing down belligerent and defensive abusers had never failed to put Felix in a bad mood, and it was only made worse when he’d returned to his car and looked at Dante and remembered how this man had been one of the many to turn a blind eye to countless bruises covering a little boy’s body. Felix wondered if he’d even be able to stomach a lunch when having to stare at this man’s face.

“It’s rather cold out there,” Dante says as they duck into the homey little place. Felix ignored his comment and squinted at the menu. “Why don’t you get yourself something nice and warm? I’ve heard the smoked bacon chili is amazing. Or the Fat Cat burger. It received the CNN top ten burger award some years ago. All of their burgers are simply superb. And the onion rings are to die for.”

Felix tried to keep the sour expression from his face and ordered the clam chowder, just to give the most subtle middle finger to Dante that he could afford. He didn’t even really like clam chowder, but he wasn’t about to give Dante the satisfaction. Felix grabbed a booth in the back, letting Dante handle the payment since he’d so kindly offered. Felix wasn’t really concerned about taking advantage of blood money these days. His apartment furniture was full of it.

Felix scanned the shop with sharp eyes, wondering if Dante had planned on bringing Felix here and had done what Jack had; filling the store with his own men as a sort of added protection wasn’t something Felix would put past Dante. But the place was full of families and young adults, only a few older men and women that Felix would deem out of place. And Dante was the kind of guy to be overconfident. Maybe he felt like he didn’t need the protection. Maybe his name was enough of a shield.
“The food will be ready soon,” Dante said as he slid into the booth across from Felix. He knocked his foot against Felix’s, then curled his legs back. When Felix glared at him, Dante smiled sweetly. “I didn’t mean to jostle you, officer.”

“What do you want from me?” Felix demanded. He kept his voice low, but the booth was secluded and the rest of the conversations in the restaurant overpowered his voice. Only Dante would be able to hear him. “You’ve got some sort of fucking scheme and I’m not stupid enough to think you’re just here to observe. You’re supposed to be accepting Jack into your ranks with what shit you and the other families are doing. Why the fuck are you coming to me?”

Dante narrowed his eyes, the first show of an emotion that wasn’t aloofness. “Unlike my brother and the rest of my— business partners, I, for one, do not buy into dear Jack’s sudden change of heart. That boy grew up hating everything about his father’s work. He has no reason to suddenly support and even want to purchase stocks in it, so to speak. I know it is all some clever ruse, and I believe you are the key to proving as much. Which is why I wanted to meet you, personally, privately, and away from his prying eyes.”

Their food was set down in front of them and Dante clasped his hands around the basket with his burger. “I am prepared to offer you a lump sum of forty five million dollars in tradable stocks and bonds in return for your cooperation with my investigation into Mr. McLoughlin’s true motives.”

Felix balked. For a moment, Dante seemed pleased at his expression. “I know that is quite an amount of money,” he hummed. “But I assure you, it’s all clean and untraceable. You would be given the various passwords and legal access to the accounts, all of which will have the withdrawal fees and taxes paid for. You may transfer funds into your accounts or even exchange currency between any country you wish, so long as they fall within EU regulations and states of power. If you wish to continue to grow the value, I have several skilled employees that would bring your fortune to immeasurable heights.” As Felix continued to gape, Dante smirked. “Tell me— are you shocked that I would be willing to offer so much?”

“No,” Felix denied readily. “I’m shocked that you think you can buy my loyalty from Jack.”

Dante’s expression fell flat. “Do not tell me you are turning my offer down.”

“Then I won’t tell you. My silence will speak volumes. But it’s not happening either way.”

Dante was silent for a moment, almost stunned. “Do you realize what you’re turning down?” he asked in incredulousness. “That money would give you more than a future— it would give your children a future, and then the children after them. You could retire. You could live comfortably or extravagantly. Or you could pull it all out and give it all away to some charity and continue to live your life. All you have to do is tell me a few things, just a few simple sentences, and then everything for you will change for the better. I will guarantee your safety from the other families, I will ensure that Jack will leave you be. I am offering you safety in the form of wealth and you— you’re turning it down? For what?”

“Jack’s my friend,” Felix said firmly. “I don’t betray my friends.”

Dante paused again. Then he sneered, ugly and disruptive, setting Felix on edge. “Your friend,” he repeated slowly. “I see it now— all of your steadfast denial, your stubborn arguments. You’re not his friend— you’re his slut.”

Felix barely kept himself from flinching from the word that felt like a slap.

“That little piece of scum is buying your loyalty with your body,” Dante continued, his voice
dripping with disdain. “You’re hiding him behind your lies of friendship while you settle between his legs and submit. Do you enjoy it? Feeling his hands on your body and imaging the innocent blood he leaves behind? Do you relish the feeling of his cock inside of you and staining your virtue? You’ve only ever been with women before that piece of shit—tell me. Did you let him fuck you from the start or did you defend your chastity as well as you could before succumbing to his depravity?”

Dante sat back, the sneer morphing into a cruel smile. “I can see it now,” he drawled. “You, down on your knees, swearing your loyalty to his family and wearing that ring with a semblance of pride. There is no pride to be had in becoming the consort of the McLoughlin boy. You don’t mean a damn thing to him. You’re just a warm body for him to spill his seed into and nothing more. And when he finally uses you up, turns you into an empty husk, he’ll toss you aside and you’ll decay in the garbage, where people like you always end up.”

“That’s not the kind of person Jack is,” Felix defended weakly. In reality, Dante was simply echoing a thought Felix had always harbored, deep within his mind. Jack thought he loved Felix but that simply wasn’t true—Jack only lusted for him. He’d grow tired of Felix and move on, one way or another. “Jesus christ, what are you trying to do? Ruin his character? You think I’m loyal to him because I think he’s a good person?” Felix did. “That’s not the way this world works. I’m loyal to Jack because he’s loyal to me.”

“He’s to marry a woman and he will,” Dante said, baring his teeth. “Jack is acting on childish rebellion left over from his father’s hand. His revolting escapades with men will come to an end, as will his loyalty to you. You’re living on borrowed time, Officer. Enjoy what sin he gives you while you can. Just know, next time he fucks you like the whore you are, that your days are numbered and he’ll toss you aside when you’re all used up.”

“Jack and I—” Felix cut himself off, faltering in the face of the disgust he was seeing in Dante. He’d had people accuse him of being Jack’s something, but had never faced such a hateful allegation. “It doesn’t matter,” Felix said, knowing his insistence on the truth wouldn’t help. “It doesn’t matter if I’m sleeping with him or not—you can’t buy me. Not from him.”

“Not with money,” Dante snapped. “But with people—your sister and nephew. Your parents. Your friends. That partner of yours.” Felix stiffened. “Your life is molded around the protection of the innocent—what will you do once I fashion your very existence into a threat on their lives?”

Felix swallowed down the panic and replied, “I’ll keep them safe. It’s what I’m good at. The Mingyün failed to pose any threat to my sister and nephew and they’re the ones who are best at threatening. Why should I be afraid of you?”

“Because the Mingyün don’t hate you like I do,” Dante spat.

Felix struggled to remain calm and took the spoon that had been brought with his soup to keep his hands from shaking. “You’re not the Don, Dante,” he said coolly, betraying the fear he actually felt. “You’re just the little brother. You’re trying to start a war with no army to fight for you. I don’t have to listen to empty threats.”

“I will kill you with my bare fucking hands.”

“I can think of a few people who would have something to say about that,” Felix replied, blowing on his soup. His confidence had been regained in the face of Dante’s anger. Angry men made stupid mistakes. Felix just hoped no one else in the shop surrounding had heard them.

Dante was silent for a second. Then he said, “I will have Marzia executed before your very eyes.”
Now that—

Felix didn’t know what to do about that.

“Don’t you dare touch her.”

The smile that split Dante’s face could only be described as corrupt. He sat back again, relaxing, knowing he finally had the higher ground. “So that’s all it takes,” he said. “That little girl’s head on the block, and suddenly you’re belly up. I’ll have you submit to me in a way that you’ve never given yourself to Jack. Hell— I wonder how angry that man would be if I took you to my bed? You can be coerced into anything so long as I have a knife to Marzia’s throat. Would you suck my cock if it meant you could save her life?”

Felix absolutely would and he hated himself for it. His hands were shaking and he couldn’t do anything to stop it now. Marzia’s smile was burned into his mind’s eyes and the twisted image of her dead body made his stomach churn.

“I wonder how easily you would bend to my will,” Dante murmured. “If I took her by the hair and put my foot to her throat.”

Felix was suddenly jostled aside as someone sat down beside him in the booth. Felix looked to his left and saw— Tyler.

“You gonna eat those?” Tyler asked as he reached across the table and took onion rings from Dante’s basket. Felix could only feel relief as he stared owlishly at the newcomer beside him. He could fucking kiss Tyler. He owed this man his fucking life.

“Mr. Scheid,” Dante greeted with false charm. “How unpleasant of you to join us.”

“S’up, Dante,” Tyler replied. “You playing nice with my friend here?”

“We were discussing a business proposition,” Dante said, like he thought he could turn Tyler against Felix with a few simple words and some underhanded accusations. But Tyler just snorted a laugh and stole more of Dante’s onion fries.

“Oh, of course,” Tyler agreed sarcastically. “Everyone knows Felix’s moral compass allows him to be bought.”

Dante’s expression flattened. “Why is Mr. McLoughlin’s body guard busying himself with a worthless police officer and not with his boss?”

“You know Jack,” Tyler hummed. “He’s always been pretty good at keeping himself out of trouble. And I really like Officer Kjellberg, you know? He’s got a good head on his shoulders and he doesn’t try to manipulate and use my boss, unlike some pieces of shit.” Tyler’s tone was more pointed than the look he gave Dante. “Plus, I haven’t gotten to catch up with Kjellberg in a while. It was just his birthday, you know?” Tyler clapped Felix’s shoulder. “Happy Birthday, Officer.”

“Thank you,” Felix replied, hoping Tyler caught on that his gratitude was for far more than the well wishing. “Is everything, uh— is it all good?”

Tyler got his meaning and nodded. “Believe it or not, I’m not here for you, Kjellberg,” he said. “It’s not my shift tonight. There are eyes on you just outside, and they’ll be there until you go home to the next set. I’m actually here for Dante.”

“And who sent you?” Dante demanded.
“You know that little get-together you dipped out on just so you could threaten Jack’s favorite man in blue?” Tyler asked. “There’s a little bit of a shindig going down and Maria isn’t excited about her dress. She’s asking for you and I was sent as the messenger. So why don’t you stop trying to prove how big your dick is and come back with me?”

Dante scowled. “Fine,” he relented, surprising Felix. Maybe he really wasn’t as important as he made himself out to be. Why else would he be accepting such a seemingly trivial summon? Dante hadn’t even touched his food. He stood and set the umbrella down on the table. “I will extend my sincerest apologies to your sergeant, Officer Kjellberg,” Dante said. “Thank you for allowing me the indulgence in seeing how the lesser half lives.”

Dante sauntered out of the restaurant, leaving Felix a moment alone with Tyler. Once that bastard was finally gone, Felix slumped in his seat, his air leaving him in a rush. “Thank you,” he said again. “So fucking much. The shit he was saying— I can’t—”

“He fucked your audio, so Mark tapped into your phone,” Tyler said. “I only barely kept him from coming in here himself after we heard him threatening to let him fuck you.”

Felix winced, wishing that Mark hadn’t been the one to listen to Felix fall apart. Why did the man who hated him the most get to be the one to see Felix at his worst, time and time again? “I just don’t know how I can fight back against that asshole,” Felix admitted. “I can’t make my own threats cause I can’t make good on them. All I can do is hope Jack keeps enough interest in me to keep me alive. What am I supposed to do when he starts going after the people I love, for real? I can’t protect them, only Jack can, and I can’t speak for Jack. He’s had a lifetime of being controlled and used— I can’t become just another person using him.”

Tyler looked like he felt sorry for him. “For what it’s worth,” he told Felix. “Jack’s not about to lose interest in you any time soon. Especially not after we tell him how you tried to stand up to Dante tonight.” Tyler rapped his knuckles on the table twice. “Chin up, officer. Dante’s mostly talk. He has the name, but not the power that goes with it, and Vincent is in with Jack. He’s not about to mess up an alliance between families just for his bratty little brother. Everything’s gonna be okay.”

Felix nodded and forced himself to believe Tyler, even for a moment of peace. “Did Kon send Jack my thanks for how he watched my family this weekend?”

“He did,” Tyler affirmed. “Your nephew is cute as hell but we kinda hate your sister.”

Felix made a face. “Dude, come on— she’s my twin.”

“If I were a psychologist, I’d say you were emotionally abused by that bitch,” Tyler replied. “Defend her all you want, it doesn’t make you any more right. Next time she comes around, Jack wants Kon to meddle a little more. Maybe discourage her attitude problem.”

“How would you know about that?” Felix asked. “Do you have mics in my house now?”

“Hell no,” Tyler replied. “Jack’s just really good at pinpointing an abuser.”

Felix ducked his head, mollified. He wouldn’t call his sister abusive, but he knew she wasn’t the best person and he definitely didn’t want to invalidate Jack’s past by accusing him of projecting on his sister. “Tell him I’m sorry for how she treated him in the end,” he told Tyler. “And tell him— I’d like to see him soon.”

“Anything I should know about?”

Felix shook his head. “I just— want to see him.” He glanced up just in time to catch Tyler’s smug
grin at Felix’s admittance. “He’s my friend,” Felix huffed. “I like being with my friends.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Thank you.”

Tyler nodded and started to leave. “Have a good night, Kjellberg,” he said. “Don’t listen to those threats. Jack won’t let anything happen to you.”

“And the people I care about?”

“Even more so,” Tyler promised. “Be safe, Officer.”

Tyler turned and left, leaving Felix alone. His soup was losing heat, but his stomach still ached from the stress of Dante’s threats. He knew that if he ate, he’d probably just throw it up on the streets. Felix’s hands were still shaking, but he still felt relieved. He owed Tyler something for how he’d swept in and saved Felix from whatever fucked up shit Dante was about to spew next. Felix couldn’t believe there was such a bad person in existence, who wasn’t afraid to threaten even the most defenseless of people just for some sort of political gain, and Felix wished he could forget he lived in the kind of world he did. Felix hung his head in his hands and tried to breathe.

“Excuse me, Officer?”

Felix looked up to see a young woman in the uniform for the restaurant holding a milkshake with a smile on her face. “That family over there got you this,” she said, setting down the shake in front of Felix. “Chocolate malt. They wanted to say thank you for your service.”

Felix looked past her to see a family of four sitting across the way, watching him. The moment Felix met their eyes, the children—two little girls with matching piggy tails—waved excitedly and moved their mouths to form phrases Felix couldn’t read. Regardless, Felix’s chest clenched. He was able to manage a smile and raised the milkshake in toast to them.

Felix’s instincts were telling him not to drink—poison or some sort of tracker or anything Dante could come up with could be inside this innocuous dessert. His mind filled him with paranoia, made him afraid of the people surrounding him, even the employee returning to the register. He was afraid of everyone and everything in that moment and he was so tired.

Felix almost wished the malt was poisoned as he took his first sip of the dessert. Anything to bring him some sort of relief. The only thing that could make Felix feel less like garbage at this point was that Dante now understood Felix couldn’t be bought by anything. Even if Dante thought he could threaten his way into heaven, he couldn’t make Felix bend to his desires, and Felix would die before he let the man turn him against Jack.

But Felix—couldn’t let innocent people die.

“What do I do?” he asked himself under his breath, hands still shaking as he spooned out the chocolate malt. “Marzia…Fuck.” The last thing he wanted to do was put her in danger. He was so close to being able to admit he loved her. And then he would lose her.

But at least Jack wouldn’t be able to doubt Felix’s loyalty to him. And that was the only thing Felix could cling to. Even if everything went to hell and Felix ended up dead, Jack wouldn’t ever have to feel less than his worth ever again. And no one would ever lay a violent hand on Jack ever again as long as Felix lived, however limited that time was.
The dream wasn’t—

Felix didn’t have dreams like this.

Cold and harsh and painful, twisted and distorted like watching a scene in a broken mirror. Felix’s nightmares weren’t ever like this, they never featured people he knew, people he trusted. They never took someone he cared about and contorted them into an awful shadow of between who they were to Felix and how the world saw them to be. Felix didn’t have nightmares like this, his mind had never been this cruel.

Do you enjoy it? Feeling his hands on your body and imaging the innocent blood he leaves behind? Do you relish the feeling of his cock inside of you and staining your virtue?

Felix’s nightmares were ruined images of pleasure and pain, awful things he’d never subject himself too. The scene was saying he enjoyed it, enjoyed the way fingers bruised and broke his bones while Jack smiled down at him like he hated him, driving into Felix’s body again and again and tearing something inside Felix while laughing. And Felix could see himself, could see the way he writhed and moaned like he was in some sort of demented heat, begging for Jack to keep going, never stop, use him up until he was nothing. And Jack would only agree, fingertips becoming claws, sinking into Felix’s flesh, tearing him apart, mauling him as he fucked him. And all the way, that horrible smile, stretched across Jack’s face like it was going to split his face in two. And the snap of his hips was ringing in Felix’s ears and he felt like his lungs collapsed when Jack said his name.

There was a crack from somewhere in Felix’s mind as Jack reached out and sunk his hand into Felix’s chest, pushing through skin and muscle and bone, blood oozing sluggishly from the gaping hole Jack left behind as he pulled his hand back out with Felix’s heart seizing between his fingers, beating erratically as it blackened and decayed wherever Jack touched. Jack then looked into his eyes and told Felix he loved him as he strangled Felix’s dying heart.

Felix lurched up and off as bed as he was slammed back into wakefulness, his stomach turning over. He barely noticed the figure that was standing at the end of his bed, holding Felix’s ankle, as Felix bent over his mattress and dry-heaved into the trashcan beside his nightstand. His room was oppressingly quiet, save for the sound of his labored breathing. His entire body hurt and that smile—the fucking smile—it was drowning him, every time he shut his eyes, it was all he could see. Felix trembled and whimpered as his stomach rolled again, trying to expel something, get some poison out of his body. His hand clutched at his chest, feeling for a pulse, wanting to ensure his heart was still where it belonged, though it was fluttering so quickly that he couldn’t help but be scared that he was dying anyways. Another wave of nausea, and Felix almost sobbed as nothing came up, his body empty and yet still adamant that there was something inside of him that was killing him.
“Get up, Felix.”

There were hands on his shoulders, pulling him up and onto his feet, out of the bed. Felix felt hazy from his churning stomach and rabbit heart. The hands-on his shoulders pulled him into the bathroom, where a sudden burst of light had him flinching and hunching his shoulders to his ears, hiding from the light that burned his eyes. He tried to retreat back into the darkness of his room, but the hands were insistent, holding tight. They clutched at the muscle and bone and refused to let go, they sunk in and bruised. Felix’s stomach turned over again and he dropped to his knees, gagging. There was something inside him and it was going to kill him.

“Felix, breathe,” came that same voice, one hand leaving his shoulder to rub up and down along his spine soothingly, a remnant of a sensation from when Felix had been little and prone to illness during the winter. With the touch came a wave of deja vu, his mother’s voice singing softly in Swedish into his eardrums.

“There you go.”

The nausea was creeping away as Felix struggled to focus on the memory of being young and afraid rather than being in the present and terrified. When he’d been sick, his sister would sometimes tell him horror stories of illness, people who had succumbed to seemingly harmless colds and ended up in graves days later. He would have nightmares of dying like that, alone in his bed, rotting for days before anyone thought to check on him. He would crawl into his parents’ bed for comfort, but even they wouldn’t be able to push away the terrors of his thoughts.

But every morning, when the sun rose again, Felix would feel better. And he knew that this night wasn’t any different. He was terrified now, he was shaking apart and close to crying, but he would feel better in the morning.

The bright lights of the bathroom could be the sun if he lied to himself.

“There you go.”

Felix forced his eyes open and blinked rapidly to help them adjust to the light. He was on his hands and knees on the bathroom floor, still sucking in air like he was dying, but he wasn’t going to be sick again and his heartbeat was calming gradually. The hand moving up and down his spine was a welcome comfort and he bowed his head, allowing himself a few more moments to pull himself together. Felix didn’t want to face this moment in itself because he recognized the voice now. It was the last person he wanted to see him like this.

“Can you sit up?” Mark asked him gently, sounding concerned, though Felix didn’t trust his ability to read people when he was like this, coming off of a nightmare as violent as that. “You shouldn’t be on the ground like this, it’s bad for your diaphragm coming off a panic attack if it’s all bunched together.”

Felix didn’t respond, hating himself with every fiber of his being. Why was it Mark? Why was it always fucking Mark? Wasn’t Kon supposed to be watching him on the night shift now? Then again, Kon watched his home during the day, maybe it wasn’t fair to think Kon would continue way into the AM as well. Then shouldn’t Mark be somewhere else, with Jack, handling whatever illegal shit that they got up to? Why did it always have to be Mark?

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” Felix rasped, his throat wrecked and his mouth tasting like cotton. There was a heavy sigh and then the hand slid away from Felix’s back. He was left alone to the remnants of fear in his thoughts with the sensation of touch gone. Felix shuddered and powered through the heart-stopping terror, forcing himself to sit up and face the day like the god damn adult
he was. “Fucking christ,” Felix said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, ashamed. “Look, just— just forget that happened.”

He couldn’t look at Mark, so the silence that followed made the anxiety curl in Felix’s chest. His hands were still shaking and he clenched them into fists to try and get them back under control.

Mark sat back and sighed. “Look,” he began, sounding out of sorts. “I was… the only person listening in. I know Tyler mentioned the barest minimum, but he didn’t actually hear any of it. I kept it private because I— I didn’t know how much you wanted anyone else knowing. Not even Jack heard Dante’s threats. All I did was tell him that they were, they were disgusting. Sicken. That Dante’s a piece of shit, but that’s not anything new. I can promise you, if I did let Jack listen to what Dante said, it would be a closed casket funeral for that piece of shit. But as of right now, I’m the only person who really knows what was said. And with the cameras before and the gala— I just, I want to make sure that you know that it’s… It’s okay to not be okay. After what he did. And as I’m the only person who knows, I’m… willing to listen to whatever you need to tell someone.”

Felix grimaced. “Since when did you think I was a human being?”

“Since the day I first saw you struggling in the closet for ten fucking minutes.” Mark shook his head. “If you don’t want to talk about it, then that’s fine by me. I doubt you’re gonna go to anyone else, so this is essentially your only chance.”

“That’s great, except I just wanna crawl in a hole and die.”

Mark was silent for a moment. “… You know, I’ve seen quite a few of your nightmares. Some of them I woke you from, some of them I didn’t. Not out of cruelty, but respect. Respect for privacy and your sense of shame. But for all of the nightmares I’ve seen, you’ve never actually been physically sick upon waking up.”

Felix dug his nails into the palm of his hand. “I need to ask you something,” he said after his own moment of thought. He didn’t want to reach out to Mark, didn’t want this man of all people to see him like this, but Mark was right. If he didn’t do something about that fucking dream right now, he never would, and he would never move on from it. “And look— I can literally only ask you, because fucking dumbass reasons, and I just want you to answer me truthfully and not laugh at me or say I’m a piece of shit or something. So just let me ask this and don’t— don’t fucking mock me.”

Mark knit his brow, looking confused. “What was in the dream, Felix?”

“Jesus christ, you’re gonna fucking hate me.”

“I already do, so there’s very little risk.”

Felix almost smiled. He unclenched his hands and pressed the bottoms of his palms into his eyes. “I just wish I was stronger,” he admitted with a heavy sigh. “Dante’s all fucking talk, there’s no reason for me to be so fucked up by the shit he says, so why does it keep messing me up? No one else gets as fucked up from his bullshit, why am I so fucking weak?”

“Felix.”

At his name, Felix looked up. He squinted in the oppressive lights, finding Mark to be a blurry, dark figure in his bathroom. The man was wearing all black like he was trying to blend in with the shadows. Felix wondered why Mark had been watching him, since he was able to remember that Tyler had said Mark’s watch ended with Felix’s shift. Why had Mark been the one to come to him? Why had he bothered at all? “Was this nightmare really that bad?” he asked in a small voice.
Mark pursed his lips and shook his head. “Let’s just say I knew I had to wake you from this one, and not because I just wanted to be a dick.”


“I don’t actually hate you, I hate how you are.”

“That’s me, Mark, Jesus Christ.”

“What was the dream, Felix?”

Felix’s throat closed up and he tried to bring his thoughts elsewhere, because he wasn’t sure he would be able to talk at all if he remembered the smile that had split Jack’s face in half. “You’ll hate me even more.”

“Dante has never treated anyone like he’s treating you,” Mark told him. “We’ve always known Dante to be a cruel piece of shit, but he’s never been so obsessed with someone. He’s never crossed so many lines. There’s an etiquette to these things, a rulebook that’s unspoken. He’s broken every single fucking rule there is.”

“I figured that would be for the family members themselves, not outsiders.”

“You’re not an outsider,” Mark replied. “You’re someone Jack is pursuing, or just keeping close. You’re part of his, his company, a direct associate. It’s like a mob wife sort of thing. He’s not supposed to touch you. He’s not supposed to threaten you. He’s not supposed to be doing any of what he is, and it’s putting everyone on edge, because they know Jack has a limit, and Dante is cruising for it like he thinks he can outrun Jack’s wrath. Something’s going to give and it’s not going to be pretty once it does.”

“So Dante hates me just as much as you do.”

“You are Jack’s,” Mark continued, ignoring Felix entirely. “Whether or not you’re actually together, he has laid claim to you because that’s the only way he could keep you safe. And even that’s not working. Dante is making himself a lot of enemies by acting like he is.”

“Then why the fuck is he doing this?” Felix asked. “And why is it me?”

“Because he thinks he can get to Jack like this, and he’s right. All he wants is to get under Jack’s skin, and he’s found a very effective and efficient way to do it. And he’s breaking all of the fucking rules and it’s going to end badly for him, one way or another.”

Felix sat up, putting his back to the bathroom wall. “I dreamed Jack was fucking me like he wanted to kill me.”

Mark stared at him, seemingly at a loss for words.

“Dante said it,” Felix reasoned. “And I can’t fucking forget it. Jack’s gonna— like, I know he says he loves me, but love isn’t always as good as it sounds.”

“Do you honestly think Jack would—”

“I think I’ve seen a lot of evil shit,” Felix said softly. “I’ve seen a lot of good things go bad. I’ve seen people die and I’ve seen the worst of humanity available to me. I think that people can say one thing but end up doing the opposite, whether they want to or not. I know Jack says he loves me, but that doesn’t mean he always will. And he won’t. Because unrequited love will kill anyone’s good
nature.”

Mark pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jack’s not— Jack doesn’t do violent sex.”

Felix bit his lip. “Then tell me what it’s like with him, so I can reprogram my brain.”

“How would I know?”

“You and Jack fucked.”

“What? Who told you that?”

Felix hesitated.

“Fucking christ,” Mark sighed. “What does it matter? You should know better anyways, you should know that Jack’s not a fucking monster. How could you think so little of him?”

“I can’t help it, I just fucking can’t. It won’t leave me alone. Dante’s a fucking snake, he just plants these thoughts in my head and they won’t go away. I go into my closet and shut the door to change my clothes now, I sweep my house five times every night, I stick to the walls when I take showers, I don’t fucking feel safe in my home, and now I’m not even safe in my own head.” Felix twisted his hands in his hair as his heart began to race again. He could see that smile, that fucking twisted smile tearing Jack in half, the grip of his hands breaking through Felix’s body and ruining his organs.

“It was so horrible,” he choked out. “It was so fucking horrible. He took my heart out and laughed the whole time. I know he’s not a bad person, I know he can’t be that cruel, but I can’t change the way my mind takes Dante’s words and makes them real. Jack was— I can’t even say it was rape because I was enjoying it, I was begging, but I didn’t want it, Mark, I don’t want these images in my head. And he took my heart out and he laughed and looked at me like I was worthless and I’m going to—”

He was going to be sick again. Felix clamped his hand over his mouth, screwing his eyes shut, wishing he could not be such a fucking weakling right now, in front of Mark. Tears were welling in his eyes and he was shaking again. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” he whispered. “I’ve never seen something so terrifying. And it was Jack. It was so wrong with everything I know about him, but I saw it anyways and I’ll never be able to forget it and I just want— if the thoughts could go away, I would— I don’t know how—“

Felix cut himself off again and brought his knees to the chest. The only sound in Felix’s bathroom again was his faulty breathing, his failure to cope. And Mark was seeing all of this. Felix wanted to shrivel up and die and never face the light of day again. He was so afraid just remembering and he wasn’t able to push the thoughts away. He wasn’t able to compartmentalize like he always would, he was a fucking failure and there was nothing—

“Go downstairs,” Mark told him. “Sit at the table. I have to grab something and then I’ll be back.”

Felix shook his head. “Can’t fucking stand.”

“Yes you can.”

“I can’t.”

There was a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to raise his head. He’d never seen Mark with such sympathy and patience in his face.
“Yes you can,” Mark insisted gently. “Just go downstairs. You’ll feel better with a change of scenery. I swear to you, I just have to head across the street and then I will be right back. I’m not going to leave you alone in this. Not when you’re this fucked.”

“Not even you are the cruel, huh?”

“Something like that.” Mark squeezed his shoulder. “Stand up, Felix. Go downstairs.” Then Mark stood and left, giving Felix privacy, which he appreciated. There was nothing worse than humiliating himself in front of Mark for the millionth time this night.

Felix swallowed hard, gathered whatever dignity he had left, and pulled himself to his feet by the counter. He saw his reflection in the mirror and winced. His eyes were red and his skin was pale, lips slick with either stomach acid or spit. He looked fucking disgusting and he was revolted that Mark was the one witnessing this. “Why is it always him?” he asked himself, voice ragged and torn apart. Had he been screaming in his sleep? He wouldn’t be surprised.

“Get your shit together,” he told his reflection after washing his face with water from the faucet. “Mark can’t keep seeing you like this.” Jack was smiling at him behind his eyelids, an evil thing. Felix didn’t know what was worse— being in the nightmare, or being awake with the memory of it.

It didn’t matter.

Felix’s knees were weak, but he made it downstairs. Just the small trek made him feel marginally better, marginally more human, but only just. Still, putting one foot in front of the other and his knees not giving out felt deceivingly like a true accomplishment, one he wasn’t about to slight just because he knew he was better than this. Felix slumped into one of the chairs at his table, hanging his head in his hands.

It wasn’t like his normal nightmares to take so much out of him. He’d never really dreamed about anything this fucked up, granted, but becoming physically ill upon waking up was telling of something he didn’t understand, nor did he want to try to understand. Whatever fucked up shit was going on in his head was going to stay in his head. Felix didn’t have time to cope with whatever blackness was swirling around up there. He just needed to focus on his job and make sure no one he cared about got drawn into his shit.

His front door opened and Mark strode quietly into the dining area, carrying tupperware. He went to Felix’s side and then set the tupperware down in front of him. Felix couldn’t see what was inside of it since the plastic was lined with wax paper. Felix had just enough energy to raise a single brow of sass before looking up at Mark. “What the fuck?”

“Just fucking open it.”

Felix did as told and discovered perfectly round little balls of steamed dough, small enough to easily fit in the palm of his hand. They were cold, so he couldn’t smell anything from them to try and deign what they were.

“My mother’s Jjinppang,” Mark said after Felix failed to do anything. He sounded exasperated and impatient, but he didn’t push Felix to do anything. “I was saving it from the dinner I had with her the other night, but I figured you need it more than I do.”

And Felix— had no idea what to say to that. Mark was doggedly possessive of his mother, he’d been terrifying when he’d found out Felix knew the woman, and had been even more standoffish and rude every time he saw Felix after Felix had gone shopping with the woman. Mark blatantly did not like that Felix was friends with Mama Bach, yet here he was, offering her coveted leftovers to Felix like
he— did he—

Was Mark trying to comfort him?

“Well?”

Mark’s prompt finally had Felix moving. He took one of the little circles of dough and bit down. Even cold, the dough was fluffy and pleasant, and Felix discovered the inside was filled with sweet red bean paste. The homemade dessert tasted leagues better than anything he could buy from a restaurant, and Felix sank back in his seat, forcing his muscles to relax another few leagues so he could enjoy the treat and forget the lingering echoes of fear.

Mark sat down across from him, expression drawn. Felix finished off one of the *Jjinppang* and then pushed the tupperware so it was in the center of the table. “Have some too,” he said. “She made them for you, after all. I thought you were avoiding your mother.”

“It’s hard to cut yourself off completely from someone you love,” Mark said. Then, “I miss her every day.”

Felix winced, knowing that feeling well. “She loves you regardless of how badly you’ve disappointed her,” he told Mark, not holding back any punches because Mark needed to know that he had someone who could see the good in him and knew he could do better. “I’m not saying you should ditch Jack or anything, but she knows you can do a lot more than what you are now. She sees potential in you. She doesn’t want you living this life of crime. No mother wants to watch their children get arrested.”

Mark snorted mirthlessly. “Gonna cuff me, officer? After everything we’ve been through.”

“I’m not gonna arrest you,” Felix replied. “But I can’t really keep you guys from being arrested by someone else if you fuck up.”

“We don’t fuck up.”

“I’ve gotten you twice.”

Mark shook his head. “You’re an enigma. There was no way you should have caught us at the bank, and especially not with the priest. You were not supposed to be there, and yet you were, twice, and both times in uniform.” He seemed frustrated as he ate some of his mother’s dessert, his cheek jutting out like a chipmunk as he chewed with his brow furrowed. He looked oddly adorable like this, sitting at Felix’s table. “And then you let Jack go,” Mark continued, sounding even more upset. “And then you let Jack go,” Mark continued, sounding even more upset. “And then you let Jack go.”

“Was it that bad?” Mark asked him, voice lowered out of some sort of respect for Felix’s nerves.

“I’ve never dreamed anything like it,” Felix choked out. “I’ve never— I know Jack, to an extent, I know he would never hurt me like that, and he would never hurt anyone else, but my mind keeps telling me to fear him. And it’s wrong. It’s so fucking wrong to be afraid of him because he’s suffered so much, and even considering he would be capable of such a cruel thing is an insult to him and everything he stands for, but my instincts— my hands won’t stop shaking—”
Felix cut himself off, unable to stomach another bite of the sweet food. He already felt like he was going to be sick again and wondered if throwing up Mama Bach’s food would be insulting to her and Mark. The last thing he wanted to do was piss off Mark, especially when they were seemingly reaching some sort of understanding. But Jack’s face was still there, still split by a horrendous smile, still tearing out Felix’s heart and devouring him.

“It would break Jack’s heart to know you dreamed of him like that,” Mark said, only further driving the knife into Felix’s chest. Felix felt like shit, and at this point, he fucking deserved it. Jack had only ever been his own kind of kind with Felix. Putting him into this disgusting role of abuser and defiler was wrong of Felix to do.

Mark sighed. “Jack in bed is not at all like you would expect,” he said after he’d rid his lungs of air. Felix looked up with more than a little shock, but he wasn’t about to stop Mark. He needed to know this. He needed to get this shit out of his head. “You probably think outside of this dream that he’s, like, aggressive or whatever, maybe a little bit controlling, maybe a little stupid. But he’s not. He’s very— attentive. Caring. He obsesses over making sure you’re enjoying it. He takes control, yeah, but only if he knows you’re gonna get off on it. He's not like— he’s not selfish. He’s not bad. He’s just. He’s fine.”

Mark shrugged, unable to meet Felix’s eyes, almost like he was embarrassed to be talking about this. Felix owed him a lot for doing this. “It wasn’t the best sex I’ve ever had,” Mark admitted. “Because it was also how I was able to decide that dudes just weren’t for me. And he honestly didn’t want to keep going with it either.”

Felix frowned. “How did it happen?”

“We were both drunk,” Mark explained. “Drunken enough to be make dumb decisions, but sadly, not drunk enough to forget. I was visiting from the academy and he was— going through some shit. So we both got drunk to celebrate some sort of old time happiness that never fucking happened for either of us and we fucked and the second we woke up the next morning, Jack and I both agreed that we would never do that again.”

Felix couldn’t help it—he started to laugh. Just the barest little bursts of breath, hardly a laugh at all, but more than he’d thought he could manage like this. “Jesus christ,” he chuckled. “Just instant regret?”

“Instant regret,” Mark echoed. “But I can promise you, not once did Jack ever try to hurt me, even in a sexual way that could be construed as some B-D-S-M shit if we’d negotiated. He doesn’t— you know what happened when he was a kid, right?”

“You mean his father beating him brutally and all the other fuckass bosses just turning a blind eye?”

Mark nodded, his face grim. “Jack doesn’t like pain,” he told Felix gently, emphasizing the last word. “He doesn’t like receiving and he doesn’t like inflicting. He had enough of it when he was young. He wouldn’t— whatever dream you had is wrong. And Dante was just trying to get under your skin. He’s a liar and a snake and he doesn’t deserve even an iota of your thoughts, so just— do whatever it is you do where you deny yourself the right to your own trauma and forget that asshole ever said those things to you.”

“I don’t deny my trauma.”

Mark leveled him with a glare and Felix shrunk into his seat. “Thank you,” Felix said anyways. “For telling me. I know it must be stupid to you, but— I-I just need to know that it’s wrong. And, like, having facts always helps. It’s just how my brain works. I’m sorry for forcing that on you.”
“You’re such a fucking cop,” Mark spat, but the venom in his voice was absent. “Just turn your police brain off before you kill yourself. Or get yourself killed. My dad—” Mark scowled and cut his eyes away. “Just don’t make me bury two cops in my life, okay? And don’t you fucking dare do that to Jack.”

Felix nodded slowly, then took another Jjinppang. “Thank you for sharing this,” he said softly. “You don’t have to spend anymore time with me, I’m sure you’ve got better things to do.”

Mark hummed noncommittally under his throat. “I’m not going to tell Jack about your nightmare.”

“Thank you,” Felix breathed. “God, if he ever knew— I just couldn’t ever bear to do that to him. He just doesn’t deserve this fucking shit on him, he doesn’t deserve what Dante is trying to do to me.”

Mark nodded his agreement. “And I wanted to say thank you for refusing to sell him out.”

“What the fuck,” Felix deadpanned. “I would never do that and even you should know it.”

“It was nice to see it in practice.” Mark stood and gestured to the tupperware. “Finish those off, return the tupperware to me so I can bring it back to my mom. We don’t want her knowing we know each other. Wouldn’t look good for you, Officer.”

“Thank you for waking me up,” Felix said softly.

Mark paused. “… I know you think and believe that I hate you, and I’m struggling with that idea a little, myself. All I knew was that— I didn’t want you waking up alone after something like that.”

Felix nodded his understanding. “Goodnight, Mark.”

“Goodnight, Officer. Go easy on yourself.”

Felix refused to go easy on himself, but he did allow himself another few moments of weakness, huddled up in his dimly lit kitchen until the sun rose, filling his thoughts with a very rare nothing.

Serving a court summons wasn’t normally Felix’s thing. He very rarely caught anyone in an act that didn’t have some added illegality to it, so delivering a court summons for something as mundane as parking tickets really wasn’t his priority when on shift. But he’d ran a vehicle plate on a whim while driving behind an abnormally slow-moving citizen after being sent on a wild goose chase by dispatch and had come up with fifteen parking tickets that hadn’t been paid. He’d ran it by dispatch and they’d literally ordered him to deliver the court summons to pay the grand total of five hundred sixty-seven dollars and eighty-three cents, but the driver had pulled up to some innocuous, grungy building and gone down some steps on the side before Felix could even fire up his lights. He’d told dispatch as much and had expected to be sent on his way since Officers normally wouldn’t get out of the cars and go into public buildings for things as pointless as this, but dispatch had, again, insisted. And that made Felix nervous, but what could he do? He had to follow orders.

Felix parked across the street and tried to look like he wasn’t trying to get anyone in trouble when he really was. He went down the steps and discovered some scary looking door with a buff man standing in front of it. His arms were crossed over his chest and his biceps were wider than Felix’s head.

Felix steeled his jaw and flashed his badge. “I need to speak with a woman who just went through here,” he told the man that he assumed was some sort of bouncer. There was a thumping bass beat beyond the metal door. “Literally just a second ago. Do you know her?”
The bouncer glared at Felix’s face, then glared at the badge. Felix tried to keep himself from sounding or looking as exasperated as he felt. “I have no issue with you or your boss,” he said. “I just need to find this woman. Blue hair, heavy makeup, tube top and snakeskin skirt. Will you let me through?” He hoped he wouldn’t be let through. He had no grounds for a warrant and wouldn’t be able to trespass this establishment, meaning he would be able to just move on to another call and forget this bullshit. But then the worst thing happened— the bouncer stepped aside and knocked twice on the door, which swung open to allow Felix in.

“Thank you,” Felix said with a sharp nod. He moved past the bouncer and into this— club. It was some underground club, more like a rave than anything. The most lighting in here was a strobe light and green laser lights, disconcerting flashes through smoke. He could see a conglomeration of people, all of them moving in unison to the overpowering beat of the music being played by the DJ. Everyone was scantily dressed, if dressed at all, and they paid no mind to Felix as he tried to push through the crowd, all of them trying to find the nearest warm body to grind against, like some fantastic orgy of sound. Felix could smell something in the air, something beyond just the smoke created by the fog machines that he couldn’t see. He was trying to search faces and find the woman he was pursuing.

The room was starting to feel too hot as he wedged himself between bodies. He kept trying to ask them to move aside, but everyone seemed to be in some sort of drug induced haze. The further he pushed into the crowd, the harder it was for him to see the walls and his exit point. His hackles raised, instincts telling him something was wrong. He kept seeing faces, but no eyes. Every single person had their eyes trained upwards towards the ceiling, like they could see something above them, hanging over them, something Felix couldn’t see. Their movements were jarring and stiff, seeming less like dancing and more like puppets on strings. Felix pushed through and caught sight of blue hair.

“Officer Kjellberg, ordering you to put your hands in the air!” Felix shouted, trying to be heard over the music. “Mrs. Miller, put your hands in the air! You are not under arrest, but I will be forced to restrain you if you fail to follow my order!”

The blue haired woman— Emma Miller, twenty-seven and with 15 parking tickets— failed to respond. She was just standing, jostled from side to side by the people surrounding her, but otherwise still. Her eyes were trained on the ceiling, just like all the others. Felix’s instincts were telling him to leave, get the fuck out, something is wrong here but he had his own orders as well. He couldn’t leave until serving the court summons and he wasn’t about to pussy out just because the drugged ravers were acting a little weirder than normal. Felix forced himself through a deep breath to calm his nerves and called out again.

“Officer Kjellberg, requesting you put your hands in the air!”

She didn’t move. She just stared upwards. The dancing was changing, people moving like joints were dislocated, their knees locking and torsos writhing. Everyone was staring up at the ceiling as the music was rising in pitch and volume. Felix winced in pain from how loud it was. His hands were starting to shake. He reached for his taser and pulled off the caps, holding it ready and pointed at the floor. “If you do not respond, I will have to use force!” He didn’t, he wasn’t supposed to, but he was terrified and everything around him felt like a horror film and the air was too thick with smoke. The violently seizing bodies around him were making him sick with anxiety. He just wanted to serve the summons and go back to his car, he wanted this over, he wanted to go the fuck home. He was scared and he wanted to go home.

Felix’s composure was slipping. “Put your hands in the fucking air!” he shouted. The bass of the song peaked. Everyone in the club stopped moving. They all stared upwards, into the ceiling, eyes
wide and glassy. Emma Miller started to trembling. She turned around slowly, showing Felix her face.

Blood was streaming from her eyes and ears.

“She said she misses me,” Emma Miller said.

Then she dropped like a stone, crumbling to the ground in time with every single person in the club. The sound of the bodies dropping all at once was—

Felix was the only one left standing, his hands shaking, his breath coming too short. He took a step back and his foot sunk into someone’s hand. His eyes were drawn to the floor and he was met with the dead gaze of every single person on the floor. Blood was dripping from the eyes and ears. No one made a sound, no one moved, no one even breathed.

In the matter of a split second, Felix was left as the only one left alive in this basement.

He felt numb all over as he looked over the corpses and tried to connect this moment of his life with what had happened seconds before. This place had been full of people, drugged people, yes, but fucking people. Men and women with friends and families and lovers and hopes and dreams and their futures in front of them. And now every single one of them was dead. Right in front of him, right before his eyes, right in the moment it took to draw in a breath. Everyone was dead. He was the only one left.

Then the music stopped and the club was thrust into silence. Even the DJ was dead, slumped over his turntables, an empty shell. Felix was all alone and surrounded by the dead.

He was going to pass out.

Felix fumbled for his radio with numb fingers as he stumbled out from the bodies and to the door, bursting out into the cool air of the city with a ragged gasp of relief. The bouncer let out a gruff shout at his sudden exit, but then shut up when he saw Felix’s face.

“11-41,” Felix babbled into the radio, not even bothering with his callsign. “187 or, or fucking something, I don’t know dispatch, they’re all dead.” His voice was strangled and he was crying from some sort of shock as his limbs began to lose all feeling and he sunk to the ground. “They’re all dead, all of them are dead. They’re all dead.”

“You okay, Officer?”

Felix looked up at the bouncer in a daze and said, one last time, “They’re all dead.” He couldn’t remember anything after that.

... 

After spending the past six hours in an interrogation room while being rung dry for anything he could have missed the past ten times he’d relayed what he’d seen, Felix felt empty. He’d been used up, he was a husk, he couldn’t fucking—

The only reason why Felix had been allowed to leave the station was labor laws and that Sgt. Morrison wasn’t in today. Felix stumbled as he tried to walk down the steps of the precinct and was about to hit the concrete with how little he could keep himself standing when a hand on his chest stopped him from colliding with the ground. He looked up with owlish eyes and saw Tyler.

“You look like shit,” Tyler said.
Felix shuddered and couldn’t speak. He took Tyler’s wrist in his hand and gripped tight, knowing this was the only thing that was keeping him standing. He was looking at Tyler, but he was only seeing the countless bodies that had stared up into the ceiling, bleeding from the eyes. “The body count was one hundred seventy-five,” he told Tyler. “I watched one hundred seventy-five people die. I was the only one left.” His vision blurred and he hated that he was crying again. “I thought the world was ending.”

“Jesus christ,” Tyler breathed. “I’m under orders to make sure you’re not alone. Come with me, I’m gonna take you someplace safe.”

Felix let Tyler pull him to a car parked in the visitor’s section in front of the precinct and shut his eyes as he slumped into the passenger seat, turning his face into the leather and letting himself lose time. He had the echo of one hundred seventy-five bodies dropping to the floor in his ears. Felix had no idea where he was being taken and he didn’t give a shit, he just wanted to drop onto a bed and cease to exist.

The car stopped and the door was opened violently for hands to grab Felix by the front of his shirt and all but yank him from the car.

“I swear to fucking god,” Mark was saying, sound angry, so fucking angry, but when was he not?

“Not even twenty-four fucking hours and this happens. You just don’t know how to catch a break, do you?”

“I’m investigating,” Tyler said from the car. “Not sure how they were able to time the release perfectly. We’re thinking something inside that has slow release digestion, but even that’s a gamble. No idea how they were able to make it hit at the same time like that.”

“Update me with everything you find,” Mark told Tyler. “I’m gonna get Felix somewhere safe.”

“Don’t be so hard on him.”

Mark didn’t respond, just took Felix by the shoulders and led him along with firm hands and little patience. Felix only barely took stock of the elevator he was brought into and the countless stories they climbed. He kept hearing one hundred seventy-five dead bodies hitting the floor around him and the way they’d all stared at the ceiling. His skin became clammy as he remembered how they’d all been suspended like marionettes. The air had smelled so wrong and Felix had felt such a fear for his life that he’d nearly injured an innocent civilian. His skin was crawling and there was something above his head, but he didn’t know what.

“Stop,” said a firm voice, slapping Felix’s hand away from his own arm where he’d been scratching, digging in way too deep. “Jesus christ, you’re falling apart.”

“Could I have done something?” he asked.

“Do as I say and shut up.”

Felix clacked his jaw shut and kept himself standing as the elevator came to a smooth halt. Mark pulled him from the box and Felix looked around Jack’s place with a little unease, wary of what could be around unfamiliar corners. “Jack isn’t here yet.” Mark told him, like he thought that was why Felix was afraid. “Are you over the nightmare or is that also part of what’s making you so fucking up right now?”

“Jack would never hurt me,” Felix said as he stared at a dark corner of the flat, between the kitchen and the flat screen television, a corner that had nothing in it, yet Felix was sure there was a lingering
shadow that didn’t belong.

It had been like this since he’d been in that basement, seeing things moving in shadows, making him stand and stay on edge. He couldn’t explain it except rampant paranoia and the end of his sanity. Felix prayed this wouldn’t go on forever. He tore his eyes from the corner to see Mark studying him with an odd expression. Felix ducked his head and tried not hide what he could of his crumbling psyche.

“You need a shower,” Mark said. “Something’s wrong. Go take a shower. I’ll get you some clothes to change into and then we’ll get some food in you. See if there’s anything in your system that we need to let run its course.”

Felix’s brain worked slowly, but he still figured it out. “You think I’m drugged?”

“It’s a possibility,” Mark replied. “We have no idea what caused the mass death you witnessed and, as of now, we are just as stumped as forensics. But we have reasons to believe it to be of a sinister nature that’s easily traceable rather than some sick attempt of homicide from a random sociopath. Then again, your forensics team has been bought, so of course they would turn a blind eye to this.”

Felix’s vision swam. “I’m seeing things that aren’t real,” he told Mark matter-of-factly, figuring this would be the safest way to admit to his insanity. “And my skin feels bad. I’m not breathing right. The air in that place was wrong. There was a fog machine. It might have been airborne?”

Something flashed in Mark’s eyes, a sort of epiphany. “I need to make a phone call,” he said briskly. “Go take a shower, Officer.”

“Why do you call me that sometimes?” Felix asked, unable to deny himself the temptation. “Do you try to distance yourself or something by using that title instead of my name? Or do you like putting me down? Do you think calling me by a title rather than my name is demeaning?” Felix’s skin was crawling again and he wanted to scratch it off. He shuddered hard and looked down at his feet. He could feel Mark’s glare boring into his skull. “I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“Towels are on the rack.”

“Are there cameras?”

Mark’s hesitation had Felix looking up. For a split second, he though Mark looked a little sad about the question. “They face the vanity and the door, not into the shower,” Mark told him. “But I’ll turn off those cameras as well if it makes you feel any safer.”

“Please do,” Felix said before tucking tail and all but running. He stumbled into the bathroom after darting through bedroom and—jesus christ, he’d forgotten how fucking rich Jack was. There was one of those standalone stone bath tubs with its side against a huge window looking out to the city, a waterfall shower to the right, and a two-sink vanity with plenty of counter space to the left. The mirror itself covered the entire wall above the vanity and then some, stretching beyond to show the reflection of the rest of the bathroom, floor to ceiling. Felix was so caught up in the size of this mirror that he just missed his own reflection.

He looked gray at the edges.

Felix turned away from the mirror to the huge shower and asked himself if he was really okay with taking a shower in Jack’s place when he’d been so against it the last time. It wasn’t like much had changed except—Jack was his friend now and Felix had to trust him. Mark had said he’d turn the camera off, and Felix couldn’t even see a camera, so he had to trust Mark too. Did he trust Mark?
Maybe, to an extent. Was there someone he would prefer? Tyler, but should Felix trust Tyler like he did in the first place? What about Kon? Felix had a random man watching his home at all times and he hadn’t even bothered with a background check for him, preferring to trust Jack. So while that answered the question of trusting Jack, Felix now had to ask if he should trust anyone at all.

“Stop scratching!”

Mark’s shout from outside the door had Felix jolting and looking down to his arm where he had long lines of red from his nails trying to tear his skin off.

“Camera’s off now!”

Felix forced himself to calm down and started to trip out of his uniform, wondering if he should get it thoroughly dry-cleaned to get rid of any lingering smoke from the club. He folded his uniform carefully, also wondering how badly he’d represented his badge with how he’d been stumbling all over the place. Yet being out of the uniform already had Felix feeling more human. He ran his hands over his face and flexed his fingers and scrunched his toes, bringing himself closer and closer to normal. It was odd that standing naked in Jack’s bathroom was what was grounding him.

He wasn’t going to think about that.

Felix went into the shower and gambled with which knob did what, relaxing as the hot water fell from the ceiling and warmed his bones. He wrapped his arms around himself and just—he stood there. Stood underneath the water and just breathed, eyes shut so he wouldn’t see anything he couldn’t understand. The water running over his bare skin felt like comforting caresses, like when his father would run his hand up and down Felix’s spine to help him through sickness or how his mother would rest her hand on his knee to help him through bad nights. Or how Marzia would hold his hand whenever she had the chance or—

How Jack would stand close enough for Felix to feel his presence, but never close enough to make contact.

Felix forced his eyes open and took the body wash that was sitting in an alcove in the marble tile of the shower, scrubbing his skin thoroughly, being mindful of Mark’s warning that he could be feeling some lingering effects of a second hand high from a drug. What drug could—

Felix dropped the body wash in shock when he realized he’d watched one hundred seventy-five people die in perfect unison to a Lovecraft overdose.

How was that possible? How could someone time an overdose? Mark had mentioned a slow release aspect to the drug, but that was still incredibly difficult to time so perfectly. And what the fuck were the Bisognins trying to do? Killing their customers was bad fucking business, especially en masse as they had this night. And what was the point of creating such a dangerous drug that could kill in such a manner? What the fuck were they trying to do and why on earth would they want to do whatever they were doing? It didn’t make sense to kill the people giving them money. And it definitely didn’t make sense to kill so many of them at one time, garnering fear of the very drug they were trying to sell. Why the fuck would that be the Bisognin’s play? And why was Jack allowing himself to be associated with such evil shit?

That wasn’t what was important, what Jack was doing wasn’t important. Felix needed to focus on what the Bisognins were trying to do and why they were trying to ruin their own market. If he could figure that out, then he could subtly bring it up to Sgt. Morrison in a way that hopefully wouldn’t bring suspicion to him and that would also help the investigation.
Except— there wasn’t going to be an investigation. Forensics had been bought and Mark had said they weren’t able to find anything either. Lovecraft flushed itself out of the system remarkably quickly. For all Felix knew, they wouldn’t even be able to prove it was Lovecraft apart from the symptoms, half of which only Felix had seen. And after how he’d been acting in that interrogation room, he knew he wouldn’t be labeled a reliable witness in any sense of the word. Any lawyer would be able to get him thrown from the seat immediately.

Felix tugged at his hair, floored by the impossibility of it all. It was like every part of this drug was designed to be untraceable, making any investigation useless because there was no way to collect concrete proof. The Bisognins couldn’t be brought to court on speculation and secondary evidence alone. There was no way to form a case and no way to bring these fuckers to justice. It was pointless. Everything was fucking pointless.

That did it for him. Felix dropped the train of thought and just focused on getting clean. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been in the shower, but it was probably longer than he had any excuse taking. Mark had once made some tactless masturbation joke when Felix had been forced to sleep in Jack’s bed. Now Felix was just accidentally encouraging more of those jokes and he wasn’t excited for it. Hopefully Mark would go easy on him considering how completely fucked Felix was tonight.

Doubtful.

Felix grimaced and finished washing his hair, turning off the shower and turning around to leave and — catching a full reflection of his completely naked body in that huge fucking mirror. Felix flushed red when he realized that Jack probably had the mirror like this on purpose. Was it because Jack was vain or because he liked to bring back other men back home and was adventurous in his escapades? Didn’t make sense considering how guarded of a secret Jack’s home was. Either way, now Felix had the image of Jack standing in front of this very mirror, bare as the day he was born, and Felix couldn’t erase it from his head. Felix grit his teeth and forced his eyes away from his own figure. He knew he was attractive and he was fit because he had to be for his job, but all he could see right now were all the places Dante had touched like they were his to explore. Felix had half a mind just to go to someone he trusted and ask them to retrace Dante’s path just to erase its existence from his memories.

There were clothes folded up on the far corner of the vanity and he tried to remember any sound that could have been Mark sneaking in. At least he trusted Mark not to try to catch any secretive peaks. Felix scowled at himself and his paranoia. Not everyone was out to own him. It was arrogant of him to think he was desirable by literally anyone at all. Why the fuck was he like this?

As Felix made himself pull on the clothes— just a simple t-shirt for some band he didn’t know and a pair of New York City sweatpants he could find in any gift shop in Time Square— he started to hear voices just beyond the bathroom door. It seemed fine until the voices started rising in pitch, someone sounding very, very distressed. Felix bit his lip as he tied a knot in the sweatpants so they wouldn’t fall down his hips and weighed the risk of snooping. It wasn’t like he should be trying to listen in on anything, but if he was still drugged, then what he was hearing might not even be real. Auditory hallucinations were far more common than visual ones. If he just checked through a crack in the door, he’d be able to figure out if he was still experiencing second hand drug effects and quickly duck back in if he discovered there were real people talking.

It seemed like a reasonable enough plan. A test of his current health. Pressing his ear to the door didn’t help him in knowing if the voices were real or not as the door was thick and he couldn’t recognize the voices without knowing who they were supposed to be. He thought he heard Mark, but he could be genuinely and temporarily insane. Felix bit his lip before pushing the door open just the tiniest bit to allow him some line of sight and readied himself to discover that he was still fucking
He wasn’t crazy. Jack was standing with Mark at the foot of the bed and Jack— was not okay.

“Dispatch insisted?” Jack asked, his voice strained with an emotion Felix couldn’t name. “How the fuck— they knew this was happening? Who’s in dispatch that’s targeting him like this?”

“We don’t know,” Mark replied, his own tone heavy. “But the body count is one hundred seventy-five exactly and there was no trace of Lovecraft in any of them, as reported. We can’t necessarily trust the report, but Lovecraft has never lingered in the blood system regardless.”

“That ain’t anything new, Mark, what I want t’ know is why the fuck dispatch sent him after some useless tickets into a club that was the Bisognin’s latest human experimentation.” Jack took a step away, frantic and starting to pull at his hair. There was a manic edge to his eyes and Felix knew he shouldn’t be listening to this. “They own dispatch, but only certain employees. And they sent him into the area that had Miller. They planned this, Mark, Felix seeing this wasn’t an accident. They’re targeting him and it ain’t Dante. Xiao-Zhi has the phone lines, this is a group effort, and they’re going after Felix.”

Jack looked back to Mark with tears in his eyes. “How could I have done this t’ him?” he asked Mark, his voice cracking. “All I ever did was fall in love.”

Felix tore himself away from the scene as Mark strode forward and took Jack into his arms. Felix’s heart was racing from what he’d witnessed and he didn’t know why. Why would seeing that have affected him so badly? Was it the tears or the way Jack had sounded? Was it the fear for knowing he was a target or the guilt from being the reason Jack felt such pain? Was it from Felix’s own stupidity in falling for trap after trap or was it from the knowledge that he knew he should be blaming Jack yet knew Felix physically couldn’t?

He’d watched one hundred seventy-five people die in perfect unison tonight and he could still hear the sound of bodies hitting the floor in horrifying surround sound, ringing in his ears like tinnitus. And Jack—

Jack took all of Felix’s trauma on himself because he’d fallen in love.

Felix burst from the bathroom and paid no mind to how badly he startled Mark and Jack in doing so. He only stomped forward and took Jack by the arm, forcing the contact and ignoring the way Jack flinched.

“This isn’t on you,” he told Jack firmly, pinning Jack to the floor with his words and gaze. “None of this— none of this shit is on you. Do you understand me? You cannot keep fucking blaming yourself, especially if I don’t blame you. I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with carrying the world on your shoulders, but you’re not Atlas and you’re not God and you’re not at fault for any of this fucking bullshit. Am I fucked up because what I’ve seen? Absolutely, Jack, I am probably slowly dying on the inside from all of this, but not once have I ever considering blaming you and I never fucking will. You keep seeing yourself as this constant victim just because you fell for the straight guy, and it needs to fucking stop. All you’re doing is torturing and weakening yourself because you can’t just fucking understand that if I chose not to blame you, then you’re not to fucking blame. So stop wallowing in all of this and help me figure out how we’re going to keep something like this from every happening again. Got it?”

Jack all but shrunk away from him, wide eyes frame by his dark lashes and his tears. Felix could feel the way Mark was watching him, waiting for Felix to try and hurt Jack, ready to do whatever it took to keep his— friend from being hurt. Felix sighed heavily and loosened his grip on Jack’s shoulder.
“You’re a good man, Jack,” Felix told the Irishman gently. “You are, okay? I know you don’t believe it, but that doesn’t make it any less true. I don’t know what you’re doing or how it’s going to help, but you told me you’re trying to stop the Bisognins and I believe you. I believe you, alright? And since I believe you when you say that, even though I have no proof or reason to trust what you say at all, you owe it to me to believe me when I say it’s not your fault. You look fucking awful, Jack, worse than me most days. I don’t know if you’re losing sleep or starving yourself, but blaming yourself for all for the shit happening to me isn’t good for you and it’s not good for the people who rely on you. You’re a leader, but you can’t expect your people to follow on you when you’re like this.”

It was a cruel truth, but Jack didn’t shy away from it like he had just before. “You know I’m right,” Felix reasoned. “They need you to be something you can’t when you’re like this. Stop carrying the weight of it all on your shoulders when there are countless people offering to help take their share of the weight. And I— I’m here for you too.”

Felix smiled and brought his hand from Jack’s shoulder up to the scars on Jack’s neck. He felt the tendons shudder beneath his touch, watched the way Jack’s expression twisted into neurotic vigilance, like he thought Felix was going to add to the scars. Felix didn’t like the paranoia Jack felt towards him and his touch. Instead of gripping tightly or digging in nails, Felix rubbed the pad of his thumb over one of the cigar burns. He felt Jack shudder again, but not from fear.

“I’m here for you Jack,” Felix promised. “And not just because I need to be at your side out of self preservation. You said you know me, you know who I am. Then you have to know that I’m loyal to a fault when it comes to the people I care about. I will stand by you and I will help you in any way I can, not only because I want these bastards brought to some kind of justice or punishment, but because I want to get you to a place where you can sleep at night and all of the guilt is gone.” As Jack searched Felix for any trace of a lie, Felix smiled.

“I’m here for you. I don’t blame you. I want to help you.” Felix took in a breath and asked, “Do you trust me?”

“Jesus christ,” Jack breathed, blinking rapidly, though the tears were drying. “Yes, Felix. Yeah, I fuckin’ do.”

“Then trust me and listen to me when I say it’s not your fault.” Felix circled the cigar burn with the tip of his thumb and tried to hide his even wider grin when Jack surreptitiously leaned into the careful touch, purposefully or not. “You’re not the one putting the drugs into these people and you’re not the one killing them, and you’re definitely not the one trying to make sure I see it happen. So stop taking responsibility for the actions of others and help me make sure they never get the chance to do something like this ever again.”

“Anything, Felix,” Jack whispered.

“Anything?” he repeated with a raised brow. Felix’s chest was inexplicably light. Being around Jack somehow made the horrible shit he’d seen easier to ignore and push away from the forefront of his thoughts. His nightmares had no place in his mind when Jack was looking at him with such reverent hope. “Well fuck, I could really go for some pizza and a nap right now. Think you can do something about that?”

Jack literally snapped his fingers and Mark groaned from outside of Felix’s field of view. “Any requests, children?” Mark asked sarcastically. “And if you say pineapple, I’m going to shave your eyebrows.”

“Bacon and pepperoni,” Felix requested.
“That’s acceptable,” Mark said.

“Boring as fuck,” Jack chimed in with a watery smile.

Mark snorted. “Boring can be nice,” he said as he started to leave the bedroom. “I’ll get that ordered.”

Mark shut the door behind him and Felix was left alone with Jack. He wasn’t uncomfortable to be like this with Jack in Jack’s bedroom, both of them quiet and existing together. Felix wasn’t sure when Jack had become an easy presence in Felix’s life, but he didn’t mind it. He hummed a soft noise of nothing under his breath and traced from one cigar burn to the other with the soft part of his thumb. Jack was watching him and Felix had no idea what he was thinking, but he was accepting Felix’s touch, and that was a milestone in itself.

“It’s nice you’re letting me do this,” Felix said, watching his own movements carefully to make sure he didn’t stray and startle Jack. “I noticed you’re not good with people touching you, so I gotta assume you miss it. Seems like a big deal you’re letting me do this. Guess you really do trust me, huh?”

“Felix.”

His name had him looking up to meet Jack’s eyes. He stopped moving his thumb, but didn’t pull away. “Yeah?”

Jack swallowed hard, hard enough for Felix to almost hear the bob in his throat. “Thank ye’,” Jack said. “For not— blaming me.”

Felix didn’t respond for a moment, trying to choose his words carefully. But he was tired and hungry and even though Jack pushed away the memories, he could still hear the sounds of one hundred seventy-five bodies dropping. “Don’t try and take responsibility from others,” he said. “You can’t always be this selfish.”

Jack opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by Mark’s shout of, “Pizza is on its way you fuck bags! Leave Felix alone so he can get his fucking nap.”

Jack ducked his head and pulled out of Felix’s range. Felix let him go, his hand falling back to his side. “I’ll let ye’ rest,” Jack said. “I’ll send Mark in when the pizza is here.”

“Or you,” Felix said. “You could come.”

Jack stuttered for words for a moment then tapped three times at his neck where Felix had just been touching. “Or me,” he said. “I— I’ll come.” A smile crept across Jack’s face. It was small and genuine and it didn’t split his skin. It wasn’t anything like the nightmare because Jack didn’t belong in Felix’s nightmares in the first place. “I’ll make things right,” Jack said. “Not because it’s my fault, but because I want t’.” Jack nodded firmly to Felix and himself. “Get some rest, Felix. And don’t be afraid t’ come to us if ye’ need it.”

Jack left and Felix—

Was alone and didn’t want to be.

He regretted asking for a nap. The last thing Felix needed was to be asleep. But he couldn’t take it back now without raising questions and he didn’t want Mark and Jack thinking there was something wrong.
Felix eyed the bed warily, not because it was Jack’s, but because he didn’t want to have another hard night here. He didn’t want the association. He climbed atop the sheets, not going beneath them as he’d done before, and squeezed his eye shut.

It was quiet and all he could hear were bodies—

The TV was turned on in the next room and he heard Jack start shouting at something he was watching. Dishes clattered in the kitchen and Mark started shouting at Jack. It wasn’t very audible because the doors really were thick, but Felix knew whose voices they were and it was enough.

Felix relaxed into the sheets and let himself trust that he wouldn’t see anything awful so long as Jack was close enough, just beyond the door.

...
No one woke him for pizza, and he got up to an empty apartment.

Felix tried not to feel dejected as he wandered around the place, taking stock, registering little things that he hadn’t noticed before, the impersonal photos and how the collection of books had changed, implying that Jack actually did read them rather than use them as some sort of code. There was pizza on the counter and a note atop the box, but Felix wasn’t going to read it yet. He pressed his palms into his eyes and winced at the echo in his ears. The glazed eyes of the numerous dead stared back at him through his thoughts.

The place was too quiet and Felix felt too on edge. The sun was setting outside, light reflecting off the surrounding skyscrapers like fire. For a moment, Felix was jealous that Jack got to see this view at least once a day. Then he remembered the price this kind of place had to come at—far more than just money—and settled himself for a rare moment of enjoyment.

He didn’t like waking up alone, but he was grateful to be waking up here. The warmth of Jack’s shaky little smiles still lingered in his chest, and Felix felt like he’d finally done something right by the other man. He could still feel Jack’s skin beneath his hand and couldn’t keep his heart from soaring when remembering the acceptance and trust he’d been given in the minute gesture of Jack simply leaning into his touch. It was such a small thing, yet it meant the world to Felix. He hoped he could further prove himself to be someone Jack could rely on. He hoped he could give Jack some form of peace, in the end.

For now, though, Felix was left alone. He wished someone were here, anyone, really, even Mark. Mark was actually treating him like a human being these days, Felix almost desired his company, even outside the loneliness. Felix marveled over how he’d been left utterly alone in Jack’s place. It seemed like an extension of faith that was completely unwarranted and also unprompted. Felix sure as hell hadn’t done anything to earn this privilege. It wasn’t the first time he’d been left alone in here, granted, but that had been an extenuating circumstance. This felt—casual. Felix had no idea what it meant.

He finally pulled himself over to the pizza and the note in the swanky kitchen and went for the pizza first. There were three slices left for him and they were cold and a little off-tasting from sitting on the counter, but Felix had eaten much worse. He nibbled on a slice—reminded himself to ask Mark where he’d ordered this from because it was fucking amazing—and then bent down to read the note.

*let you be because mark says you haven’t slept*

*don’t worry about locking up whenever you go but you’re not supposed to come in to work*

*get some rest officer*

*xo*

Jack’s handwriting was familiar to Felix at this point. He wondered how Jack knew he wasn’t supposed to be at work today and figured he could just call up a dispatch and ask if he was supposed to be in or not. It would make sense that he wasn’t meant to come in for his shift considering how yesterday had gone. Felix was reluctant to even remember what he’d experienced and tried to reason with himself about therapy. Seeing a therapist was probably a good idea if he started showing some sort of symptoms of legitimate PTSD, but he wouldn’t bother in the immediate moment. It wasn’t like anyone could sympathize with him. Very few other people had experienced something so
horrifying that Felix had been positive he’d been left behind from god’s rapture. No one else would be able to understand that kind of fear. The moment of resignation that had taken the air from Felix’s lungs. The split second of complete certainty that he’d been absolutely abandoned.

Now that he thought about it, waking up alone in this cold, impersonal apartment wasn’t the most helpful thing for his recovery.

Felix turned and considered being a bad guest by turning on Jack’s TV just for some white noise when he saw a second note. Pinned to the fridge by a white magnet was a pink sticky note with black writing in unfamiliar handwriting. Felix frowned when he saw his name at the top. At least he wouldn’t be overstepping his boundaries.

Felix.

_I was extended an invitation asking for you to join Jack tonight. Normally, I’d tell people with requests for you to fuck off, as that’s Jack’s solid rule for dealing with you in general when it comes to the company he keeps, but I deemed this invitation harmless and even friendly. So get the clothes out of the hall closet and go to the address at 9 o’clock. No escort, but you’ll pick up your ticket from the booth under your name. Do us a favor and learn some manners before showing up._

It wasn’t signed, but Felix knew it was Mark. No one else could put that amount of sarcastic insults into a note without once calling him a name. Felix eyed the address at the bottom of the note, recognized it to be in the New Your City Opera theatre in Manhattan. Felix didn’t know a god damn thing about opera and it seemed deceivingly like a date, but he doubted Jack would do something like that. And someone had, apparently, invited Felix through Mark. So maybe it was a mafia thing?

Felix shuddered to consider this and paid more attention to Mark’s stipulation. Mark had deemed this invitation harmless and possibly even friendly. That ruled out the Bisognins and the Mingyün right off the bat, which only left the Plague Writes. Felix didn’t know a damn thing about them. No one had ever mentioned them, they weren’t even under police radar. Felix had always assumed that meant they were either harmless or so fucking good at what they did that they were legally ghosts. If Mark had deemed them friendly, then maybe it was more of the former than the latter. Then again, Felix wasn’t even sure if it was the Plague Writes. He wasn’t about to make any bets on it, either.

A glance at the clock told him it was just past seven, so he probably wouldn’t go to work at this point even if Jack had been wrong. He would have to shower again because Felix wouldn’t dare attend the opera without freshening up first and then he’d have to leave and flag a taxi and—

It sounded hectic, but Felix was eager for the bustle of activity because it would keep his mind off of the things that would otherwise torment him. He dreaded going back to his empty home tonight. Maybe he could get drunk. That always seemed like a healthy way for cops to cope according to Hollywood. Felix smiled sardonically at his own depressing joke and decided to check out whatever Mark had left for him in the closet. Hopefully it wouldn’t be another vogue green thing with lace and gold. Felix had felt like a god damn fool in that outfit.

Inside the closet was, blessedly, a much tamer suit. Italian cut, fitted jacket, a red mulberry color with an off-white button-up and a dark tie. There was a vest that was the same mulberry as the jacket and slacks, and the black shoes were shined and matching the tie. It was a tasteful suit and Felix honestly didn’t mind the look of it, especially compared to the showboating nature of the last one. Felix wondered if Tyler or Mark had picked out this suit for him.

Felix carefully lied the pressed suit across the kitchen counter and went into the bathroom, taking the quickest shower he could manage. He avoided his reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors and refused to let himself think about Jack living his life in this place. Not that Jack was wrong to
function like a normal human being— it was just that the idea of Jack being comfortably naked in the same place as Felix had his hands clammy. Felix didn’t like to think Jack was any sort of person to take advantage of him, but would Jack somehow get off on the idea of Felix existing in the same space as him like this? Was Felix overthinking? More than likely, but it was what he did best.

As Felix crossed the apartment with a towel around his waist to grab the suit, he was hit with a sense of normalcy that threw him off balance.

He was in Jack’s apartment.

He was in the expensive home of a violent mob boss.

Felix fucking Kjellberg from Boringville, Rhode Island, was walking through a mob boss’s apartment in only a towel to grab the suit that had been tailored especially for him to meet more mob bosses at an opera in the middle of New York City.

What the fuck was his life.

Felix got dressed quickly and denied himself further exploration of that thought. He was already trying desperately not to picture what Jack looked like naked. He didn’t want an added layer of domesticity just to make his life more miserable and confusing. At least he could rationalize that this was something friends would do. Felix had attended a few sleepovers in his life. He hadn’t really used the person’s shower before, but Felix had been insecure as a kid. That was going to be Felix’s excuse for this sudden change in his boundaries.

After getting dressed, Felix finally allowed himself a glance at his reflection, and just like the last suit, it fit him like a fucking glove. Felix ran his hands down over his sides, framing his torso and hips and found he was pleased at how comfortably, yet tightly, the material hugged his frame. His thighs and calves fit well in the slacks and the vest fit snugly across his stomach, just tight enough to show that Felix’s chest and abdomen were flat as a board. He was in damn good shape. Perfect time to start his ESU training. Felix’s interest in how he looked was entirely practical. And if he noticed how the deep mulberry made his blue eyes stand out, icy and cool against his pale skin, framed by blond hair, then maybe that was his a healthy amount of ego. He’d worked hard to look this way, and had risked a lot, outright lost even more. He was allowed to take some sort of pride in it.

He wondered if that was how Jack saw him when he looked at Felix.

It was time for Felix to leave. His thoughts were getting stupidly off track and Felix didn’t want them wandering unchecked. Felix didn’t know how to lock up Jack’s place as he left, but figured no one could really get the elevator to stop at these floors unless they had the special code, so it was probably unnecessary to worry. Stepping out into the lobby, Felix felt like, for the very first time, that he wasn’t out of place when surrounded by this wealth. Felix had caught a glance of the price tag for the vest alone. Normally he’d be afraid to be wearing this much money, but he was sure it was warranted with where he was about to go.

Flagging down a cab wasn’t that hard when he looked like he owned half of the city itself.

The cabbie seemed to think Felix was someone way more important than he actually was and took Felix speedily to his destination, bringing him to the front and giving a gracious thank you when Felix tipped him well because how else was Felix supposed to act when someone thought he was rich? Fifteen minutes to 9 o’clock, there was a fair amount of people milling about, waiting outside the opera house. The place itself was an amazing architectural design, reminiscent of the early buildings of New America with a touch of modernism, white stone pillars and huge windows. Felix took a moment to just stand outside and admire the symmetry of the stonework beneath his feet and
the huge fountain in front of the theatre. Just a pause, just a breather. He could hear people talking around him, idle conversation, excitement for the city or the opera. Felix stared into the rippling water and focused on every separate limb in his body, systematically making each muscle relax.

Felix took in a deep breath turned to the opera house and went inside.

Everything was a deep oak and delicately carved, reminiscent of Italian design of opera houses rather than modern day. He went to the ticket booth and smiled at the man behind the glass, said his name and expected to just be given some boring ticket. The ticket master’s eyes went huge, though, after typing in Felix’s name, and maybe this wasn’t going to be as easy as Felix had thought.

“Please, do wait,” the ticket master beckoned, looking flustered. “We had expected everyone of that compartment to arrive later, we do not have your escort ready.”

Felix tried not to make a face at the word “escort” and just stood by, feeling out of place again just because he wasn’t moving for somewhere like everyone else was. All the other patrons shot Felix sidelong glances as they passed him on the way to their seats, many of the woman taking a moment longer to look. Felix tried to keep his expression calm because the feeling of being checked out so blatantly by people who had done nothing but fulfill their impulsive pleasures made him uncomfortable.

A man in a three piece black suit with a wire from his ear stopped in front of Felix and bowed his head, requesting Felix to follow him. Felix shoved down the paranoia and follow the man. He was led past the normal entrance doors to an elevator that was tucked away in the back and guarded by a secondary man in a black suit. The elevator ride up was completely silent and Felix wondered if the man would talk if he was allowed to. The small exercise Felix had done to relax had been undone by this overpowering silence alone with this stoic man.

The elevator doors opened and the man led him down a dark hallway, dimly lit by chandeliers with doors along the left that were guarded by more fucking men, some women, all of them as unreadable as Tyler. He was led to what was probably the richest looking door he had ever seen, in the center of the rest, carved and engraved with gold. Real or not, it looked like it could pay off ten four-year degrees of university tuition. When the escort just carelessly pulled the thing open without caring about his nails scraping on the wood, Felix was pretty sure his heart stopped.

“Lights are down in five minutes,” the escort told him. “Please enjoy the show, Mister Kjellberg.”

Felix tried not to show how impressed he was to hear his last name pronounced correctly and went into the opera box. There were four chairs, all of them looking older than him, gold and red velvet lined and extremely comfortable. There was a television screen against the wall on the right that had various dishes fading through in a slideshow, likely a way to order food. Felix went to the end of the balcony that was perfectly centered to see the entire stage, high up enough to allow full view of the backdrop and orchestra pit. A moment of curiosity had Felix bending over the railing, looking down at all the people below going to their seats. He’d gone to swanky events like this, but he’d never been in such an expensive seat. Looking down on everyone else, watching them mill about, felt somehow amazing. Being given this opportunity, regardless of circumstances, felt a little like Cinderella seeing the castle for the first time.

“Enjoying yourself, Officer Kjellberg?”

The foreign voice, a deep baritone that was somehow sensual, had Felix whirling around with a guilty expression. Then he went stiff.

There was a man and a woman at the door to the box, but Felix only really knew they were a man
and a woman by their bodies. Both of their faces were covered with blank masks, much like the ones
Tyler and Mark had warn at the masquerade, featureless, not even eyeholes that Felix could see. The
woman was dressed in a black mermaid gown with a slit traveling all the way up past the hip bone,
revealing nothing except the long, tan leg with a floral ring tattoo across the thigh. Her hair was dyed
deeper red and curled delicately around her shoulder. The man was wearing a royal blue tuxedo with
a tight sash around his middle and his brown hair was slicked back against his scalp. Felix’s eyes
instantly searched for any bulge on their persons that could be a weapon. He found none.

Felix stood in parade rest and tried to save face. “Sir and Ma’am,” he said, his tone neutral. “I didn’t
mean to impose.”

“Impose?” the man repeated with an exaggerated gasp. “Why Officer, I am the one who invited you!
And I am absolutely delighted that you accepted my invitation. Everyone else has had the pleasure of
making your acquaintance except for little ol’ me. Seemed rather unfair, if you asked me.” The man
crossed the box and held out his hand for Felix to take, which Felix did. The man’s hands were soft,
not a callous to be had. Felix doubted this man had worked a day in his life. Felix doubted this man had worked a day in his life. “My name is Cry,” the
man said, his voice dipping down, the epitome of sensuality. Felix had never heard a voice like this
that had been natural. “This is my partner for the night, Selina. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Officer
Kjellberg.”

“I thought Jack was going to be here,” Felix said stupidly. He inwardly winced at how rude that
came off, but could’t regret it. If he was going to find out Jack wasn’t going to be attending at all,
Felix definitely couldn’t risk staying. Not when he couldn’t see these peoples’ faces.

“Jack makes a habit of being fashionably late, and then some,” Cry told him with what could have
been a grin? Felix couldn’t fucking tell. “He often enjoys making people wait. It’s one of his quirks,
if I may say, and definitely one of the more appealing ones. There’s a sense of anticipation that he
gives us, whether on purpose or not. It’s quite… titillating.” Felix didn’t know what to say as Cry and
Selina sat in the two chairs on the far right, away from the screen. “Feel free to order refreshments for
yourself, Officer,” Cry told him. “I am an avid supporter of the Opera and am given much freedom
in the foods. You may order whatever you wish, whether it is on the menu or not. I’ve had Papa
Johns before. Nothing like greasy pizza with the fine arts. The contrast is simply divine.”

Felix did not like the way this guy was talking about Jack. “I don’t know who you are,” he said
cautiously. “Or how you’re connected or how you know me. Sorry if I forget my manners,” Mark
had emphasized he should have them, after all. “But I’m not very trusting of people that I don’t
know.”

“My apologies, I should have known. It what makes you a good cop, isn’t it?” It sounded like Cry
was smiling again, but Felix couldn’t know. “I’m the, as you’d say, ‘boss’ of the Plague Writes. I’ve
been wanting to meet you for quite some time and in no way did I mean to overstep boundaries or
offend. I actually admire you a great deal from what little I have heard. Most of us in the upper
circles just can’t seem to avoid you in our conversations. So rarely do we have someone as mundane
as you working their way into our line of sight, and surviving this long. It’s quite a feat.”

Felix narrowed his eyes and refused to sit when Cry gestured for him to do so. “That’s not exactly
something I’m happy to hear.”

“Of course, I understand.” Cry replied like he was trying to appease Felix. “How about this— utter
transparency. Ask me anything you want, and I will do my very best to answer as truthfully as I may
in public.” There was definitely a smile to Cry’s voice now and Felix didn’t like how out of his depth
he felt. This man knew much more than Felix did and he was well aware of it. He had the clear
advantage and Felix was essentially at his mercy. “Drill me, Officer,” Cry said, his voice low. “I’m
all yours.”

Felix squinted. This was starting to feel like a sex thing. “What are the Plague Writes?”

Cry laughed softly. “We dabble and excel in areas of pleasure and fulfillment. We are spectators and supporters of the arts, both above and underground. We believe that those who can afford to explore the limits of pleasure and pain have every right to do so with consenting partners who share the same interests. We specialize in pleasing those who are willing to pay—rigging events, setting up parties of special content, introducing people with similar interests to allow them the freedom of expression they desire. We believe that those who wish to desire the more carnal aspects of being human have every right, so long as they can afford it and agree to a few rules. We don’t sell people, of course, unless they desire the feeling of being sold. The human body is a complicated mess of sensation and thought. May as well explore such things in a safe environment—only through fulfillment can we find ourselves closer to our creators, who fulfilled every desire of their own through bringing us into existence.” Cry paused dramatically. “How was that for a business pitch?”

Felix tried to keep from stuttering. “You’re like a weird B-D-S-M sex cult?”

“There’s a lot more to pleasure than just chains and whips, Officer,” Cry told him patiently. “I invite you to a moment of exploration of your own. You would be quite a delight within the communities I harbor. You look like a piece of fine art yourself in that suit.” Felix suddenly had the crawling sensation that he was being ogled again. “I can think of quite a few of my clients who would pay good money just to have you sitting in their lap and allowing them to feed you sweets. It’s an easy way to make a pretty penny. Or maybe you have some desires of your own?”

Cry sat forward, and he was definitely studying Felix now. “You seem like a man who has been denied countless things,” Cry murmured. The orchestra was playing their dissonant mesh of chords as the lights began to dim. Jack still wasn’t here, Felix still hadn’t sat down, and Cry was watching him, Felix knew it, but he could see nothing through the mask.

“I wonder what it would take to garner your submission?” Cry wondered aloud. “Or would you give it willingly at all? I’ve heard of the terrible things Dante has done to you. Maybe submission will heal the wounds. Maybe you need that sense of trust, the knowledge that your partner is in control, but only to bring you pleasure. Maybe you need some of those chains, if only to take away all responsibility, truly freeing you from everything that is causing that tenseness in your stance. Or maybe—maybe it isn’t a particular thing. Maybe it’s a person.”

“I am asking you to stop,” Felix blurted out as panic started to well in his throat. He expected a fight—it was always a fight with these assholes—but Cry instantly sat back and raised his hands in surrender.

“I am so sorry,” he said sincerely. “I didn’t mean to cause you distress. I can’t imagine the things you have suffered at that bastard’s hands. Dante is a stain in my life and I would give anything to have him done away with. I was just trying to test the waters with you, Officer, and I realize I went a step too far. Please, accept my most sincere apologies, and—”

Cry paused for a moment. “…As someone who has led countless people into the dark depths of desire, I can tell you I have met quite a few people who have collapsed from some unknown variable. Because of this, I have a plethora of healing resources. If you ever need someone who has expertise in what you have been…forced to experience, please know that I have countless tools to offer you, free of charge.”

Felix breathed slowly as he tried to calm down. Cry hadn’t meant to do that to him. It wasn’t his fault and Felix needed to stop being an idiot and overreacting. “Why would you help me?”
“Because you are an enigma,” Cry said. “You have found a way to bring peace to Jack. And Jack is my business partner, yes, but he is also a friend. I don’t want his saving grace crumbling to pieces at the cruelty of the world.” It sounded like Cry was smiling again. Felix would give anything to read his expressions. “Though I do wish to suggest— maybe your intentions with Jack could use some reconsideration as well.”

Before Felix could ask what Cry meant, the door to their box opened, and Jack stepped in, dressed to the nines. Jack’s eyes swept over the people in the chairs before seeing Felix and— freezing.

After being disconnected from Cry and Selina, Felix could read Jack like a book. Upon seeing Felix, Jack’s eyes darkened and his mouth fell open just slightly in something like shock. At first, Felix thought it was because Jack knew Felix wasn’t supposed to be here, but then Jack’s eyes dragged down Felix’s front, taking in every line of Felix’s body that was held tightly by the tailored suit, before moving back up and landing on Felix’s lips. He wasn’t shocked to see Felix— he looked like he was turned on. But unlike Cry and the many opera-goers below, Felix wasn’t put off by the idea of Jack looking at him.

Felix was torn from his reading of Jack by Cry’s soft chuckle as the opera began below them. “It seems dear Jack is experiencing some temptation of his own. I’ve offered to find him a partner that looks as similar to you as I can manage, but even I must admit, after meeting you, any copy would pale in comparison.”

“Jesus christ,” Jack breathed, still staring hard at Felix like he wanted to see through him, cheeks darkening. “Who the fuck gave ye’ that? And why are ye’ here?”

“Did you not invite him?” Cry asked.

“Mark did,” Felix said. “Mark told me about the invitation and he gave me the suit. I thought— I just wanted to know. Mark said it was friendly enough.” Felix shrugged, feeling almost chastised. “I just wanted to know.”

“Did he say anything to ye’?” Jack asked sharply, eyes cutting to Cry with something like anger. “He knows better than pushing boundaries, if he—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Felix interrupted quickly. “We should sit, right? The show is starting.”

“We’re in a box, Officer,” Cry said. “We can have discussions to our hearts’ desires. And Jack—” Jack looked to Cry as Cry turned in his seat to face him. “I will confess I pushed too far, I implied things that caused a bit of a reaction in your friend. I apologize sincerely. I will not make the mistake again.”

Jack scowled, showing his teeth. “Make sure ye’ don’t.” He went to the chair next to Cry and sat, putting himself between Felix and the strangers. “I ordered champagne,” Jack told them all, brow furrowed with something unhappy. Felix bit his lip before cautiously moving over and nudging his thigh against Jack’s. Jack’s gaze snapped to Felix, eyes alight with fire, but Felix didn’t flinch away. He gave Jack a reassuring nod, willing Jack to believe he was fine. Only then did Jack relax. He pulled his knee out of reach of Felix, but Felix didn’t take offense to that. Baby steps would be what got Felix anywhere at this point. A moment later, the door opened behind them and a waitress entered with a bottle of champagne and four flutes. She poured the drinks, set them down at a small table in front of the balcony ledge, and then left. None of them said a word until she was gone and Felix almost felt sorry for her.

“We are meant to be watching Aleko,” Cry said as Felix watched people listen to a man tell a story around a fire on the stage. “A tragic story of hypocrisy and cultural difference and an inability to
conform, regardless of desire to fit in. Seems rather fitting, don’t you think, Officer?”

Felix shrugged. “I’m not sure if you’re talking about a police officer being friends with mafiosos or your weird kinky business.”

Cry sputtered a laugh and Jack seemed startled by the sound. “What the fuck was that?” Jack asked Cry. “You never laugh like that.”

“Shut up, you didn’t hear that,” Cry said, breaking character.

Jack grinned. “He’s something else, ain’t he?”

“I thought I was supposed to keep my hands off?”

“Don’t touch him,” Jack said. “Don’t look if he hates it. But you’re absolutely allowed to know that he’s way better than ye’ and ye’ll never have him.”

Cry tutted while Felix made a face. “You don’t own him either,” Cry said. “I don’t see your name on him. Or a collar. Or a tattoo.” Cry sat up straight. “But that reminds me! Jack, those tattoos you wanted designed for yourself. I have my best artist working on a few drafts and I do think you’ll be very pleased with what they have to offer.”

Jack nodded, eyes trained down at the performance. “Send me whatever they draft. I’d like t’ make sure it’s good. Gonna be permanent, after all.”

“You’re getting tattoos?” Felix asked, unable to deny his curiosity. “I kinda figured you’d already have some. Does Catholicism allow tattoos?” Felix instantly winced at his own blunder. “I mean, I don’t think you’re Catholic or that you’d have to follow it, especially after everything, but I, uhm. I don’t know?” Felix had no way to recover.

When Jack only arched a brow like he was amused, Cry let out this languid chuckle. “If only Jack was religious,” he lamented. “Nothing like being religiously repressed to bring a spark of something exciting to the bedroom.”

“Felix, has Jack ever told you of the time he fucked the daylight out of me in front of twenty people?” Cry asked. Felix choked on his own tongue and tried valiantly to recover with a harsh cough, cheeks flushing with shame at his own reaction. Beside him, Jack stiffened. Felix couldn’t imagine Jack had been okay with Cry just blurting something out like that, and more than anything, Felix wanted to just move on, but how the fuck was he going to manage that after learning something like this?

“Just something I thought you’d like to know,” Cry said almost offhandedly, like he thought it was perfectly normal to just lay out someone’s sex life without any respect to their privacy. “After all, I’m sure you would like to know what Jack’s capable of in bed. Let me tell you, it was nothing short of a religious experience in its own way.”

Felix cut his eyes to Jack and saw the other man was frozen solid with a hard look in his eyes. He wasn’t protesting. Why wasn’t he protesting?

“You see, I have a wide variety of ways to entertain myself,” Cry continued like he wasn’t just spilling Jack’s secret without his consent right in front of Jack to hear. And to tell these things to Felix? Someone Jack wanted to have the respect and affections of? Unless Cry thought he was helping Jack in some way. Maybe he did. Maybe Cry’s brain was so twisted by his constant impulse
fulfillment that he no longer was able to think more than one step ahead and only thought he was helping convince Felix to bend over for Jack already. “One of my favorite events that I organize is the— well, essentially, I just gather like and open-minded people and we all fuck each other silly in the privacy of my home, for everyone to watch and enjoy as they please. Call it an orgy, if you will, with a little extra hedonism thrown into the mix. And dear Jack called for me, needed my assistance on something a little more business related, and I did help, free of charge.”

Cry turned to face Jack and even though Felix couldn’t see his face, he just instinctually knew that he wouldn’t like whatever expression was on Cry’s face. Jack still hadn’t moved. He was still staring straight ahead, jaw flexing as it clenched. His hands were curled into tight fists on the armrests, knuckles white. And Felix didn’t know how to shut Cry up. He was scared to try because he was worried of getting himself into even deeper shit with this last family.

“He was going to leave, but I couldn’t have him abandoning me so quickly,” Cry continued, voice becoming a sensual murmur as he spoke to Jack rather than Felix. “I wanted him to stay, have some fun, loosen up. He was a newly-made boss and only just returning to the limelight of crime, I was eager to test the playing ground that we would share. It didn’t take much to convince him, didn’t take anymore than just a kiss to the neck and a coax with a finger before he had me lied across my 19th century French chaise and threatening to break such a priceless antique for how hard he was—”

“This isn’t right,” Felix interrupted before he could stop himself. The more Cry spoke, the more something dark and ugly twisted in Felix’s gut. He didn’t know if it was from what Cry was describing or from how Jack was reaction (or failing to react), but he knew he needed Cry to stop this horrible thing he was doing. “Look, I— whatever Jack did is his own business, and it’s fine if it happened, but you can’t just tell other people about that sort of thing without the other person being okay with it.”

Cry paused. Then he tilted his head and turned his empty, expressionless stare from Jack to Felix. Felix fucking hated that mask and he wished he could reach out and tear it off from over Cry’s face, expose him to everyone in this theatre like Cry had so carelessly exposed Jack. Felix tensed, prepared for some sort of fight, realizing that in the course of a few sentences he’d gone from wanting to avoid more confrontation to inviting it. But then Cry sat back and gave a dip of his head.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I sometimes forget the company I keep. Transparency and sharing is a huge part of what I do and I—I sometimes get a little lost in what I remember and what I think should be done. That, and cocaine makes the thoughts a little muddled.” Cry sighed heavily. “I have made a true fool of myself in front of you twice, Officer Kjellberg. I can’t imagine how bad of a first impression I have left with you.”

Felix honestly didn’t know if he should forgive the guy or not until he caught Jack’s eye and saw the man was looking at him with something like an easy kind of gratitude before giving the tiniest of nods. Like he was telling Felix Cry’s apology was sincere. Maybe the guy really was just that socially disconnected and high as heaven. “It’s fine,” he told Cry, hoping he meant it. “Just— that’s Jack’s business just as much yours. I don’t care what Jack does or who he sleeps with, but I do care about people taking shit from him like you just did.”

“I did?” Cry asked. “What did I take?”

“His privacy,” Felix said. “His sense of self. He would have told me if he’d wanted me to know. You took that choice away from him.”

Cry gave another bow of his head. “I hope you can forgive me.”

“Consider it done,” Felix sighed. Onstage, a man and a woman were fighting. Felix had no idea
what any of this was, didn’t understand a lick of the plot he was supposed to be following, and he
almost wished he could. He didn’t like the idea of knowing he was being distracted by all of Jack’s
dirty secrets being thrown out without his consent. God, did Jack not have a bit of say in his own
life? Maybe that was why Jack liked Felix. Because Felix left Jack’s things to himself and didn’t
push, didn’t try to expose him beyond what Jack was willing to give up freely. Maybe Jack liked
Felix because Felix didn’t try to dissect him for his own pleasure.

Except Felix had dug into Jack’s life without his consent, just the night before, slumped over on his
bathroom floor and begging for Mark to fix his broken thoughts.

“Well, I shall attempt to save the evening,” Cry said, sighing deeply. “By offering an extension of
peace.”

Cry sat back in his chair, lounging across it, lifting his leg to hook his knee across an armchair. He
really did looked like he felt he owned the place, probably donated enough to say he could own a
good chunk of it. Charitable benefactors always had some sort of ulterior motive.

“I wished to meet Officer Kjellberg for reasons beyond just making myself out to be a complete
asshole,” Cry said. “I am of the understanding that Officer Kjellberg has made himself an unwilling
target in the eyes of a certain man that literally no one likes. And I wanted to possibly suggest some
sort of protection we could extend for our dear man in uniform that goes a little beyond the
rudimentary.”

Jack was finally losing some of that defensiveness, that rigidness in his spine. He let out a long, slow
breath, and then turned to Cry. “What did ye’ have in mind?”

“Well, obviously Officer Kjellberg can’t necessarily be included in our family rulebook because he
isn’t family and this isn’t some test of loyalty or political move. As always, dear Jack, you take our
ways and crush it beneath your boot. Thing is, that’s worked as long as it’s your neck you’re sticking
out. But now that it’s our friendly neighborhood police officer with his head on the chopping block,
it’s going to take a little more.”

Jack grimaced, but he knew Cry was right just as well as Felix did. “And you have a bright idea?”

Cry hummed softly. “Present him. Present intentions to court. Even if you don’t go through with it,
even if it is playing a role, if I give my support, then Felix will be under some law of protection
within the families. Dante won’t be able to do all of the underhand things he’s done so far without
rightfully bringing true punishment upon himself.”

Felix had never known this was a possibility, but Jack shook his head. “I’ve considered it, but that
would put Felix even more severely under radar. He’s not part of this world and he’s not meant t’ be.
I’m not about t’ push him in any deeper.”

“Fair enough,” Cry said. “Except— maybe you should ask Officer Kjellberg himself. It is his life,
after all. Not yours.”

Jack froze again, this time looking almost guilty. “I would actually rather stick with what Jack thinks
is right,” Felix said, deciding he’d throw his loyalty with Jack once again. “Jack knows what’s
happening way better than I do, and if he thinks it’s a bad idea, then it’s a bad idea. He’s kept me
alive this long. I trust him.” Felix tried not to feel like he’d just shown his heart on his sleeve while
surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves. But then Jack moved his leg, just ever so slightly, and
touched his knee to Felix’s. And jesus christ, if that didn’t at least make Felix feel a little bit better.
Even underneath the empty stare of Cry’s mask.
“I’ve got Felix’s back,” Jack said firmly. “If ye’ meet any of those fuckers saying otherwise, just tell them what I’ve said here. Felix ain’t part of this, in every sense of the phrase. No one’s t’ touch him cause he’s nothing to do with any of it.”

Cry sighed. “Dante doesn’t make a habit of listening.”

“Dante will listen or I’ll cut out his tongue so he at least has t’ think,” Jack replied.

“I’m not afraid of him,” Felix said. When faces turned to him, only one readable but still obviously surprised, Felix sat up straighter and said once more, with feeling, “I’m not afraid of him. I know I should be— all logic says I should cower before him. But I know the kind of person he is and I’ve met people like him. They’re bad and they do awful things to good people, but they feed off of the fear you show them. They get off on the power that comes with it. I know I should be afraid of him, but I can’t give him what he wants. That would just be allowing him to win.” Felix breathed out slowly and said, one last time, “I am not afraid of him.”

“Foolish,” Cry said. “Brave, but foolish.”

Felix shrugged and glanced to Jack, not missing the gentle awe the Irishman was watching him with. Maybe it was awe for Felix’s stupidity? Or maybe awe for him. Maybe he just still liked how Felix looked in the suit and was preferring to ogle rather than focus on the problem at hand. Felix couldn’t blame him. He couldn’t imagine it was fun to have to babysit some dumbass cop that kept getting himself in more and more trouble.

“My offer still stands,” Cry said. “I will support you and your decisions, Jack. I’m not deluded enough to think that the others see me as any sort of useful. Information gathering and owing a good favor has lost its appeal to those who use brute force to solve all of their problems. And who wants to watch a boxing match when they know the outcome?” Cry sighed despondently. “Maybe I’m just old and idealistic.”

“You’re my age,” Jack said with a snort.

“Only you see my usefulness,” Cry bemoaned dramatically. “Only you believe I am worth anything anymore.”

“Ye’ve got the mayor literally eating your ass on Tuesdays,” Jack deadpanned.

Cry snorted “Democrats have much tamer definitions of debauchery. At least the Republicans know how to throw a boy around a little.”

“I’m sorry, the mayor is eating his ass?” Felix repeated. “That’s…”

When he trailed off, Cry cackled. “I don’t make a habit of blackmailing,” he assured Felix. “My people wouldn’t return if they thought their secrets weren’t safe with me. But I know how to get a favor from just about anyone I please. And I know how to ensure that the favor comes with no strings attached. It’s an art, you know, to never ask for more than someone is willing to give. And it’s not like they’re all innocent. They know very well the price of their most sinful wishes being fulfilled. And most of the time the favor is hardly worthy of moving mountains. It can range from access to private documentation concerning certain persons to simply wanting my favorite Broadway show to be back in production.” Cry looked to Felix and Felix figured he was trying to smile charmingly. “If you ever need a thing or two, Felix, feel free to reach out. First one is free of charge. Unless I am safe to assume that Jack is fulfilling all of your needs on his own?”

“Why would he?” Felix asked with a frown. “I’m a grown man, I can take care of myself.”
Cry audibly faltered. It gave Felix a moment to think about what he’d said and what it could mean. Then Felix made a face, offended. “I’m not interested in using Jack for his fucking money, jesus,” he defended. “I’m not looking to use Jack for anything. Why do people keep thinking I’m into this for, like, monetary gain? Dante thought he could buy me or something, Mark keeps making his threats like he thinks I’m just gonna dip out. Why can’t people just accept that maybe I’m starting to like Jack?”

Jack sat back and ran a hand over his face, trying to cool his expression while Cry did this little thing with his hands like he was delighted. “I can see why you’re starting to grow on everyone, regardless of the trouble you make,” Cry said. “You definitely enjoy blowing what we thought we knew out of the water. Well done for reshaping the world as I knew it. Such a rare thrill that I hardly ever experience. Nothing has been new for years—not until you came along.” Cry fanned out his fingers and wiggled them in the air. “It’s exciting!”

Selina slapped Cry’s arm and shushed him. Felix realized that she’d genuinely been watching the opera this entire time. And the opera was coming to a close. Onstage, a sole man sang a mournful tune as a group of people walked away, leaving him behind. Felix wasn’t sure what had happened or why the man was being isolated onstage to a song that sounded like a funeral hymn, and was glad for it. He hated sad stories, even for the sake of entertainment. The song finished and the lights went up after the cast took their bows. Cry stood and applauded with wide sweeps of his arm, whistling and hollering his praises for a performance he hadn’t even watched. Felix was about to stand as well when Jack suddenly bent over and whispered into his ear.

“I’ve t’ talk to ye’.”

Then Jack was standing again, like he hadn’t made the hair on the back of Felix’s neck stand on end with the brush of his breath over the crest of Felix’s ear. Felix couldn’t stand for a moment, finding his knees weak and unable to explain why. It took him a second before he was able to stand with the others and applaud the show that he likely would never remember for what it had actually been. Distantly, Felix realized he was hungry.

“I can say, with all of my heart,” Cry said as the applause finally began to die. “That it was a true pleasure to finally meet you, Officer Kjellberg. I had plenty of expectations and you overshadowed all of them. Please believe me when I say that I fully intend to extend any aid to you that I can.”

Felix nodded along with his words but didn’t really latch onto them. All he could think about was the ghost of Jack’s breath on his skin and his sudden fascination was freaking him out.

The show ended and Jack took Felix by the elbow. He gave Cry and Selina a brisk goodbye before pulling Felix through the small crowd of people leaving their boxes. The guard at the elevator made a show of holding people back from the elevator when Jack came forward, and it was only them in the small box despite the line of people waiting to get in. Jack didn’t say anything, just kept his grip light and his eyes sharp.

“I’m sorry for showing up,” Felix said when he couldn’t stand the silence any longer as Jack pulled him from the elevator and through the lobby. “But Mark gave the invitation and I like to meet these kinds of people on my own terms instead of being kidnapped and taken to an Italian restaurant.”

His joke fell flat and Felix grimaced at the way Jack refused to even look at him. Felix sighed. “I’m hungry,” he told Jack. “Cry said I could order food, but I guess I just forgot. Wanna get something to eat with me?”

That had Jack faltering, his expression caging shut as they moved through the doors to the huge open of the front lawn of the opera theatre. “Shouldn’t ye’ be home?” he asked Felix, sounding like he
didn’t know what he wanted.

“I wouldn’t mind hanging out with you a little longer.”

Jack worried his lower lip between his teeth. “There’s a pub down the way,” he told Felix. “Three, really, then there’s another bar, and then a Japanese grill, and a—”

“I saw a Dunkin’ Donuts on my way here,” Felix said, interrupting gently. “And since I kinda wanna pay, how about we don’t bust my wallet?”

“Ye’ wanna go t’ a Dunkin’ Donuts dressed like this?”

Jack’s sharp up and down of Felix’s body made it clear that he thought Felix wasn’t dressed like he belonged in any restaurant with less than four stars. But Felix only rolled his eyes and grinned easily, a little amused by Jack’s quiriness. Jack would never mind going to a place lower than his class regardless of how he was dressed, but god forbid Felix do the same. If Felix was dressed like money, he should be surrounded by money. It was almost flattering. “Come get a cheap donut with me,” Felix asked with a jerk of his head in the general direction. “My treat, however low income of a treat it is.”

Jack shook his head and let out a frustrated noise, but he gestured for Felix to lead the way. Felix was happy to walk to the Dunkin’ Donuts. It was cold and winter was gradually approaching. November was one of Felix’s favorite times of year when in the countryside and bay area, but in the city, it was just dreary and wet. Thanksgiving was fast approaching and Felix knew he was going to have to deal with his parents asking him to come back to Rhode Island. He was going to try and convince them to come to his place instead.

The walk was quick and quiet and the Dunkin’ Donuts was still open. Felix darted forward to open the door for Jack, which had Jack reeling back momentarily, blinking fast like he was startled by the gesture. Felix snorted a laugh. “Dude, it’s cold,” he reminded Jack like his own fingers weren’t starting to go numb. Jack finally ducked in after his moment of oddity and stood in the entrance of the restaurant, looking around owlishly. “Have you ever been to one of these before?” Felix asked after following Jack inside. Jack jumped and looked over his shoulder to Felix with wide eyes. Felix frowned and lowered his voice. The place was empty with only a single employee at the register, but Felix still didn’t want to push boundaries. “Are you okay?”

“Why are ye so close to me?” Jack demanded. Felix winced and took a big step to the side, out of Jack’s personal bubble.

“Know what you want?” Felix asked, fighting for normalcy.

“Just order for me,” Jack said, going to a booth and dropping into it with a sense of finality. Felix tried not to think about what he’d done wrong and went to the employee, smiling a little at her. She smiled back with a lot less friendliness and Felix ordered just a half dozen of the regular glazed donuts. Far more than he could eat on his own, hopefully something Jack would eat. He stood by the counter and waited for the donuts, taking the bag and going to the booth, wanting to give Jack as long of a moment alone as he could. When Felix slid into the seat of the booth across from Jack, Jack stared at him.

“Alright,” Felix said. “What did I do?”

“What?” Jack blinked owlishly, looked around like he was confused. “I’m sorry, shit.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Felix asked with a frown. He pushed the bag of donuts closer to Jack,
hoping to get him to eat something. Jack eyed the brown paper bag before reaching in and taking one of those overpoweringly sugary donuts and took a bite. He winced and looked to the donut like it had hurt him and Felix bit back a laugh. “Too sweet, huh?”

“Can’nae even imagine eating this first thing in the morning,” Jack said. “My teeth would fall out.” Felix nodded his agreement. “Why are you freaking out?”

“I’m not.”

“Alright, so that’s complete bullshit.”

Jack scowled, but his eyes were wild like he was looking for somewhere to run. Felix sighed and sat forward, nudging Jack underneath the table with the foot of his shoe. “Hey,” he called out gently. “We’re friends, right? I know we are. Friends tell each other when something’s wrong, and you’re not acting like everything’s alright. Tell me what’s going on. You can’t just say you want to be my friend and then keep me at arm’s length. I don’t do shit in halves, Jack. Just let me be what you want me to be, as far as I can.”

Jack’s scowl morphed into a grimace and he slumped into the booth. “… I ain’t like that,” he said. Before Felix could ask for some sort of specification, Jack gave it for him. “How Cry made me out t’ be. I don’t— I ain’t into that kinky shit. No shame to those who do, but I’m not— good— for it.”

Felix nodded. “Mark mentioned something like that.”

“Mark?” Jack repeated, head snapping up to look to Felix. “When the fuck were ye’ talking t’ Mark about me?”

“Uh…” Felix faltered, then winced. He didn’t want to tell Jack about the awful dream he’d been forced through, but he didn’t want to lie to Jack either. “I had a bad night,” he began carefully. “And Mark woke me up from a nightmare. He tried to distract me and help me work through the dream. One thing led to another, and he told me about, uh, the one time you guys. You know.” Felix made an obscene gesture with his fingers, the tips of his ears red. “That.”

Jack look horrified. “He shouldn’t have told ye’.”

“Mark wasn’t telling me without good reason,” Felix insisted. “He didn’t want to tell me at all, but I was—”

“Sticking yer nose into my fuckin’ business?” Jack finished for him, angry. “And for what? For fun? A distraction? Just some sort of twisted desire to flay me open like everyone else? Are you just like everyone else, Felix, tearing me open fer your own pleasure, or do you just like to violate—”

“Dante’s fucking with my head, Jack,” Felix interjected before Jack could ruin him any further with his words. “I can’t do it. I can’t keep listening to what he says. My sanity can’t fucking take it. So I went to Mark because he had insight that would keep me from throwing myself off the deep end.” Felix sat forward and lied his hands on the table, letting Jack see his hands so he would have the utmost confidence that Felix wasn’t looking to hurt him in any way. “I am so sorry for doing what I did in asking Mark,” Felix said. “I can’t even begin to describe how shitty I feel for doing it. I’m so sorry. I was in such a bad place. I felt like I didn’t have a choice. But I did and I made the wrong choice and I am so. Fucking. Sorry.”

Jack set his jaw and crossed his arms over his chest, but he didn’t leave, so that was a positive.

“I never want to be anything like those horrible people in your life,” Felix told Jack. “I would rather
die than becoming just another villain to you. But I was— I was slipping. I was physically sick from the dream. I was falling. I needed to know and I’m so sorry that that was the price for my peace.”

“What in the fuck did Dante say t’ ye?”

Felix shook his head, his hands on the table beginning to shake a little. “Don’t make me think about it again, Jack,” he said. “I beg of you.”

If anything, Felix’s firm denial had Jack only more concerned. His brow knit upwards and he sat forward, looking at Felix’s trembling hands like he wanted to reach out and touch. Felix wanted to think about anything but the dream, so he made the move and reached out to take Jack’s hand with his own. He knew his own flesh was clammy and the shaking had to be overpowering, which didn’t make Jack look any better in the slightest, but at least he knew to stop asking.

“I’d kill him if I could,” Jack said. “You know I would.”

“I don’t think I’d want you to,” Felix replied.

“Even after all he’s done?”

“You killed a man just for kicking me in the face,” Felix reminded Jack, unable to forget, even though that man’s death felt years in the past. “I don’t like killing, Jack, I don’t like death in the slightest. If we could live in a world without murder, I’d give my life to ensure it lasted forever. It’s why I do what I do. I don’t want death, Jack.”

“So then ye’ lied?” Jack asked. “When you told me you agreed what I did. With my da’.”

Felix’s hand clenched fiercely around Jack’s. “Never,” he swore with vehemence. “What you did was in the right. I don’t know what happened, but that man had been exempt from the law in every way and there was no way for him to be legally brought to justice. You did the right thing and I support what you did. Don’t ever doubt that.”

Jack’s jaw flexed. “It’s why I fucked Cry.”

“Jesus,” Felix said at the bluntness. “Uh, okay?”

“Ye’ gotta understand,” Jack explained. “I don’t— I’m not like that. Yeah, I’ve slept around, yeah, I can do a casual fuck, but I don’t make a habit of sleeping with people in the families. I don’t even like being around most of ‘em that ain’t my own men and ain’t a real friend. Cry was— Cry was a bad point in my life.”

“Did you not want it?” Felix hedged carefully.

“That ain’t it,” Jack denied, giving Felix some sort of relief. “I just was not in a good place.” Jack paused, bit his lip, glanced around the donut shop to make sure all of the employees were out of earshot, then looked Felix in the eye. “Five years ago, I killed my father. And in doing so, I brought a world of responsibility down on my shoulders. And I- I was not ready for any of it, Felix. I never intended t’ be in that position and I never wanted t’ be in the place I am now. But I am and it was my own fault and that’s all there is. And I was in this bad, bad place after my da’ and I couldn’t handle any of it because Mark had all these other things for me, and I had t’ go t’ all the families, tail between my legs, swearing loyalty to a life I hated, all for them t’ see, and I— Cry was there. And he offered. And it was a distraction. A way to get some sort of relief from everything going on in my head. So I took it and I— and it didn’t mean anything.” Jack nodded firmly, tearing his gaze from Felix’s now that he’d laid his heart bare. “I ain’t the kind of person to hold sex t’ this high place, but I don’t just throw myself around either. I can’t afford t’.”
Felix nodded as well, giving himself a moment. “… Well, to be clear, I would literally never judge you for who you have sex with.”

Jack snorted a laugh. “Not even Dante?”

“Did you fuck Dante?” Felix demanded sharply, distantly horrified. But when Jack let out this snicker, Felix scowled. "Don't fucking taunt me like that, jesus.”

“Jealous?” Jack asked teasingly and Felix had only a split second to bite down on his tongue and stop himself from saying what he’d originally meant to say. He had no idea what he’d been going to say, but he knew it wouldn’t be right. “I’d never fuck Dante,” Jack said. “I have some standards. Why else would I be into you?”

“Pretty sure that’s an argument against you having standards,” Felix griped. He yelped, though, when Jack kicked him harshly beneath the table and sent Felix a glare. “Self deprecation not working comedy for you?” Felix asked, wincing and stretching out his leg. “Fair enough.”

“I’d give anything for ye’ t’ see yourself through my eyes,” Jack told him. “Then you’d never dare t’ say anything like that again.” Jack reached for another donut and Felix distantly realized Jack had actually eaten two. For someone whose first bite had been so unsettling, Jack had converted quickly. “You’re perfect, Felix. Don’t ever think you’re anything less.” Jack munched on his donut and licked the glaze from his fingers. Felix tracked the movement of Jack’s tongue and then tried to figure out why he was watching so closely. “I had t’ tell ye’ something,” Jack said. “Whole reason why we came out here.”

“Is everything okay?” Felix asked, figuring he would just hold back and let Jack eat all six donuts. Felix didn’t want the sugar to keep him up. “I’ve already seen the world end once,” Felix tried to joke even as his heart rate freaked out to keep him from remembering the other thing he was avoiding.

Jack shook his head. “Don’t jest that.”

“It happened to me, not you.” Felix nudged Jack under the table again. “What’s going on?”

“I’m leaving,” Jack said.

Felix sat up straight. “What, like— for good?”

“Fuck’s sake, no,” Jack replied with a snort. “But for a while, yeah. A few weeks. In the meantime, ye’ve got all the same security, all the same eyes. Mark will be lagging behind t’ be with ye’, and Tyler’s head of yer security. Kon’s still gonna be there and I’ve got a man workin’ on getting a handle on your police equipment. Not t’ spy, but t’ make sure Dante doesn’t get it again.”

“If all this protection is staying with me, who’s going with you?”

Jack hesitated.

Felix scowled. “Tyler or Mark. You pick.”

He was shocked when Jack sighed and said, “Tyler.”

“What, leave me with the guy who hates me?”

“Mark doesn’t hate you,” Jack replied softly. “In fact, it’s damn near the opposite. But you’re right, I shouldn’t be stupid. I’ll have Tyler with me.” Jack shook his head and went for a fourth donut, “I
leave tomorrow morning. Just wanted t’ let ye’ know.”

Felix nodded. “You’ll answer your phone, right?”

“Uh, why?”


Jack smiled just a little. “If ye’ want.”

“Good,” Felix replied. “Expect a dumb message and at least one selfie from me every day. I’ll look terrible and you can pretend that I don’t to make me feel better.” Felix tapped at the table and grinned. “Mind if I see you off?”

Jack’s cheeks went the barest shade of pink. “If ye’ want,” he said again.

“I do,” Felix replied sincerely. “For now, let’s get back to your place. My uniform needs to be thrown into a vat of bleach and I’d like to get some sort of details of what I saw before you go, even if it’s nothing at all. And maybe I can actually eat pizza with you guys without being ditched.”

“I just wanted ye’ to’ sleep,” Jack admitted with a wince. “Didn’t mean t’ hurt yer feelings.”

“Whatever, Mom.” Felix winked playfully at Jack. “Let’s get going, before the weather gets any fucking worse. Maybe fill me in on where you’re going for your lovely vacation.”

“It ain’t a vacation,” Jack said even as he fought down a smile and stood, grabbing the bag of the last two donuts. “But it is in sunny South America, so I guess I’ll be better off than the rest of ye’. Ain’t gonna have no winter storms crawling up my ass down there, unlike you sorry sacks.”

“I resent that,” Felix said as he opened the door and then followed Jack out into the rain, matching smiles on their faces.
“I still think it’s bullshit you get to go on vacation,” Felix said as he stood beside Jack and watched airport workers get Jack’s jet ready. Felix had almost forgotten Jack had his own private jet, but he guessed it was more practical than Jack having to cover all the variables of taking a public flight. That was just a huge risk to a ton of people beyond Jack. Still—a *private fucking jet*. “You know we’re meant to get some record lows this coming month,” Felix said conversationally. “And you just so happen to be going to some business meeting down in South America.”

“Cartagena is hardly a vacation,” Jack replied with a scoff. He glanced over his shoulder to the car they’d taken here, back to where Mark and Tyler where standing just out of earshot and watching them both like hawks. Felix would have been put off by their watchful eyes if he wasn’t somewhat comforted to know that he was under some level of protection.

“I googled Cartagena,” Felix told Jack. “And it’s got a lot of fucking colors for a place that is ‘hardly a vacation.’ Really scenic. Some might say it’s a tropical paradise.” He arched a brow at Jack, but kept his grin easy. He was teasing and it made his chest feel light. When Jack scoffed and rolled his eyes, Felix nudged him with his elbow. “You can’t deny it,” he said. “Google has never lied to me.”

“Google probably didn’t advertise the crime rates,” Jack argued. “And if I told ye’ what exactly goes on there, then ye’d be a little less jealous. But I must admit, green is good on ye’.”

Felix only distantly realized Jack was playfully flirting with him once Jack sent him a wink. Felix snorted his own laugh and shook his head, saying, “I’ll have you know I look best in pastel pink and overpowering orange. Just about any color that makes you not look at my face is best for me.”

When Jack glared at him, Felix couldn’t help but laugh again. “Man, you really don’t like the self deprecation jokes, do you?”

“Ye’ don’t say them like they’re a joke, fuckass,” Jack huffed. “There ain’t nothing bad about ye’, so shut the fuck up, or I won’t bring ye’ back a souvenir.”

“Oh my god, bring me back something super racist,” Felix deadpanned. “I just really want to be one of those hapless tourists that does awful offensive things that aren’t in travel guides without meaning to so no one can really blame them. What’s wrong with a sombrero, seriously? Why do people get so pissed? What if I just want to drink out of a skull and listen to a mariachi band just once before I die?”

Jack made a face. “Have ye’ never been to South America?”

“Never been on a vacation.”

Jack gaped.
“What?” Felix asked.

“I thought yer parents were well off.”

“They were,” Felix said. “But they didn’t like spoiling us. They wanted us to grow up with realistic expectations and ideas of the world. So, like, we didn’t go anywhere incredible, but we did plenty of fun stuff at home. Sailing, tennis, ice skating, rich shit like that. But I’ve never been out of the states since I came here from Sweden. And I was, like, a baby. Never been out of the East Coast, either.” Felix shrugged when Jack continued to look horrified. “I don’t know, I never really had the opportunity.”

“I’m gonna take ye’ on the best damn international vacation ever,” Jack swore. “Down t’ Latin America, then int’ Africa, hop over into Souther Europe and head up, then into Asia, jump t’ Australia, over stateside t’ show ye’ the PCH, and then bring ye’ home.”

“That’ll take ages,” Felix pointed out. “And a shit ton of money.”

“I’ve the money,” Jack said. “I’ll make the time if I must. Before this ends, I’m gonna show ye. Or at least, give ye’ the means t’ see it yourself.” Jack nodded firmly, mostly to himself. “You’re gonna see the world, Felix, because the world needs t’ see you. And then you’re gonna become internationally renown and start a modeling career and you’ll never have t’ work again— just take Insta photos of yourself and rake in the big bucks.”

Felix snorted a laugh and tried to see this logically. “I legitimately do not want to quit my job, and you know that.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said. “The photos of you in yer uniform will be the best.”

“Stop objectifying me,” Felix joked.

“Stop being so easy t’ sexualize,” Jack retorted.

“Stop fucking flirting!” Mark shouted from behind.

“I wasn’t flirting!” Felix defended.

“I definitely was,” Jack said.

“His intentions are pure,” Tyler argued. “A little harmless flirting has never hurt anyone.”

“Literally all of Troy,” Mark said.

“Probably the entirety of Greek mythology got fucked by flirting,” Felix agreed.

“Felix deserves to be flirted with,” Jack snapped at all of them. “He makes too many self deprecating jokes. We need t’ build up his self esteem and I’ve literally no other way.” Felix could practically hear the strain of Mark’s body as he rolled his eyes. No teenage girl could measure up to Mark’s eye rolls. “My flight’s ready,” Jack said, looking to the jet. He didn’t seem eager to leave. “Ye’ve got Mark,” he told Felix. “He’s t’ tail ye’ on shifts and he’s gonna be keyed into yer radio waves so he can check out all orders and calls and maybe find some pattern to them so we can predict the awful calls before ye’ go. And we’re keeping an eye on dispatch itself, digging into them. Something’s up and we’ll find it, I swear, Felix.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Felix said, and meaning it. “You’re doing your best and so am I. I can handle it.” Jack looked skeptical. “I can,” Felix insisted. “I haven’t collapsed yet.” There was an echo, but he
hadn’t suffered any nightmares last night, stretched out on Jack’s couch after refusing to steal Jack’s bed for another night. “If I just keep my head above the water, I’ll be fine. Dante already said his piece on the ride along and there’s literally no way those Bisognin fuckers can one-up what they’ve already done. It genuinely cannot get any worse.”

“I hate that phrase,” Jack said. “Because it’s a challenge. And people always rise up to a challenge.” Jack grimaced and looked away. “Stay safe, Officer. Call me if ye’ need anything.” When Felix only nodded, Jack took him by the shoulder and repeated, “Anything, Felix. I don’t want ye’ t’ hesitate fer nothing. And hell, even if it’s for someone ye’ know. Your partner or your girlfriend. Your sister or parents. Anyone and anything, Felix. I-I thought about what ye’ said. About us being friends and what it means. I just—I want t’ step up t’ the plate. But the only way I know how t’ be something to someone is with what I can do for them. So if ye’ need me t’ do anything for anyone, just call me, and I’ll move mountains.”

Felix was hit by an overwhelming wave of fondness for this man in front of him. He lifted his own arm and rested it on Jack’s neck, thumb going for the cigar burns again. Jack, to his credit, barely even flinched. He tensed beneath Felix’s hand, but he steeled his jaw and didn’t wilt away under the touch that he obviously couldn’t handle. Jack was being brave for him, and Felix was proud. “The thing about how I treat my friends,” he told Jack. “Is I refuse to use them for anything. So how about you just settle for giving me a few moments of your day and tell me about your awesome vacation that I am super jealous of? And that’s it.”

Jack huffed unhappily and kicked the ground. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m gonna be mad about it. Cry said shit about me not takin’ care of ye’ and shite, and I don’t want that t’ be the case. I’m able t’ give ye’ whatever you need.”

“All I need is your dumb selfies,” Felix said. He let his hand fall from Jack’s neck, letting his fingers brush down the skin, positive reinforcement of Felix’s touch never being with the intention to hurt. And maybe because Felix also loved knowing he was allowed to touch. “Have a safe flight, Jack. Text me when you land so I know you made it.”

Jack blinked owlishly at the request, then just nodded and moved towards the awaiting jet. Tyler came up behind him and gave Felix an exaggerated wink before cutting his thumb to Jack. Felix rolled his eyes and looked to Jack just in time to watch him trip on the bottom step. The suddenly movement had a rosary that was around Jack’s neck swinging from his shirt and into view, glinting in the bare sunlight. “Eyes up, McLoughlin!” Tyler shouted, laughing. “You can’t keep getting hypnotized by his blue eyes! I can only do so much to protect you.”

“Fuck off!” Jack snapped, ducking into the jet. Tyler waved goodbye before following and Felix stood and watched the jet start to taxi as Mark came up to stand beside him.

“You really do put him off guard,” Mark told him. “It’s fucking annoying.”

“How do you feel any sort of happiness?” Felix asked. “I legitimately have never seen you smile. Are you okay?”

“Happiness is a useless emotion and god is dead,” Mark intoned dully. Felix had to purse his lips together to keep from laughing. He was slowly beginning to understand Mark’s horrifically dry sense of humor and it was definitely appealing to Felix’s own humor as well. “Come on,” Mark beckoned. “I’m supposed to fill you in on a few things and then I’m to take you home. Also, your girlfriend has come by your house twice and she seems very, very concerned. I recommend seeing her.”

Felix’s eyes went wide. He’d forgotten about Marzia. He had entirely forgotten about Marzia. What the fuck was wrong with him? How could he forget the woman he was dating, the woman he was
pretty sure he was in love with? Normally his first thought would be for his significant other, but he’d gone the past few days without sparing a single thought for her. Felix felt like shit as he realized this. What the actual fuck was wrong with him?

He looked put to see Mark studying him carefully. Felix winced. “I completely forgot about her,” he confessed, knowing Mark would have another reason to hate him depending on how he took it. “And that—that isn’t okay.”

“You do realize you survived a massively traumatic event, right?” Mark asked. “I’m sure you’ve disassociated from it very heavily. You’re experiencing a memory-emotion disconnect for the sake of your own sanity. There is nothing wrong with forgetting her for a few days.

Felix hadn’t expected Mark to defend his actions, but he appreciated it. “You should come with me,” he told Mark. “To meet her. I don’t know why, I just—” He didn’t want to be alone still.

Mark sighed heavily. “Sure, fine, whatever.”

Felix felt relief. “Don’t sound so excited, Mark, I might get the wrong idea.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely into your girlfriend,” Mark said with another one of his infamous eye rolls. “I would like to meet her,” Mark told him. “But not for friendliness’ sake. Jack and I and Tyler checked her out and she seems safe enough, but I would like to make sure we can rule her entirely out.”

Felix frowned. “Please don’t psycho-analyze my girlfriend.”

“Has she met any of your friends?” Mark asked.

“She met Sive. Then my sister and nephew. That’s about it.”

Mark scowled. “I hate your sister.”

“Jesus christ.”

“I do,” Mark insisted as the jet took off far away down the strip. Mark jerked his head towards the car and Felix followed him back to it. “She manipulates you. She’s not a good person. I don’t like considering how you grew up with someone as violently possessive of you as she is. I don’t like the idea of you and Jack together, but I can tell you, with confidence, that he would be an improvement, romantic or not.”

“She’s not that bad,” Felix said uselessly. Mark opened the passenger door for him and Felix made a face.

“Fuck,” Mark said, expression flattening. “I didn’t—it’s a habit. I don’t know why I opened the door for you.”

“Gonna take me on a ride in your carriage?”

“I hate you and everything you stand for,” Mark said. Felix cackled and dropped into the passenger seat with fluid grace, blowing Mark a kiss before taking the handle and pulling the door shut. Then he sat in the seat and wondered what the fuck was wrong with himself. Why the fuck had he blown the kiss? Since when was Mark someone he felt this comfortable around? And what the fuck did it even mean?

“You’re so fucking weird,” Mark said as he slid into the driver’s seat. “And look—I’ve been requested to give you a crash course on all of this shit. You’ve stubborned yourself into the thick of it, and it’s no longer fair, nor safe, for you to be kept in the dark. So we’re going to Kon for some
dinner and then we’re gonna give you a mafia family crash course that is long overdue.”

“And if I say I know enough?”

Mark flattened him with a look, grip tight on the steering wheel. Mark had always acted a little serious while driving, and Felix had never really known why, but now that he had the chance to think, he wondered if it had to do with a traumatic crash or maybe— Mark’s father. Felix felt something like pity settle in his chest and knew it wouldn’t be appreciated.

“I wanted to thank you,” Mark said, startling Felix with more than just his voice. “Don’t look at me like that, I can be a good fucking person. I wanted to thank you for making sure Jack took some measure of protection with him.”

“I would have thought there’d be a lot more body guard employment within a mafia family.”

“Jack downsized,” Mark said. “Our inner numbers are actually quite small. The McLoughlin family used to be one of the biggest crime families in the continental US, but he’s working on the big plan to get rid of mafia crime, so of course he’s going to start with himself.”

Felix paused. “Is that really his goal? Get rid of the mafias?”

Mark shrugged. “There’s a lot you don’t know. I can’t tell you all of it. But you can be absolutely certain that the Bisognin family will not survive this. Not if Jack and I have anything to say about it.”

Felix was curious why Mark was including himself in there, but figured he shouldn’t ask just because he likely wouldn’t get a straight answer. Mark kept his grip white and Felix took the chance to just look at the city. The drive through Jersey into New York City was just like a drive to anywhere else. He rarely had the chance to just look at the city because he rarely road passenger for something that wasn’t work related. It was raining, as was normal in November, and Felix found himself looking forward to seeing this beautiful place covered in snow in the coming months. Philadelphia and Boston had been gorgeous. He knew that New York would look even more amazing, with the lights and the bridges and the ocean beyond. Felix was excited for it.

It took a long while, but the silence was comfortable enough and Mark didn’t expect Felix to fill any role, so when they pulled up in front Kon’s place with Felix’s home across the street, the sun was beginning to set and Felix felt almost rested. He’d zoned out watching people and clouds and buildings zip by. Traffic hadn’t even been that bad, which was a statement within itself. When Mark finally parked on the side of the road in a rare empty spot, Felix got out of the car and stretched his arms up, pleasantly relaxed.

He knew it wouldn’t last. He knew that he would hear that echo again. He knew he would see Dante’s smile and the blood dripping from the eyes. But for now, Felix’s mind was blank and ready to absorb whatever he was going to be taught. He’d been kept in ignorance for far too long and he wanted to learn as much as he could for his own survival. Felix would just keep those thoughts away manually until it just happened naturally. He’d get there one day.

“Head inside,” Mark told Felix as he got out of the car on the other side. “Kon is expecting us, told us he would have dinner ready. Considering I have no idea what ethnicity he actually is, it’s a gamble on what we’re going to be eating. One day I’m hoping to get the name of the dishes he makes from him so I can figure out just where the fuck he’s from.”

“You didn’t background check the guy?” Felix asked.

“Kon has a sort of amnesty,” Mark explained. “Him and a few others that are not around today.
Felix gaped. “You have an officially pardoned individual working within your mafia? Doesn’t that put a pretty keen eye on you from outside law enforcement?”

“I know what I’m doing,” Mark defended. “Stop asking dumb questions and go inside.”

Felix snorted and kicked at the curb, ducking into the overhang above the door and getting out of the rain. He watched Mark rifle through the trunk of the car for a moment before knocking on the door. It swung open to reveal Kon, and Felix was hit by a wave of heat and the smell of something delicious. “Holy shit,” Felix said to the mountain of a man. “That smells so fucking good.”

“Gołąbki and salatka jarzynowa,” Kon told him. “Family recipe. Sit in living room, I have presentation ready.”

Felix ran the title of the food through his head and lamented his limited knowledge of the Slavic tongues. He had no fucking idea where Kon was from and now that Mark had introduced the mystery to him, Felix found himself wanting the answer. He went into the living room as Kon went back into the kitchen. “Where are you from, Kon?” Felix asked, figuring being straightforward would work. He’d asked Kon before, when they’d first met, and Kon hadn’t responded. Maybe now would be different? But then Kon just laughed at him and didn’t say anything else as Felix sat on the sofa. It was a nice sofa, but not nearly as nice as the one Jack had gotten for Felix. Felix then began to wonder how expensive the furniture in his home was. And what the fuck had happened to the furniture Felix had brought from Philly?

“This is a nice place!” Felix called out, looking around the living room. There was a TV in front of a set of windows that looked out into the streets and an electric fireplace against the wall. There was one of those intricate rugs on the floor that looked like it was older than Felix or everyone he’d ever met. The light was warm and faux-natural from glowing lamps as it grew gradually darker outside. Felix sank into the couch and rested his head back, looking up at the ceiling. He took in and then let out a long breath. Felix shut his eyes for a moment. He just breathed and focused on nothing at all.

“You asleep?”

Felix’s eyes flew open to see Kon staring down at him from behind the couch, the man’s bushy brow furrowed in what could be concern. Felix smiled sheepishly. “Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to make myself comfortable like this. I, uh.” Felix sat up and moved to stand, ready to offer help in making dinner even though he’d been told to stay in the living room, but Kon put a hand on his shoulder to keep him on the couch.

“You are a stupid man,” Kon said gruffly. “You stay here and sit and you stop acting like drowned kitten.”

Felix made a face. “I’m not acting like a drowned kitten.”

“He’s right,” Mark said as he let himself in the front door with a duffel bag over his shoulder. “You’re acting like a war veteran that’s been drugged to high hell.”

“Fuck off,” Felix said softly. Mark rounded the couch to be in front of the fireplace. He set the duffel down on the coffee table and Kon came around to take what Mark pulled out of the bag, which was — Felix’s uniform. Felix frowned. “Wasn’t that supposed to be dry cleaned?”

“Unfortunately, it’s testing positive for certain substances that we’re looking into,” Mark said as Kon
took the uniform that was inside a plastic bag and went upstairs. “Kon has a room upstairs to deal with this shit. He knows the most about drug substances and all of that shit that I don’t care to look too deeply into. It looks like there was a specific chemical reaction that caused the deaths to happen so seamlessly in time with one another. Kon has a certain expertise that we need to know what that is. And the best resource we have for that chemical reaction is on your uniform.” Mark went to the duffel again. “We’ll get you a new one. I doubt I’d want to risk putting that on you again. It was either absorbed through breathing the smoke or through contact with your skin. One of those makes me want to burn that thing so it never touches anyone again.”

Felix wasn’t sure what surprised him more— how professional this whole operation was turning out to be, or how Mark sounded almost protective of him. Or maybe Mark was just generally against the drug in general. “Lovecraft, right?” Felix asked, because he couldn’t remember ever getting a definite confirmation of the drug being what caused the end of Felix’s world for a split second.

“Lovecraft,” Mark affirmed gently, watching Felix carefully. “Are you going to have a mental breakdown or can I get into specifics of what happened?”

“I’m better off knowing, aren’t I?” Felix sunk back into the couch again, but this time simply because an emotional exhaustion was returning. “I have to go to work again after tomorrow. I have to face the music eventually, and if I go in with some understanding of just what the fuck I went through, maybe I’ll have a better chance of avoiding it or even stopping it.”

“You can’t stop this, Felix,” Mark told him calmly. “You couldn’t have saved them.”

Felix stopped breathing.

“This is what I was worried about,” Mark said as he moved to the other side of the coffee table and pressed the back of his hand to Felix’s head. “The thing about what you went through is that you were drugged as well as they were.” Felix had considered that and tried to say as much, but he couldn’t talk. There was a lump in his throat that was gagging him, keeping him from speaking. He couldn’t talk to Mark— he couldn’t scream for help. “You still may have some lingering side effects,” Mark said. “Or you’ve just been fucked to all hell by what you’ve seen.”

“Give me help.”

As Mark suddenly grabbed Felix’s skull, one hand holding his cranium and the other holding his jaw, Kon’s voice behind Felix was the only warning he got when there was suddenly a sharp pain in his neck— a fucking needle breaking his skin. Felix yelped, but Mark held him fast. Kon pushed something into Felix’s body, and Felix knew he should be terrified, but instead found the panic ebbing. There were small flashing lights in his vision for only a moment before fading away as well. His breathing slowed and that lump started to melt away as well. “What the fuck,” Felix said slowly, finding his tongue almost numbed. But his heart rate was back to something that felt normal and his hands hadn’t even started shaking like they usually would.

Mark’s grip on Felix’s head didn’t lessen, and for a moment, Felix leaned into the touch, reminded again of how his mother would comfort him. Mark was somehow connected pretty consistently with Felix’s mother and he wondered if it was because he was making the connection through Mama Bach. Regardless, the second Felix started to almost nuzzle into Mark’s touch, Mark pulled away. Felix listed to the side and almost dropped onto the couch. “What the fuck was that?” he asked, stopping himself with his hand on the cushion beside him.

“Antidote,” Kon said. “Experimental.” Felix let out a noise of panic so Kon hurried to elaborate. “But we’ve had plenty of tests. I would not just inject the Boss’s man with some random gamble of possible death. Antidote has already saved a few lives. Maybe you did not need it, but we did not
want to take chance.”

“Effects from Lovecraft lasting longer than forty-eight hours is unprecedented, but the administration method of Lovecraft was new, so we have no idea what we’re up against,” Mark explained. “I didn’t want Kon telling you what he was injecting you with simply because I knew you would protest. You’re obnoxiously paranoid.”


Mark nodded. “That’s pretty normal. Essentially, Lovecraft is designed to elevate your heart rate into cardiac arrest. The antidote is a mixture of comparatively a base to cancel out certain chemicals within the drug while also slowing down your heart rate and keeping it at optimal levels, delaying the usually deadly symptom. So yes, you will feel a little, well. Lethargic, for lack of a better word. But the effects should pass very quickly.”

“Please don’t ever shoot me up like that again,” Felix said, working his words slowly to make sure he didn’t fuck up in front of Mark. “Just a kind request.”

“We probably should have given that to you sooner,” Mark said offhandedly, like he was more so thinking to himself. “If anything, it’s best to administer the antidote as early as possible, but there could have been side effects we didn’t know of with how the drug was in the air rather than ingested.” Mark frowned and turned to Kon. “Should we consider a different method of the antidote? Felix could have absorbed the drug through his lungs and skin, not the stomach.”

For someone who apparently didn’t know how this shit worked, Mark really acted like he understood what was going on.

“I will look into other methods of administration,” Kon rumbled. “But now, we eat.” Kon left them to go into the kitchen and Mark’s eyes went uncharacteristically wide as he watched closely. He was looking for clues, wasn’t he? A kind of hint.

“I can hardly pronounce it,” Felix told Mark, voice lowered and tongue still a little listless. “Gołąbki and salatka jarzynowa, he said.”

Mark made a face. “Slavic. That’s literally all I can ever conclude. I wish I could actually spell that shit, none of it is written like it sounds. Worse than French.” Mark muttered something unhappy to himself, then pulled another item from the duffel bag before dropping into the armchair that was beside the couch, the chair closer to where Felix was slowly beginning to slouch even more deeply into the plush. The antidote was probably something like really potent weed mixed with laughing gas for how much Felix was being made to relax. He watched tiredly as Mark sat forward and—

Unfolded a logic diagram, finely crafted and color coded. Felix squinted at the thing, trying to picture Mark bent over a desk with a collection of highlighters and colored pens, making this thing that looked worthy of a ribbon at an elementary school science fair. The image had Felix fighting back a laugh. He knew that whatever this was, it was meant to help him. It would be wrong to scoff in the face of that.

“Cry said something,” Felix began as Mark looked over his little diagram with thought. “Thanks for letting me go, by the way. Cry said some shit, but he seems like a good enough person, and he’s likely going to be the only other mob boss that doesn’t want me dead.”

Mark just nodded. “What did he say?”

“He said Jack could, like, present courtship of me?” The words were difficult on Felix’s tongue,
bizarre and almost like a fantasy. “And that if he did that, then certain rules would suddenly apply. Rules that could protect me.” Felix turned his gaze from Mark— who had gone very still— towards the ceiling again. “Jack said he wasn’t going to do it and I said I agree with whatever Jack decides. That’s not foolish to do, right? Jack wouldn’t— I mean, I expect him to put his mission before me, because that’s what you’re supposed to do when fighting to get rid of bad people, but he wouldn’t just ignore the possibility just because he didn’t want to do anything about it, right?”

“If Jack doesn’t want to do it, then he has a good reason,” Mark said with a fair amount of annoyance. “Because I can assure you that he’d love nothing more than to tote you around in front of all those bastards with his ring on your finger and present you as his— fucking whatever he wants you to be.” Mark was scowling, Felix could hear it in his voice. “There are rules for how the families work, Felix, rules that were instated so there could be some sort of fairness to these wars. Anyone coming in and rocking the boat is immediately thrown into the water with all of the sharks.”

Felix nodded. “Is Dante rocking the boat?”

“Not yet,” Mark replied. “But he’s getting close.”

Felix nodded again. “And if he does?”

Mark paused, then heaved a sigh. “Look,” he began. “The way this shit works— when it comes to the families, another family isn’t allowed to touch them, physically. Torture and killing and leaving any sort of mark is just against the rules. Anyone below family is fair game, right? They could feasibly kill me and Jack would have no right to ask for recompense, but if Jack were to kill Dante for fuck all, Vincent would be able to ask for Jack to give up something that is the equivalent to what Dante was. So, Jack could give up me.”

Felix frowned. “But why would you count for family if he fucks up when you didn’t count before?”

“Because it’s all according to the eye of the beholder. What counts as family that isn’t tied by blood or legal bond,” Mark explained. “Because the point of recompense is to make the other person hurt for what they’ve done. But the rules keep Dante from leaving a physical mark on you. The second he does is the second Jack can go to Vincent and appeal for an equal trade.”

Felix frowned. “I thought Jack would have to present me to make me his family in the eyes of the others.”

“Technically, he already has,” Mark said begrudgingly. “Unofficially, but all the same. You’ve met every single one of the other bosses at this point. He was hesitant to allow you to see Cry simple because of how Cry is, but as you’ve met the others, you’ve already been stated as a sort of pseudo family.”

“Then shouldn’t you be pseudo family as well?”

“I’m not the same as you,” Mark said. “Jack doesn’t want to fuck me.”

Felix’s cheeks reddened a little and he cleared his throat awkwardly as he sat up. “So that’s all it takes, then?” he asked. “The intention to court has to be romantic to get me into the family, to get those rules of protection applied to me. It doesn’t work for you because you’re his friend.”

Mark nodded. “I’m expendable in a way that isn’t sacred. Loyalty means a lot between these families, but to them, it’s more loyal to die for the person you’re sworn to. But when it comes to family— then that only brings revenge. The last time someone fucked with a family member, Vincent was told to kill his wife.”
Felix’s eyes went wide. “Did he do it?”

“Absolutely,” Mark replied. “It was Seamus asking for it, after all. Vincent was terrified of Seamus, he would never deny him simply because he knew he wouldn’t survive whatever war Seamus would rage if he did. It’s why the other bosses are tiptoeing around Jack too. Jack isn’t his father, but Jack has his father’s gun.”

Felix bit his lip. “What did Vincent do?”

“It wasn’t what Vincent did, it was what his daughter did,” Mark explained.

“The daughter? Maria?”

Mark nodded. “She saw something she wasn’t supposed to see. For that, Seamus ordered Vincent to kill his wife. And Vincent did, right there, at the dinner table in Seamus’s home.”

Felix felt a little sick. “Please tell me Jack didn’t see it.”

“Then I won’t say anything at all.”

Felix pressed the bottom of his palms into his eyes. “So I’m protected,” he said, working through the information slowly, not letting himself think of what Jack had gone through. He couldn’t emotionally handle that can of worms at the moment.

“To an extent,” Mark hedged. “Thing is, if you were presented formally, you’d be in a whole myriad of troubles, but also with added benefits. Dante wouldn’t be allowed to do the shit he is now. He wouldn’t be able to rig your work and make you see terrible things. He wouldn’t be allowed within a mile of you if Jack said as much. It would be a wider form of protection, something suiting a husband or wife, because that’s what a courtship is intended for. You’d be— you’d be at Jack’s level. You’d be a boss.”

Felix blanched. “Jack wants to make me his mob wife.”

“Something like that.” Mark sat back with a sardonic laugh. “It’s not going to happen. I won’t let it. There are levels to the protection. Children and immediate family are the highest you can get.”

Felix frowned. “Then why did Seamus order the death of Vincent’s wife?”

“Because Maria saw something that had to do with Jack,” Mark replied. “And that’s the most I’m going to tell you on the matter.”

Felix winced and bent forward. “I don’t feel good,” he admitted. His stomach was churning unhappily, meeting that sickness. “Is the antidote supposed to make me wanna puke?”

“That’s probably a ‘you’ problem,” Mark deadpanned. “The antidote is the closest you can get to a nerve suppressant without actually depressing you like alcohol. Whatever nausea you’re feeling is from—” Mark cut himself off and narrowed his eyes. “You have no reason to feel sick or whatever the fuck this is over what happened to Jack. You don’t even know what it was. It’s not your right.”

“He was beaten by his dad,” Felix replied, resting his elbows on his knees to put his head on his hands and breathe. Looked like he was going to face what Jack had been through, whether he wanted to or not. “I can’t even imagine— that’s wrong, I can. I can definitely imagine, and it makes me wanna die.”

“Jack’s not your problem to get sick and die over,” Mark said stiffly. “Stop trying to take his burdens like they’re yours to carry. Pisses me off.”
Felix kicked the leg of the chair Mark was sitting in. “Fuck you,” he grumbled. “I’m a cop. I see shit like this and try to find someone to bring to justice. Seamus is fucking dead and I can’t do anything to him, but there has to be someone out there that Jack’s still afraid of and he doesn’t fucking deserve that. I want every single fucker that ever laid a hand on him arrested. And now that I know Vincent killed his fucking wife in front of Jack? Made him witness that? I want Vincent behind bars for more than just his drug war. I want him to pay for what he’s put Jack through.”

A curious expression came over Mark’s face, and he didn’t say anything for a long moment, before turning back to his diagram. “We have four families,” he said, seemingly done with whatever Felix had been saying. “The Bisognins, the McLoughlins, the Mingyûn, and the Plague Writes. Vincent, Jack, Xiao-Zhi, and Cry. Do you know what they all do?”

Vincent is drugs and murder,” Felix began. Xiao-Zhi is also murder and eclectic sales, I think. Jack is an arms dealer and Cry does, like, bribery and sex shit.”

“Somewhat,” Mark said. “But you’re missing a lot for Xiao-Zhi. The Mingyûn also specialize in trafficking of illegal and rare materials and objects, things not even Cry would touch because Cry has morals.”

“What, like, ivory?” Felix asked.

Mark grimaced. “More like people.” At Felix’s stunned silence, he elaborated. “Prostitution, child labor, sex slaves, organ trafficking— awful things like that.”

Felix remembered something Xiao-Zhi had said to him, a seemingly offhanded comment that now bore a horrible weight. “Very few know this, but my business is people.” “She’s a monster,” Felix said with more certainty than he normally allowed when condemning a person. “Did she— did Jack—”

“Jack hates her and everything she stands for,” Mark assured him. “But unfortunately, she’s harder to touch. She has citizenship with China, not with the states. Bringing her down is an international issue, not just involving the United States. But Vincent and Dante. The entirety of the Bisognins. We aim to bring what they’re doing to an end. From there, then who knows? The Mingyûn may stay or may relocate, but they will be pursued. For now, we want the Bisognins taken down and we will stop at nothing until this goal is accomplished.”

Felix nodded. “Lovecraft is horrifying,” he said softly. “I’m sure you know that.”

“Not as well as you do.” At Felix’s look of surprise, Mark grimaced even deeper. “I’ve seen the effects of Lovecraft, but not to the extent that you have. I know what the drug does, how it affects a person and kills them. I know why it has a cult following and even a religious undertone to it to some. I’ve seen people die from it, but never like you.”

“I’m sure seeing people die is all the same.”

“It’s not,” Mark denied so readily that Felix was thrown. “I’ve seen people die from it, but from a distance. Unfortunate faces that become numbers on a page. You’ve seen it up close and personal in a way few others have. The man in the park, who bled all over you. The people in the club who just—” Mark stopped talking as Felix shut his eyes to breathe through that well of panic. “Well, I suppose I don’t have to jog your memory for that incident.” Mark shook his head. “If anything, I wish I could formally interview you, see if you can help me solidify some of the effects that come from the moments before death.”

“They talk about people they love,” Felix said, brushing through what he remembered to categorize
“People that they love and are suddenly afraid of. The drug makes them act like they’ve got to sacrifice something to the loved one.” Felix swallowed hard. “The woman I was following into the club—her last words were that someone missed her.”

Mark nodded. “It follows what we know,” he told Felix. “The drug itself takes what you love and lulls you into a false sense of security before becoming something that’s beyond your worst nightmares, which causes the cardiac arrest, either from panic or over-exertion in an attempt to flee. But they’re perfecting the drug to cause the death aspect to come much more quickly. It’s going from recreational to murder.”

Felix frowned. “Why?”

“Fuck,” Felix sighed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mark said. “You’re not involved in this.”

“Mark, I legitimately thought the world was ending,” he said. “When all of those people dropped all at once, I thought god had passed over with his rapture and said I wasn’t worthy. I cannot describe how terrifying that was. I want to know everything I can about this drug.”

“I legitimately cannot tell you,” Mark said, and sounding sorry for it. “Even Jack isn’t allowed to know everything.”

Now that was surprising. “But you can?” Felix asked. “What are you hiding?”

“It’s for your own good,” Mark insisted. “Just know that I do not intend to allow those bastards to put you—or anyone else—through something like what you survived ever again. They were testing an effect we’ve never seen before and it’s beyond worrisome. But please know that anything you could learn from me wouldn’t help anyone.”

Felix huffed and dropped back on the couch. His limbs were so relaxed from the antidote and he wondered if it could be used for more than just a cure. He was sure it was a fantastic painkiller if applied correctly. “Have you ever had it?” he asked. “The drug. Have you ever been given it?”

“Thankfully, no.”

Felix nodded. Kon was lumbering around the kitchen, moving dishes and doing something. The smell of the food was permeating every one of Felix’s senses, and he was very hungry. Far hungrier than he’d been a moment before. Maybe that was a side effect as well. In this living room, with this odd sense of home and comfort regardless of the company, Felix was struck with a sudden pain of—


Mark sneered. “Shut the fuck up.”

“We’re talking about this awful drug, but all I can think about is how warm and safe this feels and if Jack has ever gotten to feel something like this,” he continued stubbornly. “Like, did Jack have anything even remotely like a childhood?”

“Rarely,” Mark said. “But sometimes.” He paused, then continued. “I would invite him to family dinners at my place. My mother loves Jack, though she very, very rarely sees him anymore. She asks me about him from time to time, but I just say that I don’t hang around him anymore. She’s sad for it.
She only ever knew Jack to be rich boy McLoughlin, she has no idea what he’s involved in. But Jack and I both agreed that it’s best to leave her out of it. And then you came along.” Mark glared at Felix. “And you just had to ruin everything, didn’t you?”

Felix snorted. “I can’t help that your mom loves me.”

“I absolutely hate you and everything you say.”

Felix rolled his eyes even as a smile tugged at his lips. “I’m glad you gave Jack something good,” he said. “However temporary it was.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Mark said darkly. “It was never enough.”

Felix hated that even Mark thought as much. “How did you meet?”

“He ran away from home one day,” Mark said. “When he was very, very small. Probably about four or five. I’m a year older than him so I’d had some heightened sense of superiority when I found him hiding beneath a playground jungle gym. I’d told him to go home, that only big kids could be out this late, in the rain. That bad people came out at night and that he needed to go back to his parents who would keep him safe.” Mark was silent for a moment. “I don’t even remember what I was feeling when Jack told me that his father was one of the bad bad people.”

Felix’s heart twisted and he felt a little like crying. He’d never seen pictures of Jack as a child, but he could imagine. Those blue eyes on an innocent, young face, body free of scars and blemishes and wrinkles, tiny limbs and fragile bones. How anyone could hurt a child was beyond Felix— how anyone could hurt a child that looked like Jack was just impossible to even consider.

“I brought him home with me because I couldn’t leave him,” Mark said. “Mom made him dinner and gave him warmer clothes. My father came home a few hours later, tried to ask Jack who his parents were and wanted to take Jack to the police station, hopefully get him back home. But Jack ended up running away before he could. He went out the back window of the bathroom, down the fire escape, and then we couldn’t find him.”

Felix choked on a mirthless laugh and shook his head. “So he was always a little shit, wasn’t he?”

Mark smiled sadly and nodded. “He found me again a few days later, talking about being tailed cause he wasn’t allowed to leave someone’s sight and shit. But apparently he was allowed to be around me. Declared us friends and gave me very little choice. Not that I would have said no, mind you, if he’d asked. There’s something about Jack that draws you to him like a moth to a flame. He’s impossible to resist. Maybe it’s the stubbornness, maybe it’s the deadend bravery, maybe it’s the fire in his eyes. I’ve never figured it out, and I’ve given up on understanding. All I know is that I couldn’t leave his side even if I wanted to.”

Felix looked to Mark’s hands. They were folded between Mark’s knees, ling digits twisting together. Felix remembered something Mark had mentioned. “Did you swear yourself to him?”

Mark arched a brow. “Do you even understand what that means?”

He shrugged. “Sounds like how knights swear loyalty to the crown. I’m guessing it’s like that. Kiss the ring, right?”

“Essentially,” Mark replied. “The higher ups in the mafia swear loyalty to the mob boss, down on one knee like some royal ceremony if the boss in question is vain enough. Vincent has formal ceremonies and the like, and anyone beneath him swears loyalty to him, the head Don, and to his Capo Anziano, which is Dante. Beneath that are Dons, who rule over Captains, who rule over
Enforcers, who rule over associates. It’s a hierarchy.” Mark finally was able to point down at his diagrams that showed all the names and the way the others fell beneath it. “Vincent has Dons and Captains swear to him, and anyone beneath them are sworn in by default, but not deemed important enough to meet Vincent. With Vincent, you go into this big room, like a grand hall. Someone says some drivel, and then the person swearing loyalty says an oath, gets on a knee, kisses the rings on Vincents’ fingers, and then signs a contract.”

Felix nodded, marveling over the fact that the mafia was actually willingly creating a paper trail. They were either really stupid in their arrogance, or just as good as they thought themselves to be. “What was yours like?”

“Jack’s not like them,” Mark said softly. “Jack didn’t even want me to swear it. But I did regardless. I came to him in a dark time in his life, fished him out of a hole of despair. Told him what was needed, what had to be done and why. And he took all of the responsibility with his head held high with that same fire in his eyes that even his father couldn’t put out. And then, in the bar I found him in, I swore an oath of loyalty that means more than any oath Vincent could have his men rehearse.”

Felix’s cheeks flushed slightly at the intimacy of the scene Mark was describing. He pictured lowered voices in at a dimly lit bar, drinks in hands, Jack’s weary expression that he sometimes wore when he thought no one was paying close enough attention. Felix imagined Mark leaning in close, lips brushing Jack’s ears to swear his soul into Jack’s hands and the way Jack’s face would twist with combating pain and deference. How Jack likely wouldn’t know what to do with such a raw statement of fealty in such a public place. The image of Mark being the one to bring such emotion to Jack’s face had Felix’s heart twisting uncharacteristically. But if he put himself in Mark’s place it felt —

“Should I swear my loyalty to him?” he asked Mark. When Mark stiffened, Felix felt like he had to explain. “He has it,” he told Mark. “You’ve seen it, I’ve acted on that loyalty many times. But does he need to hear it? Has Tyler sworn it? Kon? The others?”

“They have sworn it,” Mark said carefully. “But not like I did. And it doesn’t mean the same thing. More like what Vincent does, but less formal. They don’t kiss the rings because Jack doesn’t like the rings. The rings his father wore. But you don’t need to swear it. If you did, it would only further complicate things. And it would hurt him.”

Felix didn’t have to ask why it would hurt Jack. He clenched his teeth and hated himself just a little more. “I won’t, then,” he said. “I guess because I don’t really understand what it entails. It wouldn’t be right for me to do something like that without understanding it.” He still felt some lingering wrench in his chest when picturing himself murmuring words into Jack’s ear in a bar, but he knew he shouldn’t push, for his own wellbeing and Jack’s. “He knows he has my loyalty,” Felix said confidently. “I don’t have to say it. I’ve proved it often enough.”

"That you have," Mark said unhappily. “And with a grand suicidal nature that only Jack could somehow find appealing.”

“Jack screamed in my face when I pulled a jumper down from a bridge,” Felix reminded Mark. “I don’t think he’s found my suicidal bravery appealing at all.”

“You would think that,” Kon’s booming voice suddenly said from behind Felix just as a bowl of food was lowered into his line of sight. Something like dumplings and an egg salad? Maybe, except the dumpling wrap looked more like cabbage and the cold salad was much more red than he’d expect. “Jack is quite contradictory. He likes suicidal bravery so long as it’s not someone he cares about who is ready to die. You should be more careful before you give him a heart attack. Now eat. Is good.”
Felix was fucking famished. “Is there gonna be a quiz?” he asked Mark idly. “I haven’t taken a quiz since I took the SWAT test.”

“Which you got into.” Mark shook his head, looking even more unhappy. “Fucking ESU. You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“The only person proud of me for that is Sarge and Sive,” Felix huffed. “I haven’t even told my parents yet.”

“If they’re anything like your sister, then just don’t.” Mark took his plate of food and started to eat, his expression morphing slowly in thought like he believed he could taste ethnicity and culture. “Your family sucks, Felix.”

“My nephew is nice,” Felix said as he ate as well. “Holy shit, this is good.”

“You’re falling deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole,” Mark told him. “Maybe you should do as I had to do and start considering distancing yourself from your family, whether you like it or not. It’s a dangerous word out here, Felix. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to Arnold.”

Felix’s blood ran cold at the thought and suddenly his hunger was turned off like a switch. Kon sat down beside him and ate as well, turning on the TV to some random news channel. There had been some rally downtown and police were expected to arrive to get a handle on things. Mark shook his head, said something about living in a constant state of panic, and Felix stared down at the red in his food and the smell of cooked meat, the echo of bodies dropping and one of those bleeding faces suddenly becoming Arnold’s and—

Felix drop the plate of food and flung himself over the back of the sofa, retching stomach acid onto the carpet behind.

“Ah,” Kon said offhandedly. “I suppose nausea truly is a side effect.”
“I’m so sorry,” Felix said the moment he went into the Flatiron and Marzia’s eyes lifted to see him. He’d slept at his own place for the first time in the past few days last night, and the sleep itself hadn’t been restful, but he hadn’t had any sort of nightmare, so there was nothing to keep him from facing the music and facing his girlfriend. “I, I had some shit go down at work,” he said as he approached the counter, head ducked, ashamed with himself for having forgotten her for so long. “It’s not excuse. I didn’t ever even check my phone, I left you in the dark, and I was—”

Felix jumped when there were hands on his face, pulling him to look somewhere else. Felix only had a moment to recognize Marzia had come around the counter before she was kissing him, lip-gloss tasting of strawberry, soft and slick against his. Felix melted into the kiss, letting himself take some dredge of comfort from this, and ignoring the way his heart was hammering. It didn’t last long enough before Marzia was pulling back to look to him with a twist in her brow.

“I went to your Sergeant when I couldn’t reach you,” she said. “He didn’t tell me what happened, but he told me enough.” Marzia shook her head, eyes shining. “Felix, I am so. Sorry. I, I read about the incident in the paper. What you went through— What you saw—”

“Don’t make me talk about it,” Felix choked out, hyperaware of where he was. He couldn’t flay his heart alive for this woman in the middle of a coffee shop. Too many eyes, too many variables, too many people he couldn’t trust. He had no idea if he had any sort of actual tail that was playing with his life like a puppet on strings. He knew Kon had eyes on him from across the street inside an innocuous Chevy, he knew he was being watched from a safe distance, but what if it was too far away? And what if something was bigger than Kon? The thoughts alone had Felix losing even more of his confidence and he clung to Marzia all too tellingly. Marzia looped her arms around his neck and went up on her toes to pull his head into her chest, cradling him close.

“I can leave early,” she said softly into his ear.

“Don’t,” Felix said. “You need your paycheck, right?” She’d told him once that, regardless of the wealth of her parents, she was living off of the work she did for herself. “Just stay, finish out your shift. I’m gonna— I’ll get a booth and just hang out. I don’t mind waiting. Or if you want me to leave?”

“Don’t you dare,” she denied. “I don’t want you out of my sight.” She pulled back to level him with a stern glare, her dark eyes fiercely protective. Felix’s heart swelled and he smiled shakily in response. “You go sit down,” she ordered. “I will bring you a drink— no espresso! You look like you haven’t slept right in ages.” She went up on her toes to kiss him again before pulling away and making laser eyes at him with her two fingers. “Go sit!”

Felix nodded and obediently went to a lonely table in the corner, one of the few empty seats. As he sunk into the chair, he looked out the window and saw that red Chevy Kon had pointed out that was his own. It was parked across the street and Felix could almost think he saw someone sitting inside, though he couldn’t tell who. The paranoia was twisting his perception. He knew it was Kon, it had to be. Who else could? But what if someone had hurt Kon? What if someone had killed him and taken his place?

His phone buzzed and the name “Cruella” flashed across the screen. It took Felix a moment to remember that this was Kon’s number and Jack was probably still under “Pup.” Felix chewed on his lip before checking the message.
Felix was going to kill Kon himself. He looked up and glared at the red Chevy, didn’t bother deeming the message with a response. But he kept the messaging app open and looked.

Yeah, Jack was still under pup.

Felix hadn’t texted Jack since he’d assured Jack he was happy to have him for his birthday. That was probably only a week or less ago, but it felt like ages away. He’d asked Jack to tell him once he’d landed, as people would do with their friends, but Jack hadn’t done so. Felix had left it for a day, figuring Jack just didn’t want to be the one to overstep boundaries even though Felix had invited him to do so. It was strange. Felix had thought Jack would be so excited to take advantage of having Felix has a friend, as it was something he’d said he’d wanted, but it seemed like how Jack defined friendship was very different from how Felix defined it. Still. Felix wasn’t going to back down. Not completely.

you didn’t tell me when you’d landed

Felix hadn’t at all expected Jack to answer— Cartagena was in the same time zone as New York City, but that meant it was nearly lunch for Jack, which meant he would probably be on some sort of business meeting that most mob bosses did in rather harmless restaurants, speaking in code— so he was surprised by the three little dots that sprung up almost immediately in the corner, followed by a message.

[it was l8 didnt want 2 bother u]

Of course Jack would speak in broken down text. Felix found himself smiling at the words, finding it almost sweet. i want you to bother the fuck out of me he responded, figuring Jack would get some sort of laugh from that. Unless it was too sexual? Fuck, it was way too sexual, Felix wished he could delete messages before Jack read it, but the three dots were already dance in the bottom left again.

[jsus felina try not 2 be so obvi]

Calling Felix Felina was unexpected, but somehow seemed like something that should have occurred to Felix. Of course he would still be Felina, especially over such a public device. Felix found himself almost smiling at the name, finding it was growing on him in the weirdest way. Jack had been so concerned about him that he’d gone as far as thinking up a fake name. Sure, Dante had already broken the code, but he’d meant well. Felix wondered what the name was for and why Jack had given it to him. Then he realized— he was friends with Jack. He could just ask.

where did you get felina from?

There was a pause, then the three dots came up again. Felix hummed and sat back, watching the little dots dance, imaging Jack sitting in some airy, sunlit restaurant with waves crashing beyond him, dressed in light clothes with sunglasses perched on his nose. He was probably bent forward into his phone with a cool drink at his elbow, shorts and flip flops, relaxed and warm. Felix found himself smiling wide at the scene he was painting in his head, enjoying the idea of Jack being on a vacation even if he insisted it wasn’t. Felix hoped he would get to see Jack in such a relaxed state in person.

The message finally came, and it was an image. A small black kitten drawn in an older style, looking like it was from the the forties or fifties. It was next to what looked like a fairy and Felix had no idea what it was from.

you named me after a cat?
Felina is the name of the kitten from the magical mimics in Oz, my favorite book from when I was a kid.

Felix’s heart fucking melted. Jack had named him after his favorite childhood book? What the fuck was that except fucking adorable and beyond anything Felix rightfully deserved? Felix felt like he hadn’t had much reason to be kind to Jack back in the beginning, when things had first started to go wrong, but he still felt a little like an asshole when Jack had named him after something so near and dear to his heart. And not a lot of Jack’s childhood had been good, from what Felix had learned, so to be put in with one of the few good things was just—it meant a lot more than he could understand.

I like it

Jack didn’t respond and Marzia sat down with a mug of coffee for Felix. Felix gratefully took it, though his thoughts were still on his lack of response from Jack. Had he said the wrong thing? Maybe Felix had overstepped a boundary by putting himself into Jack’s life and childhood by association. Except Jack had been the one to make the connection, so it couldn’t be Felix’s fault. Except the mentality of an abused child was usually a little—rough. Even though Felix couldn’t make a connection of his own fault, Jack probably could. Felix made a mental note to pick up a few books on handling adults that suffered childhood abuse on his way home.

“I cannot believe you thought I’d be upset,” Marzia said unhappily as she sat across from him after pulling off her apron. “After what you went through. I would never—Felix, you can always come to me.” She looked at him across from the table, gaze severe. “I am not going to be like whoever else you have been with who thought only of themselves and expected you to do the same. I understand your work will cause you to see some things normal people would not be able to handle. Please do not expect yourself to be anything above human in my eyes. You take all the time you need and know I will always be here whenever you are able to come back.”

Felix was blown away by her declaration and—couldn’t help but think of Jack. And the thought sat sourly in his stomach. He was with Marzia, his girlfriend, he shouldn’t be thinking of the other man. Neither Mariza nor Jack deserved it. “Thank you,” he told Marzia sincerely. “I really, really do appreciate it.” He didn’t want to say the girls he’d been with before had been bad, but they hadn’t been nearly as understanding. Marzia was definitely her own kind of special and Felix wasn’t about to take her for granted. “Thank you,” he said again. “I just—it isn’t something I think I can talk about.” Getting shot up with whatever Mark and Kon had given him yesterday was keeping the shakes away, and he could breathe when he breached the thought of what he’d seen, but he still wasn’t about to delve into and pick himself apart. “It was pretty awful.”

Marzia nodded solemnly. “It sounds like it.”

“I, uh, hope I didn’t worry you,” Felix said, even though he knew he had. Kon had said she’d come to check on him twice at his home, and both times he’d been absent. He was lucky Marzia wasn’t accusing him of cheating.

“I went to your precinct, met your partner again,” Marzia said. “He told me you were not with him, so I went to your home to try and find you, but I don’t think you were there either.”

Fuck. “I was with William,” Felix hedged carefully. “Which, I— I should tell you.”

Marzia sat back. “That is the boy your sister said is in love with you.”

Felix wasn’t sure if Fanny had ever gotten that far in her accusations, but at least he wouldn’t have to find a way to tell Marzia. “I swear, nothing happened.”

“You’re not gay, Felix,” Marzia said with a snort, something almost like a laugh. “I am not
concerned. But I do wish to know why you went to him and not me.”

“He’s studying criminal forensics,” Felix said, thinking on his feet for this lie. “I wanted to try to understand what I saw, so he gave me a crash course on cardiac arrest and drug overdose and shit. It was just for learning. Then he ordered pizza and I slept on his couch for two nights. It was— it was good for me. He’s a good friend and I’m grateful to have him. I’m so sorry for neglecting you, though, I should have thought of you and I have no excuse for the fact that I didn’t.”

Marzia looked to him with a sad shake of her head. “Please do not blame yourself for the things you cannot control. The human mind, when afraid and broken by what it has seen, is unpredictable. Surely you understand that.”

Felix did, he’d said as much himself. People did stupid things when they were afraid and it was a fact he lived his life by. He didn’t take offense to the people screaming in his face when he was confronting aggressors, didn’t think much of the horrible insults that were spat into his face by people that had expected him to come sooner or do better. He had rationalized away the hurt long ago. But he’d never really considered to extend the same understanding to himself.

Marzia reached out and laid her hand over Felix’s. “Come back to me,” she beckoned softly. “I don’t like the places you head must go when you leave me like this.”

God, fuck, Felix was pretty sure he was in love with this girl and he could do nothing about it. Simultaneously, he felt such guilt. If he could fall in love with Marzia, why couldn’t he fall in love with Jack?

“I don’t have any plans for today,” he said, turning his hand over to take hers and squeeze gently. He’d already said he didn’t want her to take off early, but then he’d had to tell her about choosing to be with someone else to cope and that— “I’ve changed my mind. Will you spend some time with me? I can pay for whatever income you miss by leaving early.”

“I’ll ask Jen,” Marzia said, perking up. “She worships you, after all, she always asks about you.”

“Yeah, I really don’t like that.”

“You don’t like Jenna?”

“Don’t like being worshiped.”

Marzia tutted and tapped Felix’s wrist with her other hand in playful admonishment. “At least accept gratitude for the good you have done.” She stood and ran her hands over the front of her shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles. It was a gorgeous baby blue blouse with shaped, white slacks and delicate flats. Felix absolutely loved how put together Marzia always looked because it made her seem like she was capable of handling all of the ways Felix was going to fall apart. “I will ask to leave my shift early and don’t you dare try to give me money for it. I enjoy seeing you and I can afford to miss out a little.”

She bent down gracefully and pressed her glossed lips to his temple. Felix let his eyes fall shut for a split second and leaned into the touch, overwhelmed by the comfort it gave him. He didn’t want to be entirely selfish and take everything from her, but sometimes he wished he could bottle up the comfort she gave him and carry it with him everywhere for whenever he needed the relief.

Then Marzia pulled away— all too soon— and sent him a kind smile while she said, “I will be back in a moment.” Felix watched her go and— god fucking dammit, Kon was right, she did have a really nice butt. Felix snorted at his own embarrassment in appreciating his girlfriend’s ass. It wasn’t like he
hadn’t made out with her on his couch more than once. He should be allowed to check her out. But Kon— Kon definitely was not allowed.

Felix’s phone buzzed. He looked down and read: [wish th name had worked]

That— that just didn’t seem fair. Felix glanced up and saw he had a moment before Marzia would be back. So he typed rapidly and sent the message before putting his phone away for the rest of his day, intending to give Marzia his full attention, as she deserved.

it doesn’t matter if it worked or not you had the intentions and they were good and i’m not at all upset about what has come from all of this because (as i’ve said before) i do not regret saving you

i feel undeserving of being named after something so important to you

do not think for a moment that i don’t understand the measure of what you’ve given me in giving that name and i want you to know that it means a lot to me and that i’ll bear the name with pride

have a good day william ;)

. . .

Felix spent his day with Marzia and that felt so fucking good to finally be able to do again. He’d taken her to Central Park and they’d walked, looking at the clouds and trying to predict when the weather would turn from rain to snow. From there, Marzia had brought him The Corner Bookstore, a little place that was within walking distance of the park. She’d wrangled from him his desire to pick up a few books on a topic he was wary to name, so once they’d ducked inside, out of the cold, Marzia had slyly pat his arm and wandered off to the fashion/art section and told him to find her when she was done.

Felix appreciated the tact, but now he had to find a way to the psychology and make himself not look like a huge fucking creep. He wasn’t sure what kind of judgements people could draw from him being in this section, just some random older man researching child abuse, but he couldn’t draw any great ones himself.

Felix wandered around the store, looking for the section, pretty lost and unable to admit it. He passed a tired looking employee, a man about his age, who smiled politely at Felix and asked if he needed help. Felix smiled back and said no because he didn’t have the guts to put what he needed into the air. He kept searching and stumbled across a myriad of things he had never even considering, including—

A copy of The Magical Mimics of Oz.

Felix eyed it, saw how fragile the binding was, how old the book had to be, how big the price tag was for a first edition. He wondered if Jack’s copy had been a first edition? If it wasn’t, Felix’s first thought was to give him this one. Felix pulled the book carefully from the shelf and decided to buy it. Then he went back to wandering.

He knew he was getting close when he left the fictional sections in return for self help and personal things. He came across collections of biographies and autobiographies, self help books, relationship issues, gay sex—

Felix stopped short as his eyes went over titles for gay and lesbian relationships and essentially how to have sex. Felix’s eyes latched onto one particular novel called A Billionaire Dinosaur Forced Me Gay by Hunter Fox and Felix blanched. Yet he couldn’t move on. The Gay Man’s Kama Sutra, Sex Tips for Gay Guys, The Joy of Gay Sex. Felix’s cheeks were bright red and he felt vaguely
uncomfortable, standing in front of this section, unable to pull away. He didn’t care if anyone saw him and thought he was gay, but he was a private person. He didn’t want people knowing his sex life regardless of who he was having sex with. But—

Felix had always been told he’d make a good detective because of his inability to deny himself the dig. Looking into tiny bits of information, fighting to understand something he couldn’t from just the surface, an endless search for knowledge, whether he actually wanted to know or not. And Cry had talked about sex with Jack like it was something fantastic. Felix realized his knowledge on gay sex was actually quite limited. Shouldn’t he learn about it? One of his friends was gay, he liked being able to understand his friends. And since he couldn’t very well ask just anyone…

Felix grabbed the *Gay Kama Sutra* one before he could think twice and then moved on quickly, head ducked. He had been on the right track and finally found the section he’d come here for in the first place. The section itself was small and focused mainly on abuse victims that were currently younger, but Felix managed to find a book he thought would work. *Treating Survivors of Child Abuse: Psychotherapy for the Interrupted Life* by Marylene Cloitre, Lisa Cohen, and Karestan Koenen. He’d skimmed it and found a lot of helpful things for coping techniques and navigating conversations. The book repeatedly emphasized the need for professional therapy, but Felix knew Jack would never go for that. Felix would have to do his best for Jack on his own.

Felix had his books and went to quickly check out, studiously ignoring the gaze of the clerk. He knew that grocery store checkout clerks didn’t care about what you bought, but books said a lot more about a person than the food they bought. *Wizard of Oz*, child abuse, and gay sex. God, Felix would almost expect to have the cops called on him. He took the bag that obscured the titles and went to find Marzia.

She was in the sewing section, sitting primly in a chair with an old book in her hands, looking every bit like she belonged in a magazine. Felix lingered and took a moment to look, a small smile coming to his face. She was gorgeous, curled up in her chair, knees up and feet off the ground, hair falling around her face as she read. Felix’s breath caught and he meant to say something when there was a voice behind him.

“You want to explain those purchases to me, Officer Kjellberg?”

Hearing Mark in this otherwise lax environment had Felix nearly jumping a foot in the air. Felix clutched a hand to his chest, trying to calm his suddenly racing heart, as he whirled around to face the man who had nearly given him a fucking heart attack. “Jesus christ,” he wheezed. “What the fuck is your problem?”

Mark looked oddly normal, dressed casually in a hoodie and jeans with his hair slightly more unruly and wild around his face, a pair of rimless glasses settled delicately on his nose. Felix was actually a little astounded to know Mark even owned clothing like this, as he’d always worn either a suit or some sort of business casual get up whenever Felix saw him. Ordinary looked good on him. Mark was holding a to-go mug of something, one of those personalized ceramic mugs with this one being decorated by various word art of expletives, exclamations and interjections, his eyes cast down at the bag in Felix’s hand. How would he know what Felix had bought? How long had he been behind Felix?

“I’m waiting, Officer,” Mark said, voice low and cool and almost cocky. So he definitely did know what Felix had bought. Well, fuck— how was he going to explain this?

“I didn’t think you’d be here,” Felix said.

“I thought you wanted me to meet your girlfriend,” Mark shot back. “Or would you rather I not?”
Felix didn’t even have to think about that. “No, I do,” he said. “I want you to meet her. Maybe even Tyler someday. “But, uh.” Felix hesitated, wary of Marzia just behind him, who was probably engrossed in her book, but still not necessarily far enough away. “I don’t want— William meeting her.”

Something flickered in Mark’s eyes. “William,” he repeated slowly, not giving anything away. “Of course. Wouldn’t want to put William through anything more difficult than what he’s already gone through.” At least Felix knew Mark had caught on to who William was. Maybe William really was Jack’s real name. “Well, since we’re in the range of concern for dear William, why don’t we go back to those things you’ve purchased?”

Felix winced. “Look,” he said. “Two out of three doesn’t mean anything.”

“You bought the book containing your name, the book for a friend’s current psychological predicament, and the book of curious sins,” Mark said. Felix squinted a little and tried to figure out why Mark was calling the gay Kama Sutra a sin. “It’s not a slur,” Mark said with a roll of his eyes that looked painful. “But anyone owning a Kama fucking Sutra is into some sort of weird shit in my eyes. Who needs a book to learn how to have sex when we have instructive video?”

Felix’s cheeks went bright red and he found he he couldn’t answer. Mark rolled his eyes even harder and nodded his head past Felix. “She’s pretty,” he said. “Can’t imagine what made her settle for you.”

At this point, Felix didn’t know whether to take Mark’s jabs as sincere or not. He struggled to work it out when Mark suddenly let out this soft noise and lifted his phone, holding it out and— snapping a picture of Felix. “Sorry,” Mark said. “But William doesn’t trust you to tell him the truth about your wellbeing, and has tasked me with sending photographic evidence of you still being alive. So I’ll be taking a daily photo of you simply to ensure his peace of mind.”

Felix made a face. “Can I at least make sure it isn’t a bad picture?”

“I can promise you I intend to only take bad pictures.” Felix made more of face and resisted the urge to flip Mark off while Mark raised a brow. “I would think you would want me to make you look as horrible as possible. After all— that book means absolutely nothing, doesn’t it? So of course you don’t want me to make you look attractive, right?”

“Do you realize you have a worse attitude problem than a thirteen year old girl that suddenly thinks she’s hot shit because she got her period?”

Mark’s expression flickered and he pursed his lips, then shut his eyes, cocking his head a certain way. Felix realized he was trying not to laugh. “I despise you,” Mark said, his voice strained. “Introduce me before I think your manners are worse off than I’d ever suspected.”

“I’m fucking delightful,” Felix said. He turned and looked to where Marzia was still reading, her brow pinched with concentration. Felix couldn’t see what she was reading, but it had to be good to be keeping her attention so intensely. Felix approached her cautiously, cleared his throat when he was a foot away. Marzia jumped and made to close the book, before stopping when she looked up and saw him.

“Felix, you scared me,” she admonished with a sigh. “Wouldn’t a cop know not to sneak up on someone like that?”

“You would think,” Mark said dryly from behind. Marzia sat up straight at the sound of the foreign voice. She cleared her voice and untucked her legs from beneath her, saving face.
“Hello,” Marzia said, her tone guarded. “Do we know you?”

Felix tried not to feel giddy at Marzia using the grand “we” and jerked his thumb back at Mark. “This guy’s a friend of mine,” he said.

“Or something like it,” Mark intoned.

“We just ran into each other,” Felix continued, ignoring Mark’s sass. “I figured it would be nice for you two to meet.”

“No pressure,” Mark added with a placid smile, and fuck, Felix hadn’t thought about how unfair it was to spring this on Marzia. She was a well-mannered lady, she’d probably preferred some sort of warning. Maybe she would want to get better dressed like Felix’s previous girlfriends would have. Felix hadn’t thought of this. He thought Marzia always looked perfect.

“No pressure,” Marzia echoed with the beginnings of a smile, standing gracefully. “Felix never means any harm when he does these sorts of things and I never see any harm in it in the first place.” She brightened that smile and directed it at Felix. “To be honest, I was wondering why I haven’t met your friends. We’ve been together almost two months. That means a lot in this day and age.”

“Two happy months, I’m sure,” Mark said. He extended his hand and pulled on the most pleasant smile Felix had ever seen on his face. “I’m Mark,” he said. “Friend of Felix’s, as said before. We met while he was on a shift.”

“You’re an officer?” Marzia asked, shaking his hand.

“No, no, EMT,” Mark said. “Driver, mainly, so if you ever need a skilled getaway driver, I’m the next closest thing. But I also know how to stitch up a fatal wound or two if Felix here ever makes a fool of himself.”

“Felix?” Marzia scoffed, waving her hand like she didn’t believe that could happen, but now her smile was directed at Mark. “Never. How could this man ever be foolish? Maybe you’re referring to swinging off the bridge? Or that homeless man in the park?”

“How about just every other decision he makes,” Mark replied with a smooth little chuckle. Felix was a little too stunned by how charming Mark could be to defend himself. He felt a little like he was in the Twilight Zone as Maria and Mark laughed and traded moments of Felix being an idiot, though all of Mark’s were fake and not at all fair to Felix’s character. He would never approach a wild dog without at least some sort of proper protection, and definitely not in a t-shirt and shorts.

“How about just every other decision he makes,” Mark replied with a smooth little chuckle. Felix was a little too stunned by how charming Mark could be to defend himself. He felt a little like he was in the Twilight Zone as Maria and Mark laughed and traded moments of Felix being an idiot, though all of Mark’s were fake and not at all fair to Felix’s character. He would never approach a wild dog without at least some sort of proper protection, and definitely not in a t-shirt and shorts.

“Of course, he did make the rather genius decision to ask you out,” Mark said after effectively murdering Felix’s person.

“Oh, he didn’t, I did,” Marzia corrected. “He had come into the shop several times after I started working and I thought he was, well.” She shrugged and her smile became delicate. “He was cute. And he was brave. I’d always had a thing for men in uniform, and he seemed like all of the best of both worlds. I found myself very much—infatuated. And that was before we ever dated. I felt very lucky when he accepted.”

Mark scoffed. “As much as I enjoy mocking Felix, even I don’t think he’s stupid enough to turn down a girl like you. He’s an officer, after all, we like to hope they have some measure of intelligence.” Mark looked pleased with himself as Maria giggled. He gestured for the chair Marzia had once been in and sat in one of the lounge chairs beside it, setting his coffee down on the little table between the chairs. “So tell me about yourself.”
As it turned out, Mark could be a genuinely pleasant human being if he cared enough to try, and
Felix felt cheated to know that maybe Mark did genuinely hate him. Why else would he not act as
caring and gentle as he was with Marzia, nodding along earnestly as she told him her current story of
work and school and dreams, letting out soft words of encouragement that would follow the
prompting Felix gave as well— follow her dreams because she’d outlive her parents. Felix wished
Mark would talk to him and treat him like he treated Marzia. Like how he knew he treated Jack,
because Felix suddenly remembered that quiet moment in Jack’s penthouse he had spied, when he’d
listened to Jack’s fears and failures about falling in love. Mark had been so kind then. Felix
wondered why he wasn’t allowed to be treated like this.

Maybe it really was the cop thing.

Felix came out of his musings and back into the present in time to see Mark and Marzia trading
numbers. He watched calmly, figuring that was a smart move. If anything ever happened to Felix, it
would be smart to be able to call his significant other, even if she had no medical jurisdiction. Felix
suddenly realized he should give Mark and Jack and Tyler his parents’ numbers and maybe even
Fanny’s, in case of any sort of emergency. He knew that if he didn’t die on the force, they’d expect
some sort of explanation, even if it was from an anonymous dialer.

“It was delightful to meet you,” Mark said. “But I must admit, I was well on my way to something
else.”

“Oh, so soon?” Marzia pouted. “Where are you going? I actually enjoyed hearing about your work,
however gruesome it can be. You don’t have to go to work, do you?”

“Oh, no, not tonight,” Mark said. “I’m actually going to see my mother.”

While Felix suddenly felt a sort of giddiness to know Mark was going to see Mama Bach, Marzia’
expression shuttered. She probably didn’t have a good relationship with her mother, the poor girl.
“Have fun,” she said diplomatically, sounding like she wanted to avoid all conversation about
mothers. “And please— keep an eye on Felix for me. I can’t exactly follow him on his shift, so I trust
you’ll be there to rush him to any hospital needed.”

“I’ll do my job, ma’am,” Mark said with a playful wink that had Marzia giggling again and Felix
wondering if Mark had some sort of personality disorder. “Don’t worry— we’ll always make sure
your boy comes home safe.”

Mark stood from his chair, took his coffee, bid goodbye to Marzia and then whispered to Felix as he
left, “I expect you to explain that fucking book, Officer.” Then he was ducking out and back into the
city, like he’d never been here at all, except for the way Marzia couldn’t stop smiling, Felix felt really
fucking good about that meeting, regardless of how he’d condemned himself with the purchases he’d
made.

“I like him,” Marzia said. “He seems very friendly, like Officer Osman. You have good friends,
Felix.” She paused. “Will I ever meet William?”

Felix winced. “I don’t think so,” he said, hedging carefully. “Not because he’s my dirty little secret,
but— I don’t make a habit of hurting people if I can avoid it.”

He expected Marzia to be upset, but her smile only became sad, and she nodded like she agreed.
“Unrequited love can be a terrible thing,” she said, stunning Felix a little with her understanding. He
also felt very lucky that she wasn’t mad or jealous. “I wouldn’t want to hurt him either. But please,
let him know that I do want to meet him, regardless.” She looked down at her hands in her own lap.
“I— know you live a big life. With a lot of people. I’d like to be part of it, if you let me.”
Felix was slammed with the need to kiss this girl. He went and stood in front of her chair, cupping her cheek to gently lift her face so he could bend down and do just that. Marzia pressed up into the touch of their lips, a soft noise escaping her that had Felix’s heart pounding. “You’re part of my life in a way no one else can be,” he assured her after pulling away only an inch. “I’m happy to bring you into all corners of the rest of it.”

Marzia beamed up at him and then stood, pecking his lips once more before walking past. “Let’s get going,” she told him. “I’d rather not be caught in the rain just yet and I’d like to take you to dinner.” She spun slowly on her heel as she moved to the checkout, watching Felix like she didn’t want to look away, before smiling at the clerk and paying for the book she wanted.

As Felix went to the door, he chanced a glance, and saw she was had bought a book about Entactogenic effects. He thought nothing of it and opened the door for her with a bow as they left.

He was tired by the end of his day, what else was he to expect? Marzia preferred to walk, it seemed, and while Felix normally wouldn’t mind considering how much he was used to being on his feet thanks to his job, he’d still found himself a little weary by the end of it all. It wasn’t like he hadn’t enjoyed Marzia and he hadn’t had a nice dinner and he hadn’t felt more normal than he ever thought he could within the week, but—

It felt oddly like he was faking it. Like he was delaying the inevitable with some horrible mask of happiness and that the mask was going to slip away at any second. He was reminded of the time he’d worn a physical mask, when he’d first met Dante and had royally fucked up the rest of his current life, all because Dante had been able to recognize him as someone important to Jack. If only Felix had just bided his time and waited for Jack to be able to come to him. He shouldn’t have gone to that stupid party.

That was the first time Felix had regretted the party. Regret was such an odd thing for him to feel. Felix believed in making decisions based on his gut, because his gut was normally the thing he could trust. Sometimes things went wrong, but he’d at least be able to say he’d done what he’d thought was best at the time. He rarely regretted the things he chose to do because he knew he wouldn’t survive this life if he did. He couldn’t afford to feel regret. It would just make it hard for him to make those gut decisions next time.

That being said, Felix regretted going to that party and he hated it. Because he knew that would keep him from making the right decisions later, which was the last thing he wanted, especially when it came to Jack. Any hesitation on his part could get Jack in even more trouble than he had in the past, like when Jack had been forced to actually negotiate for Felix’s life after Summers. Felix wasn’t supposed to be doing stupid things and he couldn’t afford to regret and second guess. He just— he wished he hadn’t even gone to that fucking party.

Felix set his bag of books aside and studiously refused to look at the titles. He shouldn’t feel ashamed of two of them, but he couldn’t help it. Mark had been so adamant that he was going to get some answers from Felix for them, and Felix probably needed to think of some sort of excuse, but he wasn’t sure how to explain away a Gay Kama Sutra when—

Felix made himself stop thinking and focused on undressing, pulling his shirt off from over his head. The button up was drenched at this point, Marzia loving her walks, even in the rain if she didn’t give enough of a shit. Felix smiled to himself as he remembered the way she’d turned her head up towards the sky and let the rain fall upon her skin, careless of her makeup or clothes. She was from a higher class than Felix, but she was just as real as anyone else, and Felix loved her for it.
That was another thing Felix was finding easier to trust his gut on. He loved Marzia. He’d known her long enough to get a good idea of her person and her thoughts and her ways. She wasn’t like the other girls he’d been with. She understood what he did and what he had to sacrifice. She didn’t expect things from him that he couldn’t give and that— that was a level of forgiveness for who Felix was that he hadn’t expected, but was so fucking grateful to have. Felix smiled even wider with that warmth curling in his gut and he almost wished he’d invited Marzia to his home, but—

He pulled out his phone, checked the time, figured he’d given Jack long enough to take the initiative himself. Felix was sure Jack wasn’t comfortable enough to do things on his own and he figured he’d have to do it himself, but he’d still wanted to give Jack the chance. At least give Jack some semblance of power in a situation. But for now, Felix would be the first to take that step, if only to show Jack that it was okay.

He stripped down to his boxers and went into his bedroom, searching for something comfy to wear as he brought the number up and then brought the phone to his ear. It rang three times as he searched around his closet, feeling a little cold in so little, but for the first time comfortable enough to be normal in his own home. He had no idea why. Maybe it was because he was getting off of the high of feeling normal and he knew he had Mark’s eyes on his home and— well, hopefully, he was about to have Jack in his ear.

Fuck, now Felix was thinking about it. There was a moment of panic in his chest, constricting him and stealing his air. Mark had eyes on him, but what if someone else did? What if there were new cameras? What if Dante was up to something else? Jack was gone, what if Felix—

“Hello?”

Jack’s voice in his ear brought Felix back to the present, and he found himself literally hidden in his own closet, tucked in between hanging clothes, the doors shut, his world dark. He felt a little dazed as he looked around and wondered how he’d gotten in here so suddenly. Then he felt silly.

“Who’s there?”

“Fuck,” Felix said softly. He ran a hand over his face and internally cringed at how he’d acted in that split second of insanity. There was this echo in his ears. Jack called out one last time and Felix finally had the sense to respond. “It’s me,” he told Jack, wincing. “I, uh. Sorry? Didn’t expect you to pick up so quickly.”

A horrible lie. “Why do ye’ sound like you’re in a bad way?” Jack asked, of course being smart enough to see right through him. “Ye’ weren’t breathing right. What’s wrong?” There was a shuffle, like someone else was moving around. “I’ll get Mark.”

“For fuck’s sake, please don’t get Mark,” Felix said. “I just— got a little freaked out.” He wet his lips and looked around in his dark closet, knowing full well he was a fucking idiot. “I kinda just had a moment of panic and basically hid in my closet. Everything’s fine.”

There was a pause on Jack’s end, then something that almost— sounded like a laugh. “Are ye’ still in the closet, Felix? Trust me, I can help ye’ with that.”

It took him a moment to get the joke, and when he did, Felix couldn’t help but roll his eyes even as his chest began to slowly unknot. “Fuck off,” he said, pushing the doors open just a little, sweeping his eyes across his bedroom. It was still dark, as Felix had only thought to turn on his bedside lamp once coming in here. He looked out the window, saw one light was on in Kon’s home. He had eyes on him, the right set of eyes. He’d be fine. “That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard.”
“Why are ye’ calling me, Felina?”

“I said I would,” Felix told him as he stepped out carefully from his closet, once again hyperaware of how little clothing he was wearing. “I want to hear about your day.” There was another long pause, like Jack didn’t believe him. “I can tell you about mine, first,” he offered. “This is something friends do, you know. And I know that maybe you’re not used to friends doing that, but, like, it’s what I do.” Maybe not an every night thing, but Jack was a new scenario for Felix and he was going to handle it as efficiently and effectively as he could. “I, uh.” Maybe he shouldn’t tell Jack about his day, actually.

“Ye’ went with Marzia,” Jack said, surprising Felix, but not by much. “Mark told me he met her, said she was a delight. He seems t’ think she’s really good for you. Said she’s got a good head on her shoulders. Might even keep ye’ from getting yourself killed. In a way I can’t.”

Felix grimaced. “Don’t put yourself down like that.”

He expected more of a fight, so Felix was surprised when Jack heaved a sigh. “Yeah, you’re right,” Jack said. “It’s hard, I guess, t’ not compare myself t’ her, but I’m working on it. I’m happy t’ be a friend of yours at all.” Another sigh. “What else did ye’ do? Mark said ye’ bought some weird books? Something about yer name?”

“Yeah, Felina,” Felix said. “I just wanted to understand. I want to read the book you named me for,” he shrugged, knew Jack couldn’t see it, felt like he had to explain more. “If it’s important to you, it’s important to me.”

“Felina, you’re something else.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m pretty annoying.”

“Ain’t at all what I was thinkin’.”

Felix grinned a bit and grabbed some sweatpants, holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder as he stepped into them. “Walked with Marzia for a bit, had dinner, stayed out in the rain too long. Cold front is blowing in soon, they’re saying we might have snow over Thanksgiving. But that’s about it for me.”

Jack took the cue rather well this time. “I, uh, I met with some people,” Jack said, his words a little stiff, obviously unaccustomed to this entire thing in some way.

Felix nodded along, wishing he could actually observe more of this. If he understood how this shit worked, he felt like he’d be able to help more, both with Jack and on the force. When Jack trailed off, Felix decided to press. “And after the illegal shit?”

There was a delay. Then, “I, uh, I went out on my own for a bit. Well, me and Tyler, really, but Tyler made sure t’ give me space. I don’t— like what I do.”

There was another pause and Felix wished he could be with Jack just to give him some sort of face-to-face comfort, like his hand to this scars or even just a touch to the shoulder. Jack was reacting to that better these days. “I hate this life,” Jack said. “But I’m really good at it, so no one really believes me when I say it. But I do hate it, and I just. I needed room t’ breathe.”

“What did you do?” Felix prompted gently to get Jack’s thoughts on a better track. “Maybe hit up a bar or two? Had some good tequila? Maybe, uh, met a guy? For some fun?” He didn’t want to imply anything, but he knew Jack had said he didn’t mind a quick fuck with a stranger. And he knew quite a few people used that sort of thing for stress relief. “Could be good for you.”
There was a long moment of silence. Then, “None of them are you, Felina.” Felix sunk his teeth into his lower lip and hated himself. “I can’t— it’s nigh impossible I’d do that now that I know you,” Jack continued. “So, no. There ain’t anyone. Don’t know if there ever will be again.”

What was Felix supposed to say? That Jack would move on one day? He didn’t want to say that because that would only be saying he thought Jack’s feelings for him were cheap. And he couldn’t just tell Jack to fuck someone anyways. He didn’t want to push Jack into anything that he wasn’t comfortable doing by saying Felix would prefer if Jack tried. God, when had his life become so fucking complicated?

“Just don’t give up,” Felix said, unable to specify if he meant for Jack to not give up on Felix or not give up on trying to move on anyways. “It’ll be okay soon.”

“It won’t,” Jack said with a lot more confidence than Felix wanted to hear. “But it doesn’t matter.” Jack sighed again. “Uh, no, I just had some drinks. Cocktails, really, fruity things, not a lot of alcohol. Walked on the beach a bit, enjoyed some quiet. That’s all.”

“Sounds nice,” Felix said, latching onto the change of topic for Jack’s benefit. “Are you gonna go snorkeling or something?”

“I can’t swim.”

Felix blanched. “You can’t— what?”

“I don’t know, never really had someone who’d teach me, had some bad experiences with water. Didn’t quite trust anyone to keep me in more than an inch of water after that. Can’t ride a bike either.”

Felix wished he could kill Seamus twice over. “I can teach you,” he offered thoughtlessly. “I did a lot of sailing when I was a kid, I know how to swim better than most. And you trust me, right?”

“With my life, Fe’.”

Felix almost liked that nickname better than Felina. It felt more like a nickname for Felix than a code. He grinned. “I’ll teach you,” he said. “Time and place, Jack, we’ll make it happen.”

“O’ course.” There was a murmur on Jack’s end, and Felix almost thought he was hearing Tyler. “I have t’ go,” Jack told Felix. “Uh, yeah. I have to go.”

“You didn’t send me your selfie for the day,” Felix told him. “I won’t go to bed until I get one.”

“I’ve a bit of a sunburn, Felix.”

“Like I give a shit.” Felix pulled on a sweater and then brought the phone back. “Just one selfie, Jack, take it with Tyler if you want. But I want to see you and make sure you haven’t been beaten to hell or anything. Give me some peace of mind.”

There was a fourth sigh. “Yeah, okay.”

“Well, geez, don’t make it sound like I’m pulling your teeth.”

“I’d love yer fingers in my mouth, Felix.”

Felix snickered and shook his head. “Have a good rest of your night, Jack.”

“Will do, Felina. And Tyler wanted me t’ tell you that ye’ start ESU training tomorrow.”
Felix’s throat closed shut as he remembered he had to go back to work tomorrow. He stood in his bedroom and tried to deny the weight of the ceiling crushing him into nothing. He wanted to hide in his closet again. “Tell him thanks,” he managed to get out. “I appreciate the warning.”

“You gonna be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Felix said firmly for both their benefits. “Goodnight, Jack. Stay safe.”

“You too.”

Jack hung up first and Felix was left utterly alone in his bedroom with the fear of returning to his shift tomorrow strangling him. He’d pulled apart every bit of the memory and pieced it away with his uniform and badge, separating work Felix from civilian Felix, and that was the only reason he was still standing. But tomorrow, he’d be back in uniform with that badge on his chest and he wouldn’t be able to pretend he was someone else anymore. He wouldn’t be able to treat the memory as distant and not his own. He’d have to face it. Felix didn’t know if he was going to survive it.

His phone pinged and Felix looked down to see—

Jack’s face appearing in his message app, a silly little photo. It was grainy from the darkness of night surrounding Jack, who was smiling tightly to the camera, lips shut, expression hard despite the smile itself. What made Felix love the photo, though, were the bunny ears Tyler was making above Jack’s head from over his shoulder. And that made the picture seem all the more real to Felix. More candid. More comforting.

“I’ll be fine,” Felix said to himself again as he met Jack’s tight smile with one of his own. Felix then turned off his phone, looked one last time across the street to make sure he had eyes on himself, and then went to bed.
Felix came onto his porch to wait for the carpool and was surprised to see Mark instead of Kon.
Felix hadn’t slept well at all the night before, had forced himself through hours of laying awake and
wishing he could shut down his brain. He’d thought he’d been over his nightmares, at least, but that
apparently wasn’t the case. And he was so nervous about going back to work, so fucking nervous in
a way he’d never been before. Felix had been anxious about first days and coming back after fucking
up back at his other cities, but he’d never been scared of the job itself. He hated being afraid of what
he loved.

Having faced that can of worms, Felix wasn’t excited to see Mark instead of Kon at all. Kon didn’t
expect shit from Felix, didn’t do anything else but listen and reply sarcastically. Mark, though. Mark
wanted to know why Felix had bought the Gay Kama Sutra. Felix wished he could sink into the
ground and cease existing, if only to avoid Mark. Felix pulled uncomfortably at the collar of his
uniform, his work duffel slung over his shoulder. He kept his gaze from meeting Mark’s as he went
to stand beside him because he didn’t have any other choice. Felix sighed. Mark didn’t look at him
either. They stood side by side for thirty uncomfortable second before Felix couldn’t stand it any
longer.

“I bought the book because I’m a fucking idiot who just wants to be able to understand the people I
care about,” he told Mark, figuring he may as well own up to being stupid. “It’s not because I’m
having whatever fucking crisis you probably think I am. I’m with Marzia and I love her. But Jack’s
gay and Cry said shit that got me thinking. There’s a lot about Jack that I don’t know or understand. I
want to change that in the few areas that I can.”

Mark paused. “So,” he began slowly. “In an attempt to better understand my boss, you’ve bought a
book on the various creative positions that gay men can have sex.”

It did not sound at all logical when Mark put it like that, especially when Mark called Jack his boss.
“Fuck,” Felix bit out, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “Cut me some slack, man, this shit is all so
fucked.”

“Why the hell didn’t you just ask someone about gay sex instead of creating a paper trail?”

“Who could I ask?” Felix shot back. “It’s not like I’m part of the gay culture in this city, and I can’t
very well go around showing my face in most places these days. Who knows who’s watching me
and how they could use these sorts of things against me? I’m comfortable in my sexuality, but that
doesn’t mean someone couldn’t find a way to fuck me up with this if they really wanted to. And I
couldn’t ask Jack. Couldn’t ask you.” Felix shook his head. “I don’t have a lot of options.”

“You have one that you didn’t list.” Mark pursed his lips, studying Felix with narrowed eyes. “I’ll
send them to you on your lunch. Don’t be alarmed when they show up, they’ll make sure they aren’t
followed by anyone sordid. Use their time wisely.”

Felix squinted. “Okay,” he said. “And why are you helping me?”

“If Jack sees that book or the receipt or some sort evidence of you owning it, he’ll feel hope.” Mark
was glaring at Felix now, his expression stern like he wanted Felix to know he’d fucked up. Felix
knew he had, of course, he was starting to just assume he could only ever fuck up these days, but
having Mark look at him like this still struck a pang in his chest. “I cannot afford to let him feel that
kind of hope only for you to dash it on the rocks, whether you intend to or not. So don’t you fucking
dare make the same mistake again. Do not leave a paper trail. Pay in cash.”
That was probably what Felix should have done. He needed to be more careful. Felix pinched at the bridge of his nose and nodded. “I’m sorry,” He said. “For what it’s worth, I never mean to make things harder for him.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Felix couldn’t agree more. “I talked to Jack last night,” he said. “He told me about his day and shit, sent me a picture. Apparently Tyler’s a fun guy to be around, even from a distance.” Felix shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I should stop trying to force a friendship on him if you think that his want to hope is that strong.”

“I have no idea what you’re supposed to do anymore,” Mark admitted. “All I can say is that you should actively avoid making things worse.”

“Sometimes it feels like that’s all I’m good at,” Felix murmured. When Mark didn’t respond with an affirmative, Felix glanced up to see Mark was watching him with the oddest expression. A furrowed brow, a slight downturn to his lips, something like unhappiness, but at what? Felix had said the truth, after all, and Felix was sure Mark agreed. Felix only ever fucked things up these days. Why would his relationship with Jack be any different? “What?” Felix asked, feeling defeated. “You know I’m right.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Mark snapped. “God. I fucking hate you.”

Felix had to look away, feeling too off kilter to handle any of Mark’s shit right now. “Thanks, Mark,” he said instead.

“Your fucking friends are almost here,” Mark said, sounding so pissed, his voice tight. “Don’t get yourself fucking killed today, or I swear to god, I’ll drag you out of hell myself just to punch you in your Scandinavian face.”

“Thanks,” Felix said again. “Glad to know you think I’ll end up in hell.”

“The devil is a possessive sonuva bitch,” Mark said. “Get to work. I’m fucking done with you.”

Hopper’s car pulling up in front of Felix’s place couldn’t be more perfectly timed. Felix didn’t even say goodbye to Mark—he only ducked his head to hide his face and dropped down the steps, getting into the car as fast as possible.

He was greeted by soft words, his fellow officers probably unsure how to handle Felix after what he’d been through and how he’d isolated himself immediately after. Felix felt bad for how he’d cut them all out, but he knew they’d understand. Beside him, Sive took Felix’s duffel bag and laid it on the ground at their feet, giving Felix a small smile. “You doing good, Officer Kjellberg? Surprised you didn’t use up some of your PTO.”

“Crime waits for no man,” Felix replied dully.

“Should’ve stayed home, Kjellberg,” Hopper said, shaking his head. There was another officer beside him in the front passenger seat, a female Felix wasn’t sure he’d ever met before. She was staring out the window like she didn’t even want to look at him. “Can’t even fucking imagine what seeing that does to a person.”

Felix couldn’t either. “How about we move onto something else,” Sive suggested, ever the amazing partner. “Sarge says you got into ESU and you’re moving onto training today, and you know what? I’m fucking proud of you, man.” Sive clapped a hand on his shoulder across from Felix and made Felix look at him when he grinned. “I’m proud to be your partner, dude, I practically brag to the
precinct and every other officer I find. You know your name is half a legend at this point, right? Cops trust you. Cops look to you. You’re the one standing tall even when you should have been beaten to the ground, and instead of giving up, you’re reaching higher. I’m just really fucking proud of you, dude.”

Felix realized Sive was his first friend to say that to him. He smiled shakily, grateful regardless of his inability to translate that, as ruined as he was at the moment. “Gotta live up to something, right?” he said instead, figuring it’d be better to just avoid himself entirely. “Gotta prove I can survive the training, so I’m not ESU yet.”

“Like you could fail after fucking destroying their tests,” Hopper snorted.

“That doesn’t matter,” Felix said softly. “It doesn’t. I already passed so that test is behind me. Now I just have to make it through.”

Sive made a face. “I’m sorry— have you not celebrated yet?”

“I don’t want to,” Felix replied.

Hopper groaned loudly and rather excessively, but Felix understood his exasperation. Felix wasn’t exactly being very fun right now, and was even acting almost childlike in his melancholy. Could he call it that? More like extreme anxiety. Or fear. Something like fucking fear. And it was making him sick and worried and he had no fucking business to being this fucked up about his god damn job. He had work to do. He couldn’t afford to let himself be wrapped up in his bullshit fears.

“Sorry guys,” he said quickly, covering up his panic and stupidity with a laugh. “I’m not feeling very up for celebrating until I graduate, you hear me?” He could fake this. He could absolutely fake this. And then, eventually, soon, it would be fake anymore. But he had no choice. Felix wasn’t about to quit his job and he couldn’t hide forever. Felix was just going to shove it down until he could wrangle it under control. He would fake normal until it wasn’t fake again. “Once I make it through the training, I expect all of you to take me out to the nicest steakhouse in this city.”

“Nicest?” Sive repeated with a wince. “How about just nice? Sorry, dude, I love you and shit, but my rent can’t afford the nicest steakhouse in New York City.” Felix laughed again and didn’t disagree. He sat back and watched the city go by for the rest of the ride, because even that smallest amount of a lie was leaving him exhausted. He almost wished he would get desked by Sarge, but he wasn’t about to ask. Maybe he’d get a guard detail. Maybe he’d—

Shut the fuck up, face the music, and be ready for whatever he got. This was his job. This was his life. This was his passion. Felix clenched his fists, steeled his jaw, and told himself he would face it no matter what.

“ESS-1,” Sarge told Felix as Felix stood before his desk and listened to what was expected of him. “You’re assigned to ESS-1, specializing in your arms and combat training. Expect to be used mainly from rooftops in a sharpshooter position or some sort of first line of attack. No negotiation, no translation, nothing like that. They’ve been lacking a man that can pull any trigger, and they think they’ve found that in you.”

Felix could do that. Felix could pull any fucking trigger they wanted him to if it meant he would be protecting someone. “Any specifics?”

“Today, you’ll be getting used to some of the more ESU specific arms,” Sarge told him. “Colt M-4,
Heckler and Koch 416 and MP-5N, Sig-Sauer 552P. Things like that. Any experience?”

Felix actually had experience in all of those. Back in Boston, the force had been a little more adamant that their officers know how to use just about any weapon that could stumble into their hands. Knowing how to use a special kind of gun meant knowing how to avoid it and disarm the person with it. “Experience with all of the above,” Felix said with a hint of pride. He’d worked long hours in the range for his extensive arms experience.

Sarge nodded and didn’t look surprised. “Any experience with a rifle?”

“What kind?”

“Sniper,” Sarge said with a hint of smile.

“Plenty.”

“Average shot length?”

“One hundred and twelve meters.”

Sarge’s brows shot hight. “You know the average police sniper shot is a good forty-eight meters, right?” Felix just stood silently, figuring that would speak for itself. He knew the average and he knew his own ability. Again—he’d worked damn hard for what he was capable of. “My only question,” Sarge began. “Is why it took you so damn long to apply for ESU or SWAT in any of your other cities.”

Because Felix had never worked in a city and failed to think about when he would leave. But ever since meeting Jack, Felix had never even considering moving away. His mind was in stasis and he couldn’t blame the city. But he would regardless. “Never felt at home like I have here, sir,” Felix told his sergeant obediently. “Haven’t ever been somewhere that hasn’t made me look on to the next place. I can imagine myself staying here.”

Sarge grinned. “It’s the girl, isn’t it?” he asked. “You’ve known her for a few months, but you know she’s something special. You’re thinking of settling down.” Felix hadn’t even thought of that, jesus. He wished Marzia was part of the reason of why he couldn’t imagine leaving. It would make more sense to himself if she was the reason why he wanted to stay and not have to face his growing attachment to a criminal, regardless of how difficult it was to think of Jack as a criminal these days. Jack was so much more than the crimes he committed, and Felix could also argue Jack was committing these crimes with forced consent. That could stand in the court of law, right? So long as Jack testified and got himself a deal. Felix was sure he could figure something else.

Why was Felix thinking about getting Jack out of legal trouble in the middle of Sarge’s office?

“You with me, Officer?”

Felix jolted a little and looked to Sergeant Morrison with what he hoped was an alert gaze. “I’m fine,” he said. “Little tired,” he admitted, figuring a half truth would help his case. “Sleeping has been… difficult.”

Sarge grimaced. “I didn’t want you in. I got that call from your friend after the shit went down. Hadn’t even been in when it happened.” Sarge shook his head, expression twisted. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but I want to assure you that if you do not feel safe on your shift, I want you to bow out immediately and come back. You’ve seen more than you signed up for. Your fellow officers will understand. They’re all willing to accommodate for a while.”
Felix absolutely hated to know that everyone was planning on handling him with kid gloves. He grit his teeth and solidified his stance. “I’m fine, Sergeant,” he said firmly. “I swear it. I can go on patrol, I can handle a rally, I can guard some shindig, I can do whatever you want. I’m fine.”

Sarge looked like he didn’t believe him. “You’re gonna be working with a current ESU member and showing them what you can do with the arms provided,” he told Felix. “That’s the first half of your shift. Second half is patrol, with monitored calls. Anything dispatch puts you on will go through me first. Might be the case for the unforeseeable future.”

Felix paused. “Any reason for that, Sergeant Morrison?”

Sgt. Morrison smiled tightly. “Let’s just say I’m noticing a few patterns that are making me rather uncomfortable and wary to send you off on your own. But don’t worry about it, Officer. I’m keeping a personal eye on you.” Sgt. Morrison tapped his desk once and then nodded to Felix’s person. “Put on your ESU badge so people know you’re cool to be messing with scary shit on the range. You’re gonna be working with men who know what they’re doing, but I still want you to be on guard.”

“Do you think I should be concerned for my safety within the precinct?” Felix asked carefully.

“Officer, someone led you into that club,” Sgt. Morrison said. “The dispatcher that sent you down there? She hasn’t been to her station since. I have no idea what is going on, but it has to do with you, and I don’t like it. Just know I’m keeping my second eye on you.”

Felix wished that could comfort him in some way. He didn’t know how to handle the knowledge that the dispatch worker who had sent him down into that hellhole was suddenly MIA. That was way too fucking suspicious for him. He wished he had Mark’s number so he could text the guy this new tidbit of information. Did he have Mark’s number? Felix couldn’t remember. “Is someone in the precinct trying to hurt me?” Felix asked, hating how small his voice was and how he couldn’t keep himself from asking. When Sgt. Morrison only grimaced, Felix regretted asking even more. “I’m not going to lie,” he said carefully. “I don’t think I’m innocent in drawing this attention to myself. I don’t want to put anyone else in danger. If you think I should be let go—”

“Fuck that,” Sgt. Morrison said. “No other officer is being affected by this and there’s no reason for me to give up one of the best officers this precinct as ever seen. The only way I’m letting you go is if you decide to quit. And please know that if you do choose to quit, I will not blame you. Not grudges, no hard feelings. I’ll completely understand.”

“No way in hell is that happening.”

Sgt. Morrison smiled a bit. “That’s what I figured. Just don’t forget to put your safety first—at least once in a while.”

Felix had absolutely no intention of doing that.

“You’ll be meeting your ESU Sergeant,” Sgt. Morrison told him. “As I’m not ESU, you’ll obviously be reporting to another person when you’re called in to report for ESU works. I know it may be a bit of an adjustment for you at first, but I can assure you that she’s the best of the best.”

Felix nodded, knowing he could trust Sgt. Morrison, if no one else. “She’ll be here to collect you soon,” Sgt. Morrison told him with a hint of a smile that Felix didn’t understand. “I requested she come here just so I can see the look on your face.”

Felix had no idea what he meant, but the door swung open to reveal a woman dressed in a tactical uniform with the three chevrons on her shoulder like Sgt. Morrison’s. She was thin but of good
weight for her height, a little shorter than Felix with blond hair that was tied back in a bun that was normal for female officers with long hair. Her eyes were wide and bright and she seemed about Felix’s age, though maybe older if looks could be deceiving. She had a strong jaw and a glint to her eyes as she swept her gaze over Felix, up and down, assessing. Felix stood tall and stiff, in his usual parade rest, and waited for whatever she chose to do next.

The woman stuck out her hand and said, “I’m Sergeant Morrison.”

Felix felt like he’d been slapped across the face. Was he talking to— what? Wife or sister, Felix had no idea, and he didn’t know if it was rude to ask. His mind was working slowly through this new information and he felt a little like he was drowning in some sort of shame or embarrassment. But Sgt.— Morrison? The female. She was smiling.

“Ken felt like this moment would be comedic, and I think he was right,” she said. “You can actually call me Sergeant Thomson, but I just wanted you to understand the status quo. That’s my husband there, and I have been putting up with so much gushing about you during various dinners and breakfasts. So I have to admit— I’m excited to have you on my team, Officer Kjellberg.”

Felix finally managed to stick out his hand and shake— Sgt. Thomson’s. God. “I didn’t know Sgt. Morrison was married,” he admitted, feeling like shit for the fact.

“It’s not exactly something we advertise,” she told him. “After all, officer fraternization is usually frowned upon. Luckily, we’re both good enough at our jobs, and I’m not exactly assigned to this precinct only, so we’re allowed some leniency.”

Felix just nodded dumbly.

Sgt. Thomson smiled even wider. “Poor kid,” she said to Sgt. Morrison. “He seems shell shocked.”

“Let’s just say he’s had a trying couple of days,” Sgt. Morrison told her. “Just make sure he goes easy on himself in the range, though I can tell you he’ll likely exceed your expectations right off the bat.”

“Yeah?”

Sgt. Morrison nodded. “His average is one hundred and twelve meters.”

Sgt. Thomson let out a low whistle. “Color me impressed.”

“Sergeant Morrison talks about me over dinners?” Felix asked.

The man and wife laughed. They even laughed the same. Felix felt like he was in the Twilight Zone.

“Come with me, Officer Kjellberg,” Sgt. Thomson said, waving Felix after her as she turned to leave the office. “I wanna see if you can really live up to the legends.”

... 

“Andrew, I’m gonna beat you into a pulp if you tell mom!”

Felix rolled his eyes as he unpeeled a bandaid from its wrap and laid it on the skinned knee of Andrew, who was blubberyng up a storm just because that was how he knew he could get attention. Arthur had pushed his brother over when trying to block a pass that would have gone over his head anyways. Felix thought the kid was just being a bit of a drama queen, but his knee was bleeding badly, and his brother really had been a jerk. Felix didn’t blame the kid for needing a good cry and
he’d grabbed his first aid kid in a jiff, ready to patch the poor kid up.

He’d spent the first half of his shift working through various firearms and showing that he knew how to handle just about all of them. Sgt. Thomson had watched him keenly the whole time and Felix didn’t like the feeling of most eyes on him these days, but he’d done well enough to declare him ready to skip at least a month of the ESU training since his marksmanship was already far beyond average. Normally, Felix would feel good about that. Instead, he’d sought out some sort of emotional relief in these kids, knowing that he’d forget his worries for a while with them. It was worth skipping the eating part of his lunch if he got a moment of reprieve.

“Don’t listen to him,” he told the sniffling Andrew. “Your mom will ask where you got such a cool bandaid anyways.” It was Mr. Incredible and waterproof and Felix had filled his first aid kit with these specific bandaids simply in the case of a kid getting hurt. A lot of kids wouldn’t let a stranger patch them up, regardless of uniform, unless they liked the bandaid. Weird thing Felix had picked up over the years, but he was happy to have learned the lesson now. “Don’t lie to your mom—if she asks, you tell her.”

“Don’t tell her!” Arthur shrieked, angry and freaked to hell at the prospect of getting in trouble. “He’s a fucking snitch!”

“Arthur, dude,” Felix sighed, patting Andrew’s leg once he was done. Andrew stood on wobbly knees, but then immediately started jumping like he was ready to play again. “You hurt your brother,” Felix told Arthur, putting on his “adult voice.” “Whether you meant to or not, the consequence that came from it stays the same. In my line of work, the best way to get through a problem is to take responsibility. You hurt him. If you own up to it and apologize, I doubt you’ll be in as much trouble as you’ll get in if you go home screaming.”

Arthur scowled, but Felix knew he was a smart kid and that he would listen. Felix packed up his kit and stood, raising a brow down at Arthur. “You gonna be a big kid or are you gonna keep yelling that the skinned knee never happened?”

“I’mma big kid,” Arthur grumbled. “And I’m gonna kick your ass at basketball.”

“Let me know when you gain a few feet,” Felix teased. “Andrew, why don’t you go sit?”

“I don’t wanna sit,” Andrew said with a proud jut of his chin. “I wanna beat my brother’s face!”

“You fucking try it, pussy!”

Felix had never met a more aggressive pair of brothers. “Why on earth would you want to do that?” Felix asked. “If you’re going for revenge, just go to your mom.”

“Don’t give him ideas!”

“A real man doesn’t go to other people for revenge,” Andrew declared, glaring at his older brother. “I’m gonna kick his ass and then everyone will know I did it!”

Felix squinted between the two. Then he snorted a laugh as it dawned on him. Fanny had never been an aggressive child with anyone except someone who was interested in Felix. “Do you two have a crush on the same girl?”

Both boys went wide eyed and started screeching unintelligibly at the same time, letting Felix knew he had gotten it in one. “That’s tragic,” he said, figuring the kids already knew how much of a conundrum they were in. “What’s her name?”
“Elsa,” Andrew said, making Felix lament the new age of Disney parents that had been thrust upon the world. “She has a big brother named Raimundo that doesn’t like anyone.” Felix squinted and wondered if that was another reference. All he could think of was Xiaolin Showdown, and he liked to think the world was better than that. “She’s new! She doesn’t talk a lot, but she’s so pretty.” Andrew was going starry-eyed and Felix thought this was sweet. “And she can burp the alphabet!”

Felix felt his left eye twitch. He could have sworn that talent had died with the boyband craze. “That’s incredible,” he said, hoping the kids didn’t catch on to the sarcasm in his tone. “Is there anything else you like about her?”

“I don’t know,” Arthur said. “But everyone likes her, even if her clothes are messed up. Not everyone can buy new clothes. It’s not their fault.”

Felix didn’t know if he was touched or shocked. He remembered being bullied for his shoes not being the latest Nikes or whatever had been cool back then. He’d thought it was extremely stupid considering he thought those shoes looked fucking stupid regardless of the price tag and he’d continued to wear his Vans no matter what the fuck people said. “That’s real big of you guys,” he told the kids, honestly a little touched to know that society had somehow advanced since he was in grade school. “But you kids know you’re not supposed to fight over someone, right? No matter how cool they are, family is forever, whether you like it or not. Your goal shouldn’t be to win over the other. You should be trying to find that person you wanna make part of your family. And you definitely don’t want to make her feel like she’s just an object to be won, okay? If you guys really like her, you should treat her like anyone else. And you shouldn’t hurt others to get her.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at Felix. “You sound like our mom.”

“Your mom is a gosh darn legend,” Felix replied, grinning a little. “Listen to her, okay? Don’t make poor Elsa feel like a trophy you put on a shelf. Be her friend first. People need more friends, not collectors.”

“Did someone collect you?” Andrew asked.

Felix’s first instinct was to say no, even though he knew that would be a lie. His sister collected him, his parents tried to mold him into something they could display on their mantel, he was only worth anything to his work for his skills as an officer, even Jack— “It doesn’t matter,” Felix said softly. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is you make sure you don’t put someone else through that. Golden rule, kids— treat others the way you want to be treated. If that means punching an asshole in the face, by all means. But that also means not treating people like they’re something to own.”

Arthur and Andrew both nodded firmly. “You sound exactly like mom,” Arthur repeated.

“Fine by me,” Felix said. “So long as you make sure to learn from the things she says to you.”

“At least you say it nicer,” Andrew grumbled.

“Your mother works hard,” Felix defended. “Just like I do. Practice some forgiveness. I’m sure she hates yelling or getting upset just as much as you do.”

Both boys crossed their arms and glared at nothing, meaning they knew Felix was right. Single parents had it rough in a way Felix couldn’t imagine. “Just go easy on her,” he said. “And go easy on each other. You two are brothers. Whether you like it or not, you’re gonna be stuck with each other for a while longer. Try to make the best of it.”

Andrew looked like he was about to argue, but Arthur beat his brother to it, pointing to Felix’s car and exclaiming, “There’s some freaky white dude on your shit!”
Felix felt there were quite a few things wrong with that statement, but when he turned to look to where his patrol car was parked—same spot as always—and saw that Arthur was right, he couldn’t help but slip into the offensive. There really was some fucking freaky white dude leaning against Felix’s car. The man was thin, had brown hair, wore all white clothes, and had a surgical mask covering his mouth and huge aviators covering his eyes. He was wearing gloves and a turtleneck and long slacks. The only skin he showed was the skin on the sides of his face.

“Fuck,” Felix said, fearful of whatever situation he was about to face now. He felt too ragged for this kind of thing, spread too far. He was sure the sinews in his arms and legs would snap if they could. Felix wanted nothing more than to turn and run, but he couldn’t. He stood up straight and put his hand out. “Stand back,” he told the kids. “If it seems weird, you fucking run.”

“We need a code!” Andrew hissed. “Whistle if he’s bad!”

“I’ll give you a thumbs up if it’s good,” Felix told them. “Regardless, stay back.” He would bet his life on this being a mafia thing. Felix suddenly worried that he shouldn’t be hanging out with Andrew and Arthur. It was obvious people knew who he was by his face and were watching him. Hanging out with innocent children was the worst thing he could possibly do.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he said to himself as he began to approach the stranger at his car, wishing he had thought to at least keep his taser on his person while playing with the boys. Now he was facing down an unknown, defenseless. “Such a fucking idiot.” As he got within earshot, he watched the masked man perk up. “Can I help you, Sir?” Felix asked, voice sharp and unhappy with paranoia. The man began to pull something from behind his back, and everything in Felix told him to fucking run, it was a gun, he was about to be shot, he needed to protect the kids—

The man pulled out a box of chocolates and waved at Felix with his free hand, calling out to Felix in a voice he recognized but honestly hadn’t expected to ever hear in any lax scenario. “Cry?” Felix called out, just to double check. Now that he heard the voice, he looked over the body and—still didn’t recognize it. He didn’t know Cry well enough by sight or in any other way at all and he couldn’t believe that someone was so desperate to hide their face that they’d go into public like this. “What are you doing here?” He quickly held up a thumbs-up for the boys, but kept facing Cry so they would catch on that Felix needed to do some grownup shit.

“My presence was requested,” Cry said with what sounded like a smile, but Felix couldn’t tell. God, he hated being unable to get a read on people. “Your friend, Mr. Fischbach. He told me you have a few questions about some certain things and I, of course, was more than happy to give my aid. And my apologies.” As Felix reached his car, Cry held the box of chocolates out in Felix’s personal space. “I really did make an absolute fool of myself,” Cry told him sheepishly. “And I am so unbelievably sorry for the lines I waltzed across in grandiose style. Cocaine makes my lips loose, you could say, and I am making a point to be sober right now, for various reasons. One of them being your wellbeing, another being that I am in a public park and I do not wish to endanger children, and the list goes on. Just know that I am attempting to make right my wrongs and my treatment of you.”

Felix had no idea what to say. “Legally, I cannot accept the chocolates from you while in uniform,” he told Cry.

Cry’s hand listed in the air, then he jerked his head to Felix’s car. “If you’d open the door, I can toss them in the back and make them a present for the next lucky soul that gets to have your hands all over them during their arrest.”

“I have a feeling they don’t share your idea of enjoyable,” Felix hedged. He glanced around, then opened the passenger door of his patrol car. “Just throw it in,” he said, knowing he wouldn’t eat it for sake of paranoia. He was sure Mark would agree with him. Cry did as told, throwing the box like a
frisbee, and Felix felt like that was a little dumb and that they were both lucky the box hadn’t fallen open and thrown chocolates all over his interior. “So Mark sent you?”

“He did, he did, he did,” Cry replied, leaning back against the patrol car. “Dear god, do I love these,” he said, running his hand almost sensuously over the hood of the car. “Every time one of New York’s finest drives by me in one of these beauties, I find myself unable to to think of anything but you. You must allow me a shot of you in your vehicle. I know not only I would appreciate the image.”

Felix squinted at the man and watched him touch the patrol car like it was the body of a woman. “Are you getting turned on by me or my car?”

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Cry deadpanned. “I tend to just accept the feeling as it comes.”

“Please do not force me to arrest you, I don’t wanna frisk your boner.”

Cry laughed and stopped molesting Felix’s patrol car, leaning back again. “What questions did you have for me, Officer?”

“What did Mark tell you?”

“He told me you bought a particular kind of book,” Cry said. “And that he didn’t want you getting your information from books when there were credible, reliable sources that would also be able to provide specialized specifics in their answers.” Felix was sure Cry was smirking. “That was my fancy way of beating around the bush. He told me about your gay Kama Sutra. I must admit, I am just as curious as he is as to why, though much less aggressive.”

Felix scowled. “Mark likes to think I’m gonna fall for Jack, like I don’t have any sort of personal identity. He thinks Jack can turn me gay. It’s fucking insulting.”

“I can see how that would be upsetting,” Cry said. “There’s nothing worse than someone who thinks they can change your sexuality on a whim. Our bodies aren’t exactly hardwired in a way that we can control. Yes, there may be odd exceptions to the rules, but having someone in your face, saying they know they can change who you are for whatever sexual whimsy they have is— aggravating.”

“It’s what Jack said to me, back in the beginning,” Felix told Cry, honestly relieved to finally have someone who thought that Felix couldn’t just be manipulated into sexual attraction. “I told him I wasn’t gay and he told me he could change his mind. And that just made me so fucking angry.” Felix looked down at the ground, wishing his uniform allowed him to have his hair hang down so he could hide just a little from Cry. “It hurt. Why can these people make the argument that they didn’t choose to be gay, then act like they can just change the straight person’s mind? It’s hypocritical.”

“It’s definitely not fair,” Cry agreed gently. “But I must argue in defense of my friend— I am sure he wasn’t in the right place of mind when he met you. Regardless for how aloof he may seem, I don’t think Jack was exactly in a healthy state when you saved his life.”

“Then why did it continue into the fucking dinner date I was kidnapped into attention?” Felix asked. “Why was he trying? It was like he didn’t register me as human until Dante bugged my house and I confronted Jack about it.”

Cry hesitated. “Jack— had been through some very difficult things.”

“I know that,” Felix huffed. “But it’s the difference between kids that are treated like shit who become bullies or become social workers. There’s a fucking line and he didn’t have to cross it like that.”
“I don’t think Jack fully understood who you are as a person until you were suddenly brave enough to storm his castle and throw the cameras on his desk like you owned the whole place yourself,” Cry explained. “Or possibly even when you bested him in combat. He’s a complicated person. I believe he truly did intend to just fuck you and leave until he got to know you.” Cry shrugged while Felix’s expression contorted into something between pained and disgusted. “If it helps, I believe he regrets his old mentality more than anyone else. Is this what you wanted to ask me about?”

Felix sneered and looked away, something twisting unhappily in his chest at the idea that Jack had actually intended to use his body like that. It didn’t connect well with the Jack he knew today, who would brokenly confess his love and inability to move on from Felix. It wasn’t fucking fair to know that Jack had once seen him as nothing more than a warm body to get off in. He’d just wanted Felix for the sex. “It doesn’t matter,” Felix said, because it just simply couldn’t. That was who Jack had been and it wasn’t right for Felix to judge him for the past, no matter how much it upset him. “I just wanted to know how two men have sex.”

Cry went dead silent at Felix’s blunt statement and Felix’s cheeks flushed. “I know how that sounds,” he said. “But I honestly do prefer to know as many things as I can about basic shit about my friends. I don’t—I’ve never really had gay friends, never really seen gay porn, never been part of that culture. Not because I hate it or avoided it, but just because I never got the opportunity to come across it. And regardless of my own sexuality, it’s a big part of Jack’s life. And since Mark thinks the book I bought isn’t any good, I’d just like to know, like—from the point of view of someone who experiences it…”

Cry nodded slowly as Felix trailed off, at a loss for words or ways to defend himself. “I have a question myself, then,” Cry said. “Do you want to know about the physical aspects of sex between men or the emotional aspects?”

Felix’s cheeks went even warmer when he realized he was going to talk about this, in public, with a mob boss. His life was just hilariously chaotic at this point. “The emotional aspect,” he finally said. “Like, I know how the physical aspect works. There’s a dick, there’s a hole, there’s a mouth. You’ve got options and the end game is to make it good for each other.”

“My goodness,” Cry said softly. “Do you actually have sex with the sole intention of the pleasure of your partner?”

Felix was a tomato at this point. “Don’t you?”

“You pure soul.”

“Just tell me,” Felix said. “Because I want to know. When Jack says he— has feelings for me, what does that even mean between men? With girls, there’s just this sort of instinctual give and take, at least for me. I give protection, she gives comfort. It’s symbiotic. But with men—I just don’t know how it works.” He bit his lip. “I hope I’m not being, like, an insensitive asshole in this. I don’t even mean to be sexist. But with all of my relationships, it was clear that the other person expected me to protect and provide for them, and then I got to get some sort of healing aspect from them.”

Cry frowned. “You’re currently in a relationship— is it like that between you and this woman even now?”

Felix paused, because he realized it wasn’t. Marzia didn’t expect Felix to provide for her and fully intended to provide for herself, and she never once acted like she needed Felix to take care of her. “Maybe not,” he said. “But I just—I don’t know. She’s new and exciting and good. I’m just as in the dark with her as I am with how Jack feels.”
“You poor thing,” Cry lamented. “Didn’t you observe your parents for what a healthy relationship should look like?”

Felix hesitated again. “Uh, let’s just say my parents weren’t very affectionate with one another.”

Cry shook his head. “Well, I can tell you one thing— Jack will not at all be expecting you to provide protection so he can just trade you for comfort. That’s such an archaic way of being. I’m saddened to know that the women you’ve been with expected as much, though I am happy to know your current relationship is breaking those boundaries.”

“There was nothing wrong with the other women,” Felix defended out of habit. “They can’t help how they were raised to see these things. We’re all victims of our birth, it wasn’t their fault.”

“Your capacity to forgive is worrisome.”

Felix didn’t see how being able to forgive could ever be a problem, so he just frowned and faced Cry. “Just tell me what I want to know. My lunch is almost over.”

“Such a busy man.” Cry hummed and turned his masked face up towards the sky. “Well, I’m not sure what I can tell you that won’t upset you in breaching Jack’s privacy.”

“Just give me generals,” Felix said. “I want to know what he’s looking for.”

“Like in a partner? Are you sure you’re just asking for knowledge’s sake?”

"Jack doesn’t think he can move on from me," Felix said. "I want to help him try."

“You can’t really think you can just help him find some new infatuation to solve all your problems.”

“I don’t,” Felix agreed. “That would be insulting to him. But I don’t want him to wallow in unhappiness for the rest of his life just because he thinks I’m some perfect thing that I’m not.”

Cry nodded like he understood. “Jack isn’t like most men,” he told Felix. “He has worries and concerns normal civilians never have to face. While I’ve never conversed with Jack on this matter personally, I can assure you he’s not looking for someone to protect him. He’s looking for someone that he can trust to take care of their self. The constant worry for his partner would put him in an early grave. He’s looking for someone capable and strong. Much like you proved yourself to be, after pinning him three times in a row without breaking a sweat.”

Felix nodded along with what Cry was telling him. “People said Jack has a type and that I didn’t normally fit it,” he said. “That he likes them bigger and stronger.”

“Aesthetically, I’m sure,” Cry agreed. “But if someone can prove to hold their own, I doubt the looks matter so much, so long as they’re reasonably attractive. And you blow the phrase ‘reasonably attractive’ right out of the water.”

“So he doesn’t actually have a physical type, so long as it fits the other criteria,” Felix said, brushing past Cry’s compliment because it made him uncomfortable. “Any other general things?”

Cry shrugged. “Brave,” he said, looking away as he began to list. “Courageous, which, you know, isn’t the same as being brave. Loyal and headstrong and very, very certain of their moral lines that can and cannot be crossed. Very good, very, uhm.” Cry shrugged. “I don’t know how else to list traits until I tell you it’s just you. He is attracted to men like you. Steadfast in their beliefs and morals, strong and capable and able to protect yourself, very certain in the difference between right and wrong, very attractive and bullheaded. It’s just you.”
Felix scowled. “I’d clone myself if I could, but that’s not in the cards. I just want him happy and since it can’t be me, it has to be someone else.”

“Good god, how expendable do you think you are?”

Felix faltered. He’d never thought of it that way and he didn’t like it. “So loyal, brave, strong, shit like that,” he listed. “And without giving anything away, what does he expect from the sex? The book I have, it, it seemed to emphasize a top versus a bottom?” Felix was flushing again at the words. “What is— what’s Jack?”

“Don’t listen to your silly books,” Cry said with a snort. “There’s rarely ever a true difference and most men don’t mind a switch up. I know that when Jack was with me, he was in a rather aggressive state of mind and I wasn’t bothered at all in submitting. But I know that when he was Mark, he definitely didn’t mind taking Mark’s cock.”

Felix hated the way Cry said that. “How do you know so much?”

“I’m sorry, Officer, did you miss when I told you I specialize in the collection of information?”

Felix should have thought of that. “Just— what does he expect?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Cry said. “I think it’s something you’d have to ask him yourself. And since you don’t want me breaching Jack’s privacy any further, I suggest you stop asking me.”

Felix winced, knowing a dismal when he heard it. “Can I ask you something, then?”

Cry shrugged and held up his hands. “Sure— I’m an open book.”

“Has anyone ever seen your face?”

There was a halt and Cry shifted his weight. “No, actually. Other than those who knew my when I was younger, but— well, they’re not around anymore.”

Felix’s heart ached. “I’m sorry. That sounds lonely.”

“Come again?”

“I don’t mean to insult you,” Felix said. “I just— the idea that no one knows your face, that no one has seen that. I know it’s probably your choice and you have a reason for making that choice, but it still seems incredibly lonely.”

Cry stared into Felix for a long moment. “I want to do so many things to you.” When Felix blanched, Cry continued. “Seriously. I want to blow your mind and your world and then your cock. No particular order.”

“Dude, what the fuck.”

“Really,” Cry insisted. “If you ever want to know the ins and outs of gay sex, I would be overjoyed to give you first hand experience.”

“I don’t have any more questions.”

Cry chuckled and gave an elegant bow. “Always happy to be of service.”

“Right. Tell Mark to fuck off for sending you.”
Cry’s chuckle turned into bright laughter. “Good heavens, I wish I could clone you. You would be a coveted asset in my business.” Felix definitely did not like the things Cry was saying. “Do me a favor and hit me up if you ever change your mind,” Cry said as he finally pushed off the patrol car and made to leave. “I hope you have a good rest of your shift. Congratulations on making it to the ESU!”

Felix wondered if everyone knew that much about Felix’s work or if Cry really was just that good at collecting information. As Cry turned and headed to a rather expensive, sleek car parked just beyond Felix’s, he gave a final wave and said, “I’ll make sure that Dante hears nothing of our meeting. I worry he has something planned for the future and it concerns me. There’s whispering in the darker corners of my world. Please, Officer— do be safe.”

Cry ducked down into his car and Felix was left with an awful sense of foreboding. But as he finished out the rest of his shift after making sure Arnold and Arthur made it home safely, he was then left with a sort of anticlimactic anxiety. For Cry’s warning, nothing had happened, and Felix was exhausted of looking over his shoulder.

As he dressed down and got ready for bed, he made to call Jack just to stick with his promise of checking up on him. But Felix’s call was sent straight to voicemail and that— hurt.

Why did it hurt?

Felix crawled into bed and tried not to feel like shit. The crash from the heightened adrenaline from constantly being on his toes during his entire shift was worse than any come down from a drug. Constant adrenaline was a sickening experience and he wanted nothing more than to collapse and wallow in misery because Jack had ignored him. But that was stupid. It had only been twenty-four hours and Jack was busy. Felix wasn’t important, not in comparison to what Jack was doing, he didn’t matter—

His phone pinged with a message and Felix looked to see a text and an image from Jack.

[cant talk felina hope u had a good day hope esu went well wanted 2 say im proud of u obligatory shitty photo included]

The image was of Jack, sitting at some table, the angle from below with Jack looking down into the camera with an annoyed expression, like he was in some meeting he wished he didn’t have to attend. His lower lip was in some sort of pout and he had the slightest sunburn, face and neck a little redder. His blue eyes stood out and reflected some sort of monitor beyond him and his head was resting on his fist. It looked like he was taking the picture from beneath the table, on the sly.

And it was just some random picture, but the image and the fact that Jack had remembered to take it, along with the words “im proud of u” standing out in black and white had a hitch in Felix’s throat and his vision blurring.

Why was he crying?
Felix didn’t cry.

What was happening? Why was he falling apart? Was it the adrenaline crash or something else? More than anything, Felix wanted to call Jack, if only to take his mind off the nothingness in his head that was constricting his chest. Why was he fucking crying? Why was he such a fucking idiot? Approaching a stranger at his patrol car when civilians were at risk, asking questions about Jack like they weren’t violating his privacy in a way Felix was all too familiar with. Why was Felix such a piece of shit? Why was Jack being so nice to him when he didn’t deserve it? Putting himself in harm’s way for Felix’s sake, putting his work at risk because of the dumbass cop that was just trying
to get himself killed. Forcing himself to be around Felix no matter how much it hurt because Felix was so fucking selfish. How could Jack be proud of someone like Felix? How could anyone be proud of him?

Felix pushed the phone away and curled up beneath his covers, knees to his chest, struggling to breathe. His lights were off, he was swaddled in darkness, he was going to be okay, but what if there were eyes on him he couldn’t trust? What if Dante was watching him? What if something was going to happen tomorrow? What if everything went wrong? And what if it was all Felix’s fault?

His phone pinged again. He couldn’t deny the sound of the phone, so Felix reached out and pulled it under the covers with him. It was a message from Jack.

[felina?]

It didn’t matter. None of Felix’s problems mattered, not right now. Felix needed to make sure he didn’t make things any harder for Jack.

glad to hear you’re okay and doing well don’t worry about making the call just glad you’re good

[ur shift go ok?]

everything’s fine william goodnight

Felix pushed the phone away one final time, brought his pillow to his chest and held it close, pretending there was someone with him that would watch over him while he slept that wasn’t across the street, as he tried to make himself feel tired. Everything was fine because it had to be. Felix didn’t have any other choice.

“You’ll be okay in the morning,” he told himself. “You’ll be okay.”

Felix had no choice but to believe that.
The nights never got any easier, but Felix got better at pretending they did. ESU training swept him off his feet and into a world of focus and hard, manual effort, his strength and agility reaching new heights over the course of the two weeks or so. Felix lost time, falling into a routine that seemed to rob him of his sense of self.

When he would have normally spent a healthy chunk of his morning getting ready for his day, Felix found himself sleeping well into the limits of the afternoon, forced to sleep because he couldn’t get any rest after the adrenaline of surviving his shift. Nothing ever happened, nothing got any worse, there was no reason for Felix to be so high-strung and fucked up like he was. He was acting like an idiot, paranoid and ready for something that was never going to come. And it was already so close to the holidays and there was something wrong with his head. His parents would be flying in tomorrow, there was no panic about any Chinese bitch of a lady trying to threaten him, and Felix was to see Marzia after Thanksgiving. He hadn’t spoken to Mark in days and he hadn’t seen anyone but Tyler. Jack’s texts came at the end of the night, but he didn’t have time for conversation with a lowly cop.

Everything—everything was normal. It was Felix who was ruining everything. Being ignored and being brushed off, being pushed aside and hinted at uselessness, how unimportant he was—

That wasn’t happening, was it?

Felix wasn’t sure. It had happened so often in his life, people trading him aside for someone that could better fit their needs and desires, people deciding he wasn’t worth the effort of piecing together how his mind worked. People realizing they liked his sister more. People realizing he was too good at observing them and knowing how they worked, taking away their sense of mystery, exposing them like a dissected frog. Felix was used to people not liking him in the end, he didn’t know why it felt so bad every time Jack wasn’t able to give him more than two messages a day.

Why did it matter? Why the ever loving fuck did it matter? Jack was a god damn mob boss, he had a crime ring to run, he had weapons to export and sell, he had people looking to him for leadership, and on top of that, he had to work to overthrow the Bisognins. Felix didn’t even know how that worked, didn’t understand the depth of such a task. There had to be so much going on in Jack’s life, of course he wouldn’t have any fucking time for Felix and it was fucking rude of him to expect that Jack could sacrifice so much just for a few minutes of useless conversation with a man that could never love him back. Felix’s expectations were disgustingly ridiculous.

It didn’t matter. It didn’t fucking matter. He hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in ages and his hands were shaking on and off and there was that fucking echo in his head and Mark was ignoring Felix’s existence just when Felix and started to feel like they could be friends and—

His parents were coming.

Felix wanted to collapse. Just drop to the floor and give up. He had deep cleaned his apartment, googled the furniture labels he found because he knew his parents would ask after what brands and where he’d gotten them, and since Felix hadn’t actually bought the shit, it had seemed prudent to do some research and save himself the headache of an explanation. He loved his mom and dad, but they were so—they didn’t—

They weren’t happy with him, and they hadn’t been happy with him since he’d been 16. It had been hard for them to accept that he didn’t want to do as his sister had done and start his own small
business or get comfortably married and wait for his inheritance. Felix had denied the offer of a high position in his father’s company, had turned down studying to become the next in line in his mother’s company. He’d denied going to university and ivy league schools and he’d turned down all these huge opportunities he’d been offered just because Kjellberg was a big name in the business industry of fashion and culture and Felix— Felix hadn’t wanted about any of that.

He’d turned down all the opportunities with fear in his heart and had stepped off into the dark, riding on a bet that he could get into the Police Academy and relying only on that. He’d been lucky to make it at all and he wasn’t about to say that he’d been smart to have no backup plan. He’d gone with his gut and his dreams and had hoped he wouldn’t sink to the bottom of nothing if he failed. Felix had lucked out and made it into the academy and started his career as a police officer from there and— his parents hadn’t been happy with him since.

Gone were the days of gentle encouragement and helpful offerings of advice. No long phone calls checking up on one another, no unplanned and pointless visits just because they missed him. No promise of help if he needed it, no safety net beneath his feet regardless of the wealth his family had. Felix wasn’t even included in the yearly Kjellberg Christmas photo shoot, no one in their family even asked after him because they knew Felix’s parents were unhappy with their son and no one wanted to risk alienating the rich part of their family.

His parents would visit him at least once a year, the holiday they chose varying depending on what they needed to do for their work. That was what they told him, at least, but he knew that it wasn’t true. They were both CEOs, they could both take off whatever time they wanted, and he knew that they did to help Fanny raise Arnold, both of Felix’s parents eager to be part of the little boy’s life and maybe bring up a Kjellberg boy that wouldn’t be a complete fucking disappointment, throwing away everything for a dangerous line of work, spitting in his parents face for denying the opportunities and taking a low-paying, high-risk, manual labor job instead. Felix was just—

Felix was everything they didn’t want and that just made for stressful holidays and the ever-present feeling of being crushed beneath their gazes of disgust.

Last year the’d seen them for Christmas. His parents had strode into his apartment, looked around at the furniture and the paintings and his uniform in the laundry room, and declared that they’d rather stay in a hotel, just like that. Fuck the guest bedroom, right? Fuck the fact that Felix had scrubbed the place spotless, fuck that he’d tried so hard to make it look like he had a good life and everything under control. They’d decided they’d wanted a hotel. Something about the guns Felix had, the level of risk in staying in a cop’s home. It had stung. Felix hadn’t let himself hurt for long, but he’d spent an hour in his kitchen, bent over his sink, driving his water bill while washing the dinner that he’d prepared that his parents hadn’t eaten down the drain.

Now it was Thanksgiving and Felix had no positive expectations. At least his father had begrudgingly promised that they would be staying in Felix’s home, at the insistence of Fanny. Fanny wanted them to get along, Fanny wanted her family back, Fanny wanted Felix back in the Christmas cards so people would stop pestering her about him. It was an inconvenience to her, wasn’t it? She needed to be able to focus on normal life and not answer questions about fucking Felix running amok in New York City, disappointing his family ever step of the way. Fanny was the peacemaker. What Fanny wanted, Fanny got.

“I will be keeping an eye out,” Kon told him, breaking Felix from his thoughts during a rare unplanned conversation outside of their normally scheduled meetings together. “All has been silent— no word on anyone going after your parents. I will keep twenty-four watch and make sure nothing bad happens.”
Felix frowned. “Don’t do that,” he said. “Don’t you have someone to spend the holiday with?”

“Thanksgiving means nothing to me,” Kon replied.

That made sense. It really was an American custom and there wasn’t much reason for anyone else to celebrate it, though Felix had always figured that people around the world would take any excuse to throw a feast and eat until they couldn’t move. Felix had been working hard on prepping food all day. His kitchen was too hot and his feet were tired. He could be on his feet for ten hours a day on shift, but on the tile of the kitchen, he just felt exhausted. The guest room was ready and he had scrubbed his hands raw and his knees hurt and he was so fucking—

“Hey.”

Kon’s voice had Felix jolting out of his thoughts, shaking his head to bring himself back to the present. Felix looked up at the huge man and winced. “Sorry,” he said. Kon had caught Felix in a daze more than once these past few days, he knew that Felix wasn’t sleeping, there was no reason for Felix to hide from Kon. Kon probably knew better than anyone else on this point. “I, uh. I’ve been doing a lot of work and then cleaning. It’s grueling.”

Kon snorted skeptically. “Of course,” he said. “Just that. Have you tried that stuff?”

Kon had been giving Felix things to help him sleep, natural shit, melatonin and valerian root and shit like that. None of it was working, none of it helped. “Yeah, I have,” Felix said. “Seems to be doing some good, thanks.”

Kon nodded. “Their plane landed ten minutes ago.”

“I know.” Felix had gotten a text, first message from his father in five months. They hadn’t spoken to him since he’d move to New York and seeing his father’s name on the screen had been some weird experience that hadn’t felt real. Not a lot was feeling real these days, the daily grind of learning special ops for ESU and then wading through static through the rest of his shift, lying awake in bed and fighting off nightmares because he didn’t want Mark to see him in a vulnerable state. Now Felix was facing down another nightmare but he was damingly awake for it all; no escape in sight. “It’ll be great,” he told Kon, not meaning a word of it. “I’m excited, I haven’t seen them in so long.”

“You do not visit?”

Felix had offered to visit home once and had been ignored for a week. That had been answer enough. “Nah, never have time,” he said. “Neither do they have time to see me. Not often.”

“Is that so?”

Felix didn’t look at Kon, knowing he was too tired to lie well. “How’s Jack doing?”

Kon shrugged. “Did you not talk to him last night?”

Barely. Jack had sent a selfie and a message telling Felix he had to tour a facility and couldn’t talk. That had been it. The selfie had been of Jack sitting in the back of a car, looking out the window in some dramatic pose, like a teenager listening to moody music in the back of a bus. And Felix had managed to smile for a bit, but when he’d responded and gotten nothing in reply, it all just felt so terrible again and the smile had died. Felix was left tired and that had been the end of it. He hadn’t slept at all and had just cleaned his apartment well into the morning. Now his fingers ached and his feet were sore and he wanted to just sleep forever.

“He sent me a picture,” Felix said. “He didn’t have time for much else.”
Kon grimaced and nodded. “Things are going odd in Colombia. He is doing his best to manage.”

That was the last thing Felix wanted to hear. “Give him my best,” he said softly. “I don’t— want him to worry about me. If he doesn’t have time to talk to me or send a picture, then he doesn’t have to.” Felix wasn’t going to admit that Jack’s messages and the occasional meetup with Marzia were the only things to make him feel anything other than tired. He could afford to lose something if it meant Jack would be safe. “Tell him he can skip a day or two, I don’t mind.”

Kon chuckled. “Pretty sure he would mind.”

Felix grimaced. “… Kon, I don’t want you watching me for this.”

“No can do, Officer.”

“I’m not asking.”

Kon was quiet.

“I just— please.” Felix knew it was stupid to not have eyes on him, but he couldn’t deny the fact that the last thing he wanted was for the others to see whatever went down with his parents. Felix had high hopes, but little else. High hopes, head low. “They wouldn’t appreciate being watched,” he told Kon, trying to be logical about this. “And since no one has made any sort of legitimate threat in ages, I think it’d be safe to just not aggravate the situation.”

Kon was watching Felix sharply, seeing right through him. Felix tried not to wilt beneath his gaze, knowing that however logical his excuse was, it was weak. Felix had been violated too many times to think that it was safe to get eyes off him for longer than a couple hours. “If they ever find out, they’ll be so upset with me and I just don’t want to make this worse. So please, Kon, just take some time off. I know there’s someone you’d like to see. Go check on them.”

Kon was quiet for a moment longer. “You trying to hide something?”

“No,” Felix lied. “I just think you should get the day off. And look— none of you liked my sister. Most of you have this near-hatred of her, and I don’t want you hating my parents either. We’re not like normal families. I don’t want you guys misjudging them and me for something you just don’t understand.”

“You sound like woman defending her abuser,” Kon deadpanned.

“Fuck off, it’s not that bad.”

“Hmph,” was all Kon said. “I will respect your wishes. My eyes not on you for forty-eight hours. But if anything goes bad, you promise to call. If anything were to happen to you and Jack were to find out that I was not keeping an eye, he would genuinely kill me.”

“Jack doesn’t—“ Except Felix couldn’t finish that sentence, that defense. Jack did kill.


“Jack murdered him.”

“He did,” Kon agreed. “Bill O’Riley also took part in Xiao-Zhi’s nonconsensual porn ring.” When Felix looked to Kon with wide eyes, Kon gave him a rare smile. “You were not the reason why that man died. Jack was just happy to have an excuse to take out the garbage.”
“That— still doesn’t make it okay.” Except Felix honestly felt like it was justified at that point. Even in the midst of all of these stressors threatening to drown Felix, he was genuinely relieved to get that long-living weight off his chest. Bill O’Riley hadn’t been killed solely for what he’d done to Felix. He’d gotten what was coming to him. Felix wasn’t the blame for the death of that man, not entirely. Jack had just needed the motive to cover up the murder of one of his own men. “I can’t help but feel better.”

“You are colossally stupid,” Kon said. “Taking world on your shoulders. Dead men aren’t your fault unless you pull the trigger yourself.”

“Killing in the name of me puts the blame on me as well,” Felix argued. “Jack put that on my head whether it was on purpose or not. He didn’t know me well enough then, he didn’t know I would take responsibility, but he knows me now. And to know that Bill O’Riley deserved it still doesn’t change the fact that a life was lost and it was because of me.”

Felix was so tired of who he was. How he thought. How he saw justice. It used to have been his saving grace, giving him firm direction through life. Now it only made him feel worse and worse with every passing day.

“Like I said,” Kon sighed. “Colossally stupid.” Kon nodded across the street towards Felix’s home. “Next forty-eight hours, my eyes are absent. You better not get yourself killed. Then I’ll be in a shit ton of trouble.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” Felix said.

“Sure, sure,” Kon drawled. “Go do whatever it is you must hide from the rest of us. I wish you luck.”

Felix nodded and crossed the street as Kon went back into his own home. He stood in his foyer, looked over everything through the lens of his parents, and told himself that there was nothing more that he could do.

There was the sound of a car pulling up in front of his home after what felt like ages and Felix braced for impact.

...  

“And Fanny told us you have a girlfriend.”

Felix was on the verge of collapsing, standing in front of his sink, washing dishes for the second time because his mother had said it had looked like there were hard water stains on the glasses. She hadn’t told Felix to rewash them, he’d done this himself, he’d chosen to wash the dishes again because he didn’t want her thinking that he didn’t care. He’d taken the glasses from her and gone to the sink and went back to scrubbing his fingertips raw. His parents were sitting at the table with cups of coffee, freshly brewed from Felix’s Franke Evolution 1 Step coffee maker, a machine that apparently cost eighteen thousand dollars.

“We are happy to see your tastes have evolved,” his mother said as she sipped from her cup. Her and his father had already done the rounds of the house and it was getting late. Felix had answered all of the questions after brands and thread count and use and now Felix was too tired to fucking think, but he was on his feet and washing dishes while his parents got ready to flay open another part of his life. “Am I to assume this heightened taste comes from her? Fanny seemed to think she was more of our class.”
“I don’t care about that,” Felix said, knowing they wouldn’t like that answer, but also knowing that they wouldn’t expect anything less from him. “Marzia is a good person and I love being around her.”

His fingertips were stinging. There was a cut from his thumbnail, stretching back to the first joint, the aftermath of getting his hands wet and dry and then going into the cold. “Her parents own a range of dry cleaners and she knows how to dress just as well as you or Fanny. But she’s down to earth and fun and I enjoy being around her and I want to see her more often than I feasibly can.”

His father scoffed. “Well, we both know you’d see her more often if you had a career change.”

The plate dropped from Felix’s hand, the clang of it hitting the basin of his sink startling him. “She understands,” Felix said after a moment. “She supports what I do and my motives for doing it. She’s a good person.”

His parents both let out noises that said they weren’t pleased. Felix chose to ignore them. “The turkey’s in the oven,” he told his mother. “Could you check it for me?”

“You made a whole turkey for the three of us?” His mother tutted her disdain. “Wasteful. We’ll have to give the leftovers to a soup kitchen.”

Felix would never understand his parents. Waste money on useless things in the home, but don’t waste food, right? There was no happy medium, no way to please them. Felix knew this was going to be a disaster. “Can we just call a truce?” Felix asked. “I know you guys are unhappy with me. I know that we’re not gonna see eye to eye on this. Can we please just agree to disagree and try to have a good time?”

Both his parents paused, causing Felix to look over his shoulder. They were trading looks with one another, communicating silently and in whatever code they’d slowly developed between one another over the years. Then they looked to Felix, expressions prim. “Fair enough,” his father said. “We will refrain from unnecessary commentary, but you must promise to keep an open mind. We have something important to discuss over dinner and we’d appreciate you not keeping to your doggedly stubborn ways.”

Felix clenched his jaw, then nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Now then,” his mother said, pulling down the oven and checking on the turkey inside. “Oh. What a small bird.” She smiled at Felix. “That will be perfect for the three of us. And it smells delicious. You always were an excellent cook, Felix.”

Felix almost sunk to the floor in relief. “Thank you.”

“Can I do anything to help?” his father asked. “I do hope you’ve made that green bean casserole.”

“It’s in the fridge,” Felix said, jerking his head to the Samsung smart fridge that was six-fucking-thousand dollars. “Bottom shelf, be careful cause it’s in glass and it could be pretty cold.”

“I am a Swedish man, born and raised,” his father boasted. “The cold cannot touch me.”

“Where’s your baster?” his mother asked. “I need to make sure this turkey does not dry out. It’s small, isn’t it? It shouldn’t cook so long.”

It felt deceivingly normal from there. Felix’s parents bustled around the kitchen with him, sharing light conversation that had the knot in Felix’s chest slowly unwinding, luring him into a sense of security that he wasn’t sure he could trust. They wanted to talk to him about something important at dinner, and Felix was going to put that off as long as he could. At the risk of them seeing through him, Felix let the turkey cook another hour and insisted on mashing the potatoes into absolute mush,
more so than he normally would for the sake of delaying the inevitable.

As he tried to avoid thinking about what they wanted to talk to him about, Felix found his thoughts drawn to Marzia. He hoped she was having a good Thanksgiving, hoped she’d been able to call the same sort of truce as Felix had with her own family to celebrate. He knew she was Italian, but didn’t know the extent. He’d tried texting her earlier today and she hadn’t answered, so she must be some sort of busy. Maybe she didn’t even celebrate it, like Kon. He wondered— Felix wondered if Jack celebrated Thanksgiving.

He was sure Tyler did. Probably Mark, too, and hopefully Mark was with Mama Bach, giving the woman the peaceful Thanksgiving with her family that she deserved. Then again, Mama Bach was full bred Korean. Maybe the Fischbachs didn’t celebrate at all either. But Felix hoped they did, because that would mean that maybe Jack had been invited to some sort of Thanksgiving when he’d been younger. He hoped that the Fischbachs celebrated so that Jack could have the chance to have a normal holiday as well. Same with Christmas and Easter and all of those stupid excuses people had to get the family together and eat. Felix prayed that Jack had been given some slice of normalcy when he’d been younger, even if it had only been akin to what Felix was doing now— delaying the inevitable.

Eventually, the night came to the point where Felix couldn’t put it off any longer. The table was set, his mother had dug out candles that Felix hadn’t even known he owned from the stairwell closet, and his parents were hungry. Felix sat down at one end of the table, his parents at the other, with the food plated in front of them. It felt strange to be so far away from the people he should feel the closest with. But that strangeness was nothing knew.

“Take my hand,” His mother prompted from over the cranberry sauce. Felix did as told. Her hands felt soft and her fingertips were cold. She held Felix’s hand lightly, like she didn’t want to touch him more than she had to. Felix swallowed around a hitch in his throat and willed his hands to keep from shaking.


“Amen,” his mother echoed.


Felix’s hand was dropped and he was grateful. He didn’t know why he was suddenly so against the touch of his family, but he knew he couldn’t force it down like it meant nothing. There had been a horrific detachment between him and the rest of the Kjellbergs since coming here. There was no other way to say it. And Felix had a feeling that tonight something was going to give.

“Pass the potatoes,” His father requested.

His parents ate silently while Felix avoided eating, the clink of silverware on ceramic being the only sound Felix could hear for what felt like ages. He was reminded of being a child, being sent to his parents room, sitting on the bed and awaiting a punishment he couldn’t predict. Would they take his toys away, would they rap his knuckles, would they shout— would Felix even deserve the punishment he’d be given?

He’d once gotten in trouble for defending a boy in school. His parents had told him that he wasn’t supposed to start or finish fights, regardless of the reason. They’d told him he’d need a perfect record to get into those Ivy league schools and make a name for himself. They’d grounded him for two weeks just because Felix had gotten between a victim and a bully. That was where the rift had
started, the detachment between him and his family. Especially with his sister. She’d been the one to tell their parents why Felix had gotten in trouble.

“So, Felix,” his father said. “We wanted to talk to you about something important.”

Felix had barely touched his food, only a few slices of turkey and some green bean casserole. It wasn’t because he wasn’t hungry— he’d worked himself to the bone today, after all— but because he was self conscious of eating in front of his own parents and had no idea why. He was just sure they’d be able to judge him for it somehow.

“We worked hard to raise you and your sister with humility and respect for money,” his mother said. “An understanding for risk versus reward and what it takes to make it in this day and age. We didn’t want you relying on the money you had, but become capable of making important decisions for yourselves and keeping your wits about you. Your sister has handled herself especially well, but you have take what your father and I have referred to as a ‘break year.’ Going on more than five years, of course. Nearly at a decade now. While we’re happy you’ve finally found someone you would consider settling down with, we do believe you need to turn your eyes towards the future.”

Felix’s stomach sunk. “I told you,” he said. “I don’t want to talk about my work.”

“We understand that,” his father said gently. “But unfortunately, it’s proving to be a necessity. We don’t want you stuck in this job for the rest of your life, Felix. It isn’t good for you.”

“Health problems,” his mother said. “Bad knees, bad backs, bad hands, all from the manual labor you force upon yourself. Not to mention the injury and death rates of police officers. You make deplorable pay for such a high risk job. The benefits are nice, yes, and the retirement will be decent, but it will be nothing compared to the money a smart boy like you will save from your own personal profits if you have your own business and store away for your own retirement, outside of a government 401k.”

“I’m not doing this for my retirement,” Felix argued. “I’m doing this because it’s what I was born to do.”

“That’s just simply not the truth,” his father sighed. “No one is born to do anything, really, so this is nothing more than a desire. A whim, if you will. It means absolutely nothing.”

Felix felt his father’s words like a slap. “That’s not true,” he said, his tone strangled. “It means everything to me.” His work was his life, Felix couldn’t imagine himself doing anything else. “I’m not— you can’t ask me to stop.”

“Unfortunately,” his mother said while taking a bit of the casserole that she’d drowned in gravy. “We are done with asking. It has come to the point where your father and I have been forced to make a difficult decision. Please know that we love you dearly, Felix, and only want the best for you, but you keeping fighting us on what’s right. You've forced our hands.”

"I am retiring in May of the coming year," his father said. "You will be the successor to my company.”

“No,” Felix denied without a thought.

“Please take a moment,” his mother insisted gently. “This is a very important decision. You should sleep on it, at least. This is going to be your entire future, right in this moment. You know what your father and I believe you should do. We’ve been asking this for years, Felix, you must take our advice at the amount it is worthy of.”
“I’m not going to do it,” Felix said, his hands trembling atop the table. “You can’t make me.”

“Felix, please.” His father was almost begging, and Felix wanted nothing more than to make everyone in the world happy, but he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t sacrifice himself like this, not for his family, not for anyone. “There are more repercussions for saying no than you realize.”

“Why don’t you understand me?” Felix asked, his vision blurring. The panic was welling in his chest again, remnants of the fear he would revel in after his nightmares, akin to the panic that had him hiding from unseen eyes in his own home. “I know you don’t like this life of mine, but it’s all I have and all I want. I’m a cop, okay? Even though I know you hate it, that’s not going to change the fact that I’m a cop. It’s what I’m meant to do. I feel it in my bones, I feel it in my chest every time I wake up and get ready for my shift. Putting on that uniform is one of the only times I feel like myself. The only time I feel capable of being anything at all. Please. Why can’t you understand that?”

His parents traded another one of those looks, a silent conversation that Felix wasn’t welcome in. He felt like he was facing down a firing squad, looking down the barrel of his own gun. His parents were giving him one final chance to become what they wanted him to be and Felix wasn’t going to take it. He couldn’t take it. Maybe his job was a death sentence, but doing what his parents did would be an even slower suicide.

“We are then forced to file for disinheritance,” his mother said matter-of-factually while Felix’s heart caved in his chest. “We will keep an open line of contact with you until you come to your senses, but this is what you’ve made us do, Felix. We never wanted this for you. Now we are forced to take drastic measure to make you see reason.”

“You will no longer be included in our will or any legal proceedings until you accept our offer and leave this insane career,” his father said, sounding sad. “And we have your sister with us as well. You will not be allowed to see her or her family. She is willing to consider a non-felon restraining order should you continue to be stubborn.” His father dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “This is what you have brought us to, Felix—I am sorry.”

“You’re disowning me,” Felix said, the wind pushed from his chest. “You’re disowning me.”

“That’s a harsh word,” his mother sighed. “But if that’s what it takes for you to understand, then yes. We’re disowning you.”

Felix stood from the table, felt like he was pushing through water, slow motion and drowning. “I— have to go,” he said. “Please lock up the house. I have to go.”

“Where are you going?” his father demanded. “Out into the city? At this hour? New York is dangerous, Felix!”

“What do you care,” Felix whispered. He looked down at his hands, saw they weren’t shaking anymore, felt the air moving sluggishly in his lungs. He was going into some sort of shock again, like when he’d brought the cameras to Jack and found out that someone else was watching him, someone he couldn’t trust. Felix was going into shock. “I’m leaving,” he said. “Please lock up tonight.”

Felix was out of his home and into the streets before he could even register the actions it took themselves. His socks became instantly soaked by the rain that was beginning to fall, telling him he’d forgotten his shoes. His phone was in his back pocket, but he knew he had five percent battery left, so that wasn’t much use for anything. The home across the street was dark, meaning Kon wasn’t there. Jack was in Colombia. Mark was with his family. Marzia wasn’t responding.

Felix was standing in the middle of the street in the pouring rain with no shoes, crushed beneath the
weight that he no longer had a family.

Felix didn’t have a family.

A sob wrenched itself from his chest without warning and he kicked himself, refusing to cry. He was an adult and he’d made the decision. He’d done this to himself. Felix had no right to feel sorry when this was his own fault. Tensions had risen and ties had been strained slowly over the years and it was all Felix’s fault. He’d done this to himself. He’d done this to himself.


He stumbled and began to walk, uncaring of where he ended up. He could fall off a fucking bridge for all he gave a shit for right now. Everything was fucked, everything was gone. Felix had no one, not really, and it was his own fault. If only he’d listened to his parents back when he’d been young and still able to deny who he was for the sake of survival within his family. If only he’d been able to give Jack what he wanted so Jack wouldn’t need to avoid Felix to feel better. If only Felix was anyone else than the failure he was today.

His phone was burning in his back pocket, but Felix wouldn’t use what little battery he had for some wasted effort to reach out to someone who didn’t have the time to respond. Jack or Marzia, Felix didn’t even know whose company he sought anymore. But there was this emptiness in his chest, this black hole of nothing that shouldn’t be there. He was trying not to cry, and yet there wasn’t any sadness in him to be found. It was just— nothing.

“You deserve this,” Felix told himself as he went to the sidewalk, realizing he didn’t want to get hit by a car and put that guilt on the driver. “You made all of these decisions yourself, you knowingly brought them to this. You drove them to this. You fucking deserve it, Kjellberg.”

Never had Felix been so hard on himself, but he couldn’t deny the truth any longer. “A waste,” he choked out. “Just a fucking waste. You can’t help anyone. Just one giant fucking waste.”

With every word, something inside Felix broke. He had no idea what it was or how he was going to put it back together, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. There was nothing he needed more in the moment than the honest truth that he’d been denying for so long.

“Why couldn’t you just make Jack happy?” Felix asked himself. “Why do you have to be so selfish? Everything would be better if you could just get over yourself. If you could just put aside what you fucking want and do what people need from you. Should have listened to your parents. Should have given in to Jack. Shouldn’t have hit him when he kissed you. He didn’t deserve that. He deserves what he wants. You fucking piece of shit, why couldn’t you just stop being selfish for one second and give in? Why can’t you just give in?”

Felix brought his hands up to his neck, digging his nails into the skin. He was starting to cry again and he couldn’t stop it. “Why couldn’t you make Jack happy?” he sobbed. “Why couldn’t you be a good person? Why are you so terrible? Why are you like this? Why are you like this?”

The few people walking the same street as him parted around him like waves, not wanting to even touch the man muttering to himself with only socks on his feet, no umbrella or jacket, no ounce of sanity left. Felix was a stain on the city. He was a stain in his own life.

“You piece of shit,” he growled, his nails digging deep into his neck, nearly breaking the skin. “You piece of fucking shit. You’re nothing but a hinderance, nothing but a way to hurt him. You’re nothing. You don’t save anyone, you only make things worse. You’re nothing and no one and you deserve to—”
“What are you doing out here, Felix?”

There was a set of feet in front of Felix, black boots and blue jeans, not stepping around him and avoiding his existence like everyone else. Felix stopped short in his tracks and released his grip on his neck, wondering if that was just the rain or blood that was trickling down his skin. He stared at the feet, then followed them up the legs and waist and chest to the face.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Felix replied to Mark dully. Now confronted with the weariness of conversation, all emotion bled away from Felix and left him empty. “Shouldn’t you be at home? With your mother?”

“Shouldn’t you?” Mark asked.

Felix swallowed hard. “I— can’t be there right now.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Mark sighed heavily. “Go back home, Officer.”

Felix shook his head, starting to shiver from the cold. “I can’t,” he said, his voice absolutely ruined. “Don’t make me, Mark, please. I’ll do anything. I will literally do anything if you don’t make me go back there.”

For a moment, Mark looked worried. Then it was washed away by his usual exasperated apathy he always felt with Felix, because Felix wasn’t worth anything at all to him, even at the best of moments between them. Felix was about to crumble into pieces onto the fucking concrete and the only person that was going to be able to catch him was Mark. Felix was as good as dead at this point.

“You’re not going back,” Mark said. “I can’t risk sending you to a hotel. Why not go to Kon?”

“I gave him the night off.” Of all of the stupid things Felix had done, that was one of the worst. He clenched his hands in the front of his shirt and trembled hard, a wave of frigid air running up his spine, soaked to the bone and looking absolutely pathetic in front of Mark, once again. “Just let me pass.”

“No can do, Officer,” Mark denied softly. “Let me pass.”

Mark was quiet for a long moment. Felix couldn’t look him in the eye. Then Mark took Felix by the elbow. “You’re coming with me,” he said, pulling Felix along as he began to walk to a car that was parked on the side of the street. “I need to make a call so shut up.” Mark manhandled Felix into the passenger seat, Felix too cold to put up any sort of fight, and then pulled out his phone as he got in the driver’s seat and started the engine. Felix stared owlishly, useless and stunned by Mark helping him and moving Felix so quickly. One second he’d been drowning in the rain, the next he was in Mark’s warm car, actually sat in the front. He was so out of his depth that it wasn’t even funny.

“It’s me,” Mark said to whoever picked up the phone. “Code K.” There was a pause, someone talking on the other line, voice chipped. Felix slumped in the seat and tried to tell himself he wasn’t a burden to Mark. “I’ve deemed it necessary,” Mark told the other person softly. “You know I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t think there was any other choice. Code K. I’ll keep you posted.” There was another bout of words Felix couldn’t understand, then Mark nodded. “Gotcha. Take good care of him. Don’t let him know.”

Mark hung up and turned his full attention to the road. “I’m taking you home,” he told Felix.
“Which home.”

Mark glanced to Felix, seemed put off by the lack of emotion in Felix’s voice. Felix couldn’t even be bothered to fake it anymore. “I’m taking you to my mother’s place,” he said. “You’re going to have Thanksgiving with us. Have you eaten?”

Felix had made the meal, but he hadn’t had a bite of it. He wondered if his parents— fuck, could he even call them that anymore? He wanted to, but it would only hurt worse the more he realized that it was the wrong word. They were no longer his parents. They were Ulf and Lotta and making that difference was going to save Felix endless agony in the long run, no matter how much it tortured him now. Cauterize the wound early. Face the music while the song was fresh. “I haven’t,” he said softly. “But I’m not hungry.” God, he didn’t know if he was going to be able to fake a smile for Mama Bach no matter how much he loved the woman. She wasn’t a lot like Lotta, but she was a mother regardless.

“You’re coming to dinner,” Mark said firmly. “No arguments. We’ll have to make up a story of how we know each other on the fly.”

“Let’s just say I’ve arrested you.”

Mark snorted. “Unfortunately, that excuse will not work.”

Felix was too tired to care why. He didn’t say another word, only stared out the window and systematically went through every little thing in his life he was going to have to fix.

The one that stood out the most was his will. He’d had his will since being accepted into the academy at the young age of eighteen, it was carefully worded and specific and well-thought out and now completely useless. He wouldn’t legally be allowed to give anything to his nephew and sister. He had no one he could possibly give anything of worth to. Maybe he could talk to a friend and trust them to handle his assets reasonably? But who would he want to dump that responsibility on? And what even was his anymore? All of his furniture was Jack’s. All Felix genuinely had to his name was his gear and guns and that— that wasn’t worth anything to anyone else. The guns that had saved Felix’s life were worthless to anyone else. Everything Felix was— just fucking worthless.

Felix’s sudden hitch in breath was the only reason he realized he was crying again. Felix brought his hands to his face, trying to hide. He had a bad habit of falling apart in front of the one person he’d rather die than see him like this. Mark was respectfully silent beside him, but his silence could easily be judgement. Felix held his breath to try and control his sobbing.

He hated himself. He hated everything about who he was. He dug his nails in the skin of his face, relished the way it hurt. There was an echo in his ears and the the sound of Lotta saying she and Ulf were disowning him, tossing Felix aside like he wasn’t their son, like he didn’t mean anything. They were fucking right to do it. Felix didn’t mean anything at all.

The car stopped after what felt like years. Felix wanted to curl in on himself and cease to exist. “We’re here,” Mark said, tone low, almost respectful. “Come inside. My mother will be happy to see you.”

“I can’t do this,” Felix choked out. “I can’t— she can’t see me like this.”

Mark didn’t say anything immediately. “What happened?”

“I won’t say.”

“Officer,” Mark said firmly. “What happened?”
Felix swallowed down a sob. “I won’t say.”

Mark breathed out harshly through his nose. “Fine,” he snapped. “But don’t you dare take this out on my mother.”

“Just let me leave.”

“You’re gonna walk straight off a bridge if I let you do that. Get out of the car, Officer, we’ll say that you saw a dog get it by a car or something.” Mark made this noise. “Jesus, don’t wanna think about that, then I’ll start crying too.”

So Mark had a soft spot for dogs. Oddly, that was the most human thing Felix knew about the other man. “Come inside,” Mark beckoned gently again. “And whatever happened— put it to the back of your mind. This is a day for family and since I don’t know why you can’t be with yours, come be with mine. No matter how much I hate it, my mother loves you. Let’s give her a good Thanksgiving with her two favorite boys.”

Felix was pretty sure that drug-dealer Mark wasn’t Mama Bach’s favorite of the two boys, but he wasn’t going to argue. And it wasn’t like he could stay in the car. Felix finally uncovered his face, then froze when he saw a tissue being held in front of him. Mark was studiously avoiding his gaze. Felix took the tissue and wiped his eyes and nose, feeling like a child. But at least Mark was enough of a stone cold bastard to be able to take control when Felix was failing so spectacularly.

“Let’s go,” Mark said before getting out of the car. Felix followed, stepping back into the freezing rain, shivering violently. He hugged his arms around his own torso, flexing his toes that were so cold he couldn’t feel them anymore. He felt like he would never be warm again. “For fuck’s sake, Felix,” Mark sighed. “You look like a drowned cat.”

Felix looked up at Mark, defeated, and Mark could see it. Something washed over Mark’s expression and he lost his annoyance, settling with a mask. “Come inside,” Mark beckoned gently. “I don’t want you dying out here.”

Felix finally started to move, his socks making ugly noises with each step. “I don’t want to get her floor soaked.”

“I’ll grab you a towel and a change of clothes,” Mark said. “Do me a favor and don’t complain about what I grab you, she keeps clothes for both of us sons and they’re not exactly anything to be proud of.”

Felix would take anything at this point. Mark went to the familiar front door, letting himself in. “Mom!” he called out into the home as he took off his jacket and stepped out of his boots. He shook his hair and let the water droplets fly. Felix watched this all with detachment, marveling over how weird it was to be seeing Mark in such a mundane setting as this. “Mom!” Mark shouted again. “I brought a friend! He’s gonna eat with us!”

“Heol!” cried Mama Bach from within the home. “I be there in a second, come in, come in!”

Mark turned to Felix and pointed to the front rug. “Stay there,” he ordered before bounding up the stairs. Felix was left alone in the foyer, looking around with a sinking feeling of nothing in his chest. He’d apparently cried his heart out in the rain and the car. Now that he was in this warm home, intruding on a celebration meant for family and not fuckups like Felix, he couldn’t feel anything at all.

Mark came back down quickly, holding a USMC wooly and a pair of sweatpants with NYC down
“Go get changed in the downstairs bathroom,” Mark ordered after handing him the clothes. “Hang your shit over the shower rod. If you’re in there for more than a minute, I’m coming after you, even if I have to kick the door in.”

Felix blinked slowly. “Do you actually hate me?”

Mark glared. “Don’t even bother asking that.”

Felix ducked his head, feeling like he’d been admonished. He went into the bathroom and didn’t dare look at his reflection, pealing off his clothes and changing into the dry ones in record time. He only paused to ruffle the water from his hair, splash cool water on his face, let out a long breath while bent over at the sink, and then opened the door, expecting to see Mark. Instead, there was Mama Bach, looking up at him with wide, excited eyes.

“Ei, ei, ei!” she cried out, clapping excitedly. “Officer Felix, I did not know it would be you! Oh my goodness, my goodness, come sit! I have food, plenty of food, I am so happy to see you! I make traditional Chuseok dinner, much like your Thanksgiving, but in Korea! Hangwa, Baekseju, japchae, bulgogi, sonpyeon, so much food! Come sit, come sit!”

She took Felix by the arm and pulled him into a seat at the table after leading him through the house that he could have navigated easily on his own. She even put Felix in his favorite chair—it was facing the large front windows while also still allowing a view of the foyer, and angled just right so that he could see the backdoor in his peripherals. All of the exits were displayed and he would be able to see anyone coming at the moment when it mattered most.

At the table, Felix rubbed tiredly at his eyes and tried to keep himself sitting up straight.

“You look exhausted,” Mama Bach said as she set down an extra plate and chopsticks in front of Felix, then a small, round glass that she filled with soju. Felix thanked her softly and Mama Bach went back to pattering around, chattering away at a mile a minute.

“I didn’t know you knew my son!” she exclaimed. “I am sure you know each other well, Mark doesn’t like introducing me to his friends, he has so many fears and worries and it’s all very nice, but his mother wants to know what her son is doing and who with, yes? He had this old friend, sweet boy, little thing with such a bad family. And Mark would always bring him over and he would have such fun. I always wondered what happened to him, the poor thing, I always wanted to take him away and keep him in my family.”

Felix was going to cry, listening to Mama Bach talk about Jack. She probably didn’t know he knew, but Felix couldn’t think of who else it could be. Poor little thing, Poor little Jack, staring up at who could have been the first truly kind woman he’d ever met in his life. Felix wondered if Mama Bach insisted on feeding Jack as heartily as she insisted on feeding him. He hoped she had. He hoped Mama Bach had made a point to hug Jack every time she saw him, would always put bandaids on his wounds, would speak softly and teach him hands could be used for things that didn’t hurt. Felix hoped beyond hope that Mama Bach had treated Jack like the human being he was, the child worthy of love. He prayed Mama Bach had loved Jack because Felix was only ever managing to hurt Jack. He hoped Mama Bach had never been put in the same impossible situation as Felix was now.

There were footsteps from the stairs coming down, probably Mark coming back from wherever he’d gone. Felix watched the bottom of the stairs with sharp attention regardless, mentally reminding himself where all of Mama Bach’s sharpest knives were kept. His hand went up the table and took a skewer of roasted vegetables, pushing the vegetables slowly onto his plate to give himself some kind of weapon. Every muscle in his body wound itself tight, adrenaline and fear pumping through his veins, terrified of who it could be if it wasn’t who it was supposed to be, running through every
possibly scenario and trying to ensure the ones that got Mama Bach and Mark out alive. His breath began to shorten, his hands were shaking, he was—

Mark came down and into view, gaze zeroing in on Felix immediately. Mark narrowed his eyes and pointed at Felix meaningfully, then cut at his throat, telling Felix to quit his bullshit. Felix relaxed with manual thought, picturing every limb in his body unwinding slowly.

“Of course, there is no problem with not wanting to be around certain people,” Mama Bach continued, making Felix realize he hadn’t been listening and had lost part of the conversation. “Not everyone has perfect family and perfect life like I do!” She smiled widely as she put a little spring in her step while she plated more food on the table. It was like some complicated buffet with so many colors and meats and veggies and savory pastries and all of it was something Felix had never experienced before and he was grateful for it. Mama Bach tottered over to Mark and went up on her toes to kiss his cheek— Mark bent down the last few inches for her, accommodating his mother with the smallest smile that Felix had never seen on him before.

“This is my son!” Mama Bach stated proudly. A shot of envy went through Felix, wishing his mother could have introduced him to someone with the same amount of pride. Felix had always wanted to be someone that was worthy of remembering. And now he was disowned. “My son, my big boy.” Mama Bach went up again and kissed Mark’s cheek three more times.

Even for all of the things that Mama Bach had said about her son that worked with the bad people and did illegal shit, she genuinely did love Mark with all of her heart, a true moment of unconditional love that Felix had never known. Felix, for all the of the pain his chest, was so happy that Mark had this woman as his mother. Even for what Mark had done, he deserved someone as good as her, someone who would always forgive and welcome him home with open arms. And maybe, from there, Felix could work on making sure Mark didn’t get any deeper with the crime web of New York City than he had to— for Mama Bach’s sake.

“I’m so happy you both know each other!” Mama Bach cried out. “You must be good partners or something, fighting crime together!”

Felix’s thoughts processed this slowly. He looked to Mark and just stared. Mark met his gaze and didn’t say a word, jaw tight.

“Do you guys go out and fight the bad guys?” Mama Bach continued, patting Mark’s arm and heading to the oven while throwing punches in the air in front of her with her own sound effects. “My good-doing boys, working together, being friends! Never could have asked for better, so happy you both know each other. Mark has heard so much about you, Felix, I’m trying to convince him to recruit you!”

“Recruit me,” Felix repeated slowly as that fear bled slowly back into his lungs. Mark was staring into him. The room was deadly still between them both, a stalemate, a dam about to break. “Recruit me for what?” Mark’s expression was calm— deadly serenity.

“FBI of course!” Mama Bach crowed, unaware of how she shattered the last of Felix’s insanity with that single acronym. “Federal Bureau of Investigation! My big boy Agent Fischbach here, reporting to duty, ready to bring down all the bad people in the world! Just like his father.”

Felix breathed out slowly. He wasn’t shaking anymore. He stood slowly from his chair, not looking anywhere but Mark. “Before we have dinner,” he said slowly. “I’d like to see Mark’s old room. Just curious.”

“Sure, sure,” Mama Bach said, waving them both off as she stirred something on the stove. Mark
was tense for a moment before he rolled his shoulders and tested the stretch of his neck. Felix rounded the table and watched Mark the whole way. This stalemate between them felt like fire, like bullets would fly if they had them. Felix only barely remembered to leave the skewer behind.

“It’s upstairs,” Mark said, voice forcibly casual. “Follow me, Officer Kjellberg.”

Mark went up the stairs first, showing Felix his back in a display of trust that Felix didn’t know what to do with. With each climb of the steps, something curled tight in Felix’s chest. Only at the top did he realized it was— fury. Absolute fucking fury.

How dare Mark do this? Felix had no other possible conclusion except that Mark was using Jack, was lying to him and intended to put Jack into a cell once everything was over and done with. FBI riding the coattails of his childhood friend into the world of the mafia just to bring it all down. Or maybe Mark didn’t even intend on Jack surviving for a fair trial— maybe Mark planned for Jack to be a corpse by the end of this.

How could Mark do this? Jack trusted Mark in a way he couldn’t physically trust anyone else. Jack had put his life into Mark’s hands willingly since he’d been a small child, and here Mark was, taking that trust and contorting it until it burst into nothing, the disgusting abuse of the faith you would be given when you were loved yet you didn’t love them back, not the way they needed, not how they deserved. As Mark led Felix down a hallway to a bedroom door, Felix glared into the back of Mark’s head and hated him. Then he saw the firearm tucked into the back of Mark’s pants.

Mark pushed the bedroom door open, opened his mouth to say something, but Felix acted before Mark could speak. He grabbed the firearm from the back of Mark’s pants and shoved Mark into the bedroom with a firm push to his lower spine. Mark stumbled into the room and Felix followed, shutting the door behind them both and locking it, then taking the safety off the gun after pulling the slide to bring in a bullet. He held the gun up to Mark’s head and said, “I’m going to kill you if you even think of betraying Jack.”

Mark stared down the barrel with disbelief. “Are you… pointing a gun at a federal agent?” he asked slowly.

“You’re going to call Jack and tell him what you are right now,” Felix demanded, his words chosen carefully and bitten out through gnashed teeth. He was furious and a horrific calm had settled into his bones, making him capable of anything. He’d never wanted to kill someone before, not really, but in this moment, he knew that if he found out Mark really did intend to do anything to Jack, Felix would put a bullet into him before he could try. “You’re going to call him and tell him you’re FBI and then you’re going to pull out of whatever you’re doing and never see him again.”

“Are you pointing a gun at a federal agent?” Mark asked again, his hands held up in surrender, but his brow twisted like he couldn’t believe Felix was doing this.

“Did not you fucking hear me?” Felix asked, stepping closer, pressing the muzzle between Mark’s eyes. Mark’s eyes slowly widened, but not in fear. He truly looked incredulous. Felix sneered. “If you ever, ever try to hurt Jack in any way, get him in any sort of trouble, I will fucking hurt you. And I’ll make sure you can never touch him again and you will be out of his life forever. Do you understand me?”

“You’re pointing a fucking gun at a federal agent,” Mark said dumbly. Then his gaze darkened as he spat, “For Jack.”

“Don’t try me, Mark,” Felix growled. “Call Jack right now and tell him before I put a bullet between your eyes in your childhood bedroom.”
“You fucking idiot—*Jack fucking knows.*”

The rage flashed away. Felix blinked, suddenly unsure of who he should listen to. “What?”

“Jack. Knows. I’m FBI,” Mark repeated slowly. “He’s the entire reason I’m here, you fucking dipshit. Jack is working with me and my partner in a kingpin takedown, he has a deal with the FBI, he knows I’m FBI and he’s working with me.”

Felix stared. Stared a little longer. Then stared more as things started to make sense. Felix looked at the gun in his hand, then carefully followed the line it made, his arm to the firearm to the place that muzzle was resting, between Mark’s eyes. “Oh,” he said dumbly. “I’m—pointing a gun at a federal agent.”

“Yes,” Mark affirmed slowly through his anger. “You should probably stop.”

Felix lowered the gun, arm now hanging uselessly at his side. All at once, the exhaustion and panic filtered back in, what had once been overshadowed by the rage now returning full force. He was shaking again. He needed fucking tranquilizers because he couldn’t stop shaking. Felix stumbled back, out of Mark’s space, and looked around the room in a daze.

Mark’s old bedroom was cute in a disarming way. There were glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling and dark covers on the oak bed with posters pasted all over the wall, bands and places Felix didn’t know. There was a desk with an old PC and a picture frame beside it. Two small boys, one of them looking a little more like Mark than the other, and a tall man between them. The man had broad shoulders and a bright smile with his arms around both the boys’ necks in a playful hug. The man was wearing a police uniform and both of the boys were looking at the man rather than the camera, adolescent adoration shining in their eyes. Mark’s father.

Felix felt something inside of himself break. “My parents disowned me.”

He felt Mark’s eyes on him. “Come again?” Mark asked, voice low like he was worried of speaking too loudly and collapsing whatever was somehow keeping Felix standing.

“They disowned me,” Felix repeated shakily. “They told me that either I quit being a cop and move back to Rhode Island to take over my dad’s company, or they cut me out of the family. Disinheritance, cut me off, even get a fucking restraining order so I can’t see my nephew or sister.” Felix trembled and his legs were threatening to give out beneath him. “I can’t be what they want me to be,” he whispered. “And that makes me nothing to them.”

Felix fell back against the door and slid down the wall, unable to remain standing. He looked up and blinked rapidly to keep tears from falling, saw Mark staring at him in gentle shock. Felix smiled wretchedly and ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t stop shaking,” he confessed through laughter that felt like a panic attack. “Everything is so—why can’t I do anything right?”

Mark didn’t move. He was watching something to Felix’s right. Felix followed his gaze and realized Mark was staring at the gun in Felix’s hand, the gun that Felix’s finger was resting above the trigger of, the gun that was pointed at the ceiling, but dangerously close to Felix’s head.

“Give me the gun, Officer,” Mark beckoned carefully, holding out his hand. Felix passed it over without any argument, knowing Mark probably had good reason to be so worried. Mark pulled the slide and let the unused bullet drop to the floor before setting the safety back and tucking the gun away in the back of his pants again. Then Mark looked around for a second, bit his lip, and sat down beside Felix. “Okay,” Mark said slowly. “They—disowned you.” There was a long pause from Mark. He rubbed at his neck and stared into his own room, visibly thinking. Felix didn’t move,
didn’t speak. He was happy to have someone else take the lead.

“Fuck, Felix,” Mark sighed. “I don’t even know— I never thought—” He cut himself off with an aggravated noise. “I can’t think of anything I could say to make this any better.”

“Am I worthless, Mark?” Felix almost heard Mark’s neck crack when his head snapped to look at Felix. Felix choked on a sob and quickly looked away. He was tired of Mark being the one to see him cry. “My own fucking parents— they just throw me away like I’m nothing. My sister has no issue getting a restraining order, so I’ll never see my nephew again. They’re asking something impossible of me and they don’t care that I can’t do it because all they want is to get their way.”

“I—” Mark cut himself off again. “… I’m sure they love you.”

“If this is what love is, then I don’t want it.” Felix shook his head and wiped at his eyes, cursing his stupid fucking tears. “If demanding someone sacrifice who they are and what they believe in in its entirety just for the sake of getting your way is love, then I never want it. I’d rather die cold and alone with no one coming to my funeral, no one even fucking burying me, they just let me decay in my fucking home. I’d rather that happen if this is what love is.”

Mark pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jesus christ,” he murmured to himself. “Jesus fucking christ.” Mark heaved a sigh and let his head thunk against the door behind them. “I don’t know…”

Felix sniffled. “I miss Jack.”

“God damnit, Felix.”

“I do,” Felix said, doubling down because he was at the end of whatever was left in him. “I miss him so much. Even for all the headaches and the hurt of not being good enough for him or being what he needs, Jack makes me feel— lighter. He makes me worry less. He makes me feel safer, untouchable, like the world can’t hurt me when he’s there. And it’s stupid because that’s a false sense of security, but I can’t help it. It’s just how Jack is for me and I’m sorry I can’t be the same detached person you want me to be from him, but Jack means a lot to me and I’m— I’m tired and I miss him.”

Mark groaned, low and loud in his throat. Then: “If I call him and tell him what happened, he’ll come back tonight.”

“Don’t,” Felix denied without a thought. “He, he’s doing something way too important. God, working with the FBI.” Felix smiled and hated himself even more. “I thought so badly of him in the beginning, yet he’s been the best of us this whole fucking time. How could I have thought so little of him?”

“Out of everything you’re beating yourself up for, not knowing that the mob boss is secretly working with the undercover FBI agents is one of the last things you should be upset over.”

“Agents,” Felix repeated. “There’s two of you?”

Mark nodded. “Tyler’s my partner. He’s been at my side since I graduated the academy.”

Felix pulled on another wretched smile. “Funny— looks like we have a lot more in common than I’d ever thought.” He swallowed around a lump in his throat as he heard the sound of Mama Bach singing downstairs. “Well,” he murmured. “Not everything in common.”

Mark shook his head. “Your family are all a bunch of shithheads and you deserve better,” he said, surprising Felix. “Even though I hate how you are, I would never expect you to be anything else. They’re— fucking monsters. You don’t deserve that and I hate them for doing this.”
“You feel a lot of hate,” Felix said.

“There’s a lot of reasons to hate just about anything these days.”

There was suddenly a warm arm around Felix’s shoulders, Mark’s hand resting on Felix’s forearm on the other side. Felix startled and looked at the hand, then the arm, then Mark in shock. Mark was watching him with an ache in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Officer,” Mark said, using the title like he needed to distance himself from whatever he was feeling. But the arm over Felix’s shoulders was the most comforting touch Felix felt in days and he sunk into Mark’s side, still fucking shaking.

“Thanks,” Felix whispered, letting himself take the what tiny amount of peace he could.

“Jack will be back in two days.”

Felix jolted out of his peace immediately, looking to Mark with wide eyes.

“It’s not your fault,” Mark said before Felix could be stupid enough to think so. “He’s coming back because there’s a little hitch and he needs to regroup with me and Tyler. We’re the ones in charge of this whole shitfest, me, Jack, and Tyler, and we’re working through some problems that I can’t necessarily tell you about until I get the consent of the other two. So Jack’s coming back for literally two days. He lands Tuesday, leaves Wednesday. And there wasn’t going to be time for you to see him, but— fuck me, I’ll figure out how to fit you in.”

Felix would’ve cried if he had anything left in him. “Thank you,” he said, knowing he didn’t deserve this. “I know it’s selfish, but everything— it’s all too much.” He ducked his head, pulling at his hair. “I still here the echo. All those people dying. And Dante’s hands on me…” He shuddered, a violent break in the shaking. “I haven’t slept in what feels like days.”

“I know,” Mark said, sounding unhappy. He squeezed Felix’s shoulder and then stood. Felix missed his warmth, but wasn’t ready to humiliate himself in asking for more. “You’re staying here tonight,” he told Felix with no room for argument. “And I’m going to make sure you fucking sleep, you got it? Even if I have to knock you out myself.”

For some stupid fucking reason, Felix was relieved. He stood on coltish legs and nodded, not looking Mark in the eye because he couldn’t, but trying to smile again. “Thanks for not arresting me for pulling a gun on you.”

“You pulled a fucking gun on a federal agent,” Mark groaned. “For Jack. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You mom’s been waiting for too long,” Felix said, honestly not knowing what to do with the fact that he’d been perfectly willing to kill a federal agent for Jack and wanting to avoid opening that can of worms for as long as he could. He was sure that was the same reason Mark sounded so screwed up too. Felix reached out and opened the door. “After you.”

Mark didn’t leave yet. He took Felix by the shoulder and made him look at him. “Your family is shit and they made a fucking mistake,” he told Felix firmly. “So considering this an olive branch— my mother loves you like your mother doesn’t. Feel free to see her whenever the fuck you need to be reminded that you’re worth something and that being a police officer is what you’re meant to do, and that even though your family is a bunch of fucking idiots, we’re proud of you.”

Mark was... proud of him? Felix felt his eyes welling up with tears again. He nodded jerkily and bit his lower lip to keep control of his emotions. “Thank you.”

Mark nodded and left the bedroom. For a moment, Felix was utterly alone and he felt it deep within
his bones. Then Mark realized Felix wasn’t following him, ducked back in to take Felix by the front of the wooly, and pulled him down the stairs after him. Mama Bach was delighted to see them again and Felix didn’t spare his parents back at his home another thought.
Felix startled awake on Mama Bach’s couch to the sound of his phone ringing.

For a moment, he was terrified.

A thousand different worst case scenarios flew through his thoughts, people that could be dead, things that could have gone wrong, problems that could have arisen. What if Kon had found something in Felix’s home? What if Sive had gotten hurt during some bizarre event because he hadn’t taken Thanksgiving off and had picked up a shift for overtime? What if Jack was in the thick of it in Cartagena? What if Marzia was hurt?

He reached for his phone and honestly would have preferred any of the above over what he saw. His sister’s name on the screen drove a knife into his chest, leaving him in a state of quiet nothing. His phone ran a few more times before he realized he should probably answer the call. Felix stood from the couch, letting the throw blanket Mama Bach had insisted he use fall from his shoulders, and picked up the call.

He didn’t say anything. There was silence over the line, not even breath, then his sister’s voice. "Felix?"

Felix’s heart crumbled. “What do you want?” he asked, knowing he sounded like a wreck and hoping she hated it. She deserved to know what she’d helped do to him. “What could you possibly want? I’ve already lost everything. How much lower can you pull me down?”

There was a heavy sigh, like Fanny was exasperated or annoyed with him. It hurt. It hurt so fucking much. He walked into the kitchen with the phone to his ear and held to the back of the chair to ground himself, twisted the bar in his palm. The wood creaked a protest at being abused and Felix trembled.

“It wasn’t supposed to go this far,” Fanny said. “But then when I saw how comfortable you were in your new home, I knew we’d have to up the ante. I honestly thought you’d cave to this. I didn’t—we don’t want to do this, Felix.”

Felix was going to break this fucking chair. “Seems pretty easy to do for something you don’t want.”

“Oh my god, Felix, are you back on that ‘my family doesn’t love me’ deal again? That was so fucking high school.”

Never mind the chair— Felix was going to break his sister. She was treating Felix’s disownment like it was some clique teenage drama from a fucking movie. As anger welled in his chest, though, it failed to translate. Instead, Felix’s grip on the chair became nothing. His stance slumped. He stood in that empty kitchen and began to cry again. “Why do you hate me?” he asked his sister, a sob hitching in his throat.

The phone was suddenly snatched from Felix’s ear and Mama Bach stalked into view around the table, speaking harshly into the receiver. “Who is this?” she barked. “Why are you making him upset?” There was a pause for listening and Mama Bach’s brow furrowed. “Eh? Fanny? You calling me a butt?” Another pause, then her eyes became saucers. “Sister?!”
The sweet little woman was gone, replaced by someone whose fury was matched only by her son’s.
“You listen to me,” she snapped into the receiver. “You fuck off and you never call my son again!
You are not welcome here! Fuck off!” Mama Bach pulled the phone back, glared at the buttons, and
then hung up on Felix’s sister with a huff of triumph. She set the phone down on the table and shook
her head. “The nerve of some people,” she grumbled. “All these humans but not one bit of humanity!
Makes me sick.”

“I agree,” came Mark’s deep voice from over his shoulder before the man came into view, sitting in
the chair next to the one Felix was standing behind. Felix pulled out said chair in a daze and sat at the
table. Mark didn’t even acknowledge him. “Who was it?”

“His sister!” Mama Bach cried out. “If we can even call her that! Jiralhanaem, gguh juh.” Mark
sputtered some godforsaken noise that could have been laughter at whatever his mother had said.
“Do you know her?” Mama Bach asked her son. “The mean butt? What was her name? Butt?
Fanny. You know Fanny?”

“I know of her,” Mark replied calmly. “And unfortunately, that’s bad enough.”

“Making my boy cry.” Mama Bach scowled, and somehow she still looked adorable when so upset.
Felix realized his tears were already drying on his face, his mind no longer running over the words
Fanny had said. “Too early in the morning to feel such bad things! Nimiral, I need to make coffee.”

She all but stomped into the kitchen and out of earshot, leaving Mark and Felix alone. Mark drilled
his nails on the wood of the table and Felix sunk into the quiet, forcing the strain to ease from his
bones. Then he wiped at his eyes with the back of his wrists and felt stupid for falling so quickly to
his sister’s cruel words.

“I swear to god, I’m not a crybaby.”

Mark huffed. “And I swear to god, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with crying after being fucking
disowned. But it looks like neither of us are going to be able to get through to one another, are we?”
Felix only grimaced and looked away. Mark sighed loudly. “I’m assuming you have questions.”

“Are we talking about my shit or your shit?”

“The FBI shit.”

Felix paused, giving himself a moment to think. It was hard to sort through the muddled thoughts that
were all jumbled together thanks to his rude awakening. He pinched the bridge of his nose and
breathed slowly. His heartbeat had spiked at his sister’s voice, but it was ebbing now, getting back to
normal, less on the fight or flight spectrum of existence. Did he want Mark to tell him about the FBI
shit?

“Legally,” he began carefully. “I’m not sure how much I’m allowed to know. If it’s really a matter of
the FBI, then there’s no way a lowly cop like me can have clearance for any of this. Plus, I don’t
want to get you guys into trouble. I know you and Tyler likely are already in deep shit for some of
the stuff I’ve seen you do. Not that you’ve had a choice, of course, I get that. I just— I want to
know, but I don’t want to make things any more difficult than they already are for you guys.” He
winced and brought his hands down to wring them in the front of the wooly. “I don’t wanna make
things worse.”

Mark smacked his hand down hard on the table in front of Felix, making both Felix and Mama Bach
jump. “Why you do that?!?” Mama Bach demanded, her hand to her chest.
“Felix was saying mean things about himself,” Mark replied simply.

“Oh, oh.” Mama Bach nodded like that made sense. “Carry on.”

“Felix.” The way Mark said his name felt almost like a threat. Felix hid by ducking his head, but then nodded to show he was listening. “You’re acting like a child, Felix.”

“I feel as small as one,” Felix confessed in a whisper. Mark smacked the table again and Felix flinched. One knee came up in a reflexive move to guard his chest and it hit the bottom of the table hard enough to tear a yelp of surprised pain from Felix’s lips.

“Fuck,” Mark said. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Felix said as he rubbed his now sore knee. “That was— I was being stupid.”

“I’m gonna hit the table again.” Felix looked up at the warning just in time to watch Mark smack his hand on the table once more. “You need to stop saying this shit about yourself. Jack doesn’t fucking like it and you’re making it harder on him the more you keep that mindset.”

Well fuck— that was the last thing Felix wanted. “I’ll stop,” he said without a thought. “God, I didn’t even think about that. Jack doesn’t need me acting like this. It’s why I didn’t want you to tell him about my parents. He doesn’t need to worry about this.”

He looked back to Mark to see he was glaring at him. Felix faltered. “Or, uh…” He trailed off, unsure of how to do this. “Look,” he said, voice wavering at the edge. “I’m not in a good place. If you could just tell me what I’m supposed to say so that you won’t get even more pissed off, I’ll gladly swallow whatever words you put in my mouth.”

Mark sneered. “I fucking hate how you said that.”

Felix wanted to start crying again. “Please,” he choked out. “Just tell me what to do. I can’t keep doing this with you.”

He’d expected Mark to dig his heels in and tell Felix off for being such a waste of space, but instead, Mark’s expression fell into something like uneasiness. Mark sat back and scratched at his neck, probably some sort of nervous tick.

“No,” he said slowly. “I am going to tell you what to do,” he said slowly. “And I’m only going to do it once because I only have so much patience in my body and I have Tyler fucking Scheid as a partner, so that already brings my patience quota down to nearly ten percent capacity on a daily basis.”

Mark turned in his seat to face Felix, dead serious. “You need to stop taking the weight of the world on your shoulders when it’s the actions and mistakes of other people that are threatening to bring you down. It’s fine to suffer. It’s fine to be sad. But it’s not fine to feel guilty. Wallow in misery all you want, Felix, I know what it’s like to want to hurt, just do not ever try to take the blame. And since I
have jurisdiction over you, consider this a fucking order.” He paused, then raised a brow. “Do you understand me?”

Felix swallowed hard. “Yessir.”

Mark’s jaw visibly clenched. “I swear to god,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “How Jack managed to fall in love with someone more damaged than himself is beyond me.”

“I’m not damaged,” Felix said. “Not like him. I was fine before this.”

“You were not fine,” Mark argued. “In fact, I’d go as far to say that you’d be the textbook antonym reference photo for fine.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You dove in front of a gunshot path to pull a stranger to the ground,” Mark replied readily. “That kind of suicidal recklessness doesn’t just show up over night. Even most cops think to cover their own heads first when bullets start to fly. Your instincts are all sorts of fucked, Officer.”

Honestly, Felix couldn’t disagree. He cleared his throat to get rid of the frog that was making it hard to breathe and took the mug of coffee, taking a sip and finding the Bailey’s a fantastic addition.

“Your mom makes good coffee,” he said.

“Our mom,” Mark corrected. Felix almost dropped his mug. “What, you think I didn’t mean it?” Mark asked, raising his brow again. “She already adopted Jack years ago— still asks after him too. Dodging her questions are hard. So long as she adopts you as well, it’ll be easier for him to slip under her radar.”

“Why can’t Jack come see her?” At Mark’s stink eye, Felix realized how stupid of a question that was. “Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Mark griped. “If you were anywhere near as smart as me, the FBI would have recruited you straight out of the police academy. I can't expect everyone to meet my own personal standards.”

It took Felix a moment to realize Mark was trying to tease. “You’re really terrible at being friendly,” he commented.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Mark sighed. “Another order— finish that coffee and go see Marzia.” At the sound of her name, Felix only felt more stressed. “I know you probably just want to curl up in your shell and never come out, but isolation isn’t the way to handle this. You should see her, even if you feel like you don’t want to. I’m picking up Jack from the airport later this today, just spend the day with her and when Jack lands, I’ll make sure you get an hour or so with him.”

Felix wasn’t sure why Mark was being so accommodating, but he was beyond grateful regardless. “He’s my friend,” he said, still feeling the need to defend his desire to see Jack to Mark. “I just— I want to see my friend.”

“Sure,” Mark bit out. “And I just want to run a snorkeling business.”

Felix didn’t know enough about Mark to guess if that was true or not. “I’ll go see Marzia,” he said. “I, uh, I don’t—” He cut himself off, throat closing in momentary panic. But Felix knew he couldn’t keep shutting down like this. “My parents,” he said slowly. “My parents. Lotta and Ulf. I need to go home and change and I think they might still be there.”

“They’re gone,” Mark said stiffly. “Kon made sure of it.”
While he wanted to be relieved, Felix had gone through too much mafia shit these past months to avoid thinking the worst. He tried to ask this delicately, but Mark beat him to the punch.

“We didn’t fucking gank your asshole ex-parents, Felix, jesus.” Mark rolled his eyes and took a huge gulp of his own still-hot coffee. “Kon just made sure they made it back to the airport and that they got on the flight they bought right after you left. They didn’t even bother to stay to make sure you got home from wherever you’d ditched them for. Here, obviously, but they didn’t know that.” Mark shook his head, scowling, looking so much like his mother in that moment. “Fucking cunts,” he snarled. “Heartless bastards like them shouldn’t even be allowed to have children.”

“Yeah,” Felix agreed dully. “Then I wouldn’t exist. That’d make your life a lot easier, wouldn’t it?”

The look Mark sent Felix was like a fucking dagger. He hovered his hand above the table in an obvious threat.

“F-fuck,” Felix sputtered, sinking into his chair. “I’m sorry, it’s a habit at this point. I’ll stop.”

“Break the habit,” Mark ordered lowly. “Now.”

“Yessir.” Felix made to down half the coffee and ignored the way it burned his mouth and throat. “I’ll go change, go see Marzia. I’d like to see her.” It still felt like a lie, but Felix was worried about how he’d rather see Jack than Marzia more and more these days. Marzia deserved his attention, why was he being so terrible to her? It wasn’t like Jack was easier. Felix loved Marzia, why couldn’t he give her what she truly deserved?

He stood and looked owlishly around the home for a moment, taking in the small touches that made it the Fischbach family house and nothing else. The little trinkets Mama Bach had brought from Korea, the things left behind by the late Mr. Fischbach, small childhood items that Mama Bach never threw away as the children grew older. It looked like a home should. It looked nothing like Felix had ever lived in.

Even young, he’d been something is parents didn’t want. He’d gotten a inkling of what he’d wanted to be around ten and had begged for fight classes and chances to cultivate skills that would aid him in his future goals. He’d hung around with weird kids that liked parkour and free running and simple gymnastics—he’d stayed away from everything his parents had encouraged simply because it wasn’t who he was. He learned to sail and to dance and all those other useful skills, but he put his heart into what his parents despised because he couldn’t be anyone else. So all of the tournaments Felix entered, all of the medals and ribbons he earned, none of them would ever be found around his home. None of the letters of praise from various teachers that were blown away by his aptitude. None of Felix’s achievements that didn’t fit their goals. Nothing that would make them have to face the fact that their youngest child was a fucking failure.

Felix wondered why he’d been given the parents that could somehow look down on their child for wanting to make the world a better place. But maybe that was his own inner vanity. Maybe he wasn’t helping the world at all. Maybe he really was just making things worse. Maybe he was just selfish.

“I can literally feel your self deprecation from here,” Mark bit out, unhappy. “For god’s sake, Felix, can’t you just listen to me? For once?”

“Thank you for bringing me here,” Felix said. “I honestly don’t know what would have happened if I’d just kept wandering around the city. Probably would have been mugged or something.”

“No criminal looks at a man stumbling in the rain in socks and thinks he has money.”
Felix knew he had a point. He also didn’t want to say what really would have happened, the ugly words hanging unspoken in the air between them. Felix wasn’t—he wasn’t the kind of person to give up. But last night, if someone had tried to hurt him for whatever reason, Felix wasn’t sure he would have even tried to defend himself. “Thank you for picking me up,” he said. “Sorry for bothering you both.”

“Shut up,” Mark snapped. “Go home, Officer. Kon is gonna tail you all the way back and then some because we’re not letting you out of our sights for the next fucking month. You’re just one walking risk to my fucking sanity.”

“Okay,” Felix said. “I’m going to leave.” And then he turned and walked out the front door and still wasn’t wearing shoes. As the door swung shut behind him, he heard Mark’s voice but couldn’t make out the words in time. Felix stood at the steps in bare feet, not even socks this time. He’d left his clothes in Mark’s bathroom. The ground was damp and the clouds above were heavy with more rain. Felix had never felt so defeated.

A car pulled up and someone laid down on the horn. The window was rolled down and Felix saw Kon. “I’m not supposed to give you ride,” Kon said gruffly. “But Mark is asshole.”

Felix choked out a laugh that sounded horrifically close to a sob and couldn’t agree more. He trudged down the steps and dropped into the passenger seat, hoping his feet weren’t too dirty from the street for Kon’s car.


“They’re not that bad,” Felix defended out of habit.

Kon made a gruff noise of unhappiness. “You remind me so much of him.”

“Of who?”

“Of little pup.”

It took Felix a moment to realize Kon was talking about Jack. “I’m nothing like him,” Felix argued gently, hating how loud his voice was in the car. “He was horrifically abused and came out so strong from it. He’s doing everything he can now to make the world a better place in the only way he is capable of. And he’s able to stand tall and face down the evil with his head held high. He faced his abuser and won. I wasn’t even abused by my parents, yet I still couldn’t face them. I just ran.”

“Because you are afraid of them,” Kon said. “Jack was also afraid of his father. He didn’t face Seamus down and win. He faced Seamus and crumbled and panicked.”

Felix wanted to argue, but then he realized he had no idea how Seamus had actually been killed. He had originally thought death was death in that sense, but— depending on how it had happened, it could mean a lot of different things. Felix wanted to ask more than anything, but he knew Kon wasn’t the person he should be asking. If he was going to talk to anyone about what had happened, it would be Jack, for more than just getting a reliable point of view.

“What you did was just the safer version of what Jack did,” Kon told him. “I wouldn’t have run, but I come from hard place. Running isn’t exactly something you can do where I come from. But you—you are absolutely allowed to run. Killing your parents isn’t in your realm of possibilities. And neither should you want to. Jack doesn’t deal in healthy ways. You do.”

“Running isn’t healthy,” Felix argued.
“But I doubt you had any other choice,” Kon reply. “What could you do? Argue? Counter-disown? Get angry and scream? All of these would have been wrong choice. Sometimes running is best thing for you to do.”

Felix shook his head but was too tired to disagree. “I just want to be home,” he confessed shakily. “I’ll change my clothes and go see Marzia. She won’t like this but she’ll understand. Her family is pretty terrible too.”

Kon nodded. “What are they?”


When Kon snorted a laugh, Felix frowned. “Sorry,” Kon said. “It’s just cute.”

“How so?”

“Just such honest work. There’s you, falling in with mafia crazy shit, then her, whose family runs simple little business, always in the background, allowing the gears to turn. Corporate America needs its clean suits and ties. Marzia’s family keeps capitalism functioning on the aesthetic and that’s about as honest as it gets with corporations. Jack should get into dry cleaning business. Helps with bloodstains.”


“Why worried?”

“Because I find myself looking to seeing Jack more than her.”

Kon was quiet for a moment and Felix sunk into the seat, ashamed. “I know it’s wrong,” he murmured. “I’m scared of what it could mean. I can’t help it. Jack just— makes me feel better. He helps me forget about the bad things while Marzia is just a reminder. I love her, don’t get me wrong. I’m going to tell her today because she deserves to know what she means to me. But the idea of seeing Jack helps the nightmares more than she does.”

“Maybe because you are worried of driving her away with your problems,” Kon thought aloud carefully. “Whereas Jack has same problems himself— no need to be concerned of scaring him away.”

Felix was going to accept that reason for better or for worse. “You’re probably right,” he told Kon. “One day, when I’m really able to open up with her, I’ll be able to tell her all of the bad shit. And then she’ll become a safe space for me too. If she sticks around.”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Kon asked. “If someone loves you like you love people, then it’s foolish to throw that away.”

“You would think that,” Felix replied. “But then how do you explain my family?”

Kon didn’t say anything, only heaved a weary sigh. “You cops,” he finally griped. “So confusing.” He pulled up in front of their respective places on opposite ends of the street and parked the car in a rare empty spot. “You shoot me text when you leave for Flatiron. I will watch from car unless you say otherwise.”

“Mark says you’re both not going to let me out of your sight.”

“Mark doesn’t have same hangups as me when it comes to privacy,” Kon told him. “While I wish I
had been able to be there when you left home last night, I still understand your desire to have me not a witness. Also, I do not want to see you make out with your girlfriend.” He shrugged. “Personal preference. Mark has done stakeouts where he’s watched men and women have nasty sex. He’s immune. But me? I keep my thoughts pure.”

Felix almost wanted to laugh. “Thank you,” he said softly, meaning it. He truly was grateful no one had seen Felix when the levee broke. “I, uh. I’ll just get changed and then see Marzia. It’s cool if you come inside to get some coffee before you sit back, you know, I kinda plan on being there awhile. Or do you want me to bring something out for you?”

Kon snorted a laugh. “You are too kind,” he said. “And too stupid. Why would you incriminate the person tailing you by bringing them drink?”

“I mean…” Felix winced. “Look, I’m not exactly thinking straight.”

“Then let me do thinking for you.”

Felix nodded. “Seems like a good idea.” He opened the passenger door and lifted himself from the seat, grunting with the soreness from having slept on a coach. He was twenty-eight, he couldn’t pull shit like that without consequence anymore. Felix waved goodbye to Kon before gently shutting the car door and crossing the wet street, mindful of any glass or debris that could hurt his bare feet. He really need to get out of the habit of running away from his problems without getting the proper equipment first. Should probably just stop running in general. Felix was the special kind of stupid that ran away from feelings, but towards gunshots. He knew why so few people like him existed—natural selection tended to take care of their numbers quickly.

He ducked into his home, found it unlocked. Felix grimaced and readied himself to see leftovers from the night before, braced himself for a visual reminder of what had happened, but opened the door and saw the entire place was spotless. No plates on the table, no leftovers in the fridge, nothing even in the garbage can. Felix didn’t know who had cleaned up for him, but he wasn’t about to agonize over it. He was just happy he wouldn’t have to do it himself.

Felix left the kitchen behind and went upstairs to get changed. The USMC wooly was actually really nice. It reminded him of his days in the academy wearing issued-clothing for just about everything, going between classes and testing and training. His missed those days, the simplicity of his life, the straight line purpose laid ahead for him. Graduate and get into a uniform. That was it. Felix had been happy with that. Now he had—he had no idea what was going to happen. The only thing that was certain was that he was going to get in a uniform regardless and go to his next shift and do his job. After that…

Well, he’d just leave that up to the forces that be.

Felix changed into some worn sweater and skinny jeans that he’d had for years, so they were the most comfortable pair of pants he owned. He slipped on a set of Toms that he rarely wore, going for comfort and not really caring if the blue of the sweater didn’t match the grey of the jeans or the red of the shoes. Felix was trying to take care of himself. That was what he was supposed to be doing, right?

Felix took a moment to stop in front of the mirror and make sure he didn’t look like absolute shit. He ran a hand through his hair, realized he’d need another haircut soon to sheer the sides and he should probably take a shower before going to see Marzia, but that was wasting precious time that he could be spending with her. He hoped he wouldn’t be ruining her day or anything.

Leaving his home brought some sort of relief, if only because he was able to be away from that
fucking kitchen. He wasn’t sure when he was going to be able to feel normal in his own home again, but between Dante and the cameras and now his own fucked up family, it was looking like it would take some time.

He sighed and moved down the steps, feeling a little put down by just about everything. He glanced and saw Kon was still in his car, ready to tail Felix to Flatiron, which was nice. At least Felix wouldn’t have to watch his own back. He walked through the streets, letting himself be jostled by anyone that felt like he was in their way, uncaring if it was rude or not. He’d seen his own expression in the mirror, he knew what he looked like. Felix was the walking visage of a defeated man and no one would be able to miss it. All Felix wanted was some time with his girlfriend and maybe a decent cup of coffee that didn’t have an FBI agent treating him like a stain along with it. He’d get to see Jack tonight and he’d be able to ignore everything going wrong in his life for just a little bit. The ideal scenario for him right now was just stubborn denial through distraction.

Felix reached Flatiron and only then realized he should have charged his phone. He looked down, saw the five percent was still staring him down, and honestly didn’t care. If anything went wrong, Kon would be able to see it go down and Felix wouldn’t need to worry about calling for emergency aid. Felix went into the Flatiron and saw Marzia wasn’t behind the counter. At first, he was so fucking disappointed that he could have fucking cried, standing there in the doorway with a lost look on his face, wondering what he would do now that his only way of feeling any more human was gone. But then Jenna looked up, saw him, and waved him down.

“She’s in the back,” Jenna told Felix with a wary sort of smile. She probably could tell Felix was in an awful way already. “Go sit down, I’ll grab her for you.”

Felix could cry again, this time out of relief. He nodded and went to an empty table, the store in the middle of its lazier hours, giving Felix plenty of breathing room. He slumped into the seat and shut his eyes for a moment, exhausted but happier to be here than anywhere else. He rested his head in his hand, elbow braced on the table, and just focused on taking slow breaths, calming himself down. IN his back pocket, his phone buzzed.

Felix frowned and pulled it out, wondering who would be texting him. He was surprised to see Mark’s name, wondering when Mark had been put into his phone. He couldn’t pinpoint a time when Mark had been alone with Felix’s phone, but it would make sense that Mark would be capable of just about anything with Felix’s personal shit. FBI, what the actual fuck had Felix’s life become? How did he get tangled up in all of this? And why was he honestly preferring fucking around with the FBI over mending his relationship with his family? Felix knew he wanted to learn more about what Jack and Mark and Tyler were doing, but not once had he considered trying to compromise with the Kjellbergs. Felix was a cop and now he was legally an orphan for it. So it goes.

He sighed and opened the message, seeing that Mark had just sent him a clipped little statement.

*Jack landed early.*

Alright, good, so Jack was already here. Maybe that would mean Felix could get more than a couple hours with the Irishman if he was lucky. Maybe Felix could try and make an argument to Mark about letting him go get some dinner or something with Jack. He was yearning for those relaxed moments he’d had in the past, at that random bar with Jack and the game of twenty questions, Jack taking to Felix to a diner and recommending food, and then Jack eating his first donut across from Felix in the booth. Felix had never thought back to those moment before, but now that he was, he fucking ached to experience something like it again. He was about to send Mark a text, asking for a chance to just be with Jack for more than a few stolen moments, when there was suddenly a mug of coffee in front of him and the most beautiful woman sitting across from him.
“Felix,” Marzia said softly. “You look sick.”

Felix made himself smile and carelessly pushed his phone away without locking it. “I’m fine,” he assured her. “Please don’t worry about it. Just had some rough shit go down with the family last night. I’ll be okay.”

“As your girlfriend, I politely veto your request and am going to ask— what happened?”

The earnest concern in her brown eyes was more than enough to shatter the weak defensive wall Felix had built for this moment. Marzia wanted to know and she was honestly the only person Felix could feasibly imagine telling this willingly, much more so than Jack. Jack didn’t deserve to take on Felix’s baggage, but Marzia was his girlfriend and someone Felix wanted at his side for as long as possible. She should know these things.

Felix reached across the table and sought out Marzia’s hand, holding it delicately, letting himself soak in her warmth. Marzia laid her other hand across Felix’s, squeezing reassuringly. “You can tell me,” she prodded. “I’m here for you, Felix. If not me, then who else?”

No one, there was no one else. There wasn’t supposed to be anyone on his mind except for Marzia. Felix swallowed hard and and nodded, knowing she was right. “I, uh.” He trailed off and cleared his throat, unsure of where to start. “Well, you know my family doesn’t like my career choice.” Marzia nodded her understanding and Felix continued. “My parents came for Thanksgiving, and they— it seemed normal? Until they suddenly sat me down and told me that if I don’t take over my dad’s company when he retires come May, they’re filing for disinheritance and they’ll go as far as getting a restraining order to keep me from seeing my family.”

Marzia’s grip became stiff, and Felix looked up to see shock across her gorgeous face. He grimaced and rubbed his thumb over the soft skin of her hands. He hoped the callouses he had from holding his gun weren’t scratching her skin. “Yeah,” he said, figuring she was at as much of a loss for words as he was about all of this. “I never thought— I never really considered they’d do this.”

“Felix,” she breathed, her voice trembling. “I am so, so sorry.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” she insisted. “To put themselves above your dreams like that…” Marzia shook her head, lips pulled back, jaw tight with emotion. “It’s wrong, Felix. Do not give in to them. I know it’s a lot to ask you to give up, but you cannot sacrifice who you are for the desires of your parents. You cannot risk everything you love and believe in for people that are so willing to abandon.”

Felix couldn’t help but smile brokenly. “That’s exactly what I was thinking,” he admitted. “And I’m scared it makes me a monster to be so willing to trade my own family for just some job.”

“It’s not just a job,” Marzia insisted, sitting forward, looking into Felix like she was willing him to understand. “It’s more than a job. It’s who you are and what you believe in and what you find worth fighting for. They’re not asking you to leave a job, they’re asking you to leave yourself. They’re asking you to leave behind what you love. No family that truly cares for its members would ever ask that. It must ache to know, but you have to understand— a real family wouldn’t ask that of you. They’re not your family. Blood means nothing if this is what blood is asking of you.”

Felix breathed in shakily and blinked rapidly, nodding. “You’re right,” he whispered. “You’re right and it hurts.”

“It has to hurt in a way I cannot imagine,” Marzia agreed. “But you will be better off without them in the long run.”
Felix knew she was right. “It just sucks,” he confessed. “To know how little I’m worth to them. No problem just cutting me off. We haven’t gotten along in years, but— I was always trying. I was always looking for a way to redeem myself. Turns out I’m irredeemable. I’m just— absolutely nothing.”

“That’s not true,” she argued, squeezing Felix’s hand again. “They’re your family— they’re supposed to love you. The fact that they act like this is a failure on their end, not yours. They are the ones to take what you should be given by blood right and use it against you.”

Felix shook his head. “If they’re supposed to love me because I’m family and they treat me like this, then it only seems like it’s more my fault.”

Marzia sighed heavily and ran the pad of her thumb across the knuckles of his hand. “I don’t know what to say, then,” she told him. “You know that I— my family and I. They are disappointed in the way I’ve taken my life, but they still love me. They still support me. It’s why I’m so nervous to really pursue the career in fashion— because they’ve already been so willing to let me study something that is useless to the future they want for me. Even in their constant critique, they’ve never made me do anything else, and that’s why I feel like I owe them at least a good, uh, college try with what they want. But you…” She sighed again. “I’m just so sorry, Felix. It’s like they didn’t even try.”

“I just— want to feel loved.” Felix felt ashamed for the confession, but it was all he could think about. “Is that so much to ask? After everything I’ve done for people— maybe it’s wrong to think like that. I don’t do what I do for gratitude and shit, I shouldn’t think of it like that. I just thought— I deserved to be loved. But that, that’s such a selfish way of thinking.” Felix pulled his hands back to cover his eyes, scared he was about to cry. He honestly would rather cry in front of Mark than Marzia. “I just want to feel loved and it’s stupid.”

Mariza’s delicate hands pulled Felix’s away from his eyes and he as he looked up, Marzia leaned over the table to kiss him. Felix instantly melted into the touch, letting himself be as selfish as he’d accused himself of being, taking everything she would give him. Marzia parted her lips carefully against his own, and Felix had to hold himself back, refusing to startle her and act out of hand in public. But everything in his being yearned for some kind of physical connection, everything inside of him was ready to beg for someone to prove that he was loved and he was good and he deserved to be appreciated. He wouldn’t force his problems on Marzia, but god, would he take whatever kindness she gave him.

His cellphone rattled at his elbow and Marzia pulled away. She looked down at the phone and giggled. “Who’s that?”

Felix looked to his phone and saw— Jack.

The message was from Mark, a simple statement. *got him home, will give time for meet momentarily, asking for Felina.* The image was Jack leaning against a windowsill, Kon’s upstairs window to be specific. Felix could see his own home across the street. Jack wasn’t looking at the camera, he was looking at someone off to the left that Felix couldn’t see, lips parted like he was in the middle of a sentence. Jack looked— not that good. Those bags under his eyes were worse and that broken rosary was twisted tightly around his right hand that was a fist at his side. But he was alive and there wasn’t any kind of injury on his person that Felix could see, so that was good.

“That’s William,” Felix said. “He, uh, has been away. Mark is just telling me that he’s back from his vacation. I asked to see him and stuff while he wasn’t busy, haven’t seen him in a while.”

Marzia took the phone to look at the picture and smiled sweetly. “He’s cute,” she said. “I’m surprised you’re not taking him up on his offers.”
Felix had no idea how to respond to that. “I have a girlfriend?” he asked, forming it as a question because Marzia was the girlfriend and he had no idea why she would say something like that. “I’m not into guys.”

Marzia giggled, bright and cute, something sparkling in her eyes when she looked across the table to Felix. “I’m just saying, he’s cute and I know even you can appreciate that. But I’m happy to know that I shouldn’t have to worry about any dramatics between you and me.” She leaned over the table again to kiss his cheek. “You’ve been nothing but faithful to me. Thank you.” She glanced back to the phone. “Are you Felina?”

Felix made a face and nodded. “Just a dumb nickname,” he said, trying to think of a good cover story.


Felix couldn’t help but smile a little. “Nice to meet you too, Marzia.”

“I’m gonna use that,” she said. Then she stood and took Felix’s mug of Redeye. “Give me a moment,” she told him. “I just realized that I wanted to add something more to your drink last I made it. Don’t worry, you’ll love it! I promise.” She went down and kissed his cheek again. “I love you,” she said. The she went back behind the counter. The touch of her lip glossed lips lingered on his cheek and his chest felt lighter than it had in days from her simple declaration. Felix looked back to his phone she had left in front of him and saw that the thing had finally given in to its low battery and died. Felix glanced across the street just outside, saw Kon’s car. Everything was fine, everything was in working order, Felix was with the girl he loved and he had eyes on him that he trusted. Everything was going to be okay.

And then, only then, did Felix let himself truly relax.

The quiet chatter of the Flatiron with the smell of coffee and fresh pastries felt more like home than his own empty townhouse. Felix was going to be seeing Jack soon and he’d be able to just soak in the easy comfort that the man somehow was able to exude into Felix and then Felix would be able to move on from what his family had done to him. It was going to take a long while, but Felix knew he would be able to come out of this better off in the end, if he just took it easy and didn’t expect more of himself than he could do.

Marzia loved him. That meant more than the fucking world to Felix. Maybe his parents didn’t see his worth, maybe Fanny was somehow able to abandon him, but Marzia loved him, and Marzia was— Felix’s family was his past and Marzia was his future. He didn’t need his past to hang around with such bright days with the perfect girl ahead of him. Felix shut his eyes and relaxed in his chair and let himself feel hope. And from there, for a moment, the stress melted away form his bones and he felt like he could maybe be normal again one day. Felix knew he could.

Marzia came back, looking perfect, hair flowing about her like something from a movie. She gave Felix a smile that made him feel like he was the only person in the world that mattered. Marzia set down the fresh mug of coffee for Felix and sat across from him. “Try it,” she beckoned, nodding her head to the coffee. “I think you’ll love it.”

Felix grinned a little and took the mug. There was writing on the side, but he would look at that later. Felix brought the edge to his lips and took a huge swallow of the hot brew, letting himself feel the pain of the burn, needing to feel a little something more right now. Marzia really had added something—it tasted different. There was a new layer to the drink, something much sweeter than he normally tasted, even with the sweetener he had her put in with the espresso. He wondered if Marzia had finally given in to his original request and used creamer instead of the vanilla she’d used to
compromise his offensive taste. Felix took another long gulp and found the sweetness a little overpowering. He grimaced involuntarily and put down the mug. “It’s good,” he said, hoping she didn’t see the way he’d reacted.

Marzia smiled wide like she was proud, her eyes gleaming. “Lovecraft is quite a genius concoction.”

Felix blinked slowly at her across the table. His fingertips suddenly began to tingle, like they were falling asleep. “What?”

Marzia’s smile softened. “I wish I’d known it was you from the start,” she told him. “I wouldn’t have gotten so attached. But I’m a good daughter, Felix, let that be known. I never wished you dead, but I don’t think I have much of a choice.”

Felix didn’t understand. The coffee he’d just drank was settling badly in his stomach and his skin was suddenly too tight. He looked at the mug and saw what Marzia had written. In her clever cursive, the i’s dotted with hearts, was the name Marzia Bisognin.

Felix felt cold all over. “Wait,” he said, voice shaking, looking between Marzia and the name she’d written. He shook his head, unable to accept this. “No,” he denied firmly. “No, this isn’t— this isn’t right. You wouldn’t—” He looked up at her again and felt his world falling apart. Marzia was still smiling at him, the corners trembling. “You— you said you love me.”

“You can love someone and still hurt them,” Marzia told him. “I thought you of all people would understand that.” Marzia stood, folding up her apron and leaving it in her seat. “I doubt I’ll ever see you again. Thank you so much for the advice you gave me, Felix. I wish I could take it to heart, but sometimes fate is stronger than the best of us. It’s already proven to be stronger than you.” She went to his side and took him by the chin, turning Felix’s face towards her and kissing him softly while Felix was too stunned to pull away.

“Go home, Felina,” she said softly with tears beginning to brim in her eyes. “You don’t want everyone to see this.”

Marzia then left, walking through the coffee shop and leaving through the front door. As the door swung shut behind her, Felix saw his nephew standing just outside, roots growing from his skin, blood pouring from empty eye sockets. Arnold lifted a tiny little hand and pointed at Felix like he had something Felix wanted.

Felix’s skin was trying to crawl off his bones and the walls were moving.

Lovecraft.

Marzia had put Lovecraft in his drink.

Marzia was a Bisognin.

Felix was was going to die.

The fear welled up in his throat and his lungs were already starting to shrivel in his ribcage. His mind was a flurry of information, facts about Lovecraft, about the Bisognins, about Marzia. Cardiac arrest, drug peddlers, fashionista, panic attacks, hallucinations, death threats, cameras, loafers, religious experiences, walks in the park, Felix was going to die.

No he wasn’t, this was a trip, if he could handle himself and keep his head on straight, he’d survive. Felix tore his eyes away from Arnold and told himself the little boy begging for his attention wasn’t real. Where was Kon? He was supposed to be just outside, but Felix wasn’t sure if Kon had the
antidote on hand. Would the antidote even save Felix from this? He’d never known it to be this fast-acting, the paint was already starting to peel away in his peripherals and there was the echo of bodies hitting the floor and the roots beneath were breaking through the wooden floor. This wasn’t real, the way the vines were encroaching on his hands and the whispers of his nephew begging for his sight back weren’t real. Felix chanced another look up, saw Arnold was pressed to the glass, eye sockets somehow still being able to cry. Those thin lips mouthed Felix’s name.

It wasn’t real, it wasn’t real. The roots rolled and tumbled beneath his feet, setting him and his chair off balance. There was that echo now matching the beat of drums, distant and far away and beckoning him, telling him his time had come. His skin was trying to fall away from his bones, release the old things inside of him so he could become what Arnold wanted and needed. This wasn’t real, right? Felix looked to Arnold one last time and saw the world beyond was dying—trees, cyclopean and terrifying, were breaking through all foundations and swallowing everything. The world was ending and it— it looked real.

Arnold looked real and he needed Felix’s help.

He stood suddenly from his seat, the chair falling over as he swayed. He looked back out the door to where Arnold was pressing those tiny fingertips to the glass, empty sockets boring into him. Arnold wanted eyes, he needed eyes, did he want Felix’s? Felix would give them, he’d tear them out and give Arnold what he wanted if Arnold only asked, he’d let the blood pool from his skull into Arnold and give the boy back his sight.

Marzia had told him to go home.

Felix’s phone was dead.

Felix fled from Flatiron into the street, looking to the corner where he had first met Jack. Arnold tugged at the bottom of his shirt and Felix looked down to watch the roots grow from Arnold’s skin, reaching and twisting up towards Felix like they wanted to wrap around him and cocoon him and keep him safe. Felix stumbled and fell away from the touch of the roots, finding them cold. His heart was racing in his chest and he wasn’t able to breathe fast enough. He pushed through throngs of people, all of them grabbing and taking, their eyes bleeding. Felix was gasping for breath at this point, he didn’t know where he was going, but he knew he had to get home. If he got home, he’d be able to find a knife and take his eyes out and give them to Arnold.

“Come with me,” he gasped, looking back to his nephew, relieved to find Arnold following, held up by roots on the ground like stilts that brought Arnold along behind Felix, a looming presence behind his back, above Felix and hanging in the air like a marionette. “Come with me, I’ll help you.”

He reached up and took one of Arnold’s clammy, cold hands into his own. Beyond, the world was swimming, trees growing from the ground, breaking through asphalt and concrete, reclaiming what humans and stolen from it. Arnold looked down at him, lips moving to soundless words. Felix was shaking and barely able to stand as he shuffled down the street, clutching at his rabbit-fast heart with the free hand. “Come with me,” he chanted. “I’ll help, I’ll help.”

He brought Arnold home, his pulse roaring in his ears. The world was broken, vines and roots shattering everything, the steps to his own house consumed by the trees. His eyes were burning and he knew Arnold needed them more. Felix pulled Arnold into his home, letting the colossal eldritch thing wedge through his doorframe, the roots bursting from Arnold’s bones like secondary limbs. Felix felt the veins under his own skin slowly rot over and become like roots themselves, twisting under his flesh, begging to be release, to be like Arnold, to join the old world and what it should have been. Felix whispered soft words of comfort to the boy, telling him it was okay. “Don’t be afraid, I’ll help you,” he promised as he moved through his decayed kitchen, the entire house
overtaken by weeds and green, the cabinets overflowing with what was here before.

Felix rifled through old drawers and brought out the rusted Santoku knife, turning to face his nephew. He smiled up at the child, stared into those bleeding sockets without fear, and brought the knife to his own face while still holding Arnold’s hand. “Just stay with me,” he whispered to Arnold as leaves and branches began to grow from Arnold’s mouth, splitting and tearing the skin and send black oozing down Arnold’s face. “I’ll give you back your sight.” Outside the shattered windows, the sky began to roll with black clouds, the end approaching quickly.

As Felix brought the blade to to his iris, his heart beating so fast that his trembling hands fell into tandem, there was a sudden sharp pain in his neck and Felix’s world was suddenly encroached with darkness.

The roots and vines and branches and green began to retreat. Arnold began to writhe in pain. “Wait!” Felix cried out, trying to clutch to the small hand that was crumbling in on itself like a log giving in to decay. “No, no, you can’t go! I’m giving you what you want, please don’t leave me!” As Arnold still began to fade, Felix sobbed and his heart began skipping beats. “Don’t leave me!” he begged. "Don’t leave me!"

“Felix, it’s okay, I’ve got ye’.”

Hands wrapped around Felix’s arms and waist and head and he was being lowered to the ground against his will. He struggled as the knife was pulled from his grip, but the darkness was overcoming him with a wave of exhaustion. Felix cried out weakly and watched Arnold break away into dust on his floor.

“Don’t leave me,” was the last he was able to say before his heart pushed itself past its limits and Felix’s world went abruptly black.

Chapter End Notes

:)
ah okay so first off i wanna say i'm super sorry i haven't been responding to comments in ages i'm so sorry i've been having a rough couple weeks just know that i'm reading all of them and i love all of them and i'm sorry i haven't been replying i appreciate all of you so much thank you for giving me your time and telling me your thoughts it really means a lot to me <3

secondly this might be the last update for 2-3 weeks because from the 11-17 i'm gonna be in florida and i may not be able to have a chap finished by then and then my birthday is like right after and march is just super hectic for me and I'm sorry guys i'll do my best to have something up but i can't make promises

His mouth tasted like iron.

That was probably blood.

Felix came back to life on a mattress that accommodated his frame like a cookie cutter and the soft patter of rain somewhere near his feet. There was the gentle swish of clothing, someone moving around quietly, and a pain in Felix’s wrist, likely a type of IV or something of the like. It pinched and felt like it was protruding, a foreign entity inside his body. His limbs were stiff and his fingertips were tingling. He had the uncontrollable urge to get into the smallest corner he could find and hide.

He took stock of all of this before remembering.

Marzia Bisognin, his girlfriend, had poisoned him.

Felix opened his eyes with effort and stared up at his ceiling. His room was dark. It was night and raining outside.

He wasn’t sure how he felt. Felix was tired. He knew he felt a little ill. He wanted to sink to the bottom of the ocean, but none of that was how he felt. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he felt a little close to nothing.

Marzia Bisognin…

Felix wasn’t sure how Mark or Tyler or Jack had missed that, but she must have been pretty sneaky to have pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes. And back on the ride along, Dante had talked about her like he meant to threaten her, hadn’t even shown an inkling of familiarity to the name. Plus, Jack had seen Felix and Marzia kiss that first time. Then again, he hadn’t seen her face, but Felix wanted to think that if Marzia really were a Bisognin, Jack would have noticed something.

Who was Felix kidding?

It wasn’t like Dante had shown up to try and convince Felix Marzia was a Bisognin, she had done it herself. Felix couldn’t defend her, couldn’t find a way to convince himself that it was all a lie. Dante hadn’t been the one to poison Felix, neither had Xiao-Zhi or even Vincent, a terrible man Felix had yet to meet. Felix couldn’t defend the woman who had condemned herself with a smile on her face.
and a kiss to the corner of Felix’s lips.

Felix stared up at his ceiling and felt absolutely nothing and it scared him.

“You’re awake.”

The unfamiliar female voice in Felix’s room had him reaching beneath his pillow with his free hand for the sidearm that he kept beneath. Felix yanked it out and pulled off the safety, pointing it in the direction of the voice in one fluid motion. There was a squeak in the dark, someone who probably hadn’t expected to have a gun pulled on them. If it was just some civilian, Felix would apologize later. He felt like he had a right to react like this these days.

“Turn on the light,” he ordered, his voice gruff and ruined like he’d been screaming for hours. “Slowly. Let me see your face.”

There was a shadowy figure that moved timidly and carefully across the room, from Felix’s left side where the IV really was in his wrist, and to the light switch by the bathroom door. The figure flicked it on and Felix didn’t flinch at the bright light, even though it stung his eyes like needles. He forced his eyes to adjust and saw—

Felix squinted. He knew this woman. Dyed blond hair, large brown eyes, thin fingers. It took him a moment, but Felix finally landed on the memory. “EMT lady?”

The woman smiled, telling Felix he got it right. “Boy meets brick wall.”

It really was her. Felix kept the gun up. “Why are you in my home?”

“Jack called me.”

Felix scowled at the name simply because he was tired of discovering the web of Jack’s reach when he was at his worst moments. “You work for the mafia?”

“No,” the woman denied. Amy, wasn’t it? “I work for my friends.”

“Look, as much as I fucking love cryptic bullshit from just about everyone in my life, I’m going to ask you to stop throwing me around and speak clearly.”

Amy sighed, but then smiled a little more. “Jack and Mark and I— well, really me and Mark. I knew Jack, but not as well as I knew Mark. We all kinda came together in our teenage years. After Mark’s father was gone. We were all kinda friends and we kept in contact. After Mark joined the FBI, I was formally brought on as someone he deemed trustworthy. I don’t know much, but I’m the emergency first aid. I, uh, I wanted to be a trauma center nurse before I got into EMT work. Just made more sense for me to make sure the person got to help first and foremost than just be in the hospital and hope they showed up alive for me to help.” Amy shrugged. “I don’t know a lot about what’s happening, but I come when I’m called. I haven't been called in a while, and I was even more surprised to see you.”

Felix snorted. He finally lowered the gun. "Must've had a hell of a laugh, huh?"

Amy’s smile morphed into a frown. “Do you remember what happened?”

“What would you do if I did?”

“Recommend a shit ton of therapy.”
“I don’t do therapy.”

Amy nodded. “I didn’t have a laugh— contrary to your belief, I don’t enjoy seeing people in pain, even if it is a little ironic. I’ve seen a lot of the worst of what Lovecraft can do. When I was finally able to make it here…”

She trailed off, looking at Felix like she was thinking. And that pissed Felix off. "If it has to do with me, I’m the person who has the right to know,” he growled, not bothering to keep his emotions under control. “Stop trying to hide shit for them. You think you can just keep this from me? This is my fucking life and my fucking body and my fucking shit show of an existence. The only person who doesn’t have a right to know is all of them.”

Amy looked like she felt sorry for him. “Mark was administering CPR when I arrived. I had to take over and bring you back with my improved method of CPR and then used an AED to keep you from going below anything deadly again. I argued for the hospital but Mark insisted it would be signing your death sentence if we did.” She approached the bed cautiously, watching Felix like she was afraid he would slip out of existence. “Officer— I’m not legally able to declare my patients dead during any process in which they’re within my care, but I couldn’t get your heart beating again for a solid minute at one point.”

Felix stared up at her, unable to process the words. “I… died.”

“Legally, I can’t confirm that,” Amy said. “Medically? Yeah.”

Felix nodded slowly. Then he dropped back onto his bed to stare at his ceiling. “… What happened?”

“Before or after I arrived?”

“Before.”

He saw Amy shake her head from the corner of his eye. “I’m not sure of the specifics, all I know is that the antidote they injected you with wasn’t acting as quickly as the drug itself. It seems like the Bisognins are really upping the time frame on a trip and how severely it sends the victim into cardiac arrest. I was able to keep you alive long enough for the antidote to finish its work, but I don’t know if we’ll be so lucky the next time this happens to someone.”

“Seems a little stupid,” Felix thought aloud. “Manufacturing a recreational drug and then tuning it to kill almost automatically.”

“Doesn’t seem like good business,” she agreed softly.

Felix stared at his ceiling a little longer. “Did you give me any drugs?”

“Excuse me?”


“None,” Amy said. “All that’s in your arm is some fluids for your dehydration. Lovecraft tends to use up a lot of water in the body. But even then, you’ve had that IV in you for a good eight hours. You’re not in any danger of passing out from that.”

Felix nodded, then sat up and pulled out the IV, not flinching at the sting. He swung his feet out from under the covers and over the side of the bed, then stood, tucking the firearm into the back of the sweatpants he’d been changed into. Someone had undressed him and he didn’t want to think about
“Uh, what do you think you’re doing?” Amy asked.

“Getting a drink.”

“Alright, so I was trying to be delicate,” Amy began, moving to stand between Felix and the door out of his bedroom. “Obviously, that was my mistake. Officer, you literally died, like, eight hours ago. You should not be on your feet. As a medically licensed EMT operator, I really, really must recommend you get back in bed.”

Felix eyed her and felt nothing. “Did they tell you what happened?” he asked. “Who poisoned me?”

“I know very little.”

“It was my girlfriend,” Felix told Amy. “My girlfriend, Marzia Bisognin. Been with her since I came to this city. I didn’t know she was involved in any of this, and then she suddenly realized who I was in relation to this cluster fuck, and poisoned my coffee.”


“Thank you,” Felix said, before stepping around her and heading out of his room. His steps were shaky and he felt light headed, but Amy had already deemed this okay to do, and there was no way he could cope with what had happened with all of this oppressive empty in his thoughts. Felix moved quietly around the second story and even more silently down the steps. His care to making as little noise as possible allowed him to catch the strains of a conversation below. And normally Felix didn’t like eavesdropping, but this was his fucking house. People shouldn’t have private conversations they didn’t want him to overhear in his own home.

Felix moved carefully down the steps until he was just within earshot. The wall framing the steps kept him from seeing who was talking, but he knew the voices well enough.

“I just don’t know how we missed this. It’s not like we don’t know Maria’s face. Was she always Maria or did she have a different face when you were younger?” That was Tyler, though Felix had never heard him sounding so— urgent. So concerned. Felix flattened himself against his wall, realized he was leaning next to a picture of his sister and nephew and step-brother. Felix made a mental note to throw the picture away.

“Maria was always Maria,” came Mark’s voice. “Maria Bisognin has always been in the files and there has never been any mention of a Marzia.”

“That seems false now,” said Kon, which was a startling person to have in his home. Not that Kon wasn’t welcome, Felix just hadn’t thought that maybe Kon was in on the FBI shit too.

“They had to have falsified her identity from the very beginning,” Tyler said. “Which identity is the real one is the question.”

“How could they have falsified two identities so thoroughly over such a long period of time?” Mark asked, sounding stumped. “When we looked at Marzia Bellandi she was clean as a fucking whistle and her background was extensive. We had fucking report cards from kindergarten to her name, we had extensive backgrounds into her parents and grandparents and great grandparents. That was the most artfully falsified lie I have ever seen if it was one.”

“They probably stole the identity,” Tyler suggested. “Because for however deep the background
check went, we didn’t find any truly good photographic evidence of her face.”

There was a moment of silence. “Fuck,” Mark said. “That would— explain a lot.”

“Then there is sad Marzia Bellandi dead in ditch somewhere,” Kon grumbled. “Tragic.”

“Maria.”

Jack’s voice shot through Felix, more painful than words. Felix had to shut his eyes and take in a slow breath, too much overcoming him all at once. The emptiness had been thrown into the ocean and now Felix couldn’t stop feeling everything if he tried.

“Maria is the one that’s dead,” Jack said. His voice was brisk and cold. He sounded angry. “Because I remember— the first time I ever met that girl, with her dead mother between us— I remember that she was Marzia.”

“Shit, Jack.”

“That’s— important, Pup.” Kon said after Tyler.

“And you didn’t think to tell us?”

“It was a rather traumatic incident, Mark,” Jack shot back dryly. “Forgive me fer blockin’ that unpleasant shit from my youth.”

“If you hadn’t blocked it out and actually remembered the name, Felix wouldn’t have died in your fucking arms.”

Felix stumbled down the last of his stairs in a panic to save Jack from whatever Mark’s words would do to him. His entrance had the four men that was standing in Felix’s dining room startling and looking to Felix like they felt guilty. Well they god damn should, they were having secret conversations in Felix’s own fucking home. “Don’t stop on my account,” he snapped, striding between them to get into his kitchen and into the cabinet above the fridge. “If anyone feels like telling me what the fuck just happened, feel free.”

He searched blindly and found it— the fucking whiskey Jack had given him way at the beginning of this mess, the whiskey that he’d nearly finished off after finding Bill O’Riley’s body in a dumpster. Felix pulled it down and twisted off the top, throwing back a huge gulp of the whiskey and grimacing at the taste, even as the warm liquor warmed his throat and stomach.

“Should you be drinking that, Officer?”

“Fuck off, Mark.”

“That seems fair,” Tyler said.

Felix ignored all of them and threw back another swig, knowing he was probably drinking beyond the recommended amount, but also knowing that this handle was 70 proof and Amy wouldn’t be able to get on his case for it. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and bent over his counter, holding himself up with trembling arms. He was feeling everything all at once and simply because he’d heard Jack’s voice. What the fuck was wrong with him?

“Still waiting for that explanation,” Felix said before taking a third gulp. The alcohol settled in his stomach badly and he probably should eat something with this, but dying once in the last eight hours made him hungry for a second go at it. Maybe he’d get it right this time.
“Maria Bisognin has been a false name,” came Jack’s voice again, the Irish accent twisting Felix’s lungs. “I knew her as Marzia only once. It was a long time ago. I should have— I should’ve remembered. But I didn’t.” There was a pause before Jack spoke again, voice strangled. “I’m sorry, Felix. I-I should have done better.”

And that— just wasn’t fucking okay.

“I knew her face,” Jack continued. “I had her face in my memory, I should’ve looked harder, should’ve gotten over myself and just been brave enough to catch a glimpse. Just one moment would have been all it took and then none of this would have ever happened.”

“Don’t be stupid, Pup.”

“No, he’s right,” Mark argued, ever the fucking asshole. “And you know what? None of this would have happened if you’d just listened to me from the very fucking beginning and not messed with the fucking police officer that was just doing his fucking job! He didn’t have to be part of any of this if you hadn’t gotten it in your fucking head that you wanted to get off and use him for it! If you had just listened to me and left him alone, he wouldn’t have been involved in any of this!”

Felix didn’t even think as he whirled around and slammed Mark across the jaw with his fist. Mark stumbled but didn’t fall and Felix pretty much regretted hitting Mark immediately, but the way Mark had been shouting at Jack just didn’t— it wasn’t—

“Don’t yell at him,” Felix said, refusing to let his voice shake. Jack, Tyler, and Kon were all looking wide eyed at Felix while Mark didn’t do a damn thing. He had a hand to where he’d been punched, but he was looking at Felix with stone cold fury. But he also wasn’t hitting back. “I don’t— know what’s going on,” Felix admitted. “But you don’t fucking yell at Jack. He had no idea this was going to happen.”

“You think he’s not to blame?” Mark demanded, words bit out through clenched teeth. “All of this is because he wanted to fuck you, and that’s it. He didn’t even fucking like you in the beginning, Felix, he just wanted to get off in you and then leave you in the dust, careless of whatever repercussions came from it. You weren’t anything to him but a warm body for him to use as a cum bucket and that’s the reason why your life is falling apart!”

“Orphan?” Tyler repeated with a frown.
“Jack,” Felix said, looking to where Jack was standing like a statue, staring at the floor. When Felix called his name, Jack didn’t move. “Jack,” he repeated, softer. “You know I don’t blame you, right?”

Jack shuddered a breath. “If ye’ don’t, then Mark’s right,” he said. “You’re the stupidest fucking cop in this whole city.”

And— that fucking hurt. For everything that Felix had suffered, he’d always kinda thought that Jack would be a little more grateful for the forgiveness Felix extended. Then again, that was a selfish way to think. Jack had no reason to be grateful for Felix just doing what he was supposed to do. Still, it just seemed a little… It didn’t seem fair.

Well, what part of Felix’s life was fair these days?

Felix nodded, mostly to himself, and moved away from the four men, taking another long swig of the whiskey that was still in his left hand. “If all of you are set on burning me at the stake, why don’t you do me a favor and let yourselves move this across the street so I can’t hear? I’d rather stop being stabbed in the fucking back for at least the next forty eight hours. Pretty sure I’ve already got enough of that on my plate as is. Oh, and do me a favor? If any of you feel like poisoning, make it something quick, like arsenic. Less room for error.”

“You’re acting childish,” Kon admonished.

“Oh, yeah, no, you’re right,” Felix said, throwing a hand in the air. “Look at Officer Kjellberg, acting fucking childish. God forbid he actually feels anything like that, right? God forbid he feel small and weak and insignificant and helpless. God forbid he be anything but an outstanding upholder of the law, righteous and impenetrable and fucking perfect. Felix Kjellberg? Throwing a fit? Acting like a child? Unheard of! Undeserved! Smack some sense into that man, we have work to do, no time to be upset, right? Who gives a shit that his girlfriend literally fucking murdered him! Who gives a shit that he’s got no family! Who gives a shit that he’s anything less than okie-dokie, as long as he’s able to not act like a child then we don’t care!”

“Felix,” Tyler hedged. “That’s not fair—”

“Oh my god, yeah, let’s talk about fair!” Felix cried out, laughing a little, a hysteric edge painting his voice with mania. “Let’s talk about fair, because let me fucking tell you guys, I know all about fair. I’ve gotten so much fairness! Everything’s fucking fair, everything’s coming up Felix! That time your own fucking goons cornered me in the alley and trashed my groceries and beat me to shit? So fair, I deserved that. And those cameras? In my house? My bedroom? My fucking bathroom? I deserved that, who the hell would think I didn’t? Also, Dante just feeling me up in the middle of some Phantom of the Opera bullshit, when Mark? Mark? You fucking held Jack back! You were gonna let that man fucking molest me! That was fair, I absolutely deserved that.” Felix took another long draw of the whiskey to catch his breath, enjoying the way it burned before he continued. “Oh man, and Mark! Just you in general! I totally have earned and deserved the way you treat me! Yeah, guys, listen to Kjellberg, life’s not fair and it’s being perfectly fair to me in that regard!”

“This isn’t what he meant,” Mark snapped. “You’re acting like—”

“No, that’s exactly what all of you meant,” Felix interrupted, the manic laughter dying and dripping acid in his voice. “I deserved this. I deserved all of it. I shouldn’t have saved Jack, right? And I should have just ignored him. I should’ve thrown out everything he gave me and I should have ditched the furniture and I should have thrown everything away. All of this is my fault. All of this. Is my fault. It’s all my fault. I had so many chances to turn my back and wash my hands of this, but I didn’t, because I’m just the biggest fucking idiot in New York City and I started to care about someone. It’s my fault. It’s my fault. It’s my fault!” Felix turned and threw the handle of whiskey at
the wall, the glass shattering on impact, liquor splattering across the floor. Jack flinched badly and Mark turned away, not letting anyone see his face.

“It’s my fault,” Felix choked out, hands shaking as he stared at the broken glass on his floor. “Marzia — it’s my fault.” Then he stumbled back and brought his hands to his eyes, pressing the heel of his palms into the sockets hard enough to make stars of light bloom across his vision. “Oh god,” he whispered to himself. “It’s my fault.”

It was, down to the core of it. He’d been the one to fail to pull away. Mark had warned him from the very beginning that Felix would be drawn in by Jack and caught in a web he wouldn’t be able to escape. Mark had known from the beginning that Felix would end up like this if he wasn’t careful. Felix should have listened to him. He should have just— moved. He should have left the city. Why hadn’t Felix run? It was all he was good at. Felix was shit at everything except being a cop and running away from places he didn’t like or understand, never setting down roots, always ready to pack up and leave whenever the fancy struck. Once upon a time, he would have told himself he was simply following crime, going where he was needed, or maybe that he was even looking for a place where he belonged. Felix knew better now. He was just a coward. And the one time he’d been stupid to follow his own pattern and run away was serving to be the end of all things.

“I’m so sorry,” he said to everyone in the room with him. “I did this. I’m so sorry for making things turn out like this.”

“Shut up.” Jack’s voice came with a whirl of motion and before Felix could catch a breath, Jack had Felix’s face in his hands and was kissing him hard.

There was a sudden flurry of shouting and Jack was being yanked away from Felix before Felix could process the kiss itself, but at least Felix’s gut reaction wasn’t to punch. As Felix worked his way through the thought, he suddenly remembered that he had, in fact, punched Jack the first time Jack had kissed him. Right across the jaw, no holds back. Oh god, Felix had hit a victim of child abuse. How could he have done that? The sinking in his gut from the memory and the ghost of Jack’s lips had Felix shaking where he stood. Beyond, he just barely was able to understand the scene— Tyler with a hand on Jack’s shoulder, having been the one to pull Jack away, Mark literally screaming his face red while Tyler spoke in low, deadly tones, Kon watching Felix like he was waiting for Felix to attack. And Jack—

“I didn’t know how else t’ shut him up!” Jack pleaded.

“So you fucking assault him?!” Mark screamed.

Felix touched his lips and realized he wanted to kiss Jack to keep him from crying like Jack had done for him.

Felix felt sick.

“Officer.”

Tyler’s voice was calm and steady and too close to his ear. Felix couldn’t pinpoint him or the word itself or anything past the roaring of blood in his skull. He was staring at Jack, unable to look away from the shouting match between Jack and Mark, the way Jack was trying desperately to defend his actions and how Mark was condemning them with such steadfast clarity. Felix was staring at Jack’s mouth, watching it form words, hating himself and everything he was because his only thought right now was to kiss Jack back and make him stop screaming and that wasn’t okay, that wasn’t fucking okay, Felix wasn’t gay and he’d spent so long turning Jack down, he couldn’t be that cruel, how could he be so cruel? Jack had wanted for so long and suddenly Felix was making this sadistic one-eighty and ruining everything he had built and Felix couldn’t be like this, he couldn’t be this much of a monster, Felix didn’t want to believe he was this terrible of a person, he had a fucking girlfriend for
the love of—

Felix didn’t have a girlfriend.

He had— and she’d fucking poisoned his coffee and he’d died in Jack’s arms.

“Officer.”

Tyler’s voice again. Felix reached out blindly, taking a handful of clothing, probably Tyler’s shirt. He felt himself slipping into something, into nothing. He distantly realized he wasn’t breathing. The shouting beyond his conscience reached a new fervor and Tyler was in front of Felix, above him. Felix realized he was on the ground. Then there was another face above him, lang hair falling in front of his face. For a moment, Felix almost thought it was Marzia in his home, delivering a final dose, finishing the job. Then Felix realized he was stupid and that it was Amy.

She was talking to him, words muffled by a ringing in Felix’s ears. Felix felt like he was in some sort of glass tube and that everyone talking to him was on the other side, muffled and far away and impossible to understand. Then there was a hand on his stomach, and another on his nose, pinching it shut, forcing him to breathe through his—

Fuck, Felix realized he wasn’t breathing.

He gasped in a breath and reality flooded his sense once again, crashing over him and making him tremble. The shouting voices were suddenly understandable, panic audible in almost everyone except for Tyler, who was dead silent, and Amy, who was counting.

“One, two, three, four, five. Now hold it. One, two. And now out, slowly. One, two, three, four, five. You with me? And again.”

Felix followed her orders, trusting the EMT worker to know how to get Felix’s body back under control. He hadn’t noticed the darkness encroaching his vision until it was gone after Felix had given his lungs the much needed oxygen he’d deprived them of. Felix was sure this was a panic attack, but he couldn’t remember having one like this. Even though everything felt terrible and scary, he felt—detached. As if he was observing himself from the outside, a third POV camera over his own shoulder. Someone else watching from above while everything just went to shit.

“One, two, three, four, five,” came Amy’s steady voice over his thoughts. Felix’s lips were tingling with Jack’s touching and he absently brought his own hand up to touch them, the pads of his fingers catching on the swell of his own lower lip, where Jack had kissed Felix like he was dying.

“Something’s wrong with me,” Felix whispered. Amy kept counting, gaze flitting to Tyler, who narrowed his eyes and reached down to put his hand beneath Felix’s head, lifting him from the floor. Amy kept her hand firm on Felix’s stomach so Tyler couldn’t lift him completely, but Felix was happy to not have his head on the hard tile beneath. “Something’s wrong,” he said again, barely audible. Tyler leaned in closer, attentive. Felix laughed breathlessly, feeling his lungs protesting the effort and the oxygen deprivation. “Why do I want to kiss him?”

Tyler pulled back, pale. He glanced over his shoulder to where Mark was still chewing Jack out, so they hadn’t heard what Felix said. But Felix knew Tyler had understood and Felix—just wanted to die.

“Why did this happen?” he asked Amy and Tyler as he slowly regained his heart rate and breathing. When they didn’t answer him, Felix repeated himself, wondering if they didn’t understand the question. “Why did I stop breathing?”
Amy jumped when she realized his question had been practical and not existential. “Your, you likely went into some secondary kind of shock,” Amy explained. “I’m not quite sure what triggered this panic attack, but the effects of Lovecraft tend to last far beyond twenty-four hours, even with the antidote administered. Your triggered panic attack was exacerbated by the lingering symptoms, worsening your state. Luckily, you were able to get yourself back under control, but you shouldn’t be under any kind of strain for the next forty-eight hours so we don’t risk sending you into a secondary cardiac arrest. I didn’t think it would be this serious, but it seems the effect of the drug on your system was much more severe than we predicted.”

Felix nodded slowly along with her words and barely understood any of it.

“Can you fabricate a doctor’s note?” Tyler asked Amy, obviously five steps ahead. “We have our contact within his precinct, but they’ll need some sort of documentation to create a viable paper trail.”

“I can’t create one, legally,” Amy hedged with a wince. “I can try to get you one? But it’ll be blank with just a signature and I wont be able to back it up in any sort of databank.”

“Then we’ll call Felix out sick” Tyler said.

“Fuck you,” Felix said, his words feeling weird like his tongue was numb. “I gotta go to work.” He had a shift tomorrow, he had already missed enough and he wanted to save his vacation time for a trip back to Newport and see Arnold and— oh wait. Never mind. He’ll find some other reason to save his vacation time. Was working himself into an early grave still a viable reason?

“You can’t be serious,” Amy deadpanned.

“He’s absolutely serious,” Tyler sighed. Then Tyler stood and clapped his hands loudly. The shouting that had been ongoing in the background fell silent. Felix wanted to laugh at Tyler’s wizard powers, but his lips were still tingling and Amy looked too much like Marzia in his peripherals.

“Mark, you’re going to Cartagena with Jack,” Tyler ordered. “The flight leaves in two hours, you should leave as soon as possible. I’m staying back with Felix. Kon, I’m giving you temporary leave for the next twenty-four hours. I’m taking Felix out of the vicinity until his shift tomorrow.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Mark asked. “Amy just said he shouldn’t be going anywhere.” At Mark saying her name, Amy’s eyes shot to the other man. From the floor, Felix could see the way her hand clenched into a fist. Amy had said she was friends with Mark from when they were teens. He wondered how that friendship had changed over the years. Fuck, Felix was still on the floor. Jack had kissed him and Felix had wanted to kiss him back and everything was just— so fucking awful. And his fucking firearm was digging terribly into his spine. Felix groaned and squirmed and realized his entire body was still trembling. What a fucking disaster he was.

“He shouldn’t be moved too much,” Amy said, her voice a little weaker now that she was addressing a room full of mafia members. “And he shouldn’t be introduced to stressful situations. Where do you intend to take him?”

“Out of this city,” Tyler said. “Anyone got any problems with that?”

As Felix tried to pull himself up, he was able to see Kon shrug like he didn’t care and Mark make a face that said he had several problems with what Tyler wanted to do. But Mark was also a fucking dick and he’d yelled at Jack so much. Maybe Jack deserved it because Jack had—

Felix pushed the bottom of his hands into his eyes. That alcohol was finally hitting him, everything just so fucking bad that he felt like sleeping until he died. Felix had no idea what he was doing at this
point, but the idea of Tyler taking him out of the city entirely was so beyond appealing. “I could use a spa day,” he mumbled, hoping no one heard him because no one would like the idea of him cracking jokes during a time like this. Mark’s frustrated exhale told Felix that he’d failed in being quiet. “Mark, I swear to god, if I die in the next month, you’re gonna be the guy that comes and shits on my grave.”

There was a tense silence and Felix lifted his head to see everyone looking at him in disgust. “Am I wrong?” he asked.

“Absolutely and horribly wrong,” Mark snapped. “I’m tired of defending myself to you.”

“Whatever,” Felix sighed. “Just— I’m all for fucking leaving.”

“And putting yourself in immediate danger?” Mark asked, He obviously thought this was the stupidest idea ever. “And for what? Some therapeutic detachment? You just nearly went into cardiac arrest on your kitchen floor! How many times do you have to fucking die before it gets to your head that whatever you’re doing isn’t working?”

Felix’s gut reaction was to be angry, except— well, Mark was the person to always see Felix at his worst. Maybe he genuinely did just hate seeing Felix hurt. But then that would mean Mark actually did like him, and that didn’t tango well with the anger Mark always showed him. Felix just— was so tired of trying to figure this shit out.

“Mark, take Jack back to Cartagena and handle Enrique,” Tyler ordered again, his tone firm and leaving no room for argument. “And talk to him. Talk. Talking meaning no fucking shouting. Kon, go dark for twenty-four hours. Marzia might know who you are since she’s been around Felix’s home and has a direct line of contact with Dante and Vincent. I want to make sure that they don’t have anything on you. Amy, go dark for twenty-four hours too. Just to be safe.”

Amy nodded. “I’m going to leave some shit with you,” he told Tyler. “Don’t bring him into any stressful situations and keep him in low temperature environments and nothing too stimulating. I’m going to give you some natural zen shit just to keep a handle on his stress levels.”

“I’m a cop, no way in fuck am I smoking weed,” Felix said.

“Lucky you, it’s not weed,” Amy snorted, smiling at Felix like he meant something at all to her. “It’s Holy Basil and it’s pretty good shit. You’ll sleep better with it.”

“Better not be weed,” Felix grumbled, finally managing to sit up. He reached behind himself and pulled out his firearm, grateful to no longer having it against his spine. The entire room froze, though, when he saw he had the gun. It took Felix a long moment to understand why. “Jesus christ, I’m not going to fucking shoot myself,” he huffed, brow furrowed. “You think I’d just give up?”

“You’re talking like ye’ will.”

That was Jack’s voice, the first words Felix really registered from him since the kiss. Felix’s heart raced again and his breath started to fail. Shit, Jack was proving to be the stressful situation Felix was supposed to be avoiding. His lips were tingling. Was that the memory of the kiss or just Felix’s broken mind? Didn’t oxygen deprivation create numbness?

“You’re talking like ye’ will.”

Tyler’s voice had Felix sucking in a gulp of air. He realized he’d been staring at Jack, but not really seeing him. Jack looked like he wanted to crawl in a hole in die just as much as Felix did and Mark was pacing the room like he needed something to break. “Wow, I suck at this,” Felix said, laughing
because he couldn’t do anything else and his lungs were burning. “God, Jack,” Felix said, his organs twisting, making him feel ill. “Jack, why the fuck did you have to kiss me?”

“I’m sorry,” Jack choked out.

“Don’t be,” Felix sighed, leaning forward to put his head in his hands. “Just—do me a favor and, like—fuck.” What could he ask? Don’t let Jack beat himself up over it? Don’t worry about it? Don’t—don’t what? Felix was suddenly fucking drowning in the fact that he wanted to kiss Jack back and Marzia had poisoned him and he was being disowned and there was literally no way for this to get any worse. Felix realized his own heartbeat in his ears matched the echo of one hundred seventy-fucking-five people dropping dead in unison. Felix pulled at his hair. “Jack, come here.”

Jack didn’t move. “Are ye’ gonna hit me?”

Felix felt that question like a knife in his throat.

“He deserves to hit you,” Mark grumbled. “You can’t just fucking do that without fucking permission, Jack. What the fuck happened to you asking for consent?”

“I said I was sorry.”

“That’s not fucking good enough for what you’ve done!”

“Jack, come here,” Felix repeated. There was a moment of tense quiet before footsteps, and then the sound of someone sitting down in front of Felix. He looked up at saw Jack crouched on the floor, watching Felix warily, bracing for a hit. Felix reached out slowly, letting Jack track the movement, and rested his hand on Jack’s neck. His thumb brushed gently over the cigar burns against Jack’s skin and he felt the other man shudder.

Felix was crushed beneath the weight of wanting to have returned that kiss and he felt like giving up. He couldn’t do that to him or Jack.

Felix tightened his grip on Jack’s neck, felt the man freeze up like he was preparing for the blow, but Felix surprised them both by pulling Jack into his chest and wrapping his arms around the other man, burying his face in Jack’s neck, hiding from everything. He couldn’t think about it—Felix couldn’t risk thinking about it. All he knew was that Jack was what made him feel better and feel safe regardless of the ache of his chest. Felix was drowning. He couldn’t afford to be picky about what was going to save his life.

Felix clung to Jack and just focused on nothing but the man himself. Jack, who had thrown Felix into the mess, but then been good enough to stick around for the aftermath of his decisions. Maybe Mark and Cry were right, that Felix hadn’t meant a god damn thing to Jack in the beginning, but Felix eventually became someone to Jack and Jack hadn’t abandoned him to the horror show he had inflicted. Jack could have just turned Felix away when he’d stormed the castle with a duffel bag of cameras. Jack could have just turned blind eye and told Felix to fuck off, it wasn’t his problem, he was just some cop that wasn’t worth the effort. But Jack had stayed and that mattered to Felix because it was starting to look like literally the only thing Felix had left. Mark jumped between love and hate, Kon was nice but he was being paid to be around Felix, Felix barely knew Tyler, Sive and his fellow officers couldn’t be brought into any of this—

All Felix had was Jack.

He couldn’t afford to lose him.

“Don’t leave me,” Felix told Jack, whispering into his skin, holding tight even as Jack refused to
relax in his arms. “It’s fucking selfish and wrong but I— it’s all gone, Jack. I don’t have anything. Just please promise me you won’t— you won’t let me die to this shit. I’m so fucking scared of dying.” He kept aching for it, saying he wanted it, that death was preferable to everything falling apart in slow motion, but Felix—

He didn’t believe in god. He didn’t believe in heaven. He didn’t believe in the afterlife. This horrible, horrible mess—it was all Felix had. “Please don’t let me die to this,” he begged of Jack, clinging to him. “Please don’t let me die. I’ll do anything.”

Finally— fucking finally— Jack eased into the hold and put his arms around Felix as well. Felix shuddered and his breathing was freaking out again, so he started to mentally count. Five-two-five, five-two-five, keep breathing and don’t scare Jack with another panic attack. Felix probably was risking brain damage with his shitty breathing and he definitely was worried about memory disassociation, but his heartbeat was doing this awful spasm that Felix was sure could kill him if he didn’t get it under control. At least holding Jack was bringing the fear from Felix’s spine and breaking the ghost of Jack’s lips.

“Just don’t let me die,” Felix pleaded again. “Promise me I’m going to survive this.”

“Ye’ve died in my arms, Felix,” Jack choked out. “I’ll burn the world t’ make sure it never happens again.”

“Well, I don’t want to encourage that,” Felix admitted, laughing shakily. He pulled Jack even closer, their chests pressed together. Jack was warm and alive in his arms and it felt so good to be close to another human being that Felix absolutely trusted. He’d had Marzia for this, maybe Fanny, but that was—that was it. Jack was literally all Felix had left and it ached. “Okay,” Felix breathed, finally finding some solid ground in his mind when he had Jack so close. He could feel the rise and fall of Jack’s lungs and the press of their bodies was peaceful static in Felix’s mind. “Okay,” he said again. “I can do this. I’m fine.” Felix pulled away, no longer hiding in Jack, forcing a smile. He was so close to Jack’s face, so close to his lips, and everything inside of Felix was tearing itself apart. “Go to Cartagena,” he told Jack. “Handle whatever shit is happening there. Don’t worry about me.”

“It’s impossible not t’ worry,” Jack told him.

“Try anyways,” Felix said. “Because I don’t want to have to worry about you while I try to sort out how much of a disaster everything is. Take care of yourself, Jack. Don’t beat yourself up too hard.”

Jack looked down between them and Felix’s eyes were, again, drawn to his lips. They were gleaming and parted delicately, tempting and probably the worst thing Felix had ever seen in his life. “I’ll do my best, Felix,” he said. “I’m sorry for kissing you and calling you stupid.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Felix was going to worry about that first part enough for the both of them. “Just watch your back. Mark’s a fucking dick, he might not watch it for you.”

“Mark would never hurt me,” Jack said confidently. “And I— I’m sorry, Felix I can’t—”

Felix wasn’t sure what he was referring to until he realized Jack was slowly trying to pull away. Felix had probably overdone it with the touching. He winced and let Jack go, sitting back against the cupboards of his kitchen. “My bad,” he said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, it’s me,” Jack told him. He sat back regardless, and then stood, turning to face the people still in Felix’s home who were observing quietly. Mark still looked like he wanted to throttle Jack. Felix wasn’t so sure about Jack’s confidence in Mark not hurting him.
“Don’t worry about Felina,” Tyler told Jack. “I’m gonna get him somewhere calm.”

“See to it that ye’ do,” Jack told Tyler, standing tall and falling into a persona that Felix hadn’t seen in ages. “I don’t want a god damn moment of him alone, ye’ hear me? And constant updates. If Lovecraft is evolving, we need t’ treat this like a study. He’s the only subject we have.”

“I’ll keep you and Kon updated,” Tyler promised. “You can trust me, Jack.”

The look Jack gave Tyler was anything but happy. “Don’t ye’ dare let anything happen t’ him.”

“On my life,” Tyler promised.

“Amy, contact me if ye’ need t’ make any purchases,” Jack told the woman who had been entirely silent to this point. “No expense spared. If Felix needs a fuckin’ personal CAT scan in his home, I’ll make it happen. Ye’ contact me immediately, got it?” When Amy nodded, Jack looked to Kon. “I’m upgrading yer arsenal,” he told Kon. “And you’re tailing him on his shifts.”

“I did before,” Kon said. “Switch with Mark and Tyler.”

“Well it’s official now, and I’m upping the pay grade,” Jack said. There was a pause, then— “I want a bounty on Marzia’s head.”

“Veto,” Tyler said.

“One hundred percent veto,” Mark echoed.

“It ain’t yer choice t’ make,” Jack said. “I want a bounty. One mil, goes up the longer she ain’t caught.”

“If Maria has been revealed as Marzia and she’s actually fucking active, you can’t fucking kill her,” Mark spat. “You’re supposed to fucking marry her, why would you kill the daughter of the man we’re trying to suck up to?!”

“Marriage?” Felix repeated incredulously from the floor. “What the— how much worse can this get?”

“I’m vetoing the bounty,” Mark told Jack, ignoring Felix. “So is Tyler. And you and I will discuss this on the flight, which we’re about to be late for. Get the lead out, McLoughlin, we’re fucking leaving.”

Jack flinched at the sound of his last name, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he glared hard at Mark, brushed past him, and just— left. Mark followed along with Kon, Amy gave Tyler a nod and followed them as well, and that was it. Felix’s home was suddenly almost empty.

It didn’t feel real.

None of this felt real.

“Did you mean it?”

Felix looked up at Tyler, stunned by the sudden quiet. He wasn’t sure what Tyler meant, but—


Tyler looked down at him with pity. “Did you mean it?”
Felix bit hard into his lower lip, the lip Jack had taken between his own. Then he nodded. “I’m really scared,” he confessed.

Tyler heaved a sigh. Then he said, “Don’t be afraid. We’ll figure this out.” Tyler offered him a hand and Felix took it, letting himself be pulled to his feet. “I’ll get a detail in to clean up this mess and take care of whatever Amy left up in your room,” he told Felix. “You’re coming with me, Officer. I’ll keep you safe.”

Felix hardly knew the meaning of the word anymore, and it only went as far as Jack. But he follows Tyler out of his home, still dressed in the night clothes some unknown person had changed him into, and breathed in deeply. The night was cool and brisk and everything was in ruins. At least Tyler was going to be the one to drive. Felix wasn’t going to trust himself with even the simplest of tasks in the state he was in.

“I’m gonna pass out,” he told Tyler as he followed him to a black car with illegally tinted windows. “Just don’t drive me to an organ harvesting factory and you can do whatever else you want.” Tyler opened the door for him with a wry grin and Felix slumped into the comfortable leather seat, excited to become dead to the world.

“Rest easy, Officer,” Tyler said. “I won’t let anything happen.”

Felix had no choice but to take his word for it as the darkness encroached again and exhaustion took him. It was probably the whiskey.

Please be the fucking whiskey.

End Notes

come join this small jelix discord :)

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