The Beaumort Society

by miserynovel

Summary

The city of Omen is on the cutting-edge of learning and science, and the things going on behind the backs of the Institute and the government, and sometimes with their approval...well, they don’t really matter. Conspirators operate just below the surface, societies clashing, fighting for their own mysterious ends.

It's here that the individual known as Nemesis Jones, a self-styled private investigator, arrives, stumbling onto the doorstep of a curious bookstore called Beaumort's. He's here in search of answers, but all he seems to find is more questions - like the strange girl who arrived at Beaumort's shortly after him, and the peculiar stranger who just may have the answers he seeks. After he stumbles upon a conspiracy tied far too closely for comfort to his best friend, it's up to him and some other nosy eccentrics to unravel the mysteries of the city one by one, beginning with the murder at the Theatre Obscura.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, all of this is explicitly outlined in Nemesis' job description.

[Illustrations by twitter user @theegggarden!]

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The end of winter brings with it a very familiar atmosphere. Soaked cobblestones provide a backdrop as the faint smell of spring rising over the horizon fills the city of Omen with something approaching optimism, even amidst the frequent and inconvenient downpours and the perpetual twilight beneath the *Umbra Maximus*. The sort of atmosphere that’s liable to put a smile on one’s face, even when one is receiving news of a death, as Nemesis Jones is.

He sits, legs crossed and elbows leaned on a table cleared of dishes, in the booth of the cafe closest to the window, idly watching the raindrops splatter against the streets outside, soaking pedestrians past the ankles. The real occupier of his attention is the newspaper in his hands. Across the front page, written in large letters, the death of the baron Vigenere is proclaimed.

It’s not a surprise, but then again, it also is. The baron was old enough and sick enough that his demise was by no means a complete shock, but if someone had told Nemesis Jones yesterday that Vigenere was mortal, he would have been baffled at the thought. Rationally, yes, the baron was no less mortal than anyone else, but his presence was felt throughout the region, even outside of Omen. Even as far as Nemesis’ home of Citrea Viridia. A philanthropist, cultural figure, and patron of the arts, everyone had felt as though they new the baron personally, though a comparative few had ever met him in person.

“Lord Vigenere is dead,” he announces in his normal tone - slightly high-pitched and distinctly indifferent-sounding. His companion, a boy around his age with a dark complexion and equally dark expression, whose mere presence seems to cast the room in a light coat of shadow despite the unpleasant yellow lighting in the diner, frowns even deeper.

“He’s a family friend, you know. Him and Fitzroy eat dinner sometimes. Apparently close to my parents as well. Weird to think he’s dead, just like that. Did they list a cause?”
“Old age or illness, I assume. The usual for an old guy.” Nemesis frowns in response, nudging his companion with a foot underneath the table. “Wasn’t aware you’d met the baron. You’re so important, El. A proper high-society gentleman.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. It’s really nothing abnormal.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow.

“Right, fine, okay. Apparently it’s something abnormal.”

“You’re a right snob sometimes, Elias. And I know you don’t mean to. That’s the frustrating part.” He nudges him again, and Elias shakes his head.

“Not in the mood for banter today, sorry.”

Nemesis falls silent and glances over at the window. His reflection stares back at him - a handsome face, that of a young adult, with light brown skin, sharp, angular features and wavy silver hair framing his face, a nose which had definitely, at some point or another, been broken, and a pair of sharp gray eyes.

The people in the street pass the window by, paying the boys no attention. Nemesis observes them carefully, hoping to see something of any vague interest to him, but the closest any of them come to eye-catching is a woman with a hat brim perhaps wider than practically advisable (but most likely still in fashion – not as if Nemesis knows anything about Omenite womens’ fashion). Of course, it’s a rainy day. Everyone is dressed in black, umbrellas, overcoats, and hats. Faces are near impossible to discern, even when they might have otherwise been distinctive.

In a city of shrouded pedestrians and grayscale Automata Lex, Nemesis stands out. That’s fine. He doesn’t mind standing out. Plain sight is often the best place to be. His colors are muted, browns and light blues and even dashes of purple, but they’re colors.

Back in Citrea Viridia, people are far more colorful. Light greens, tan browns, and even splashes of brightness are the fashion. Here, it’s as if the color’s been drained from the surroundings and the people.

Elias sighs, drawing Nemesis’ attention back from the street. “...you should find a place to stay. And I’ve got to get back to Fitzroy’s.”

“You don’t have to, you know.”

He laughs humorlessly. “As if. He’ll find me, you know that much. I’ve been out for long enough already, actually.”

“I suppose.” Not that Nemesis is about to argue with something he knows is true, but the look on Elias’ face…

Elias frowns. “...you’re staring.”

“Ah, am I?”

“Yeah.”

He stands up. “Let me at least walk you part of the way there, Elias.” To this, at least, Elias nods. A small comfort in a world of concerns.
As he holds the door for Elias, Nemesis thinks to himself that, though he feels far more at home in the Omenite dreariness, he misses the way the sunlight in Citrea Viridia always brought out Elias’ darkness, like a blot of ink spreading behind him, something so distinctive and stunning. Here, Elias looks like just another of the crowd, lost in the shuffle.

With the winter over, all that's left is the dampness of the cobblestone, the cold humid air, and the smell of wet leaves drifting through the streets. Nemesis doesn't mind the cold. What he really dreads is overpowering heat of the summer, the way it seems to wrap around his limbs and force its way into his skull, choking him, drowning him in the air.

It doesn’t get that hot in Omen. Instead of Lygredyg’s sweltering days and frigid nights, here it goes from pleasantly cool to pleasantly chilly depending on the time of day, from what he’s heard. The thought is enticing.

It certainly seems to rain more often, though that might be a hasty conclusion from someone who’s been here all of six hours. He certainly hopes he’s right, though. Nemesis always loved the sound of the rain against the street and the damp air just after the clouds clear.

Not that, he supposes, one could truly see rainclouds against the Umbra well enough to know when they’ve passed by.

A full ten minutes after parting ways with Elias, the tense feeling in his stomach hasn’t left. He stares into the window, drumming his fingers against the table in an agitated rhythm, barely aware of the impact of his gloved fingers into the oak, feeling an almost tangible degree of separation between the man he sees and himself. Which is absurd, because he’s Nemesis Jones.

Pocketing the newspaper, he stands, paying the bill in cash and sliding an extra hundred crowns to the waiter, who doesn’t look any older than Nemesis is. Based on just that, there’s a good chance he’s a university student working part-time to pay his bills. The shock on his face is enough to paint an uncontrollable grin on Nemesis’ own.

The air in Omen is pleasant, far moreso than the air in Citrea Viridia. Despite how much he stands out in every possible way, Nemesis feels strangely at home. There’s something very refreshing about walking with confidence through the streets of an unfamiliar city, dressed to the nines, garnering strange looks. Some are hostile, some likely envious. He’s pretty sure he’s the only person on this sidewalk smiling.

But, of course, he can’t simply do this all day. He ducks into an alley. Even the alleys here, he observes, are nicer than the ones in Citrea Viridia - cleaner, wider, and even, he thinks, slightly longer. These are truly a king’s alleys - and here he is, a humble foreign misfit, invading them.

He chuckles quietly to himself and yanks the object in his pocket out by its chain (gently, of course), taking a quick glance at it. Of course, he’d look like a fool if he ran through the streets, studying it intensely, but a discreet glance every once in a while can’t hurt.

He crosses the street, doubling back through every alley and bypass he can think of. This isn’t a route anyone in their right mind would take - if someone is tailing him, it’ll be clear as day, but thankfully, he appears unfollowed as he emerges into an older-looking street.

The buildings here are in desperate need of upkeep, the street lamps dimmer, the cobblestone broken and uneven. The device doesn’t offer a single clear answer. If anything, every building
around here seems to be rather similar.

It’s hard to tell, because of the *Umbra* robbing the city of any visual indicator of the arrival of night, but he has a feeling it’s getting rather late. A quick glance at his wristwatch confirms his suspicions - it’s near midnight, which means he’s been wandering and taking in the scenery for something in the range of seven hours. Though he didn’t notice the time passing, the fact that it did doesn’t come as a surprise to him. There’s so much interesting to see in Omen, and he hasn’t even gone into any of the buildings yet.

However, it does leave the pressing issue of where to go next. Nemesis knows that, at some point or another, he will pass out on his feet - this is an immutable fact of biology, to his endless frustration. If he times it badly enough, he’ll likely get robbed or run over by an automobile, neither of which are on his to-do list. The alley, he supposes, truly isn’t too horrible of an option, though he doesn’t know if the constables here are as unwelcoming to those who might sleep in alleyways as the ones in Citrea Viridia. As it stands at the moment, nearly every building around here is closed.

Except for one. A larger, three-story building, decorated simply, with the flat roof, brick construction, and black shutters that seem to be typical architectural features in this part of town. Through the window, he can see faint lamp-light, indicating that at least one place has yet to close for the evening. He glances at his device, and his eyes widen. If he hadn’t an excuse to look closer at this place before, he certainly doesn’t now.
He approaches calmly. Despite the lamp, the building is dark enough that he can’t make out much inside. What he can make out is mostly bookshelves, rows and rows of them, and their shadows looming inside the narrow space. Though the window has space for a display, it’s completely empty.

On the door, someone has pinned up a sign. Hand-written on old paper, it reads:
A grin spreads across his face. They don’t have shops like this back in Citrea Viridia. There’s no other word for it - this is exciting.

He throws open the door.

Even halfway across the continent, entering a bookstore is a breath of relief. The smell of old paper and the jingling of the bell attached to the door is enough to remind him of a different time. The room is dimly lit, candlelight, and the shadows seem to dance upon the surprisingly few rows of books.

It makes sense. Considering the sort of texts this place stocks, the majority would likely be in the back or out on loan. Very little displayable.

The proprietor is a brown-skinned woman with long black hair, sleeves rolled up to her elbows and a book in her hands. She glares at Nemesis through her circular wire-rimmed spectacles, as though upset he had interrupted her reading. Realistically, that’s indeed the case.

“What do you want?”

It isn’t a simple question to answer. When one is alone in a new city, they often do things inexplicably, compelled by sheer curiosity and the underlying current of near-electric anxiety that propels those who wander to become lost. He could say that he was simply fond of bookstores with no sign on the door and a strange ambiance surrounding them, or he could tell her the truth, though he supposes that would, perhaps, be a bad way to introduce oneself.

“Well...what is this place called, first off?” Seems to him like as good an opener as any. “There’s no proper sign on the door. Forgive me, but it seems like bad business. Can’t bring in new customers if no one knows who you are.”

“Have you really come here to lecture me about how to run my bookstore?” She rolls her eyes. She has no irises, he notices - flat circles of black in the center of the sclera. “...Beaumort’s. We’re not looking for money, thank you very much.”

“Beaumort - that’s your name, then? How old are you?” Sometimes, he’s learned, people with strange features, like a complete lack of irises, end up being far older than they look.

She scoffs. “That’s not a strange or invasive question to ask off the bat in the least. I’m Theory Hayes and this is my parents’ bookstore, I just take care of it while they’re out of town. Which is always, so I suppose it’s my bookstore now.”

“A pleasure, Ms. Hayes.” Formalities are formalities no matter where one is, so he sweeps his hat off and bows, and Theory looks about as unimpressed as a person physically can look. “I am Nemesis Jones, private detective extraordinaire.”
She raises an eyebrow, turning back to her book. “That’s not your real name.”

His breath catches in his throat. Though he manages to keep himself from giving any visible reaction, his heart feels far heavier as he realizes that this will certainly be a regular occurrence. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“No one names their child Nemesis. That’s ridiculous.”

At that, he relaxes and frowns. “...coming from someone whose name is a noun.”

“Your name is a noun.” She scoffs. “My name is Theodora, but I highly doubt you’re actually Nemesistopher.”

It’s true, his name isn’t Nemesistopher. “...right, it’s not. ‘S just Nemesis.”

Her frown only seems to deepen by the moment. “...really, why are you here? Am I meant to take the arrival of an overdressed, strange-looking foreigner as something mundane, or are you here on some business my parents didn’t think to warn me in advance about?”

“I was simply looking for somewhere to stay - I’ve not been able to find any hotels, and it’s getting rather late.” Not a complete lie, and something more blurted out on impulse than actively formulated, but still dishonest enough to create that unpleasant feeling in his mouth, that impulse to just spit out the whole truth.

She raises an eyebrow. “Well, that’s not here, and I’m not an information desk. Perhaps you should have made your living arrangements before coming here.”

If only he’d had the opportunity.

“I didn’t assume otherwise. I just-”

“You just what?”

He glances around, to verify the emptiness of the room he knows full well has no business being anything but empty. Sometimes people lurk where they’re not meant to - Nemesis Jones, a habitual lurker, is very much proof of concept. Still, there’s no one in sight or in earshot, thankfully. Just when it seems Theory Hayes is about to pick him up by the scruff of the neck and toss him out into the still-damp streets, he reaches into his pocket and displays the device with a flourish.

“A pocketwatch. You’re here and bothering me because of a pocketwatch,” Theory remarks dryly, as he presses the button on the top and the case springs open. “...oh.”

Where a watch should be, thirteen needles of crystal and multi-colored gemstone quiver as they point at various objects. A wall, a bookshelf, the book in Theory Hayes’ hands, the door to a back room - things otherwise innocuous. A large, red-tipped needle, glowing with a faint light, is fixed on Hayes herself.

“Are you looking to...sell that?” Her eyebrow quirks. “I’m not a pawn shop, though there’s probably one I could direct you to.”

“Not looking to sell, no. After all, it’s not mine. I’m simply...well and truly lost, and came to the first place that looked as though it might get me anywhere at all. If anything, I’m looking to get it...appraised.”

She shakes her head. “Then I can’t help you, beyond directing you to the aforementioned pawn
shop. I’m not a hotel, either. I’m not going to let some freeloader with some fancy artificial device breathe all over my books.”

He has to hold back a chuckle at that. “Take a couple steps back. Whenever did I imply I wouldn’t be able to pay you?”

Despite claiming that she’s not in it for the money, Hayes falls into the trappings of the average person - that being requiring sustenance and shelter, and, by extension, money. Though it takes a good deal of somewhat desperate negotiating, Hayes concedes, and Nemesis moves into the spare room in the loft above Beaumort’s bookstore.

They become shockingly civil roommates. Hayes seemingly finds it hard to be too intolerant of someone as surprisingly neat and put-together as Nemesis Jones, who both pays her a sum she should think is unsustainable and often cooks meals with a surprising amount of skill. He, on the other hand, finds that Hayes is quiet enough that he can often forget she exists - and more often than not, the two simply don’t interact, except to discuss what books they’ve been reading over dinner. They both seem to be fine with that.

During the daytime, Nemesis primarily works on establishing himself. He spends his time in cafes and alleys and parks, speaking to whoever will speak to him, and searching for work. Here and there, he finds it. He locates lost objects, keeps tabs on people, ducks out of the line of sight of Automata Lex, and is offered an exorbitant sum by a schoolboy, equal parts amusingly and frustratingly, to write an essay about the properties of various sodium-based compounds (a subject he finds mind-numbingly boring). His name soon begins to float amidst the denizens of the city, and, to his rather questionable (morally, he supposes) excitement, he finds Omen to be far more in need of his services than Citrea Viridia. A few serious cases are thrown his direction, through one means or another - a missing person, a murder of a gang member, a theft of an object best kept out of the police’s eyes, a case of suspected blackmail by a gentleman on good terms with the constables. All are dealt with promptly, and payment is collected with a flourish of his favorite gray newsboy cap.

He finds himself passing through pawn shops and antique stores alike, and presents his compass to each of them in turn. The answers vary in terms of potential selling value (generally exceptionally large, though Nemesis has no need for the money), but the answer he’s searching for - any clues as to his conundrum - are met with a forlorn shrug and a suggestion of another person that might be able to help, but, inevitably, turns out to have roughly the same results. By this point, he supposes he’s been through every single pawnbroker, antiques owner, artificer-for-hire, and strange man in an alleyway in this entire city, and has come out with no answers whatsoever and an ever-growing sense of dread that the answers, if they’re even to be found at all, are out of his reach.

Elias, sadly, is even more difficult to deal with. Attempts at contact are made, and each one of them fails. The most he manages is a glimpse through a window, a tapped message in Morse code that, if he has to guess, is unlikely to have been received. It’s all he can do to keep himself from being caught, and the one solace the situation gives him is that surely Elias is feeling the oppressive separation just as strongly as Nemesis.

Or perhaps not. One never knows.

And throughout all of this, the weather remains pleasant. Nemesis was right to assume that it never gets too hot or too cold here. For once, he finds the summer entirely manageable, roughly equivalent to a late Citrea Viridian autumn. He gets used to the persistent darkness, learning to tell time in ways that don’t involve sunlight. It rains two or three times a week, on average. Sometimes, he appreciates the excuse to simply stay inside and read, eschewing responsibility as
he listens to the rain splatter against the cobblestones and the brick walls of Beaumort’s.

Theory Hayes begins to warm up to him at some point, though he can’t identify precisely when it is. Perhaps it’s when he expresses his dislike of the Institute, if he has to pick a specific point. He knows it’s a matter of time before they approach him, a matter of time before they begin to consider him a threat, and that fact causes him no shortage of worry. Theory suggests ways to stay as far under that specific radar as he can manage, and Nemesis appreciates it greatly. He’s not here to cause trouble, and certainly not to pick fights with people he knows are far more powerful than him.

The more he talks with Hayes, the more he appreciates her. That sort of straightforward, undeniably intelligent personality is the perfect counter to his wild creativity. She doesn’t entirely remind him of Elias, but the resemblance is indubitably there, buried beneath the wildly different demeanor. She teaches him things. Things about the city, things he was left wondering after reading one book or another, things about artifice that someone like him would never have been taught otherwise. As someone with a general inclination towards learning, he greatly appreciates it.

She calls him paranoid, once or twice. He rebuffs her, but of course, it’s hard to deny when he sleeps with a pistol within arm’s reach and constant, furtive glances at his compass. He has good reasons to be, he argues, and he’s handling himself quite well so far. It could be so much worse. It’s not paranoia when it’s common sense. Sure, she replies, whatever you say. He thinks it’s a bit hypocritical, considering the way she checks the locks on her doors and takes great pains to redo each and every one of the enchantments on the bookstore before she goes to sleep every night. To each their own, he supposes. She must have her reasons.

Newfound rapport aside, she gets on his nerves sometimes. Perhaps this is how Elias has always felt. Hayes is the most stubborn person he’s ever met, save for himself, and her wit is a deadly weapon in its own right. And he understands, at the same time, beyond the obvious, why she so rarely has visitors to the bookstore.

In fact, ‘rarely’ begins to seem more like ‘almost never’. Inquiries about it are met with swift and decisive deflection, but as the weeks turn into months he manages to observe a total of three visitors. They’re all hurried, speaking in hushed whispers and glancing around, just like Nemesis, as though terrified the shadows themselves will grow claws. Each of them makes his compass’ needles swing around wildly, until they all point directly at them.

“They’re associates of my parents’,” Theory informs him nonchalantly after the third one leaves. “They’re all like that.”

“Your parents have some peculiar associates.” Of course, he isn’t one to judge. His own parents had presumably had some rather strange associates back in the day. He has a peculiar associate himself and her name is Theory Hayes. “Any reason why?”

“They’re talented artificers. Very infamous.”

“Don’t you mean famous?”

She shakes her head, with a look that practically begs him not to inquire further. Nemesis gets the sense that something is rotten in the house of Hayes.

The months begin to stretch towards half a year. Though he isn’t giving up on finding his answers, he no longer sees any urgency in it - after all, he’s already spoken to anyone in the city who might know, and it seems as though he might never find the information he seeks. Despite himself, he’s become exhausted. Elias remains walled up in the Fitzroy manor, and Nemesis swears that he sees
him in the window, and that they meet eyes for a brief moment before he turns away sharply. Perhaps he’s being watched, and doesn’t want to betray Nemesis’ significance, or maybe he didn’t really see him at all, and is simply returning to his piano after a brief glance out the window. The fact that Nemesis can’t tell is getting increasingly frustrating.

And then, almost exactly six months after Nemesis Jones’s arrival in Omen, there’s a very out-of-the-blue knock on Theory Hayes’ door.
Appendix A - Select excerpts from The Wayfarer’s Pocket Atlas

Excerpts taken from The Wayfarer’s Pocket Atlas, second edition, by [Author’s name]

The nation of Acerbis is governed primarily from its capital, a city-state known as Rex, located in the northernmost area of the country (see fig. 1). Aside from those with immediate and pressing business in the city, no one may enter and no one may leave, for the safety of the royal family. The residents of Rex include the royal family, their servants, the members of the Senate, their families and servants, and the chancellor of the Institute - the one person who, due to their inherent duties outside of the city, is allowed to enter and leave at will.

Though Rex is the legislative center of the city, it is shut off to tourists. Unless the holder of this book would like to commit a crime, which the writer would humbly offer advice against, it does not make for a good vacation spot. However, brave reader, do not fear - there are many other cities within our own fair nation that could prove a lovely place to visit.

The majority of this chapter will be focused on one such city. Omen, located in the Semper region, in the southeast, is a large, industrialized city, officially classified as an *Urbs Maxima*, as it is home to its own air-port and central power grid. Omen is large enough that trains, such as those used in the countryside, are installed in the city, as it would be futile to attempt to walk from one end of the city to the other! This city is known as a center of learning, as Catacumba - the main branch of the Institute - is located here! In general, this city harbors many inventors and creatives, spurred on by funding from the Vigenere barony.

Moreso than many other industrialized cities, Omen is home to various arts. The most notorious artistic venue in this city is the Theatre Obscura, a national attraction and a major source of tourism. Run by former silver-screen acting legend Tobias Fitzroy, these days it both screens films and puts on various performances, from music to theatre. Similarly prolific, Phineas Sterling’s Cabinet of Marvels, funded by both the Vigenere barony and Gilbert Banks of the Aurum Lux line of department stores, houses the greatest works of art which Acerbis has to offer, holding regular, stunning exhibitions with artists from all over the world lining up to participate.

Of course, the presence of the Catacumba libraries and attached branch of the Institute is also a major boon to Omen. According to the [census], Omenites are, on average, more highly educated than any other region of the country, save Rex itself. Higher education is regularly available here, and in particular, those who wish to study Artifice need only pass the gruelling written and practical exams required to join the Institute’s student body, without worrying about other barriers to entry. Many major intellectuals in the field of artifice live and study in Omen, including the Chancellor, Persephone Cross, herself, as well as others.

One thing of note to anyone who visits this city is that, though the artifice practiced here furthers the needs and development of our beloved nation, there are those who would use it for evil. Omen combats its unusually high crime rate, bolstered by secret societies feuding over new discoveries in artifice and even petty thieves having access to the basics of the art, with use of *Automata Lex* - automatons specifically created for the constabulary, which prowl the streets, keeping a watchful eye on things for the safety of our citizens. They can be quite unsettling to a newcomer, but I assure you, dear reader, that they are there for your safety!

And even something potentially unsettling, such as the *Automata Lex*, can be beautiful. Omen is underneath the *Umbra Maximus*, and thus lit by street-lamps even during the day. It is often rainy
and windy, and zeppelins are commonly seen overhead. It may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but I, personally, find it beautiful, and I think some readers might as well.

Llygredyg is a Acerbian territory located to the west. The *Umbra Maximus* does not extend to its limits, leaving the entirety of the region bright and sunlit. Most of Llygredyg remains rural, but there is little variation in wealth, and very few are impoverished.

As the region has not advanced as far as Acerbis proper in technology, and remains primarily agricultural, many of its people cling to outdated ideas. Reverenti are common here, as are, to a lesser extent M’mand settlers. Knacklessness is far more common here than it is basically anywhere else, and suppressing one’s knack is even more common than elsewhere, with the exception of the rare individual fortunate enough to be properly trained in artifice - these will generally move to Acerbis after their graduation from school.

Curiously, Llygredyg is home to some rather impressive schools. A surprising amount of noble’s children and potential future intellectuals from Rex, are, in fact, educated in Llygredyg. Because of this, some dialects of Llygredish are seen as very chic and refined in Omen. None of these tend to be dialects people born in the country would ever speak. Coriolanus Lawson, the current Head Justice, was born in Llygredyg, and his children are currently undergoing schooling there.

Llygredyg is considered quite welcoming, and the people very kind. Since its conquest, Llygredyg has not participated in any military battles, and its people enjoy peace. However, there is very little urban to be found in this nation, aside from the few exceptions, such as the old capital of Citrea Viridia - a visitor from Acerbis’ metropolitan centers might find the silence quite unsettling indeed!

Zemlyan society is spread out into small hunter communities, and generally very unwelcoming to foreigners. However, if one were to somehow stumble into this nation, they would find the people cold, warlike, and determined to survive at any cost. Though this might paint an unfavorable picture of them, the people of Zemlya are actually deeply empathetic - they have strong senses of community, which they need to stay alive. A large proportion of Zemlyans are partially or fully Aogiyu, and the two groups have a close relationship, likely due to the nation’s closeness to the Border Wilds.

Zemlyans practice their own unique form of artifice. A lot of it is, predictably, focused around survival and battle, and, very uniquely, Zemlyan artifice can affect objects without directly touching them.

Many Zemlyans have migrated to Llygredyg or Al-Mushriq, with a smaller number living in Lucielle or Acerbis proper. Generally, they have a hard time adjusting to our culture, which seems somehow far more cutthroat than theirs.

To the west, in the hallowed halls of the University of Al-Mushriq, the leading scholars debate theories of artifice in front of thousands of eager students. Though Acerbis is proud of our knowledge of Artifice, Al-Mushriq not only invented the art - it is far closer than we will ever be to perfecting it.
A nation of scholars, Al-Mushriq is home to a massive university, with the city surrounding it being filled with all of the latest advances in artifice. One who visits this nation may find themselves completely overwhelmed - indeed, some of the things the Al-Mushrites have created boggle the mind. The universities there teach such entirely foreign subjects as spectrobiology, cryptochemistry, and applied phlebotinology - things about which information is scarce outside of Al-Mushriq. Thankfully, they are a staunch ally of Acerbis’, and the wealthy, important students from Rex mentioned in an earlier chapter generally complete their higher education here, once their basic schooling in Llygredyg is completed.

Wealthy from the influx of foreign-born students who wish to study in this most illustrious of settings, the Al-Mushrite capital of Eulim is a city that might as well be paved in gold. Any visitor will find beautiful art, which has been allowed to flourish, but what they might also notice is a lack of crime - something that will come as very strange to any Omenite reading this, I’m sure. In a nation where education is valued so highly, very few have any reason to waste their time on things such as petty theft or arson.

Lucielle is a shining nation, filled with vanity and excess. Wealthy, and technologically comparable to Acerbis, the people of Lucielle live easy, with massive cities filled with luxury to the very brim. What a wonderful life they must lead! Unfortunately for those of us who might want to join in this lifestyle, Lucielle’s borders remain almost completely closed to those who would wish to live there - but one can certainly visit!

A visitor to Lucielle might wish to sit by the banks of the River Etoile, eating gourmet pastries and holding in their arms shopping bags full of luxury clothing. If that sounds like something you might enjoy, dear reader, then you would be wise to keep a bookmark on this page - for the chapter following this will tell you everything you need to know to find your way around this beautiful nation.

Guo Ji Bei, located in the very north, is a country primarily characterized by its wealth. Centuries of trading with the other nations have left the Beians extremely rich, and thus the nation has spent exceptional time on the pursuit of art and self-betterment. Most well-off Beians will study in Llygredyg and Al-Mushriq, just as Acerbians do, but even the poorest will teach themselves to read from a young age.

The art of the nation is beyond exquisite. Particularly known for pottery and weaving, Beians also create some of the best paintings and sculptures in the world, and some of the best food, as well. It’s simply a very pleasant place to visit, if one has coin to spare.

However, they do have a problem that us Acerbians may be more than familiar with. In Guo Ji Be, poverty is a real and pressing issues, and the upper classes tend to have little, if any, sympathy for the impoverished citizens - who are often forced to turn to crime in alarming numbers.

Kude Lee, to the southeast, is somewhat shrouded in mystery, as they refused entry to most who wished to write about them - including myself. Their nation is constructed with a fascinating architecture - as opposed to the tall brick and wood buildings of Acerbis, the gilded spires of Al-Mushriq, and the skyscrapers of Lucielle, Kude Lee’s buildings vary in height and size, made of an unrecognizable material, and beautifully painted in orange, purple, and blue.

The few who have left Kude Lee for other nations have described it as very affluent and their lives as comfortable. Their reason for leaving, then, is generally that they lack a trait almost universally present among the Kudeians - they don’t have the knack. The nation is primarily run using artifice,
and that their techniques would be unrecognizable to any Acerbian or Luciellite - but that they are of the same potency, if not more powerful.

A large population of Kudeians is native to Acerbis, in particular, though there are scattered pockets throughout other nations. Each nation has its own subculture of Kudeians who were living abroad before the Great Splitting, who were isolated from their nation when it detached from the main-land and refused entry after. For the Kudeians took the Splitting as an excuse to detach themselves, for the most part, from the warring of other nations, and an individual’s decision to leave the nation is never taken likely, as they know return will be extremely difficult.

Despite that, it is not impossible. Those who visit Kude Lee describe it as welcoming and gorgeous, but there are far surer bets for a vacation, if one is in the market.

The Border Wilds are a long stretch of forests, fields, and mountains, enclosing our world from all sides. Those airships which have attempted to pass the mountains have never been heard from again. As far as we are concerned, this is the end of the world.

The wilds themselves are expansive and beautiful, but impossible to stay in long - daemons roam them, hunting. What is a daemon, you ask? Dear, sweet, innocent, foolish reader, let us both pray that you never have to learn the answer to that question. Humanity is driven by natural curiosity and fear of unknown, but some things are simply best left in the realm of wondering. Trust your humble author just this once.

The M’amand, known commonly and perhaps derogatively as ‘shepherds’, conversely, have developed a rather remarkable lifestyle. Simply put, they are herdsmen, harnessing Daemons for their own use. The Daemons they use have been trained over centuries not to harm them, but will defend them from the other, more hostile Daemons roaming the landscape. Though they, like any Acerbian Reverenti, believe in a Divine, they do not base their lifestyle off of worship of this Divine. Instead, they have a strong philosophy of treasuring life as it happens, and are known to have strongly-knit family groups which travel together.

Many M’amand live outside of the Border Wilds, having migrated to safer pastures entirely. Lucille, Zemlya, and Lygedyg have high populations, in particular. Both Reverenti and the average Acerbian tend to be quite hostile to them. In addition, they find it hard to find homes in other nations, mostly because, inexplicably, no M’amand has ever manifested the Knack - something science is still attempting to parse.

Overall, the Border Wilds probably aren’t a good place to visit, but that’s just this author’s take. Feel free to prove me wrong, as with any of these.

A final note to my dear readers - though travel seems thrilling, perhaps it is sometimes best to stay at home. If you do travel: make sure to keep your eyes on the shadows, lest something move without warning. Keep this book handy and nearby. If you would like, wear it in your chest pocket.
- you never know when it might prove useful for intercepting a bullet.

Be careful. Do not draw needless attention to yourself. Exercise the utmost care, always. Some secrets are best left that way. Never be careless. Remember my advice. Above all, I hope that even one of you will find something of my words that will help you in a far darker hour. Do not attempt to contact me - if all goes well I will be long-gone, and if not, it will only bring attention to the both of us.

Happy travels!
INTRODUCTION

Before I begin to describe specific techniques and theory, I must acknowledge that some may be reading this book who, through either spectacular failure of education or having spent one's life beneath a rock of impressive magnitude, may not know the very purpose and method of the most basic of artifice, and thus I must describe in this introduction what any primary schooler should know. If you know even the most basics of artifice, I recommend passing this chapter by, but I cannot discount the possibility that some pitiable shepherd or urchin has found their way, by some freak stroke of luck, to this book, and I am bound to a virtue of education for even the most undeserving and least qualified, and this I must provide this introduction, so that the rest of my writing might become a bit more legible for those who have not been taught properly.

In our Acerbian Empire, artifice is the paramount art. You have certainly heard people discussing it if you speak our language. But what is artifice? What does it mean for something to be artificial? What does it mean to enchant an object?

To begin with, you've likely done it at some point in your life. Have you ever wished that the train would go faster, and then felt it pick up speed, almost inexplicably? The railways in most major Acerbian cities are designed, in fact, to run on artifice, on the consolidated desires of the passengers to get to their location. They are pre-enchanted as a conduit, but it is the desire of every single passenger that passes through that conduit, the sub-enchantments combining into the larger pool of artificial power, that moves the train.

Conduits and sub-enchantments are, of course, very complex matter. Most beginner enchantments are smaller. They say food is “made with love”, and indeed, a chef who truly loves their art may enchant their food even without meaning to, which would, in fact, make it more appealing. These enchantments may sometimes be unintentional. Many children discover their knack for artifice by accidentally flinging rocks at other children during more heated games. Artifice is, essentially, the infusing of an object with a strong intention. It is a desire made material.

Because of this, especially stubborn people tend to be more talented artificers, but this is not the only predictor of ability. In fact, to which degree one has the knack - the ability to translate their desires into reality - seems to be partially genetic and partially random. In Acerbis, Lucielle, and Al-Mushriq, it is rare to meet someone without some degree of a knack, even if that degree is relatively small. In Llygredyg, however, fifteen per cent of the population lack the knack entirely, and yet manage to live full and normal lives, just like anyone else. Shepherds entirely lack the knack, and most Reverenti ideologically refuse to practice artifice even if they have it. Their lives are harder for it, but they are by no means far different from you or me, and are far less so different from those who do not exercise their knack.

If you have the knack, you likely know it. Those with the strongest knack, whose family actively practiced artifice for generations, tend to manifest physical features. The "penumbra" is a common manifestation, common to specific types of artifice, which appears as a shadow spreading behind the holder. The appearance of a lack of pupils, too, can be a common manifestation. Contrary to a "penumbra", some have a “halo” - but there are countless manifestations. Those with weaker knacks likely have them as well, but they are so small as to not be detectable.

Now, if you have the knack, you have probably been taught the basics of how to repress it at
school. If we all went enchanting things whenever we came into contact with them, this would be not only chaotic, but actively harmful. Though it has no negative side effects in the long term, and in fact increases, among other things, lifespan, bone density, and height, short term use of artifice will render the user with a deep exhaustion. The mental and physical exertion is great, and in extreme circumstances users may pass out or even die from the sheer strain which artifice puts on the user’s body. Different people have different tolerances, of course, and using a conduit will not cause the same sort of exhaustion, as the existing enchantment is essentially doing all the work for the user. For this reason, children are taught not to actively use their abilities to enchant anything, and are taught methods to keep themselves from accidentally doing something that would require an untimely trip to the Domus Vitae. It is when we reach higher education in artifice that we must unlearn these methods, and re-teach ourselves to use our natural talents without use of a conduit. However, even you, ordinary person that you presumably are, can begin to teach yourself to unlearn these very inabilities.

Try a short exercise. Pick up an object - a pen, for the sake of this exercise - and enchant it. Exert your will upon it, and with that exertion, force it to write a sentence of your choice without you touching it. It’s difficult, right? But you should, at the least, be able to make the pencil move on its own, however slightly. Congratulations! You have enchanted it.

At its core, this is artifice. Of course, there is more to learn - of conduits, as previously mentioned, of acquired manifestations, of the aether and its various properties, of the few unpredictable and heinous side effects of our glorious art and how best to prevent them, and of Them. There remains the curious question of the Shepherds and the Border Wilds, and, of course, the niche techniques certain artificers use, such as necromancy, chronomancy, and quantum aeromancy - none of which concern even those who have devoted most of their life to studying this art. Only time will tell which of these, if any, will ever be relevant to your life, but there will be at least a page in this tome about each, and you will be better off for understanding the bare basics of each intricacy of this art.

Now that you understand the very basics of what artifice is, you may continue to read this book, and get as much out of it as you wish. Whether you continue on to study artifice as a career path, or simply read this out of a passing interest, I bid you good luck.

Persephone Cross

Persephone Cross

Chancellor; Catacumba Institute of Artifice
Frederick Vigenere of Semper Dead; Only Son to Inherit the Barony

T Percival Chase for the Electric Sun

Our baron, Frederick Vigenere, was today found dead in his home by a member of his staff. In his sixty-three years of life, Vigenere was a treasured local fixture, a patron of the arts and education. He would often personally pay for the schooling of those who could not afford it, attend parties, and heavily funded the Institute and Cabinet of Marvels as well as, perhaps most famously, the Theatre Obscura. His presence will be greatly missed, both financially and emotionally.

According to police, Meredith de Bastion, a member of the security detail, found the door unlocked when she arrived at the manor. The Baron was lying at the bottom of the stairs, having seemingly fallen down - though an autopsy has yet to be performed, the coroner’s office assured the Electric Sun that the Baron had quote “almost certainly died of a fractured skull”. We are assured it was likely instant, and he did not suffer, despite the rather alarming amount of blood at the scene.

His manor was closed off, even to the most intrepid of reporters, and his estate and staff rudely declined comment. No suspect has been named in the case. Indeed, most suspiciously, the coroner has claimed that this death was “likely accidental” and that there is “no evidence of foul play”.

The Barony is set to pass to the late Baron’s son, Lucian, a student Artificer attending the Institute. Despite being only nineteen years old, Lucian has declined to appoint a regent, saying that he will return immediately to his post, continuing his education with tutors. Contemporaries of Lucian Vigenere describe him as rather high-strung and cold, a far cry from his kindly father.

The rest of this edition will be devoted to the late Baron, with tribute pieces by many of his closest friends, colleagues, and family.

T. Percival Chase | Lucian Vigenere
The girl would look more at home in Citrea Viridia than she does in Omen. But even there, Nemesis feels, she would be on the receiving end of quite the menagerie of nasty looks.

Blonde hair in a long braid, far too long to reasonably manage. Simple white dress tied with a purple sash; soaked in dirt and sweat. No shoes. Her feet are bleeding all over the cobblestones, red liquid splattering onto the steps of the bookstore.

Even Theory Hayes can’t let someone who looks like that be.

The girl is ushered in as Theory mumbles concernedly under her breath. Does this girl know how long it’s going to take her to remove all that blood from the carpeting, she asks, how she’ll likely have to keep Beaumont’s closed because of it, how much this inconveniences her at every possible
Nemesis, in the meanwhile, waits for her to sit down so he can catch a glimpse of the soles of her feet. Despite the circumstances, he’d not like to become known as the sort of person who asks to see people’s feet, and the mere action of needing to look at them, all reason aside, makes him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Regardless, he gets the information he needs: she’s undoubtedly stepped on something sharp at some point or another, like a bed of nails or a massive cheese-grater (or, more realistically, she’s been running on many, many sidewalks). The bottoms of her feet are both lacerated, horribly so, enough that he feels a pang of pain simply looking at them.

“Who are you? Why... why did you come here? Where from?” He asks, without the force of an interrogation, but she still flinches at the questions.

“My name is Calisto. Or... Callie. My brother called me Callie. My brother - my brother told me I had to leave. He didn’t tell me why.” She frowns. “He looked scared. He never looks scared the way he did. And he told me to find an old friend of his in Omen, a guy named Apollinaire, but I couldn’t... and then... I don’t know why, but I needed to get somewhere fast, it was getting dark out.”

Nemesis grimaces. It’s certainly not the most detailed of testimonies, but he’ll work with what he can get. He doesn’t know of anyone by that name, but then again, Omen is a large city, and moreso to someone like him, who comes from a nation known for being remarkably rural. Even moreso to her, probably, wherever she’s from. Though she looks Acerbian, he doubts she’s actually from anywhere around the country - everything else about her suggests that she’s from a different culture entirely, and perhaps one that doesn’t exist.

“That’s alright. Apollinaire, you say? Your brother told you to leave? He was scared?” Perhaps the pace is a bit fast, a bit too close to comfort for an interrogation, Nemesis realizes, but he feels tense, unable to slow down.

She nods. “My brother and I live together - or, we did, for as long as I can remember. He said it was important that I never leave, or else something bad might happen... but then he kicked me out without a warning. He said it wasn’t safe anymore.”

That prompts yet more of a frown. “It wasn’t safe anymore? And then... you... came here? From where?”

“It was on an island. He had a boat there, ready, and then I made it to the docks here. I looked for Apollinaire, but everyone seemed more scared of me than anything... hardly anyone would help me. They all looked away or told me to get lost.”

As someone who was just recently lost in a new city, but with far more means than this girl, Nemesis can’t say he doesn’t sympathize. Still, something about the matter-of-fact way she’s saying it... it’s not that she doesn’t look upset, but she’s simply rattling off one word after another with all the emotion of the recorded announcements at the train station. It’s quite unsettling. “Then you’re all on your own? What’s your brother’s name? Did he tell you anything else?”

She shakes her head. “He didn’t tell me much... but his name is Art. I’m all on my own now that he’s gone...”

His frown only continues to deepen. This girl is simply far too close for comfort. “Don’t have a surname, Callie?”
“A surname?”

His eyebrows crease. “You know. The second part of your name. Your family name. Like her,” he points at Theory. “Theory Hayes. Given name Theory, surname Hayes.” Theory glares at him. He somehow gets the sense she doesn’t enjoy being pointed at.

“My name is... Callisto Burns. That’s what he told me.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know much. About anything. Just that I had to leave.”

Nemesis has to stare at her for a solid moment, before tipping his cap with a sigh. “Well, then. As I’ve said, her name is Theory Hayes. She owns this bookstore. My name is Nemesis Jones. I suppose that makes us formally acquainted.” He pauses, trying to gauge her reaction (at present, entirely indifferent, as though the significance of a formal introduction is entirely lost on her).

“Theory owns this bookstore. I’m a private investigator, and I live here.”

“Just because I took in one lodger,” Theory says, voice low and perhaps threatening, “Doesn’t mean I’ll take another.”

“I’ll pay for her,” Nemesis offers immediately.

“You can’t possibly.”

“Try me.”

“Unfortunately, you and your inexplicable wealth have convinced me.” She sighs, running a hand through her sheet of black hair. “She can stay, for the time being. But I want you to find this Apollinaire character as promptly as you can. Having you living in my house is trouble enough.”

Nemesis sighs, somewhere between sheepish and tired. “Alright... though I can’t imagine I’m that bad.” Theory’s immediate shake of the head makes it clear that they differ on that point. “I’ll go looking for them tomorrow. It’s too late today.”

Theory begrudgingly seems to accept that, glancing at the girl with the closest semblance of pity Nemesis has yet seen from her. “Be careful not to get blood on my carpets,” she says, seemingly as a form of encouragement.

Callie, unsurprisingly, doesn’t seem encouraged, practically cowering as Theory turns off the lamp outside of her bedroom, leaving the two in shadow. Nemesis, trying his best to not seem as pensive as he’s been coming across so far, cracks a thin smile that he hopes is reassuring. Unfortunately, he’s never been the best at reassuring people, and Callie seems entirely unaffected.

“Scared of the dark?” She gives a shaky, nervous nod in response, and he chuckles lightly. “Me, personally, I’m not scared of the dark. I always liked it. Good for hiding in. But that’s the thing about it that’s scary, too, huh? See, though, being a private eye, the unknown doesn’t scare me so much as it entices me. I see it as a challenge. The things in the dark, they’re hidden from me, but I’m also hidden from them. Which of us is going to be found out first? I don’t intend for it to be me.”

Based on the look on her face, she doesn’t read him at all. And that’s okay. He knows most people are scared of the dark. “I’m scared of other things, though. Everyone’s scared of something, and if they say they aren’t, they’re lying to seem tough, and they’re rather bad at it, too, and probably not very tough at all. It might sound silly, but me, personally, I’m scared of flying. Like in zeppelins. It’s usually safe, but I find it so terrifying that I can’t even bring myself to get on. I got all the way from my hometown to Omen by train.”
She blinks slowly, and when she speaks, her voice is very slow, almost unsure. “A zeppelin... is a large, floating device capable of carrying passengers, constructed by imbuing a specially-made chassis with artificial features that modify gravity around it, creating the illusion of natural flight.”

Well, she isn’t technically wrong. “You sound like you’re quoting that from a textbook. Did your brother read textbooks to you, or leave you some to read?”

She nods. “He wanted me to know about the world, even if I couldn’t experience myself... but he was an inventor, so artifice was most of what he taught me about. It was what he knew.”

Nemesis nods back. Something about what she’s saying seems like a mystery - one begging a certain genius private eye to solve it - but perhaps that thought is a little rude to express out loud, even by his rather low standards. “An inventor, you say?”

“Yes. He was always tinkering with strange designs…” She glances away, not meeting his eyes. “...I’m feeling light-headed.”

“Understandable.” She’s probably lost a decent amount of blood, now that he thinks about it. Those wounds are bleeding a lot - off the top of his head, he’d say the amount is a bit concerning, but then again, he’s just a genius, not an actual doctor. He can only hope that the blood won’t attract the Automata Lex to the bookstore. “I’ll bandage those and you should get to sleep.”

They have a convenient spare room, but it’s not set up. She’ll have to use his bed, at least for tonight. That’s fine. He’s more than happy to sleep on the couch. After all this time, it seems welcoming in a way he can’t precisely put into words - at least, not ones anyone else would understand.

His sleep that night is restless, though it isn’t Callie he thinks of, but Elias.

He gets up early the next morning to cook breakfast. Callie sleeps in - probably for the best - but Theory is up unusually bright and early, or as bright and early as her somber demeanor will allow.

“Is there a reason,” he asks, slowly and carefully eroding an egg with a spatula, “that I have the pleasure of your company on this fine morning, my dear Ms. Hayes?”

“Don’t give me that. I know this is earlier than I’m usually out of my room. And you know I hate being called ‘dear’ and ‘Ms.’” She rolls her eyes. “I’m going to meet with an associate. Guy by the name of Geoff Calloway. Dealer in antiques, so I assume you’ve met him, but he has a lot of books come through his place.”

“Right, right. I’m sorry, Theory.” The apology is genuine. He has to admit that he was doing that specifically to get a rise out of her, but she’s far less okay with the idea than Elias ever was, and he knows better than to push his luck farther. “I have, he was as useless as the others, but... don’t you have enough books already?” He gestures down at the floor below, the Hayes family’s dimly-lit emporium of texts that he could never even hope to begin to progress in reading. “I mean, I know, ‘no such thing’ and all, but you have an entire bookstore.”

She shakes her head, uncharacteristically unoffended by his prodding. Something really must have happened, he thinks to himself. Could Callie’s appearance truly have shook her so much? No, the chances of that are minuscule. “I’ve read every book down there. I read faster than you, and I’ve lived here for twenty-one years now. I’ve had plenty of time. The only time I get new material to read is when people trade in books, or when I go to Calloway.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Well, Theory, why not simply go to the library, like a normal person?”
Wrong question, evidently, because she visibly stiffens. “... I - can’t. Um. I can, theoretically, but functionally, it would be a rather... suboptimal idea.”

Before he can ask her for any sort of clarification on what is by anyone’s standards quite the ominous statement, she opens the door and steps down into the stairwell, and in another moment the bell on the door jingles to signify her departure.

Nemesis sighs and returns to his eggs.

Callie wakes up an hour or so later, and wobbles out of her room to sit at the lone kitchen roundtable, an oak piece with legs propped up by small stacks of books - of which there is, of course, no shortage in these parts. She’s dressed in some more proper clothing, a skirt, blouse, and tights - if he had to guess, Nemesis thinks it must be some of Theory’s old clothing, which must have been left out for her. He places breakfast on the table with a soft smile, at which Callie only looks mildly confused.

“Good morning. Did you sleep okay?”

She glances apprehensively at the breakfast. “I was alright, I guess... did you cook that?”

He nods. “I know, it’s a bit out of the skillset of a normal private eye - but, I assure you that Nemesis Jones is infinitely multitalented, as any genius should be.”

She stares him directly in the eyes. “Why do you speak about yourself as though you’re a narrator describing a character in a novel?”

It’s probably the last thing he’d ever expect to be asked so forthrightly. He has to take a moment to process, to well and truly confirm that she’d said that, and even then he can scarcely believe she’d asked it, and even his mind struggles to process the meaning. It is, by all means, a simple statement, and yet he can’t make heads or tails of it. Genius, indeed.

He stammers, “Well, erm - come again?”

“You call yourself Nemesis Jones. You describe yourself like you’re an observer.” She shakes her head. “It’s weird.”

He chuckles under his breath. “… that’s probably the strangest thing ever said about me. First off, I call myself Nemesis Jones because I am Nemesis Jones. Secondly - I assure you this is simply how I speak, and I believe you’ll find many others out there with my speech patterns as well. I am not... that strange.”

“If a fact is the weirdest thing anyone’s said about you, that’s probably a good thing.” She begins to work on her breakfast, leaving Nemesis to be vaguely perplexed at her words.

It takes him several moments - long enough for her to eat what must be an entire half of an egg - to formulate his reply. “You ever hear of that saying? ‘Truth is stranger than fiction’?” he finally responds. He doesn’t manage to hide his unsettlement quite as well as he would like to.

“Is that you admitting I’m right?”

He has to admit that, now that he thinks about it, it could easily be interpreted that way from an outsider’s perspective. “No. A normal person would have just said you were right, wouldn’t he? No need to get into all these theatrics about it, a simple ‘yes’ would have done the job.”

She puts down her fork. “A normal person would have, but you wouldn’t have? That’s what I’m
understanding from this conversation.” And before he can formulate a response to that, she continues, “and you seem like you like needless theatrics.”

He has to admit it’s the best read anyone’s gotten on him in a while, and so quickly, too. He feels a familiar wave of frustration welling up in him, and he has to repress it carefully so as to not break his smile, which is already looking more nervous than he likes. He’s someone who prides himself on being quick - impossibly quick - and here he is, out-maneuvered by a strange girl who’s shown up at his doorstep.

Well, at Theory Hayes’ doorstep.

But, of course, in his life, he had been taught important lesson after important lesson. He’s nothing if not scrappy. Nemesis Jones is confident in his ability to solve any puzzle, to flip any threat on its head. And this will be no exception. Which, as he sees it, leaves him only one option.

“You’re sharp,” he admits, hiding the way his tongue half-refuses to say the words and the small but visceral feeling of hopelessness. He’s lost. He’s surrendering: that much is apparent. Surely to her, as well, if she’s as smart as she seems. “People like you are rare to come by.”

“I don’t know about that. Surely they’re not uncommon? Art was far smarter than I could hope to be.” At the mention of her brother, she seems subdued again.

“No, no, no, they’re of the utmost rarity. The world is full of people content to be average, Callie. People who wouldn’t even notice what you did, never mind point it out.” He smiles softly, the building animosity finally dispersing, giving him a renewed sense of ease and relief. “Until we find this Apollinaire fellow, what say you to this proposal - I don’t take on assistants often, but you’re more than qualified.”

“Assistants…?” She mumbles. “My brother called me his assistant sometimes, when he made me help with his inventions. Would you be doing something like that? I didn’t know you were an inventor.”

“I’m not, but I could be.” Even as the words leave his mouth, he has no idea what that means. “Er - I mean, I’m not an inventor. I’m a private investigator. People hire me to solve mysteries - lost things, lost people, more dramatic things, sometimes. Someone with your mind could make my job far more efficient.”

“An inventor solves a problem by devising a unique system, a tool, that will render the problem possible to overcome,” she mutters. “The problem of humans not being able to cross long distances over a short time was solved by the invention of the train. The problem of trains not being able to cross the water was solved with bridges and dirigibles. Conversely, a private eye solves a problem by finding a unique trail of facts. The problem of not knowing who committed the murder can be solved by finding a still-warm gun which has on it a fingerprint belonging to the murderer. They’re essentially the same thing - or at least, they share a common goal. That of inventing an answer to a problem.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” Nemesis remarks. Internally, he adds that he’s unlikely to ever begin thinking of it that way, either. “I don’t wish to be an inventor. It sounds like such directionless work. I’m a solver, not an innovator.”

“Mhm,” she murmurs, seemingly agreeing. “Right. I’d be willing to join you for a time... until you get me back to Art, anyway. I can’t pay you myself, and I don’t know if he’ll be able to, so this will have to do as reimbursement for the time being?”
“Reimbursement?”

She stares at him blankly. He can’t remember when she last blinked, and it’s beginning to unsettle him. “Yes. You’re paying Miss Hayes so that I can stay here, aren’t you?”

Indeed, he is. A large sum, though not a concerning one. “Don’t sweat it. Really. I have more money than I know what to do with.”

“Is being a private investigator actually so lucrative? I had no idea.” Somehow, he fails to detect a hint of sarcasm in her voice. Is she truly that good at lying, or is she truly that ignorant? He’ll have to assume the former.

“Not really,” he answers with the utmost truthfulness. “There are many ways to get rich rather fast.”

“Like theft.”

He half-grins. “Yes. Precisely like theft.”

“Are you admitting to being a thief? I thought that was socially frowned upon.”

“It is, it is.” He sighs, waving a dismissive hand. “I’m not a thief unless I need to be. Anyway, you can’t get the amount of money I’ve been tossing around unless you rob banks. That’s banks, multiple - did the math, I was curious, it’d need to be something like fifty to get even close.”

It’s not something that feels good to admit. Really, he’d like to part ways with this money as soon as possible. There’s better places for it than in the hands of one private investigator; plenty of people in the city are starving.

“I’ll optimistically assume you haven’t done that.”

He laughs. “Yeah, no kidding. I don’t think there’s even fifty banks in Omen… or perhaps that’s just what I want you to think.” He winks to emphasise that he’s joking - although, his carefully curated mess of hair, hiding a good bit of his face, might leave the impression that the was simply blinking.

Thankfully, she seems to understand it, though her response is so deadpan he can’t tell if it’s serious or not: “but people would know if you were robbing multiple banks.”

“Not if I were any good at it,” he chuckles.

She looks down at her plate. “... will you be teaching me to rob banks?”

He feigns being deep in thought for a moment. “Maybe I should do - no.” He stands up, carrying his now empty plate to the sink. “No, no banks. Just... I have a meeting scheduled today, actually. Something more boring. Lead on a case I’ve been working on for a while.”

“A case?” She brightens up, just a bit. “Is it interesting?”

“... Nah.”

Briefly, he sees his reflection in the water of the sink. He looks so alien to himself now, like a photograph of a stranger hung up on a wall somewhere. “It’s a horrid case. It’s just bloody sad. And it’s something that only concerns me.”

“How am I supposed to help with a case that I don’t know anything about?”
“Well... you aren’t.” He places one hand on the counter, feeling his knuckles tighten and tense. “This one is... a passion project. Not something that should concern you. I assure you, I’ll have some actually interesting cases to show you.”

“If you say so.” She seems nervous now. He supposes he might have pushed her away her somewhat. “Can you at least tell me what happened? A murder? A theft? A string of disappearances?”

“Aye, at least that much, I think I can divulge.” He sighs to himself quietly, hoping she doesn’t notice. “It’s a missing person.”

He looks away, staring at his hand. He can’t stand to keep looking at his reflection.

It’s a very pleasant temperature outside. Callie seems to be adjusting decently to the climate (though Nemesis hasn’t thought to ask her what the climate is like where she’s from). The one thing that seems to be inconveniencing her are the shoes. An old pair of Theory’s boots, they’re around a size too large, and if it didn’t hurt to walk with her scraped-up and bleeding feet to begin with, the three-inch heel certainly doesn’t help.

They make their exit from Beaumort’s, Callie stumbling over the doorstep. She trips immediately - Nemesis only just barely manages to catch her, haphazardly grabbing the front of her capelet to steady her to the best of his ability.

“Careful, careful. It’s awful hubristic of you to be up and walking at all with the state of your feet - don’t want to fall and break your nose, do you?”

She straightens up and dusts herself off, looking neither ashamed nor indignant - simply entirely ambivalent.

“I don’t want to break my nose,” she confirms, reaching up to carefully feel it, as if to make sure it hasn’t somehow broken in the time after he’s said that. “I have no choice, do I? If I want to join you on this case, I need to walk.”

Nemesis frowns. “Well, you’re under no obligation to. If you’d like to rest - in fact, I think you honestly should do, just so you don’t mess up your legs any further-”

“No,” she insists. “I’ll manage. I want to see what it’s like, being a private investigator.”

“It’s probably a bad idea,” he repeats, knowing full well that this would not stop him were he in her shoes, and likely won’t stop her either.

Immediately, she proves him right, stumbling forward. He follows her, concernedly hovering over her shoulder.

“At least let me buy you some shoes you’re more comfortable in,” he insists.

She glances at him. “... More comfortable... That’s a good idea. You’re right. I can just take off my shoes, I’m more comfortable that way.”

He shakes his head. “Very much not what I meant.”

“Why not?”

He pauses for a moment to take in her statement, before sighing. “... Lass, you can’t simply walk
through the streets of Omen barefoot.”

“Why not?” she repeats. Her confusion is frustratingly genuine.

Nemesis sighs. He’s never had to explain the hard truth of social norms to anyone before. “It’s simply… I’ve no problem with it - well, aside from the risk of scuffing them up more, or stepping on a nail, or getting an infection, or any number of other horrid things - it’s simply not considered proper.”

“Not considered proper?”

“Not considered proper,” he confirms. “See, part of living in society is that people have standards. There are these rules. Call them what you want - norms, folkways, taboos. Some of them make sense - for instance, the idea that you should not stab people on the train is a generally sound one. I think the idea of needing to wear shoes on the streets is also rather sound, but then again, I grew up wearing shoes.” He shrugs.

“But at the end of the day, it’s not up to me to decide which ideas are and aren’t sound. If the majority of society sees something as taboo, you’ll face consequences, whether I want you to or not. And the majority of society does not appreciate it when shoeless girls bleed on their floors.”

She frowns. “Then as long as I stay outside and don’t bleed too much it’s fine, right?”

Sheepishly, Nemesis shakes his head. “N-no. Not at all, nowhere close. People will think you’re strange if you don’t wear shoes. Er, stranger than they would regardless.”

She tilts her head inquisitively, as if she doesn’t understand. “But what’s wrong with being strange?”

“Nothing, nothing! Some of my best friends are strange! I’m strange! But…” he lowers his voice. “You must understand, Calisto… Like it or not, if you’re strange, you have a target on your back. People don’t like strange people. It’s not… it isn’t safe, being strange.”

She seems to think over his words. “But I thought you said you were strange, sir.”

“Don’t call me that,” he responds immediately, almost as a reflex. “Nemesis is fine. Just ‘Nemesis’. And I am strange. But unlike you, I know how to be strange safely. I know how to defend myself. You…” And at this he looks at her more sympathetically. “… You’ve just arrived in a new city. You know nothing of the culture. You should minimize the impression you make, if possible. Just stick close to me.”

“If you say so.” Before he can object, she grabs his arm, and he doesn’t exactly have the heart to tell her to let go.

“But I’ll at least get you some more comfortable shoes, okay?” He smiles in a way he hopes is reassuring. “Something without that high a heel.”

She nods, and Nemesis leads her through the city. The streets, now that it’s daytime, are wide and sprawling, filled with people, automobiles, and the occasional pigeon. Callie glances around, wide-eyed, taking in the scenery.

“Is it always this dark here?”

“Of course. It’s under the Umbra Maximus, it pretty much never changes.”
“I suppose I knew that, but I didn’t expect it to actually be this dark here.”

So she’s from a place where the Umbra doesn’t extend to. That’s curious. “You’ll get used to it, promise.”

“How do you tell what time it is?”

“You wear a watch,” he chuckles quietly. “I actually quite like it. It hurts the eyes far less.”

She shrugs. “It all feels the same to me.”

Nemesis doesn’t know off the top of his head where any specific shops are, but it doesn’t take long to find a cobbler’s. After a brief time, they emerge, a new pair of flat, close-toed shoes in Callie’s size having been acquired.

He’s miles at her. “That feel any better?”

“It does,” she says. Indeed, she’s stumbling far less, and doesn’t wince whenever she takes a step.

“Good to hear.” He glances at his wristwatch. “I’d offer you lunch, but we should really be getting to meeting with my contact. They said to meet them behind the train station. It’s not far from here - two or three minutes’ walk.”

She frowns. “A train station? Is that not a strange place to meet someone?”

“Oh, because you’d know all about what is and isn’t strange, would you?” He laughs. “Joking, joking, joking. It’s a little peculiar, but it suits our needs.”

“If you say so.”

He’s beginning to get the sense that might be her default response to things.

“Come on, then.” He gestures for her to follow him. “This isn’t all that exciting, compared to most of what I do... and we should hope it stays that way, in all honesty. Let me do the talking this time, and pay attention to your surroundings. Even the smallest detail could be secretly important.”

“Ohay. Pay attention to everything. Got it.”

He gives her a thumbs-up. “That’s the spirit! And also half of a private investigator’s skillset.” An oversimplification, yes, but he’s trying to be encouraging.

They round the corner, walking past the station and promptly entering a rather well-hidden alleyway. Fog rolls in, filling the alley to the brim. Nemesis can make out a human form, but he can’t see the details. His contact, most likely. It seems he’s late this time.

That’s probably good. He wouldn’t have wanted to make them wait.

Though he’s outwardly calm, his heart threatens to burst out of his chest. This contact is someone he had come to learn of through several strings of cryptic mutterings, some whispered hints from people he doesn’t particularly trust to have good intentions, and a couple of solved ciphers in borrowed books. It had taken a lot of effort, but this one he’s confident about, more-so than usual. They might know the things he needs to learn.

The person’s details are hazy and obscured. He can’t make out any clear features until he’s close, unsettlingly close, uncomfortably close. Close enough to reach out and touch them. Close enough that he can see his own face reflected in their glasses. The lenses seem to be mirrored. He finds it
deeply unpleasant to stand here with the knowledge that they can see his eyes despite the fact that he can’t see theirs.

The contact is taller than Callie but shorter than Nemesis by a good bit, pale and with disheveled brown hair, dressed in a torn-looking long coat, a dirty shirt, and ripped trousers, eyes obscured by the mirrored circular spectacles, which sit on a thin silver chain. Something about them seems... fuzzy, almost, as if they’re out of focus, no matter how many times Nemesis blinks, and it doesn’t feel like it’s just the fog. The grin on their face is eerie.

“Nemesis Jones, then?”

He nods. “Nemesis Jones. And you’re Salem Riddle.”

Salem nods back, expression unchanging. “The one and only.”

There is something very unsettling about Salem Riddle, he thinks. “I need answers, and you need a private eye.”

“Well, ‘need’ is a strong word. But you’re here, so that’s great, that’s great. Something to celebrate, hmm?” Their teeth are sharper than any teeth should have any right to be. “And things are already falling into place. Wonderful, wonderful.”

“Just tell me what you want me to do and how much you’re willing to pay me for it.” There’s a low, intimidating current to his voice. “Don’t waste my time.”

“I’m not. Calm down, calm down.” Salem chuckles, and a wave of frustration runs through Nemesis. “Anyway, anyway, I’m just the messenger. You have somewhere to be, and it’s really important. So make sure to take some time off, okay, okay?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Is this a job, then? And -” he takes out his compass “- can you tell me about this?”

“I can, I can, but why would I want to? Those answers are far, far better to learn organically, and
really, I believe in you, I do, I do.” They smile condescendingly at Nemesis.

Again, those teeth…

“Go where I say, and you’ll see, you’ll see. You’ll find your answers and you’ll satisfy me as well - so consider this payment, and the start to your journey!” They rummage through the messenger bag slung over their shoulder, hand Nemesis a piece of paper held in their hand, and turn to leave with a final grin back at him.

“Good luck, good luck. Not that you need it.”

As they leave, Nemesis notices his compass needles in disarray, swinging wildly and unpredictably in circles, as though short-circuiting. He stares at their retreating form, and Callie seems, understandably, to be at as much of a loss as he is.

The fog, curiously enough, seems to leave with them, dissipating into nothingness and leaving nothing but a disturbingly empty alleyway and the distant sound of the street.

"That’s not normal."

It’s a bit of a strong stance coming from someone like Theory Hayes, who can herself no sooner be described as normal than the sky be described as yellow. Still, Nemesis, who can himself no sooner be described as normal than the grass can be described as purple, thinks she has a point.

“Good,” Callie mutters. “I thought it might have just been my lack of perspective.”

“Not at all.” Hayes runs a tense hand through her hair. “And they didn’t have any weird features? Your compass didn’t explode upon coming into contact with them?

Nemesis flinches at the thought of his compass being destroyed. “No, nothing of the sort. I got a scan of them, and the compass went completely mad. Whatever’s up with them, it’s confusing it, but if everyone I’ve spoken to has been telling me the truth, my compass can’t be confused.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “That can’t be right.”

“Are you doubting my memory?”

“Absolutely, I’m doubting your memory.” She doesn’t sound too serious. More annoyed.

“Everything he’s saying is true,” Callie speaks up. “He definitely remembers. He spent half an hour scribbling in his notebook about it. Like it inspired him to write a novel.”

“Not a novel. Just notes.”

Theory sighs again. “Right. Can we see those notes, then?”

“I don’t think it’ll do you much good…” he half-trails off, knowing she’ll likely not take that for an answer, and carefully removes his notebook - a thin leather-bound volume with a cord wrapped around it, the name ‘JONES’ embossed on the spine. Carefully, he opens the book, leafing through its pages until he gets to his entry on Salem Riddle, which he then passes to Hayes.

Her eyes pass over a detailed drawing, a separate detailed drawing of their face as Nemesis could best remember it despite the blurring, with a distinct focus on the teeth, and a diagram of his compass - plenty of motion arrows and slight line irregularities to represent blur, quite (in Nemesis’ expert appraisal) well-drawn.
Hayes frowns. “... You didn’t.”

Nemesis finds a light grin that can only be described as smug spreading over his face. “I did.”

“What did you…?” Callie asks, apprehensive and muttered.

Theory turns around the book so Callie can look at it. The page is covered in minuscule text, written in what can only be Nemesis Jones’s hand - a perfect blend of rushed and strangely elegant. It’s crammed into every corner, labeling the drawings and running into the margins.

Callie squints. “Sorry, is that…”

“The smug idiot takes notes in cipher.” Theory glares across the table at Nemesis, who simply smiles in response. “I can’t imagine how long that took to encode, but I hope you haven’t left your key just lying around the city somewhere. You know it’ll inevitably get back to you.”

Nemesis’ smirk grows ever-smugger. Her eyes narrow.

“It would, I suppose, be apt to hide the key to the cipher with which one encodes their notebooks, yes,” Nemesis says with a tinge of insufferable pride in his voice. “But perhaps someone out there, perhaps, bear with me here, a certain genius private eye, could come up with a better, easier solution. After all, Theers, there’s no need to worry about anyone finding a key if there isn’t one to begin with.”

Callie’s eyes widen, though it’s hard to tell what, exactly, she’s thinking. Theory looks as though she might just throw the cup of tea currently getting cold next to her at Nemesis with as extreme prejudice as she can manage. “You didn’t. You couldn’t. There’s no way you’d be able to do that.”

She hadn’t commented on the nickname, he thinks to himself. It had come out on impulse, and he’s shocked that she isn’t angered by it. “It’s not that outrageous when one considers what other people have done.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You can find your way around the bookstore, right? Surely that requires just as much mental faculty as encoding something in one’s head as one writes it. In fact, I’ve been doing this for so long it’s practically second nature. I reckon that’s how it is for you, too. It’s not that difficult, anyway. Just remember which letters correspond to which.”

Her frustration seems to abate, but only slightly. “You are... ridiculous, you know that? If I weren’t so devoted to my work, I’d dedicate the hours to decoding that entire book by hand. I’m sure I could do it. A fast cipher isn’t a particularly good cipher. You’d be safer just locking the book and eating the key the moment you were captured.”

“He frowns. “Who, exactly, do you think is out here trying to capture me? I’m a private investigator, not a spy. The amount of espionage I engage in is existent but negligible!”

She sighs. “Forget it. Forget it, just... be careful, Jones. Not everyone around here is as welcoming as I am.”

He thinks back to the time about a week ago that someone had accosted him while waiting for the train to inform him that the end of days was coming with frantic, flailing determination. “The world shall be consumed and the Ancient One will again return us to primordial sludge!, ” the man had yelled. “We shall all be one again with all that is, as it was meant to be! We have drawn on the powers of the universe for far too long!”
He doubts that’s what she means, but for whatever reason, that’s what his mind immediately jumped to. He’s sure there are many other dangerous people around. For example, that kind gentleman Nemesis had tailed on the payroll of his wife for around three hours or so only to be thanked for all the hard work by being threatened at gunpoint. Somehow, though, the classic and perhaps slightly overdone danger of a revolver can’t begin to compare with the thought of primordial sludge. The Reverenti have strange ideas he isn’t sure he subscribes to, but at least they have one hell of a flair for the dramatic. He can really appreciate that in a quasi-cult.

“Aye, I’m aware. I know. People in my line of work go missing all the time,” he says, stopping his thoughts before they can get too far off-course. It would be wholly unnecessary and not even slightly productive for him to rank all of his encounters in the city by how well-executed and dramatic he thinks they were, but that’s direction in which his thoughts had been heading. Now, of course, that he’s said that, his thoughts are going in a completely different direction - but this lead has been crazy enough that he has to consider it progress. The weird people, generally, are the ones that know things.

“Good.” She raises an eyebrow. “That being said. You said this Riddle character gave you something?”

“Aye,” he mutters. Though he’s loathe to admit it, this entire conversation is beginning to render him quite exhausted. “Tickets. Theatre Obscura’s holding a show, in honor of the Baron’s passing.”

“You’re saying this strange bastard showed up just to give you free tickets to a play? No one gives away free things, that’s ridiculous.” She quirks said eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’re going. Clearly either something’s up or Riddle is a lunatic.”

“Probably both,” Nemesis agrees. “But I’m going anyway. My job to sort out dodgy stuff like this, isn’t it? You don’t have to come with, either of you, but I think it’d be lovely if you did.”

“I will, of course,” Callie says calmly. “I’m your assistant.”

To that, he has to offer a small smile. “Of course you are. Thank you.”

Theory rolls her eyes. “Very well. I have nothing better to do, I suppose.” It’s the barest excuse, almost cliché in its simplicity. Nemesis is sure he’s heard those exact words in a novel before.

“Right, I know that’s not really why you’re agreeing.”

She glares at him. “Just have to take every possible opportunity to be an insufferable smartass, huh, Jones?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Callie quietly adds, “You seem curious about it. There’s no reason to lie.”

“You too?” Theory asks incredulously. “You’re going to do this to me, too?”

“You’re a lot like my brother,” Callie says quietly.

Theory sighs, running a hand through her hair. “I sure hope not.”

She stands up, pushes in her chair, and begins to walk upstairs. Nemesis, even with his lacking sense of tact, gets the sense that this is the end of the conversation. “Play’s in three days, right? I’ll put some sort of formal clothing together, you two worry about whatever detective stuff you’ve got
your overly long nose in and stay out of my face for the time being.”

"Private investigator," Nemesis corrects, too quiet for her to possibly hear.

“She sounds upset,” Callie observes.

“My nose isn’t that long,” Nemesis mutters quietly. “Is it?”

“No. But I think she meant it metaphorically.”

“I see.” He frowns, standing up. “...I’ll be in my room, if you need me.”

“Are you going to sleep?”

“Nah. Just... working, probably. That’s how I relax.” He glances down at his notebook. “...Writing, probably.”

Sometimes, when his mind gets away from him, writing things down is all he can do.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I appreciate all of you so much.
In his very objective and factual opinion, which is the only opinion he’s capable of having on this particular issue, Theory Hayes is capable of looking quite nice when she bothers to dress up.

She stands ahead in the rather lengthy queue feeding into the Theatre Obscura. The gathered people, so small compared to the massive structure, look to him like small fish swimming directly into the mouth of a massive whale. The scale of the building, with its decorative clocktower and opulent, gilded ornaments, is honestly humbling. He feels like he should take off his hat and salute it, but he has a little too much pride for that.

Theory is dressed in similar colors to the building itself: black and gold. A graceful, low-cut backless gown, short sleeves that cascade off the shoulders, a shawl elegantly draped about her arms, sunglasses, heeled boots, an elaborate braided bun. It’s a lot more revealing than he thought she would be comfortable in, but she moves in it as fluidly as she does her normal clothing. She makes him feel underdressed. He seems far more the type to dress up than her, and yet here he is, having merely switched out his brown overcoat for a black one.

Callie (who is dressed precisely as normal) cowers behind him, seeming as awed by the scale of the place as he is, if not more. She whispers to him, “I saw this building on the way over. I thought it was a castle.”

“Might as well be,” he replies before quickly adding, “Don’t ask me what I mean by that.”

“Okay,” she says, calm as ever. He almost feels bad at how quickly she agrees.

The man behind Callie, he notices, has a rather nice pair of spade cuff-links. A quick glance at his compass confirms it. He nods back at her, motioning for her to lean in so that he can whisper to her.

He knows it’s a long shot, but it’s the only thing he can think of. “You don’t happen to speak any other languages, by any chance?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Which ones?”

“All of them, I think.”

He blinks, leaning back. A small noise of resignation escapes him. At this point, even a ridiculous and yet somehow completely plausible, entirely frustrating statement like that can’t possibly begin to faze him when it comes to her.

“In that case,” he begins, speaking M’amand.

“Actually, not that one, whichever that is.” Even when she’s cutting him off, her voice is so quiet and understated.

Miffed that his fluency in an obscure language, yet again, fails to be of any use to him, Nemesis begrudgingly nods. “How about this, then?” he tries again in his far less fluent Zemlyan.

And this time, she seems to understand.
“... That works,” Callie replies, voice just as quiet in Zemlyan as it is in Acerbic. Her pronunciation is scarily impeccable. “Why...?”

He glances around to see if there’s any response from the gentleman – thankfully, there doesn’t seem to be. Considering how few Zemlyans there are in Acerbis, it’s unlikely that he would have spoken the language, but one never knows with these types. “You see the man behind you? The one with the spade cufflinks?”

Without even turning around, she replies, “Yes.”

“He’s part of a society. I’d assume the Actors’ Guild, but I could be wrong. Or he could be a double agent.”

“A society? Like...” She raises her eyebrow. “A secret society?”

“Aye. Omen’s got its fair share.” He scans around him, eyes settling on the back of Theory’s head, which feels like a safe place to look at. “The Obscura Actors’ Guild is a big one. They operate out of the Obscura. Tobias Fitzroy - the Obscura’s owner - he’s in league with them, or he’s even the leader, that much is an open secret. Others of note are... the Greater Omen Correspondents’ League... the Acolytes of the Forgotten... The Omen Eyes... Likely the police force itself could constitute another, in function if not theory.”

He abruptly stops speaking as an Automaton Lex floats by, and waits tensely to continue until it drifts out of range again.

“I see.” She pauses. “Why? And how can you tell?”

“Why? I dunno. There’s something they’re fighting over, definitely. I’m not privy to what it is. I don’t think most of them know, either. But there’s something. Lotta Reverenti in those societies, ‘specially the Acolytes...” He sighs. “... That’s beyond me, I’m not shoving my nose in their business. Just keep an eye on ‘em.”

“Alright.” She pauses again for a brief moment as the Automaton Lex floats by a second time. “Then how do you know he’s a member?”

He scoffs lightly. “... That’s elementary. The spades are a common symbol. Most of the Actors’ Guild have them tattooed, somewhere or other. Tattoos are common, in general. Weird stuff. Stuff like eyes on ankles and chains on collarbones. And of course, I have my ways to tell – this guy is swimming in deceit. Most of them are. On their own, neither of those clues are proof, but... The way he’s glancing around, like he’s looking for something. That helped me come to that conclusion, too. I could be wrong. But I doubt it.”

“Pardon me,” says a third voice, in plain Acerbic. “I happened to overhear your conversation. I must say, it’s been quite a while since I’ve heard someone so astute, even if he was speaking in Zemlyan of all languages.”

The speaker is a man perhaps one or two years older than Nemesis, but probably no older than Theory. He’s dressed sharply in a gray tweed jacket and a messenger bag not dissimilar to Nemesis’ slung over his shoulder. Short (but still somewhat disheveled) coils of hair frame the deep brown skin of his face. His eyes, also brown, are sharp and inquisitive, and he wears square glasses with silver rims, which have slid perhaps a concerning amount down his nose. His expression radiates excitement, somehow kind-looking, as though he has not just overheard two strange people discussing secret societies.
In front of Nemesis, Theory glances over her shoulder with brows furrowed.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry! No, that must have been so unsettling, sorry – I need to stop just doing that to people! Please forgive me!” The man frantically shakes his head. “My instincts got ahead of me. I hope I haven’t ruined your conversation!”

Now that Nemesis thinks about it, this is a rather suspicious way to interrupt a conversation, especially about such a suspicious subject. He glances down at his compass, and feels a brief jolt of shock. The hands are pointing in just about every direction, glowing and quivering – the one thing they don’t seem to identify as deceitful is this man. He is, if anything, suspiciously truthful.

“Not at all,” Nemesis responds calmly, glancing over him again. Either he’s completely genuine, or he’s somehow preventing the compass from reading him – but no, that can’t be the case, either, because there’s a clear green needle pointed directly at him, absent of any of the tell-tale glow.

Whoever this man is, he isn’t keeping any secrets.

“Oh, thank goodness. I would have hated to offend you…” He runs a hand through his hair, smiling sheepishly. Under his breath, he murmurs, “You can’t keep doing this, Percy.”


“It’s your job to interrupt people in crowded lines?” His eyes widen, intrigued. “That’s – that’s fascinating, I really must hear more about that, would you mind an interview even though I’m aware this is quite the public place and really might be inconvenient for you and I might be making a fool of myself –”

“No, no, no…” Against his own better judgement, Nemesis can’t help but find Percy a little bit endearing. “No, I’m a private investigator.”

“A private investigator ?!” At that, he seems to get almost more excited. “Oh, oh my goodness. You must be Nemesis Jones! Yes, you must be, silver hair and a newsboy cap, of course - I’ve heard about you, you know –” he holds out his hand eagerly, extending it so alarmingly fast that Nemesis briefly thinks he’s about to be punched and just barely flinches. The grin on his face would be infectious were the whole of the situation not faintly unnerving. “T. Percival Chase, reporter for The Electric Sun. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Wait, wait… You’ve heard of me?” Nemesis shakes the hand with his own gloved one. Percy returns the gesture vigorously. “You’re the bloke that wrote the piece about the Baron’s passing, right? Remember reading that one.”

“Yes, that was me. It was pretty good work, if I may say so myself.” Percy grins lopsidedly. It isn’t un-charming. “Yeah, you’re getting pretty well-known around here. You solved the O’Leary kidnapping, and you exposed Mrs. Archibald’s affair… and those were both pretty quick, too.”

He quirks an eyebrow, face falling into something more serious. “… Really, you should be more careful. Criminals already feel safe going to you. Either the constables will get on your case, or you’ll get in the middle of something nasty. and that would be a tragic loss of detective skills.”

Callie looks up in concern. Nemesis simply chuckles in response. “… I’ll be fine, promise. I can handle myself better than people think.”

“Really?” Theory asks, deadpan, “Because you look, full offense intended, like a rich boy with easily breakable kneecaps.”
“I am a rich boy with kneecaps of average breakability, thank you very much –” Nemesis continues as Percy stifles a laugh, “– and I reckon I’ve been in more fistfights than you, actually, Miss I-Own-A-Bookstore.”

“Can’t argue with that. Never been in a fistfight, and I’m not particularly an expert on kneecaps,” she agrees.

“I haven’t been in a fistfight either,” Callie adds. “I know a lot about kneecaps.”

“Ooh, tell me something about kneecaps!” Percy asks enthusiastically.

“Frogs have them.”

“Thank you. I’m so happy for them…” he says, sounding as genuine as ever.

Nemesis observes Theory rolling her eyes as the line inches forward. The entrance to the theatre feels both so close he should be able to reach out and touch it and so far that he’s convinced he’ll wait the remainder of his lifespan before he can finally cross its doorstep. On top of that, it’s rather cold outside. He’s not too bothered by it himself, but he can’t imagine how Theory is managing to function in that low-cut dress of hers.

There’s a momentary, oppressive silence, before Percy follows up, “I don’t think I’ve been in a fistfight, either, but I’ve watched them.”

“Do you enjoy watching people be hurt, Chase?” Theory asks, unnervingly serious, though Nemesis gets the sense she’s joking.

Percy, clearly, doesn’t get the same read of it. “No! I mean – it’s just important to know what’s going on, right? Especially for a reporter like me.”

The line continues on moving forward. Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “Aye, just as important as it is for a private investigator. But a fistfight can be plenty entertaining if done right, you know.”

“I’m sure… I suppose the same can be said for swordfights in plays.” Percy smiles. “I hear there’s quite the swordfight in this production. I’m very excited for it. The Theatre Obscura’s productions tend to be top-notch. I would know. I’ve reviewed most of them.”

His grin seems a little more confident now, not unlike a softer version of a smirk that would certainly look very natural on Nemesis, but very unnatural on him. “Have you read any of my reviews, by the way?”

“New in town, sorry.” He raises his eyebrow a little further, hoping this expression is quizzical enough to get the point across. “Never especially interested in the theatre, either. Always preferred books. You really, er… like swordfights, hmm?”

“No more than anything else. A journalist has to know a little about everything, and –”

“Pardon, ma’am,” a dry-voiced usher asks. “May I see your tickets?”

Theory produces them calmly, and they enter the theatre as, behind them, Percy struggles to locate his own tickets among a mass of crumpled papers in his pockets. For a journalist, he doesn't seem especially organized, Nemesis thinks to himself. Callie glances from Percy to Nemesis and back, nervous.

“…does he need help?”
Nemesis shrugs. “Eh. He can probably figure it out himself. He’s an adult, isn’t he?”

“He doesn’t look much older than you.” Theory mutters dryly. Callie, on the other hand, is already by Percy’s side, attempting to help him to no avail.

Nemesis sighs. “And I’m an adult, aren’t I?”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“I pay rent. I pay taxes.”

“Do you actually pay taxes?”

He scoffs. “Goodness, no. Nothing I do is so above-board as to be taxable.”

She rolls her eyes, though he can detect the barest affectionate edge to her voice. “That’s what I thought, you ruffian. Be a little quieter, we’re in public.”

“So that means you’re not turning me in to the constables…?”

She lets out what he supposes might, in some universe, be construed as the faintest hint of a chuckle.

Finally, though, Percy seems to have it sorted out, and steps at last into the crowded entryway. The Theatre Obscura doesn’t look dissimilar to a large manor, with velvet carpets, and paintings lining the walls. In the center of the room, a statue of King Julius the Great stands mounted on a fountain, dressed in his finery and holding aloft a sword that looks as though it might have, once upon a time, been functional. The fountain’s bubbling waters are tinged red, a work of subtle and shockingly tasteful artifice.

Percy stops to photograph the fountain, and Callie hovers over his shoulder, looking intrigued. Nemesis approaches them. “Found a new boss, eh? That was awful quick…”

“Not unless he has a better house, or unless he knows Ap-him.”

Percy flinches. “House? I have no idea what either of you are on about, but my father would be so angry if I brought a strange girl into my house.”

“Probably a reasonable attitude to have,” Theory adds from over Nemesis’ shoulder. “I think someone around here should start taking notes, personally.”

Callie glances from Percy to Nemesis. “... It’s fine. I think I’m better being a detective than a reporter.”

“Flattered, truly. Though we’re private investigators, not detectives.” He neglects to add that the two of them have yet to solve any cases together. Time for that later. “Apologies, Chase. Looks as if you shan’t be relieving me of my assistant yet. Better luck next time.”

Percy laughs lightly. “... Darn it. Next time. I’ll... um, I’ll be on my way, then. My sister, she’s actually in this performance – I’d like to see her before it starts.”

Nemesis nods. “... You might see me again, then, actually. I’m – er – I’d like to head backstage at some point, too.”

“Of course, your natural curiosity would propel you to do something like that, detective!”
“Private investigator,” he corrects.

“Right, right, whichever,” he says with a slight hum, waving as he leaves.

“A detective works with the police, for the record. That’s the difference,” he informs Callie promptly.

“I don’t know why that distinction matters so much to you, but I was aware it existed.” She glances across at where Theory had been a moment ago. “... Where did Ms. Hayes vanish off to? I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Weren’t –” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “– Okay, just to be clear. As my assistant, it’s your job to help me. And it will be very helpful, if, in the future –”

“I pay attention to things?”

“Aye, that’d be great, seeing as my eyes are exclusively located on the one side of my head and all.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.” She raises an eyebrow. “You should have probably told me that before something happened.”

“Realizing that now. Hindsight’s immaculate and all.” He adjusts his cap with a sigh, glancing around. “’S not like she’s not more of an adult than either of us or can’t take care of herself, but I wish she’d said something.”

“You said it yourself. She’s an adult.” Her gaze has turned uncharacteristically intense, and he has to tilt his head to avoid it. “I know how you feel, though. I worry about Art, even though I know between the two of us he can take better care of himself.”

“Hayes isn’t my brother, or my guardian. We’re not even friends. It’s not the same.”

“You’re not friends?” she repeats slowly. “I see…”

“No. No, we aren’t–” He frowns. “She’s an acquaintance. Friend is a strong word, you know. Don’t use it so flippantly. Friendship is – it’s a big deal.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she mutters. It’s almost unintelligible. Nemesis feels his heart drop.

Carefully, he places one hand on her shoulder. “... Sorry.” It isn’t as if he could have thought of anything else to say, and she seems to realize that, and understand, at least to some degree. She doesn’t seem angry, at least.

He sighs. “... I need to... go somewhere. Somewhere I probably shouldn’t be. If you’d like to come with...”

“I wouldn’t be able to find my way around if I didn’t,” she says, just as quiet. Of course she wouldn’t. She’s reliant on him.

It’s a feeling he should be relishing in, but instead it feels like a weight. He weaves through the crowd, holding the hand of a girl who has never, in her life, had a friend.

His destination is at the back of the hall, and as he expected, it’s thoroughly off-limits. A sign on the door reads, in plain type:
He tries the doorknob, finding it predictably locked. A bit rude, Nemesis thinks, but only a slight inconvenience. He has just the thing for this. He quickly reaches into his bag, fiddling around for only a moment before pulling out what he needs – a set of wires in various lengths. He quickly begins work on the lock.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Callie asks nervously, glancing around as though the Automata Lex are going to appear at any moment and call for both of their arrests.

“I’m offended you’d imply I’ve ever had anything other than a good idea.” Though he can’t shake the heavy feeling their earlier conversation has left him with, Nemesis’ focus is on his goal. “Really, I’m fine. This lock is pretty well put-together, but it’s not a big d –”

And, as though he has unknowingly become an actor in a slapstick routine, the door opens, knob slamming directly into Nemesis’ head, knocking his cap off as he feels a dull, deep pain spread through his skull. Of course this would happen, he thinks to himself. Rule of dramatic irony, always. But he still has enough of his wits about him to shove the lockpicks deep into his bag, far out of sight.

Callie, unnervingly, seems completely unfazed by the door opening. “I told you this was a bad idea,” she says quietly. Nemesis has to bite his cheek to quiet down the feeling of rage that immediately swells up in him. He faintly tastes metal.

“Bad idea? Are you guys idiots, trying to sneak backstage? Hmph.” The person who opened the door is around Nemesis’ height, with braided brown hair that reaches their waist and disheveled clothing, a musical instrument of some sort strapped to their back. Their pointed ears immediately catch Nemesis’ attention.

Willowy build, light tan skin, green eyes, long black braid, Beian, with strangely pointy ears and cat-like eyes – not precisely an unremarkable appearance, but he recognizes it from Elias’ descriptions. Of course, that means there’s only one person this could be.

“Hello, Jing,” he says calmly. “May I call you Jing? I’m afraid I don’t know your surname. I’m an old friend of Elias’, and I was hoping to stop by and say hello, if that’s alright –”

They humph again and cross their arms, glaring at him. “And why should I believe you? Some random bastard shows up and says he’s Elias’ friend? I don’t buy it. Give me a more believable explanation before I get Mr. Fitzroy and he has you arrested.”

He sighs, painstakingly moving onto his knees and pinching the bridge of his nose. Of course, it won’t be that easy. “If I’m not really Elias’ friend, how would I know your name?”

He notices the momentary look of hesitation on their face, and has to hold himself back from grinning. Checkmate.

“Well…” They glance at him, and their look is full of contempt. It isn’t a look he’s unused to. He
feels equal parts enraged and powerful. “He talks about me?”

“Of course. Mentions you fairly often.” He shrugs. “He ever talk about me?”

“What’s your name?”

“Jones. Nemesis Jones.”

Jing pretends to think for a moment, then shakes their head. “Hmm, no! In fact, he never talks about any of his little Llygredish acquaintances. I guess you just didn’t mean that much to him.”

Of course, Elias wouldn’t have spoken about anyone named Nemesis Jones. Still, the way they said it… Trying and succeeding to hide just how much that statement feels like a punch in the gut, Nemesis shakily stands up. “Right, well. Thought I’d stop by and say hello regardless. So if you don’t mind…”

He attempts to walk past them, but they stick their arm out, and as he pauses to adjust his trajectory, they deliver a not-so-gentle kick to his left shin.

“I’ll to ask him, but if he says no, I’m going to tell security, so I’d recommend taking advantage of this head start.”

With a malicious snicker, they turn around to walk off.

Callie stares at their retreating back. Playing nervously with the end of her own shorter braid, she says, “... You said hair like that isn’t normal.”

“Aye, that’s ‘cause it isn’t. Not for Acerbians, anyway. For Beians, sure.” He looks away from her, shaking, and in the brief moment his rage escapes him.

With all the force he can muster, he throws his fist against the nearest wall, and he feels his bones groan as a burning sensation spreads through his hand and wrist.

Callie looks on in disbelief and concern as he drops his hand to his side, now aching and throbbing. He can feel it beginning to swell under his glove.

“Wh–hy did you do that?” It’s had an effect he didn’t count on – Callie looks terrified. The girl who was completely unflappable when the door slammed open in Nemesis’ face now looks on wide-eyed, as though that punch might as well have been directed at her. “Doesn’t it… Doesn’t it hurt?”

He reflexively apologises. “Sorry. Instinct. Hurts, yeah. Sorry. Won’t happen again.” That isn’t a promise he’s sure he can make, and the lie tastes like bile on his tongue; putrid and unsettling.

“If it hurts, why did you do it?” Callie takes a deep breath, eyes squeezed shut. “What’s the point?”

“I dunno. I dunno – it’s just – it’s like a rush, I can’t stop myself. It’s like I lose it for a moment, and just go unhinged, lose all sense of domestication and –” he takes a deep breath, shakes his head, and slaps himself with his good hand. “This all makes me sound like a bloody lunatic, but I swear that’s not it. I don’t – I don’t hurt people, I just –”

“It’s alright, I believe you.”

That in itself is nearly enough to send him over the edge again, but he bottles it up properly this time, nodding.
“... Thanks. I’ll make it worth your while.” And even as he says it, the pain still spreading through
his arm and the guilt he feels when he sees Callie’s face can’t compare to his feeling of sick
satisfaction. He has to hold himself back from grinning.

*I can hurt myself better than any of you could ever hope to.*

And then the door opens again, and he finds himself faced with Elias Malik Fitzroy. For so long, it
felt as though it would never happen – but here he is, and here Nemesis is, and they’re meeting
eyes, Elias’ wide with worry.

“You’re here–” he says, voice high and shocked, grabbing Nemesis by the still-injured wrist and
pulling him backstage. “Jing, keep an eye on his guest – I need to – one moment.”

And before Nemesis can say anything, Elias has pulled both of them into a supply closet and shut
the door.

There they are, mere inches from each other, Elias looking disheveled and worried but entirely
like *Elias*, and Nemesis can barely feel the pain of his arm anymore.

“You’re okay,” he mutters.

“I’m okay? *I’m* okay? I was worried sick about you. I… I thought you wouldn’t be able to find a
place to stay –” Elias frowns. “I’m *fine*, don’t… don’t waste your time worrying about that. I’m
fine. The most pressing worry in my mind has been that you were probably out there on the
streets.”

“I found somewhere to stay. It’s fine. Not like I wouldn’t survive fine on the streets, regardless.”
Nemesis winces, shifting slightly. “My arm is, er… Don’t worry about it. Really. No need to worry
about anything. I’ve just been… er… I’ve been worried about you, and everything –”

Elias laughs. It hits Nemesis hard, how much he missed seeing it. “We’re both idiots.”

“Speak for yourself.” He grins half-heartedly. “I’m a genius.”

“Sure you bloody are. That’s why you ruined your wrist again, huh?” He holds Nemesis’ wrist in
both hands, frowning as he places a characteristically gentle hand on his glove. Nemesis shakes his
head, and he nods.

“Later. Later. Not… not *here*.”

There’s a pause. Elias doesn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah. I understand. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Before he can think better of it, Nemesis places his hand over Elias’, lightly squeezing
it. “Don’t be sorry. I missed you.”

“I’m –” Elias glances away sharply. “Right. I… I missed you too –” He pauses, deflating just a tiny
bit. “–Nemesis. Really.”

“... Sorry. It’s –” Nemesis has to struggle to force the words out. “–t’s… I can’t… Can’t risk…”

“I understand,” Elias replies, chuckling ruefully under his breath. “*Nemesis Jones*. That’s a dumb
name, you know? That’s the most obviously fake name I’ve ever heard.”

“I know, I know.” And yet it still feels like being punched in the stomach. The sensation isn’t far
from having all the air drained from him in one fell swoop, leaving him with a dull, empty feeling
in his chest. “But it’s my name now. I can’t be him again. It’s… it’s meant to sound fake. You know how I feel about lying.”

“I can’t pretend I understand.” And here he sounds genuinely conflicted. Elias isn’t the type to be malicious, especially hopefully not towards him. “You hate lying, but you’re introducing yourself with a fake name?”

He takes a deep breath. “… It’s not lying. I don’t say… I don’t say my name is Nemesis Jones. I just say… I’m Nemesis Jones. It’s not a lie. It isn’t.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to. Just… Don’t blow my cover, El.” He feels as though he’s begging. He might as well be.

Elias purses his lips, finally glancing back at Nemesis with a look of stony thought. Nemesis’ heart skips a beat – surely Elias is about to reveal that he never cared and commit to ruining his old friend’s new life, once and for all – but instead, his voice is soft, barely above a murmur. Nervous.

“… Can I at least keep… you know? When it’s just the two of us?” And before Nemesis can give his honest answer – I’d rather you didn’t – he continues, “N-nah, I take it back. I can tell it makes you uncomfortable, and I’m not going to keep doing that. I don’t know… what you mean. When you talk about being different people now. But whoever you are, he’s my best friend. I don’t want him to be gone.”

All he can manage in response is a low, nervous laugh. “Fuck, Elias, you might as well’ve just punched me in the face, huh? Yeah. You can call me whatever you want if it makes you happy.”

Elias doesn’t look particularly reassured, but he gives a stiff nod.

“I… I’m going to respect your wishes. I can’t call myself a good friend and then hurt you like that. Sorry.” He twitches nervously, glancing at the door. “… Jing will be wondering where we are.”

It’s a very good excuse to end the conversation, Nemesis thinks. He’s almost impressed. “Who cares? Jing’s a dick. Jing threatened to turn me in to the constables. I don’t give a damn what they think.”

“Don’t be like that…” Elias awkwardly stands, helping Nemesis up, careful not to put too much pressure on his hurt arm. “They’re difficult, I know, but they’re trying their hardest. They’ve had a tough life.”

“I’ve also had a tough life. Having a bloody tough life right now, actually. As we speak.”

Elias narrows his eyes. “Me too. Let’s not make anyone else’s any tougher then, alright? Promise?”

“Unless they deserve it,” Nemesis insists.

“Unless they deserve it,” Elias amends, reaching out his hand carefully. “Shake on it? And don’t go suggesting a blood pact or anything else dramatic like that. I know you think everything’s gotta be meaningful and significant, but I can’t get hurt right before a show. We can carve matching scars into our arms or whatever it is you’re going to suggest later.”

“You think so lowly of me.” Nemesis shakes Elias’ hand carefully, trying to hide shaking that he knows is there. “No blood pacts, no matching scars. My word is binding, you know.”
“Unfortunately, I’m aware. That’s what I’d consider a flaw, my dear friend.” Elias adjusts his sleeve with a half-grin forming on his face. “Keep in mind, when I’m saying you can’t make anyone’s life tougher, that includes your own.”

Nemesis frowns. “You tricked me, you scoundrel. You know my word is my oath. That isn’t fair.”

“Not fair? Shouldn’t agree to promises with shady pianists in dark closets, then, genius.”

Elias removes Nemesis’ cap from his head in one smooth motion, flicking his forehead with the other hand as he repositions it atop his own hair, brown and curly and charmingly untidy as always. “This is why you keep losing bets to me. Think for a moment. Don’t just do whatever seems right.”

“Has doing what seems right ever worked out badly for me?!”

He raises a single eyebrow. “Are you seriously asking that?”

“I– no, no I’m not. But I can’t think about that now.” Nemesis sighs. “... For the time being, your wish is my command. No one gets hurt, unless they deserve it. But I want my hat back.”

Elias carefully opens the door. “Later, Jones, later. All things come in due time, and I’m actually sort of loving how this feels on my head. How do I look?”

“Devilishly handsome. I want to get on my knees and propose to you right now.”

“Good, good. That’s the plan.” He gives Nemesis an affectionate smack on the shoulder – the shoulder that still hurts, but it’s not as if Nemesis is in any place to complain, not when Elias is smiling. “You can try it if you want. No guarantee I’ll say yes, but I do think I’d enjoy the sight. Anyway, if it’s that easy to get you on your knees –”

“Aha! That’s very funny, Elias, and I am going to kick you in the shins.”

“Please do, but only if I can slap you after you’re done with that.”

“Deal.” Nemesis kicks him in the shin rather gently, and Elias chuckles and turns around to slap him quite hard across the face. He feels disoriented, a warm feeling spreading through his cheek. It isn’t quite pain.

“You actually did it, you bloody madman,” he says between laughs.
“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“Nah, I knew you would.”

“Right. That makes two, then.”

He laughs, rubbing his face gingerly. He’s taken quite the beating so far in the night, and he hasn’t even gotten into any fistfights yet. “You hit way harder than I remember.”

“And you hit way softer.” Elias punches him in the shoulder, gently this time. “Wimp.”

“Bastard.”

“Nah, you.”

“Got me there.”

“Oh my stars.” Jing’s eyes are wide and full of what seems to Nemesis like abject disgust, while Callie stands behind them, looking concerned to the point of mild fear. “What are you doing to Elias? I’m going to kill you!”

“Hey, hey.” Elias places a hand gingerly on their shoulder. “No. No, you are not going to kill him. It’s fine. He’s a friend.”

“But he kicked you!” They protest.

“And he slapped him,” Callie interjects, and Jing glares at her.

Elias sighs. “She’s right, Jing. It’s okay. Don’t get angry on my behalf.”

They don’t seem happy about it, but they step back, relenting for the time being. “Okay. But if it happens again…”

“You’re not my bodyguard and you aren’t my parent, Jing.”

They look for a moment as though they might protest, but seem to think better of it, glancing to the side. “… Right. Okay. If you say so.”

Callie awkwardly glances at Nemesis. He can tell all of this interaction is beginning to overwhelm her. “Should we… leave?”

“By all means, no.” Elias crosses his arms. “I’m not going to have an old friend turn up without showing him around. What sort of host would that make me?”

“… I didn’t know Nemesis had friends,” she mutters under her breath.

“Yeah. Common sentiment, that.” Nemesis hopes he’s managed to hide the bitterness in his voice. “I do, and his name’s Elias. Elias, this is Callie. My… assistant.”


And this,” he motions to Jing, who begrudgingly waves, “Is Liu Jing, one of the employees here. You could consider them my friend as well. They’re quite a talented musician.”

Jing beams. “Aww, you’re flattering me!” It’s such a drastic shift in demeanor from just a moment
ago that Nemesis can hardly believe he’s still looking at the same person.

“Which instrument do you play?” Callie asks tentatively.

Their grin widens. “Glad you asked! I play the sanxian. It’s a traditional Beian instrument, you’ve probably never seen one before.”

“I haven’t,” she admits, “But I’ve seen pictures in books.”

“Then boy, do I have an experience for you! They’re pretty in books, but way better in person!” They reach onto their back to remove the strange instrument from its holster. The sanxian is a round instrument with three strings and a long neck, rather beautifully made, with strange patterns carved on it. They proceed to play a short scale, and Nemesis must admit, their talent is even clear to someone like him, who has never been a particular sanxian music aficionado. Their fingers fly gracefully over the strings, elegant, airy, and quick, and when they’re done Callie applauds energetically.

Elias applauds as well, a genuine, soft smile on his face. “You’ll hear more of Jing’s work tonight, of course…”

Jing bows, and Nemesis’ attention wanders.

The backstage, unlike the front of the theatre, is in complete disarray. Boxes and crates, in various opened and unopened states, are scattered all over. In the back, a black-haired violinist is tuning their instrument, and several stagehands are rushing around with various props. In the far corner, Nemesis can see Percy talking to a beautiful girl with long, braided hair – his sister, he presumes. He can certainly see the resemblance, even from a distance.

It’s mostly quiet, but one person turns around to smile widely at the gathered four, and then begins rapidly making her way in their direction. Nemesis attempts to offer her an introductory grin, but she pushes past him without a word. “Elias, dear, you completely vanished.”

The woman is tall, dressed in a beautiful purple dress, a tight pearl necklace around her neck, and long off-white gloves reaching to her elbows. Her sandy-colored hair is tied up in an elaborate bun, and her pale face is made up elaborately, with lavender eye-shadow. Nemesis can smell perfume wafting off of her in waves, a sweet and flowery scent with that distinct, overwhelming, unpleasant alcoholic scent that far too many perfumes seem to have.

She puts a hand on each of Elias’ shoulders and leans in towards him, and Nemesis can see him struggling not to recoil. “I was so worried!”

“Well, there wasn’t any need for that, seeing as I haven’t gone any farther than this.” He isn’t making eye contact. “I was simply greeting an old friend. Lusitania, this is… Nemesis.”

Of course. Lusitania Renwick: Tobias Fitzroy’s hand-picked young star, the one whose name has been headlining so many of the Theatre Obscura’s shows as of late. Nemesis has been told that she was beautiful, but now that he’s met her in person, he can’t really see it.

She smiles at him, and he feels vaguely unsettled, like a prey animal meeting eyes with its natural predator. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you… Nemmy?”

“You are absolutely not calling me that. Pleasure to meet you too, though.” Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Elias staring at him with a quiet concern.

“Hmph. Don’t be rude.” She glances back at Elias. “Darling, all your little friends are so rude to
me. I can’t imagine they’re nice to you.”

Behind him, Nemesis can practically feel Jing seething with rage.

“That’ll be my problem, then. I like my friends fine.” He crosses his arms tensely. “That’s why they’re my friends.”

“I worry. They must have a negative effect on your mental state, with how violent and judgemental they are.” Callie holds out an precautionary arm, pulling Jing farther from Lusitania, who continues, not seeming to notice. “Not to mention, that boy’s accent… No offense, but he sounds like he grew up on a farm.”

Nemesis crosses his arms, scowling. This is the last thing he’d expected to hear. His native accent’s not quite so proper as the posh Llygredish spoken by the aristocracy and foreign students or the ever-so-fashionable Omenite accent, that’s true. But it’s a city dialect, far from anything that would ever come up on a farm. “All due respect, madam, I’ve never been to a farm in my life.”

“Well, that’s very good for you.” Lusitania pouts at Elias. “... Really, though. You should come help me go over my lines.”

Elias sighs and lowers his gaze. Nemesis can tell he’s not precisely thrilled at the invitation. “... Okay. Alright, if that’s what you want.”

Nemesis feels a familiar anger welling up, but before he can act on it, he hears another new voice – this particular one tinged with faint Luciellite accent.

“Aww, Luce! You left me all alone to rehearse, that’s not fair! What, do you expect me to read my lines to this broom?” A man with a wild grin and a rather expensive-looking suit pokes Lusitania with the end of the aforementioned broomstick. “Or am I not good enough for you? Elias doesn’t know any of our lines, he just knows his cues. You know full well he doesn’t bother to read the scripts properly.”

“Hmph.” Lusitania straightens up, glaring at him. “Very well. I suppose I’ll humor that. I wouldn’t want to put dear Elias out of his depth. But is Shuai not an appropriate person to work with?”

“I have my own lines to go over, you know.” A Beian woman with short hair, wearing a green dress accented with gold jewelry, leans on the man’s shoulder with a thin smile. In contrast to Lusitania’s stick-thin figure, she’s curvier, more heavyset, and rounder. “You’re both acting awfully flippant, considering we have about two hours until curtains rise.”

“Oh! Oh, goodness, you’re right, oh… I’ve been horrid, I’ve been neglecting my work –”

The woman’s face falls. “... Oh, Lusie, I didn’t mean that.” To Nemesis, she looks more exhausted of Renwick’s behavior than sincerely apologetic.

“Don’t feel bad! Let’s just do better now!” The man grabs Lusitania by the arm, pulling her away from Elias, who visibly relaxes. He points to Nemesis and Callie with a grin. “And you guys! Don’t listen in, okay? No spoilers!”

“Right, no spoilers.” Nemesis, in all honesty, finds himself relieved that Lusitania is no longer in his immediate vicinity. “Break a leg! That’s what you theatre-types say, right?”

“Yeah! This guy’s got the spirit!” The man grins, and the woman laughs as they retreat.

Elias brushes a tired hand through his hair. “... Sorry about that. Those were… Walter Morrow and
Some of the stars of tonight’s performance. As I assume… you had already figured out, that was more for her.” He points at Callie.

She blinks. “Oh, no, I figured it out too. I saw their names on the posters at the door. I’m just curious as to why she thinks you can talk to you like that.”

“… Thinks she can… talk to me like what?” He doesn’t look genuinely confused, more subdued; uncomfortable. “Lusitania isn’t doing anything wrong. She can talk to me however she wants. She’s my fiancée, and all.”

Jing, Nemesis can see, is trying their best to bottle up their frustration, and mostly failing. He’s in a similar place, though doing a much better job of hiding it. Elias carefully reaches out and puts a hand on Jing’s shoulder, sighing. “… You two should probably get going. Before… before Father shows up. When Lusitania’s upset, he’s always the first to hear about it.”

Nemesis glances nervously at Callie, reaching for her arm. “Right. I’m… I’m sorry. I’ll see you after, right?”

“I hope so.” Elias doesn’t sound sure.

The door opens behind Nemesis and Callie moments after they close it behind them. He looks back over his shoulder to see a familiar, grinning face.

“Didn’t know you were backstage,” Percy says, smiling ear to ear. “No idea why you were, I mean. Did you sneak in? That’s pretty awesome.”

“Hmm, no, we were invited.” After the fact, but that's not important. Nemesis smiles slightly. “After all, Elias Fitzroy is an old friend of mine.”

“Old friend? Intriguing. You know, when people say ‘old friend’, that’s almost always code for something a bit more meaningful, right? I’ve got the sense he’s either your arch-nemesis or your secret lover, based on that. Or maybe both. I suppose they’re not mutually exclusive.”

He shakes his head, chuckling. “Goodness, no. Neither of those. Unfortunately. I’d love to say we’ve had some sort of dramatic backstory, but as it stands we were simply schoolmates. I suppose ‘arch-nemesis’ isn’t too far off, sometimes. He can be a lot. I could also be a lot, back in the day.”

His smile slowly morphs into a smirk. “Whenever we competed I won, though.”

Within a specific definition of ‘competed’, but that doesn’t need to be said.

Percy seems contemplative for a moment, before brightening up again. “That’s… fascinating. If I ever write a piece about him, I’ll make sure to interview you. Reticent guy, doesn’t open up to many people, from what I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, sounds like Elias.” There’s a well-concealed stab of pride. “That’s right, Elias doesn’t open up to many people. Just me.

“He’s pretty nice, but he still hasn’t apologized for the time he forgot my name.” The girl who must be Percy’s sister leans against the wall with her arms crossed, grinning. Unlike Percy’s grin, which is soft and curious, hers is more self-assured and cocky. The skin on her temples is slightly discolored, Nemesis notes, reflecting the red light but looking strangely blue. He supposes it must be a strange manifestation.

That aside, she wears a black calf-length skirt over a white blouse, with a black necktie and jacket,
and her hair is braided and tied back. She does bear a very close resemblance to Percy, as Nemesis had initially thought. Aside from the discoloration, she might as well be a female version of him. They must be twins.

“Her name’s Evelyn,” Percy provides. “But she goes by Evie, mostly. And sometimes forgets to introduce herself, which is really the crux of the matter here. I still fully believe it was an honest mistake and you’re being far too harsh on him.”

“He should have known.”

“How, if you never told him?” Callie asks.

Evie’s grin softens. “I’m joking, I’m joking. He’s fine, he’s a nice enough guy, plays the piano really well. Just feels like it’s hard to talk to him when Lusie’s also in the room, and she usually is.”

“No offense to Miss Renwick, but she seems like quite a lot to deal with.” Callie is quiet. Probably worried about offending Evie, Nemesis assumes.

“Oh, she definitely is. But she’s a great actress, and ever since she proposed to Elias, Mr. Fitzroy has been making sure she’s made welcome. Shuai gets tired of her as well, and even Walter does sometimes, and I don’t think he ever gets tired of anything. I still think Elias’ assistant is about to murder her in her sleep one of these days.”

“Again, sounds plausible for Jing.” He has to hold himself back from thinking that he won’t mind if they do just that. Wishing harm upon innocent women who did nothing more than be slightly overbearing would be unbecoming of someone like him. “Still, I’m quite excited to see her in action tonight.”

“Oh, she’s an amazing actress, of course. After all—”

The door behind them opens again. “Evie, who are you talking to?”

Of course, he knows who the speaker is. With her long black hair and unsettlingly pale skin—through which he can almost swear he sees veins—her deep red eyes, and her nearly featureless figure, lacking in visible curves, she’s among the most easily recognizable people in the city. Morgana Fitzroy is dressed practically, with a dark blue satin blouse, a thin, tiered black skirt which is, as is the fashion, long in the back and knee-length in the front, black lace tights, black knee-high boots, and a formal jacket. Her face is adorned with a thin, delicate smile. Despite how unsettling her appearance should be, she’s beautiful, there’s no denying it.

“No one important. Just acquaintances.” He bows slightly, as is customary, and Callie nervously imitates. “We were just about to leave Miss Chase in peace, in fact.”

“I see.” Morgana smiles. “That’s fine. I do hope you’ve enjoyed yourselves tonight so far.”

“Oh of course.” This time it’s Callie who speaks up. “The theatre is really beautiful. I’ve never been before.”

Morgana chuckles lightly. Her voice is low, composed, and elegant. “Why, thank you. I did some of the decorating, you know. Father is very busy, so it’s up to me sometimes. It’s very gratifying to know that you’ve been enjoying it.”

“Well, it’s gorgeous. Truly. If you’re half as good a playwright as you are a designer, I have a feeling tonight will be amazing – but of course, I know you’re even better.” Nemesis smiles. Of
course, it’s flattery, and the lies feel unpleasant on his tongue, but he can’t deny she has a very good eye for decoration, and he’s heard she’s supposedly an amazing playwright. However, that all remains to be seen, and his standards are very high.

“Of course. She’s amazing. I’m always honored to report on her shows.” Percy smiles at her, which she returns. “I think you’re going to enjoy yourself a lot, Nemesis.”

“Well, I do hope so.” Nemesis nods. “But I do worry I’ve been keeping you three. Callie and I may as well go get some food before the show starts. It’s been an honor meeting you, Miss Fitzroy.” He tips her his cap.

“Of course. An honor meeting you as well, Mr…”

“Jones.”

“Mr. Jones.” She almost seems surprised. He supposes the name is deceptively plain.

“Right. Before you go –” Percy scribbles on a piece of paper and hands it to him. “Call me about an interview sometime. Or a collaboration.”

“Will do.” Nemesis waves, and turns to leave, Callie following him. Behind them, they hear the door shut.

“So that was the illustrious Ms. Fitzroy.”

Callie raises an eyebrow. “Her and Elias don’t look related.”

“Well, of course. They’re not related by blood. Never heard of adoption?”

She lowers her voice. “Well, no, actually. Raised away from society and all?”

“Right, right, aware of it, just…” He frowns. “Sorta hard to predict what you would and wouldn’t know about. I’m not your brother.”

“You aren’t,” she agrees. “But really, what’s ‘adopted’?”

He sighs. “Adoption is when… people who aren’t blood related legally and socially become recognized as family. Most common with orphans adopted by new parents, but any sort of relative can be adopted.”

“I see. That sounds strange. Calling someone your family, even when they aren’t related by blood? And… is that what happened to Elias, then? He’s an orphan?”

“It’s not so strange when you’ve experienced it. I mean, think about it in reverse. Would you expect someone whose family died before they even knew them, or someone whose family abandoned them, or tormented them until they had to run away – just because they’re considered family by some metric, that doesn’t mean the child in question should feel connected to them. One has no obligation to their blood family, as far as I’m concerned. And you can’t just ask if someone is an orphan. But yes, he is.”

“You make this sound like it might be personal. Don’t tell me you don’t have a family.”

“And that’s none of your business.” He scoffs. “Let’s just find Miss Hayes before you start asking me more invasive questions.”

“I don’t see how that’s invasive. You know about my family.”
They finally find Theory sitting by the bar, two men sharing her table with her. One is around Nemesis’ age, pale and gaunt, with messy shoulder-length black hair and earrings in the shape of a bird’s skull, dressed in black. The other looks significantly older, with short blond hair, a dark green waistcoat, and a tired expression.

Theory waves them over. “No idea where you two were, by the way. I suppose you must enjoy vanishing, but I thought better of Callie.”

Callie frowns. “I was just following him.”

“That you were. All my fault, of course – don’t even think about blaming anyone else, Theers.” Nemesis pulls out a chair and sits down, scrutinizing the other two men. They’re both familiar. The black-haired one he recognizes, despite the fact that they’ve never spoken. It’s difficult to forget one of the few visitors to the bookstore, especially considering how young he looks. Barely older than Nemesis. Surely younger than Theory.

Noticing he’s being looked at, the man tilts his head curiously. “Yes, hello. Is there something on my face?” His voice carries a faint, upper-class Lygredish accent, the same elegant sort Nemesis emulates to the best of his ability.

“No, no.” Nemesis waves a hand, dismissing the thought. “I just remember you. You were at the bookstore, about a month ago.”

“That I was,” he agrees. “And so were you. Simply… lurking in the corner, like some sort of strange cat. Not that you’re a cat, of course. Simply that the silent staring achieved about the same effect.”

“Well, was I meant to intrude on your shopping experience?”

“No, no.” The man chuckles lightly. “But I never did get your name, Nemesis Jones.”

“Seems like you might’ve.”

“No, Miss Hayes was just talking about how she couldn’t locate you a couple minutes ago. I can only assume someone as ridiculous-looking as you would have a ridiculous name like Nemesis Jones.”

Nemesis laughs. “Guilty as charged. And what might your name be?”

“Oh, it’s Charles. Charles Dreadful.”

He pauses for a moment, then shakes his head. “Nah, too easy.”

Charles frowns. “It’s a perfectly respectable family name, you know.”

“Aye, of course it is, Charlie Horrible.”

“I prefer ‘Chuck Simply-the-Worst’, actually.” He sighs. “... Don’t actually call me that, if you don’t mind.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He glances at the blond man. This one, he recognizes as well, of course. He had sought him out first for help with his compass troubles. “Y’seem tired, Calloway… long day, has it been?”
“Every day is long in my line of work.” Indeed, Calloway sounds beyond exhausted, voice low and absent of any sort of energy.

“Of course. Forgive me for making one of your days that bit longer.”

“Not a problem, seeing as you paid me more than you had to.” He sighs. “At least I get today off to relax. Um… Suppose I’m self-employed, so having a day off shouldn’t be a big deal, but I feel comfortable taking today off, anyhow.”

“Right. How’s your wife been? You did mention having a wife, didn’t you?”

He sighs despondently. “... I do, yeah.”

Theory nods.

“We were just discussing… business. But it was lovely of you two to show up.” She glances at Nemesis. Despite the ‘two’ in her sentence, he gets the feeling this admonishment is directed entirely at him. “Show’s in not that long. We should be getting to our seats soon, anyway.”

“Genuine apologies,” Nemesis says. “I was just off, doing… oh, you know…”

“Mystery bullshit?” she suggests, quirking an eyebrow.

“… Aye, something like that. Not much success.”

“Perhaps,” she says slowly, “You would have more success if you applied yourself to a field other than mystery bullshit. I hear the common sense industry is really looking for new blood.”

He chuckles quietly, and she offers just the barest hint of a smile back. Any hint of emotion that isn’t tired stoicism seems to light her face up, despite the fact that her mouth barely moved. He quietly supposes that this isn’t unlike when he talks to Elias. But, for whatever reason, something about it is different. The intense warm feeling that threatens to overcome him isn’t present. Instead, it’s a dull feeling: subtle, but distinctly happy.

He wonders if Theory could be considered his friend.

“Theory. Theo. Theers.” He grins. “The day I sell out to those common sense idiots is the day Nemesis Jones ceases to be Nemesis Jones.”

She looks stonily at him, though he can sense a hint of amusement in her expression. “Cease to exist, then.”

He laughs again. “You wound me, Theers!”

She pats him on the shoulder. “That’s something to bring up with the physicians at the Domus Vitae.”

Calloway clears his throat. “Ahem. We were saying. About getting to our seats.”

“Right, right.” Theory glances at Nemesis. “... Would you like something to drink, before we go in?”

“No thanks.” All things considered, it doesn’t seem the greatest idea. He’ll need his sobriety in these trying times.
Acolytes of the Forgotten: These ones are Reverenti, maybe? Probably? Supposedly on the disorganized side. Probably angling for the end of the world. Interact with caution, probably. Believe in some sort of higher power and want it to destroy anything. Lunatics. Dangerous. ‘Primordial slime’ is a fun phrase but not a fun experience.

Known Associates: I’ve no bloody clue

Greater Omen Correspondents’ League: A bunch of nosy guys who like to know everything that’s going on. Smaller group and no one has any idea what their goals are. Probably to blackmail everyone until they get whatever it is they want, eventually. Don’t seem to be overtly dangerous, but to be approached with an abundance of caution nonetheless.

Known Associates: They own most of the newspapers, so if anyone’s involved with those, it’s fair to assume they’re involved with the Correspondents, at least tangentially. It’s why all the newspapers tend to report the same thing to varying degrees of quality.

The Obscura Actors’ Guild: A bunch of weirdos, lead by Tobias Fitzroy. Mostly actors and stagehands, but some other people are involved too. I don’t know what they want and neither does Elias but they’re dangerous (obviously).

Known Associates: Tobias Fitzroy, Morgana Fitzroy, and the vast majority of Fitzroy employees

Postmens’ Association: Not really a society so much as a group of couriers who work for the other weird groups around here. They’ve morphed, though, they have their own initiations and such now, but they’re not harmful so much as just freelancing.

The Constables: I don’t think this one counts but they’re dangerous and bad. They don’t really plot much, though, they’ll mostly just arrest you.

The Catacumba Institute: Not “secret” by any means but a society nonetheless. Probably out to fuck everyone over, weird rituals, goals shrouded in mystery...if it looks like a secret society, acts like a secret society, and smells like a secret society, safe to say it is one.

The Omen Eyes: Some rich bellends. Namely a lot of rich bellends involved in other schemes. From what I’ve heard, this one’s the most dangerous but also the most secretive of the lot, save maybe the Correspondents.

Known Associates: Tobias Fitzroy, I’m sure. He sounds like precisely the type, utter knob that he is.
Appendix E - Playbill, "The Tragedy of Edward and Lucia"

Tobias Fitzroy’s Theatre Obscura presents…

The Tragedy of Edward and Lucia

Dedicated to the late Frederick Vigenere

PENNED BY THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS

Morgana Fitzroy

WITH ACCOMPANIMENT ON THE PIANO BY THE VIRTUOSO

Elias Fitzroy

AS WELL AS

Liu Jing - Sanxian

STARRING

Lusitania Renwicke

AS THE BEAUTIFUL LUCIA

Walter Morrow

AS THE DASHING EDWARD

Tobias Fitzroy

AS LUCIA’S FATHER, MORTIMER

Zhou Shuai

AS THE VILLAINOUS RIVAL, FANG

AND

Evelyn Chase

AS LUCIA’S FRIEND, ANNA

Sponsored by the generous donations of the late Frederick Vigenere and the goodwill of the Semper barony
1.4 - Vivace

Chapter Notes

CW: suicide. Briefly mentioned and fictional even in-universe, but suicide nonetheless.

They bid goodbye to Charles Dreadful and Geoff Calloway by the door to the theatre proper before finding their seats with ease. Their seats are in the front row of the mezzanine, in a small side section of ten or so people. Rather nice view – especially for seats obtained quite literally in a dark alley from a disreputable contact.

Next to Nemesis, Callie sits silently, while Theory looks anywhere but the stage. He observes the others in their section. A tall and wiry, somewhat underdressed and remarkably pale red-haired man with comically small spectacles perched on his nose sits beside a black-haired man with light tan skin in a spectacularly expensive-looking black suit. Beside him, a teenage boy with light skin and unkempt brown hair who doesn’t look like he wants to be there scowls to himself. A pale woman with brown hair in a bun at the top of her head sits in the very last row, and beside her is a girl who looks around college-aged, with dark skin and braided hair.

The rest of the seats are empty. They must be expensive enough that even the elite can’t afford them. Alternatively, perhaps the people who bought them just haven’t bothered to show up. Nemesis isn’t going to question extra space.

Centuries pass of murmuring and milling and the orchestra’s warming up. It feels overwhelming – unsettling. Nemesis wishes he could stand up and stretch his legs. Instead he waits, trying to tune out the quiet voices and buzzing strings that seem to merge into one entity swirling around his head.

Finally, the noise settles. The stage lamps rise. The theatre quiets with a collective sigh as the red velvet curtains brush aside.

On the stage is a simple setup - a false courtyard, a false garden, a false balcony, and in the distance an artificial lamp floats near the top of the set, a convincing image of a false moon. Amidst the grass, a road of rocks leads to a small pool, in which dancing lights give the illusion of colorful fish mingling among the water. The set might be simplistic, but it’s well-made, and the special effects are gorgeous. He begrudgingly approves.

In the center of it, a tall man stands – a man Nemesis is familiar with, even though he’s never met him. He looks just like his daughter: the same black hair, shaggy and shoulder-length; A thin goatee, immaculately maintained; The same red eyes, soulless and without pupils; The same unnervingly pale skin, through which the veins are practically visible, even at this distance.

He’s too far away to see it properly, but Nemesis knows exactly what’s inside his mouth before he even opens it: sharp canines, and a charming smile that, even at this distance, sends a cold chill down his spine.

As always, Tobias Fitzroy is dressed handsomely in black and red. He leans heavily on the ornate cane he always carries with him. Nemesis can practically smell his perfume from where he sat – as
the rumors go, Fitzroy is known for his distinctive scent, a blend of oud wood and pomegranate. The crowd bursts into thunderous applause as Fitzroy gracefully removes a microphone from his coat pocket and begins to speak in a voice low and accented Luciellite.

“Ladies and gentlemen and all variations thereof, distinguished guests, associates, those who are not, children of all ages, our most beloved patrons.” His voice is smooth. Nemesis would liken it to milk - something which some people greatly enjoy, but he finds unpleasant and slimy. “We have gathered here to celebrate the work of our actors and crew here at this hallowed theatre, in a performance of my own daughter – Morgana’s – latest and greatest work: The Tragedy of Edward and Lucia.”

He pauses, allowing for the claps and whistles he knows will come, before continuing. “But, perhaps more somberly, we are also gathered to celebrate the life of the late Frederick Vigenere, Lord of the Semper Barony, who has recently and tragically passed away.”

A hush falls over the crowd.

“Frederick was a great friend of mine. He was beloved by all, a tireless force for the betterment of our fair city and fair nation, and a treasure to the world. He was a patron of the arts and sciences, and a notorious provider for those deserving and in need. It is because of him, and his generous contributions and patronage, that our own Theatre Obscura has reached the pinnacle of success that it has today. His loss shall be deeply felt by our community for many a year to come, and his memory should not, can not, and will not be allowed to fade. For the time being, in his honor, if I may, I now request a moment of silence.”

Nemesis leans back in his seat tiredly, trying not to groan audibly as the entire theatre is washed over by a dead silence. For a minute, it becomes difficult to identify that there is anything living in that hall. The patrons, in their gold and red velvet seats, seem afraid to even move for fear of disturbing the silence. Even Theory and Callie sit stone-still and silent on either side of Nemesis. It feels, briefly, as though he must be the only person in this hall still breathing.

As the moment concludes, Fitzroy lowers his head. “Thank you. In honor of my late friend, this showing is dedicated to him. In fact, he had the opportunity to sit in on a rehearsal, and had been thrilled at the prospect of seeing the finished product. In his place, I would like to introduce tonight’s guest of honor – his only son and successor, Lucian Vigenere!”

Fitzroy gestures to the balcony section in the center of the theatre. Nemesis has to crane his head to see Lucian Vigenere, but he can, indeed, spot him. Lucian looks barely older than he does, with pale skin, large circular glasses, and black hair neatly tied into a ponytail over his right shoulder. From all the pictures of him he’s seen, Nemesis knows just how ordinary he looks. Somewhat large green eyes, freckles, and, despite the fact that he’s the heir to an entire barony, his clothing is plain enough that he surely wouldn’t look out of place among the crowds of students he supposedly frequents.

Behind him sit other guests of honor. His section has only three seats, and the other two are occupied by a woman with very tall, poofy hair and a bright purple coat and a woman dressed in a teal suit, with dark skin and long hair in a ponytail. He doesn’t recognize either of them. Are they here on society connections, or are they the sort of reticent artist who is famous but impossible to recognize on the street?

Lucian Vigenere doesn’t respond to Fitzroy’s gesture, but the theatre explodes with applause again. This time, it takes a solid minute to quiet down, until Fitzroy finally clears his throat, silencing the audience.
“And now, the story of a tragic love fated for tragedy… In which I shall be playing the part of Mortimer, a father, who has to work hard to make ends meet after the untimely death of his wife. His daughter, Lucia, is a beautiful girl, coming into her own, but her life feels empty, for she has never felt… Love.”

A morose piano melody begins to play, and even with everything else happening, Nemesis can’t help but smile. Elias is amazingly talented, and the music reminds him of those nights when they would sneak out of the dormitories into the music room, and he would sit there and listen to Elias play. He can almost see it in his mind’s eye – him leaning against the wall, a light smile on his tired face, eyes locked on Elias as he plays. Not that it was him, he supposes.

A soft twanging of strings joins in with the piano. That must be Jing. For all his dislike of their personality, he has to admit they’re a very skilled musician, their sanxian blending gorgeously with the piano, crafting an eerie atmosphere into the hall. They are joined by a quiet tremolo from what Nemesis can only assume is a violin.

The lights lower.

Lusitania Renwick is radiant, approaching Fitzroy with the look of melancholy on her face. “Father,” she says, in a voice quiet and unlike the Lusitania Nemesis had met backstage, “Anna and I have received invitations to Cai Fang’s annual ball. I know we do not have the money to travel, but I will work hard, if it means this small amount of excitement in my average life.”

He has to stop himself from laughing. That Tobias Fitzroy in his silk cravat, and Lusitania Renwick with her pearl dress, could ever lack the money to travel is completely absurd. On either side of him, Theory looks mildly amused while Callie looks baffled, glancing at Nemesis for an explanation that he can’t give without bringing the attention of the nearby viewers directly to himself.

And yet the theatre takes this at face value. Of course they do. Few in the audience have Fitzroy’s or Lusitania’s wealth, but none of them are poor, or even middle class. They want a heartwarming story of poverty laid out on a backdrop of excess and opulence. Their own lavish struggle, to watch over their caviar and champagne.

It sickens him.

“My beloved daughter,” Fitzroy says, voice filled with an insincere thoughtfulness. “Though we have little in the way of money, I cannot stand to turn you down. My heart could simply not take it. You may have my blessing but I am afraid I cannot pay for your travels.”

“Thank you, Father. I will not force us further into poverty for the sake of this. I’ll tell Anna I can’t go.” Lusitania wilts, morosely making her way downstage, as Evelyn Chase enters from stage right.

“My dear friend, Anna!” Lusitania exclaims. “Forgive me, for I cannot attend the ball with you! For father and I do not have the money required to travel, nor could we afford a beautiful gown!”

Like the one you’re wearing right now, Nemesis has to fight saying out loud.

“How unconscionable! That a girl as beautiful as you – the most beautiful girl in the town - would be prevented from going to the season’s hottest social event!” As the two exchange unnaturally-written sentences, mostly praising Lucia wildly, Nemesis is beginning to question all the positive things people had said about Morgana’s writing. This is truly drier than an Al-Mushrite summer.

Finally, Walter enters stage left. He grins charmingly at the two girls. “Why, forgive me! I couldn’t
help but notice such a gorgeous woman!” He grabs both of Lusitania's hands, and Nemesis rolls his eyes to himself. Yet another story based around superficial attraction at first sight. A handsome boy sees a beautiful girl, and they fall in love. If only that was how it was.

He doesn’t know much about love, but he knows it isn’t that.

“Well…” Lusitania looks up at Walter. Nemesis observes with an amusement that when they had been backstage, Lusitania had actually looked taller than Walter. He supposes he must be wearing platform shoes, to preserve the fantasy. “You’re forgiven. But I think you might be overestimating my beauty…”

“By all means, no! You are the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on! All the world’s beauties could not compare to the one in front of me!” His brow furrows in concern. If nothing else, Nemesis thinks, Walter is quite a good actor. He plays the role of the dashing, handsome idiot quite well. No matter what, Nemesis can’t help but be a little endeared by him. It’s probably the freckles.

“Well…” Lusitania glances away, sheepish. She, too, is quite the actress, but – perhaps due to prior bias, and perhaps due to his line of work – Nemesis can’t see her as anything but grossly insincere. “Coming from someone such as you, I can’t help but feel flattered.”

Evelyn’s character, no longer seemingly relevant to the scene, stands awkwardly, smiling a soulless smile as Lusitania and Walter flirt, achingly saccharine. Nemesis can’t help but pity her. She’s, by his assessment, the best actress on the stage at the moment, but of course she would be sidelined for the young lovers. For a brief moment, he finds himself wishing Lucia and Anna would discover their true feelings for each other. The writing is bland, yes, but a relationship between best friends is far more interesting than love at first sight.

Next to him, Theory is drumming her fingers against her seat. If he knows her at all, she’s probably thinking the same thing he is. Callie, on the other hand, looks as though she has never witnessed flirting before in her life, and isn’t sure she likes it. Which, upon second thought, is more than likely the case.

And then Walter exits, and Nemesis realizes he’s completely stopped paying attention. No huge loss, he supposes. It’s horribly soulless – in his opinion, it really is a wonder he’s still awake at all.

“Oh my goodness!” Evelyn exclaims, finally freed from her prison of irrelevance by the exit of the main romantic interest. “Do you not realize what just happened? That was Edward, the most handsome and eligible bachelor in town! And he’s invited you to the ball with him!”

“I didn’t know he was that important…” To Nemesis, angrily enough, she doesn’t sound particularly enamored. Here she is, living her own love story, and she barely seems to care, accepting it with an elegant nonchalance.

And here he is, he supposes, being mad at a fictional character he perceives as ungrateful. But still, he can’t help but feel his hand tighten on the arm of the seat.

“But of course he’s that important. After all, he’s betrothed to Fang – the one who is hosting the ball!”

Lusitania’s face tightens with feigned anger. “He didn’t tell me he was engaged.”

“It’s okay, Lucia.” Evelyn puts her hand on her in-character friend’s shoulder, somehow acting out an incredibly convincing facsimile of sympathy. “He’s simply another rascal. He’s not good for
you, and he doesn’t care. I’m sure any boy worth your love would immediately find himself attracted to you.”

Nemesis doesn’t think that’s how it works, but maybe he doesn’t share the experiences of a rich and beautiful woman who wears a ball gown to meet her friend in town.

“But I love him. I know we’ve only just met, but there was something in our touch… something electric, something beautiful. I can’t live without him!” Lusitania insists.

And Evelyn’s expression hardens as she scoffs. “That’s actually ridiculous. You can’t fall in love with someone you’ve just met.”

“But I have! And I shall die if I can’t be with him!”

She rolls her eyes at the audience. “Lucia, you always get like this. There will be another boy. You’re pretty, it’s fine.”

“But how shall I function without my true love?”

She places a tired hand on her shoulder. “We should skip the ball, on second thought. We can just spend some time together. Would you like to get dinner?”

“No!” Lusitania pulls away from her. “We must go to the ball. Because… I love him and he loves me! And Fang won’t stand between us!”

“I don’t think this is very healthy. Perhaps we should just relax? I’ll buy you a new dress, and we can go to a bar in town.”

Nemesis can’t believe it. This play… is turning into something reasonable.

“Okay,” she relents. “Fine. We can do that.”

Evelyn slings an arm around her shoulder. “I knew you’d come around. Come on. You’ll feel better in no time.”

The scene transitions. Evelyn exits, as a wall - one that looks not too different from that of the Theatre Obscura - shifts halfway across the stage. Lusitania glances up at it from by the pond, a determined look on her face.

“I don’t care what she says. We’re meant for each other.” And she begins to climb the side of the wall.

The scene shifts again. Inside, extras in beautiful clothing dance, swirling in enticing patterns. Near the back of the room, Shuai is in a beautiful gown, an arm linked with Walter’s, watching the ball unfold in front of her with a calm, satisfied expression. Lusitania somehow manages to enter the room without bringing attention to herself. Nemesis supposes he will have to stretch his disbelief pretty far. He admits, if he does, the scene is impressive.

So is the scene that follows, Lusitania finding her way across the dancefloor, caught up in the dancing and struggling to find her path. It’s a distinctive scene, beautifully choreographed and, in his opinion, full of hidden meaning. It’s the sort of thing he can use as inspiration. Perhaps in the near future, there’ll be a poem in his notebook about this.

Lusitania passes from arm to arm, crossing the floor like a leaf tossed by the wind. She finds herself locking arms with handsome male actors, but she perseveres – not to be deterred in her
search for the man she’s convinced must be her soulmate. Finally, she finds herself face to face with the man she came there for.

Walter – Edward – looks shocked to see her, holding her hands as the violin swells and the piano rises to a quick, ear-straining crescendo. He can almost see Elias in his mind’s eye, hammering away at the keys with that passion that makes him seem not quite human, equal parts force of nature and marionette, with that blank stare in his eyes.

But this isn’t about Elias. Elias isn’t here, Elias is down in the orchestra pit, why is he thinking about Elias? It could be any pianist, really; anyone of sufficient skill could play the same notes and he wouldn’t be able to tell the damn difference. There is no reason to think about Elias, and the serene look he always has on his face when he’s left alone with the piano. Does he have that look now, when he’s anything but left alone? Nemesis feels his hands tighten on the arm of his chair again, feels the searing pain in his knuckles resurface, sees Callie looking over at him in what must be confusion because it can’t possibly be concern.

“Edward,” Lucia says, and Nemesis realizes with alarm that he’s just thought of her as ‘Lucia’.

“I didn’t think you’d be here.” Edward looks from Lucia to Fang, then back at her. “This makes things so much more complicated. I feel like maybe, just maybe, I might be a terrible person, and that’s not the sort of thing I like to confront at parties.”

“I don’t care if you are. I love you.” She leans close, into his chest. And Nemesis has to look away. He can only imagine how warm that feels, how secure. He feels an overwhelming urge to punch the nearest person, and to hope to the stars they would punch back, and punch back hard, and leave him bleeding on the floor.

But even though he isn’t looking, he can hear their voices, loud and clear. “That’s a very noble attitude for you to have,” Edward replies, “And it sort of makes me worry for your health in general. It doesn’t matter. I’m engaged. I can’t do anything about that, even if she’s not the love of my life. I don’t have any choice in the matter, but I’m not miserable about it. She’s enough. The marriage benefits both of our families. You have to find your own person. Someone out there will love you far better than I ever could.”

“No, I can’t, I can’t, I love you, it has to be you –”

“There’s no easy way to say this, but it can’t be me. As much as I want it to be. It simply can’t happen, even if it hurts to hear.”

He tunes it out, because he has to, because otherwise the tremor in his hand might become something more, and he has to struggle to disconnect. It’s just fiction, just a play. It shouldn’t be making you angry. It definitely shouldn’t be making you sad. Time must have passed, but Nemesis isn’t aware of it. All he’s aware of is the strange, uncontrollable concoction of feelings swirling around in his chest.

When he manages to look back at the stage, Shuai is confronting Lusitania. They both draw swords, and what follows is another scene, gorgeous in its execution. The two gracefully step and bob and weave through the crowd, still dancing, as Walter frantically attempts to get between them. For some reason, both have obtained swords somewhere. He supposes this is the swordfight Percy had mentioned.

It’s rather decent, as far as swordfights go.

But it has to end, just like anything else. And when it ends, Lucia screams as Edward is run
through, collapsing to the ground in her arms.

“You saved my life,” she cries. “I have to get you to the hospital —”

“No,” Fang says, cold. It’s quite the departure from Shuai’s normal demeanor. As an actress, Nemesis can’t say she isn’t gifted. “If you stay here, he will die, and you will be responsible. But if you leave, I will save him. I am not cruel.”

“But —” Lucia sobs. “Surely someone will —”

The dancers around her continue their dance, silent and opulent, caught in their elaborate whirls and their rhythm. The piano continues its upbeat tune, careless. They won’t interrupt themselves for anyone.

And Lucia realizes what she has to do. She runs from the building, jumping down into the courtyard below, as Fang scoops Walter into her arms. With Lucia out of the way, she has incentive to save him, just like she promised. And Lucia keeps running and running, until she reaches her home, and she shuts the door. The music cut.

Of course, the play has ‘tragedy’ in the title. Nemesis has known from the start there could only be one way for this to end. Mortimer and Anna open the door to her room, and from the top of the stage a rope swings. Lucia, hair covering her face, dangles from a noose, surely of her own making. Dead silence. A momentary, agonizing pause. And there is a stillness on the stage, before the lights cut out and fade to black.

The bows begin. The audience provides a thunderous veil of applause. And still, Lucia’s prop corpse dangles there, an unsettling reminder of the play’s conclusion. Nemesis can’t help but think this had all been quite overrated. It had seemed disjointed and unsure, not precisely a masterwork. Lucia did not, at any point in the production, behave even remotely as a real person might. Nor did anyone else, save perhaps Anna. Though most of the acting was good, and the music and set were phenomenal, the script was a mess, and the main role was the weakest one by far. He would give it two stars at best. He wonders if this would be a worthwhile message to pass on to Percival Chase, or if he would merely come off as a killjoy.

The applause continues past any reasonable span of time. If anything, it feels as though it’s getting louder, making his eardrums cry for help. And that prop is damn unsettling. It looks so realistic, so limp and pallid and flesh-like, but of course, Lusitania is standing right there on the stage, smiling widely as she drapes an arm around Elias’ shoulder. Elias is offering her a painfully soft smile in return, though Nemesis isn’t sure if the pain is on his part or Elias’s.

The audience begins to slowly trickle out of the theatre. There’s to be an after-party in the foyer, as Nemesis remembers it, and they likely want to get there before all the food is gone. They probably want to ask the Fitzroys questions, too. After all, it seems as though they’ve enjoyed themselves. Was the play truly good? Is his hatred of the Fitzroys clouding his mind that much?

That damn prop keeps swinging back and forth, maintaining a tiny bit of momentum long after it should have fallen still.

“I’ll be there in a moment,” he tells an exhausted-looking Theory, and motions for Callie to follow him. They both seem bewildered, but Theory leaves, and Callie follows Nemesis down the stairs and up through the aisles, to the stage.

After the entire theatre is emptied of people, another figure joins them. Percy looks at Nemesis with an expression he can only describe as deep dread. “... You had the same thought as me, huh?”
“What thought?” Callie asks, glancing frantically between the two of them.

Nemesis doesn’t respond to her, instead glancing to Percy. “You’ve lived here longer than I have. What are we supposed to do about it?”

“Make sure it’s real, I think. And then… We can’t just report him to the constables, obviously. But we can retreat. Work out a plan.”
“A plan for what?” Callie asks. Perhaps it’s understandable, how freaked out and terrified she is. The things he and Percy are saying must be alarming without context, or even with it. Nemesis supposes it’s definitely understandable, but he can’t respond, he doesn’t have the energy or the words to make this any easier on her.

Instead, he grabs the nearest chair, setting it up on the stage with almost robotic movements. With his natural height – not extremely tall, but certainly not short – he can just about reach it if he stands on the very tips of his toes. He stretches his arms out towards it, carefully turning it around and removing its veil, gentle, so as to not harm it, nor disturb it more than he needs to.

Its skin is pale and clammy, tinted a nasty shade of thistle. With hands that struggle not to shake, he reaches across and gingerly brushes its sandy blonde hair out of its face – and its eyes, olive, washed-out, wide-open and terrified, as if permanently trapped in a waking nightmare, meet his own.

What he’s staring at is a woman. A human woman. An undeniably dead human woman.
Nemesis Jones has been given a lot of bad advice over the course of his nineteen years, but perhaps the worst advice he’s ever been given is to keep his mouth shut. It’s a sobering thought, what his life could have been if only he had spoken up more often, made his presence more known. If he’d disrupted things.

And yet here he is, thirteen hours later, sitting at the table in Beaumont’s as though nothing had happened.

He nervously drums his fingers on the table. Across from him, Callie looks unsettled. Theory looks vexed.

It’s the next day, but the newspapers have nothing to say about the murder that has taken place at the Theatre Obscura. Nemesis hadn’t expected them to – the papers that Fitzroy doesn’t own are far too scared to report anything incriminating to him. The Obscura Actors’ Guild is one of the more powerful forces at work in Omen, after all.

And it isn’t as though he and Percy had sounded any sort of alarm. They’d simply left. Despite that, knowing the city, they’re not the only ones to find out. Somewhere out there, people know. What they’ll do with their knowledge is another matter entirely.

He flips idly through his copy of this morning’s edition of the Electric Sun. Even though the Sun often remains above the influence of most societies and reports on things no one else dares to, to go against Tobias Fitzroy is a very deeply irresponsible idea.

He pauses his idle flipping on the crossword puzzle. These sorts of things aren’t challenging, so he doesn’t normally bother with them, but they can be decent time-wasters in a pinch. Something to think about, other than the murder. He scans the list of clues – all so tragically obvious – but one catches his eye.

6: An agent of sure downfall.

Seven letters. He half-grins. What are the chances? It doesn’t matter. This isn’t a coincidence. With confident strokes, he writes: NEMESIS.

His hand moves down the list of words. It doesn’t take him long to finish the crossword. It doesn’t take a private eye to tell that something is very clearly up – the words ‘murder’ and ‘death’ are present, as is ‘obscure’. The strangest word, by far, is 9 Across: “A variation on a traditional shift cipher, using an alphabet key for more secure encoding.” Nemesis, of course, knows that’s a Keyed Caesar, but he has no idea how any member of the general populace would be expected to know that.

Perhaps they aren’t.

Theory peers over his shoulder. “Solving crosswords with a pen to show off, Jones?” she asks, dry as usual.
He chuckles. “Something like that, sure.”

“No idea what that’s supposed to mean. Please tell me you’re not up to mystery bullshit.”

He half-grins. “Oh, I am absolutely up to mystery bullshit.”

“When are you not up to mystery bullshit?”

“Never. My middle name might as well be ‘mystery bullshit’.”

“Nemesis Mystery Bullshit Jones?” Callie pipes up.

“Precisely!”

Theory leans over his shoulder. “Alright, tell me about the mystery bullshit.”

He points to the top left corner of the crossword, and says, “Well, first off. ‘Keyed Caesar’?”

Callie nods, leaning eagerly across the table. “So you think that means something?”

“Yeah. I think someone’s trying to leave me a message, and I know who it is.” He points his pen at the name of the author. ‘Peter Sacha Cliv. What sort of name is that?’

“I don’t know, what sort of name is it?” Theory asks, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Sounds normal to me.”

“Oh, I think I know,” Callie says. “I’m going to wait for him to solve it, though.”

“How… kind of you.” He grabs a piece of paper, clenching his teeth and politely refraining from snapping at her. And with a smirk – perhaps a half-hearted one – he scribbles rapidly.

PETER SACHA CLIV
PTRSCHCLV EEEAII
PRCVL CHS

Percival Chase

He grins at Theory. Well, if he’s being accused of showing off, he might as well act the part. “Simple, really.”

She rolls her eyes. “Right, what next? Said there’s a keyed Caesar?

“That’s a type of cipher, right?” Callie asks.

“I dunno. Why don’t you ask the genius?” He motions sharply towards Theory, who sighs, exhausted.

“… No need to be rude.” Callie crosses her arms and hmphs.

“Well,” he mutters, scanning the page for any sign of encoded text, “you are both more than welcome to leave, you know. I’ll solve this case on my own. If anything, I’ll solve it faster without you two holding me back.”

The funny thing is, Nemesis Jones actually believes it, and that makes him want to burst out laughing, right here, in front of the both of them.
Theory frowns, glancing away. “... Call me if you actually need me. I doubt you will, but. Just in case. You’re lucky I don’t have feelings.” And with that utterly baffling final statement, she turns to leave.

Callie frowns. “Are you mad? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

He tries to keep himself from scowling. “No, no, no. I’m fine, I’m fine. I like to consider myself competent once in a blue moon is all, but I assure you I will get over it in due time... a-ha.”

“Huh? You figured something out?”

Talking about the mystery, Nemesis supposes, is probably easier for Callie than talking about his feelings. He doesn’t blame her.

“Sort of,” he says. “See, the only thing we were provided was the crossword. No outside sources. That means all the information we need has to be in the crossword.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Then I think I know what words to focus on. There’s twenty-six, but I think we only need five of them.”

He turns over the scrap paper he had used for the anagram and carefully writes on it:

KEYED CAESAR
THIRTEEN
FIRST
TRAGEDY/ZEITGEIST

“I…” Callie leans over his shoulder. “Don’t... get it.”

“That’s fine. That’s what I’m here for. It’s simple – the keyed Caesar is the type of cipher this is encoded in. Thirteen is the shift – that’s fairly obvious. ‘First’ is a clue as to what the code itself is; I have a few ideas as to what it could mean. And anything could be the key, but ‘zeitgeist’ and ‘tragedy’ are isolated up in the top corner, with ‘keyed Caesar’. It doesn’t have to mean anything for sure, but they’d be my first two guesses for the key.”

He flips to the first page of the newspaper. The headline there is simple: ‘Tribute To Late Baron Draws Crowds’. The author is… one ‘Phileus Teemer Radcliffe’, which he can say with decent confidence is not an anagram of ‘T. Percival Chase’.

Probably not that, then. He flips back. “... Alright. I’ve got a hunch. If this is wrong, I’ve no idea what to do from here, so let’s hope against hope it is, hmm?”

Carefully, he begins to scribble again.

Tragedy, Obscure, Zealot, Obvious, Death, Unpredictable, Dedication, Murder, Kaleidoscope, Xenolith, Xenophobia, Zeitgeist, Or
First, Oration, Thirteen, Overcoat, Obstruct, Nemesis, Yearning, Reporter, Ytterbium, Keyed Caesar, xenon, Widdershins, Absinthe, Mystery

TOZODUDMKXXXZOFOTOONYRYKXWAM

Callie leans over his shoulder and nods. “And then... you think you can decrypt that?”
“Definitely. Keyed Caesars are easy.” He brings out a second piece of scrap paper. “I can do them in my head, but I prefer to at least have paper to work with. I can explain it to you this way, at least. In a keyed Caesar, the alphabet is modified before decrypting. In this case, the letters from the keyword are removed, and written at the start of the alphabet, like so –”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Z E I T G S A B C D F H J K L M N O P Q R U V W X Y} \\
\text{T R A G E D Y B C F H I J K L M N O P Q S U V W X Z}
\end{align*}
\]

“I see.” She raises her eyebrow. “I don’t know much about codes. Art liked them but he told me I shouldn’t worry about learning any.”

“I can teach you,” he assures her. “From here, you solve it as you would a normal Caesarian shift. That is to say –” he fishes around in his bag before pulling out a cylinder, with two dials, each corresponding to the letters of the alphabet. He carefully presses a switch, and one of the dials expels the letters on it into his hands, allowing him to rearrange it into the ZEITGEIST alphabet and twist the dials so that Z is lined up with A.

“This device is one-of-a-kind, but a lot of similar models exist out there. It was given to me by the person who made it.” He smiles ruefully as he keeps writing. “Since we know the shift, we can simply use this to solve it. If we stumble across a shift cipher we don’t know the shift to, I can show you how to crack them, that’s fun.”

“You know how to do that?” She asks. “Well, actually, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

He winks. “I can do it in my head. Anyhow, this is… utter gibberish.”

\[
\text{Q E N E W I W C A L L N E X E Q E E D M H M A L K T C}
\]

She frowns. “Then we went wrong somewhere…? Were we using the wrong code?”

“Nah, I dunno. Gotta give ‘tragedy’ a shot before giving up, don’t we?” He re-configures the dials again, and carefully, with a steady hand, writes out his results.

\[
\text{N E M E S I S C A L L M E W E N E E D T O T A L K P C}
\]

NEMESIS CALL ME WE NEED TO TALK PC

He sighs. “I suppose that means we’re calling him, then.”

Of course, Nemesis still has Percy’s number from the night before. Percy picks up on the second ring, sounding in decent spirits, all things considered.

“This is the office of T. Percival Chase, how may I help you?”

“It’s me, Chase.” Nemesis rolls his eyes, even knowing the reporter can’t see him doing it over the phone. “What was the point of all of that, exactly…? I mean, it was a nice puzzle and all, gave me a split second worth of pause, but I don’t see the point when you could have just tracked me down or something.”

“Tracking you down would have taken centuries! I figured you’d be getting in touch with me regardless but I wanted to make damn sure. Crosswords are hard to make, you know! I had to do that in twenty minutes!” A scoff comes through the speaker. “At least you managed to solve it. Like I knew you would.”
Nemesis rolls his eyes again for good measure. “Right, right. It was a good effort. I assume I know what you’re calling me about.”

“I must say, I’m quite amazed you could figure all of that out so quickly. That paper was only delivered around two hours ago.”

“I’m impressed I figured it out too, considering how little I had to work with. For the record, ‘initial’ would have been far clearer as a clue than ‘first’.”

“Well, you should have told me that four hours ago. But yes, yes. The murder. I know a way we can get in to investigate. Apparently, since neither of us thought to call the constables, the Fitzroys are continuing like nothing happened. And the corpse is still in there, somewhere.”

Nemesis blinks to himself. “Are you proposing we steal a corpse?”

“That is exactly what I am proposing. Quite glad you’re catching on.”

“I ‘unno. I’ll have to ask Callie if she’s up for it.”

“I’d like to help steal a corpse,” Callie says without missing a beat.

“I guess it’s settled then.” He’s never stolen a corpse before, but he supposes there’s a first time for everything. Anyway, what better time to start? “You got experience with stealing corpses, Chase?”

“Okay, okay. Upon revision, we are not stealing a corpse. Ideally, we’d drop it in the street and have an Automaton Lex stumble across it. The constables aren’t about to investigate seriously into Fitzroy, so we can step in, and they’ll think we’re just nosy. We’ll at least have an excuse to ask some of the actors and crew what happened once they’re aware a murder happened – because if Evie’s anything to go off of, they’re not.”

“That’s…” A surprisingly good plan, one that he now wishes he’d thought of first. “…fair. We can snoop around while we’re there, right? Because I doubt Fitzroy will let us once his secret is out there.”

“Absolutely. Meet me in the corner store down the street from the theatre. You know the one?”

“I think I can probably figure it out. Should I bring a disguise or something? You’ve got an excuse to be there, but not so much me.”

“Sounds like it’d be a fair idea. Callie can probably sneak in and look normal enough if she just hides her hair under a hat or something, but you… You’ve got a reputation.”

“Alright, we’ll figure something out. We’ll meet you in an hour or so, if that works?”

“Right,” Percy responds. “I’ll be waiting eagerly.”

He hangs up.

Nemesis sighs, turning to his assistant. “Alright. We’d best find… disguises. Wouldn’t want to be recognized and identified, if news of this gets out. And you need to find a way to hide that braid of yours. It’s a rather distinguishing feature.”

She frowns, playing with the end of it. “I might as well just cut it off, right?”

“Huh? No, not unless you want to.”
She frowns deeper. “I think… I think maybe I do.”

Nemesis feels a soft panic overcome him. “Wh-why? I don’t want to pressure you into anything. I think it looks fine like this –”

“You’re right.” She sighs. “I stick out like this. And it’s heavy. And… I only grew it long because that’s what Art wanted. Now that he’s not around… you’re all right. It’s inconvenient.”

He tries his best to keep himself looking as neutral as possible, despite most of him struggling against that decision. “If you’re sure. It’s a big decision.”

“Not really. It’s just hair. It grows back, doesn’t it?” She runs a hand through it. “You can help me cut it, right? I don’t think that I would be very good at doing it myself.”

“Sure.” He sighs. “Sure. Reckon I could do, if you’re okay with me having a knife near your neck.”

“I’ll just have to live with that risk.”

She sits down, letting her hair fall over the back of the chair. Nemesis pulls his pocket-knife out and flips it open. With another sigh, he undoes her braid and combs his fingers through her hair. It’s a bit more tangled and frizzy than he would like, but time is limited, and with its absurd length washing it will likely take more time than he can afford.

Actually, now that he thinks about it, he can’t imagine how she washes it to begin with.

“How short would you like it, then…?”

She shrugs. “… Shuai’s hair is pretty. Maybe… something like that?”

He thinks back to Shuai’s hair. A short, blunt bob. “I could do something like that, yeah. Don’t move.”

And carefully, he begins to cut off her hair in a careful motion, sawing through it. He’s focused, making sure not a single stroke is out of place, keeping the knife, jokes aside, well away from her neck. When he’s finally done, he has a massive length of hair held in one fist. He estimates that it’s a good half as long as Callie is tall. From where he holds it, the tips just barely brush against the floor. He glances down at it. “… Do you want to keep this, or…?”

“No. Why would I? I can just grow more whenever I want.”

“Can’t argue with that,” he chuckles as he tosses it into the trash. “Okay. Would you mind standing over the sink? Potentially getting your hair wet? I’m not a professional, it would help.”

“Okay.” She goes to do that, running a hand through her hair – currently choppy, uneven, and approximately shoulder length. “It already feels lighter.”

“It probably does. Never had knee-length hair. Wouldn’t know.” He offers her a towel. “Best to wrap this around your shoulders. Your hair is going to be shedding for days, by the way. Unfortunate side effect. Unavoidable, but gets worse when you’re cutting off this much.”

She obeys, wrapping it around her shoulders. “I see. Is it really awful?”

“Nah, not terrible. Just annoying. Bit itchy.” Now that her hair is wet and flat, Nemesis can actually do something decent with it. Not great, admittedly, since he’s an untrained non-
professional working with kitchen scissors and a switchblade, but, he thinks to himself, he truly isn’t that bad at this. Perhaps it can be a backup career option if he ever decides the private investigator life is no longer for him. Probably not, but it’s a strangely nice thought.

She allows him to cut in silence, but finally murmurs, “You’re good at this. Or… I can’t really tell, since I’ve never cut my hair before, but you seem like you know what you’re doing.”

He responds with a wistful sigh. “… Sort of. Chopped most of my hair off when I left Citrea Viridia. Shame, that. I’d been wearing it long out of spite for a while. Guardians wanted it to be more professional, I wanted to make them angry. It hurt, cutting all of that off.”

“Then why did you do it?”

He shrugs. “Complex reasons. Doesn’t matter, now that it’s done. I like this style better, anyway. And I know it would make them just as angry.”

He fumbles around in his bag for a mirror and passes it over to her. “Tell me what you think.”

Not quite the same as Shuai’s, Callie’s hair is cropped a decent bit below the chin, but above the shoulders. Her hair doesn’t quite have Shuai’s blunt quality; instead, it looks somewhat soft. He’s left enough of the hair in the front intact to frame her face, so she isn’t quite unrecognizable. All things considered, he thinks it suits her, even if it doesn’t look quite so professionally done.

She smiles to herself, and Nemesis can’t help but smile himself, seeing it. “It’s nice. Thank you.”

“Of course. Anytime. Or, well, maybe not soon, because I’ve never tried to work with short hair. But, you know.”

That project being done, he ducks his head into Theory’s room. “Hayes, I figure you’re still mad at me, but would you mind doing me a solid?”

She glances up from the book in her hands. When she speaks, she sounds perfectly calm. Pleasant, even. “… I’m not mad at you. What do you need?”

“I was wondering if I could borrow a pair of your glasses. For… mystery reasons.”

She sighs, shutting her book. “Don’t see why not, I suppose. Do you have a favorite glasses shape? Most of mine are just… round.”

He prefers rectangular glasses, but that’s neither here nor there. “Anything will do.”

She shrugs and hands him a rather gaudy pair of tortoiseshell half-moons. He’s never seen her wearing it, so this is probably the pair she’s the most okay with getting damaged. It’ll suit his needs just fine. Theory follows him out of her bedroom, watching him search through his own things before he finally finds what he’s looking for: a wig, shoulder-length and dark brown – perfectly unremarkable. He reluctantly removes his cap and glances down at his outfit.

Far too colorful.

“You got an, er… sweater I could borrow, maybe?”

As it turns out, all of Theory’s sweaters are far too small for him. He probably should have seen that coming.

Instead, he’s wearing a simple white shirt, black tie, and black jacket. The only strange thing about
him is his bag – which, obviously, he can’t just leave at home. Callie follows behind him, periodically running a hand through her newly shortened hair, trying to get herself used to the sensation.

He locates the shop Percy’s designated as their meeting spot fairly quickly. Percy is standing in the back, grinning when he sees them enter.

“Wow, barely recognized you two. I must say, I think chopping your hair off was a bit excessive, but it looks nice. As for you, Nemesis…” He looks him over. “… You look like a tired secretary.”

“Might as well be.” He gives a shrug in response. “Since when are you into codes?”

“Oh, a while. A journalist has to be qualified to write about anything. And with all these societies communicating on the down-low, I need to be able to intercept it if I need to.”

“Intercept, yes. But a crossword…”

Percy grins lightly. “Maybe I’m out to start a society or something, Jones. Indulge me for a moment. I found it thrilling.”

“Good for you, I guess.” Nemesis raises an eyebrow; Percy being a generally pleasant person aside, the desire to start a society is as red a flag as they come. “… I don’t wanna be tied down to any sort of vague, shadowy goals, mind. I value my status as a neutral party in this city.”

“Not interested in weird malicious espionage, either. But a society of people who figure out other people’s malicious espionage…”

“I’m in,” Callie says. No hesitation.

He scowls. “I’ll think about it. We have more important things to figure out right now. Like what we’re going to do about this whole… situation.”

“I’m getting to that.” Percy smiles and motions for them to follow him into what appears to be a broom closet, shutting the door behind them with a hideous creaking noise. With the utmost delicacy, he reaches towards the back of the far shelf, where a paintbrush sits in a half-empty can of paint. He winks at Nemesis, then grabs the paintbrush, pulling on it lightly.

And Nemesis can hear gears whirr as the back wall of the room slides open, revealing a set of double-doors locked with a combination padlock. He looks at Percy. Percy looks back at him, grin widening.

“I don’t actually know the code, but I’ve known about it for a while. Pretty sure I know where the exit is, too. Figure you’re probably in a better position to intuit out codes than me?” He pats Nemesis on the shoulder. “Good luck, detective.”

Nemesis sighs. “… Private investigator,” he corrects him, kneeling down by the padlock. So this is why Percy has brought him on this excursion – because he couldn’t figure out how to crack a padlock.

“Unfortunately, I’m not a miracle worker. There’s nothing here that would give me any clues as to what the code is,” he says up at Percy, a hint of irritation present in his voice.

Percy frowns. “… So you don’t think you can get us in?”

“Didn’t say that.” With care, Nemesis sets the dial to zero and yanks down on the lock, turning the
dial counter-clockwise. His movements are ginger, calculated, and incredibly precise. “Callie, get a piece of paper and a pencil. I’m going to need you to take some notes for me.”

She rushes to do just that.

He feels the dial stop. “... 1,” he mutters to her. He hears scratching behind him, and continues to turn the dial, pausing each time it stops.

Eventually, he finishes, having made a full revolution. “Pass me that list, now.” Callie obeys, and he surveys his findings.

1. 4.5. 7. 11. 14.5. 17.5. 21. 25.5. 29.5. 31. 37.5.

He reads them over carefully. Eliminate the fractions, and what’s left: 1, 7, 11, 21, 31.

Find the odd one out; that means the third number is seven. That’s the easy part down, then.

He reaches for a pencil, which she hands to him, and begins to write. Divide the third number by four, take the remainder, add four, do it again, until you reach the highest possible number.

\[
7/4 = 1r3 \\
3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 39
\]

And there are his possibilities for the first number. If he remembers correctly, the remainder being three means he starts at one this time. All things considered, this would be a rather bad time for his knowledge to fail him, but he has no choice but to work with what he has and hope to the stars it’s correct.

1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, 37

With that, all of his cards are on the table. He frowns, clearing the lock. “Alright. This is going to take a bit.”

Callie and Percy eagerly watch over his shoulder as he begins trying combinations, beginning with (1, 3, 7). It takes, according to his pocket-watch, around five or six minutes, but finally, he enters (27, 13, 7), and the lock satisfyingly clicks open.

Percy smiles lightly. “I knew there was a reason I wanted you on my side. Where in the world did you learn something like that, though?”

“Same place I learned to pick locks.” Nemesis declines to elaborate beyond that, opening the door. Conveniently, he’d remembered to bring his folding lantern - he takes it out now, holding it aloft. Its faint sickly yellow light illuminates what little of the corridor it can.

The passageway is dark, carpeted in velvet and decorated with garish gold-and red-wallpaper. Sconces line the walls – he can safely assume they’re meant to be lit artificially, which means that as far as he knows the three of them are fresh out of luck in that regard. The decorations are luxurious, and the corridor is extraordinarily roomy.

Typical. Even their *secret corridors* are dripping with needless luxury.

“Careful,” he cautions, shining his light at the floor. “Pretty sure that’s a trip-wire.”

Callie looks around him, holding onto his arm to steady herself. “Can you disable it…?”
“Not without activating it, I wouldn’t think. Just step over it. It’s probably only there as a failsafe.” He delicately steps over it, motioning for them to follow him. Once Percy is in, he closes the door behind him. Darkness surrounds the three.

The corridor is lengthy. The carpet on the floor is worn, and there’s a distinct absence of cobwebs. Clearly it’s been in use, and recently too. Save for the weak, flickering light of Nemesis’ lantern, the tunnel is pitch black - whatever lies in the distance is impossible to discern. Each footstep is audible on the ground, faintly echoing in the dead silence.

He leads the way, carefully searching for traps as he goes – he finds another tripwire and what looks like it might be a trap-door, all of which he avoids. Finally, after what seems like years alone in the silent dark, the end is within reach. Nemesis opens the door, steps over a final wire, and the three spill out, relieved, into a very familiar closet.

Percy grins. “I knew it. Thanks, Jones. That was amazing.”

Callie looks at Nemesis in awe. “That was cool…”

Nemesis runs a hand through his hair, grinning in a manner he’s sure is charming, ignoring the fact that just yesterday he had been in this closet with Elias Malik Fitzroy. “Well, of course. It’s all in the job description.”

“And since I was right about where the tunnel would end, that means…” Percy opens the door carefully, and the three are met with a smiling Evelyn, who carefully steps into the room and shuts it again behind her.

“ Took you three ages,” she says, not seeming particularly upset about it. “Thought you’d been eaten by wolves. Did he guess the code?”

“Cracked it, actually.” Nemesis interjects. “You couldn’t’ve just told us?”

She shakes her head. “ It’s something they only tell the higher-ups. I don’t think I was even meant to be aware of it. I stumbled across it one day, and that was it. As far as I can tell, it’s probably Fitzroy’s personal tunnel.”

“... Yeah, lines up. Place looks like a damn castle.”

Callie looks at him slowly. “Wait... why would you assume she would know the code?”

“I mean, she’s a member of the Actors’ Guild. *Obviously*.”

“...that’s not very obvious,” she mutters under her breath.

“It’s pretty much impossible to get a role at the Obscura without being a member. That sounds like a rumor, but more often than not rumors like that tend to be true”

Evie nods. “It’s true. Well, actually – I’m just an initiate. The initiation process is needlessly long, and being in a performance is one step of it. Before you ask me what’s next, I don’t know. It’s all very secretive.

He thinks to himself that screening out traitors like her is precisely why the length is anything but *needless*. Though he despises everything about the Guild, this, at least, they’ve been doing right.

Percy smiles softly at Evie. “... Thanks for doing this, again.”
Having said that, he turns to Nemesis. “Full disclosure, Evie’s doing this because I suggested it. I’m trying to do a proper exposé on the societies tearing this city apart, one at a time. The Guild seemed the most present threat, and then this murder just happened to happen, like the city handed me the opportunity for the story of a lifetime.”

Nemesis frowns. In his pocket, his hand tightens around the handle of his gun. With his other hand, he pulls out his compass. “And you expect me to think you’re not doing this for another society? Let me guess – the Correspondents, we all know they own the Sun. It’s all the bloody same with you types, acting like you’ve some larger, kinder purpose, but all any of you are after is power, strange, nebulous power that I don’t think you’re actually fully equipped to handle. Dunno why in the world I thought you’d be different.”

Callie nervously slides behind him, and Percy stares him down before… smiling.

“You won’t find me disagreeing with that. Any of it. I mean. I’m of the same opinion. And you’re right, partially. I knew you were gonna be good at your job.” He doesn’t seem too bothered by being found out, which Nemesis finds endlessly infuriating. “... Now, everything I’m saying is suspicious, obviously. For the record, so is everything you’re saying. You could be an agent of any group on the planet, cleverly veiled as an impartial detective. But I’ll be forthright – I might be a member of the Correspondents, but I don’t know what their goals are. And I don’t care.”

“Then why are you doing all of this…?” Callie asks quietly.

“Because he cares,” Evelyn cuts in. “He’s intending to expose the societies, so that society – the larger society, not a secret one – so that society can get less dangerous. Because he’s always been like this, after the truth of any situation even when it’s dangerous and probably not even going to fix things, because he’s –”

“Because I’m a ‘nosy little bastard’, is the traditional way it’s put.” He’s remaining calm, a friendly smile dancing over his face. “It’s a descriptor that’s been applied to you as well, historically, I’m sure.”

Perhaps it’s usually a little ruder than that, but Nemesis can’t disagree.

“And that’s why I want you on my side. You and me… we’re the same.” His smile softens. “So I want you to help me expose all the corruption in this city. You, me, Evie, Callie… We’re like the anti-society. Exposing the truth. We can call ourselves… the Chase Commission.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “We cannot call ourselves that. Much as you’re acting pretty dodgy right now, I get it. Thankfully for you…” He holds up his compass. There are needles trained on himself, Callie, and several other objects in the room, each glowing varying shades of their own color, but the area where Percy stands is absent of any needle. “My compass says you’re telling the truth. And in all honesty, I’d join a society for my own purposes too, if given the opportunity. So I’ll offer my help – but I am not paying membership fees, and we are not having a catchy name.”

“We can negotiate later.” Percy leans over Nemesis’ shoulder, looking closer at the compass and chuckling. “No idea where you’d get something like that. You’re not an artificer, are you?”

“Couldn’t be if I wanted. Don’t have the knack.”

“I didn’t think so, which is why I was curious.” He squints at it. “So this detects lies, huh?”

“Broader than that. The needles detect hidden things; anything intentionally obscured. There’s some nuance and skill involved in reading it, but as a general rule: when people tell an outright
falsehood, it starts glowing brightly. Usually, it detects everyone, because everyone’s hiding something about themself. None of us present our true nature to the public, exactly. It picks up some people stronger than others, because some people are more authentic, but it doesn’t pick you up just about at all.”

“And what does that mean…?” Percy ventures.

“Means you wear your nature pretty much on your sleeve. Nothing insincere or hidden. Pretty impressive, all considered.” Nemesis knows his voice must be tinged with annoyance. There’s something so frustrating about someone so open and honest.

He grins, poking at it with a single finger. “That’s… amazing. Really, where did you get it?”

“Story for another time, Chase.” Nemesis closes and pockets it, shrugging. “Anyhow. That’s why I’m willing to hear you out. People lie – all the time – but artifice just is.”

“Well, I’m grateful this exists, then. It would be a real shame if we had to be enemies. I really prefer people like you to be on my side, whenever possible.” Percy pops the closet door open.

“Right. Getting off track, though. I do tend to think in tangents, so I’ll sort of take responsibility for that, even if you were accusing me of lying to you and colluding with secretive powers for nefarious purposes. The past is the past, even if it was around fifteen seconds ago. We have a ‘prop’ to track down, for the time being.”

Nemesis follows him out, though he isn’t happy about any of this, and is sincerely hoping his posture conveys that. “Hope you don’t expect me to find it. I don’t bloody know where I’m going.”

Evie carefully helps Callie out of the closet. She closes the door carefully, making sure not to slam it behind her.

“No, I don’t expect you to know your way around here. That’s what I’m here for, and all.”

Evie does know her way around quite well. If anything, she’s almost frustratingly difficult to keep up with – though Percy and, to Nemesis’ great irritation, Callie, seem to be having no trouble in the least.

She leads them through the tall, dark corridors of the theatre, finally emerging into a room full of various potential props. Scattered over the floor are fake swords and bows with fake-tipped arrows and replica pistols. The walls are lined with racks upon racks of clothing, varying from subdued to showy to downright strange. Various convincing fakes of every object from frying pans to radio sets are placed in inconvenient locations, and the four have to struggle not to trip over any of them as she points up at a shelf near the ceiling, out of normal human reach. On it, a white shrouded figure lies.

Percy squints. “Ten crowns says it’s up that high so no one can look too close at it.”

“I won’t bet against you on that,” Nemesis agrees.

“How are we going to get up there?” Evie asks.

Callie points at the wall. “I can get you that ladder?”

He nods. “You mean the stepladder? That would be lovely, thank you.”

She rushes to get it, and Evie glances at him. “I didn’t know there was a difference between a
stepladder and a ladder.”

“I don’t think there is. He’s just being pedantic,” Percy says, absent of malice.

“There most certainly is.” Nemesis crosses his arms. “A step-ladder is self-supporting, as it folds open, while ladder is more of a blanket term –”

“So it’s like squares and rectangles, then?” she asks.

“Which means he’s just being pedantic, because the word ‘ladder’ would apply here as well.” Percy smiles. “Sorry, Jones.”

Nemesis feels as though he might punch something. Thankfully, the feeling isn’t quite pervasive enough to bother him, merely simmering harmlessly below the surface. He says nothing as he sets up the ladder, seething quietly. By the time he’s had climbed up to the top shelf, he’s mostly over it, though a small part of him continues to scream for his own blood.

The white-shrouded figure certainly looks humanoid. Gently, he lifts the veil off her face. It’s the same woman, just as dead, though her skin feels strange and elastic. She has yet to begin to decompose, even though she’s been dead at least a day, likely longer. It creates the unsettling feeling that, perhaps, she might still be alive, but when he touches her throat he can’t feel her heartbeat.

He supposes, for this situation, he’ll need to take a desperate measure. Carefully, he removes his glove, and feels for a heartbeat again.

Her skin is cool, clammy, and unsettlingly smooth. There is no heartbeat, nor any other sign of life. His hand passes over what feels like a small hole in her neck, and he pauses, looking closer. He can see nothing but the prints of the rope around her neck, deep and purple.

Her veins are visible through her skin, unsettling and deep blue.

Carefully, he takes out his compass. As usual, plenty of the room is picked up weakly, but, predictably, an incredibly stiff and determined needle points directly at the corpse. Another points across the room, at a rack of clothing. A third points directly at Nemesis himself, as always.

He glances down Percy-wards. “Alright, corpse located. Where do we go from here?”

Percy looks over at Evie, who meets his gaze and nods. “Stand back.”

“Okay…” Callie mutters. Clearly terrified, she steps behind Percy, who grins.

Evie steps forward, placing her hands against the cleanest wall in the room – below the shelf on which Nemesis is perched. The blue on the corpse’s face seems to glow as she concentrates, and the walls melt away like a candle burning down, replaced with a large section of empty air between the inside of the room and the air above the expertly maintained front lawn outside the theatre.

He isn’t an expert, but it’s an impressive feat of artifice. He’s shocked she’s so much as on her feet, but she looks almost unbothered.

“Toss me the corpse,” she says. “Quick! Before someone sees.”

He dutifully passes down the corpse (a feat far more difficult than it appears, though he manages to perform it successfully), which she holds briefly, as it glows with a soft blue outline. Then, she unceremoniously tosses it out of the newly created hole in the wall.
The four watch as it floats gently down to the lawn, like a late-autumn leaf falling from a tree. Then, Evie exhales, touches the corner of the wall again, and the melted plaster fuses back together, as though nothing had happened.

Callie gives a polite round of applause.

Nemesis looks down at Evie, frowning to himself. “... Might sound rude, but there’s something I need to ask.”

“Why I have the knack, right?” She laughs. Now that he looks closer, she does seem tired. Most artificers probably would have passed out from the strain, so it’s impressive that she merely seems winded, as though she’s run up ten or so flights of stairs, and she’s handling it quite well. “I get that a lot. Simply put, it skips the men in our family. Father eventually left the country because he didn’t have it, and that prevented him from interacting with most of the technology there, but there was still the genetic potential for it. Mom had it and all. Didn’t get Percy, but it got me, even though we’re identical.”

“That’s why you look so different from each other, right?” Callie speaks up. “Your manifestation isn’t like anything I’ve read about before, but I assume it means you’re pretty powerful. I read that sometimes powerful artificers can change the appearance of their bodies, just through sheer force of will.”

Nemesis chuckles under his breath. “Yeah, they can. Elias’ hair was always perfect. It always looked like he wanted it to. One time, he got it tangled, and he chopped that section off. It grew back in less than a week. It was bonkers.”

Evie nods. “Everyone in Kude Lee has these sorts of manifestations. The knack there is more powerful, in general. That was pretty good for me, it turned out.”

Nemesis leaps down from his shelf, landing on his feet with a slight wince but managing not to stumble. “Right, that’s done. Now time for the daring escape, is it?”

“I guess so. Just back the way we came, right?” Callie asks.

“Maybe. Just one thing, first.” He follows his compass to the rack of clothing, carefully looking at the clothing piece by piece. This particular rack seems to be occupied by the more outlandish outfits; things useful in highly specific situations but worthless otherwise – likely put together for a specific production, then placed here to fester upon completion. A sorry fate.

He swipes through a suit jacket ostensibly made for a giant, three flare dresses in garish polka-dot colors, what appears to be a donkey suit, an endearing spherical mask, a rather spectacular clown costume, and a somewhat out-of-place looking low-cut black lace dress. The final object is the one which seems to draw the needle’s attention.

Carefully, Nemesis yanks on the clothes hanger.

The entire rack depresses with it, and with a familiar whirring noise, the wall opens. This time, there are no doors – simply a passageway leading onwards into inky blackness. He shines his lantern into it, and it cuts through the pitch-black entrance, revealing… more darkness.

He scans the ground. No tripwires in sight, though who can say what the future holds? He chuckles quietly. “What have we here…?”

“This is probably a bad idea,” Evie proposes. “You have no idea who or what is on the other side. You don’t even know what the other side is.”
“Somehow,” Callie mutters, “I don’t think that’s even remotely going to stop him.”

“Nor me.” Percy hugs Evie, and she hug's back, tense after a moment of hesitation. “Evie, stay here and make sure no one follows us, okay? I promise we’ll be careful.”

“I know you well enough to know that you absolutely can’t promise that,” she nods, solemnly. “... But I can’t stop you. Just know that I’ll be extremely worried the entire time.”

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” He assures her. “But I need to find out where this goes. I can’t rest until I do.”

“I know. I know.” She backs away with a sigh. “... Be safe.”

“I will.” He glances down at the entrance. Despite his words, there’s trepidation visible on his face. “... Think you should probably go first, Nemesis. I’m not used to things like this.”

Nemesis scoffs, entering. “Y’think I am, then?”

“You aren’t?” Callie asks, following him in.

“Not especially.”

Percy enters last, and the door shuts behind them. Aside from Nemesis’ lantern, they’re in pitch darkness again – though this somehow feels blacker than the previous time. This corridor is far thinner than the last, and the darkness far more oppressive. Perhaps, he thinks, this truly is a bad idea. Though he doesn’t see any traps, he can’t shake the deep feeling of foreboding that threatens to force him to stop in his tracks. And yet, he reaches the other side without an issue, motioning for the other two to follow him as he steps out, back into the light.

The room they emerge into is pentagonal and mostly empty. Each wall has a single bookshelf on it, with slight space on either end – Nemesis can see why, as the bookshelf at their wall has slid to the side to accommodate their exit. It’s a little bit squished, but they manage to make it out, and the door slides neatly closed behind them.

In the center of the room, a velvet armchair sits by a desk, books and papers scattered over it. Percy immediately reaches forward, snatching a book off of the desk.

“Hey, Jones, you know what language this is in?” He holds up the book. It’s covered in strange runes that Nemesis can swear he’s seen before, but can’t for the life of him recognize.

“No…” He shakes his head, and picks up a paper which had been next to the book. It appears to be Tobias Fitzroy’s to-do list, including such fascinating subjects as ‘purchase toothpaste’ and ‘look over lights setup’.

Of course, that still means they’re in Tobias Fitzroy’s study. Nemesis feels a rush of alarm. “Can’t believe I of all people am saying this, but let’s go. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Alright,” Percy mutters. “If you say so. But you’re going to have to find the way out.”

Nemesis frowns and turns back around to face the bookshelf they’d come through. It’s featureless, and the books on it seem to be in every language he’s ever heard of, and then some. Carefully, he runs his hand over the spines of the books, frowning. They all seem mostly the same to him, but he pulls on the top of each one, one by one.

Finally, one of the books he tries freezes in its dislodged position, and he hears a soft click as the
door opens. He gestures to the other two, who follow him in.

Not a moment too soon, because before they’re too far down the tunnel, they hear the sound of footsteps. Nemesis turns around, pressing his ear against the wood of the bookshelf.

Inside, he hears movement.

“It’s not here – where did I put that book?” That’s Fitzroy, almost certainly. Nemesis hears him cross the room. “I can’t have misplaced it too far from here. I remember it being on the desk.”

“Maybe it’s in your study proper?” He feels a small jolt of surprise – because that voice is unmistakably that of Lusitania Renwick.

“Perhaps, darling.” To Nemesis, he doesn’t sound especially convinced. “I’ll have to look for it later, I suppose. This is all so inconvenient… Truly, it's as if I’m being tested.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m sure you’ll be able to fix all of this. You’re the most powerful man in this city.”

“Yes. Yes, I know.” He hears Fitzroy sigh. “It’s just a massive inconvenience, really. And everything was going so well, too, before Frederick died… Well, nothing to be done about it, except punish those responsible.”

“I suspect it’s that horrid one that Elias insists on keeping around for some reason.” Lusitania’s voice is dripping with disdain. Nemesis, despite his low opinion of Jing, feels a spike of anger. “It would be just like that… that annoyance to do something like this simply to ruin you.”

“Hmm, perhaps. I can’t discount the possibility, but I can’t be hasty. If I simply get rid of them, that would draw attention – unfortunately, Elias would most certainly notice. How irritating…” Fitzroy sighs. “I doubt it was either of the Chases. They haven’t the resolve. They may be agents, but they’re incompetent ones – if they can’t even hide their true allegiances, they can’t possibly have found their way in here. As it stands, any member of our staff could be an infiltrator.” He hears a rustling, then a sigh. “We should get going, then, and sort this out. Keep a closer eye on everyone, will you?”

“Of course… That includes Elias, right? I get to keep a closer eye on him, too?”

He chuckles. “I don’t believe I need to tell you to do that, dear. I trust you’ll make me proud.”

Nemesis feels his stomach twist.

He and Percy rush, as quietly as possible, back to the theatre proper.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, it's a miracle I have this chapter up on time, as I've been fully occupied with a horrible cocktail of schoolwork and NaNoWriMo. However, here it is!

Apologies for my lack of responsiveness to comments up until this point. I promise I appreciate every single commentor on my works - I am, for lack of a better word, a little shy when it comes to interacting with comments on my work, but that is something I'm attempting to overcome. I'll do my best to actually reply to comments in
the future, and know that I greatly appreciate any sort of comments or feedback.
Chapter Notes

Content warnings for mentions of violence, implied child abuse, and some horrifying medical experiments involving corpses. Nothing too upsettingly graphic, hopefully, but be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a long night for Nemesis. For once, he doesn’t dream of Elias, but that’s no comfort to him. Instead, he dreams of the dead woman, with her uncanny-but-not-quite-perfect resemblance to Lusitania Renwick, as Tobias Fitzroy’s hands close around her neck and she struggles, miserably, hopelessly, for air. And then he dreams of desperate sobs, and he dreams of different hands closing around a different neck, of struggling for air, and of covering bruises with long sleeves and collars and gloves, and of washing faces so that no one can see the redness or the streaks, so that no one has an excuse to admit that they suspect something is terribly, terribly wrong. He dreams of pain just strong enough that he can’t fully ignore it. He dreams about fear and about anger and about miserable orphans and about willful ignorance.

And then he wakes up and reassures himself he’s none the worse for any of it, despite the throbbing of his knuckles.

At Nemesis’ request, it’s Percy who comes to meet him this time, knocking nervously on the door of Beaumort’s. The place has a reputation, according to Theory; Nemesis hasn’t seen evidence of that until now, but if Percy of all people, the same Percy who had eagerly entered the secret tunnel at the Theatre Obscura, is nervous at entering, that’s a sure sign there’s something sinister about the place. Evie trails behind him, seeming less scared for herself and more worried for Percy, who, despite his visible trepidation, hasn’t hesitated to rip the door open and dramatically proclaim his presence.

Even Theory looks a little tense as the five of them sit around the dinner table in the loft. The table normally only has three chairs, so Percy has been forced to pull up an armchair, and Evie a padded stool from downstairs which Theory uses to get books off of the shelves too tall for her to reach. The five of them look, Nemesis thinks, like an especially ragtag group of strangers gathered by chance.

Percy is the first to speak, quieter than Nemesis has yet heard him. “The newspapers aren’t reporting on this, predictably. Not even the Sun. I wanted to, but Ms. Alhazred wouldn’t allow it. Something about keeping our cards in our sleeves and not inciting mass panic.”

He sighs. “She said you and I should go to the constables, Nemesis. If we get permission to investigate – which we probably will, because the Correspondents have agents among the police – then we can collect more information, and then… Once we figure out what’s going on, some of it can go public.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “All sounds like a lot of hassle. I’m not entirely opposed to inciting mass panic, though, so maybe my opinions on how to go about this can’t completely be trusted. I’ll trust you for now, as long as Fitzroy gets taken down.”
“Even if he isn’t guilty?” Evie asks.

“He’s guilty. No way he’s not guilty.” He pauses, hearing his heart beating like a jackhammer in his chest, and makes sure to take a deep breath before he continues speaking. “But, yes. Even if he didn’t kill this specific woman – I don’t care. I want to ruin his life.”

This earns him concerned looks from everyone except for Theory, who seems completely unfazed. “You two do that. Meanwhile, you wanted me to take a look at that book you stole from Fitzroy’s study, right?”

“If you don’t mind,” he confirms.

Percy frowns; his eyebrows furrow in a way that’s, quite frankly, cute. “I’m not sure this is really necessary to prove anyone murdered anyone –”

“Nah, it’s not. I’m just curious, as it were.”

Theory speaks, calm and even. “I can try my best. This looks like it might be a strange sort of Pre-Al-Mushrite, not one I’ve seen before. I can certainly translate it, but it will take some time. I must say, it’s gorgeous. It looks as though it might be thousands of years old, but it’s very well-preserved. It’ll be a welcome addition to my collection, once I’m done.” She gingerly runs her hand over the spine. There’s an attentiveness from her that Nemesis has never seen before.

“So we’re just outright stealing from Mr. Fitzroy?” Callie asks. “Not that I have any moral issues with that. I wouldn’t still be here if I did. I’m just curious.”

Nemesis starts to wonder where else she could possibly go, but realizes that he’ll feel like a bad person if he lingers on this topic much longer. He’s useless when he mopes. “Yes, we are. Of course we are. And we’re going to do more of it, if I have any say in the matter.”

Evie frowns. “You really hate Fitzroy, I’m getting the sense. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, but you haven’t even met him, have you?”

“You could call him an old enemy of mine,” he says. “No, I will not elaborate on that whatsoever, so don’t bother asking. My own feelings on the subject don’t matter nearly as much as solving this crime.”

“Right, right. We’ll get going soon. But first,” Percy tents his hands and glances sharply across the table at Theory. “I have some questions for you, Ms. Hayes. About this bookstore, and about your family.”

Theory flinches, barely visibly, at that last word. She almost manages to keep her expression completely neutral as she stares back at Percy, her voice as controlled as it ever is. “Yes, of course. Ask whatever you’d like.”

“This might be a bit of a touchy question, and I apologize, but this bookstore has its own history. That much I know. Your family is pretty infamous around here, in a really negative way. I mean, you’re one of the only families that’s been blacklisted, definitively, from attending the Institute.” He pauses to gauge Theory’s reaction – which is rather indifferent, of course. She knows all of that already. “The reason they were blacklisted was because they were doing some rather dodgy stuff in this very bookstore. They even named it after their organization – the Beaumort Society. But the Beaumort Society seemingly vanished, around five years ago. What happened?”

She seems almost relieved, though that might just be Nemesis’ eyes playing tricks on him. “Oh, you want to know that? I was never a member, but I know approximately what happened. They
thought it would be safer to operate out of Al-Mushriq. Probably for the best, that. So they shifted their base of operations, and they all travel there for meetings. They rebranded, too, and I’m not sure what to, so don’t ask me. Like I said. Haven’t become a member yet. My parents haven’t come back to collect me, or the books. I assume they’re too busy… working.”

“I see. This might seem a little bit insensitive, considering the circumstances, but I think we - a group of like-minded people seeking the truth - should bring back the Beaumort society.”

That provokes a dramatic and immediate reaction from both Evie – whose eyes widen quickly and drastically, giving her a distinctly frog-like appearance – and Theory, who seems to tense in every possible joint, projecting the look of pure simmering rage. Despite that, her response is calm and measured. “Why would you want to do that? It isn’t as though they were a group of like-minded individuals who solved mysteries, you know. They were researchers, and they researched things that would nauseate you. The aspects of artifice so taboo even the Institute won’t dare touch them.”

“I know, I know. But you said they rebranded, right? We can be a new Beaumort Society, except this time, we’re researchers in a different sense. We’re looking into the secrets not even the constables will touch. It seems fairly analogous. Besides, if we want anyone to take us seriously we need name recognition. With how few of us there is, we’re better off working with someone else’s legacy.”

“It isn’t even close, and I don’t think you want this legacy, but I really can’t stop you, if that’s what you want,” Theory sighs. She doesn’t sound particularly okay with the idea.

She glances at the wall. Nemesis follows her eyes. She’s looking directly at the sole photograph on the wall; a framed oval portrait of a younger Theory and what Nemesis concluded long ago must be her parents: a wild-haired man with an equally wild grin and a very neat, frowning woman. The Doctors Hayes had owned this bookstore before Theory, and if their word is to be taken seriously, they’ll be back to reclaim it one of these days.

“All I’m saying is we’re not getting matching tattoos,” Nemesis says. “You wanna be a society, you wanna expand? Sure. But don’t be surprised when you go mad with power and I defect and work against you.”

“Duly noted,” Percy mutters. “Don’t want this to be hierarchical, know that much. I’d just like an official name for a loose coalition of people who work together to root out corruption!”

“That’s the police,” Callie suggests.

“Nah. All the police do is arrest people who don’t need to be arrested and refuse to arrest the people who do,” Nemesis scowls. “Again, Chase, I’ll work with this, but only until you prove yourself untrustworthy – which I have no doubt you will, eventually.”

“You’re so hostile towards me, Nemesis. You’ve already proved I’m not lying.” Percy does seem a little hurt, and a cursory glance at his compass confirms his sincerity. Nemesis can’t pretend he doesn’t feel a pang of guilt in his chest. It isn’t easy or pleasant, but it’s necessary. In his line of work, he has to be sure that everyone he interacts with will eventually betray him. And they will.

But he sighs, glanced at Percy, then Evie, then Callie, and finally, the still-tense Theory. “I think it’s an alright idea. An alliance to undo all of the other alliances. For now, I’m not opposed. Just know I’ll be keeping all of you in check.”

He forces himself to relax, because despite what he says and despite the guilt, something tells him this is a spectacularly horrible idea. “Admittedly, it’s probably a good idea for other reasons.
People in my line of work have a tendency to… vanish mysteriously. Especially someone as young as me, in a city like this… could probably use the backup.”

Percy smiles softly. “Right. Think of it that way. Backup.”

The police station is strangely empty. Nemesis and Percy walk by rows of empty benches to the reception desk, where a woman sits, legs crossed, a tired expression on her face. Behind her, rows of cells are lined up; the prisoners in them are either sleeping, exhausted, or dead. From this distance, it’s difficult to tell.

Nemesis thinks to himself how deeply unpleasant it is, keeping people in here. Even if it’s just a transitional step on their way to prison, and probably makes things easier for the police themselves, he can’t imagine being those prisoners, on display for anyone who happens to enter this room.

The woman at the desk, he notices with a sinking feeling, isn’t someone he recognizes. She has black hair in a high ponytail and piercing blue eyes. When they enter, she looks up from her magazine – *The Discerning Manacle*, a publication frequented by agents of the law and fetishists alike – to glare at them. Her nametag reads ‘Charlotte Crawford’. “I sense you’re here to talk to me. Make it quick.”

Her tone is so unpleasant. It makes his skin crawl; sends a familiar chill down his spine. He’s met precisely one police officer he’s even remotely enjoyed the company of, and he’d been hedging his bets on his old acquaintance being on duty. Unfortunately, it’s this woman instead. Somehow, he feels like she won’t be nearly as willing to parlay.

*Seriously, what’s the point of a constable who can’t even be bribed?*

Percy nods. “I’m a reporter with the Electric Sun, and –”

“And you want an interview? No. I don’t wanna talk to you.” She sighs. “I hate desk duty… It’s a waste of perfectly good officers who should be on patrol. Ugh. You can go bother someone else.”

He still seems very composed, which Nemesis thinks is rather impressive. “We were wondering if we could look into the corpse found outside of the Obscura – for investigative journalism purposes, of course. Is there a detective assigned to the case?”

“Don’t see why there would be. She died of natural causes. No need to investigate.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “‘Natural causes’? She had rope marks around her neck. She was hanged.”

“Nothing unnatural about dying of being hanged. That’d kill most people.”

He sighs and opens his mouth to argue, but she raises a finger. “No buts. The Automaton Lex determined that her death was of natural causes. And unless you’re the murderer yourself, I don’t see why you’d know better.”

He feels Percy’s hand on his shoulder. He has to deflate, simmer instead of boiling, because right now (he realizes with a dull, almost too-familiar feeling) he is incredibly close to getting himself arrested.

“... Sorry about my friend. If it’s all so sure, you wouldn’t mind us looking into interviewing people in proximity to the case, right?” Percy sounds sheepish, but also scared. Nemesis supposes he should probably feel guilty.
“Yeah, no, I don’t care. If you wanna track people down, be my guest. It’s your time you’ll be wasting, then, and not mine. Which is what you’re doing right now, is wasting my time, by the way.”

“Duly noted,” he mutters. “Do you at least know which morgue the corpse is being held at?”

She groans, puts down her magazine, and flips carelessly through a stack of papers. “... She was given to Dr. Aleister Burke, one of the Institute’s guys. I’d feel sorry for her if she was still alive, but she’s not, so at least she won’t feel herself getting vivisected.”

“Actually,” Nemesis says, almost on instinct, “It’s only a vivisection if the subject is alive —”

Percy claps a hand over his mouth. “Of course, what my friend is saying is that it’s a very good thing corpses don’t feel pain.”

“Yeah. Thank goodness we don’t have any sort of weird cultural hang-ups around working with corpses. Imagine how much less scientific and medical progress we would have made if we treated corpses like people instead of bones and flesh? I can’t.” She picks her magazine back up and waves them off. “Anyway, shoo. Before I arrest both of you for trespassing.”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you for your time!” Percy grabs him and firmly pulls him outside by the arm.

Callie is waiting for them outside, wearing a large pair of sunglasses borrowed from Theory, not wanting to call the police’s attention to herself - though Nemesis thinks it’s accomplishing very much the opposite. (Apparently Art always told her never to trust the police, which is a viewpoint Nemesis can greatly respect.) When they come out, she glances up at them nervously. “How did it go…?”

“Mixed bag, mixed bag,” Percy mutters, seeming just the barest bit agitated. “I mean, we got our permission, and a lead, but Nemesis almost got himself arrested.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

“It’s not like almost getting arrested is a new experience for me,” Nemesis grins, despite himself. “But I’ve never actually been arrested, so right now I have a pretty good overall track record, I’d say!”

“That isn’t particularly reassuring…” she sighs.

“You’re such a critic. I know what I’m doing, you know,” he mutters. It’s half a joke.

“Of course you know what you’re doing. That’s why I wanted you on my side,” Percy says with surprising sincerity. “But you need to slow down sometimes too, you know. You can’t solve everything. When we talk to Dr. Burke, keep that in mind. You know how to interrogate, but I know how to interview.”

He pats Nemesis on the shoulder. “Sometimes, you need to know when to act.”

Nemesis feels a little like this might be a covert way of insulting him, especially coming from a person who is supposedly known for being impulsive and having little common sense, but he nods. “... I’ll keep it in mind.” He hopes Percy can’t hear the spite in his voice.
“Good. I believe in you!” Percy offers him a wide smile. The sheer amount of likely feigned positivity coming off of him in waves makes Nemesis unbelievably angry.

Dr. Aleister Burke’s office is located in a part of town known as the Institute District. Surrounding the main headquarters of Catacumba in an outward spiral, towers of buildings serve as extra classrooms, offices, and lodging. This particular black brick building is located on the outskirts of both the district and the city. It looks quite a bit worse for wear – a fallen branch is sticking crookedly out of the top left section, and bricks were scattered on the ground like fallen leaves. The street lacks enough lamps, and the trees cast large shadows across the front of the building. A small brass plaque over the door proclaims, in large letters, DEPARTMENT OF NECROMANCY, and then, a smaller plaque, in smaller letters, off to the side: DR ALEISTER BURKE.

“Is he the only professor?” Callie asks as she reads the plaque. She’s visibly nervous. Nemesis supposes the place doesn’t precisely project a comforting aura.


“It’s probably a type of artifice, but I don’t know anything about it either.”

“I know it’s a bit obscure, but neither of you have even heard of it?” Nemesis scoffs. Though he, of course, won’t say it out loud, he’s thrilled that he knows something neither of them do.

“Necromancy’s a type of artifice, yeah. It involves… well, end goal is reviving the dead. No one’s gotten that far yet, but…”

“That’s… interesting,” Percy comments, visibly unnerved. Callie, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to see anything concerning about this.

“More than a bit obscure, then. I reckon, as long as he doesn’t kill any of us to try and revive us, we’ll all be fine,” Nemesis reassures them.

With that rather optimistic view of things, he knocks on the door.

The door is answered by someone who looks nothing like what Nemesis had imagined Dr. Aleister Burke would look like. In fact, he looks quite like Charles Dreadful.

Charles seems exhausted and sleep-deprived, dressed simply in a white shirt and black waistcoat. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and bandages completely cover both of his arms. His hair is clipped up behind his head. When he sees Nemesis, he frowns. “Why are you here? Did Hayes send you?”

“We were looking for a Dr. Aleister Burke,” Nemesis answers.

“Well, I’m not him. I doubt you’ve forgotten my name, Nemesis Jones.”

“Haven’t. So are we in the wrong place? Has he been secretly dead for years, is that what’s happening?”

“… Heh. No. Goodness, no. Wait just a moment.” Charles leans back in, half-shutting the door. “PROFESSOR! PEOPLE HERE TO SEE YOU! ASSOCIATES OF HAYES’!”

There’s a sound of things being put down, and of footsteps, and the door opens properly. Aleister Burke is tall, with unruly dark hair tied haphazardly back and braided, somewhat sunken hazel eyes, and a long white doctor’s coat over his dark clothing. He is pale and gaunt, looking not completely unlike a reanimated corpse himself. He looks from Nemesis, to Callie, to Percy, taking
in each of their rather… distinctive appearances. “Who have we here?” he asks, in a rather deep, intimidating voice, accented Lygredish – one of the older, less urban dialects.

“Nemesis Jones,” Nemesis answers promptly. “Not actually here on behalf of Theory Hayes. Here on behalf of that corpse you’ve been holding onto.”

Burke frowns. “No offense, lad, but that could be several corpses.”

“You just got a corpse collection going or something?” Percy asks nervously. “Nothing wrong with that, I mean, people have hobbies –”

“Not a collection. I need them for my line of work.”

He looks as though the response might have sucked his soul directly out of his body, which Nemesis can’t entirely blame him for. Burke is scary, just by nature of his appearance. Were Nemesis not used to dealing with terrifying older people, this might be difficult for him.

Percy, it seems, is not so used to dealing with terrifying adults.

“Right, right. We’re looking for the one found outside the Theatre Obscura. For crime investigating reasons, and not corpse theft reasons, or anything of the sort. We’ll let you have it back afterwards.”

Burke looks somber. “... Had a feeling it’d be her. Yes, I can help you, er… You don’t look like police.”

“We aren’t.”

“Good to hear.” He glances between the three visitors. “All of you look awfully young, to be doing this sort of work. Fair warning – what’s in my office may disturb you. Any of you are free to wait outside, if you have a weak stomach.”

“I’ll be fine,” Nemesis says confidently. Behind him, Percy nods a shaky affirmation.

“My stomach isn’t weak, and it could beat up Nemesis’ stomach,” Callie mutters. Though it isn’t the proper time or correct, Nemesis admires the chutzpah.

Burke seems to appreciate it, though, judging by the barest hint of a chuckle he lets out in response. It looks utterly foreign on his face. “Right, right. Come on, then. Would any of you like any tea? And do keep your shoes on, by the way – I wash the floors regularly, but who knows what there’s trace amounts of down there.”

Percy laughs nervously. Nemesis pats him on the shoulder, hoping it’s as condescending as he intends.

The room’s interior is, simply put, a mess. Theory Hayes is bad at cleaning, but this place easily puts Beaumort’s to shame. Papers and tools are scattered all over the multiple desks; various cleaning implements are out in the open, clearly having seen recent use; the room is absolutely devoid of anything that could be called ‘interior decorating’.

All of that, however, pales in comparison to the true horrors of the room. A door in the back of the room, labeled ‘FREEZER’, is concerning in itself, but is made even more ominous by the cabinet next to it, labeled ‘BONES’. The door of the ‘Bones’ cabinet is slightly ajar, and Nemesis can see a femur poking out of it.
The walls are covered in large papers, with elaborate diagrams of the human body scrawled on them. Some of the diagrams are benign, like something out of an anatomy textbook (of which there is no shortage in the room to begin with). Others are horrifying cross-sections drawn with sickening detail. The most disturbing, perhaps, are photographs of corpses that, as far as Nemesis can tell by the sheer amount of gore, died terrible, terrible deaths.

And among them, he notices a single photograph. The old paper shows a man with deep brown skin, shoulder-length dreadlocks, and a kind smile. It doesn’t seem to belong in this room of death, but perhaps isn’t the most polite thing to ask about.

And finally, there are the tables; two of them, one on each side of the room. One is covered with fresh blood and viscerae. The other holds a corpse, stretched out and head bored open. Some sort of device is attached to it as blue liquid pumps into its veins. Despite what he can only assume are Burke’s best efforts the corpse seems to remain quite dead.

Next to him, Percy is gagging. Callie looks completely unaffected.

As Charles moves to clean off the bloody table, a rush of feathers comes at Nemesis. He ducks and feels claws tear into his scalp, before Burke shouts “No –” and the sensation ceases.

When he looks up, Burke is holding in his arms what looks to be a skeletal raven; flesh and feathers are scarce on its bones. A red glow peeks out of its eyes. The skeleton miraculously moves on its own, looking miffed at having been pulled out of Nemesis’ hair and letting out a dissatisfied croak.

Burke glances to Charles. “Boy, your infernal bird-creature is bothering the guests.”

“That isn’t my problem,” Charles mutters, but he reluctantly clicks his tongue and holds out his hand. The raven flies over to perch on his bandages. He carefully scratches its skull before returning to his work.

Nemesis glances between Charles and Burke. “What’s the deal here, then? He your employee? Apprentice?”

“Former apprentice. Assistant, now. He’s my most devoted student. And yes, before you make the obvious comment, I do have others.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he frowns, hoping Burke hasn’t noticed his reaction. “Right, though. We’re here for a corpse, as it were. A specific one.”

“Yes, her.” Burke’s face falls a mite. “Once the table is clean – yes, she’s… Well… She’s fully intact, right now. The police told me it was natural causes, but a single glance is enough to assure that is not the case. Such a shame, she was quite the talented young girl, gone before her time.”

“You knew her?” Callie asks.

“Yes, yes, I did. She was a student of artifice herself – though she primarily worked in a far different field, she did pass through my department once or twice. She was very studious, and I hear she graduated with high honors. Though it’s strange… I haven’t heard of her since then.”

“What’s her name?” Nemesis asks.

“Elizabeth Calloway,” Burke answers, and Nemesis feels his heart sink.

“No, er… relationship to Geoffrey?”
“Relationship. Yes. She’s – was - his daughter.”

Nemesis feels as if the air has been sucked out of him. He imagines tired Geoffrey Calloway, who always seems so exhausted and sad. His daughter is dead, and as it stands right now, her killer will be getting off scot-free. Of course, it isn’t as if the killer being caught would be much solace, either.

The fact is that Elizabeth Calloway is dead – gone – and that her father will never see her again. The thought sickens him.

Percy, who has been staring ceaselessly in a sort of rapt horror at the corpse on the table, leans one hand against the wall. He covers his mouth with the other.

“Need to bow out, Chase?” Nemesis asks, this time free of condescension. “I didn’t know you were so squeamish. Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

Really, Callie’s stoicism is the more concerning thing at this point.

“Maybe. Maybe –” He shakes his head. “I’ll wait outside, right. Um. Sorry.”

And with that, he ducks outside.

Callie watches him leave, sympathetic but visibly confused. “Why is he so upset?”

“It’s not unnatural,” Charles speaks up, having finished cleaning off the table. “Most people are a little squeamish around corpses. And necromancy, in particular… Reverenti consider it an insult to the natural order, and some artificers consider it a waste of resources. Doesn’t precisely have the best of reputations. That’s why everyone who studies it has a reason to.”

“A reason to?”

“Yes, a reason to. Either a natural draw, someone in particular they’d like to bring back, some sort of experience with death. It’s different for every person, but no one studies necromancy who doesn’t have a passion for it.” He scratches the raven’s head.

Nemesis thinks, for a brief moment, that he and Charles might not be so different. That, if his life was slightly different, he could have ended up here under the wing of Aleister Burke, cutting open corpses and reanimating bird skeletons.

With a loud caw that breaks Nemesis out of his thoughts, the skeletal raven sits on his shoulder. He glances at it. A hint of a smile pulls at his lips.

“Baron’s nervous around strangers, I think. Forgive me. He hasn’t had any opportunity to be around anyone but me or Professor Burke, since I animated him,” Charles explains.

“His name’s Baron?” Callie asks. “... May I pet him?”

He shrugs. “You may certainly try.”

She does just that, reaching out her hand and patting the creature’s awful skeletal head. The raven seems more confused than anything, but it doesn’t attack her. As far as Nemesis is concerned, it goes better than he expected.

“Did you actually reanimate it?” he asks Charles.

“Yes, I did.”
“If you can reanimate a bird, why have necromancers never been able to reanimate humans?”

“We can reanimate humans, that’s never been the issue. But our reanimation isn’t *revival*. We can allow them to move on their own, to act, almost as if they are truly alive, but they have no memories, they know nothing, and they must relearn how to function on the most basic level, as if they are children.

“It is… a semblance of life. They need no nutrients or sleep, and they cannot be killed by normal means. They must be disenchanted, so having too many of them around is a hazard, in case something goes wrong. That’s why it’s illegal without a certification.

“But none of that really matters. The problem is that if a person is dead… we have yet to find a way to bring them back as they were. And that is, of course, the end-goal of necromancy.” He lowers his head somberly. “In short, in death, the *animus* is separated from the *corpus*, that is, the physical – and we have found, as far as we can tell, a way to create a primitive mimicry of an *animus*, but not to reunite the *animus* and the *corpus*.”

“I see. That’s fascinating, actually,” Nemesis remarks truthfully. “But unfortunately, I’m here to investigate a murder, not sit in on a lecture.”

“Right, of course.” Charles stands and migrates back to the freezer, gingerly opening the door and looking around inside.

Burke glances at Nemesis. “You know, you’re welcome to sit in on lectures anytime you’d like. They’re rather small and hands-on.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I actually can’t.” He shrugs, “Don’t have the knack, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, I see.” Burke nods. “Not even a little, hmm? That must make life a little difficult.”

“Not really, actually. Back in Citrea Viridia, people who had powerful knacks either moved here or destroyed things without meaning to. It’s not like here, where most people here learn to suppress their knack if they aren’t studying artifice. I was pretty relieved to not have it.”

“Citrea Viridia? You’re from Llygredyg? Hmm… Lad, what did you say your name was again?”

“I’m Nemesis Jones. Er, if there’s something about that you find… interesting, we can talk after I take a look at this corpse.”

“Right, right.” Burke looks distinctly vexed. Nemesis is both proud and deeply worried that his presence is capable of inducing that emotion.

Charles brings out Calloway’s corpse. It looks just as pale and horrifying as Nemesis remembers it. Slowly, he reaches out to touch her face, to brush her hair out of her eyes. The same terrified look is still painted on her face.

He runs his hand over her forehead, cursing the lack of sensation through his glove. He’s long grown used to the strange way it affects his movement – the suffocating feeling of it, the clumsiness – but the lack of sensation remains an impediment. “I’m not precisely a doctor, so I need your expertise. What’s going on with this corpse?”

Burke leans over the corpse and frowns.

“… It’s difficult to tell. This woman has been dead for over a day, at the very least, and yet…” He places a careful hand over her throat, “…Perfectly preserved. She seems as if she is in stasis –
perfectly alive save for the heartbeat. She is a snapshot of a living body, but the blood in her veins
does not move, and she does not breathe. By all means, distinctly dead, but there is nothing to
indicate that except for the lack of life."

“That’s horrifying,” Nemesis mutters, though his expression remains undisturbed. “Then you think
the marks on the neck could have been made post-mortem, feasibly? You think she can bruise in
this state?”

“I was wondering the same thing, actually. As it stands, I see no reason to think the bruising
"couldn’t be post-mortem. I don’t know that for sure, though – nor do I have any reason to assume it
was post-mortem.”

He pulls his notebook and pen from his pocket, dutifully writing down what Burke is saying. “I
see, I see. Now, you’re a necromancer, so you really can’t object to what I’m about to do without
seeming like a massive hypocrite.”

And, without further elaborating, he lifts Calloway’s hand and slams her wrist down on the side of
the table with enough force that a disgusting crack rings through the room.

Burke and Charles look on grimly. Callie still seems unperturbed.

Gingerly, Nemesis brushes back her sleeve. Underneath, her wrist is rapidly swelling. It’s probably
good that she isn’t alive to feel this, because judging by his own limited knowledge it looks most
definitely broken, and badly, too. And indeed, a horrifying, deep purple bruise is rapidly spreading
across the length of her wrist and forearm.

“That’s one way to find out,” Burke mutters. “To be frank, I’d considered doing the same myself,
but that just seemed disrespectful.”

“I’m pretty disrespectful in general, so lines up.” Nemesis rummages in his bag before removing a
camera, carefully photographing the wrist and watching the image print itself before doing the
same for Calloway’s face and neck. He steps back to get a larger shot of her whole body, splayed
out on the table.

Finally, he reaches to her other hand, gently lifting it and brushing back the sleeve. The wrist is
stained with a deep purple circle.

He frowns, photographing it as well, then turns to her legs. Around her ankles, a similar purple
circle stands out against her snow-white, utterly dead skin. He photographs that, too. “Bloody hell.
Right, that should be it, for now. Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

“Right.” Burke glances at Callie, then Charles. “Oh, Charles, would you mind showing the girl
out? I’d like to speak to Jones here for a moment.”

Nemesis tenses. Damnit.

“Sure,” Charles says, though he seems a little on the confused side. He gestures to Callie, who
glances nervously at Nemesis.

He waves to her, giving her a half-grin he hopes is reassuring. She lowers her head and follows
Charles out, not seeming completely comfortable with it despite her compliance. The room is left
empty: just Burke, Nemesis, and Elizabeth Calloway’s corpse.

Burke turns to him and sighs. “ Might take a bit. Would you like some tea, lad?”
“No thanks.” He pulls a flask from his bag, replacing the camera. “Don’t really trust you not to poison me. No offense.”

“None taken.” The ghost of a forlorn grin crosses Burke’s face. “You’re just like him, down to the paranoia.”

Nemesis sits down on a chair, currently the one piece of furniture in the room not occupied by corpses. He tries not to think about what might have been on it in the past. He puts his legs up on the table on which Elizabeth Calloway’s corpse is resting, and begins to take a sip of the liquid in his flask before deciding that he’s being rude enough. “I dunno what you mean by that,” he quips back.

Burke sighs. “Right. You’re really pretending you’ve no relation to Arthur? You don’t need to do that, you know. I’m on his side, and on yours.”

“I am doing nothing of the sort,” Nemesis mutters, bringing out his compass. As far as it seems to be concerned, Burke is entirely sincere – though his eyes widen when he sees it, and he slowly pulls up his sleeve to the elbow.
On the back of his forearm is a tattoo – a large letter ‘C’.

Nemesis turns over his compass. On the back is an identical logo.

“Bloody hell,” he mutters, agitated and tense, and he knows Burke can tell he is. “Never told me he was part of a secret society. Seems like something important to mention before you mysteriously go missing, but what would I know?”

“Seems like it would be,” Burke frowns. “So he got himself in hot water again, huh… Arthur, Arthur, Arthur. You fool. Vanishing and leaving your son to sort it out without so much as a word. I didn’t even know he had a son.”

“Not his son,” Nemesis immediately clarifies. “Er, I mean. I’m his apprentice. Was.”

“Then ‘Nemesis Jones’ is an alias...”
“Obviously.”

“And he’s really just vanished without a word? Even to you?”

“Aye. He left his compass to me.” He pulls out his decoder with a frown. “This, too. It was a gift, he told me, and the compass was a loan so I could solve a specific case – but then I came back to his office and he was just gone, and that was when I knew I had to leave Citrea Viridia.”

“Sounds like Arthur, unfortunately. I recognize those dials. He made them himself, as I remember. Spent a while on the whittling. When I asked him why afterwards, he said he just wanted to occupy himself.”

“Right. I was hoping – if I found someone who recognized the compass, they could direct me to his whereabouts. But it seems that’s a dead end.” He sighs in an attempt to hide just how frustrated he is. “Funny. He always told me the people in those societies were freaks who just wanted to screw everyone else over for their own shady reasons. Turns out he was one of them. Heh.”

Burke frowns sympathetically. “I wouldn’t let that color your opinion of him, lad. The Correspondents were founded as a countermeasure to the Eyes, back when they first got started. Back then, our goals were simple: collect information and prevent the Eyes from getting things done. It wasn’t until Alhazred – one of our members – got a bit too… secretive… that us thirteen original members split up. The organization as it stands right now couldn’t be farther from what it was meant to be. In fact, I’d say Arthur’s negative opinion of such matters probably came primarily from his own experiences. He doesn’t have a nasty bone in his body.”

“He doesn’t, no.” Nemesis agrees. Although all the logic adds up, it does nothing to put his mind at ease. “So you all moved on after? You haven’t been in contact with him?”

Burke shakes his head. “No. Sorry. At least, I’ve not spoken to him in years. I’ll try to get in touch with some of the others, see if they have, but my hopes aren’t terribly high.”

“That’d be lovely. Thank you. And you don’t think you can tell me much about how this murder was carried out? What happened to this poor girl?”

“I don’t think so. I reanimate people, not so much heal them. Charles studies some medicine, from a teacher who I trust greatly. I’ll give you his building number, if you’d like to stop by and talk to him. He’s quite the doctor.”

He glances apprehensively at the corpse. “Think it’d be better if I could take her with me, but that seems out of the question. If anything, best to stop dragging her around and get her to her father for a proper burial. You’re not going to hold onto the corpse, right?”

“Goodness, no. It’s a bit more… unsavory, reanimating someone you knew as a mindless mound of flesh. It shouldn’t be, but I simply can’t get over my squeamishness in those circumstances. Charles has no such inhibitions, apparently.”

“That’s weird,” he mutters. “Right, then. I’ll be off. Nice meeting you and all that, society rubbish aside. Just give me that doctor’s address and I’ll be on my way.”

Burke writes down the address carefully, handing the paper over to him. “For what it’s worth, I’m sure you’ll find the answers you seek. If you really are his student, well – there wasn’t a question on the planet that guy couldn’t solve. You’ll do fine, lad.”
On their way to the doctor’s, Nemesis cleverly dodges all of Percy and Callie’s attempts at interrogation. By the time they find themselves standing outside the ordinary-looking brick building, the two have learned a significant amount about his taste in interior decorating, as well as how much he hated a specific anatomy teacher he had been forced to endure years ago, but nothing about what had transpired between Nemesis Jones and Aleister Burke in that room.

“You think that Charles guy was an agent of something or other? He seemed really dodgy,” Callie asks, finally.

He thinks back to how frankly Burke had spoken about his own history, and how he had spoken about Charles. “Nah, not a chance.”

“Doesn’t need to be an agent of anything to be dodgy.” Percy still looks a little worse for wear; slightly unsteady on his feet. “Reanimating corpses – keeping bones in a cabinet – that’s so… disgusting.”

“That’s very harsh,” Callie mutters. “All it is is bones, right? It’s not like he’s experimenting on people.”

“They were people.” He shudders. “It’s gross. I wouldn’t want anything like that done with my bones after I died.”

“I wouldn’t care. Just bones and all,” Nemesis inputs. “Really, I’ll be dead. I won’t be able to care anymore. Something that used to be a person does not necessarily a person remain.”

“Does not necessarily a person remain’... You two are so strange,” Percy mutters, dejected. “A corpse is still the remains of a person. If I die and you two are in charge of my corpse for some probably-ridiculous reason, please just have me cremated. In a proper crematory, Nemesis – do not attempt to incinerate my corpse yourself.”

“Noted,” Nemesis says perhaps a bit too snappily, and knocks on the door.

Instantly, the door opens, but he doesn’t see anyone at it – at first. His vision pans down, and standing before him is some horrible sort of creature; one with ashy red skin and pointed horns and red pupils against black sclera. They’re dressed in a white shirt and a black coat and with shockingly humanlike choppy chin-length black hair.

And they have a revolver pointed straight at Nemesis’ head.

He flinches, stumbling back and reaching for his own, as a voice rings out.

“Stabby, no. We aren’t shooting people who knock politely.” The creature – Stabby? – lowers the gun as a figure approaches from the shade of the room.

They’re just a little shorter than Nemesis, with choppy, disheveled gray hair that just grazes their shoulders, dressed in a somewhat threadbare gray blazer, white shirt, and a slate-blue tie. Their one visible eye is a light, clear gray – the other is covered with a bandage which wraps loosely around their head, half-stained through with some sort of viscous blue substance. They look like they might have just lost a fight.

The newcomer glares at Nemesis, and he can feel himself withering in their gaze. Despite it, he keeps up appearances, not letting any cracks appear in his facade. “Hello. We were directed here by one Aleister Burke, for...medical advice.”

“Medical advice?” The gray one raises their sole visible eyebrow. “Can’t just go to the hospital for
whatever it is?”

“Not really,” Nemesis replies briskly. “It’s sort of important and time-sensitive, actually.”

“...okay.” The two stare at each other for a brief moment, before the gray-haired one follows up, “...you aren’t going to elaborate, then?”

“Rather not, really? If that’s alright with everyone here.” Nemesis shrugs. “Unless you’re the doctor, but you don’t really look the part, no offense.”

“...none taken. I’m not.” They glance around the room, then lean back behind the door. “...wait here while I fetch him. Stabby will watch you, and keep in mind they have an itchy trigger finger and the common sense of a young teenager.”

Nemesis and Stabby meet eyes. He can easily buy that this child-thing is capable of shooting him with zero remorse. Behind him, he can practically feel Percy’s tension and Callie’s outright fear. His own hand is on his revolver, but he doubts it will make much of a difference. He’s quick on the draw, but maybe not quick enough, and deep down, he knows he’d have trouble shooting a child, even if it happens to be a horrible child with horns and a gun.

He doesn’t know how long their staring match lasts, but finally it’s interrupted by the gray-haired one’s return. Following them is a man about Nemesis’ height, who—

And Nemesis finds himself practically unable to look away, because this man is beautiful. It isn’t that he’s especially attractive – by all means, he might be if he were some decades younger – but he isn’t, and Nemesis can even see the faint signs of age appearing on his tired face, though he doesn’t look especially old. He has shaggy blond hair that reaches beneath his shoulders, shiny and looking as though it must be exceptionally silky to the touch, framing his light brown skin and hazel eyes, hiding behind small, oval-shaped glasses which sit significantly down his nose. His clothing is disheveled, a black overcoat and messy white shirt, and his face bears a soft, kind smile. Behind him, a soft light that manages to be bright without being blinding fills the room.

Nemesis is sure he’s staring, but the man seems nothing but polite. “Forgive me for not immediately answering the door. Mallory said you had something important and time–sensitive to bring to my attention...?”

Nemesis blinks. “Y...Yeah. I did.” In the moments he’d been staring at the man, Calloway’s murder and the conversation he had with Burke had left his mind entirely. “It’s, er...”

“Your arm, right?” The man purses his lips concernedly. “You’re guarding it, that is – it’s rather clear you’re trying to keep from injuring it more. I’ll take a look at it, if you’ll just take off your g-”

“No.”

The man’s eyes widen. Part of Nemesis wonders if his tone isn’t a little harsh there, but he stands his ground. “I’m not taking off my glove. Er–this isn’t even why we’re here. There was a murder.”

His eyes widen again. “...ah! Of course, Aleister was just telling me about that – he called me ahead to tell me you were coming, nothing more – you’re here to investigate that, I take it?” He clicks his tongue. “I had a friend many years ago who used to need me to tell him this, too - you can’t solve the murder if you can’t keep yourself in one piece. Come here, lad. It’ll just take a moment.”

Nemesis frowns, but, despite himself, takes a tentative step in. Stabby and Mallory look
apprehensively at him, but let him pass. Behind him, Percy and Callie nervously follow.

The place is small, minimally decorated, but homey. A table sits in the center of the room, illuminated by a soft lamp, casting its warm light all over the scattered papers and what looks like a half-consumed cup of tea. The doctor pulls out a chair for Nemesis, gently but sternly moving him towards it before pulling out a chair for himself. Carefully, he takes Nemesis’ arm, stretches it out across the table, and purses his lips when Nemesis can’t help but wince in pain.

“Oh, dear.” He frowns and adjusts his glasses. “Would you mind terribly if I took a closer look? Your reaction makes it seem as if there’s some significant damage, and all of that isn’t very conducive to mystery-solving, you know. Even when there are other things on your mind, it’s always best to be in good condition.”

Nemesis, despite the sense of inherent ease that being around this man instills in him, grits his teeth, fighting through the irrational peace of mind to restore his default, well-reasoned distrust. “I would mind, actually,” he hisses, yanking his hand out of the man’s arm and ignoring the immediate pity he feels when the doctor’s face falls, as though he had just been slapped. “I am fine. I have managed, and I will continue to manage, and I would prefer the gloves stay on, if you’d please.”

The doctor blinks, then nods, despite how hurt he looks. “...I suppose I understand. I’ll at least give you a little something for the pain, if you would accept that.” He stands, rifling through cabinets before coming out with a small bottle. “You’ve...not developed an opioid dependency at such a young age, I’ll hazard a hopeful guess?”

“Not yet,” Nemesis sighs. “...whatever that is, you’re drinking some before you put it within my arms’ reach.”

The doctor frowns. “...that’s not the best idea, but...if it sets your mind at ease.” He carefully picks up a spoon from the counter, pours some of the reddish-brown liquid into it, and puts it in his mouth, wincing. “...there?”

It would be a lot of trouble, Nemesis thinks, to poison the tincture, and have a spoon on hand which has the antidote on it. More likely, perhaps, the tincture simply isn’t poisoned. And yet, somehow, that seems to him the less plausible option. He sighs, reaching his hand out. “...right...if I drop dead in mysterious circumstances, Chase, you know who did it.”

Percy, who’d been carefully observing a rather colorful plant, gives him a thumbs-up. “Noted.”

That being done, he pockets the bottle, though he knows it’ll take a decent bit of mental fortitude to actually get himself to drink it. It’ll be fine, as it always is. The pain won’t bother him too much.

The doctor sits down across from Nemesis, a look of concern on his face. “You’re quite the strange-looking bunch, no offense. Obviously not police, though I suppose Aleister would have warned me were that the case.” Across the room, Nemesis notices Mallory stiffen, giving the appearance of someone unhinged and perhaps, if he has to make a crazy leap of logic, on the run from the constables. He can’t pretend he doesn’t find it a relatable state of being.

“We aren’t,” he clarifies, pointing at Percy first. “He’s a reporter.” Then, Callie. “She’s an anomaly.” And, finally, to himself. “And I’m Nemesis Jones, private investigator extraordinaire, as you likely were told. And you are...?”

“Oh, how rude. I haven’t even introduced myself—” The doctor’s eyes narrow. “...you...don’t even know my name?”
“Nah. Aleister Burke sent me here, gave me an address. No information beyond that and ‘doctor’, but figured I might as well.” He pulls out the photographs of the corpse, sliding them onto the table. Behind the doctor, Mallory leans over, squinting at them with a frown.

“Looks like she was hanged. What’s the problem…?” They ask calmly.

“No, no, Mallory. Well, yes. But there is something strange going on here…” The doctor frowns, looking closer. “That skin, those veins…it all looks awfully strange. You say this woman was...no manifestations, right?”

“I should assume so, yes. I’ve heard nothing to the contrary.”

“The reason I ask is...well, it looks similar to the manifestations that the Fitzroy family have, just from a glance. The sort of manifestations so overpowering of the features that it makes one question if the subject is even human.”

Now that Nemesis hears him say it, he has to admit the resemblance is undeniable. He frowns. “If manifestations make you not human, I’m pretty much the only human in this city.”

The doctor chuckles. “Perhaps...you are M’amand, I take it?”

He nods. “...half. Doesn’t really matter. Not like I’m...in touch with it. I mean, what’s more important is…” He points to the picture. “People don’t just...spontaneously develop manifestations, do they?”

“Not spontaneously ,” he says. “But over time, yes. It’s possible. My own halo—” he gestures vaguely behind him, at the light that seems to softly emanate from him, “—was not something I was born with. In fact,” he smiles benevolently. “I’m part M’amand, as you are, but unlike you, presumably, I have the Knack. Over time, Manifestations may develop in anyone who studies artifice diligently enough.”

That’s entirely news to Nemesis. He frowns. “...’part’ Shepherd is a little vague. You’re like, a sixteenth, or something? ‘Cause far as I know we can’t have the Knack at all. Anyway, manifestations can develop, aye, reckon that requires a little more explaining.”

“No, I’m half. Half...M’amand. Which is the name of our people.” His voice is calm but stern. “The genetic potential does not exist for the Knack among the M’amand, but my other half - my Luciellite father – had it, quite strongly. Strongly enough for me to inherit his manifestation, which, over my lifetime of practice, has...developed into its current form. And you are, judging by your accent, Llygredish. Not quite the same potential there, I’ve heard.”

“M’amand. Shepherd. Whatever. They’re just words. I call myself one, you call yourself the other. M’amand’s a mouthful, and it’s not like anyone’s ever called me that, anyway. That was what they called the language when I studied it in school, even. I call myself what other people call me. Shepherd.” He scowls. “Lygredish, yeah. You’re telling me if I’d been a bit luckier I’d have the knack, too? ’Cause I know my father did.”

The doctor purses his lips. “My mother would have had a few stern words for you about the way that term is used, but...to each their own. Anyway, there’s no telling, but you would have had the potential.” He sighs and glances at the pictures. “As I was saying...manifestations are mostly genetic, and genetic ones can often be very drastic, as with Ashley here—” he points at Stabby, who frowns, “—but those who study artifice seriously may attain them as they gain in power. Tobias Fitzroy, I know, was likely not born with his, as I’ve never heard of that sort of Manifestation before, and these...well...they tend to be well-documented. Morgana, however, seems to have hers
innately. Aleister commented on this, you said?”

“Aye. Said he knew her beforehand, and she wasn’t like that.”

“Well, that’s quite strange, then,” the doctor mutters. “Unfortunately, I can’t say that I would have an explanation for such a rapid onset – other than that perhaps she overwhelmed herself channeling something beyond her control. That has been known to cause such drastic manifestations in the short moments before immediate death.”

Nemesis frowns to himself. If she’d simply killed herself through stupidity, how would the Fitzroys have gotten their hands on her corpse? None of that adds up. “…couldn’t’ve been it, but I’ll...keep it in mind.”

“You do that. And...be careful. There’s a reason the police normally handle this.”

“The police…” Nemesis scoffs. “The police can’t even handle routine paperwork.”

The table rattled as Mallory slams their arm into it. “And what would criminal vermin like you know about the police, then?” Their face is a contorted mask of fury, almost enough to scare Nemesis, but anger only scares him when it’s cold, authoritative, heartless. Mallory seems more akin to someone gone past their limits, now on the verge of going feral.

All from one comment… “I think that’s a bit presumptive, first off. Assuming I’m a criminal, just because I act like one.” He quirks his eyebrow, and he can feel them simmering. “The police called this one natural causes. And, unfortunately for them, I have some measure of common sense. Sorry, not sorry.”

Mallory growls, but before they can say more the doctor gently places his hand on their shoulder. Immediately, they detense, stepping back from the table and out of the room - but Nemesis can still see the malice in their glare, and he knows that this conversation is far from over.

The doctor sighs. “...forgive me. It’s been quite the time since Mallory came into my care, and even now, they’ve not fully...well, become used to society and such.” He folds his hands and leans against them, sighing again. “It’s...it’s instinct, really, is what it is.”

“Instinct. Right. Awfully weird instinct, to call people vermin.”

He sighs again, tired. “...well, no. It’s wrong. Forgive me. And, if you can, forgive them.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “I see no reason to.”

“I can’t pretend I don’t understand,” he says, glancing away. “Regardless, my opinion is that it’s a rapidly acquired manifestation. That’s all you came here for, so that should satisfy you, right?”

“Hey, now. You’re acting like we just barged into your place and harassed you–”

“Well,” Percy mutters with a sigh, now carefully inspecting a magazine lying on a counter in a distant corner of the room, “That’s not too far from what we’ve been doing, is it?”

“It absolutely is,” Nemesis snaps.

The doctor smiles a little bit. “Forgive me. My tone may make me sound tired, but I’m truly not upset by any of this. Mallory is merely...exhausting to deal with, but, of course, it is something I’ve committed myself to at this point. It isn’t quite as thankless as I make it seem.”
“Then this is something you do as a hobby?” Nemesis glances up. Callie has been absolutely quiet this entire time, and here she is, staring directly at Stabby. “…you collect…weirdos. People who don’t belong in society. Is that it?”

Instead of looking mortified at the accusation, the doctor chuckles lightly. “I see how it might seem that way. This office has become somewhat of a home for wayward and very eccentric youth, yes. But no. I merely help those in need of it. That is what a doctor is meant to do, after all. These two happen to need a bit more help than most. I’m happy to provide that.”

Mallory peers back in from the other room. “Don’t accuse Dr. Apollinaire of things like that. He selflessly helped something like me. It’s not a ‘collection’. He treats me…” They trail off, and Nemesis realizes that they’ve said something they weren’t supposed to. Still, they finish the sentence: “…with the dignity one would typically reserve for people.”

Nemesis’ eyes widen as the dots connect in his mind. “No way. You’re an Automaton Lex, aren’t you?”

And at the same time, Callie blinks. “Did you just say…Apollinaire?”

Percy glances between the two of them. “I feel as though I don’t really have the necessary background information to be shocked but I also feel as though I am anyway, somehow.”

Apollinaire sighs. “…let’s…tackle these one at a time, shall we? Otherwise, we might all get overwhelmed with incoherent information, and that would be a shame, because I believe both of these questions deserve answers. I’ll begin with the simpler of the two.” He sits up straighter, more official, turning to Callie. “My name is Dr. Aharon Apollinaire.”

“Then…” she glances around the room. “You’re…the man Art told me to find?”

His eyes widen. “Art! Of course! You mean Artair Smith, right?”

“…yes?” Nemesis can tell she hadn’t been aware of Art’s surname until just now. “He told me to find you.”

“Ah, well…that can’t be good news,” Apollinaire mutters sheepishly. “Normally, he’s very self-reliant. The sort of person to say he’d sooner die than crawl back to me for help. Who are you, by the way?”

Callie nods solemnly. “That sounds like him. My name is Callie. I’m his…sister.”

Apollinaire looks quietly, barely confused. “I never knew he had a sister, but that doesn’t shock me. What’s happened to him, then?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know. He said people were coming, and that I needed to get out and find you. He basically kicked me out, completely unceremonious. I’d never seen him that scared before.”

Apollinaire frowns. “That’s all?”

“That’s all,” she confirms. “I remember what he said, word for word. ‘I don’t know how, but they found me. They’re coming. Run to the docks, go to the mainland, and don’t look back. Find Apollinaire. I love you.’ Except he was shouting it.” She lowers her head, and Nemesis can see her hands, threatening to shake, folded in front of her, gripping each other tightly, as though if she holds tightly enough she would be holding her brother’s hand instead of her own.
He thinks back to long nights of reading alone in Beaumont’s, wishing a familiar presence was there to sit next to him.

“He thinks back to long nights of reading alone in Beaumont’s, wishing a familiar presence was there to sit next to him.

“I see. It’s pretty rare for him to admit he doesn’t know something.”

Percy quirks an eyebrow. “That’s the part you’re choosing to focus on?”

“Hard not to, if you knew the guy like I do.” Apollinaire runs a hand through his hair. He looks tense. “...I’m afraid I’ve been out of contact with him, ever since...our reason for seeing each other somewhat unraveled.”

Nemesis feels as though everything is coming together in his mind, even though the revelation raises far more questions than it answers. He leans in, carefully, whispering into his ear. “Your reason for seeing each other...the Correspondents, right?”

Nemesis leans back, and Apollinaire frowns quietly. He isn’t surprised, of course he wouldn’t be, Burke told him, but Nemesis isn’t prepared for the look of sadness that crosses his face. It makes Nemesis just the tiniest bit sad as well, despite his best efforts to keep his emotions stable. Whatever had happened...

“Well, yes,” he admits. “That is, back in the day, when we met. We were both founding members, and Mallory was...a group effort, between the two of us and Aleister Burke. But then, of course, since the schism, we’ve been out of touch...” He trails off. “...and you’re right, about Mallory’s origin. Artair being an inventor, and Aleister a necromancer...they found a decommissioned Automaton Lex on Mallory Lane, and decided to attempt to get information from it. An automaton can exist in multiple forms...so they removed it from its previous form, and removed some of the safeguards that were placed on it. And from there, we got Mallory, and I was more than willing to house them. Aleister wouldn’t have had time with his teaching, and Artair simply didn’t want to...”

He smiles at them warmly. They cross their arms and glance away. “...that was a long time ago. I might as well be vermin like you, at this point.”

“...the mindset’s not quite there yet,” he admits, putting a hand on their shoulder that makes Nemesis’ heart spike with envy. “But we’re working on it. And in the meantime, I have someone to assist me with alchemy. They’ve quite the knack for it.”

“...that’s a little excessive,” they mutter.

“...Is Stabby a similar situation?” Percy asks, gesturing to the child, who looks as though they just might pull out their gun.

“Not at all. Stabby is merely in my care.” He ruffles their hair, and Nemesis feels downright as if he could cry. “That being said, I find it curious, that, of all people, Artair would direct the sister I’d never even heard of to me. I wasn’t aware he had such high regard of me. In fact, I remember him regularly calling me a waste of flesh. I suppose he must simply consider me trustworthy. He trusted me with the automaton form he made for Mallory, after all.”

Callie glances sideways at Mallory. “He did always like to build automatons. He couldn’t get anywhere near this level of realism, of course. Not with the materials he had. And he never...actually activated them. Maybe because of that, but he mentioned...actually bringing an animus to an automaton is horribly difficult, even a semblance of one...so Mallory already had an animus, and it was merely transplanted into the automaton form Art made?”

“Not quite,” Apollinaire corrects. “Not an animus in the human sense. Sentience, in automatons, is
a series of electrical impulses. The presence of an animus has yet to be proven.”

“Isn’t it electrical impulses in humans, too?” Nemesis asks.

“I suppose so,” he concedes. “We simply don’t know. There hasn’t been much research on it. The ones researching it – myself, Artair, and Aleister – have moved onto different areas, and it is not as though we are drowning in means or subjects, anyway.”

“I see.” Callie sighs, glancing down at the floor, hands folded nervously behind her back. “So you can’t help me?”

“I never said that. I just don’t know what Artair would want me to do. I think he would have simply named me as a person who would have allowed you to stay with him. He actually had a generally low opinion of my usefulness.” He sighs. “As for...actually resolving the issues...I don’t think I can help. I’m just an apothecary, after all.”

Callie nods. “I already have a place to stay, anyway. So the one clue I had was a dead end.” Nemesis thinks back to his compass. They’re in the same position, then. Questions answered, but with no solutions in sight.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies if this chapter is of slightly lower polish than previous ones - I’ve been somewhat swamped with coursework and such. Thankfully, I have a backlog, or else I would be floundering entirely. Next update might have to be called off, but hopefully I’ll be able to make it work.

Also, apologies if it’s a little bit long. Unfortunately, they’ll only be getting longer from here on, as the plot really begins to start happening.

Thank you so much for reading, as always. Comments mean a lot to me, as does just reading my work! I hope you all enjoyed the chapter.
And we're back, lads! Thank you so much for your patience - now that the semester is over, I hope I can get back to regular updates!

Nemesis’ hand curls around the notebook in his pocket. Next to him Percy sighs to himself, and Callie looks miserably solemn.

He’s written down Aharon Apollinaire’s phone number and address. Aleister Burke’s, too. There’s a cork board on the wall in Beaumont’s that’s going to get a good few new entries when he returns tonight. He will stare at it like he does many nights, trying to find the connections between the scattered evidence and falling asleep beside it. Whatever the truth is, it seems beyond his reach.

The train is rather empty at this time of the night; three or four passengers aside from him and his companions, and of course he’s knackless, and so is Percy (and presumably Callie, though he supposes he hasn’t asked), so the train drags onward. The other passengers, almost as if they might be catching onto the fact that the three of them aren’t pulling their weight, seem to stare.

Perhaps it’s just his...distinctive appearance? He thinks he looks striking - these people probably don’t agree, though. Their gazes are tinged with contempt, at least when directed at him and Callie. After all, the two of them are strange people; people who move through the streets like they don’t belong there. Some of the gazes are tinged with intrigue. These ones, he relishes, but they’re few and far between.

And all of this is better than what’s surely coming, and he knows this. He would far rather be at home, looking over the new information by himself. And yet, what he wishes could be his priority will inevitably take a backseat to the far more pressing issue, and there will be no resolution for what will feel like eternity.

How selfish. Someone died. He bites his tongue, not looking out the windows as the locomotive finishes its journey towards their destination.

The three disembark, and this time Percy looks to Nemesis.

“Not to seem like I’m not carrying my weight here, even though I’m really not,” he mutters, seemingly just as much to himself as it is to Nemesis, “But I assume you know where we’re going, so – lead the way.”

Next to him, he sees Callie glance away. He supposes she must have had a similar thought about herself. He sighs to himself, even as he gestures them in the correct direction. He’s been here before, after all.

“You’re doing fine,” he tells Percy, though he supposes his tone probably isn’t the most encouraging. “Not your fault you’re freaked out by viscerae, really. Perfectly normal, that.”

“I’d like to think so,” he mutters, following behind Nemesis. “Still, it’s impressive how fast you’ve taken charge. I knew I needed your expertise, but I didn’t expect to be rendered completely
useless.” He sounds sheepish, a little ashamed, and not at all angry.

“Don’t worry about it, though. You’ve done plenty. Remember, if not for you that corpse would still be in the theatre, and this case would be cold.”

“I suppose,” he agrees, though Nemesis gets the sense this conversation is far from over. That Percy has hidden depths to him goes without saying, but it’s still a surprise to see them from someone so open even Nemesis’s compass didn’t pick him up.

He shakes his head, dismissing the thoughts. More important things are afoot.

And here they are. A large sign at the front of the building proclaims:

CALLOWAY’S
Pawn shop; fine antiques; books

Nemesis takes a deep breath, steels himself, and knocks on the door.

Geoff Calloway responds immediately, standing by the door in a disheveled shirt and hurriedly-thrown-on jacket. His glasses are askew. He bears an unsettling resemblance to someone else Nemesis knows.

“Oh, Jones. You’re here.” He glances from Callie to Percy. “And you’ve brought that one writer from the Sun and some… girl? Is this for an interview?”

Before Nemesis can greet him, Percy interjects, “I’m afraid it isn’t. We came about… something else.”

Calloway’s face falls. “The… incident at the Obscura, I assume? Word has traveled fast. It’s comforting to know that someone other than the police is investigating it, honestly.”

Callie nods purposefully. “We’re here to… ask you. About that.”

The anxiety is clear as day on his face. Of course, there could be any number of explanations for it. Is he scared of being accused? Is he scared he may be in danger? Either is a perfectly rational fear.

He gestures tiredly at the three of them. “Come in. No sense in talking outside, where anyone could hear us. I’ll put on some tea.”

The inside of his shop is familiar, cozy, and filled with displays of various items in varying states of disarray. Nemesis remembers when he was last here, Calloway had been straightening and tidying things even as he spoke to him.

Calloway gestures to an oak roundtable and the three of them sit, all of them across from the candle at its center.

He puts on a kettle, sighing heavily as he looks through his tea cabinet. “Preferences?”

Nemesis immediately asks for darjeeling. Percy takes an earl gray; two sugars. Callie - after some deliberation - asks for plain water.

“Right.” Calloway nods. “Any preference for water temperature, miss?”

“No really.”

“Ah.” He seems a bit thrown off his rhythm by the lack of preference, but continues with the kettle
regardless.

Percy glances at Nemesis. “You have expensive taste, don’t you? I guess I should’ve seen that coming.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s funny. You seem to have the air about you of a refined gentleman and a rather scruffy criminal at the same time.” He shrugs. “It creates a certain sort of intrigue about you, so I don’t think it’s a bad thing. It’s just weird to see the same guy who cracked a lock while I watched ask for darjeeling.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that part,” Calloway mutters from by the stove.

Callie looks at Nemesis carefully. “... I don’t see where you’re seeing the refined part. I mean, he kind of acts like it sometimes, but it’s clearly an act, isn’t it? It’s not real, just like –”

“Hey. Shh.” He sits up a little too quickly. “Let’s save the armchair analysis for when we’re not trying to solve a mystery, alright?”

“Okay,” she mutters, disappointment clear. “I can do that.”

Calloway brings over the cups and sits, taking a cautionary sip of his own black tea. Nemesis takes one as well, and has to hold back a yelp, because the liquid is scalding. He sees Percy wince next to him. Callie seems unbothered by the temperature of her water.

Calloway sighs into his cup, not meeting any of their eyes. “I fear I know what you’ve come to speak to me about. The corpse at the theatre. You want to ask me what I know.”

“Sort of,” Nemesis admits hesitantly. “I’m... Er, I’m sorry. It’s... I think we know who the victim was, and...”

He can see several expressions wash over Calloway’s face, one after the other. A sneaking suspicion – disbelief – abject misery. Finally, he seems to resign himself and weakly glances down to the ground.

“I thought I’d come to terms with the fact that something like this would inevitably happen, but to think – of all the ways, all the places...” He shakes his head and runs a tense hand through his hair. “It’s not a shock, no. Not nearly a shock. I knew it was a matter of time. I simply... didn’t expect – I wasn’t as prepared as I thought I would be.”

“You knew this was going to happen?” Percy immediately asks.

“Not this, specifically, no.” He shakes his head. “But... Lizzie hasn’t been okay for a while. It started when she began attending classes at Catacumba. We found strange ciphers in her room, saw her muttering to herself in tongues, and she went missing for long periods of time. It’s all normal teenager stuff, you know – but then at one point she went missing and she never came back.”

“Is that normal?” Callie asks tentatively. “Sorry. I’m not from around here.”

“Not normal, so much,” Percy answers. “More like depressingly hard to avoid. With everything going on, the most susceptible people are student artificers. It’s hard to graduate from the Institute without getting involved with one group or another, one way or another.”

Calloway nods. “It wasn’t like that, back in my day, you know. Back in my day, it was easy to just
drift through the Institute like any other sort of schooling. Then again, I was always studious. Not really one for parties. Supposedly, it’s the parties where they really get you.”

“And you don’t go to many of those?” she asks.

“Don’t. Already clarified that, I thought.” he takes a tense sip of tea. “Really not – really never been my thing, you know. I’m sort of… Well, social interaction wears me out, you know.”

“I know how you feel,” Nemesis agrees.

“Right. And my wife was never like that. She’s, er, she’s why I’m a bit more outgoing now, actually. Sort of rubbed off on me. Lizzie always took after her, anyway, er…” He leans in closer, lowering his voice to a strained, careful whisper. “Speaking of Ophelia, though… Please, if you can, don’t tell her about Lizzie. She’s, er – how do I put this, she still – she thinks Lizzie’s… gonna… come home someday.”

Before he can even finish his sentence, a sob bursts out of him. “I’m sorry – I’ve come to terms with this, time and time again, I don’t know why it’s still –”

“It’s alright,” Nemesis mutters, offering him a handkerchief which he takes and miserably bashes into his face. “It’s – it’s a reasonable thing to be upset about.”

“Of course it is;” he agrees. “I know that. I simply thought… I was beyond this.” He shakes his head. “But, no more of this. You youths came here to investigate a murder. You shouldn’t… spend too long worrying about me.”

“But –”

Nemesis cuts Percy off with a dismissive wave of his hand. “No, he’s right. We’ve a murder to solve. That’s all that’s important right now. After everything is resolved, that’s when we stop to mourn.”

Percy seems almost more upset about being cut off than he is about Geoffrey Calloway’s pain. At least, that’s what Nemesis would figure the indignant look on his face suggests. “Oh, so you’re a philosopher now?”

“Not a philosopher, no. Just a man with opinions… Well, that’s also what a philosopher is, I suppose.”

“Okay, okay, we’re all philosophers,” Callie says, voice raised very slightly. Nemesis and Percy both immediately quiet down. “But we’re also here to solve a murder, aren’t we?”

She turns her attention to Calloway, now. “You said she was in with the wrong crowd. Did she ever give any hints as to her affiliations?”

Nemesis feels a surge of emotion, equal parts impressed and threatened. She’s taking after him so fast, and he hasn’t even really taught her anything.

Calloway sighs. He start to take a sip from his cup, before realizing he’s already emptied it. There’s a slight tremor to his hands. “Lizzie was… she was an artist. She loved to create elaborate mechanisms, art that seemed as though it was almost alive. Simply based on that – a major suspect comes to mind, off the bat.”

Percy nods. “Of course… the Benefactors’ Circle. It’s hard to seek a career in art without crossing paths with them.”
“The Benefactors’ Circle?” Callie asks, glancing at Nemesis.

He simply frowns in response. He’s been getting into everyone’s business like there was no tomorrow, but he is, of course, only human. He’s lived in Omen for a short enough amount of time, and there’s enough going on, that if mention of the Benefactors’ Circle has ever crossed his path he hasn’t considered it important enough to write down, and it’s failed to stick in his mind.

Of course, in retrospect, he should have immediately known anything with a name like that would be yet another secret society. Has he simply never heard of them before? With how many links there are between all the societies operating in the city, it seems unlikely. Has he not cast his net as wide as he should have?

He hasn’t felt this frustrated in some time. Normally, he’s always the one who manages to be a step ahead of everyone else, knows all the things they don’t. He meets eyes with Percy, and he can tell that he knows that he doesn’t know, and the feeling of helplessness threatens to tear through him yet again, anger and despair fighting back and forth within his mind as he sits there in stunned panic, trying his best to not let on that there is anything amiss in the least.

Thankfully, Geoff Calloway picks up the slack for him. “The Cabinet of Marvels. She wanted to work for them. She’s even had pieces of hers displayed there, in more minor exhibitions. The next major one was meant to be her big break, and there’ll be a piece of hers displayed there, posthumously. Though I suppose they don’t… know that it’s posthumous. Regardless, the top echelon of their donations is known as the Benefactors’ Circle, which is, coincidentally, also the name of the society that’s formed around it. Very hard to get into the art field without paying them their dues.”

“What he said.”

Callie frowns. “Then do you think that they ended up killing her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Nemesis raises his eyebrow. “Are they and the Actors’ Guild at war, then? That would explain why her corpse was in the Obscura.” It seems a logical train of thought. Almost too easy.

“Nah,” Percy says, shattering his hopes of saying a single productive thing in this conversation. “They’re staunch allies. The Cabinet of Marvels is hosting a reception in honor of their new exhibition, and the Fitzroys are all going to be in attendance. He’s actually had his art put up there, too – Morgana as well, if I recall correctly. There’s even theories about the Cabinet actually being run by Fitzroy in secret.”

Nemesis frowns. “The Cabinet’s run by Phineas Sterling, innit?”

“Well, yes, but… there’s this thought that he’s just in Fitzroy’s pocket that’s rather pervasive. See, Sterling’s somewhat of an eccentric, and he doesn’t have as much of a public presence as he does…”

“It’s not hard to have less of a public presence than Fitzroy,” Callie mutters.

“Still, he’s kind of a recluse. His spokesperson and financier, a guy named Banks, has a presence similar to Fitzroy’s.” Percy pauses to think. “Still less, though, I’d suppose. Doesn’t go to quite as many galas. Also, not really as much of a people person. Prefers to talk money, if you know what I mean.”

“If one’s public status is based around how many galas one attends, everyone in this city would be
famous,” Calloway observes. “He isn’t the main draw at as many galas, is what I assume you meant.”

Percy looks, in Nemesis’ opinion, just the tiniest bit miffed. Observing that brings him equal amounts of concern and satisfaction. “I said what I said.”

He takes a cursory glance at his compass. For once, it’s picking up Percy – not clearly, but ever-so-slightly, with a golden needle quivering in roughly his direction; glowing with a faint yellow-green light. It’s so sad, he thinks, to see that even someone so superhumanly honest is seemingly capable of lying.

“I suppose they were both funded by the Vigenere barony. And both of them are speculated to be members of the same organization, as well.” He remembers Fitzroy talking about how Frederick Vigenere’s death had made things difficult. Was he in cahoots with both of the societies at once, or was he simply an enthusiastic patron of the arts who unwittingly funded conspiracy? Unfortunately, knowing the city, Nemesis is forced to assume the former.

“The same organization?” Callie asks nervously. “Another society?”

“More of a society alliance. The Omen eyes are the richest people in Omen – Fitzroy, Vigenere, Banks, they’re all members, and so are their societies by extension. It’s quite the powerful crowd.” Percy sounds remarkably matter-of-fact. “One of the main ways the Correspondents market themselves is as an alternative to the Eyes, in fact.”

“Well, none of that sounds even remotely good.” Nemesis says, throwing Calloway a curious look. “Back to the point: have you ever had any interactions with the Fitzroy yourself, then?”

“No. Not at all. I’m not… important, see. I own a pawn shop. This is all my wife and I wanted to do, out of school. Now that she’s sick, I’ve got to make twice as much money with half the hands, and now Lizzie’s gone too…” Calloway leans his elbows against the table, running both hands through his hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t – shouldn’t trouble you with all of that…”

“No.” Nemesis stares directly at him now. “I want to know more. About you. Your business. Your wife – how long has she been sick? All of that’s important in understanding why your daughter ended up in the situation she did.”

“If we understand that, then we can understand why she died, and that could lead us to who did it.” Callie looks to Nemesis, as if to confirm that what she’s saying is correct – when he gives her a small nod, he can see the corner of her mouth quirk up ever so slightly into a smile.

Calloway doesn’t look up. “My wife has been sick two years now, I think. It was gradual at first, but she’s been bed-ridden for at least six months now, and has had difficulties working for longer than that. It was all I could do to support her and Lizzie. And then Lizzie… she started acting so erratic. The things she made became so strange, and she started spending more and more time away from the house. She stopped talking to me. Six weeks ago, she vanished entirely.”

“Started making strange things?” Nemesis asks. “What do you mean?”

“Things that seemed… different, from her normal art. The things she made normally — mechanical sculptures of scenes that would seem to come to life – they were beautiful. But she started building strange…” He searches for the word. “… The only way I can describe them is contraptions. I – I’ll show you, if you want.”

“I’d like to see them.” Nemesis stands, and Callie and Percy both stand after him.
Percy’s mood seems to have already bounced back – at least, as far as Nemesis can tell. He smiles somberly as he carefully pushes his chair back in, ever polite. “Even though what happened is tragic, I want to appreciate your daughter’s art. I’ve never heard of her before, which means she’s never been on most people’s radar. Even though she’s dead now, we can still appreciate her legacy – the things she’s created.”

Calloway nods. “Of course. She made… some awfully beautiful things, she really did.” He sniffs, turning away, and Nemesis feels his heart fall again.

Mysteries are exciting, of course. It’s easy to forget there’s always people on the other end. People who spend their last moments alone and afraid. People who will never see their daughters again. Always people, always complications.

Nemesis Jones is a good person. Nemesis Jones cares. And Nemesis Jones forces all the selfish thoughts of himself and of mysteries that have no solution in sight to the back of his mind.

His compass doesn’t pick up any deceit from Calloway. That makes it worse, really. A kind, tired, introverted pawn shop owner has lost his daughter, and he’s not even involved in the conspiracy surrounding her death. If this were a mystery novel, he thinks it’d be a shitty one. Sparse leads and nothing but bad feelings to be found. A carefully curated tale of woe and tragedy with no higher meaning and, alarmingly, potentially no resolution.

He clenches his fist. He’ll do anything and everything in his power to keep it from coming to that, and he won’t linger on the deeply alarming thought that his power is almost certainly nowhere near close to enough.

Depressed people aren’t productive.

The door is simple and oak, with a glass handle. Calloway’s hand shakes as he attempts to open it. He succeeds on the third try. Nemesis peers in, and has to stifle a gasp.

The room is crowded with things stacked halfway to the ceiling and piles of boxes occupying at least half of it. The walls themselves are largely unadorned; plain and brown and covered in spiderwebs and the faintest coat of dust. In the back of the room, a single window has a heavy black curtain thrown over it.

But the contents of the room itself are far more fascinating. Within it, various sculptures, varying in size from roughly that of a shoe-box to some larger than Nemesis himself, are leaned against walls and stood on boxes, replicas of everything from objects to animals to people to natural landscapes, made of cogs and silver wire and scrap metal, twisted into hollow yet beautiful facsimiles of anything and everything imaginable.

Wide-eyed, Percy picks up a small crab and turns it over, examining the intricate shapes forming it. “Did she make these by hand? All of them?”

“She did. Some Artifice involved with the mechanisms, but the chassis, that was all her. Back in the day she used to just sit in this room for hours, welding and sculpting away. She’d pick the locks and get into the metal and blowtorches whether I wanted her to or not.” Calloway chuckles quietly. “She was such a boisterous child.”

“Sounds like it.” Nemesis looks at the nearest humanoid statue. It’s about Callie’s height with slightly wavy copper wire forming a ponytail, a gear and a disc of multi-colored sea-glass for eyes, and holding a similarly scrap-metal bird in her hands.
“She worked so hard on that one,” Calloway says. “It took her almost a year, but she wanted to make a statue of herself. This one is one of the more recent. She made it in her last year of school, I think.”

Nemesis reaches out to touch her shoulder. For once, he wishes he could feel the metal, but, of course, his gloves prevent that. He’s sure it’s cold. Cold is painful, but it’s also somehow comforting.

It’s a strange feeling, expecting to feel cold metal and instead feeling nothing but the lining of his gloves. Even after years, he’s not used to it. Not enough.

“And what’s this?” Callie asks, holding up what looks like a wooden tube.

Calloway glances over and shrugs noncommittally. “I wouldn’t know. She didn’t talk about her artwork, as of recent. I wasn’t aware she could whittle.”

“That’s not whittled,” Nemesis says immediately. “Not unless she’s gone properly to town with an unconscionable amount of sandpaper, because it looks entirely too cylindrical. Could I see that?”

Callie hands it to him, and he turns it over in his hands. It’s made of what looks like a dark cherry wood, lightly lacquered, with a golden band wrapped around each end. A disc is inserted into it, made of glass that seems transparent at first, but when he looks closer it shines a faint purple. The other side has a teardrop-shaped hole (almost, he thinks, like a keyhole) through which one can peer in. The overall appearance isn’t unlike that of a particularly unusual spyglass.

Of course, when presented with a hole through which one may feasibly look, one would be a fool to not look through it. He does just that, positioning it in front of his eye.

Through the device, the room is cast in a somewhat brighter light. The wires and scrap metal seem to almost glow, their edges blurring outwards into purple halos. Though it’s somewhat disorienting, he turns – the blurring seems to apply selectively, because though the crates and the door and his companions are warped, except for Callie, who blurs faintly at the edges. He turns back to the statues, back to her. Still blurred.

He frowns, hoping she doesn’t notice, and glances back at the statues. The warping shifts in front of his eyes.

“Anything interesting?” Percy asks, seeming almost amused.

“Reminds me of how things look after a couple glasses,” Nemesis remarks. He reaches to lower the device when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees movement.

He turns, rapidly. Whatever it was, he can’t see it now. He pauses, baffled, not lowering the tube.

And it takes a moment, but then, it’s unmistakable – in the ripples and distortions, Nemesis can see movement. Outlined in that eerie purple glow with blurred boundaries between where metal ends and light begins, the statue of Elizabeth Calloway begins to move.

It’s slow at first – a careful bend of wires as her head twists, the arm lifts ever-so-slightly. The bird flaps its wings and elegantly flies off. It feels as though the metal should be creaking, but the entire process transpires before his eyes in unnerving silence.

“... You three seeing this?” he practically whispers.

“Seeing what?” Callie asks.
“Whatever it is, I don’t think I’m seeing it,” Percy agrees.

“He simply means the artwork,” Calloway explains. “What he’s holding there is a kinetoscope – one of Lizzie’s inventions. It’s what makes her work so remarkable. It’s enchanted to make the statues look as though they’re almost animate.”

Almost seems like the understatement of the decade, but Nemesis supposes that would be a feasible enough explanation. “Thanks for explaining. Thought I’d gone mad.”

“Of course. Tends to catch people off guard the first time.”

He can feel Percy and Callie crowding around him, intrigued.

And as he continues to watch, the bird does a lap around the statue, which puts its hand in front of its face, as though laughing amicably to itself. The absence of sound continually unnerves Nemesis – it’s like watching a film, but without the background music or the text. The statue twirls her finger through her hair, and then gestures to Nemesis, as though she has a secret to tell him. Against his own better judgement, he takes a step closer.

The bird lands back on her hand, and she pets it gently, before reaching up and tapping her eye – the glass one. And then he has to stifle a quiet gasp as she plucks it out with a smile, before replacing it and placing a finger over her mouth.

A secret. This is a secret. Elizabeth Calloway was a woman with many secrets, clearly. One of them ended in her death. Was it this one?
The statue seems to giggle, returning to its default configuration. Nemesis waits what feels like an hour but is realistically closer to a minute, but it doesn’t move. The sequence is finished.

He doesn’t lower the kinetoscope. Time is limited, and he knows he has to do some things he might later regret. He can feel the figurative gears in his brain whirr as they try to come up with a solution, and finally settle on one which he thinks is so easy to see through it might as well not even be worth trying.

“Er, Mr. Calloway,” he says, “Is it just me, or does something smell strange in here?”

Although he’s not looking at Calloway, he can hear his voice, tinged with nervousness. “Whatever do you mean? It just smells like dust and metal to me.”

“It’s almost like something is burning, isn’t it?” Again, the lie feels sickening. It’s one thing to lie to someone, and another thing entirely to lie to an exhausted, grieving man who’s been nothing but kind so far.

“Is it?” Calloway pauses, and Nemesis supposes he must be trying to detect it. “... Oh, stars, did I leave the kettle on?”

Did he? Nemesis honestly can’t remember, but he thinks it’s rather unlikely. Despite that, Calloway leaves to go check, and without a moment of pause Nemesis shoves the kinetoscope into his bag.

“What are you doing?!” Percy exclaims, just barely keeping from shouting.

“Trust me,” Nemesis mutters. “I might seem like a massive knob who is committing a crime at the moment – and I am both of those things – but trust me.”

“I trust you,” Callie reassures him.

“I could probably stand to trust you more at this current moment,” Percy says. At least someone around here is honest, Nemesis thinks.

I don’t especially trust you either, anyway…

From outside, he hears a dull thud and Calloway exclaiming, “Philly! Goodness, what are you doing out of bed?”

Nemesis’ heart soars. The universe has given him just the opening he needs. He plucks the glass disc from the statue, and it comes out with a satisfying click. He supposes it was there just to be removed, anyway. He slides it into his pocket as Calloway peers his head back in.

“Thank you for pointing out the kettle, Jones,” Calloway says, and a quick glance at Nemesis’ compass detects honesty. What were the chances that the kettle would actually be on? He’d been fully prepared to lie and take the rather long shot that it would suitably occupy Calloway, but, as it turns out, he’s lucked out in every possible way.

“That’s… Er… It’s no problem, sir.”

He smiles carefully. “That being said, it seems my wife has regained strength enough to stand. As loathe as I am to kick out such kind people –” (Nemesis has to stifle a laugh) “— who are doing something so important, I can’t have you loitering in our supply closet.”

“That’s perfectly understandable,” Percy agrees. “We probably need to regroup and talk, anyway.”
“You’ve been hugely helpful,” Nemesis adds. “Thank you so much, genuinely.”

Calloway smiles tiredly. “Of course. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to call me.”

He leads them back through the shop. Sitting at the chair which Callie had been using earlier is a woman who looks far older than her age; her graying, stringy hair is tied up messily, and she’s dressed in a nightgown and shawl. To Nemesis, she looks like the concept of sickness made flesh. Calloway gestures to her.

“This is my wife, Ophelia. Ophelia, this is Nemesis Jones… and company. They might stop by here again.”

Ophelia smiles. He can tell that even doing this strains her – he can’t imagine how she’s managed to walk. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, dear.”

He thinks about the fact that her daughter is dead. He now sees why he was told to keep it a secret. He forces a smile onto his own face. “It’s lovely to meet you too.”

On the way back, they stop by a small cafe by the name of The Bitter End. Nemesis pays for their food (another round of tea and a shared plate of scones) and the three find a booth sequestered in the back, away from the door.

As Callie consumes scones at a rapid pace (he supposes this is be the first time she’s ever tried them), Percy looks vexed. Finally, he speaks in a voice low and tired.

“You stole from the victim’s family.”

Nemesis nods. “Guilty as charged.”

An exhausted expression is turned on him. “Why, Jones. Why would you do that?” “I’ve got no idea what to think of you.”

“This might be alarming, Chase, but I’m not a good person.”

“Yeah,” Percy agrees. “I’m getting that idea.”

Nemesis takes a slow sip of tea. Somehow, it stings just the tiniest bit to have him agree. “That being said, I’ve an explanation for my actions, if you care to hear it.”

“Go on.”

Callie pauses mid-scone to listen.

He takes a deep breath. He’s not sure why it feels so difficult to explain. After all, his reasoning is simple and straightforward, for once. “When I looked through the kinetoscope, the statues looked like they were moving. That’s the real art of it. And the statue told me that I should take her eye.”

Percy stares flatly at him. “...you must be aware of how much you sound like a complete lunatic now, right?”

“I’m aware that I don’t sound like a lunatic at all, actually.” Nemesis folds his hands, continuing his speech matter-of-factly. “Chase, sometimes strange things happen. Elizabeth Calloway managed to create something spectacular and I experienced it. None of that points to lunacy.”

Percy rolls his eyes. “So the statue told you to take its eye?”
“Essentially.” Nemesis pulls the eye from his bag, turning it over in his hand. What little light there is inside The Bitter End reflects off of it, casting a purple light onto Percy’s forehead. “In the moment, I just panicked, I’ll admit. But now that I think about it more, I wonder… I wonder if it really did mean something.”

“You didn’t look like you were panicking.”

“I didn’t really feel like I was, either.” He doesn’t like to admit things like this – just how little control he has – and yet here he is, revealing something terrifying to Percival Chase in a nearly empty cafe. “I felt clear and rational and controlled. Maybe a little tense. I felt like a slingshot pulled taut. I felt like someone was pushing me forward, but that someone was me. I couldn’t stop myself, but no, it made complete sense. I was thinking with the utmost clarity. More clarity than normal, even.”

Percy shakes his head. “... I see. I really wish I could say I don’t get you, Nemesis. But we’re more alike than not, in that regard. I feel the same, sometimes. I’m just more cautious about it.”

Nemesis remembers the crossword, and stealing Elizabeth Calloway’s corpse, and somehow doubts that. As far as he can tell, Percy’s sister is roughly three-fourths of his impulse control.

Callie finishes her scone and furrows her brow. “... Are you two friends or do you hate each other? Because I honestly can’t tell.”

“This is one hell of a conversation to have in a cafe,” he mutters to himself, slowly taking as drawn-out a sip of tea as he can manage.

Percy almost doesn’t chuckle at that. “I don’t hate Nemesis. I just think he’s very alarming.”

Nemesis leans back in his chair. “See, if anything, I think our issue is that we’re too similar. You’re like if I were normal-behaving and pleasant to be around and I’m like you if you were a worse but smarter person.”

Percy looks taken aback, somewhere between offended and in agreement. “... Just about. You’re stubborn, though, and you’re always convinced that you’re right.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “I generally am right.”

“See, this is what I mean. You’re frustrating.” Percy sighs, adjusting his glasses, just a touch snappier than normal. “I don’t hate you, and I’m trying to understand you, but you’re an… acquired taste.”

Flatly, Nemesis mutters, “I don’t hate you either. Sorry if I seem like I do. You don’t trust me very much.”

“You don’t trust me very much either,” Percy observes. “I’m normally a trusting person, but, like I said. Acquired taste.”

“Well, I trust both of you, for what it’s worth. And I don’t want you two to fight,” Callie says.

Percy laughs. “Honestly? I don’t either, because I feel like he would absolutely wipe the floor with me.”

“Good of you to recognize that,” Nemesis says, hoping the slight grin on his face indicates that he’s joking. It seems to; Percy smiles ever-so-slightly. “We’re not fighting, though. We’re allies.”
At that, though, his expression falls. “Speaking of which. I have a theory, but you have to promise you won’t insist I’ve gone mad.”

“Promise.”

He leans closer. “Swear it. Formally.”

He can see the anxiety on Percy’s face. He supposes it’s a bit of a strange request. “Do you want to like, write out a contract, or… What are you getting at?”

“Just say it. ‘I swear I won’t call you mad’, and then don’t break it, or I’ll be right angry with you.”

Percy raises an eyebrow. “Okay. Just so we’re clear, you’re aware what you’re doing right now is both incredibly strange and incredibly alarming, right?”

“Absolutely.”

He nods nervously. “Just checking. Right. I swear I won’t call you mad.”

He looks more bemused than threatened. Nemesis nods and leans back away from him. He supposes he’s glad to see that. Tense as things are, the last thing he needs is to completely alienate him. Perhaps he simply doesn’t enjoy it when people are afraid of him.

“I think she left clues. Clues to something. And I think, if we follow that trail, we’ll find whoever killed her.”

“... You know what, Nemesis, I think you’ve lost your marbles.”

He laughs when Nemesis punches him in the arm. “What! I didn’t say you were mad, did I?”

“You’re a bloody smartass, Chase.” He can’t hide the tiny grin on his face. This is the exact same thing Elias would always do – except somehow, with Percy, it’s less endearing and more frustrating. And yet, even going through the same motions brings him a strange sort of comfort, despite the circumstances. “Right, you got one over on me. Nice job. How do you really feel?”

Percy’s smile isn’t as nice as Elias’, but it’s pretty good. “I think you might be right. Society business tends to all lead into each other. If she was involved then that’s probably why she died, and whatever she was doing beforehand will lead to that. It’s at least worth a shot.”

“Exactly.”

What he doesn’t say is that his reasoning doesn’t begin and end there. When Nemesis Jones is presented with a trail, he will follow it, consequences be damned. He would have taken the eye even if he was sure it had nothing to do with the murder.

“Well, that’s good,” Callie says, having finally finished all of the scones. “It’s the only concrete lead we have so far, and all.”

Nemesis sighs. In the moment, it’s so easy to forget that one is working off of barely anything.

They make their way back to Beaumont’s at a leisurely pace. By the time they arrive, it’s beginning to be evening, as signified by the darker gray sky and brighter street-lamps. Callie immediately heads in through the door, complaining of her feet hurting (which Nemesis supposes they would, after how much they had been bleeding just a week prior), but Percy stops on the corner outside.
There’s still the theatre itself to investigate. People to talk to and things to search. You’re with me, I assume?”

He nods. “Of course. Though this is where it gets dangerous, you realize.”

Percy glances away from him. He supposes the thought was not at the forefront of Percy’s mind. “... I realize. I’ll be careful, and I trust you will as well.”

“I will,” Nemesis agrees, even knowing that he’ll definitely be liable to do something horribly reckless. “Take care, now. Say hello to your sister for me.”

“Of course. And you say hello to Ms. Hayes.” He waves and turns to leave.

“Er… Chase.”

Percy doesn’t fully halt in his trajectory, but he does look back over his shoulder. “Huh?”

“Thanks for the help.” He sighs. As difficult as it is to admit – “I wouldn’t even be on this case if it weren’t for you. And I trust that the two of us together will be able to get to the bottom of this, no matter how long it takes.”

Percy smiles, just barely. “You’re a smart guy, Nemesis. Weird, but smart. I’m glad to have you on the team, even if you’re a bit…”

Nemesis smiles back. “Even if I’m a right knob half the time?”

“More like ‘concerning’, is the word I was looking for.” He turns around properly to clap Nemesis on the shoulder. “Take care, Nemesis. I mean it.”

Nemesis tips his cap. “You take care too, mate.”

Percy smiles, a soft, warm, kind smile. “Night, Nemesis.”

And then Percy is on his way, and Nemesis carefully opens the door, the familiar book-smell and faint chiming welcoming him back to Beaumort’s. The downstairs bookstore is empty, so he immediately makes his way up to the loft.

Callie is on the couch – he can’t tell if she’s asleep or not, but he’s glad to see her getting some rest. Theory, on the other hand, is sitting at the table, papers scattered around her covered in writing, more books than he can count lying open or stacked nearby. She’s cut a stack of strips of paper to use as bookmarks, but that stack has been upended, and they litter the floor near her feet. Her hair is tied up into a messy bun, and next to her sit six empty mugs of what must have been tea, and an additional mug of what is currently tea.

“Translation going well?” He asks.

Theory scoffs. “Swimmingly.”

“You said it was proto-Al-Mushrite, if I recall?”

“Pre-Al-Mushrite. A variety of it I’m not familiar with.” She sighs, resting her elbow on the table with a quiet thud. “I’m trying to cobble together some semblance of an understanding based on other varieties from a similar time period, but it’s still looking incredibly incoherent.”

Nemesis frowns. “You figured out a general gist yet?”
“Actually, the title is one of the few things I’ve been able to partially translate so far.” She closes the book, motioning to the cover. “It’s still rough, but this word here generally means ‘enemy’, and this one, up here, means ‘blind’ but has also been used to mean ‘obscure’ or ‘unknown’, and this one isn’t even the same language, but it means ‘beginning’. Altogether, something like… ‘history of the unknown enemy’. As far as I can tell, anyway. And then these words, I don’t know.”

“Ah. Lovely. Goodness, I wish that were the most foreboding thing I’d heard today.” He takes a deep breath, reaching across the table to scoop up all of her used cups. “Ancient books that talk about unknown enemies aren’t generally a good sign, are they?”

“Not especially.” Theory shakes her head. “But I’m glad you brought me this book. Whatever’s in here...it’ll be something important, I think.”

“Important? So you don’t just think Fitzroy was keeping it around for casual reading?”

“It’s a couple thousand years too old for that, I think.” She shakes her head. “Whatever’s in here, this book isn’t like anything we’ve ever had in our collection.” She pauses. “... There might be some texts that can help in the Catacumba libraries, but I’m not allowed there, and I don’t think you would do a very good job of making it in, either. I suppose I could get Burke to do it, but…”

“You could do.” He unceremoniously drops the mugs in the sink, deciding that he’s too tired to wash them at this precise moment and then seconds later deciding that he’ll be bothered by the mess if he doesn’t. “Know what, I’ll contact him for you. Needed to talk to him anyway.”

“Did you, now? I wasn’t aware you had an interest in necromancy.”

“I very much don’t.”

“Probably good to keep it that way. No point in even caring about it for a knackless person.” She shrugs. “But if you’d like to get in touch with him for me, then be my guest. It isn’t like I’m ever thrilled to need to talk to people, anyway.”

He grins. “See? Aren’t you happy to have me around now? I’ll talk to anyone you need me to, so you need never so much as leave the house.”

She frowns in response, and his own grin melts off his face. “You know that attitude will get you in trouble one of these days, right? You can’t just go around acting all confident. It’ll end badly.”

“I… I know.” Of course it’s dangerous, that’s no question. “I’m being safe about it, promise. Safe as I can be.”

“I worry that’s not enough.” She pauses, glancing at the wall – at the portrait of her mother and father. “How much do you know about my parents, Nemesis? Like I said, they’re pretty infamous around here.”

“I only know how much you’ve told me,” he admits. “Haven’t really been looking into it too much. I have other priorities, you must understand.”

“I do,” she agrees. “I just wondered if you hadn’t heard any… offhand statements. The Beaumort Society was infamous, back in its day. I couldn’t go to school, or go outside at all, really, because chances were some other society’s operative would have kidnapped me on the spot.”

He glances at her sympathetically, accidentally turning the mug he’s washing at such an angle that it sprays water directly into his eye. Theory snickers to herself as he gets a towel to dry himself off, grumbling.
“Really, though, that sounds tough,” he finally says, running a ginger hand through his newly moistened hair. “Never got to go to school? Socialize? See the daylight - at least, the closest you can get around here?”

“I don’t like the daylight,” she mutters. “I don’t like people. Schools around here don’t teach anything. I learned from my parents. They taught me knowledge that society doesn’t want anyone to know. Secrets of artifice that are considered forbidden. I didn’t need anything else, just that knowledge. That’s all I want.”

He still thinks it sounds like a rather lonely existence. Then again, better lonely than kidnapped, he supposes. “I reckon that makes some sense.”

“I can’t imagine you went to school, either. Somehow, when I think of your past, I imagine you leading a gang of plucky street urchins who steal from the rich.”

He can’t help but laugh at that. “Oh, bloody stars, I wish. That all sounds so glamorous and exciting. Nah, the reality was a lot more mundane.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You don’t really strike me as a mundane sort of guy.”

He grins triumphantly. “That’s what I want you to think.”

“... Okay,” She lets out a single quiet laugh. “Well, I don’t think you’re mundane, if that means anything. Anyway, though, my parents. They were well-known for their work. They did things and learned things that the Institute didn’t want people to do and learn. So they eventually relocated to Al-Mushriq...after some of their friends simply vanished.”

He nods. “Trust me, I know about people up and vanishing. I’m being careful.”

She seems a little surprised to hear that, he observes with just a tiny bit of bitterness building. “If you don’t mind saying...”

“I do mind,” he says coldly, and then continues regardless. “It was my, er... Teacher.”

“I see.” She frowns. “And you’re searching for them now, I take it?”

He pauses, then begrudgingly nods.

She sits in silence, before finally saying, quietly, “I hope you find them.”

He doesn’t respond, returning to the dishes silently. She returns to her reading, as well, and the only noise in the room is the flow of the water and the quiet rustling of pages.

After a bit, though, she glances up at him. “Jones, how much do you know about aether?”

The question catches him off-guard. “Er... It’s a fuel source, but it’s also used as an anaesthetic, isn’t it? And a solvent? And...supposedly extremely flammable? But way too expensive to ever make for an efficient Molotov.”

She chuckles lightly at his last statement. “You’re correct, but that’s not the entire definition. Aether is the fundamental force behind artifice.”

Nemesis blinks. “I don’t read.”

Theory shakes her head, sighing. “Do they not teach you anything in those fancy Lygredish schools?”

She rolls her eyes. “Studying literature in schools… What a waste. Chemistry and physics are important, I suppose.”

“Why would you need to know chemistry or physics? You’re an artificer, the rules don’t count for you.”

“That’s a common misconception. To break the rules of reality, you first have to be aware of them. Physics and chemistry are taught even by the Institute. Most artificers try to work within the existing knowledge, lest they destabilize things too badly.” She twirls her pen idly in her hand. “But, of course, one never gets anywhere playing by the rules. Those of us who seek knowledge in any serious way must break the rules and take the risks as they come.” She pauses for a moment, before scoffing. “Besides, most people’s knack isn’t powerful enough to break through the laws of reality, anyway.”

“… Fascinating.” He supposes that makes sense, though the thought of destabilizing the laws of physics is quite ominous. “We’re getting off the subject, though. You were telling me about aether?”

“I was,” she agrees, seeming to consider her wording. “Aether is the fundamental force behind artifice, like I said. It’s everywhere, interspersed throughout all of matter. Broadly put, as it is currently theorized, the knack is actually a certain amount of control over the aether within objects, allowing a degree of control over the object itself, which varies from person to person in strength and precision.”

“That tracks, I suppose.” Nemesis frowns. “So what does that mean about knackless people?”

“Not much. Just that they lack that ability.” She shrugs. “One of the theories is that different locations have higher or lower concentrations of aether. Acerbis is higher on that scale, while Lygredyg is far lower.”

His frown deepens. “That doesn’t explain the shepherds, though. I’d think the Border Wilds would be full of aether.”

“They are.” Theory sighs. “The M’amand are an anomaly, all things considered. The things we understand don’t seem to apply to them. I’d be curious as to the thoughts of a M’amand scholar on their own knacklessness, but I’ve never met any, never mind ones that would actually have the proper base knowledge to have input.”

Nemesis silently points to himself, and her eyes widen ever-so-slightly.

“I didn’t realize. I suppose Lygredyg does have a higher M’amand population than here-”

“Nah, it’s fine. I don’t really advertise it or anything.” He sighs, trying to look at the mug he’s drying instead of at her. “I’m half, from my mom’s side. Not really a desirable trait over there, either, so I’m used to being quieter about it.”

“That’s sad,” she mutters.

“It’s life. I don’t mind it much. The knacklessness, though, I’ll admit that’s a little more of an inconvenience.”

“I suppose it would be.” She nods, though he knows she can’t fully understand. He doubts she knows many knackless people at all, considering who her parents are. “Anyway, the reason I was
asking is that I’m pretty sure I’ve recognized the words I didn’t know earlier. It’s a word for aether, I think.”

He frowns. “The enemy is the aether?”

“From the aether… I think.” She motions with her pen, carefully, upwards.

Nemesis’ eyes follow the trajectory of her hand. “The rafters? Er, the attic? Do you have an attic, even?”

“We do have an attic, but that’s beside the point. The aether… is said to be what makes up the stars themselves. And it’s present here, on the earth. Present in all of us.” She pauses. “Some of us more than others. The aether is the basest energy and foundation of the universe. An enemy from the aether-”

“Bit less than great, I’d reckon.”

“I’d reckon,” she agrees. “Depending on what it is… But, truly, it’s unlikely anything like that exists. Surely, if something that powerful were to be present, close enough that we could write a book about it, surely human civilization would have been destroyed by it long ago.”

Nemesis frowns. “You assume it’s hostile and destructive.”

“Well, that is what the word ‘enemy’ would imply,” she says simply, humming to herself as she turns a page. “But of course, we have no way of knowing if it is or not. You’re right. All we know is what we can glean from this title – and my translation might not even be correct.” At this point, her face falls. “… Do get Burke to the library, please. This isn’t going to leave my thoughts until I solve it.”

“Understandable.” Nemesis knows he gets the same way, whenever he encounters a puzzle or code which he can’t immediately decipher. “I’ll make sure to.” And with that, the final mug is dried and placed carefully back in the cupboard. “I’ll be taking my leave now. Goodnight, Theory. Try to sleep before you pass out.”

“I can stay awake far longer than you, you know. Regular use of one’s knack reduces the need for sleep.”

Nemesis chuckles under his breath. “Okay, that I envy. Still, be careful.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. Goodnight.”

There truly isn’t a more worrying way she could have phrased that. Despite this, he doesn’t press her about it. He figures there’s likely no point. Someone like Theory Hayes is bound to be stuck in her ways to a degree that he can’t exactly fix overnight.

What he can do instead is stand in front of his bulletin board, pinning in more notes and pictures, until the web of Correspondents and Benefactors and Eyes and strange disappearances and murders and quirks of artifice that he surely wasn’t taught about in school seem to spread out, becoming a swirl of words and concepts.

All of it is connected. And somehow, he is at the end of this web, waiting. If only Nemesis could find his way to him.
Chapter Summary

So, today, June 7, is Nemesis's birthday! I've written a short story to commemorate this - a little bit of bonus content. In canon, this marks his nineteenth year, and is set sometime between him meeting Percy (out of continuity necessity) and Chapter 11, which is a very broad span of time, but I'm giving it the vague authorly handwave.

As extra bonus content, server I'm in was doing character Q&As, so I asked both that server and the tBS server for questions for the characters! This isn't a proper chapter, just a fun bit of bonus content. If it reads a little weirdly, it's because I never write in script, ever.

If you're wondering who Dorian is, he'll be relevant in around...checks watch...another six chapters or so.

These are fun, and I might do another, so feel free to leave any questions in the comments, if you'd like. They can be as serious or nonserious as you'd like, though I'll cleverly avoid actual spoilers.

Just as they would any other day, the people mill about the streets. Nemesis stands by the window of Beaumont’s looking out, watching their uniformly boring forms pass by. No one here is worth a second glance, and any other day they wouldn’t be getting it.

“Something is on your mind,” Theory says. It’s not a question, it’s a statement, though one with a curious undertone to it.

“Maybe,” he agrees, with just a hint of irritation.

“You sound angry.”

“I might be angry.”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

He scoffs. “It’s not like you actually care - you’re just curious about me in the same distant sense you would be about a character in one of those ancient novels you’re always reading.”

“Maybe. But you must admit, normally you’re a lot more tolerant of it than this.”

He sighs. “Maybe I am.”

“You two look awfully somber.”

Callie has seemingly awoken and is standing behind them, eyes wide with curiosity as ever.

“I might be,” Nemesis admits.

“I’m not,” Theory says neutrally, “but he certainly is. I can’t imagine why, and he won’t talk to me
about it.”

“Forgive me,” Nemesis says, with no intention of seeking or receiving the barest shred of forgiveness.

“Today means something to you, doesn’t it?” Callie asks the question clearly and with even tone.

He stares at the ground, awkwardly sorting through the many potential responses, none of them suitable, before finally choosing the one he finds least immediately offensive. “You think?”

“I think you were staring at the newspaper on the table a bit too long for someone who showed no interest in actually reading it. Beside that, there’s no reason for you to be in such a sour mood.”

He lets out a strained chuckle despite himself. “You really might be a fantastic private eye, you know? I can’t believe you noticed that.”

“You taught me well.” He knows that’s not true, and hearing the words makes him angry in a way he can’t quite describe. His knuckles curl on the dark brown oak windowsill. A bit of the paint chips off.

When he doesn’t say anything, she continues, with an undercurrent of nerves in her voice which certainly wasn’t there before. “Is it something I can help you with?”

“Afraid not,” he responds. “Afraid I’ve somewhere to be, anyway. Chase and I said we’d meet at the Bitter End.”

The meeting isn’t for an hour and a half, but these two don’t need to know that. He puts on his shoes with more urgency than he might normally, slinging his coat over his shoulder and rushing out the door.

Callie is there as it closes behind him. How could she possibly have gotten there so fast? “Won’t you at least tell me? I figured it out, after all.”

He rolls his eyes, though it’s out of her view. “Sure, sure. Today is a birthday I’ve never had cause to celebrate. Does that satisfy you?”

“Very much so.” She raises an eyebrow quizzically. “It’s your birthday, isn’t it?”

“It might be.”

“I read a lot about birthdays. I don’t have one.”

Nemesis sighs. “...might sound insensitive, but I wish I didn’t have a birthday.”

“I’m not going to question that. I’ll let you go to your meeting, and I’m sorry.”

Nemesis shakes his head. “You’ve nothing to be sorry for, my dear. Water the houseplants while I’m gone, because Theory surely won’t do it.”

It isn’t until he’s fully left Beaumort’s behind, turned the corner of Scroll Street, and become just another of the throngs of ordinary people on an ordinary day that he realizes just how reminiscent the conversation is of the ones he used to have with a certain man. How times have changed. The thought makes him sick to his stomach.

It’s a beautiful early summer day. Outside, it’s the perfect warm-but-not-hot temperature, with a
light breeze making it the perfect environment. Nemesis is wearing far less layers than usual, feeling the wind run through his hair and remembering how different it had felt when his hair was long, and the air had been hot and sticky and Llygredish and smelling of smoke and rot and misery. The air here is cool and clear, though the smell of smoke remains, brushing lightly over his nose.

He stops by the wharf. The sea air is something he never got to experience in Citrea Viridia. The way it had been described to him, it sounded so idyllic and beautiful, but in person it’s even better. Nemesis can’t imagine ever living away from the sea again.

A wave crests and breaks. Spray hits his face. He doesn’t even try to dodge it.

Leviathan Bridge is a gorgeous beige-stone structure, and Nemesis pauses in the middle of the crowded footpath to look over the River Lethe where it runs into Drowned Man’s Bay. The dark and turbulent waves in the distance have softened into ripples, understated and harmless, flanking the central current. He watches a leaf fall from one of the oaks which flank each side of the river, carried away immediately by the river and fed to the mouth of the bay.

There’s an indescribable, hazy feeling that comes with having a bad day. Something so detached and ethereal, wretchedness cloaked in the fog of ephemeral beauty. He can’t let himself indulge these thoughts any longer, for his own sake.

The Bitter End smells of ground coffee and pancake syrup from meters away. The smell always puts a smile on Nemesis’s face, however faint.

Percy is waiting for him at the booth farthest from the door, grinning smugly when Nemesis arrives. He wonders if he hasn’t stumbled upon an especially good topic for an article. It occurs to him that he doesn’t know Percy well enough yet to concoct any alternate hypotheses, anyway - there are surely many things which would put him in a good mood of this nature, but Nemesis can’t imagine what they are.

“Afternoon,” he says, sliding into the seat across from Percy. Through the window, he can see the passerby rushing. He was just another one of them, mere minutes ago.

“It sure is,” Percy agrees. “You’re here early.”

“You are too,” Nemesis points out.

“Well, I like to sit here, reflect and such. It’s near enough to the office that it’s convenient. Nicer than spending all my time inside, isn’t it?”

“You’re still inside.”

“Well, at least I can get coffee here.” Percy looks at Nemesis, smiling. “Anyway, I have a lot to talk to you about. It’s probably for the best that you got here early.”

He certainly isn’t lying. Their conversation - a discussion of a series of thefts in the southeast Omen district known as the Bones, home to primarily impoverished fishermen and dock-workers and almost nothing whatsoever worth stealing - spans three cups of slightly oversteeped tea and two and a half plates of scones. The sky outside goes from its pleasant early-afternoon light gray to a far murkier color, though not dark enough to necessitate the switching-on of the streetlamps. Nemesis feels his attention occasionally straying, though not to anything important. Things like the patterns of the dust on the floor, or the way Percy drums his fingers against the handle of his cup when he’s trying to collect his thoughts, sharp and quick. But all conversations have their end, and eventually this one runs its natural course, and the two are left in silence, finishing their drinks with
plenty still to think about.

“Nemesis?” Percy asks.

“That’s my name,” Nemesis answers.

“You’re upset about something.”

Nemesis blinks at him, hoping he’s successfully conveyed his confusion. “What makes you think that?”

Percy chuckles lowly, wagging a finger. “Nemesis, Nemesis...lying by omission works fine on people who don’t know you very well, when you only need to fool them once, but it doesn’t work nearly as well on your co-workers. The fact that you didn’t tell me ‘no, I’m not’ outright speaks volumes.”

“Okay.”

Percy’s grin falls. “Okay, bastard.”

“That’s me.”

“Yeah, it is.” But then Percy’s voice softens, as does his tone. “I don’t mean to pry into your personal business, but, you know - as your friend, seeing you this upset is a little upsetting to me, too. So if you want to talk about it-”

“I don’t.”

“Okay.” Percy takes a sip of his tea, seemingly unbothered, leaving Nemesis to consider his words a moment longer.

Finally, he sighs. “Er, Chase-”

Percy’s grin returns. “That’s my name.”

“You can’t tell what I’m about to tell you to anyone else, alright?” Nemesis has his compass ready, watching under the table as it indicates Percy’s utter sincerity, as it reliably does.

“I promise,” Percy agrees. As usual, to an almost irritating degree, he’s truthful.

“It’s my birthday today,” Nemesis admits.

Percy’s eyes widen barely. “Is that why you’re upset?”

“Sort of. I’m not upset so much as mildly...upset.”

“Why would you be upset that it’s your birthday?”

“A lot of reasons. You can’t tell this to anyone else, okay?” Though the risk is minimal, it’s the sort of personal information which could be used to connect Nemesis to his past. Better to avoid having it known entirely, just in case.

Percy stands up, having emptied his coffee. “Okay. And I won’t press you about it more, because clearly this is something personal, but I will be getting you a gift tomorrow.”

“You don’t need to. I can afford anything you possibly can.”
“That isn’t the point, Nemesis.” He pats him on the shoulder briskly as he leaves.

Percy wasn’t Nemesis’s only scheduled rendezvous on this most introspective of days. After he’s sure his companion has left, he makes his way to the scheduled meeting-place, east, to the harbor and the botanical gardens. He crosses back over the bridge, feels the wind in his hair again, and listens to his shoes thudding against the cobblestones as he walks.

It’s twilight, or at least Omen’s nearest equivalent, by the time he makes it to the public gardens. A soft breeze ruffles the foliage. On a small bench, sitting beneath a large carnivorous plant locked behind spectacular wrought-iron bars, Elias’s back is turned to him.

“Careful,” he says, teasingly. “I hear that thing’s eaten tourists before.”

“Would it really be able to do that without being taken somewhere more secure?” Elias moves over so that Nemesis can sit beside him, and he does. The black iron of the bench may as well be ice.

“I don’t know. It’s just a rumour. An urban legend.”

The two stare at the plant, which twists its vines around the bars of its cell. The vines aren’t prehensile - at least, they don’t look it - merely growing in whimsical configurations, like ivy, upwards towards the unreachable sun. Does a pitcher-plant experience want, Nemesis wonders? Does it have some instinctual knowledge of what must lie beyond the Umbra?

“It’s a strange-looking plant,” Elias observes flatly.

“I think it’s charming.”

Elias looks at him strangely. “It’s carnivorous, is what it is.”

“Nothing wrong with needing to survive.”

Elias chuckles lightly. “I guess not. I just hate the idea. I think all plants should photosynthesize. Ideally, all creatures.”

Nemesis gestures to the dark gray sky above them. “If we photosynthesized we would be dead by now.”

“That doesn’t.” Elias looks Nemesis in the eye and cuts himself off.

“You were about to say something depressing and concerning, weren’t you?”

“Possibly.”

“Elias…”

“I’m not going to,” Elias resolves. “Not on your birthday.”

“Elias,” Nemesis says more seriously. “If you were dead that would be terrible, okay? No redeeming features to that.”

“If you say so.”

“You can’t just keep saying that all the time, Elias. It’s a conversation-ender. It’s rude. It makes me wonder if you might not care that I worry about you.”
“I just don’t know what else to say,” he acquiesces. “Sorry. Happy birthday.”

“It’s alright. I didn’t think you were going to remember,” Nemesis admits. “I’m glad you did.”

“How could I possibly forget? It took years to get you to admit you have a birthday. Once I have that information, I’m not about to forget it.” He punches Nemesis in the arm, lighter than usual.

“You know I wouldn’t be offended if you did.”

“I’d be offended on your behalf, then!” The fist grabs onto his shoulders, shakes him lightly. “Idiot. Stop acting ungrateful. I wrote a poem for you.”

“You did what?”

Elias looks sheepishly away. “I wrote a poem. I thought...you like poetry, so I may as well. But I remembered too late that I hate writing, and that I’m also not very good at it. Sorry. I think I’m going to chicken out and buy you something a couple days late.”

“Elias,” Nemesis says seriously. “You know I want to hear what you’ve written, even if it’s completely rubbish.”

Elias doesn’t seem convinced beyond reasonable doubt, but he nods. “If you insist. I...I’m sorry it’s not better, though. I tried, but…”

“It’s alright. I appreciate that you tried. Anything you could have written for me would mean more than you can imagine, you know.”

“If you insist,” Elias repeats. He brings out from his waistcoat pocket a folded piece of paper, which he unfolds with a tentative and trembling hand, clearing his throat. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Er- ‘When we first met in sunlight/For you a desolate place/You and I at once resolved/To leave without a trace/And though we suffer tribulations/Whether there or here/I thank each star in the cold sky/That you’ve lived another year.”

Nemesis applauds, muffled by his gloves. Elias flinches. “I’m sorry it was so short. I...I wanted to imitate your writing style, because you’re the only poet I ever read, really…”

“Calling me a poet is far too kind,” Nemesis says. “I loved it, though. Not at all that bad, for a first try.”

“Well...it’s like writing music with words, isn’t it?”

“I reckon you could say that.” Nemesis smiles at him, and is thrilled to see Elias smile back, in that subdued, Elias-y way.

And there’s a moment of silence, in which Nemesis leans his hand on the bench, and Elias casually places his own hand over it. The shadows around them twist like vines. The sky darkens.

“Thank you for coming out here today. And remembering my birthday. And...everything, really,” Nemesis says at last.

Elias nods. “You never need to thank me for anything like that. I’ll be here for your birthday every year I physically can. But it’s getting late, and Fitzroy will start to notice I’m missing.”

“And I...have things to do, as well.”

The two embrace and part ways. Nemesis mutters the words of Elias’s poem under his breath as he
walks home. No masterpiece, certainly, but he can’t get it out of his mind.

As he lies in his bed, trying to let sleep take him, Nemesis thinks that, just perhaps, he’s begun to tolerate his birthday.

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**To the entire cast: do any of you sing well? Who sings frequently, if anyone, ability not withstanding?**

ELIAS: I'm a musician, but I can't sing at all, and I wouldn't if I could. It's a little...attention-grabbing for my taste.

JING: Well, I like singing. It's relaxing.

ELIAS: It's part of your job, so I hope you like it.

ELIAS: Nemesis doesn't sing much, but he's actually pretty alright at it.

ELIAS: I used to have him accompany me, when I had sheet music which had both a vocal and piano part. He was acceptable at it.

NEMESIS: Acceptable?

ELIAS: Yes, acceptable.

PERCY: Well, Evie is also an amazing singer!

EVIE: I wouldn't say I'm amazing.

THEORY: You are, though.

EVIE: I do an okay enough job. I need to, sometimes, now that I'm trying to be an actress.

PERCY: Don't be modest, Eves, you're a triple threat! I like to sing, too.

NEMESIS: No offense, but you're not very good at it.

PERCY: None taken! It's fine, it doesn't stop me.

THEORY: I refuse to sing on principle.

PERCY: Really? Never?

THEORY: Never.

EVIE: I'm sure you would be alright at it. Come on, try it.

THEORY: ...

THEORY: Fine. [clears her throat] My mother used to sing this song back in the day...

THEORY: [singing, badly] ~White on white translucent black capes/Back on the rack/Bela Lugosi's dead/The bats have left the bell-tower/The victims have been bled/Red velvet lines the black box~

EVIE: Well, your voice sounds very strained, but there's potential.
THEORY: Do you think so?

CALLIE: I like to sing. Art used to say I had a really nice singing voice.

NEMESIS: I've never heard you sing.

CALLIE: Well, there's no point if there's no one around, is there?

To Percy: Thoughts on thoughts?

PERCY: ...

PERCY: They're good?

To Dorian: You are my dad.

DORIAN: Ah, am I?

DORIAN: ...

DORIAN: Don't joke about that, please. That's a serious accusation.

DORIAN: Also, it's not a question.

Nemesis: what's the strangest thing you've ever eaten?

NEMESIS: One time, when I was a little bit younger, I was at a summer party where fruit and a blender were provided for making refreshments to one's own taste.

NEMESIS: I don't know what came over me. A desire to spit in the face of this establishment? Simple stupidity?

NEMESIS: I picked up a single lime, put it in the blender, and watched the blades spin until it was quite thoroughly liquefied, peel and all.

NEMESIS: And then, out of spite, refusing to admit my mistake, I drank it. It was miserable.

NEMESIS: The worst part is that Elias was right there. He saw everything. What must he have thought of me? That our friendship did not end in that moment is a blessing, one which I do not deserve.

Theory: What are your hobbies?

THEORY: Reading. Organizing the bookstore. More reading.

THEORY: I don't read much for pleasure. It's generally research. I'm always seeking knowledge. Organizing the bookstore serves the same end. I'm not sure either of those count as hobbies, upon reflection. They're sort of my job.

THEORY: An actual hobby? Don't tell anyone, but sometimes I like to look at fashion magazines. They're delivered to me by mistake, so I might as well not let them go to waste. They're...an adequate distraction.
Theory: do you have a favorite book?

THEORY: Asking me to choose that is like asking me to choose my favorite neuron. All of them are essential, except for the ones that deal in trivialities, and all are equally valuable to my state of existence.

THEORY: You might say my favorite book is whichever I'm reading at the time. Or, perhaps...there are a few of my parents' research journals which couldn't possibly be replicated. Those are quite important.

Nemesis: thoughts on Elias?

NEMESIS: He's my best mate, isn't he? I don't know what you expect me to say about him. I wouldn't be friends with someone who I disliked, would I?

Percy: thoughts on Elias?

PERCY: He's, uh...

PERCY: I don't want to upset Nemesis but he's a little bit intimidating? I mean, he's so quiet, and he doesn't seem like he likes to talk to people at all...I always feel like I'm bothering him when we're in the same room.

PERCY: I'm sure he's nice deep down, though! I trust Nemesis's taste in people.

Theory: thoughts on thots?

THEORY: It is important to think, yes.

Callie: thoughts?

CALLIE: What?

CALLIE: ....

CALLIE: ...sorry?
Apologies if this chapter is less polished than normal. This week has been...a lot, for reasons I won't go into, but I'm always determined to have something to upload despite that.

And, oh yeah. We're really getting into the long chapter zone. This begins to taper off around chapter 15. Until then...good luck, I suppose?

CW for alcohol.

Also, shoutout to Hal, who helps me edit and do a lot of other things. I don't think I'd still be writing if it weren't for him.

The next morning, Theory is still laboring over the books. True to her word, she’s awake before Nemesis, and doesn’t seem to have moved whatsoever in the time he spent sleeping. The look on his face as he slides her a cup of coffee (which he detests, but is well aware she greatly enjoys) is purely one of concern. “I know what you said, but you know how this seems to me, right?”

“Why should I care how it seems to someone like you?” Her words have no bite to them, and she drinks the coffee anyway, begrudging him a sliver of gratitude. It only takes her three sips to empty the cup.

“Someone like me? That’d best not be a dig at the fact that I actually require sleep, Theers, I can’t help that.”

“You’ve never stayed up overnight to study, have you?”

He has to laugh at that. “Stars, of course I have. And without your gifts, too.”

“Hmm. I suppose you never came off as especially bookish to me.”

He glances at her in disbelief. “Theers, you’ve seen how much I read.”

“Well, studious, I mean. It’s a semantic difference and you know it.” She sighs. “I simply suppose I can’t understand why a knackless person would be. How much can you possibly gain from studying, anyway?”

“You realize how that sounds, right?”

She shakes her head.

“Just because I can’t be an artificer, doesn’t mean I can’t study things. That’s ludicrous. Private investigators need to know a lot.”

“Did you go to private investigation school, then? Is that a thing?”

He can’t help himself - he chuckles at that. “No, no. Thought I told you I was apprenticed. I went
to school to be…” He frowns. “Er, never thought that far ahead, actually, but I’ve always thought I’d maybe like to be a teacher, or a librarian.”

“A librarian…” She sighs. “I suppose that word does have different connotations where you’re from. Still, interesting choice.”

“I spent a lot of time in libraries when I was younger,” he says as explanation.

“Can’t imagine why you’d need to.”

“Yes, well, you grew up in a bookstore, Theers.”

“Your point?”

Before Nemesis can respond, a door opens, and Callie, not looking well-rested in the least, stumbles to the table.

“Morning,” he says to her. “Blimey. You look like you got hit by a train.”

“I’d be dead if I got hit by a train,” she mutters.

Nemesis hurries to make a cup of tea. By the time he’s back, she’s collapsed onto the table. He gently nudges her, then shakes her shoulder, and she sits up, groggy. He frowns.

“We weren’t even out that late,” he mutters, frowning. “You seem completely non-functional.”

“I’m fine,” she says through a yawn, and Nemesis’s frown deepens.

“You aren’t.” It’s said sternly, but not without sympathy. “You’re a bloody mess. You need to rest up.”

She looks up at him miserably. “But we were going to go to the Obscura today. I can’t rest…”

“You can, and you will.” He puts a hand on her shoulder. “You can’t do this to yourself. You’ll be far more useful if you take the time to sleep than if you exert yourself until you can’t function anymore. Trust me.”

“But I want to help…” Her expression is one of abject despair. Nemesis can barely look her in the eye.

“You’ll be less help if you’re on the verge of passing clean out. Do both of us a favor and rest, just for today.”

“But…”

“You know what?” Theory speaks sharply, with authority. “You can stay here and help me with my translations, if you want to be useful. I probably need your help more than he does, anyway - what I’m doing is far harder than just getting information out of people.”

“Love to see you respect my work as always, Theo.” He glances back towards Callie. “…she’s right, though. You’re best staying here - I’ll be fine on my own for the time being.”

“…okay.” She seems reluctant to agree, but concedes at last, clutching onto her cup of tea with a weak, half-asleep hand.
And so Nemesis makes his way to the Theatre Obscura on his own. It’s been some time since he’s walked these streets unaccompanied - they’re large as always, easily the width of a large Citrea Viridian house, threatening to swallow whole any curious foreigners lost within their miles.

The Theatre is no more welcoming than the other times. He enters through the same tunnel he used before. This time, the pattern of trip-wires is in his muscle memory, and it’s barely any time before he’s emerged through the same broom closet. By now, it might as well be home.

The Chases are there to welcome him, though Percy looks far more somber after yesterday’s outing. Evie smiles politely as greeting.

“Hey,” Percy asks, frowning, “Where’s Callie? I thought she’d be coming with you. She seems to like following you around.”

“Less that she likes to,” he replies, remembering the circumstances under which she had agreed to be his assistant, “And more that she feels obliged to. But she’s sleep-deprived to the point where I’d worry for her safety if she had to be outside. I told her to take the day off and rest for her own good.”

Percy nods, visibly concerned. “I hope she does that. I hope she hasn’t gotten sick or anything…”

“Me too,” Nemesis agrees. “How’ve things been going on your end?”

“Pretty alright,” Percy answers. “Evie’s been...well, things are interesting around here, apparently.”

“It’s business as usual,” Evie says calmly, though Nemesis can hear the barest hint of strain in her voice. “They’re just rehearsing as normal, as if a murder didn’t happen here. You can tell Fitzroy isn’t very worried about any investigations, either. He doesn’t consider any of what’s happening to be a legitimate threat.”

“Lines up with what I know of the guy.”

“Do you know a lot about the guy?” Percy inquires.

Nemesis shrugs. “I know a good bit about him. Enough to dislike him, let’s say. Not that I think that’s all that high of a bar.”

“I thought you weren’t from around here,” Evie interjects.

“I’m not. You think I’ve got this accent on purpose?” He’s aware of the irony - that he does, in fact, disguise his accent for one considered more proper - but it isn’t as if he’s faking one of those stylish Omenite accents. He’s tried, and it’s beyond his abilities.

“Then why are you suddenly an expert on Fitzroy’s behavior?”

“About that,” he says, opening the door to the room and exiting into the backstage room. Percy and Evie look on in a mixture of concern and disappointment, realizing that the conversation has effectively just been cut short.

Nemesis takes a brief look at his compass. The needle pointing at him is glowing brighter than usual.

He glances in both directions. He knows what the layout of the Obscura is, approximately - he’s drafted an incomplete floor plan based on his last two times here, which comprises the entirety of the publicly accessible areas, around a third of the backstage, and the tunnels of which he’s aware.
But his first instinct is to head towards one of the uncharted territories, because what he hears from it is faint piano music, so beautiful and delicate and sorrowful that he knows there’s only one person who could be playing it.

He realizes he’s missed the sound of piano music wafting through a silent hallway. Even if he didn’t know he needed to speak to the source, he would have been drawn to it regardless, trance-like, pulled towards the point of origin like a compass needle towards magnetic north.

The room is mostly empty, cases and sheet music scattered haphazardly around. Nemesis nearly trips over a broken cello as he makes his way towards the grand piano in the very center of the room, at which Elias sits, looking so effortlessly ethereal as he presses the keys, with that strange cadence of a marionette, unstable yet graceful. The piano plays him as much as he plays it. He’s caught up in the music, and the familiar sight can only be described as beautiful.

It wasn’t just the sound. He missed this, too.
Elias looks up at him, smiling lightly. Not pausing in his playing, he gestures with his head, beckoning Nemesis over. “I didn’t expect to see you here again.”

“I’m surprised. I figured you would expect me, what with all the excitement around here. You know I can’t resist a good murder mystery.” Nemesis sits on the piano bench, a few inches away from Elias, and glances at the stand.

The piece on it is labeled ‘Hymn to Adelaide’. Nemesis has never been formally trained in music, but he reads notation well enough, and a simple glance is enough to tell that this isn’t the piece Elias is playing. Not even close. Hymn to Adelaide is in harmonic E-flat minor and 12/8 time, while what Elias is playing is blatantly a waltz, and though he can’t precisely identify the key, he can tell there’s far less flats than on the paper. Besides, the pages of this piece haven’t been turned at all, and with how fast it looks, he’s sure Elias would have needed to move on by this point. He tends to play pieces a bit slow (Nemesis, his more-than-occasional page-turner, is well aware), but not this slow.

“It’s not a murder mystery,” he says calmly. “It’s real. Someone died. And I suppose I just thought you had a little more self-preservation than to rush in here when Fitzroy already has reasons to be on guard.”

“Me? Self-preservation? Never. I’m here to solve a murder.”

Elias sighs. “You know this isn’t safe, right? You can’t keep operating as if you’ve still got him around to keep you out of trouble.”

Nemesis pretends he doesn’t feel as if he’s just been punched in the stomach.

It’ll be okay. I’ll find him.

Perhaps he doesn’t pretend well enough, or perhaps Elias simply knows him too well, because he stops playing and puts a hand on Nemesis’ shoulder. “You’ve been making progress. It’s okay. It’ll be okay.”

Nemesis wishes he could believe that. “I’d like to hope so.”

“I believe in your abilities, even if I do think you’re probably biting off a bit more than you can chew.” Just as Nemesis is thinking of a response, Elias shifts closer to him, puts an arm around him, and resumes playing, and anything he could have said is rendered pointless, the words dissolving into nothingness before they can even be formed.

“Sorry,” he says, as though Nemesis is upset. “I have to keep playing or someone’ll think something’s up. I’ve been practicing for something like eight hours straight, it’d be strange if I stopped now.”

That’s why he’s like this, then. He’s delirious from exhaustion. “Eight hours? Elias, you need to take care of yourself.”

“It’s basically the only thing I enjoy doing. People leave me alone eventually. No one wants to listen to me play the piano for eight hours straight.”

Nemesis thinks to himself that he might like to hear Elias play the piano for eight hours straight.

Elias continues uninterrupted, though. “Well, not the only thing I enjoy doing. Sometimes I’ll grab some books from the library and wall myself up in my room. I’ve been starting on those novels you recommended me - the Dick Remmington books. But mostly I just practice. There’s always
Normally, Nemesis would be thrilled that, after so many years, Elias is finally reading his favorite books. Instead, he just feels intense concern. That self-professed un-bookish below-average student Elias would be actively seeking out reading material is in itself worrying. “How have you been liking them, then?”

“The language is awful flowery for my liking, but the stories are interesting enough. I haven’t been able to solve any of the mysteries before the characters yet, but I didn’t really expect to.” He begins to shift into a different, slightly more energetic, upbeat movement. “I can see why you like them.”

“I’m glad you don’t hate them too much.” He sighs, watching Elias’ hands fly effortlessly, almost unconsciously, over the keys. “I don’t recognize this piece. It’s a new one, right? And it’s not—” he gestures to the piece on the stand, “—so that means you memorised it too, you unfairly talented bastard.”

“It’s not that piece, no. Fitzroy composed that one. This is...I’ve been working on it for a bit. I’m playing at the reception at the Cabinet’s new exhibition, you know the one. Fitzroy...volunteered me. Not like I can say no.”

“Bloody stars, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He smiles to himself. “I don’t mind that much. It’s no worse than needing to provide musical accompaniment for Morgana’s bi-monthly literary triumphs, really. I get to compose a piece. That’s already not bad by me.”

“So you’ve composed this piece? I thought it sounded like your work.” He pauses, not sure how much of this Elias wants to hear. “It’s beautiful. Really. I missed...hearing this.”

“It’s not bad. I don’t particularly care to work to the best of my abilities for Fitzroy, really.”

“As you well shouldn’t.”

The two fall into silence, Elias continuing to play. It isn’t until he shifts back to a minor key, slowing down, that Nemesis speaks.

“So Fitzroy will be at the gala, then?”

“Of course. He’s everywhere important.” Nemesis might be imagining it, but Elias seems as though his playing is increasing in intensity, slowly getting louder and harsher, slamming his hands into the keys. “Why do you ask?”

“I was thinking of stopping by myself.” Not a lie, he supposes.

“I’d recommend against it. I’d recommend avoiding him at all costs.” Elias sighs. “In fact, I’d recommend not being here, either. I still don’t understand why you are.”

“Because I’m sure that someone within the theatre committed the murder.”

Elias looks darkly at his hands, still moving gracefully across the keys. “Have you ever considered that I’m someone within the theatre? That you’re sitting right next to someone who could, conceivably, have committed that murder?”

Before Nemesis can respond, he feels Elias’ hand lift off the piano, shifting back to curl through
his hair. Something cold presses against the back of his neck, feeling eerily similar to a knife, but he knows it isn’t one. Though Elias is loathe to use his knack, the solid shadows he creates are capable of having the same function as a blade, razor-sharp and easily hidden by Nemesis’ hair. Elias’ penumbra expands ever-so-slightly outwards, threatening to envelop Nemesis, and perhaps the whole room.

“Elias,” he says slowly, because he doesn’t really know what else to say.

“That’s my name.” The piano has stopped now. It’s just the two of them and the shadows.

Despite himself, Nemesis finds himself tense, unable to move. How can he, when there’s a sharp object digging into the back of his neck? Too late, he realizes he must have unintentionally ditched the Chases, and it’s just him and Elias in this room.

But Elias would never hurt him, he thinks, even as his breath catches in his throat. “I trust you.”

He hears a sigh, and he feels the knife-like sensation turn into that of Elias’ hand, also cold, sliding down the back of his neck before falling by his side. “I don’t know what I expected. Or what I was trying to do. I just know that you’re an idiot, Nemesis Jones.”

“I’ve been told,” Nemesis agrees, though he can’t hide his sigh of relief as he slumps forward, a horrible sound coming from the piano as he depresses three or four of the keys.

Elias raises his hand again, but this time he wraps it around Nemesis’ shoulder, pulling him back up into a half-hug. “Sorry. That was…uncouth of me.”

Circumstances aside, Nemesis can’t help but laugh. “You think? If I were anyone else I’d be right angry. What in the stars was that meant to be?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.” He sighs. “I’m sorry. I hope you know I couldn’t kill you even if I had to.”

“I should hope so. I’m sorry for, er…”

“If you need to search for a reason to apologize to me, that’s a pretty clear sign that you shouldn’t be apologizing at all.” Elias squeezes him, just barely. “But…you should be going, and I should be back to my practicing. Else someone’ll get suspicious.”

“…you’re right,” he admits. “But…just a few minutes, okay?”

“…” Elias moves his hands back to the keys, sighing. “If you insist. Keep track, since you love that pocketwatch of yours so much.”

“’S not a pocketwatch,” he mutters, still slumped over onto Elias’ shoulder and with no intentions of moving. “Just a few minutes. Promise.”

“…right.” He pauses. “I’m sorry.”

“’S okay, Elias. I’m not mad. Not at you.”

Elias doesn’t respond this time. The music starts again, low and sorrowful and haunting and beautiful.

Nemesis hopes the Chases are waiting for him in the hallway, but it’s a different face that meets him. A face he didn’t entirely expect to see here. Perhaps, he had even hoped he wouldn’t.
Jing Liu is sitting on a crate, legs crossed, humming quietly to themself. He supposes they must have been waiting for him, because they waste no time in springing to their feet and crossing the hallway, standing face to face with him.

“You were in there a long time,” they remark. Nemesis feels the tension in the air, but despite that, this is a stroke of good luck.

“I was looking for you, actually.” He takes advantage of Jing’s momentary shock to lean in closer, whispering into their ear. “You’re in danger.”

He feels them stiffen. “What do you mean?” They whisper. “Are you threatening me?”

“No. I...I overheard something...” It’s always so hard to tell people things like this, not because of the emotional toll, but because it’s difficult to phrase it in a way that doesn’t massively incriminate himself. “Overheard...Fitzroy and Renwick...talking about ‘getting rid’ of you, and you causing trouble. They’re not actually about to do it, mainly because of Elias, but-”

“Oh.” They sound almost delightfully surprised. “That’s not news. They make their disdain for me known.”

“They make their disdain for everyone known. Do you think they want to kill everyone they look down on?”

Jing nods. “Really, they just want the world to be full of rich, stuffy people like them. Everyone else can either die or accept they’ll never be treated as human. Fitzroy hates it when us plebeians think we’re living for any reason but their mercy.”

Nemesis shudders. “…that’s the impression I got, aye. But they were talking about you specifically, so I thought I’d-”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Jing interjects. “I appreciate it. But you’re not going to get me off point.” The poke him in the chest with a remarkably sharp, bony finger. The nails themselves, Nemesis notes, are neatly clipped short - he would presume for musical reasons. “What’s your angle? Who do you think you are to Elias?”

“I’m...his friend? I thought we’d been over this.”

Jing frowns. “I’m his friend.”

“He is capable of having multiple friends.”

They grumble to themself. “But I’m his friend.”

“I don’t doubt that you’re his friend.” He sighs, hoping his frustration isn’t too apparent. “Like I said, he’s capable of having multiple friends.”

They seem as though they’re about to simply repeat themself, but they think better of it, glancing down at the floor instead. “He’s changed so much since he left for school.”

“That he has,” Nemesis agrees. “We’ve known each other five years now. He’s changed a lot in that time.”

“I barely got to see him at all those five years, you know,” Jing says.

Nemesis struggles not to roll his eyes. “My condolences. At least he’s back now, isn’t he?”
“He’s back, but he spends all his time all holed up by himself, and I-” They sigh. “I... get it. I really do. Because if I were engaged to Lusitania Renwick, forget leaving my room, I’d actually jump out of-”

“Same. Can’t imagine it.” Nemesis feels a spike of anger at the mention of her name. “She doesn’t respect him at all. He doesn’t like being around her. He seems to dread her very presence.”

“That’s because he does,” Jing agrees. “He can’t stand being around her. It makes me want to scream whenever they’re in the same room.”

“Lusitania Renwick is perhaps among the most spectacularly unpleasant people I’ve ever met,” he says matter-of-factly. “And that’s a bloody high bar, you know.”

“She really is. We’ve had a lot of unpleasant actors around here, but she really takes the cake.” They lower their voice, seeming almost incredulous. “She doesn’t remember my name. She called me Jim the other day.”

“Doesn’t surprise me at all. That woman’s probably not capable of respecting anyone, never mind an employee.” He frowns disgustedly. “That Elias is being forced to deal with her…”

“It’s so much worse than that. She’s insisting on being around him all the time. She gets upset when he talks to anyone else, doesn’t let him have any time to himself, doesn’t even seem to care if he’s actively uncomfortable. She’s an awful person,” Jing says, voice rising to an enraged, shrill tone.

“I know you’re upset - trust me, I am too - but careful, careful, don’t let anyone overhear you. You’re already on their shitlist, aren’t you? Let’s not do anything to aggravate that.” Nemesis sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. He remembers how he’d helped Elias sneak out of just about anything that involved socialization, how much he’d seemed to recoil at the very thought of human interaction. The way Lusitania behaves around him, though he’s seen admittedly little of it, makes him seethe.

Jing looks as though they’re about to argue, but they relent, sighing. “Yeah, yeah. You’re right. Uh...thanks, by the way. For the heads-up. I don’t actually think I’m about to be killed in my sleep, but I’ll keep an eye out.”

“You should do. Wouldn’t do for you to get hurt.”

They cross their arms and scoff. “Not like you care, Jones.”

“I care, in a rather general sense, about Fitzroy harming people. I care in a less general sense about Elias being harmed, and you are close to him.”

He pauses. “...you don’t seem that horrid a person.”

They raise an eyebrow.

“Listen, I’m not saying I’ve been thrilled with you so far. You did threaten to get me arrested, and all. But you don’t seem evil, and that’s really a depressingly low and yet existent bar around here.”

They fiddle sheepishly with the end of their braid. “Yeah, I’m, uh...I’d like to think I’m not evil. I’m sorry, uh...that was a bit awful of me.”

“It was a bit awful of you,” he agrees. “But, lucky for you, I don’t really hold grudges. Let’s just
not do that again, aye?"

“Yeah, I’m not planning to. I just—”

“Oh, Nemesis! There you are! We’ve been looking all over for you!”

He whirs around, towards the source of the voice. Percy seems out of breath, Evie just barely behind him, looking far less exhausted. Though he’s a little put off by the interruption, he supposes he’d been getting off-topic, and this is a welcome reminder.

“Sorry, sorry. I got a little carried away,” he tells Percy. “I was just talking to Jing here about...the murder?” He looks at them seriously, his glance begging them to play along.

Either they don’t get the message or, more likely, intentionally disobey it for the sake of being contrary. “We were definitely not talking about anything of the sort, but, you want murder? We can talk about murder.”

Nemesis sighs, pulling his compass out and clicking it open, hoping Jing won’t question why it is he’s checking the time. “Okay, then. Tell us about the murder.”

“Alright. If you say so...Nemesis Jokes.”

He rolls his eyes as Percy lets out a single snicker behind him. “Good one.”

“I know,” they say, smiling one of the most smug and insufferable smiles he’s ever had the displeasure of witnessing. “Really, though, I don’t have that much to say. I didn’t kill her, obviously. I don’t even know anything about the murder.”

Though a yellow-green arrow finds itself fixed on Jing, there’s no hint of the normal light. They’re being honest.

“She was killed by an artificer, and was used as the prop corpse during the performance of Edward and Lucia.” He rattles off the details in a voice flat enough to unnerve himself. When did he get so blase about this whole affair?

Jing winces. “Eugh. Thought that thing smelled funky. In that case, I was helping with the parts of the set that required artifice - not just a simple lever and trapdoor.”

No dishonesty, and they sound almost proud of it. Jing is a talented artificer, Elias has mentioned offhandedly. Nemesis supposes it’s fair for them to be proud of their skills.

They continue. “I was in the orchestra pit during the show itself, but I don’t think that proves my innocence at all. Beyond that, I don’t know much.”

Nothing but honesty.

They tap their temples, genuinely seeming to consider their words, shockingly thoughtful. “The people who would set up an effect like that, and probably put it back after it’s been used...would be the stagehands. Corey Morgan and Jack Fletcher.”

“Morgan and Fletcher would have, yeah,” Evie corroborates, “But it’s hard to imagine them as the murderers. I think Fletcher’s knackless, as note.”

“It’s noted. We can never rule out a suspect, though. Not without something conclusive,” Nemesis says briskly
Evie replies: “Oh, if you need something a bit more substantial, people who aren’t the Fitzroys, Morgan, and Fletcher aren’t generally meant to go in the prop room. It’s not locked or anything, but it’s pretty much an informal rule, and you’d get treated weird if you were caught violating it...unless you were Renwick, maybe. Fitzroy lets her get away with just about anything.”

Jing nods. “But, of course, someone could have snuck in. That doesn’t conclusively rule out anyone, if we’re being detectives.”

“My job is literally being a private investigator.” Nemesis, any previous thoughts about Jing aside, admires the commitment to honesty at the expense of refusing to conclusively disprove their own involvement to anyone without a lie-detecting compass. It’s the sort of integrity that’s rare to see in people who could potentially be suspects in a murder.

“As another note, does the name ‘Elizabeth Calloway’ mean anything to you?”

“Never heard of her.” True.

“And are you loyal to the Actors’ Guild?”

Jing freezes stiff in shock. “You-you can’t just say that out loud!” They say, halfway between a whisper and a shriek. “Do you know what’ll happen if someone hears you?!!”

“Well, are you?”

They lower their head and lean in closer, whispering. “Not even fucking slightly. I’m here because I need the money to live, and the moment me and Elias can ditch this place I’m never looking back.”

“I assumed so,” he admits.

“Well,” Percy says, smiling awkwardly, “Thank you for your time, Jing! We know it can be a bit tough to be asked questions about a murder that happened at your workplace that you’re probably still processing emotionally in your own way but we really do appreciate your cooperation. Do you mind if I quote you for any possible articles, by the way?”

“...you’re welcome. And sure, but only if it’s completely anonymous.” They shrug. “Next time, maybe don’t do your interrogations in the middle of a hallway if you don’t want the Fitzroys to get onto you, though, dumbass.”

He sighs. “...advice taken. Good day, then?”

“Nah, average day.” They turn to leave with a dramatic snap of their head, nearly slapping Nemesis in the face with their braid in the process.

Nemesis sighs and glances at Percy. “They’re right, which I utterly despise. Shall we find these Morgan and Fletcher fellows, then?”

“We should. Even though they would have had the best opportunity to plant the corpse, I somehow doubt they committed the murder - but I still think they’ll probably have some important insights to tell us, if anyone around here does,” Evie agrees.

“You think maybe everyone’ll just be unbearably cagey and we’ll get nothing out of this at all?”

“There’s...” Evie frowns and admits, “...a chance. A pretty good one, if I’m being realistic.”
Percy glances at Nemesis, and he can see a familiar horror dawning on his face. “Nemesis, is this...is this case even solvable?”

“Any case is solvable if you try hard enough, in theory.” He sighs, meeting eyes with Percy’s disappointed stare. “...there’ve been cases that haven’t been solved, yes. Not by me in particular, not yet, but a third of murders go unsolved, you know.”

“That’s...not comforting.” Percy looks unsettled.

“The good news is that, back in the day, I saw some pretty hopeless-seeming cases get solved neatly. There’s always a possibility.”

“But you don’t think it’s likely?”

He shrugs. “I mean, we don’t have much to work off, but I think it’s too soon to say. We’ve only spent two days on this.”

Percy nods, not looking reassured in the least. “Okay. Okay, we can do this. Fletcher and Morgan, they said?”

“Generally, those two are hard to find,” Evie says. “Stagehands. Seem to vanish into the scenery. Suppose that’s part of their job, and all.”

“Probably a useful skill.” Nemesis glances at his compass. Places like here, where so many people are constantly lying and so many things are constantly hidden, tend to pick up from all directions, so one won’t get any leads from just doing that, but it’s almost a habit by this point.

“Nothing coming up, huh...? I actually wouldn’t know, I have no idea how to read this thing,” Percy mutters, glancing over Nemesis’ shoulder.

“It takes a little practice. It’s more intuitive than you’d think once you learn the ropes.” Nemesis says matter-of-factly. Of course, he thinks proudly to himself, he’d picked it up quick.

“Can you teach me?” Percy asks, and Nemesis shakes his head. “Aww, why not?”

“I don’t see why I’d need to, since I can already read it. It’s my compass, and all.”

He sighs. “You seem awfully touchy about this. Don’t tell me you’re insecure about your worth as a detective, and you think I might surpass you in skill if you didn’t have the compass to keep you ahead?”

Nemesis scoffs and shakes his head, holding up his compass so that Percy can tell he isn’t lying. “I have the utmost faith in my skills, compass or no compass. I don’t want anyone else near it because it used to belong to someone I respect very much.”

A blue needle is fixed on him, shining with the typical faint glow, but it doesn’t light up any more. The compass, at least, has deemed this statement to be entirely truthful.

Percy leans in to look closer at it. “It’s, er...it’s glowing a little...”

“Because I’m a generally secretive person. Not lighting up any more when I speak. That means I’m honest.”

He frowns, realization dawning. “And you’ve just conned me into teaching you how it works, even though I said I wasn’t going to, so well played, I suppose.”
“Wasn’t on purpose,” Percy admits, and the compass detects no insincerity.

“A generally secretive person?” Evie looks pointedly at him, seeming almost apprehensive. “Did you just admit to being a habitual liar?”

“I’m much the opposite. I don’t lie on principle. I simply have things I don’t talk openly about. It picks those up. I don’t know precisely how it works, but I think it’s based on how much it’s actively weighing on your mind.”

“So if it’s based on personal perception, someone could say something that they think is true, but isn’t…” she continues.

“Right, it probably wouldn’t pick them up.”

Percy cuts in. “I know you said you don’t want to teach me how it works, but would you mind telling a lie really quickly, just so I know everything you said before was true?”

“Er, if you insist.” Nemesis stares directly at his compass. “I’m eight feet tall.” Immediately, the arrow fixed on him lights up brightly, before settling back down to its steady, faint glow.

“I see.” Percy seems satisfied for a moment, before his face falls again. “You said it’s based on perception, and if someone was lying without knowing it, it wouldn’t show up...do you think someone could deliberately fool it?”

Nemesis considers it for a moment. “I don’t think so, no. I mean, they’d have to know it exists first off, right? Far as I know this is one-of-a-kind, so they’d have no practice...and I think the mere act of thinking about fooling it might set it off like crazy.”

“That’s useful, but couldn’t someone use that to their advantage? If it’s constantly going off, then you can’t tell what’s true and what isn’t.”

“Dunno why anyone would want to set off false positives, but they could, I guess. False negatives are what I’m more concerned about, though, and I’m pretty sure they’re impossible.” He sighs. “...and we’ve been simply talking in the hallway again. Not really a great look for us, I reckon.”

Percy nods. “Right, right...Eves, do you think you can track down those two?”

“I don’t know what they get up to, but I think I know someone who does. Follow me.”

She gestures the two of them after her, and leads them through the strangely expansive backstage area. High ceilings and dusty crates of props form the skeleton of the room, and various knocked-over music stands and artificial trinkets are strewn about. Percy nearly trips over a folding chair. Nemesis takes notes, filling the pieces missing from his map in, bit by bit.

Finally, they emerge into what seems to be a simple storage room. Boxes and crates are stacked to the ceilings, some lying cracked open on the floor, others perfectly sealed. If this room was ever decorated, those decorations have long since been stripped from it, leaving a desolate and depressingly cardboard-colored room.

Though it’s muffled by its surroundings, once the door is opened even a crack, Nemesis can hear the beautiful music wafting through the room. Not as good as Elias’s piano, he thinks, but he can’t deny the morose wailing of the violin is gorgeous in its own way.

The source is an individual perched atop one of the many stacks of crates, legs crossed, a serene-looking smile on his face as he plays. He has messy, short black hair, wears a brown uniform coat,
and, from where he is, Nemesis is at almost exactly the same height as his extremely scuffed-up combat boots. Despite having the appearance of a soldier in the midst of a poorly-funded military effort destined to fail, the violin looks, to Nemesis, expensive, with its cherry-red wood and gleaming silver strings. His eyes are closed as he plays, but they open fixed already on Nemesis, as though he'd sensed him entering.

When he sees Nemesis and the Chases, he cuts his song off abruptly mid-note, with absolutely no fanfare, and leaps from the box, landing elegantly on his feet before smiling lightly and pleasantly. Once on the ground, he's shorter than Nemesis expected by far. “What brings you two here?” He asks, voice accented Lucielle. “I thought you would be off solving the murders, like I always overhear you two talking about.”

“Well, that’s what we’re here for,” Evie says. “This is Nemesis Jones, by the way. I don’t believe the two of you have met.”

“We’ve not,” Nemesis answers for the stranger.

“Hrmm...we haven't, no, but I know who he is, I think. Nemesis Jones, that new private investigator, right? My name is Thomas Marchand, humble watch-man here at the Obscura - during the day, at least. It's lovely to meet you.” He bows lowly, smiling politely.

A watch-man. That explains his reaction time, then, as well as his attire.

Nemesis tips his cap. “Charmed. You work here at the Obscura, then?”

"I do, but don't get me wrong - I'm not part of any of this nonsense. I'm trying to make a living. Whoever pays me has my service but not my loyalty. And by the way," Marchand continues, mid-bow, "I do love your hair. Very stylish."

Nemesis smiles, despite himself. He's never been one to resist a compliment. "Why, thank you. And that's fair. I understand entirely."

Evie squints at him, as if she thinks Nemesis would be more suspicious of Marchand if he wasn't being blatantly flirted with. In reality, Nemesis has put his deductive powers to quick use. Someone in such ragged shape as Marchand would never be affiliated with the Obscura.

"And your clothing," Marchand continues, seemingly not yet done. "Very chic. Very...Dick Remington."

He’s never been this quickly and deeply read, even by Callie. It’s all he can do to contain a horrified gasp. “I...might’ve read some of the books, but it’s not-”

“Ahaha! I’m joking, I’m joking! You just remind me of him a little, that’s all. They’re some of my favorite books, personally."

"Ah, a fellow fan! Wonderful to-"

Evie clears her throat. "Ahem...didn’t we come here for a reason?” She glares witheringly at Nemesis. He’s beginning to get the feeling she might not be his biggest fan.

“Yes, we absolutely did.” He pulls out his compass, clicking it open as loudly as he can. Unlike those with the knack, he can’t actually amplify the noise through sheer power of spite, but he sure can try. “That is...Mr. Marchand, you are aware that a murder happened, correct?”

Marchand stares Nemesis directly in the eyes. His own are a piercing brown, and the intensity with
which he looks at Nemesis is very nearly unnerving. “I did not commit this murder,” he says, low, steady, almost threatening. “I was not involved in it in any capacity, and I was unaware it happened until just now.”

Normally, Nemesis would consider this to be among the most suspicious responses he’s ever received in an interrogation, but his compass cleanly picks him up, ice-blue, and the needle glows only faintly. He's telling the truth.

He snaps it shut. “I see. You know that’s a bit of a suspicious way to respond to that, right?”

Marchand immediately brightens. “Well, yes. I was just trying to make sure my point got across! People said in watch-man training that when one is in danger it's best to be calm and terrifying, so it’s a habit.”

“Er...alright, then.” He nods. “That’ll be all, er - actually, we’re looking for Fletcher and Morgan. Do you know where they are?”

“Oh, those two are very hard to keep track of. But they should be around, somewhere. One of these other storage rooms.”

“You don’t know any more than that?” Evie asks.

“I’m not their father. I don’t follow them around all the time. They could be in the vents and I wouldn’t know.”

“The vents here are large enough to accommodate a human?”

“A fifteen-year-old, at least. I don’t go up in the vents. It’s none of my business what’s in the vents. I think it’s considered impolite around here, anyway, and I wouldn’t want to offend one of your strange theatre-goer customs...say the name of the wrong play or anything of the like. Those two are a different story. A stagehand needs to get around quietly, y’know?”

Nemesis glances at Evie and Percy, sheepish. They look back, seeming equally thrown off. “…we’ll check the vents as a last resort. For now, we’d best return to searching.”

“Fine by me. I’ve got to be going, anyway. Not really been doing my job, have I?”

He waves and leaves, returning his violin to a case which he leaves in the room. It's not his, then.

Before he’s out the door, though, he stops to glance back at Nemesis. “Oh, and by the way...just between you and me, I’m pretty sure Tobias Fitzroy is capable of murder. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“What’s that mean?” Percy asks frantically, but he gets no response, and Marchand leaves properly this time.

Evie’s voice is even and frustrated. “I think it means he suspects Fitzroy. Can we consider how much of that conversation was pointless, though? I would say a bit too much, really. Shall we go speak to someone about the murder itself, or do you just want to talk about swords with Walter, maybe?”

“That’s a bit unfair, Eves, mean, really, he was the one leading that conversation. We can just find the others now, it’s no big deal. We have time,” Percy mutters.

“If you say so.” She scoffs.
Nemesis moves ahead through the room, checking his compass for anything hidden with no results. Behind him, he can hear Evie and Percy whispering to each other, but he pretends he can’t, listening in silence.

“He’s an idiot,” Evie insists. “He’s the opposite of helpful. He’s unhelpful, even.”

“He’s a smart idiot,” Percy replies, sounding a little subdued. “Really, he’s got way more experience with things like this than either of us. It’s safer with him around.”

“Until he gets us all into danger by not paying attention to things when it counts. Really, Perce, you could have picked anyone from the Electric Sun and you come up with this—this lunatic?”

That one, Nemesis thinks, hurts just a little bit.

“No one who works for the Sun is an actual detective. I sort of trust him, you know.”

“I can’t imagine why. Actually, I can. You have no regard for your own safety and that’s why I’m around.” Evie pauses. “You could have written your article ten times by now,” she tacks onto the end.

“It’s never just about the article and you know that. It’s about finding out the truth, and—”

“Yes, Percy. I know.” He hears her sigh, drawn-out and fatigued. “Do you really think this guy has ever found out the truth about anything?”

“I mean, objectively speaking, he’s solved some cases, yes—look, let’s not talk about this now, right in front of the guy. Or maybe at all. Maybe let’s not talk about this because I’ve made up my mind and you’re just being overprotective, Eves.”

He doesn’t hear her response. That probably means there’s not one.

The hallways lead him through a few more unremarkable storage rooms, covered in dust and absent of anything of interest, not even slightly drawing his compass’s attention. The Chases, done with their whispering, are content to follow him in silence, their footsteps accompanying his through the echoey halls.

When they emerge at last, it’s into what looks like a lounge. A long table with an elaborate black lace runner draws immediate attention, as does a crystal chandelier shining unnervingly throughout the room with a blue light. Black and purple leather couches sit by the outer edges of the room, and cabinets above them. The walls are lit by faint blue-tinged gas-lamps. Nemesis assumes this is Morgana’s handiwork. It seems far more her style than her father’s.

Of course, that assumption might be one of convenience, because Morgana is sitting on one of the couches, holding in her hands a glass of a cloudy liquid with a familiar smell. Next to her, Walter looks relaxed and approaching the borderline of not being entirely sober, holding an empty glass of what had surely been alcohol as well. A couch over, Shuai seems to have barely so much as touched her own glass of champagne.

Morgana raises her glass to Nemesis as greeting. “Evie! You’ve brought your brother along, and...Nemesis Jones as well? Might I ask what the occasion is?”

“I wanted to talk to you, actually. Call it curiosity. The show left me with a lot of questions.” Not technically a lie, but it feels close enough to it. Flattery, certainly.
If Morgana doesn’t buy it, it doesn’t show. She continues to smile at the three of them, gesturing to the couch next to hers and Walter’s, on which Shuai sits. “Well, I suppose you’re a friend of hers, then, and a friend of Evie’s is a friend of the theatre’s. You’re welcome to have a drink with us, while you’re here.”

The last thing Nemesis needs right now is to lose his sobriety, but something tells him he’d be far better off seeming less alert than he truly is. He slides into a third, empty couch. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Percy and Evie both seem somewhat puzzled as to why he’s agreeing, but they take a fourth couch for themselves, Percy muttering a quiet “thank you” under his breath.

Morgana stands, carefully nudging Walter off of her shoulder and crossing the room towards one of the cabinets. “Any preferences? We have the sort of selection you’d expect, just about anything you’d want.”

“Oh, um, I don’t drink,” Percy mumbles. Perhaps ashamed, Nemesis thinks.

“Just water for me,” Evie says immediately. Almost too fast. She’s protective of her brother...maybe, Nemesis thinks, she’s trying to keep him from feeling left out. Or perhaps she simply wants water. No way of knowing for sure.

“Oh. Alright.” Is it just him, or does Morgana seem a little downcast?

She turns to him, locking eyes immediately. It seems Morgana isn’t capable of looking directly at someone without making eye contact, instilling a feeling in Nemesis not dissimilar to that of a handshake where one individual is squeezing the other’s hand so hard that it threatens to snap bone. Nemesis sees eye contact, in general, as primarily a method of asserting dominance. He’s sure Morgana’s intentions are better than that, but he finds himself repressing his fight-or-flight response.

“And what would you like, Mr. Jones?” She asks, slow and polite, no hint of intensity whatsoever.

He points to the glass still in her hand. “What you’re having, Ms. Fitzroy - if that’s not a problem, of course.”

She stares at the glass, face flashing with trepidation. “Are you...sure? This is absinthe.”

“I’m aware.” He raises an eyebrow. “And I’m sure, yes.”

“Well, if you say so.” She pours him a glass nonchalantly. She reaches for a spoon, but Nemesis shakes his head.

“No need for all the festivities. It’s fine the way it is.”

Percy, Evie, and Shuai all look at him with visible concern, and Walter with half-drunken confusion. It’s understandable. He’s not even sure what possessed him to say it. He knows as well as anyone that absinthe is generally diluted for a reason. Morgana purses her lips, as though about to argue, but concedes, handing him the glass.

Carefully, Nemesis studies its beautifully sculpted shape. A wide reservoir glass, crystal-clear, with beautifully blown spiral cordons marking it and an intricate stem, multiple spirals twisting together. It’s actually rather inconvenient to hold onto, but anything, he supposes, to show off one’s wealth.

Inside, the absinthe is a pleasant light green shade, though the smell wafting up from it is horribly
dry and pungent. Nemesis realizes that drinking undiluted absinthe might not be the best of ideas. In fact, he’s not sure why he refused to have it diluted. That wasn’t the smartest of moves, in retrospect.

Such a shame, but there’s no backing down now. He looks Morgana dead in the eyes and takes a long sip. It doesn’t burn nearly as much as he expected. In fact, the taste is, if anything, quite pleasant, until he lowers the glass and feels the bitter aftertaste spread through his mouth. It’s a good bit more than he’s used to (one does not simply make a habit of drinking plain absinthe), but it’s not unbearable, not by any means.

He takes another sip.

There’s a moment of stunned silence, finally broken when Walter begins to applaud loudly.

“Oh my stars, that’s badass!” He practically stares at Nemesis, wide-eyed, speech uncontrolled, loud, and just the tiniest bit slurred. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He shrugs. Just in case, he makes sure his movements are just barely jerkier than normal. After all, if this goes the way he plans it to, it’s meant to become an interrogation. Perhaps people would be more willing to let down their guards around someone who looks a little less than fully functional. “’S not that badass, either, you ever met a Lygredish private school student? Swear most of ’em could drink me under the table, no problem.”

Morgana laughs softly and quietly. It’s not an un-endearing laugh. “You know it tastes better when it’s diluted, right?”

“I’ve been told. I never...do I look like an absinthe drinker to you, honest?”

“Not especially. That’s why I was surprised you asked. Why the interest, if you’ve never even tried it before?”

He shrugs again. “Good a time as any, right?” This is all edging a bit too close to outright falsehood for his comfort. He’d had no reason, of course. He’d acted on pure impulse, and now here he was, three-quarters of a glass of absinthe left to drink. She’d poured it a lot fuller than he’d expected.

“I suppose so…” Shuai says trepidatiously.

“That’s the spirit!” Walter agrees.

“I suppose so…” she repeats with even less passion this time, deflating and taking a sip of champagne.

Evie crosses her legs and leans back in her chair. “...right, so if we’re done...being impressed by someone doing the unthinkable act of drinking alcohol...Morgana, we did have some questions to ask you.”

“Oh?” Morgana doesn’t sound all that surprised. “I assume this is about the murder, if I know your brother any,“

“Well, you do know me any,” Percy mutters, sheepish. “We were just wondering how you’re doing, in the aftermath and all.”

“Oh, well…” She sighs, immediately becoming wistful. Maybe too wistful. It feels like a performance, an unsettlingly good one, but one clearly staged. “It’s all so frightening...having this
sort of thing happen on my own doorstep. I don’t know anything about it, though.”

Nemesis clicks open his compass. Morgana, predictably, is isolated by a purple needle. She’s lying.

“I don’t know anything either,” Shuai says, and she’s telling the truth. “I think something strange is happening around here in general, though. Things are always…concerning.”


“Well, like-”

Walter cuts her off. “I’ve got…sometimes there’s…it feels like time slows down and things are sluggish, sometimes, but that’s…”

“That isn’t related,” Morgana agrees. “Or, at least, I can’t imagine how it is.”

“…are you sure you aren’t epileptic?” Nemesis suggests nervously.

Walter frowns. “I don’t feel epileptic.”

“Mate, you don’t just feel epileptic-”

“What Walter is saying,” Morgana cuts in, “Is that they’re simply normal lapses of attention, right?”

“Yeah. They don’t feel not normal,” he agrees. “What I mean is that it’s probably not a big deal, but it’s still concerning.”

Evie sighs. “Not the sort of concerning I meant, then. I mean…suspicious concerning. Things that would point in the direction of a method or culprit for the murder.”

“Oh. Hmm.” Walter considers for a moment. “Well, I know I didn’t do it.”

The compass detects full sincerity. “If you had to guess, who would you think it was?”

“Well, I’d assume it’s-” He glances at Morgana, then back at Nemesis. “…I’d assume it’s one of the stagehands. They’re allowed in the props, right?”

“Or the sanxianist,” Morgana adds. “They don’t mean badly, but they’re very impulsive. I could see them snapping.”

Neither of them read as genuine.

Shuai has drained her champagne glass as the other two were speaking. Finally, she speaks herself. “I wouldn’t know. I mean, I’m not a detective, you are.”

 Entirely genuine.

“I’m a private investigator, first off,” Nemesis corrects, before continuing. “So none of you have seen anything suspicious?”

“No,” Morgana says, and the other two nod their assent. All three clearly pick up as lying.

Nemesis does his best to hide any sort of reaction. “Alright, then.”
“Okay, and now that you’ve asked us questions,” Walter says, “we get to ask you some, right? Because I’ve been really curious about you, Mr. Det-Private Investigator.”

“...sure?” Nemesis answers. Next to him, he can see both Percy and Evie look just slightly nervous.

“Okay. You seem pretty interesting as a person - uh, no offense, sorry-”

“I take it as a compliment.”

“Okay, then. You’re from Llygredyg, right?”

“Hence the accent, yes.”

“Then why come to Omen?”

Nemesis pauses, just for a moment. This question is difficult to answer without revealing too much or lying outright. Finally, he settles on: “Even in Citrea Viridia, not much really happens that would require a private investigator’s services. I heard that there’s much more going on here, so I just hopped on a train.”

“Just like that, huh…” Walter nods. “That’s pretty brave of you. I moved here as a kid, with my family.”

“It’s not all that brave. You just get on a train.”

“And do you make enough money off of being a private investigator to support yourself?” Shuai asks.

“Clearly, if I’m here and not starving.”

“Right…” She nods. “How much Dick Remington have you read?”

What is it with today and people bringing up Dick Remington, all of a sudden? He shrugs. “Fair amount. It’s not totally accurate, but it’s fun enough to try and solve the mysteries before Remington does.”

“Just checking.”

“I suppose that makes me the only person in this city who’s never read Remington,” Morgana remarks. “Even Elias of all people has been picking some up lately.”

“I’ve never read Remington either, even though Percy begs me to,” Evie says.

Morgana carries on as if she hadn’t spoken. “Right, speaking of Elias. You two are friends, isn’t that right?” She looks directly at Nemesis, and though there’s nothing unpleasant about it in theory, he feels inexplicably threatened.

“Yes, we’re friends.” No point in hiding that and getting called on it. “Why do you ask?”

“Right, you’re friends. I didn’t know Elias had friends at school.”

“I’m a full year older than him, actually. I met him on the train from Citrea Viridia. Same cart. Ate brunch together and found we quite enjoyed talking.” None of it’s an outright lie. He had met him on the train back. It just hadn’t been their first meeting.

“I see. He seems to like you. He doesn’t open up to many people, you know.”
“I’m aware.” Somehow, he feels like he’s the one being interrogated.

She’s silent for a moment, looking at him seriously, before their silence is interrupted by a faint ring-tone.

Morgana sighs. “…oh, I’ll go get that. Apologies.” She leans down to kiss Walter, and Nemesis notices Shuai staring at them. Does he detect a hint of jealousy, he wonders, or is he jumping to conclusions?

Morgana leaves, and Shuai immediately glances back at Nemesis. Did she catch him staring?

“Morgana’s just protective, I think,” she finally responds. “That’s why she was grilling you about Elias.”

He thinks back to what he’s been told about her. Elias had never given him the sense that she was especially protective, but Elias hadn’t talked about her very much at all.

“Well,” he stands up, “I think I’ll be going, no offense. I’ve got places to be, but this was lovely.”

“Yeah, this was cool! Don’t be a stranger, alright? You seem like a nice guy.” Walter gives him a thumbs-up.

“Hmm, yes,” Shuai says. Is it just him, or has she inched closed to Walter while he was talking? “I’ll see you around, as well. Next time, get your absinthe diluted.”

“Will do.” He waves, gesturing to Percy and Evie to follow him.

It isn’t until he’s out of the room that he realizes he’s still holding the glass of absinthe. Perhaps he’s a little bit more out of it than he’d initially thought.

“Uh, Nemesis, you’re,” Percy says a moment later, almost on cue.

“It’s a nice glass, and I think I might as well keep it,” he says, shrugging, careful not to spill the liquid inside. “If I’m to spend this amount of time amongst the bourgeoisie, I may as well get something for my troubles.”

“You’re also the bourgeoisie,” Evie points out, to which he shrugs.

“Let’s just say that’s not always been the case. Not that it’s important right now. We’re still looking for Fletcher and Morgan.”

“Right, right. They’re evasive, those two.” She frowns and glances about, as if searching for them, even though Nemesis is sure if they were in this hallway they would both already be aware.

“‘S fine. We’ve exhausted basically all of our options, so the rule of dramatic irony says that they’ll show up soon,” he replies, attempting to maintain his normal projected confidence.

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” Percy says nervously.

“And I’m positive that’s not how it works,” Evie adds.

But, unfortunately, it is how it works, because it’s not five minutes until the three come upon a storage room, featureless as the rest, except for the people in it - two boys who look around fifteen, if not younger, one with straight black hair, the other with far more wavy chestnut brown.
The brown-haired one, who is slightly shorter, notices their presence first, and nudges his companion. “Weird people staring at us, Corey.” He sounds nervous.

“Weird people are always staring at us. There’s nothing but weird people around here.” This one sounds distinctly more exhausted as he turns to face Evie. “Okay, though, I’ll bite. What do you and your...friends...want?”

“We wanted to ask you some questions, if that’s alright.”

The black-haired one - Corey - frowns at Evie. “Should be fine. But first off, who’s this tool?” He motions with his thumb at Nemesis.

He would be offended if not for the appearance of the two boys. Clearly, they aren’t from the lavish backgrounds typical of the actors. Instead, their scowls and posture indicate something very different to Nemesis, something he can relate to far more.

“This tool is named Nemesis Jones. Private investigator,” he says, bowing to them properly.

The brown-haired one does seem a little impressed, but Corey doesn’t, scoffing. “Holy shit, Dick Remington’s here to tell us off.”

What is it with Dick Remington today? Nemesis shakes his head. “Not tell you off, just ask you a couple of questions.”

“Oh, sure. That’s what they all say. How do I know you’re not with the police?”

Nemesis frowns and gestures to himself. “Mate, do I look like police to you?”

“No, you look like Dick Remington.”

“Fair, I suppose. I hate to be that guy, but things are at stake. We’d really appreciate your cooperation.”

Corey glances from Nemesis to Evie, to his companion, then sighs. “...alright, alright, fine. This is about that weird prop that turned out to be an actual dead woman, right?”

“Wouldn’t’ve been anything else,” Nemesis agrees. “I’d just like to ask you if you noticed anything suspicious at that time, since you two were close to it.”

“I didn’t do it. Jack didn’t either,” Corey says, and the compass reads him as genuine. Nemesis isn’t surprised - he looks fifteen at oldest. If he’d committed this murder, he would have been shocked.

“I didn’t,” the brown-haired one, Jack, agrees. He, too, reads as entirely truthful.

“When was the prop first procured?”

It’s Corey who answers. He seems to take the lead in general, between the two, Nemesis observes. “Only a day or so before the performance. I don’t remember anyone actively commenting on it. It just kind of showed up in the prop room overnight, which isn’t how things are usually done around here, but neither of us wanted to comment.”

“I see.” Certainly, that’s concerning.

Percy asks the next question. “Did the prop feel off or strange in any way? Did you suspect anything was up before the unthinkable actually transpired? Oh, and do you mind if I quote you?
Corey frowns, before settling on: “Sure, if you really want to. But, uh...first off, I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but human corpses are pretty heavy.”

“I’m not aware, no,” Percy replies, “but now that you say it, it absolutely makes sense. Nemesis, did you know that human corpses are heavy?”

“Er...secondhand? I’ve never held one myself?”

“I see...” he says, seriously. “Sorry, though, Mr...uh...Corey. Keep going.”

“Mr. Morgan,” Corey corrects. “Anyway, yeah, it was so heavy that Jack and I couldn’t really properly get it into position on our own, so we had to ask for help. Elias offered. He’s stronger than he looks.”

Evie glances at Nemesis. “That’s strange, isn’t it? He doesn’t seem like he’d be that strong, based on how he looks and acts.”

“He’s not especially, but I know for a fact that corpse doesn’t weigh too much.” After all, he’d very briefly held it - and so had Evie.

She seems to realize this, because she nods. “Right, you would, since you took a look at it at Burke’s.” It’s a convenient lie, and not one he’s going to contest.

“It wasn’t *that* light,” Corey insists.

Nemesis sighs. “How old are you, lad?”

“I’m nineteen,” he lies, the needle lighting up before he even finishes his sentence.


“I’m seventeen,” he lies again, and Nemesis shakes his head. “...fine, fifteen.” This time, the compass reads him as truthful.

Nemesis nods. “You’re quite young. Did you lie about your ages to get this job?”

“No.” This time it’s Jack who answers. “They didn’t care enough to ask to begin with. We’ve worked here for four or five years now.”

“Then you would know what it’s like around here usually. Have you noticed anything strange more recently?” Percy asks, frowning.

“Not really.”

Corey nudge Jack. “No, nothing out of the ordinary, but...you’re new in town, right?”

Nemesis nods. “Reckon I am.”

“Then you wouldn’t know.”

Evie frowns. “...what wouldn’t he know?”

“He wouldn’t know about the rumors.” Corey’s voice lowers, practically to a whisper. “The rumors that people around here keep vanishing, and have been since before me and Jack got our
jobs. A lot of previous employees who never returned home from work, and a lot of people who said they’d be going to a show and never came home again...the reason it was so easy for us to get our jobs was that, at this point, no one else wants to work here.”

“Right, right,” Nemesis replies. “I’m aware of the Actors’ Guild’s activities.”

“Then I don’t see why this would be anything different.”

Complete honesty.

“So you think it’s related to society activity?” Percy frowns. “That it’s just another disappearance?”

“I don’t see why not.”

It’s truthful.

“Then,” Nemesis asks, “you don’t have any idea as to who might have done it? Or do you simply think it isn’t important?”

“I don’t have any idea who did it,” Corey says, face hardened, and the compass detects a clear lie. “But - and you didn’t hear this from me - pissing off Tobias Fitzroy is a bad idea.”

Evie nods. “Yes, that much is clear to almost everyone. He’s a powerful man.”

Corey scoffs. “Y’know, the other day I saw him, he was angry. The murder making the news pissed him off, understandably. Even Lusitania was terrified of him, and she’s his favorite.”

“Even Lusitania…” Evie trails off. “…that’s strange, but I suppose she’s always a little nervous around him.”

Nemesis scoffs. “So she’s not as stupid as she looks, is what you’re saying?”

“Hey, be quieter.”

In the time they’ve been speaking, Jing has snuck up on them. They stand beside Nemesis, hand on their hip. “Just warning you, Fitzroy’s on his way here. I think you three should get going.”

“Ah, bloody hell. Does he know we’re here?”

“No, but…” Jing gestures to the three of them. “Follow me. Quick.”

“If you say so,” Percy waves to the two boys. “Thanks for the help. You won’t tell him we were here, will you?”

“Our lips are sealed.” Corey makes a locking motion over his mouth and feigns tossing away the key.

“I hope you solve this case,” Jack adds. “It would be nice if it were a little less scary around here.”

The compass shows that both are genuine. Nemesis nods and follows Jing.

They lead them behind the stacks of crates - just in time, it seems, because Nemesis hears the door creak open. They’re out of sight, but he can hear the sound of Fitzroy’s cane and heels against the floors.

“Work as usual, boys?” He asks, and Nemesis finds himself nauseated by the mere sound of the
man’s voice.

“Yes, sir,” he hears Corey respond. “We were just looking for those curtains you asked us to find.”

“Good, good.” Fitzroy sounds so smug that Nemesis wishes he could peer out from behind these boxes and knock him to the ground. “You know, the art of decoration requires a precise eye, and affects far more than one might think.”

“The art of…you…is being a bastard,” Jing mutters. “Haha. Got him.”

“No time for that,” Evie admonishes, whispering. “Let’s get out of here already.”

“I don’t like being in the same room as him,” Nemesis agrees.

Jing gestures for them to follow. As they leave, Nemesis can hear another voice, faint. Lusitania Renwick is speaking.

Truly, it’s good that they get out when they do.

Jing leads them to a door. An alarming number of rooms in the theatre seem to have multiple doors, when Nemesis thinks about it. He probably wouldn’t have managed to find this on his own, camouflaged among the labyrinthine stacks of boxes. He wouldn’t even have had reason to assume it existed to begin with.

They open the door. Outside, it’s darker. Nemesis has learned, by now, how to distinguish Omen’s color - when he first arrived it simply seemed dark all day, but now he can easily distinguish between the day’s gray and the night’s black. It’s been a while, and it’s getting late.

“Thanks, Jing,” he says, exiting into the cool air outside.

They nod. “…feelings on you aside, you need to solve this. Stay safe.”

Percy and Evie join him on the outside, and the door is shut behind them.

Percy sighs, finally, glancing over his notes slowly. He doesn’t look happy. “…all of that feels like a whole lot of nothing in the end, huh? This is harder than I expected.”


“I guess so. Did you at least write down which statements were true and which were lies?”

He nods. “Some of them.”

“Can I see?”

Nemesis has almost opened his notebook when he realizes. “It’s…er…it’s in cipher. I’ll translate it for you and hand it off to you tomorrow, if you’d like?”

“Hmm. Maybe.” He looks at his sister. “We could stop by tomorrow, right?”

She takes a moment to respond, but finally, she nods. “We’ll be by tomorrow, then. To discuss the case as a whole, too. Percy and I will both do more digging into the disappearances ourselves.”

“Alright,” he replies. “I’ll tell Theory you’ll be by, in that case. Good night, both of you. Take care.”
"Take care!" Percy replies. Evie simply sighs.

On his way back to Beaumont’s, Nemesis empties the glass of absinthe. His throat burns and his vision is fuzzy around the edges, but he manages to make it back, stumbling to the doorstep. It’s been a while since he’s allowed himself to drink, and though his tolerance remains high, it feels almost as if he’s out of practice.

He stumbles through the door of Beaumont's, steadying himself against the wall. "Hey, Theers. Think I’m gonna be hungover tomorrow, so, er, breakfast'll be on you, I reckon. Also, got you a gift. Hope you like it." He places the glass on the table next to her, with as much care as he can manage. It doesn’t shatter, so he supposes that’s a good sign, taken the circumstances.

“Oh...thank you. It looks expensive. Did you steal this?” She glances at him nervously, the barest hint of concern present. "Well, that's not fair. You know neither Callie nor I can cook."

"Did steal it, aye. You lived before and you'll live now. I'm going to bed before I say anything too incoherent."

She nods slowly, looking genuinely lost for a response. "...will you be okay? I can't imagine how much you needed to drink to get to that point."

"Low tolerance," he blatantly lies. "Er, sorry, that's a blatant lie. Slipped out, hate it when that happens, genuinely hate it. I'm open with my feelings, you know, don't have any choice in the matter-"

"I'm well aware." She raises an eyebrow. "You're rambling."

"Am I? Rambling? Is that what I'm doing, I'm rambling, now?" He laughs, and he can only imagine how unhinged it sounds to his unfortunate observer. "Elias used to say that about me all the time, even when I was perfectly sober, which is most of the time, because I wasn't some sort of millionaire who could afford spirits while still in school."

She raises an eyebrow. "I was under the impression that you were a millionaire, Jones. Regardless, Elias was right."

"Of course he was-" and there's a hint of frustration present there that he genuinely wishes wasn't. "Elias is right about most everything, except for a few things, but even then I can't really fault the guy, I mean, 's not like he ever means badly-"

"You've officially stopped making sense."

He sighs. "...have I? Right, Elias is good, I wish he had an ounce of self-preservation sometimes. Sometimes he says I've no self-preservation and I think that's bloody stupid considering have you seen the guy? I love him but he's dense as a brick wall, honest..."

He stumbles into the room, immediately shutting the door behind him. No point in turning on the lights - he doesn’t think he’d trust himself around a candle right now. Instead, his eyes settle on the rotary phone on his desk, and a horrible thought enters his head.

Almost as if in a trance, hands shaking, he dials the number to Elias' portable telephone, waiting for it to dial. With every tone, his heart pounds, until finally, on the thirteenth, Elias picks up.

"Nemesis?" He hears the familiar voice, distorted by the device. "You're the only person I've given this number to. I forgot I had this thing until it rang and scared me half to death."
"Sorry, sorry. Figured the post or a telegraph wouldn't be quick enough and your main phone's likely wiretapped. Didn't want to take any risks."

"Right, that makes sense..." Elias trails off, before speaking again, this time sounding distinctly sharp and concerned. "Are you drunk? You sound drunk."

"I'm, like, almost entirely sober, it's fine," he says, consciously aware of the hint of slur to his voice. "I just, er, I needed to talk to you-

"Okay."

He can't help but laugh at that, and Elias sounds more concerned than indignant when he responds. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing. I was just thinking that's such a you-like response. Endearing."

"I - endearing -"

"Anyhow, er, it's, it's a bit more serious than that. I've been meaning to, er, it's been weighing on me, how-"

Elias sighs. "It's...about earlier, isn't it?"

"Might be. Er, Elias, when I said I trusted you, that wasn't entirely, er, that's to say, I might've been fudging the truth a little."

"I figured." Elias chuckles, low and humorless. "No one trusts a guy holding a knife to their neck. Generally, no one trusts someone who can make knives out of thin air in general. I've been telling you for ages."

"Er, no, it's not...I mean, I do trust you, I just, I don't. And I keep thinking you're about to leave me stranded here and I know it's not fair to you, Fitzroy doesn't give you a choice, but, Elias, you're my best mate-

"Yeah, and I-"

Nemesis cuts him off and continues. "-frankly, you're my only mate, and I'm so unbelievably fond of you, and if I sit down to think about it for a time I trust you to not hurt me but really when I said that I didn't mean it because really I was scared, I thought you just might kill me and I knew I'd not be able to stop you, I'd not even want to stop you, and that's scary. I think about it a lot, how you must be itching to stab me in the back, I know there's no reason to believe that other than common sense but it won't go away. So it wasn't really a lie but it was close enough to a lie that I feel guilty not saying-"

Elias sighs. "I know. I mean, I'm not...completely stupid, I know. That was...it was shitty of me. I don't know why I did it."

"You don't need to hold a knife to my neck to make me scared of you. I've been living in fear of the fact that you simply must loathe me since the day we met, that's never changed. Anything, it's only gotten worse. Every single time we speak I'm convinced it's the last, that you won't miss me after, and it makes me want to curl up into a ball and cry, because surely you can't actually like me!"

His voice rings over the line. He hadn't realized how loud he'd gotten.

Elias takes a moment to formulate his speech, and when he does, it's slow and unsure. "Well, first
off, I...like you quite a bit. That's why we're friends. I know I'll probably never be able to convince
you, but I mean it. Second, you're drunk. Third, I miss you every day, you know, I-Nemesis, I wish
it didn't have to be this way."

"Elias..." he sighs, because he knows he's on the verge of bursting into tears, and that's the last
thing he wants. Damn his easily-provoked emotions. "Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, Elias. Sorry, I'll
leave you in peace for the time. I'll call again when I'm sober."

"Um, wait-

He ends the call before Elias can finish his sentence and sighs. At some point, his hands had begun
to shake.

He places the receiver back, almost repulsed by the sight of it. The lie pains him, but he doesn’t
think he’ll be calling Elias again. The very thought fills him with a sharp terror.

He stumbles to his bed, not even bothering to take off his shoes before he collapses onto it. Theory
will be mad about that, and it’ll mean more laundry to do, but he'll worry tomorrow. Theory is
probably mad fairly often, as much as he tries to pretend that she might harbor anything but
annoyance towards him, and he doesn’t mind extra work.

A thought flashes through his mind that he simply can’t shake - that he’s failed, again, because Mr.
Jones would be so disappointed to see him like this.

He rolls onto his side, eyes wide open, staring at his wall. The blurry, unsteady sight of the cork-
board at the other end of the room, covered with his own incomprehensible writing, shifts and
bleeds as sleep finds him at long last.
1.9 - Declamando

Chapter Notes

Before the chapter starts, I'd just like to announce: tBS now has illustrations! They're done by Ash, twitter user theegggarden, who also has a story on here called Monster/Hunter Mafia which you should all check out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nemesis wakes up with a throbbing pain in his head and a distinct feeling of shame. Somehow, he’s barely shifted in his sleep, and has remained staring at the same spot on the wall. He feels like he’s been bludgeoned over the head - an unfortunately familiar sensation.

With an audible groan, he pulls the blanket over his head again, despite the fact that his room is already dark. And there he remains for what must be several hours, until he finally feels alright enough to stand, change out of his now thoroughly wrinkled clothing, and finally take off his damned shoes.

The cork-board is still there, almost taunting him. He frowns to himself, running a hand over the papers pinned to it. As much as he'd love to agonize over the case which takes up the bulk of the board, simply labeled ‘DISAPPEARANCE’, his mind is swimming, and he’s unable to organize his thoughts into anything approaching coherency. There's vague thoughts, the words 'Correspondents' and 'left' and 'probably dead, anyway' and 'he can't be' resurfacing over and over. He pretends he doesn't hear them.

His hand traces over a photograph of a man. This particular image can’t be younger than five years, but his short brown hair and square spectacles, ever-so-slightly askew when the picture were taken, are unmistakable.

He sighs. Enough of this.
Of course, he promised Percy, so he sits down at his typewriter. It’s relatively new, but already showing signs of use. Painstakingly, he begins to type up his results from yesterday. His dazed and disoriented brain takes far longer than he would like to decode his own cipher, letters swimming confusingly, bumping into each other. His fingers feel like they’re slipping off the keys.

He finishes and frowns. It all looks right to him, as far as he can tell, but he might want to redo this when his mind is clearer and he can actually trust his eyes. He thinks some water might be in order, and maybe a nap, though he’s normally opposed to those on principle.

He stumbles out to the kitchen, and even the faint gaslamp lighting is enough to make his head throb all over again.

Theory and Callie are sitting at the table, Theory seemingly taking a break from her translations to read an old-looking and very thick Beian text, Callie nervously hovering by the cabinets, looking entirely out of it. Both look up at Nemesis as he closes the door behind him, faces painted with concern.

Theory is the first to speak, with a voice like a disappointed teacher. “Have you become an alcoholic now?”

“I don’t think that’s how alcoholism works.” He can see why she’d be concerned, though. He hasn’t brushed his hair, or bothered to put on anything but trousers and a dress shirt which isn’t even buttoned up all the way, and he can see the bags under his eyes reflected in the refrigerator. He looks like the sort of person who picks fights in bars.

“You know what I mean. You look awful. Do you realize what time it is?”

“Late?” He suggests. “Please tell me I didn’t miss an entire day.”

“You didn’t. It’s around noon.”

He sighs in relief. “Oh, thank goodness. The Chases were going to come over for dinner today. It would have been awfully rude of me to sleep through that.”

“You couldn’t’ve told us that in advance?” Theory grumbles. “It’s unlike you to be this irresponsible.”

“Not sure if you noticed, Theers, but I was drunk.”

“And that was irresponsible.”

She’s right and he knows it. He frowns. “Right. I’m sorry.”

She looks at him gravely. “Try not to do it again.”

“I’ll do my best.” He glances at Callie. “But, er...aside from all of that, Callie, are you feeling any better?”

“I feel better than you look, but that’s a low bar,” she says. She does look better-rested and more functional.

Nemesis chuckles. “Touche. Can’t rebut that one, I’m afraid.”

“At least you admit it.” She takes a sip of what looks like tea from what he now realizes is the stolen absinthe glass. “You being gone was really inconvenient, you know. Theory doesn’t explain
“anything to me.”

“I simply don’t see how you expect me to explain what romance is.”

She looks at Nemesis. “I’m sure he’ll explain what romance is.”

Nemesis is less sure of his ability to do that. “How did this even come up?”

“I was complaining about the romance subplot marring this perfectly good work of fiction,” Theory says, gesturing to the book in her hands. “It was all fine until Jie fell in love with Xiang, and then there went any semblance of personality and a solid five chapters that could have actually advanced the plot.”


“But you still haven’t answered my question,” Callie says. “I’m confused now. What’s romance and why is it so terrible?”

Nemesis can’t help but laugh. “I keep forgetting you lived under a rock.”

“I...didn’t? I lived in a fortress.”

“I didn’t mean…” He sighs, her words sinking in. “A...fortress. You said. Like a castle?”

“Pretty much.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Something wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, just forget that you wouldn’t realize how weird that is. Er...I’ll explain what romance is, if you’d like to take a quick trip to the general store with me. I need some air to clear my head.”

“Are you sure you should be outside right now?” Theory asks bluntly. “You look like a mess.”

“Here’s a secret: if you throw on a nice enough coat nobody’ll be able to tell.” He does just that, choosing a black knee-length overcoat to blend in more, adding a scarf to completely conceal what he’s wearing underneath, and, of course, the typical cap. “See? I’m the image of functionality.”

“Your face still looks awful,” she replies.

“I don’t know what you expect me to do about that.”

Callie’s thrown on her own coat as well. “Don’t worry. If anyone comments on it, I’ll knock something over to draw their attention.”

“That’s a horrid idea, don’t get yourself in trouble.” Nemesis pats her on the shoulder briskly, before she can come up with any other genius plans. “Come on, let’s go.”

Being on the street in this state, no matter how hidden it is, feels suffocating. Nemesis feels as though every passerby can see through his overcoat as though it’s glass, and finds himself
instinctively huddling into himself, making himself smaller, less noticeable, as though shielding himself from the cold. Callie seems to notice, because she sticks by him, standing in front of him, seeming far more confident, almost as if she’s shielding him. It’s as if they’ve changed places, he thinks to himself.

The grocery store is more crowded than normal. Nemesis ordinarily only goes shopping in the early morning, specifically to avoid the company. It feels claustrophobic here, only his coat keeping the clustered people from seeing how pathetic he is.

He stops, as normal, at the kiosk by the door, where stacks upon stacks of newspapers and penny dreadfuls are sold. He picks up his normal papers - the Electric Sun, the Omen Tribune, and the Greater Semper Gazette - and stops, running his hand over the cheap, sensational mysteries that he knows he’ll enjoy no matter how far they depart from reality. The titles are things like The Rats and the Redemption, Jack-of-Smiles Strikes Again, Original Zero Point Zero, and Murder Game in Joker Manor, and-

He picks up The Rats and Jack-of-Smiles, both of which he’s heard good things about, and pays.

On their way back, he leads her around the scenic route. Beaumort’s isn’t far from the harbor at the place where the River Lethe meets Drowned Man’s Bay, and that’s where Nemesis leads Callie, finding a bench near the wharf and sitting, watching the ships docked there bob up and down. He can hear them creak.

He sighs and leans back, feeling the wood of the bench creak. “I quite like it here. Something about the smell and the noises is weirdly calming.”

“Huh.” She stares at a tall black ship with bright red sails, streaming out against the gray sky. “Do you know how to sail?”

“A little. Citrea Viridia’s got a fairly large port. Ended up taking a couple lessons in school. You...wouldn’t know how, I assume?”

“Oh, no. Sometimes Art would take me out sailing around the fortress. It was on an island.”

That might as well have happened, he supposes. The more he learns about Callie’s life, the less he knows he can assume. “...ah. I see.”

They sit in silence, Nemesis’ gaze wandering to the lighthouse in the distance. The wind picks up a little bit, pleasantly blowing Nemesis’ hair about.

Finally, Callie speaks again. “You said you’d tell me what romance is.”

“I did,” he agrees. “It’s a tricky thing to explain, I suppose. Simplest to say it’s like friendship but not exactly. Extreme fondness, commitment, a desire for emotional intimacy...romantic love is very difficult to explain in terms beyond that, especially to someone who has never experienced it.”

“Have you experienced it, then?” She asks.

“Might’ve.” The response is noncommittal and quiet. “Doesn’t really matter. Not...like I’ve ever had a chance, in that regard.”

“I see. Art used to complain about the concept of romance. He hated it. Something about it being fake.”

Nemesis shakes his head. “Nah, it’s real. Absolutely, it’s real. Thing is, it’s not just a feeling, it’s a
choice. A conscious commitment. Some people don’t get that.”

“I see. He said he loved me, though. Not in a romantic way, obviously.”

“I should hope not.” He runs a hand through his hair, sighing. “Romance is different. Probably isn’t for everyone. I don’t think friendship’s for everyone, either. Some people just aren’t meant to function in that sort of relationship.”

“I see. Are you talking about yourself?”

She’s wrong. She’s wrong about him, and that makes the corner of his mouth twitch upwards into a grin. Finally, at long last, he has her beat. “Tch...nah. I’ve got a friend, don’t I? I can say, well and truly, that I am capable of love. I’ve held down a friendship for years. That should be proof.”

She nods. “What about your family? Do you love them?”

He scoffs. “I don’t have one. Thought I’d made that apparent by now.”

“I thought so.”

How disheartening. She’s a step ahead of him again.

Another period of silence. When she speaks again, it’s more subdued. “Is Elias the only person you’ve ever loved, then?”

The word ‘love’ makes him pause - but of course, she simply doesn’t realize the connotations. “When you use the word ‘love’ like that, it somewhat implies romance. But nah, I’ve really cared about other people.” He pauses. “...other...person, singular. Maybe. But maybe it’s becoming people, plural. Who knows.”

“I see.” Her voice is barely above a whisper. “Like Percival, and Theory?”

“Sure.” She isn’t wrong, he supposes, despite how much he wishes she were. “And I’d be right angry if something bad happened to you, as well.” There. He’s a step ahead again.

“Hmm? Thank you, but...” She glances away. “Is that how you define caring? Being upset if something bad happens?”

He really does have to think about that one for a moment, because he has no good answer. Finally, he settles on: “a lot of bad things happen to people I care about. I was forced to make it a priority.”

She nods. “That makes sense. I’m sorry.”

They sit in silence again, for who knows how long. Nemesis feels a sort of tense peace. For a moment, it’s almost as though he were a different person, and next to him was a tired man with rectangular glasses. A blackbird rushes around by their feet, searching for food amidst the cobblestones.

Beaumont’s really does blend in with its surroundings. Even though he’s lived there for months, Nemesis is given momentary pause whenever he emerges into the mouth of the street, because he can’t immediately locate it. Once he looks closer, though, it’s there, where it always is, sandwiched between an ordinary if abandoned-looking house and a locksmith’s. Beaumont’s is hard to see unless you’re directly focusing on it, feeling as though it simply vanishes into the backdrop.
Chances are, this is one of the defensive enchantments Theory has mentioned offhandedly.

He immediately makes his way to the door, unnerved by the possibility of losing track of the bookstore yet again, but Callie doesn’t follow, instead staring at where the locksmith’s meets the pavement.

Nemesis looks back at her and frowns. “Something the matter?”

“There’s something there.” She points, and Nemesis’s eyes follow her finger, searching the shadows. Where the bricks meet the cobblestones, something small and black sits, ever-so-barely twitching.

Nemesis frowns, immediately moving to its side. Its fur is matted and filthy, but there’s no mistaking what this is - a kitten, and a young one at that. Based on appearances, he’d place it at a couple weeks of age, but it’s likely older and malnourished. When he touches its side, it twitches, and he sees that its leg is bent at an odd angle.

“Bloody stars.” He lifts it carefully. The entire cat is small enough to fit into his hand, and he does just that, wrapping his gloved fingers gingerly around it.

“What...is it?” Callie asks, whispering, as though if she speaks any louder she’ll scare it.

“Do you...do you not know what a cat is?”

“Oh. So that’s what a cat is…they don’t look at all how they’re described in books.” She tries to peer over his shoulder at it, though the height difference makes it difficult. “It’s a lot smaller than I thought it would be.”

“Well, this one’s a malnourished child, normally they’re bigger. It looks injured, too.”

“Oh.” She’s at a complete loss for words, he can tell. “Are you going to take it to the doctors’?”

“The Domus Vitae doesn’t exactly service cats. I’ll…” He lets out a pained sigh. “There’s probably not much I can do for it.”

“So you’re going to leave it?”

“Stars, no. I’ll do my best to help it however I can. Er...I’ll keep it alive for tonight, and tomorrow, I’ll get Apollinaire or Dreadful to take a look at it. Perhaps the latter...he works with dead animals, so maybe he’d know how to help a living one.”

“I’m not sure that logic tracks for me, but it’s not like I have any better ideas. I trust your judgement on this more than my own.”

Nemesis spares the quickest, most discreet glance he can manage at his compass. She’s being honest, and he’s not sure if he should feel complimented or concerned.

He makes his way back to the door of Beaumort’s, taking care not to shake the cat too much. He knocks on the door, and thankfully, Theory answers it immediately.

“Need me to open the door for you? Shame on you.” She frowns when she sees the cat in his hand. “Is that a dead bird? Are you bringing a dead bird into my bookstore, Nemesis Jones?”

“Close. It’s actually a live kitten.”

She leans a little closer, scrutinizing it. She raises her hand as if to poke it, decides against, and
lowers it again, before frowning. “Kitten, yes. Live? Questionable.”

“Come on, Theers. Half-dead is still half-alive. I’ve been in condition worse than this myself before.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You are a human man, and this is a cat.”

“Does that mean I’d be able to shrug off this sort of condition? I think I was just as close to dying as this cat. And I lived, so it might too. And I’m not going to give up on that possibility.”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, fine, just be neat about it. I don’t want any cat vomit on my books, thank you very much. Most of those are irreplaceable.”

“Of course, of course. I should hope, after all this time, you trust me to at least be neat.”

“I suppose I do.” Her tone remains sharp, critical. She crosses her arms. “Really, though...comparing yourself to a dying kitten? I was under the impression that you were a millionaire.”

“I am. Your impression wasn’t mistaken.”

“You’re doing the thing where you try to reveal the least information possible because you don’t want to lie but you don’t want to answer the question either,” Callie says, quiet. She almost seems, he thinks, nervous to point it out.

“Okay, now that she says that, it makes perfect sense,” Theory concurs. “You know you’re allowed to just say you don’t want to answer, right?”

“Theory, Theory, Theory. Where’s the fun in that?”

“Is this fun to you?” Callie asks.

He shakes his head. “...nah, not really. Just feel like I’d be better off answering a question than not, generally said, even if my answer’s a non-answer.”

Theory sighs. “Okay, then, answer me properly. It was a simple enough question.”

“And I answered it simply enough.” He shrugs. “I’d rather not talk about where I got this money, actually. I wasn’t always rich. Nor do I plan to be this rich for very long, if I can help it. Have a bit too many morals for that.”

“You’d better stay that rich,” Theory says harshly. “You need to pay your rent, idiot. And your assistant’s rent. And, you know what, I’m going to make you pay rent for that cat, too.”

“Aww, Theory.” His tone is more joking. “And here I’d thought you would have grown fond of me by now.”

“Don’t bet on it,” she says, and smacks him on the shoulder.

He enters, carefully making his way upstairs. The kitten in his hand twitches and finally meows, which he thinks is a good sign. If the cat can meow, that means it’s awake and has at least some energy. The fact that it’s expressing its pain means that it is, in fact, in pain. And pain is, at its very most basic level, a sign that the sufferer is not yet quite dead. It brings to mind mornings spent nursing bruises and thinking to himself, with a sick satisfaction, that, for better or for worse, they haven’t managed to kill him yet.
Of course, Nemesis doesn’t know anything about caring for cats, never mind injured ones. But not knowing something has never stopped him. A private investigator’s work begins with not knowing and ends with knowing, and the in-between was taught to him, painstakingly, by a man who certainly hadn’t started out knowing how to teach, either.

The first step, he reasons, is to get an idea of what the damage is. His lack of medical qualifications predictably stands in the way. A secondary-school education in basic medicine does not provide a particularly robust framework for an impromptu veterinarian practice, nor does Nemesis know the slightest about cat anatomy, beyond identifying what is and isn't a bone.

He clears a space on the kitchen table, shoving aside multiple books. He’d feel more guilty about it if Theory had any semblance of organization, but with how haphazardly they’re tossed around to begin with he doesn’t think she has a right to complain. He’s the one who takes the effort to keep the place in order, so he’s also the one who gets to tear the place apart. That tracks, sure. There’s some logic in it. He’ll stick with that.

He questions if she’d be angry if he used one of her towels. Probably would be. Best to be safe - he makes a detour into his room, nearly rifling through his dresser with his cat-less hand until he finds a large enough and thick enough handkerchief he won’t especially miss. He spreads it out on the table, frowning. It definitely won’t be enough to soak up all of the blood. He’ll need to find a way to clean it up after. Is there a reliable way to remove blood from oak? He has no idea.

The cat is placed gingerly onto the handkerchief. Nemesis sighs. He runs into the Theory’s room - something distinctly off-limits - and throws open her perfume cabinet.

It’s strange that someone like Theory Hayes would have a perfume cabinet to begin with. A woman who never leaves her bookstore has no reason to have a cabinet devoted to something only necessary for social occasions, and an excess amount of it. The fact that she wears perfume to begin with was initially shocking to Nemesis. But the way she dressed at the Obscura proved that she does own formal clothing, for the eventuality, so it doesn’t feel like an unbelievable stretch that she could own multiple bottles of perfume.

He has to hold back a cry of “Yes!” when he sees that, not only does she have one empty bottle, she has multiple. He pulls the first one - a cheap drugstore brand - off of the shelf, briefly scanning the labels on the others. Several of them are jarringly high-end. So that’s what she’s been doing with his rent money.

He rushes to the sink, unscrewing the top of the bottle and filling it with water. Actually putting an injured animal under running water seems like a recipe for disaster, but a dirty animal is harder to get a proper look at. He rushes back, holds the kitten in place with a single careful finger, spritzes it with water, and hears a quiet meow.

“Right, right,” he says out loud, mostly to himself. “You bloody hate being wet, right? That’s the thing people say about cats? Well, too bad. I’m trying to save your life, so you’ll deal with it.”

He continues trying to clean the animal, frowning to himself. He knows it’s a little ridiculous for someone like him to be upset by a tiny bit of dirt, but part of him bemoans the fact that he’ll need to somehow clean his gloves later. Of course, this is nothing compared to the fact that the cat is potentially dying.

He sprays the cat’s leg, and it meows again. He grins. “You’re one tough bastard, aren’t you? I dunno what happened to your leg, but you’re here and you won’t stop screaming. That’s badass.”

The cat, being a cat, doesn’t respond. Nemesis chuckles to himself. “You know, you still might
die. I don’t know a damn thing about animal medicine. Fact, you’ll die no matter what I do. Might be tomorrow or might be fifteen years from now, but it’ll happen, and does it really matter what you do now?”

The cat meows, and he laughs this time. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. What in the stars am I even thinking? Who cares about philosophy when someone’s dying right in front of me? Even if that someone’s a cat, that’s ridiculous.”

The cat meows again.

“Yeah, mate. That’s the spirit.”

Callie’s head pokes up over the top of the railing. “Are you talking to the cat, Nemesis?”

“Might be.” He sighs and runs his hand through its fur. “Maybe I wouldn’t’ve been if you weren’t down there for so long. Might I inquire as to what you were doing there, precisely?”

“Oh, well...me and Theory were talking, mostly.” She comes up to stand beside him, watching him painstakingly clean the cat.

“About how strange I am, was it?”

It’s a wild guess, made primarily out of spite, but the guilty look on her face immediately confirms it. “I’m sorry. I don’t...necessarily think it’s a bad thing.”

“Nah, it’s fine. You’re right. I mean, I was just talking to a cat, wasn’t I?” He sighs. “Could you tell me what the topic of conversation was in more specificity, or would that be an undue invasion of confidentiality?”

“It might be, but I’ll tell you anyway. Because I’m your assistant, and not hers.” She pulls out a chair, sitting down with a bit more weight than he normally observes. “And because you deserve to know what people are saying about you.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” He chuckles. “People say things about me all the time. Behind my back or to my face, it doesn’t matter. I know what people think of me. I know it’s not precisely a glowing endorsement. I-”

She observes him for a moment before sighing. “You were going to say you don’t care, weren’t you?”

He nods.

“But that would be a lie, and you can’t lie.”

He nods again, ignoring the tense feeling in his throat.

“Well, it’s not as bad as I think you think it is. She didn’t mean it as an insult, either. She was just confused.”

“At least she doesn’t hate me. Suppose that’s an accomplishment.” He laughs humorlessly. “Puts her in the minority.”

“I’ve never met anyone who hates you. Aside from bad people, of course. People who you’re a threat to.”

Of course, it’s not Nemesis Jones most of those people disliked. He supposes Nemesis Jones is
comparatively a social butterfly. He shrugs. “Well, I suppose that’s been your experience. What did Theory say about me, then?”

“That she doesn’t understand why you would care enough to try and save its life, mainly.” She gestures to the cat. “She doesn’t understand why you would expend the effort or get your hands dirty.”

“Suppose she wouldn’t.” So it’s a simple issue of her being unable to comprehend the fact that he has compassion. That lines up well enough. “I don’t understand why she wouldn’t, personally.”

“She didn’t seem hostile about it. More genuinely curious.”

He nods. “Right. She might as well be like you, when I think about it. Is never leaving your home island really that different from never leaving a bookstore?”

“She’s been in society, though.”

“To some extent. But to perhaps a greater extent, she’s been separate from it, So I don’t blame her at all for being confused.”

The cat is pretty much clean now, and Nemesis takes a closer look at its leg. Though he’s no expert, it looks broken, and the blood seems to be coming exclusively from it. Perhaps it was partially crushed, or slammed into something. Whatever it is, the wound looks to be on the fresh side. The cat had dragged itself from wherever it happened to outside the locksmith’s. That, itself, is impressive.

And without any medical knowledge, he can’t do much about it. He turns away from her, gets his spare gloves out of his bag, rips off the filthy ones and puts on a clean pair, so more dirt doesn’t get in the wound. He has some gauze in his bag, just in case, so he wraps it up to the best of his ability, hoping he isn’t somehow making it worse. The cat screams. He wishes he knew if that was a good or a bad sign.

He takes off his hat, flings it across the room. It lands atop a wine bottle and swings around twice before settling, as though he’s playing horseshoes. He runs a hand through his hair, fully aware of the streak of blood now drawn across his face.

Briefly, his mind wanders. He can almost see a familiar hand reaching over to wipe it off, admonishing him for his carelessness. Instead, it’s Callie with a handkerchief that he’s pretty sure he gave her himself, and he pulls away, sighing.

“Oh. Sorry.” She immediately turns on the sink and tries to run it under the water. If she weren’t about to find out firsthand, Nemesis would point out that that’s not going to get any blood out of anything.

“It’s fine. I just, er. Maybe don’t want to be touched right now.” Maybe part of him likes the appearance of the smeared blood and the disheveled hair. Maybe part of him revels in the thought of being a little bit filthy, a little bit scary, like the sort of person who parents would tell their children not to stand too close to for fear that his personality is contagious. The pandemic of proud misery will consume the world, with him at the head.

Or maybe not. Maybe he’s just tired.

He carefully moves the cat off of the table. “We should find somewhere better to put it. Could you get me a towel and a basket? Do we even have baskets?”
“I don’t think we have baskets.” She rushes into the bathroom to get a towel.

“I suppose a salad bowl will have to do, then.” It’s so somehow crude, putting a hurt animal into a salad bowl, but the alternative is leaving it on the cold table. He procures the salad bowl, places the towel which Callie hands frantically to him into it, and gently puts the kitten on top. It’s so minuscule that the bowl dwarfs it by comparison. How pathetic. Like a child lost in a snowstorm.

He carefully pets it, gingerly, trying his best not to harm it, despite how tiny and fragile it is. The cat frantically begins licking his glove. Possibly tastes the blood on it, he thinks. “Ah, right. This thing’s probably starved.”

“What do cats eat?” Callie asks, and Nemesis realizes chances are she genuinely doesn’t have a clue.

“Meat, mostly.” He points to the tiny kitten. “That? That’s a predator. Lot of people keep them around to catch rats.”

“Is that the excuse you’re going to use to convince Theory to let you keep it around here?”

“Perhaps.” He opens the refrigerator, easily locating a slab of tuna. He takes out his switchblade and peels off a little bit - not too much, the creature’s far too small, and has been starving for too long - and feeds it to the cat, slowly. To its credit, the cat seems more than willing to eat. He feeds it another piece, still careful.

“Lucky bastard. That’s expensive stuff, you know.”

The cat meows.

He laughs. “Alright, alright.” A third piece, and that will have to be enough. After all, he needs some of this for dinner-

Ah, that’s right. Dinner. The Chases. In all of this excitement, it’s completely slipped his mind that they’re to have guests. The cat is immediately moved to the couch while Nemesis frantically begins cooking. Callie rushes after him, putting her non-existent knowledge of cooking to work in an attempt to help as best she can. Nemesis appreciates it, even if her lack of skill with a stovetop might actively be slowing him down.

“Where did you learn to cook, anyway?” She asks as he labors over a pot of spaghetti. “We’ve been through this seven or eight times already, how you’re rich but clearly weren’t always, but no matter how I think of your life story I can’t imagine you having any excuse to learn.”

“I just wanted to, I suppose.” He adds just a pinch of pepper. He’s fond of it himself, and Theory can’t stand food that isn’t at least a little bit spicy, but one never knows a guest’s tolerance. “Not really as big a deal as you’re making it out to be.”

“I didn’t think I was making it out to be that big of a deal.”

“Ah, but you were.” He leans back against the counter with a sigh. He’s done as much as he can, for the time. “I mean, you’re inquiring as to my life circumstances, and those are a big deal. Not well, either. There’s so much you could have gone after that you didn’t. Forget cooking, think about my accent, my manner, the cost-of-coat-to-switchblades-concealed ratio! Bloody stars, Callie, I never take off my gloves, how’s that for something that needs prodding?”

“I just assumed you find them comfortable,” she admits.
“Comfortable? It feels like my hands are in an extraordinarily claustrophobic oven twenty-four hours a day! An expensive, cashmere-lined oven, yes, but an oven is an oven is an oven!” He waves his hands in the air. “These things are prisons, Callie, and I’d be rid of them in a heartbeat were I able.”

“I. I see. I’m sorry?”

“You’d best be.” He picks up his switchblade from the counter, closes it, and pokes her in the chest with the handle. “Mind, you’re forgetting we had this conversation the moment the Chases show up. I like to pretend I’m not wearing gloves at all. Acknowledging that there’s anything strange about it really throws off the mystique, if you will.”

She nods. “...so you’ve told me what I would question you about if I wanted insight into you, and then told me to not question you about it.”

He scoffs. “Well, it’s not as if you’d’ve gotten any information out of me, anyhow.”

“I don’t see how that’s fair.”

The sound of the downstairs chime wafts faintly up into the loft. The Chases must be here. Nemesis manages to hide his sigh of relief.

Percy is the first one upstairs, rushing into the loft with a grin. He’s a little neater and more buttoned-up than usual, clearly taking the idea of being a guest for dinner a little more seriously than Nemesis had expected him to. His grin melts off his face when he looks at Nemesis.

Oh, yeah. The blood. He’d forgotten.

“‘S not my blood,” he clarifies, before realizing that this wasn’t reassuring in the least and, if anything, made him come off as a murderer. “It’s not...I’m not an axe-murderer.”

“I don’t like how you phrased that, because that leaves open the possibility of literally any other preferred murder weapon.”

“Gun,” Nemesis says, unhelpfully, “or maybe switchblade.”

“...that’s...cool,” Percy says, taking a step back.

The cat meows, and he starts. “Is that...one of the desperate cries of your victims?” He says non-seriously. “Or is there...a cat in your house, for some reason?”

“The latter.” He gestures to the kitten on the couch. “Apologies for the shock.”

“That might as well be there,” Percy mutters. “Care to, uh, explain why you’ve got a small dying cat in your apartment? Is this normal for you?”

“It’s new. He picked it up off the street.” Callie answers for him.

He sighs and glances over at the cat. “I hope both of you have your vaccines. Nemesis, you don’t expect me to believe that you know how to take care of an animal, do you?”

“Not more than a normal person. I’ll find someone to take care of it who’s actually qualified, but for the time being, I’m keeping it alive, at least.”

“Well, I guess. Now that I think about it, you do seem like the sort of person to feed stray cats in the street. I suppose this is a logical next step.” He turns his attention now to the lit oven and the
large bowl of salad. “You...cook?”

“I do.”

He nods. “I wouldn’t have initially taken you for the type, but now that I think about it it makes perfect sense.”

“Am I...required to make sense to you?”

“I hope not, because you don’t,” says Callie.

“It’s not that he doesn’t make sense. In fact, every person alive makes sense, if only to themself.” Percy hovers by the couch, staring at the cat before reaching down to gently scratch it behind the ear. The cat doesn’t seem to mind, squeezing its eyes shut and letting out a sound halfway between meow and purr, weak and strangled. “Working in journalism, you meet a lot of weird types. And every single one of them, they think everyone else is the weird ones. We all function on our own internal logic, and it makes perfect sense - to us. No such thing as a person who just doesn’t make sense at all.”

Callie seems almost confounded by the idea, and says nothing, staring at the wall blankly. This, Nemesis has learned, is how she processes things - with a blank stare and silence filling the space until she manages to come to a conclusion, whatever that may be. For now, he stays quiet as well, letting her think.

Percy is the one who breaks the silence. “Huh. Is Evie really still down there, talking to her?”

“Must be,” Nemesis says with a shrug. It doesn’t concern him where Evie Chase is or isn’t. Perhaps, he thinks, she’s staying down there with Theory because she dislikes being around him. That seems plausible enough.

“I can go check on them,” Callie offers. “I hope nothing bad happened.”

“I’m sure nothing bad happened. We’d’ve heard it,” Nemesis says, sighing. It would be just like his luck to have something both horrible and silent happen while he kept track of an oven upstairs.

Thankfully, nothing bad seems to have happened, because, with impeccable timing as always, Theory and Evie ascend the steps. Evie is dressed less formally than Percy, but still elegantly, holding a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. Both women seem more animated than usual, somehow. It’s a far cry from the slightly frustrated Theory that had greeted Nemesis at the door.

“Of course, we get free tickets for shows we’re in,” Evie finishes her sentence. “And I’m more than happy to get you some nice seats. I won’t...mention your surname to Fitzroy, though. He’s too...involved.”

“I’m glad you realized that without me having to point it out. You’d be amazed how many people don’t.”

By people she, of course, means Nemesis. He frowns. “How in the stars was I meant to know your family’s history?”

She shrugs. “You could have figured it out, detective.”

“Private investigator.” He sighs. “Why are you two negotiating ticket sales, exactly?”
“It isn’t like that,” Evie says. “Theory says she enjoyed last night’s performance, so I offered her more tickets. After all, I know it might be a bit out of a bookstore owner’s budget normally.”

Nemesis snorts. “She can afford it. I know how much rent I pay her.”

“Maybe I spend all of it on books. Have you ever considered that?” Theory crosses her arms. “May I ask why there’s blood on your face, also?”

Nemesis gestures to the cat.

Evie glances over Theory’s shoulder at it. “May I ask why there’s a cat in your apartment?”

“A good question to pose to him.” She gestures to Nemesis.

“I mean, I wasn’t about to let it die.”

Evie sighs. “...fair, yeah. Entirely fair. Take it to a clinic tomorrow, though. Better not to take risks, right?”

“Better not to,” he agrees. “I’ll admit it’s not exactly my area of expertise.”

“I hope not. That would be far too many areas of expertise for any one person to have.” Evie gestures to the table, where Callie is still sitting in contemplative silence. “May I sit?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Sorry about the lack of proper chairs, again.”

Nemesis frowns silently to himself. That might be the first time he’s ever heard Theory apologize to anyone. He wonders if some fundamental aspect of the universe has been altered without his noticing.

Of course, there’s a far more rational explanation. He watches how Theory pulls out a chair for Evie. She wants to impress her, that must be it, but why? Theory Hayes has never come off to him as a person who cares what anyone thinks of her.

“You know,” he says jokingly, “you could spend all that rent money on a couple more chairs, right?”

“You spend your money on chairs, if you think we need them that badly.”

He frowns. “I just might. And while I’m at it, I’ll actually stack the books around here into something approaching neatness, and maybe buy a new kettle, because the one you have is a little rusty for my comfort. I wear gloves, but I fear for you using it.”

“Feel free,” she replies nonchalantly.

He sighs. “Why do I feel like I’m paying you to be your interior decorator, housekeeper, and chef all at once?”

“Because you are.”

Percy smiles at Nemesis. “But you don’t actually mind, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” he agrees. “I like having things to do, and it might as well be this.”

“That’s admirable,” Evie remarks, and he has to stop himself from making his shock visible. Just yesterday she was talking about how untrustworthy he was, and here she is, calling him admirable.
“I don’t really think so. Just what I’m like. It’s selfish, isn’t it, if I’m only doing it because I want to?”

“Not at all. Someone else is still benefiting from it.” Percy pulls over a stool for himself. “Do you mind if we keep the cat by the table? Just so we’re keeping an eye on it. Reduces the risk of anything bad happening.”

“That’s a good idea,” Nemesis admits. He picks up the cat’s bowl and places it on the counter, making sure that he sits next to it.

“Oh, we brought you flowers and wine, by the way. I wasn’t sure which sorts either of you prefer, but I figure if you could drink undiluted absinthe you could drink just about anything,” Evie says, looking at Nemesis bemusedly to punctuate the last part of her sentence. If she was angry at him yesterday, she seems to have gotten over it.

Theory stares blankly at Nemesis. “...he drank...what now? No wonder he was so drunk…”

“...what’s absinthe?” Callie asks, quiet.

“Really strong alcohol. People normally dilute it with water.” Theory sighs. “Nemesis Jones, are you an idiot?”

“Well, obviously I’m not about to answer in the affirmative.”

She scoffs. “Obviously not. Can you get a vase for the flowers?”

“No problem.” Theory owns precisely one vase - a tall, plain black cylinder. He calmly snips the flowers’ stems and puts them in it, a little haphazardly. There are many things he has at least a basic level of training in, but flower arranging isn’t one of them.

Evie gestures towards him, as if asking for the vase. He gives it to her, and she immediately goes to work rearranging them.

“I have a part-time job at a florist’s,” she explains. “You did it so sloppily that it actively bothered me. Theory deserves a little bit better than that, don’t you think?”

“I reckon you’re right.”

She seems a little thrown off by him agreeing, but before she can say anything to the extent, the oven dings. Nemesis rushes to get food in order, and the four of them talk among themselves. Callie remains quiet, but Theory and Evie are much the opposite, speaking in a particularly animated manner.

“That dress you wore in the show was pretty spectacular,” Theory says. “I know I look like I prefer to dress practically, and I do, but there’s just something so nice about a fancy dress. It’s sort of a shame I never get a chance to wear any myself.”

“I know the feeling,” Evie agrees. “It’s part of what I like so much about being an actress. I’m fine just doing odd jobs and following Percy around six out of seven days a week, but the seventh I want to dress up like a noblewoman and speak on a stage in front of hundreds.”

“You like acting, then?” Theory asks.

“I do.” Evie’s voice is far softer, happier, than normal. “I’ve bounced from job to job my entire life, but it feels like I might finally have found my calling. I only took it to begin with to help Percy with
his investigation, but, Fitzroys aside, I don’t think I can give up acting now.”

“You do seem so much happier since you got that part than you ever did before,” Percy agrees, and he sounds overjoyed. If Evie’s current state is ‘much happier’ than normal, Nemesis is a little worried about what she used to be like.

“Oh course, I’m more than happy to do anything if it helps you with one of your cases. But it’s nice to find something I actually *enjoy* doing, as well.”

“Do you enjoy being a florist?” Callie asks.

“It’s not bad, but it’s not on the same level as acting.”

Nemesis, finally finished getting everything ready, sits down at long last. “When you find a career that makes you that happy, hold onto it. That’s what I’ve always been told.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Then does being a private investigator make you happy?”

He smiles. “Of course. The happiest. And I think everyone else here feels the same about their vocations?”

Theory nods her assent, as does Percy. Callie, though, shrugs. “I’m pretty indifferent to mine, actually.”

“That’s fine. You’re young.”

She frowns. “You’re *barely* older than me.”

He smiles. “I’m not old, either. I’m just lucky.”

“Goodness, if Nemesis is old, what does that make me?” Percy chuckles. “It really is superb odds that we happened to be standing next to each other in line, isn’t it? Two young nosy bastards with the desire to expose Tobias Fitzroy’s crime and the skill to do it.”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to call yourselves,” Theory remarks. “So, have you two become best friends in such a short time frame, or are you just a spectacularly nice person?”

“He’s a spectacularly nice person,” Evie answers promptly, but Percy waves a hand, cutting her off.

“I like to think I’m a nice person. I think most people do. But part of it really is that I consider Nemesis my friend.” He smiles at Nemesis, though there’s a more serious edge to it. “And my rival, of course.”

Nemesis must admit, he hadn’t been able to predict that. “Your...rival? I didn’t think we were fighting.”

“Well, that’s because we aren’t, I hope.” Percy sounds upbeat, excited almost. “That’s not what a rival has to be. Sometimes, rivals are simply two people who push each other to better themselves. No vitriol required!”

“Wow, I’ve never thought of it that way,” Theory remarks wryly.

“That’s not what the dictionary said,” Callie mutters.

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know that I really consider you a threat, Chase. Nor that I’ll be
coming for your job anytime soon, either.”

“Well, that’s good, because I need my job. But we don’t have to be direct threats to each other for us to drive each other to improve.” Percy shrugs. “But maybe I’m just weird, or you’re just really prone to interpreting things as threats when they actually really aren’t.”

Again, with the making wild assumptions about Nemesis. It feels almost like a ‘gotcha’. Percy is doing what Nemesis is doing, jumping to conclusions left and right, but his success rate, so far, seems questionable, and he lacks tact. It seems, if anything, a poor imitation of Nemesis’s own techniques, and the statement is clearly inflammatory and designed to throw him off.

But this is Percy, so for once, Nemesis doesn’t assume malice. Instead, he’s merely left confused by the behavior.

“And you love jumping to conclusions. About me specifically, actually. Want some advice, Chase? You’ve got good features. Use them and stop trying to one-up mine. My methods aren’t really meant to be imitated.”

Percy’s eyes widen. He looks caught off-guard, but not offended. More, if Nemesis has to look closely, impressed. It’s rare to see that look in response to his own actions. He has to stop himself from reacting.

Percy, though, seems to have none of the same reservations, because he reacts, and reacts strongly. “You figured me out so easily,” he says, grinning. “You’re right, though. I don’t think I’m very good at reading people at all.”

“I didn’t say that,” he corrects. “What I mean is I’ve got my methods, and they’re pretty quick and flashy. You’re someone who figures things out in quieter, less dramatic ways, I think, and there’s no shame in that. Focus on your own skills instead of trying to copy mine.”

Percy nods. “See, Nemesis, you’re proving my point, though. Here you are, pushing me to better myself. We’re rivals in the truest sense.”

Nemesis laughs. “Was all of that to get me to prove your point?”

“No, just a happy coincidence.” Percy’s grin only grows. He looks genuinely happy with himself. Nemesis isn’t about to be mad about that.

Evie and Theory have already moved on to a conversation of their own, it seems. Though earlier he’d been too focused on Percy, now it would be physically difficult to not listen in.

Evie has leaned halfway across the table. Her elbows are on the table, Nemesis observes. “Really, though, I promise you, this place is awesome,” she continues. “No one will even care that you’re a bookstore hermit. Plus, I get an employee discount.”

“You get a lot of employee discounts.” Theory fidgets awkwardly with her fork. It’s the most frazzled he’s ever seen her.

“I work a lot of part-time jobs.” Evie laughs. “But seriously, you’d be more than welcome to show up any time.”

“I don’t know…” she shakes her head. “Who would watch Beaumort’s?”

“Doesn’t the sign on the door say it’s only open when you can be bothered?” Percy asks.
She pauses. “I suppose so, yeah. I...I’ll stop by sometime. What are your hours?”

“I’ll write them down for you, why not?” Evie looks at Percy. “You wouldn’t have a spare pen and paper, would you?”

“You know I always do.” He searches through his pockets for a solid few moments, taking out, in the process, a handkerchief, three crowns, a wrapped hard candy, and several crumpled-up bits of paper with what look like notes to himself scribbled on them. Nemesis can only get a proper glimpse of one before it’s shoved back into his pocket - he can make out the words ‘BEG’, ‘INTERVIEW’, and ‘STERLING’.

Finally, Percy manages to procure a few small, blank squares of paper, badly crumpled but usable, and a pen. He hands these off to Evie, who promptly begins attempting to squeeze the requisite amount of information onto the tiny paper in minuscule, neat writing.

“Speaking of writing things down,” Percy turns to Nemesis again. “You said you’d write down who was and wasn’t lying at the Obscura, right? I hope you weren’t too hungover to remember.”

“I wasn’t.” It’s said with no small amount of pride. It had been one of the first things he’d thought of, even in his sorry state. “I can’t promise I didn’t misspell a couple words, but it should all be readable.”

“I appreciate it. Partially because me and Evie had a running bet about if you would or not.”

Nemesis laughs. “Glad I won you a couple crowns, then.”

“Not even. Just bragging rights.” Percy frowns. “Oh, I so should have bet money on you.”

“Next time, Perce,” Evie laughs.

Nemesis notices Callie looking at him across the table and meets her eyes. “Do you need me to explain what betting is?”

“I might.”

The evening is, all things considered, incredibly pleasant. Nemesis has to consider a dinner conversation that even Theory Hayes can enjoy a success by any standard. By the end, half the bottle of wine is gone and everyone is more than a little tired. Nemesis’s watch informs him that it’s well past midnight.

Callie has already taken her leave, explaining that she’s exhausted and would like to sleep early. Percy has stopped to feed the cat another small slice of tuna, and is now sitting beside it as it falls asleep. Theory has seemingly vanished - likely gone off somewhere to read, if he knows her at all. As far as hostesses go, she leaves much to be desired.

Evie approaches him. Thought he was already aware that she’s taller than him, and moreso with the two-inch heel she’s wearing factored in, there’s truly nothing like being alone in a corner of a room with someone taller than him to induce a rush of very mild frustration.

“Have a moment?” She asks.

He nods, putting on a smile that he hopes doesn’t look too fake. “Of course. What’s up?”
She looks seriously at him. “…you should show me around the downstairs. I want to see the books.”

That’s the most blatant excuse for going out of earshot he’s ever heard, especially since she’d been down there with Theory for ages. He nods. “No problem.”

The two descend the staircase. The lights have been turned off downstairs, so as to not attract any potential customers in Theory’s absence. Nemesis walks purposely to the desk, visualizing in his mind’s eye the layout of the bookstore, assuming that Theory hasn’t put any books in inconvenient places since he was last down here. His assumption appears correct, because he makes it to the front desk without tripping over anything, locating the candle Theory keeps around for reading. He lights it, and looks at Evie.

The shadows loom over the two of them, covering vast swathes of the bookstore in pitch-blackness. By the light of the candle, he sees Evie’s face, stony-cold and resolved.

“You may have noticed,” she begins, not wasting a moment. “That my brother finds you fascinating.”

“I’m not sure that’s precisely how I would describe it, but yes. I suppose I’ve noticed, yes.”

She sighs. “This isn’t the time to be sarcastic. This is serious.”

“Alright, alright.” He nods. “I got the sense. People don’t really hold non-serious conversations in dark bookstores, away from other people.”

“You’re approaching this wrong. Do you have the physical ability to be serious?”

“I think you’re misunderstanding me. Just because I don’t sound serious, doesn’t mean I’m actually not. This…merely happens to be how I talk.”

“See, I don’t like people like that. I don’t understand you.”

“A lot of people don’t understand me.” He forces his tone to become lower, calmer. “…but I’ll try to be a bit more serious, if that makes you more comfortable. I’m not in the business of harming people.”

“Are you not?” She crosses her arms. “I’ve been wondering if you’re legit for a good while, actually. You’re nothing like how Percy described you. You supposedly solved cases so fast, but once we’re around to actually watch you solve a murder you seem completely scattered and basically useless.”

“Harsh, but okay.” He sighs, leaning back against the desk. He’s sure he must sound exhausted, even though the conversation has only just started. “So this is what you’re here to talk to me about? You think I’m a fraud? How would one even go about fabricating a career as a private investigator?”

“That’s not…that’s not all of it, but now that you’ve mentioned it, you really don’t seem legitimate.” She scowls. “You’re, what, eighteen? And established as a private investigator?”

“I’m nineteen.” He shrugs. “How do you propose I’ve faked my line of work, then?”

“I have a few theories. Firstly, that you’re not really Nemesis Jones, and you’re just going by his name and stealing his accomplishments.”
He takes out his compass and flicks it open so she can see the needle pointed at him, tinged, as always, with the faintest blue-gray glow, which seems far brighter in the darkened bookstore.

“I am Nemesis Jones.”

The glow stays consistent.

She frowns. “How do I know that thing is what you say it is, anyway? You’re the one who insists it’s a lie detector. Maybe you do that so you can convince people you’re telling the truth.”

It’s a clever conclusion, and one Nemesis had never considered. “You see how it behaves around other people. I suppose you’ll just have to believe me, though. You’re right, it’s my word against yours.”

Evie stares at it intensely, and pokes the glass right above the midnight-blue needle focused on her, glowing faintly. “My middle name is Victoria.”

The blue lights up, illuminating her face, and she sighs. “Right, it’s Miranda.”

The glow goes away.

“Alright. I don’t think that’s proof, but I suppose it’s all I’ll be getting.” She sighs, staring directly and unwaveringly at the compass. “Okay, maybe you orchestrated cases so that you could pretend to have solved them.”

He has to hold back a laugh - he’s sure she wouldn’t appreciate that response. “That’s the plot of a penny dreadful I picked up this morning, pretty sure. No, I’ve not done that.”

The compass confirms his truthfulness. Evie’s scowl lessens. “I guess you do see the type to read those. Looking for inspiration, are you?”

“Maybe so. Or maybe I just enjoy mysteries of varying quality.”

She nods. “Okay. I’ll buy that. But there’s a secret, isn’t there? There has to be.”

“You mean, about why I’m so allegedly successful but have taken so long to solve this murder?” She nods, and he continues. “First off, it’s been less than a week. Solving a murder takes the constables several weeks. I don’t know why you expect me to be that much more efficient than the entire police force.”

“I don’t expect much from the police.”

“Yes, well, that’s fair,” he concedes. “Regardless, I’ll admit my methods aren’t always the most...orthodox. I tend to break and enter a bit more than your average law-abiding citizen. Some of my jobs are just tailing people. Some actually amount to what’s essentially theft. I’ve wiretapped phones, threatened people at gunpoint...a lot of my clientele, and thus the people I deal with, are...criminals. Blackmailing people like that isn’t just necessary, it’s expected. I’ve also bribed police officers, mostly just the same police officer multiple times, and I’ve forged documents. An investigator does what he must.”

He sighs heavily. “In the case of the Obscura...it’s more difficult. The people involved are richer, more influential. The police are watching closely. One wrong move...bad things happen. I need to be careful. Stay out of sight, as much as possible. More traditional methods are all I have to work with.”
The glow of the compass needle pointed at him decreases, just barely.

“So that’s it? You have slightly questionable methodology?”

He nods, and the needle indicates truth. “I’m not one of those detectives in the stories, who can figure out a culprit from a long glance at the crime scene. I need information, and sometimes the way I get that information involves breaking laws.”

“You don’t hurt people?”

“Not innocent people. Least, I try not to.”

Completely honest.

She sighs, and he can sense relief in her voice. “Okay. Good.”

“Was that all, then?”

She shakes her head. “I...actually somewhat went on a tangent there. I didn’t intend to interrogate you.”

“It’s fine.” He begins to grin before realizing that she probably doesn’t want to see that. “I interrogate so many people, it’d be ridiculous if I got mad when the shoe was on the other foot. My methods are a secret, though, so keep it quiet.”

He realizes, to some alarm, that she has no incentive to do that whatsoever, and is now in a position to completely ruin him. Though being considered a criminal would not be the end for him, nor would the loss of his few more reputable clients, he can’t return to being looked at like that. Not with envy, nor confusion, nor admiration, but disgust.

Evie nods. “I won’t tell anyone. I have no reason to. Just know that if you do anything to Percy, that’d be a reason.”

The compass detects complete sincerity. Nemesis nods. “I’m not planning to do anything to Percival, whatever you mean by that. He’s not done anything I’d consider bad enough to warrant it.”

“You’d better not.” She frowns. “My brother...is a wonderful, good-natured, kind-hearted person, with nothing but good intentions and infinite curiosity.”

“Lines up with how I’d think of him.”

Her voice lowers. “He’s also impulsive, reckless, and a little naive. Half my life has been spent tagging along with him on stories, making sure he doesn’t get himself caught in the middle of a society conflict or involved with criminals. You saw him follow you into that tunnel. He makes bad decisions in the name of finding the truth, and I’m the one who needs to stop him from going too far.”

“I can’t pretend I’m not the same. He does impulsive things...like join the Correspondents, you reckon?”

“That’s...what started it, actually. He got involved with them when he was pretty young, and he was so proud when he told me. I had to follow him from then on. Not go to university, work all these jobs so I can be everywhere at once. I find things out so he doesn’t have to risk more than he already is.”
“You’re a very devoted sister,” Nemesis says, honestly. “He’s lucky to have you.”

“He is,” she agrees. “But he doesn’t always take my advice. But you...he looks up to you. So set a good example.”

“Looks up to me…” He sighs wistfully. “That’s always strange to hear. The whole rival thing...didn’t entirely make sense to me, if I’m being honest, but if it helps him, I wouldn’t even mind if he really did dislike me.”

Evie looks carefully at the compass, which indicates no dishonesty from Nemesis. She frowns. “You really wouldn’t?”

“Well, there’s different types of dislike, mind. I don’t want to be thought of as utter scum, but if someone sees me and thinks ‘wow, that absolute bellend again, love to wipe that smug smirk off his face’, that’s fine by me, long as the other person gets something out of it.”

“I...see. That’s all fine by me, then...what I’ve been meaning to say boils down to this: don’t let Percy get hurt. Keep him out of trouble, or—” she grabs him by the collar and yanks him closer, “I will hunt you down for sport.”

No dishonesty. He’s not even sure she’s being hyperbolic.

“Of course. I don’t want to see him get hurt, either. Far too nice of a bloke for that.” He points to his compass, holding it up at an angle so that both of them can see it. “According to this thing, he’s possibly the most genuine person alive.”

She releases him and laughs, soft and airy. “That doesn’t surprise me. Okay, then. That’s settled. I’m sorry for being so antagonistic to you.”

He tries his best to smooth out his collar where she grabbed it, but it’s no use. The fabric has become horribly wrinkled. “It’s no issue. I hadn’t honestly thought much of it, and in retrospect, it’s actually quite reasonable.”

“Still, I—”

She’s interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the staircase. Of course, this bookstore is quite old, and the decaying wood makes horrible creaking noises whenever it’s used. The cause of these noises, it seems, is a curious-looking Percy, who leans over the rail in a way Nemesis wouldn’t precisely call ‘safe’.

“What’re you two up to?” He asks, grinning. “Conversations in the dark? Sounds fun, can I join?”

Nemesis has to hold back a chuckle at that. “We were just finishing, actually. Sorry. Next time, maybe. Be careful and don’t fall.”

“Right!” Percy vaults over the side of the rail. It’s dramatic, and for a moment, he’s elegant as he sails through the air, but he doesn’t land well, dropping onto one foot. For a moment, he seems surprised, then winces, steadying himself against a nearby bookshelf.

“Don’t do that again,” Nemesis dryly comments. “Sounded like you put a dent in the floorboard. Theory’s not gonna like that.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He sighs, glancing back up at the staircase from which he’d jumped. “That was stupid, in retrospect.”
“Learn from your mistakes, then. Don’t jump from high places if you know you can’t stick the landing,” Nemesis suggests. “Do you think you’re hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.” He nods. “I won’t. Sorry about the floor.”

“It’s...probably fine.”

“Right, then.” He glances at Evie. “Sorry to end a lovely night like this, but it’s getting late. Evie and I should get going, right?”

“Right,” she confirms.

“Before I do go, though,” Percy reaches into his pocket, rummaging around for a crumpled business card, which he hands to Nemesis. “I’ve already given you my own contact information, but I figured you could use my boss’s as well. She’s strict, but she knows a lot.”

“I’ll look into her. Maybe I’ll put in a good word about you if I do end up seeking her out.”

He reaches out his hand to shake Percy’s, and the gesture is reciprocated energetically. “It was lovely having you over. Feel free to come by any time, though maybe call ahead in advance for Theory’s sake.”

“Will do.”

Evie waves, and the two depart, the doorbell lightly jingling behind them as they walk into the night. Nemesis turns his attention to the business card.

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Khalida Alhazred
Editor-in-chief; Electric Sun
666-542-5432
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“Alhazred…” he mutters aloud to himself.

Promptly, he makes his way up to the loft, into his room, where he pins it up on the corkboard, directly underneath a paper which reads ‘CORRESPONDENTS’.

“Ahem.”

He turns around. Theory is standing in the doorway to his room. He has no idea where she came from, but she was so absolutely silent in it that even someone as observant as him didn’t hear her.

“Yes, what is it?”

“What was that loud thump, just a few minutes ago?”

He smiles sheepishly. “...nothing important. Just Percy - and I told him off for it, don’t worry.” He wouldn’t quite call it a telling-off, in retrospect, but it’s adjacent enough to the truth. “Nothing’s broken or such, so it’s not that big a deal.”

“Alright,” she agrees. “But be careful. They’re your friends, so you’re financially responsible for whatever havoc he unleashes.”
“That’s fair. I’m sure I unleash enough havoc on my own, without making you deal with Chase on top of it.” He chuckles.

“You do,” she agrees, with no trace of humor. “I don’t know why I tolerate you...oh, right. Money.”

“And because you’ve become at least somewhat fond of me, I should hope.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t count on it.”

“Ah. What happened to us being friends, then?”

She raises an eyebrow. “...I’ve never implied we were friends. If that’s the impression you’ve been under, then my apologies. I don’t have feelings, and I don’t have friends.”

He frowns. “I don’t think there’s a single person alive without feelings, Theers.”

“Well, you’ve met her.” She gestures to herself. Despite her words, she seems almost agitated. “I’m a Hayes. We don’t feel, we only think.”

“Afraid I don’t think that’s how it works. I’m pretty sure feelings are an inescapable aspect of humanity with which we are all burdened unnecessarily. As much as I’d love to be rid of my own, I’ve yet to see any evidence that it’s possible.”

“Well, then, look in front of you.” She gestures to herself furiously. “I am all the evidence you need. I am the epitome of science, and emotion has been rendered redundant. All that remains is desire for knowledge and the drive to obtain it.”

It might as well be the speech of a villain in a penny dreadful, he thinks. He sighs. “Are you aware you sound ridiculous?”

“Ridiculous?” She scoffs. “Of course, someone like you would never be able to understand.”

“I don’t like your tone there.” He sounds stern, uncharacteristic for himself. “Someone like me? I’ve a sinking feeling I know precisely what trait of mine you’re referring to, there.”

Is that a faint hint of guilt he detects on her face? No, he thinks to himself with no lack of sarcasm, can’t be - she doesn’t have feelings, after all. She shakes her head. “You know what I mean. You’ve never sought knowledge. Not seriously.”

He has to laugh at that. “Me? Never sought knowledge? I’m a bloody private investigator!”

“It’s not the same. You’re trying to solve a problem. All I want, all I need, is knowledge for knowledge’s sake.”

“Sometimes, I like to know things for the sake of it, too.”

She shakes her head. “It isn’t the same. You’re a normal person. You don’t understand what it’s like, to feel nothing but an endless hunger for knowledge.”

“Nah, reckon I don’t. But I know you’re my friend and I know I’ve seen you experience emotions right in front of me.”

She grits her teeth. “You-”

“You seemed thrilled at the idea of joining Evelyn Chase for another performance. You seem
annoyed by me most of the time, but occasionally endeared. Those are all feelings. When you want
knowledge, that’s a feeling too.”

She sighs. “...I won’t argue, because you won’t understand. You don’t understand. You can’t
understand why my family is so different from everyone else.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Try me.”

“I want to—need to, I need to know everything there is to know. About the powers that be, about our
universe, about artifice. My parents were called evil by people too weak to share our goal, but it
isn’t our problem that other people don’t want to elevate themselves to their full potential. My
parents didn’t let anything stop them in their goals, and I won’t either. Knowledge is more essential
to me than breath. I will know everything there is to know, until I snuff out every last star in the
universe simply to feel what it’s like when they die.”

“That seems a little bit extreme.”

“I knew it.” She glares at him. “I knew that you wouldn’t understand.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand at all. I simply…” He sighs. “I don’t understand why any of that
means you can’t have feelings.”

“Feelings are the root of morals. Morals inhibit advancement.”

“I don’t follow.”

“If my parents were held back by things like feelings, they wouldn’t have made half of the
advancements they did.”

“Was...was that you admitting to your parents doing things that are objectively immoral?” He pulls
out his compass, almost on instinct.

“My parents did what they had to.” It’s true. “And they didn’t care about friendship or feelings or
love or any of those things that all of you love to go on about.” This, as well, is genuine. “And
neither do I. I don’t care about you. If you think I do, you’re lying to yourself. Not everyone can be
weak like you.”

He angles the compass so she can see the faint glow of the needle pointing to her, blood-red light
reflected in her skin. “You’re lying.”

Silently, she reaches forward, placing a careful and cold hand on the back of his neck. “My parents
discovered many things. They discovered something interesting, years ago. If you send a specific
wave of energy through someone’s body, they’ll be in pain so unbearable it severs them from
reality, briefly sending them into a peculiar sort of trance state.”

How horrifying. He can’t imagine the sort of thing that would lead to that discovery. Surely, no
one would consent to being in that amount of pain. Surely, there are things Theory isn’t telling
him, and for a reason. Suddenly, it’s clear to him why the Beaumort Society was so distrusted.

Her hand is colder than Elias’s. He looks her in the eye and slowly raises an eyebrow. Brave face,
even when he has no idea what she’s capable of. “Well, now I’m curious.”

“This will be incredibly painful.”

“I got that.” There are worse things than pain, he thinks to himself. Pain is temporary. Pain is a sign
She scoffs. “Your funeral.”

And then pain rips through Nemesis, so intense that any response fails him. He’s sure he’s screaming, but all his senses are occupied by agony, and he feels himself detach, as though he’s lifting off of his feet and out of his body as lights flash in his vision. The light grows and warps, and he’s seeing things, things he can’t process or comprehend, things that surpass human understanding, as though the whole of the universe is within his view.

And then it’s over, and the pain subsides until the only hint of it is a strange left-over soreness, like a ringing in his ears, quieter and quieter. He’s on the floor. When did he get on the floor?

“Do you understand now?” She asks.

“Not really.”

“A shame. I had thought, maybe, since you agreed to it, that meant you understood.” She shakes her head, sighing. “You agreed more readily than I did, the first time. I had high hopes.”

“Don’t talk about me,” he manages through gritted teeth, “as though I’m a failure. I am in unimaginable amounts of pain. I have just experienced things that make me question if maybe joining the Reverenti is a worthwhile endeavor. Because you inflicted that on me.”

“...what was it like for you, then? Describe it as best you can within the confines of Acerbian language - or Al-Mushrite or Luciellite, if either of those work better for you.”

He stumbles to his feet. All of his joints feel raw and misshapen, as though they’re about to give out under him and send him to his knees again. He wonders how he must look to her. Does he even resemble a human at this point? Is he just a shambling mound of flesh, hastily reanimated like one of Charles Dreadful’s birds?

She looks at him blankly. “Are you going to attack me?”

“No.” He runs his hands through his hair, and exhaustion overcomes him, and he falls to the floor again, barely feeling the impact. “No, I’m not. Because you’re my friend.”

“...you’re still on about that, are you?”

“Aye. I am.” He sighs. “You’re my friend. That means I’m willing to forgive you for something like this. But...you’ve got to understand. No matter how scared you are of having feelings, of having feelings for people...you can’t hurt people.”

She stares intensely at him. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“Perhaps not. I know I enjoy your company, though.” He groans, forcing himself back to his feet again. “And I know I’m willing to forgive you, just this once, if you apologize.”

She narrows her eyes. “...I’m sorry,” she says, finally, barely audible, and Nemesis feels a rush of happiness.

“I’ll be honest,” he admits, dragging himself to his bed and depositing himself haphazardly on it. “I would have forgiven you even if you hadn’t apologized. But I’m glad you did. Because that proves to me that you care enough do something that clearly harms your pride.”
She frowns. “...no one has ever wanted to be my friend before.”

“If you walk around causing people extreme pain just to see what happens, I can see why.” Before she can say anything, he continues. “But I think Evelyn Chase thinks you’re pretty neat, so I’d take advantage of that. Don’t let the opportunity pass you by.”

“I want to spend time with her, like she asked me to,” she admits. “It’s simply a new experience. I don’t often leave my bookstore. At this point, I might as well be part of it.”

“Never a better opportunity to get out, in that case.”

She sighs. Almost nervously, she continues. “Evelyn is such a dramatic, interesting, attention-grabbing person. She’s the sort of character I would read about in a book. I always used to dream of being someone like her.”

Nemesis thinks back to their last trip to the Theatre Obscura. That explains the dress, then, her calm manner in public. There’s more to her dreams than the walls of this bookstore.

He nods. “Then go out and be dramatic, interesting, and attention-grabbing. I’ll go to the library for you, get that book you wanted.”

She nods. “Thank you. For that.” The last part seems almost hurriedly added on. He can sympathize. It’s hard for someone that prideful to admit they need a friend.

“But right now, I’m going to sleep off the agony you’ve put me in.” He waves to her. “Begone.”

“If you insist.” She turns, closing the door behind her.

“Goodnight!” He calls to her. There’s no response, but that’s okay. They’ll take this one day at a time.

Chapter End Notes

The titles of some of the penny dreadfuls in this chapter reference other stories which are written by friends of mine, which you should absolutely check out!

First: Kill the Joker: Survival Game, by galakei on Royal Road and Archive of our Own. It's a death-game style story, with a cast of serial killers and detectives trapped inside a manor and forced to go by aliases. The protagonist, aptly named 'Protagonist', must navigate the hostile environment of secret identities to survive in the manor.

Second: RATS: 250 Chances at Redemption, by Kisikil on Royal Road and Archive of our Own. It's also a death-game style story, featuring a really likeable cast and extremely good writing. It's also heartwrenching. I'm of the opinion that you're genuinely missing out if you aren't reading it, so, like...what are you doing still here? Go read RATS.

And that acknowledgment was a meta one. Thank you so much, Six, for putting up with me and editing my stuff.
When he awakens the next morning his limbs feel like lead. As far as long-term effects of extreme pain go he supposes it could be worse, but it still feels as though his arms might fall off by the time he’s emerged into the main room of the loft.

Theory is by the stovetop, pathetically attempting to reheat some leftover pancakes. They already look burnt, but she continues to cook. Is she that bad at this, or does she actually enjoy burnt food?

Nearby, Callie is sitting with the cat on the couch, scratching its ears. She looks up when she sees Nemesis, waving. “You look terrible again.”

“And whose bloody fault is that?” he asks, looking pointedly at Theory, who seems suspiciously focused on the pancakes.

Callie glances between the two of them. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.” He sits by her, stretching his arms out and yawning. All of his bones, harrowed by the last night’s events, crack in a horrible cascade. The cat jumps to its feet and begins to sniff Nemesis curiously.

“Oh, I think it likes you,” Callie says. “It doesn’t seem as scared of us as I thought it would be.”

“I reckon we’re the only people to ever feed it.” He scratches the cat’s head, and it purrs. “Plus, it’s not old enough to know better than to trust humans.”

He hears the rather unpleasant sound of Theory scraping burnt pancakes off of a pan and frowns. “You know, after last night, the least you could do is make me tea for once.”

“Don’t count on it,” she calls back to him, but a few moments later he can hear the familiar sound of water being poured into a kettle. He smiles to himself. The cat has taken up rubbing its head against his side.

“What happened last night?” Callie asks.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Theory says harshly.

Nemesis shrugs. “Sorry, if that’s the verdict I can’t tell you anything. She’s right, though, it doesn’t concern you, so no need to be worried.”

“I’m going to worry no matter what you say.” She sighs, gently petting the cat with one hand.

The kettle whistles loudly. Less than a full minute later, Theory is hovering by the side of the couch, holding out a mug of tea. “Don’t ask me for anything ever again.”
“Thank you. I shan’t.” Nemesis takes it. He can feel the heat radiating up to his face. “This is boiling.”

“Just trying to keep you on your toes.”

He glances at his compass. Just as he thought, by the way she turned away quickly - she’s lying. “Theory, be honest - do you drink boiling tea? Is that normal for you?”

“You mean you don’t?”

“I think you know the answer to that full well, actually.” He sighs. This would be amusing if it weren’t legitimately concerning. “Is this why you complain about the tea I make for you being cold all the time?”

“I complain about the tea you make being cold because it is cold.”

She’s not lying. He sighs. “I think you might be harder to burn than the average person.”

“Oh, well, of course. Sensitivity to temperature decreases inversely to strength of knack, just like almost everything else does.”

To demonstrate, she casually sticks her hand in the flame on the stove. Nemesis has to stop himself from actively gasping in horror, though Callie seems entirely unfazed. When Theory brings her hand out, though, it’s barely darker than before, like a light sunburn.

“Bloody stars...” he mutters. “That’s just normal for you, is it?”

“Pretty much.” She shrugs, running her hand over her burn. It vanishes, healing within the span of a second.

He frowns. “That’s right, you’re an artificer. Couldn’t you have done something about the amount of pain I’m in right now?”

“I could have, but you didn’t ask.”

“You’re in pain...?” Callie asks nervously.

“Don’t worry about it.” He stands, feeling his legs buckle underneath him again. “Pain’s just another obstacle. I’ll walk it off.”

“Oh, are we going somewhere?” She stands as well.

“Aye, we’re going to Burke’s. For multiple reasons.” He gestures to the cat. “Cat’s coming with. Shame about the continued lack of baskets. Would make this much easier.”

“The cat’s...coming with?” Callie looks nervous at the thought. “Nothing bad is happening, right?”

“Nah, nothing at all. We’re just paying a quick trip to the library.” He scoops the cat into his hands. The continued lack of anything which could be used as a carrier means that he’ll be holding onto it, making sure it doesn’t run off anywhere, not that it’s physically capable.

“Get me some scones,” Theory adds on. “And don’t be surprised if I’m not here when you’re back. I’ll be taking a pleasant midday walk today.”

Nemesis feigns an audible gasp. “Goodness, Theory, it’s like you’re a different person.”
“It’s nothing strange. I have a...meeting.” She gestures him towards the door. “Now, shoo. I need to burn things in peace.”

“You have fun with that,” he says, waving.

Just before he makes it across the door-step, Callie takes the still-boiling tea and locks eyes with Nemesis as she drinks it in a single smooth sip.

“Not that bad, really. Pleasantly toasty,” she says, grinning, as she joins him at the door.

“You are not a normal person,” he tells her.

“I can live with that,” is the reply, and she gives him an amused grin before stepping past him and out the door.

He holds the cat in his hands the entire way to Burke’s, careful not to let it wriggle out of his grasp. He must look like an absolute lunatic, walking through town with a cat in his hands, Callie immediately behind him, but he’s fine with that.

Burke’s looks much the same as it had the last visit. Nemesis knocks, and the door is answered, again, by Charles Dreadful. He looks much the same as well, with the same disheveled work clothes and tied-up hair, and the same strange bandages wrapped around his arms, like the world’s strangest pair of homemade opera gloves.

“What brings you here, Jones?” He looks warily at the cat in Nemesis’s arms. “Why have you brought me an animal?”

“Er, I was wondering…” He realizes, now, how ludicrous this request actually is. “...I suppose...you’re the only person I know that works with animals, even if they’re dead, normally...I found this sorry creature and I thought I might as well do my best to keep it alive, but I’m not precisely a doctor.”

“I’m not precisely a doctor either, Jones.” He runs a hand through his bangs and sighs. “...but I can’t exactly say no to a kitten, so you might as well come in.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

“Try adjectives, Jones. May I suggest ‘very much’? Perhaps ‘I am forever in your debt, kind Sir Dreadful’.”

“That’s pushing it.”

He enters, and Callie follows him. The inside seems a bit messier than last time. The corpses have been removed from the tables, and Baron screeches from atop a cabinet.

Nemesis frowns and gestures towards the bird. “He’s not going to hurt the cat, is he?”

“Shouldn’t. We’ve had other animals around and he’s never attacked them. Part of it might be that he doesn’t need to eat.” He laughs quietly. His laugh is remarkably soft and endearing. He’s similar to Elias in that regard, Nemesis thinks to himself.

“Well, bully for him.” He turns to the bird and salutes him. In return, Baron caws loudly, and the cat meows back.
Charles laughs again, light and airy, as he leads them into a side room, kicking aside a femur haphazardly left on the floor. Callie frowns at it as she follows him.

Unlike the laboratory, this place has a semblance of interior design. Nemesis can appreciate that in a room. Though its decoration is simplistic - gray walls and monochrome furniture - an attempt was at least visibly made. The large couch is flanked by two armchairs, a decently-sized bookshelf stuffed practically to the point of overflow with dense medical texts standing beside it. On the table are a few coasters, appearing to be legitimate cross-sections of various organs encased in a transparent resin, as well as a few journals - he recognizes several issues of *The Semper Quarterly Review* and the *Catacumba Press Journal of Medicine*, interspersed with what seem to be multiple newspapers.

Nemesis picks one up, frowning. “Bloody stars...politics.”

“Bloody stars is right.” Charles shudders. “I can’t believe the latest results.”

“Me neither. I can’t believe the Dungeons, Death, and Taxes Party picked up a seat. Who in their right mind votes for those guys?”

Charles scoffs. “Society puppets and men who enjoy watching the world burning.”

“Fools, the lot of them. At least vote for the Raving Loonies if you’re angling to be contrarian.” He sighs. “...not that the results matter, do they? It’s the societies and the Rex government that actually has power. Parliament’s just a front.”

“See,” Charles says, “I’d be less upset about that if they were just upfront about it. These pretenses are just keeping someone far more interesting from overthrowing them. I’d rather have instability than stable corruption. More exciting that way.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “You don’t think any potential overthrowers would actually make things outright better than they were before?”

“Goodness, no! Anyone with aspirations to power is inherently going to be a bad person, as far as I’m concerned. I’ll trust no man who’d willingly wear a crown.”

He nods. “I’m the same way. Those who seek power can’t be trusted with it.”

“Th-then what do you propose the solution is?” Callie asks finally. “I’m sorry, that’s a genuine question...I don’t know anything about politics.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m a doctor, not a politician.” Charles makes his way to a cabinet, through which he rifles for a moment before procuring a pair of strange-looking spectacles, with multiple loupes attached to each lens. He reaches his hands out for the cat, which Nemesis gives gingerly to him, and sits on the couch, glancing carefully at its leg through the lenses.

Unraveling the bandages with the skill of a man who has done this countless times, he carefully manipulates the joint. The cat meows loudly, and he mutters “Shush,” under his breath. Finally, he glances up at Nemesis with a dark look.

“Well, I’ve figured out what’s wrong,” he says gravely.

Nemesis sharply draws in his breath. “What is it?”

“A simple broken leg. I can fix this immediately.” He bursts into a peal of laughter. “Your face, mate. Priceless.”
“That’s not nice,” Nemesis mutters.

“Sorry, sorry. I tend to forget most people don’t have Dr. Burke’s sense of humor.” He runs his hand over the leg. The cat meows, clearly unnerved, but Charles scratches it behind the ear and it seems to relax. “This cat’s remarkably even-tempered, you know. For something that had its leg crushed, it’s doing pretty incredible. I’m glad you brought it to me.”

“It’s a really strange cat, aye. Good strange.” He reaches into his pocket. “I can pay you however much you’d like. Money is no object.”

“Save your money.” He holds the cat carefully. “I’m always more than happy to help a creature so clearly clinging desperately to life.”

“I see.” Nemesis reaches to pet the cat, and he can feel it purring. “So you think it’ll live?”

“I don’t think she’ll live, I know she will.” He grins lopsidedly, with no lack of fondness. “For someone like me, so surrounded by death, it’s easy to tell when someone really wants to live. This cat’s got an impressive zest for life. I admire that, honestly.”

“Someone like you admires the will to live?” Nemesis asks. “Not to be rude - and I’m sure you get this a lot - but I wouldn’t’ve expected that.”

“I do get that a lot,” he says. “You’re among the first to specify that the rudeness is unintentional, so I can’t be too angry. Do look away, though. What I’m about to do isn’t precisely the sort of thing most like to see.”

Callie obediently glances away, but Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “You know I’m a curious sort, right? And that saying that sort of thing is a surefire way to make me watch whatever’s about to happen in rapt fascination.”

He chuckles. “I half-expected that from you. Watch, then, but you’re not to say anything.”

“If you insist.”

At this point, Nemesis isn’t sure what to expect, but he isn’t exactly surprised when Charles reaches for his bandages, unraveling them with surgical precision. Underneath, a patchwork of lesions, healed to various degrees, run up and down the backs of his forearms. Underneath them are a strange pattern of black lines, almost brand-like, as if seared into his flesh. A manifestation, or self-inflicted? The scars certainly seem to be the latter.

From his pocket, Charles pulls a scalpel, and silently cuts into the back of his arm, almost at the elbow. He doesn’t so much as wince, silently pressing down further. The cut is deep - blood immediately gushes out, rushing down his arm in crimson rivulets, dripping onto the cat’s leg, staining the black fur. The cat tries to stand up, but he gently presses his arm down, pinning her harmlessly to the table.

Once a sufficient amount of blood has been spilled, Charles lowers the scalpel and holds the cat’s leg still. It screams, but he pays it no mind, face settled into a look of pure concentration. And before Nemesis’s eyes, the blood seems to almost come alive, shifting and bubbling in unsettling ways, before sinking into the leg. The cat screams once, then falls silent.

When Charles turns to Nemesis, he looks just a touch exhausted, as though he’s just climbed a long flight of stairs. “That should do it. It wasn’t all that bad.” And, to Callie: “You can uncover your eyes now, lass.”
She does just that, looking at the cat in amazement as she stands for the first time, curiously testing her legs by unsteadily trampling over all the journals and newspapers. “You actually managed to heal it that quickly…?”

He laughs softly. “Well, yes. Artifice does wonderful things.”

“Never seen an artificer do anything like that before,” Nemesis mutters. “I’ve healed from all my injuries the old fashioned way regardless, sure, but I don’t think anyone in Citrea Viridia could do anything like that if they wanted to.”

“It’s a rare skill. Beyond having the knack for artifice in general, one needs to have the knack for the medical things. And even beyond that, to pursue it at the cost of your own health is taxing. It takes either an especially magnanimous or especially devoted person to spill their own blood for the sake of healing.”

“And which are you?”

“A little of both, I reckon.”

Nemesis nods, and they briefly fall into silence.

Finally, Nemesis speaks. “Is Dr. Burke around?”

“He’s out at the library today. Why, did you come to see him?” He feigns offense. “Am I not enough for you, Nemesis Jones?”

“You’ve been quite wonderful so far. I merely wanted to ask him to, er...get me into that exact library, actually. That’s the main reason I came here.”

“You can’t just…” Charles glances between Callie and Nemesis. “...ah, right, neither of you are actually affiliated with the institute, are you? I keep forgetting.”

“Right, well…” Nemesis mutters. “It isn’t as if I wear it on my sleeve, you know. I like to keep my affiliations or lack thereof as quiet as possible. Better for business if people think there’s a chance I’m on their side.”

“You know, it’s a shame. You seem the sort of fellow I’d’ve liked to have as a classmate. Not completely insufferable.”

Nemesis laughs. “‘Not completely insufferable’? You flatter me. I, for my part, loathed my formal education. I’ve yet to meet a single group of people I hate more than students.”

“That’s fair, that’s entirely fair. I can fully understand why, when offered the choice, you decided on an apprenticeship instead.” He looks, Nemesis thinks, a little wistful. He remembers what Burke had said - that Charles had been his apprentice years back. “Besides, from what I’ve heard, your teacher is an amazing man.”

“He is,” Nemesis agrees, hoping the sadness in his voice isn’t apparent. “That’s not important now, though. What’s important is that we need to get a specific book from the library, and we can’t get in on our own.”

Charles nods. “Right. I’d be willing to help you, if you’ll give me a moment to get myself into something a little more…” He gestures to his disheveled work clothes and still-bleeding arm. “…presentable.”
“By all means,” Nemesis agrees.

Charles grabs his coat from by the door, snaps his fingers, and Baron flies over to sit on his still-bandaged arm. “Follow me, then. My dorm isn’t far from here.”

Callie scoops up the cat, which seems perfectly alright with being carried. It really is the best-tempered cat Nemesis has ever seen.

He gestures to the cat. “So we’re keeping her, right? We can’t not.”

“I don’t think it’s up to me.” The cat sniffs her nose, and she smiles. “But if you want to keep it, I’d really like that. I’ve never had a cat before.”

“Me neither. Maybe it’ll do me some good, having a small animal around to keep alive.”

Callie quirks an eyebrow. “And here I thought I fulfilled that role.”

Nemesis can’t help himself. He bursts into peals of uncontrollable laughter, and Charles pauses to look back in mild alarm.

Callie, too, looks alarmed. “Are you okay?”

“I am, I am,” he says through his laughter. “I just, bloody stars, I never hear you joke. It caught me off guard.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Nah, don’t be. It’s good, it’s nice to hear.”

“Oh.” She smiles nervously. “Good, then. I’ll try to tell more jokes?”

“Don’t force yourself. It’s just nice to see you in high spirits.”

“Well, I could say the same for you.”

“Eh?” He looks at her, confused. “What’s that meant to mean?”

“You seem so under the weather most of the time. I mean, you don’t seem miserable or anything, but a little bit melancholic.” She says it matter-of-factly, authoritative, in a way that leaves no room for debate. “I haven’t heard you laugh that genuinely in the time I’ve known you. For a while, you sort of reminded me of Art. Never fully happy, always with something under the surface eating at you. I’m glad I made you laugh.”

It’s a shockingly genuine conversation to have in the middle of the street, he thinks, but that’s not the sort of thought that would ever cross her mind. He almost admires her lack of inhibitions. For a moment, he thinks it might be better to stop trying to be anyone, to let himself behave as though all of society isn’t watching.

But, of course, society is watching. And to be inhibited is to be safe. Life at the price of repression. It’s only a fair trade.

They make it to Charles’s dorm, passing through an empty lobby to a rickety elevator. “My room’s on the thirteenth floor,” he says, pressing the button. “I could’ve gotten one on a lower floor, since not many people dorm in this part of town, but I like the view from up there.”

“I don’t like heights,” Nemesis admits.
“I’m indifferent to them,” Callie adds.

“Huh. Wouldn’t’ve taken you for the type.” Charles looks curiously at Nemesis. “Is there a reason you don’t like heights?”

“Aye, there is.”

“But you’re not going to tell me, I take it.”

“Not especially likely, no. Suffice it to say I’m less scared of heights and more scared of falling.”

The elevator lurches up with a horrible creak. Even Callie, normally unflappable, visibly tenses, holding the cat in her hands tighter, but Charles grins. “Don’t worry. This thing’s all bark and no bite. No matter how bad it sounds, I’ve been using this infernal contraption for years and it’s never once so much as had a hitch. The enchantments on this thing will keep it functional far longer than this building will even be standing.”

And just as Charles predicted, the elevator arrives harmlessly, doors sliding open with an uncanny smoothness. Callie doesn’t loosen her grip on the cat, and the two of them follow Charles to a door labeled ‘DREADFUL’. He unlocks the door, holding it open for them.

Inside, it’s small, cozy, and decorated in all black. Charles has more books than any student has a right to have, certainly too many to ever actively read. Nemesis picks one up at random and frowns - the title is in Llygredish, which he doesn’t know a word of.

“Touching others’ books?” Charles chuckles. “For shame, Jones, for shame.”

“Didn’t know you spoke Llygredish.”

“Didn’t know you didn’t.” He grins. “My mother taught me. It’s convenient, because I can speak it out in public with Dr. Burke knowing full well nobody’s going to be able to overhear. You never learned? For shame, Jones.”

“Didn’t have a chance. Learned M’amand in school instead, for whatever reason. Not like that’s any more useful.”

“Didn’t realize you even went to school.” Charles laughs. “It’s only logical, though, that you would want to learn the language your family spoke. It might seem entirely arbitrary and constructed, but it feels nice to keep their traditions alive, doesn’t it?”

“I…reckon you’re right,” he agrees, even though he hadn’t so much as ever heard a word of M’amand before he took that class.

“Right. Stay here,” he gestures to the room, “While I finally get myself looking presentable. You should leave the cat here, taking it to the library’s a bad idea.”

Charles ducks out of the room, and Callie and Nemesis are left to examine their surroundings. The cat is placed on the floor, and eagerly begins sniffing everything in her vicinity.

“Do you think it’s really okay to leave her here?” Callie asks nervously.

“Better than taking her to the library.” He sighs, watching as the cat explores the space behind one of the bookstores, swiping with her paw. “I’ve really become attached to a small cat, haven’t I? I’ll have to learn to take care of cats. They don’t teach that in school.”
“I can’t imagine why they would. Art never told me anything about animals, either. He thought they were a hassle.”

Nemesis nods. A thoroughly un-relatable opinion, but it lines up with what little he’s been told of the man so far. Art strikes him as the sort to be openly annoyed with anything and everything. “See, my teacher actually had a pet catfish, of all things. Really old catfish he’d gotten off an acquaintance before she left on an expedition to the Border Wilds, never to return. We called him Professor Challenger. He died around a year ago of natural causes, which implies he was pretty bloody old, because those bastards can live half a century.”

“A cat...fish.” Callie nods, visibly bewildered. “What was that like? I mean, how can something be a cat and a fish?”

“It’s not, it’s a fish that looks like a cat. Around this big,” he motions with his hands, “massive whiskers, roots about in gravel all day. Pretty calm. It’s a fish, don’t know what else to say about it.”

“I don’t think I completely follow. You’ll have to find me an illustration of one or something.”

Nemesis sighs. “I will do, when I get the chance.” It’s not as though he’s unwilling to explain things to her, but sometimes he forgets just how vexing it is to try. Her base knowledge is so sparse, and the things she does know are so unpredictable, that explaining anything to her is an exercise in frustration. An exercise he’s willing to undergo, of course, but an exercise nonetheless. How does one explain the concept of a catfish, anyway?

“So skills used when caring for a catfish aren’t transferable to cats?”

“Stars, I wish. Nah, they couldn’t be more different.”

She nods. “So we’ll both have to learn. And Theory will as well.”

“Can’t imagine she’ll be thrilled about that,” Nemesis chuckles. “I imagine she’ll make me pay rent for the cat, as well.”

“You pay Theory Hayes rent? Can’t imagine how you convinced her to let you be in a position to even do that.” Charles has emerged from his room, dressed to the nines with incredible speed. He’s dressed in all black, a stylish suit and overcoat, silver jewelry in the shape of ravens’ skulls accentuating his appearance, hair neatly combed and worn loose, just brushing his shoulders. It’s a lot closer to how he dressed at the theatre than how he does at Burke’s.

“Awful fancy-looking for a student,” Nemesis observes.

“If one is in possession of an inheritance, one may as well use it to buy fancy clothing.” Charles raises an eyebrow. “Don’t you agree?”

“I suppose I do,” Nemesis admits. “You’ve an inheritance? I know you talk poshly, but I had no idea you were actually rich. What are you doing living in this dorm, then?”

“I’m not... rich rich. I’ve got money to throw around, more than the average student, but it’s not like I’m making enough to sustain that lifestyle for more than a couple months.” He grins. “And it’s not like my mother can die again and leave me more money. I’m trying to save what I have, for when I actually need it.”

“That’s a shockingly reasonable approach,” Nemesis agrees. “Did your mother die recently, or...?”
“Goodness, no. She’s been dead since I was thirteen. I’ve been living off my inheritance ever since.” He frowns. “Of course, most of my inheritance is the family manor, but I can’t bear to sell it. I keep thinking I’ll go back someday, once I’m done with my schooling.”

“Family manor. That’s in Llygredyg, is it?”

“Up in Duskmoor, yeah. That’s where I met Dr. Burke, too. He teaches summer classes at the university there. Nostalgic for his hometown, he said, but I never got the sense that was the whole truth of it.”

“Duskmoor, eh?” It’s a remarkably rural area of Llygredyg, primarily marshy, in the very north - one of the few areas in the region covered by the Umbra. Baile Taibhse, the largest city in the region, is home to Llygredyg’s largest medical school. Surely, that’s why Burke had been there. “I suppose, when I think about it, I can’t imagine you being from anywhere else. Your accent doesn’t sound like it, though.”

“Nah, it doesn’t, does it?” Charles grins. “Wasn’t fashionable, at school, to sound like a local. I adapted.”

Nemesis nods. “My teacher did the same thing, he told me. Then...shall we be on our way?”

“I suppose we shall. Leave the cat here...er, she’s not got a name, has she?”

Nemesis glances around the room, gaze finally settling on a bottle of wine on a shelf. Even from across the room, he can read the large word on the label. “...her name’s Amontillado.”

Charles frowns. “You’re naming the cat after a type of wine?”

“Names don’t have to be meaningful. It’s as good a name as any. We can call her Monty.”

“Names aren’t obliged to be meaningful,” Charles agrees, “but how would you feel if you were named after an object? If your name was just a noun, and not even a proper one at that-”

“I regret to inform you,” Nemesis says earnestly, “that my name is Nemesis.”

“Ach...touche.”

“I think Monty’s cute, for what it matters,” Callie adds.

“Then Monty it is,” Charles agrees, defeated. “And dear Monty shall stay here for the time being, and not destroy my apartment, correct?”

Monty meows.

Monty left behind, the three make their way to the library. It’s massive, sprawling throughout the entire Institute District, sheer size making it difficult to ever leave its view. Because of its shape, the paths they are forced to take through the streets are exceptionally complex, but Charles seems to know them by heart.

The entrance to Catacumba looms above the street. The dark, curved monolith tapers to a beautiful facade, tall and dark, with spires stretching beyond human vision. Carved designs, surrounded by texts in various old languages. In the center, between two gargoyles, it reads:
It’s Charles who turns the knob on the ornate double-doors. Inside is a place Nemesis has heard plenty about but never visited personally - the entranceway, an unlit and completely featureless chamber of smooth obsidian.

Charles approaches the second door - well, ‘door’ is a bit of a stretch, really. There are no knobs, nor any cracks in the wall to be spoken of, nor anything at all to indicate that this is in fact the entrance, save for the excessively ornate carvings on it. Callie, seemingly observing this, glances at Nemesis as though waiting for an answer.

“To keep us common people out,” he explains, voice laced with contempt, though he supposes perhaps he’s being needlessly opaque with his wording. Indeed, Callie doesn’t seem to understand, and is about to ask a follow-up question when Charles clears his throat.

“It’s a perfectly useless measure, considering that one must sign in by the desk, anyway. If anything, it’s a show of power. Meant to inspire fear and insecurity in those who’ve not cultivated their knack - which is to say, the vast majority of those outside the Institute itself.”

Callie’s attention shifts to him. “Do people outside the institute not cultivate their knack? Why not?”

“It’s difficult with no direction. Those who try without a trained instructor tend to end up getting themselves horribly killed when something goes wrong.” He places a hand lightly on the featureless section of wall right in front of him. “There’s criminals and other groups, who pass down the knowledge within their membership, but otherwise the Institute is the only real way.”

“Horribly killed?” Callie asks. Nemesis can see the terror on her face at the thought. He’s shocked Art hasn’t covered this with her but, then again, perhaps he thought the concept was beneath him.

“Oh, yes,” Charles explains. “It happens all the time. Having absolute control over anything you can touch isn’t as easy as it sounds. It takes direction, focus, will, and precision. There’s plenty of stories of children with no control over their knack blowing holes in the ground or turning people’s flesh inside-out. Sometimes people who aren’t children, too, if they try to do something out of their abilities. An untrained artificer is an active risk to themself and everyone and everything around them. That’s why they teach you how to repress it in school, and, later, the Institute might teach you to actually use it.”

Unsurprisingly, this does nothing to comfort Callie. “Then is everything you do dangerous?”

“On some level, it is, but after spending most of my life studying the way to do it right, the risk is negligible. Of course, there always remains a sliver of a chance that I’ll accidentally detach my own arms and launch them in a random direction at terminal velocity,” he grins, “but that’s simply a possibility we have to reckon with, for the sake of practicing our art.”

She frowns. “And the only way to lessen this possibility is to find someone who can teach you, or go to school for it? Where does that leave people who can’t do either?”

“Well, Chancellor Cross’s theory of it is that they simply didn’t have the mental fortitude and natural skill to keep themselves in one piece. How...unfortunate.”

“What about those who can’t afford it?”

“Should’ve tried not being poor, is the leading school of thought. Best not to spend too long thinking about it, unless one enjoys being angry.” He glances at Nemesis. “...actually, even if one
does enjoy being angry. We’ve other priorities now.”

“You needn’t tell me twice,” replies Nemesis, who absolutely despises being angry. “Just...blow a hole in the door, or whatever it is you’re meant to do.”

“See, that’s how they figure out who is and isn’t an insider. That’d be the straightforward approach. The truth is that there are mechanisms buried under the door, and the only way to access them is through artifice. So one merely has to…”

He seems to focus intensely for a brief moment, before stepping back as a violet light weaves itself, like molten metal in a complex mold, through cracks Nemesis hadn’t been able to see a moment before. The light threatens to consume the room, and the last thing he sees before covering his eyes is Callie doing the same.

Finally, the light fades. Red and blue flares dance across Nemesis’s vision as he opens his eyes. Callie and Charles both seem fine, if disoriented.

“Bloody hate that,” Charles grumbles. “Gives me migraines. Don’t know why they think it’s necessary.”

The previously featureless space has opened up to reveal a large, rectangular opening in the wall. It’s through this that the three enter the library proper. Immediately, it’s cavernous, seeming far larger on the inside than it could feasibly have been on the outside. He can’t even see the ceiling, just an infinite blackness which seems to get blacker and blacker the longer he stares at it. An infinite night sky devoid of stars.

Beneath it is the far more sensible landscape of bookshelves upon bookshelves upon bookshelves, stretching out at odd and inconsistent angles into the void. He can’t see where they begin or end, nor make out any details of the seemingly never-ending tenebrous halls. Though the room is lit faintly with blue-tinted torches, and at a strange angle against the wall sits a long cherry-wood desk.

The librarian at the desk is a brown-skinned man, university-aged, with well-kept shoulder-length black hair and a single peridot earring dangling from his left ear. His workspace is disheveled, and he seems half-asleep, though he sits up when he sees Charles out of the corner of his vision.

“Dreadful!” He exclaims, voice high and with tangible Al-Mushrite accent. “...and company. Welcome.”

“These are some acquaintances of mine, Dagher,” Charles says. “We’ll just need…” He glances at Nemesis, realizing that he doesn’t, in fact, know what Nemesis came here for.

“Er, yes.” Nemesis searches his pockets for the paper where Theory wrote down the title of the book she needed and hands it to Dagher, who looks at it curiously.

“Can’t imagine what someone outside of the Institute would need with something like this,” he concludes, after a minute or so of scrutinizing. “If Dreadful’s willing to vouch for you, I’m willing to do my job. I definitely think I’ve got a book that can help with your translation. Really comprehensive guide to pre-Al-Mushrite etymologies. Problem is, there’s only one copy we know of, and it’s thoroughly checked out. Same person got it who got our copy of your book, actually.”

“It...it is?” He tries to conceal his shock. “So who was it that checked out the other copy?”

He wags his finger. “Now, now. I can’t tell you. Library policy. What I can tell you is you’re a lucky guy to have stumbled onto it. Everyone wanted a copy of that book, but we only one person
managed to actually get their hands on one - and they were lucky enough to get the other book to help with translation as well. I’ll tell you the same thing I told the others - you can try your luck with Catacumba if you need something similar.”

“We may as well,” Charles says, audibly sighing.

“Right, then.” He reaches underneath the desk, pulling out an object the size of a fist and handing it to Charles. “Feel free to take one of the spare torches from the rack.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nemesis says, going to do precisely that. The torches are sleek creations, with thin and elegant steel handles.

“No need for the formalities. Just call me Mustafa,” he insists, smiling. “Best of luck. May Catacumba favor you today.”

“...what does any of that mean?” Callie asks, the moment they’re out of earshot. “Is that guy the librarian?”

“He’s a librarian. Just a student who works here part-time for extra credit,” Charles says. “He’s a nice guy, and his specialty is spectro-cartography. Stuff like this.”

He holds up the object in his hand - a faintly glowing spool of alabaster thread. A line of it spreads out behind them, all the way back to the desk.

“...what in the stars?” Nemesis finds himself asking.

“Catacumba is the living amalgam of all human knowledge. Inexplicably, things end up here, no matter what. Sometimes, it’ll show you what you need, but you’ll wander its halls forever. The spectro-cartographers tried to map it, but it’s literally endless. The closest we can do is tap into its frequencies using things like this - Dr. Ariadne’s Guiding Filaments - that direct us towards the place from where we came.”

“Catacumba is alive?” Callie asks.

“That’s the leading theory. At least, that’s how we rationalize it. Don’t worry - normally it’ll show people what they need. I don’t think it’s malevolent.”

“But it won’t show them the exit…?” She frowns. “Are you sure this isn’t dangerous?”

“Oh, it is.” He chuckles. “No risk, no reward.”

“I don’t like that…” she admits, grabbing Nemesis’s arm. He allows it. Surely, in her position, he would be scared too. Standing amidst Catacumba’s towering bookshelves feels like standing in the gaping maw of a beast older than time.

“Don’t worry,” Charles reassures them. “These filaments are great. They’ll show you the way out, basically no matter what. They don’t even require any input. Even Nemesis would be able to use them.”

“How considerate of them,” Nemesis says dryly. “So this place is alive, and we’ll find what we need if it wants us to?”

“Assumedly. So let’s hope it’s on our side. Keep an eye on the time, though,” Charles instructs him. “You’ll lose track of it quick down here. It feels like it progresses at whatever rate Catacumba likes. I’ve been down here for weeks at a time before without noticing.”
Nemesis obediently looks at his watch. They’ve only been in the library for a couple of minutes, though if Charles is to be believed that fact is subject to rapid and unpredictable change. The three press onwards.

It only takes a short time for the light of the torch to feel unsuitable, so Nemesis hands it over to Callie and employs his own flashlight, and Charles enchants the buttons of his coat to radiate a small aura of purple-tinged light as well.

As they make their way in further, the bookshelves seem to change, progressively morphing until they look destroyed, burnt, ancient books tumbling out onto the floor, pages barely clinging to the binding. Nemesis draws his hand across one of the shelves, and it comes back covered in ash.

“Rather old-looking,” Charles observes. “A good sign, considering the age of the volume we’re looking for.”

“I don’t like it here,” Callie admits, voice barely above a whisper. “I really don’t like it here. It feels so old and knowing. I feel like I’m going to offend it somehow.”

“I doubt it,” Nemesis reassures her, but he, too, feels as though he just might vanish entirely into the inky blackness. He looks down at his feet, just to make sure that they’re still attached to him.
His timing is impeccable, it seems, because just within stepping-on range is a leather object the size of his hand. He bends over to pick it up, frowning. “What’s this, then?”

“I don’t know,” Charles asks. “What is it?”

“Wallet, looks like.” Nemesis frowns. Is this another of the library’s decisions? Was he meant to find this?

It makes him feel like a criminal, but he simply can’t help himself from opening it. The wallet is made of worn navy blue leather, and seems to be from a brand which is reputable but not quite the highest end, an amount cheaper than Nemesis would normally buy himself.

Goodness, thinking that makes him feel rich. He hates that.

Inside is something to the effect of two hundred crowns. It’s a lot to simply keep in one’s wallet. His hands twitch, making to pocket the cash, but he forces himself to relax. He’s rich, far too rich to benefit from such a paltry amount of change. Better to be magnanimous, track down the owner, and return it.

After all, there are things in this wallet far more valuable than money. He notices what look like rolled-up identification papers and an Institute badge. This wallet belongs to someone important.

Charles peers over his shoulder. “Not that I’m about to encourage snooping in other people’s wallets, but whose badge is that?”

Nemesis turns it over, squinting and focusing in order to read the faintly embossed text in the dim light of the library. “Genevieve…Merritt, I think it says. Haven’t the foggiest who that is, never heard the name before.”

“Good stars, Ginny Merritt?” Charles’s eyes widen. “That’s not good. She’s Chancellors Cross’s clerk, and if she’s in town, that means the Chancellor is too.”

“And that’s…” Nemesis wagers a guess. “…bad news, then?”

“Oh, the worst. She’s in charge of the Institute. Anything goes off-kilter, she’s the one who sorts it out, but she’d not be here without a reason. That means…something is happening.”

Nemesis frowns. “Well, she’s an authority, so I reckon it’s better if she doesn’t know I exist. Better safe than sorry…but I’d like to return this to its proper owner, despite that.”

“If you insist,” Charles concedes, continuing on into the library. Callie and Nemesis follow him quickly. After all, he’s the one with the Filaments, and they don’t want to be too far from the precious light he’s emitting.

Longer and longer, the tunnels stretch on. The burnt wood slowly rebuilds itself into towering marble shelves, upon which rows and rows of scrolls are shelved in neat lines, like the honeycomb structure of a beehive, orderly and pristine. And it’s in these pristine sections that they encounter their first company.
The more immediately noticeable of them is a man. In one word, he could be described as large - tall (if Nemesis had to guess, taller than even Burke), a little bit wider than average, dressed in a well-tailored slate blue waistcoat over a pinstriped shirt and with a monocle perched above his round nose. His hair is a shocking gray, and he has a short, well-groomed beard and moustache in this same color. Between the expensive look of his clothes and his size, he’s more than a little imposing.

His companion’s head barely reaches his chest. She’s a young woman, looking only a little older than Charles, with loose curls of unnaturally bright orange reaching to around her shoulders, pinned back neatly. Her clothing is simple, a pinstriped button-up and blue sweater over a brown skirt reaching just below the knees, and of a notably lower quality than the man’s. She’s not poor, but she’s not rich, either.

The two, alerted by the light, immediately notice the newcomers. They focus their eyes - blue, for the man, and gray, for the woman - on the three of them. Though the woman seems curious, the man seems as though he might hate them. Nemesis knows it’s a little soon to come to this conclusion, but he feels as if perhaps this man hates everyone.

It’s the man who speaks first. “Those lights are hideously bright, boy. Do you want to anger Catacumba?”

“No, sir. Sorry.” Charles seems awfully scared as he extinguishes the light of his buttons, and Nemesis switches off his flashlight for good measure.

The man, seemingly satisfied, nods gruffly. This seems to be all he has to say.

Charles is the one who next speaks up. “...might I inquire as to...if either of you might have...misplaced a wallet...somewhere in these indefinite halls?”
The man scoffs. “Misplaced a wallet? Goodness, no. What sort do you take us for?” His accent is extremely stuffy and posh, Nemesis notices. He’s met precious few people with that sort of accent - he can count the number on one hand with fingers to spare, and he’s never encountered any of them more than briefly. The chancellors of universities in Llygredyg, primarily.

The Rexish dialect of Acerbic is perhaps the rarest of all the many. The Queen’s Acerbic, they call it. It’s spoken exclusively by those who are born or make their way through merit into the academic elite of the government or the Institute. A symbol of extreme status, it develops over years of associating with the highest echelons of society and shunning those who aren’t.

Something off-kilter, certainly. A minimum of two people associated closely with Rex are here, in this library. At least one of them is directly in front of Nemesis, perhaps moments away from questioning what he’s doing here. It’s said powerful artificers can see the knack coming off people in waves. That must be just an urban legend, because if it isn’t, this man knows Nemesis is an impostor.

He feels the breath freeze in his throat. His limbs feel heavy and sluggish, an automaton of lead buried in slowly hardening resin. His heart threatens to burst, eyes locked open. He may be alive, but there’s the distinct sensation of rigor mortis.

“Breathe, lad. Come on, just breathe. Fear draws enemies like sharks to water. Fear proves that you don’t belong. Confidence means you do, whether or not you should.”

The memory washes over him like rain over a parched desert. A fond reminder that he’s not just doing this for himself.

He breathes.

And he remembers where he is, what’s happening. The girl is looking through her pockets - he can see realization dawn on her face as she turns to Charles.

“I might’ve, uh, actually lost mine,” she admits sheepishly, looking away from the man, whose face carries a look of deep disappointment. Her accent, he notices with relief, is a rural Acerbian one, far from anything that could be associated with the Queen.

“Well,” Nemesis offers, “We found one earlier, which is why we asked.” He holds it out to her, and her eyes widen.

“Wow, that really is my wallet! I wonder when I could have dropped this…” Genevieve Merritt pockets it, frowning. “Thank you for finding it for me.”

“It was in the burnt section a ways back,” Nemesis offers.

“Burnt section?” She frowns more, glancing at her companion, who shakes his head. “We haven’t seen anything burnt.”

“Just Catacumba up to its ways again, I reckon,” Charles says. “Good thing it decided to be merciful and let us stumble upon it.”

The man nods. “Well, thank you for the assistance. What might your name be?”

“Charles Dreadful,” he immediately provides. “Aleister Burke’s teacher’s assistant.”

“And…” he gestures towards Nemesis and Callie. “...these two?”
“I’m Jones. She’s Burns,” he says plainly. “We’re both relatively new. Dreadful is helping us find a book, since it’s our first time here.” Not technically a lie, but close to it. The deception is hideous, repulsive, and he feels a disgusting sensation in his chest. The deception is hideous but it’s necessary. Nothing more useless than a dead private investigator.

The man’s expression becomes almost sympathetic. “I see. Right, you sound out-of-town. Very kind of Dreadful here to help you, then. I’ll put in a word with the dean.”

“That’s not necessary,” Charles mutters sheepishly, though Nemesis can tell it’s more out of an obligational humility than genuine aversion to the thought. To him, the idea of refusing seems quite rude, but then again, he doesn’t have that same upbringing. Perhaps he’s just an egotist, and the idea of downplaying his own accomplishments is painful to so much as consider.

“Nonsense,” the man says, and leaves it at that.

Ginny looks curiously at Nemesis. “I love your hair, by the way. Where do you get it done?”

“Er-”

He’s saved from having to admit that he cuts his own hair in the bathroom sink by the man, who shakes his head. “Don’t waste this poor boy’s time, Genevieve.”

“Sorry, sir.” She frowns, glancing at Nemesis. “Thank you, though. I hope you find the book you’re looking for.”

“You as well,” Nemesis says back. “May Catacumba favor you,” he adds, hoping he remembered Mustafa Dagher’s words correctly.

Clearly, he did, because Ginny nods in response. The three of them make their way off. Just before they make it out of earshot, he can hear the two begin to speak.

“That was irresponsible,” the man says. “Chancellor Cross will be disappointed.”

“I’m sorry, Lord Guildenstern…” comes the dejected response.

The moment they’re fully out of earshot, Charles redoes the enchantment on his buttons. The light is welcome in the dark corridors.

“Did you hear that, Jones?”

“Hear what?”

“The name she said.”

“Lord Guildenstern?” Callie asks.


“Bloody stars,” Nemesis mutters. “Next we’ll run into the chancellor herself.”

“Don’t say that or it’ll actually happen,” Charles reprimands him.

But it isn’t the chancellor they encounter. Instead, the hallway opens up, into a wide and short tunnel lined with ancient-looking bricks. Callie whimpers, alarmed, as she nearly trips over-

“Looks like,” Charles mutters, tense. “This looks like some sort of proper catacombs. No idea how that got here.”

“I have no idea how anything got here,” Callie mutters.

And then, faintly, they hear it - an even, calm humming. Charles’s eyes widen in shock.

“Recognize it?” Nemesis asks.

To his surprise, Charles nods. “That’s...one of Professor Burke’s favorite songs. He always hums it when he’s working. Do you think…?”

“Worth a try, I reckon,” Nemesis says, pressing onwards.

Charles and Callie follow shortly behind him, and sure enough, within the next minute he comes upon a large room of bookshelves, arranged haphazardly, and at the end of one stands Aleister Burke, arms full of tomes, flipping carefully through another one held in his hand.

When he sees the three, he looks pleasantly surprised. Not caught off-guard. Almost as if he’d had a feeling they’d be here. “Why, Charles...what brings you here?”


Burke frowns, glancing at Nemesis. “You brought him here? That doesn’t seem safe, he doesn’t even have the knack, what if—”

“We already stumbled upon the vice-chancellor,” Nemesis says, “so I think all possible incoming disaster has been met head-on and mitigated. Er...knock on wood.”

“You ran into the what?” There it is - the familiar look of astonishment. “He’s here? In Omen? In the library? Why?”

“Didn’t exactly stop to ask him. He was looking for something, I reckon, just like everyone else here is. He was with, er...that Merritt girl, too.”

Burke pinches the bridge of his nose. “Oh, that isn’t good. If all three of them is there that means something is happening, and if I’m not privy to it that means it’s probably either society business, or...” he shudders. “...something political.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Charles says. “Wonder if it’s got to do with the murder at the Obscura? Fitzroy’s well-connected and important to the ecosystem around here, so maybe they’re interested in someone dying under mysterious circumstances near him.”

“No, that shouldn’t be it. He’s connected but not to the Institute, and even if they wanted to look into it, all three of them would be overkill. One would have more than sufficed. Something else is at foot here.”

Charles sighs. “That’s not at all comforting. Do you think we need to be worried about it?”

“Potentially.” Burke looks directly at Nemesis. “Perhaps Nemesis moreso than either of us. Private investigators tend to get more work when strange things happen.”

“And why would that worry me?” He asks. “More money, right?”
“More money. More opportunities for things to go wrong, too. I’d be careful were I you, Nemesis.” He sighs. “So you’re here to find a book, are you? I assume it’s for a case, if you’re searching here.”

“Actually, Theory wanted it. But it’s not... not for a case?” He sighs. “I don’t understand fully, but it’s for translating another volume she’s gotten her hands on.”

Burke frowns. “She needs a book to translate another book? Would you be able to tell me which?”

Nemesis shows him Theory’s note, and his eyes widen a little. “...ah. Aye, that’s something a little harder to find. Any luck so far?”

Nemesis shakes his head. “Not in the least. You can’t help, then?”

“I wish I could.”

“Dagher mentioned that someone’s found a copy already,” Charles adds. “So they’re out there, and we’ve simply been out of luck. Perhaps there’s only one copy to be found.”

“Do you think we could find out who checked out the first copy?”

“Wouldn’t it have been Fitzroy?” Callie asks.

“I don’t think so. After all, if he had both books, I think he would have kept them together. I doubt he’s fluent in pre-Al-Mushrite.”

“I don’t think anyone is,” Burke agrees. “So you need this book to translate a book you stole from Fitzroy? From pre-Al-Mushrite?”

Nemesis nods.

“It’s unlikely you’ll find another copy of something that old. And they don’t reveal who’s checked out what, unless it’s an emergency or someone important is asking. More important than me.”

“I see. We’ll keep looking then, I suppose. No harm in it.”

“You should,” Burke agrees. “I don’t think I need to tell you to never give up looking for answers, because I’m sure Arthur has countless times already. And yet, I’m doing it regardless. Never stop searching for the truth, Nemesis.”

“That’s, er...kind of you.”

“And I wouldn’t get too dejected, were I you.” He smiles. “After all, here I was, searching for some remarkably dry treatises on the preservation of the Animus written decades ago by a spectacularly self-important researcher, and what do I stumble upon? A letter from my husband, written to me, almost forty years ago. Not what I came here for, and yet it’s probably what I needed. Catacumba will provide.”

“I didn’t know you had a husband,” Callie remarks.

“I certainly did,” he says, and his smile is visibly strained. “The past is in the past, however. I’m merely thrilled to be able to read his writing again.”

“Did he leave you?” Callie asks. Of course, she wouldn’t know that she’s being rude right now. Nemesis will have to have that conversation with her when they get home.
Instead, he elects to do something far ruder. “Of course not. His husband died.”

Burke’s grimace grows. “Very...astute, Nemesis. But that is not the mystery you are trying to solve right now.”

“That your polite way of telling me to fuck off?”

“Not quite.” Burke sighs. “Actually, I’d like to see you at the office later. I have...someone to direct you to. I think you’ll find her helpful.”

“Thank you,” Nemesis says. “And I hope you find what you were here for to begin with.”

“I doubt it,” Burke says ruefully. “May you find what you seek, though. I’ll see you at my office.”

The three leave him behind, pressing on further into the library. The hallways twist and turn, almost dizzying, changing at an alarming rate. They enter a section which seems to be the roots of a massive tree, easier taller than the building supposedly is. Further on, an ancient-looking hall, the walls and shelves rotting before Nemesis’s very eyes. Finally, a room with books haphazardly tossed on the floor. Nemesis struggles to wade through them. It feels as though one could drown in them, if they weren’t careful.

He’s about to step out into a new section - shadowy long rows of bookshelves - when he hears the sound of frantic book-throwing. He turns around to see Callie rifling through the stacks, before finally pulling out a small, messy, damaged-looking book, hand-bound with a needle and thread from sheets of letter-paper. She slowly leafs through it, then stands up.

“Let’s go,” she says. “I’ll explain later, but I need you to check this out for me, Mr. Dreadful.”

“If you say so,” Charles agrees, yanking his ankle out of the pile of books it’s sunk into.

They continue on, and the library darkens beyond what Nemesis thought was possible. It’s as if they’re walking through the night itself, dark and humid, and anything could be in that darkness. Anything at all. Lurking just behind him, just out of reach of his flashlight and Callie’s torch and the weak light coming from Charles.

Moving through the darkness feels almost like moving through silk - there’s something there, something light and soft. It feels as though all structure has been removed from the surroundings. It’s unsteady. He has to take care to make sure each of his footsteps lands on the floor, careful. It’s like swimming in air. Time passes at an uncertain and inconsistent pace.

And the silence, the silence is the worst part, nothing to be heard but the sounds of their feet on the floor, regular and quiet. None of them say anything. Out of reverence for Catacumba? Out of fear? Out of some unspoken competitive urge, where the first one to crack and admit they’re scared loses?

The silence is the worst part. In the silence, one can hear things. In the silence, Nemesis can hear his heart beating, irregular. He can hear a distant rustling of pages. He can hear knives in the dark, aimed at his back, surely, because where else would they be aimed? He can hear the growls of an ancient beast, hungry and waiting. All of this is real and all of it is the inventions of a frantic, deprived mind. He thinks, for a moment, he can feel the steel on his throat, feel the breath on his face.

Silence. None of them give in. And more darkness. If Catacumba truly is alive, then it itself is the beast, ready to strike where none of them can see it. An ancient predator, beyond human imagination.
The blood is rushing through his ears. He can hear it. His eyes no longer seem to process the light.

And then, as gradually as they entered the darkness, they leave it. They emerge into rows of bookcases, and Charles frowns.

“It’s never done this before,” he says, “but it looks like we’re back near the exit again.”

“Are you sure we’re actually back at the exit? Maybe we’re just somewhere that looks a lot like the exit.” Callie sounds distinctly unsettled, definitely shaken by the darkness. So it wasn’t all in Nemesis’s head. He wasn’t the only one who was scared.

“We’re wherever Catacumba wants us to be, I reckon,” Nemesis says. He’s aware it’s not a particularly comforting answer. “No choice but to press on and hope it’s also somewhere we want to be, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” Charles agrees. “Shame you’re knackless. You’ve got just the right outlook to be an artificer.”

Nemesis scoffs. “You mean a willingness to accept that I’m powerless compared to what surrounds me and there’s nothing I can do about it? Because I don’t actually have that, normally.”

“I suppose that’s considered a positive, generally.” He frowns. “What I actually meant was your adaptability. You roll with the punches. The forces of the universe can’t intimidate you or make you give up.”

“Oh, come on, it’s a bloody library, Dreadful. Forces of the universe... please.” He makes his way farther down the hallway. Progressively lighter and lighter, bookshelves sloping downwards, getting shorter, inch by inch. Changing, slowly, from a dark oak to a lighter mahogany. He thinks to himself that Charles just may be right. This seems like the entrance.

Callie follows closely behind him. Charles does as well, despite clearly disapproving of Nemesis’s attitude. The three find their through the bookshelves, until, finally, the torch-lit passages lead them to a clearing.

On one side, the bookshelf continues, seeming to stretch on into infinity. On the other, there’s a gap, and where that gap is, there’s a set of double-doors. Large, cherry, elegantly carved, with a massive set of silver handles. On them, a neat plaque reads:

RECORDS

Nemesis looks curiously at it. “Ah, stars. Catacumba, you sly dog, you shouldn’t have.”

“It’s a records room,” Charles observes quietly. “Please tell me you’re not going to go in there. That’s a crime, Jones.”

“Well,” Nemesis proclaims, “It appears that Catacumba itself wants me to commit crimes! How fortunate for me, and my infinite criminal desires.”

“This is a crime?!” Callie asks, sounding alarmed, but Nemesis’s hand is already on the doorknob. He’s prepared to dramatically fling it open, only to find -

Well, of course, it would be locked.

“Right. Okay.” Charles smiles. “It’s locked. We can’t go in there. Such a shame, but we’ll simply have to try elsewhere.”
“Oh, ye of little faith.” Nemesis is already down on one knee, reaching for the spot of his coat’s lining, near the center of the bottom left side, where he knows his lockpicks are concealed. A careful pull on the thread, and his stitching unravels. Charles watches in rapt horror as he turns his attention to the lock.

It’s a simple pin tumbler lock, he can tell. He inserts the tension wrench, gently holding it to the side with one hand. For such an important lock, it’s not very difficult to pick. It only takes him around half a minute before he feels a satisfying click.

“...stars,” Charles says, breathless. “You’ve just picked one of the Institute’s locks. Do you know how much trouble you’ll be in if anyone finds out?!”

Nemesis smirks. “Good thing no one will find out...unless you tell, of course. But then you’d be implicating yourself, wouldn’t you? You’re the one who brought me here, despite me not being connected to the Institute.”

Charles frowns. “I’m not about to turn you in. I’m just...concerned for your safety.”

“Well, I’d just...already...” Nemesis says, sounding a little more chipper than he feels, “I actually rather pleasant. Just a nice stroll through an ancient, possibly sentient records room. I feel calm already.”

“I feel as if I’ve already been arrested,” Charles mumbles, lagging a few strides behind Nemesis. “This is a bad idea, Jones. A really bad bleeding idea.”

“You were welcome to wait outside, you know.”

“And let you get bloody killed? No thank you.”
Callie is visibly struggling to keep up with Nemesis, practically running. He feels a momentary rush of pity for her and her far shorter legs, but just when he’s about to say something snide, he hears the sound of the door opening.

Immediately, he grabs Callie and rushes into the nearest shelf. He has no way of knowing if Charles made it as well. All he can do is press his back to the shelf, feeling his heart beating fast and hard. Can she hear it, too? He can’t imagine she can’t. And yet he can’t hear anything from her. Is he the scared one, between the two of them? Is he weak?

He hears voices, behind them. To his alarm, he recognizes Horatio Guildenstern. “It’s here, you said? I must say, this room is utterly massive. However do you keep it organized?”

“The answer is...heh, we don’t?” That’s Mustafa Dagher. Even when speaking to the vice-chancellor, he sounds easygoing and relaxed. “I mean, it’s all Catacumba, even here. By the way, these are organized chronologically, one row to a year, so it’s going to take us an eternity to get there.”


“I can carry you if it’s that bad,” Dagher offers. Nemesis can hear the chuckle in his voice.

“No you can’t,” Guildenstern cuts in immediately.

“No I can’t,” he agrees.

Nemesis inches over to the edge of the shelf, careful not to make any noise. It’s quite long, but not impossibly so, and it feels as though he makes it to the end a good bit sooner than he should have based on how long it looked. Is his perception of space warped horribly, or is Catacumba helping him? No time to mull that over. Later, he’ll consider just how superstitious he is.

He peers back into the previous row. Charles is there, staring at him.

He gestures Callie towards him, placing a finger over his lips. “Hide behind the ends of the bookshelves here. I’ll be back in a moment,” he whispers.

“What are you-” Charles starts, but Nemesis has already gently nudged Callie towards him and left.

He runs along the shelves, silent. It’s a skill he’s picked up over the years, moving without being noticed, and moving fast. One wouldn’t expect it, generally, from someone of his visual flashiness, but he knows how to be quiet, unnoticed, out of sight and out of mind. It’s why he favors shoes without the metal heels which are so fashionable. Worse for kicking with, and they don’t make that intimidating clacking noise which people love, but which would be a dead giveaway. Charles’s shoes are like that. That’s an issue.

It’s not even that fashionable anymore. If everyone in the room is clacking, the individual noise becomes obscured. What’s even the point anymore? Better to take the utility.

The row he hid in was for the year 341. That means he has a little under 400 rows to clear before the Institute trio, who he can hear talking faintly a fair bit back. He can hear his blood rushing through his ears.

Rows upon rows. It’s difficult to pay any sort of attention to the numbers when he’s running this fast. 553. 554. Has he passed 200 rows already? It doesn’t feel like it - 559. 560. 653. 563? Can’t be, can it? 570 - oh, stars.
It feels far too fast, but in a flurry of careful footsteps and numbers that rush by far too fast, he arrives at row 713. It’s long, but he gets to work looking through the drawers. It’s recent, and the book title is in Al-Mushrite - that narrows it down quite a bit, but that still leaves him with far too much material to sort through. Even if he had years, he doesn’t think he could read everything in this row alone.

He hears the voices, closer by far than they should be. Is Catacumba helping them, too? Is this some sort of cruel joke? His searching becomes more frantic, only slowed by the fact that he must still be quiet, impossibly quiet. They can’t hear anything.

Finally, he sees it, at the very back of a cabinet labeled with the date of around a week ago. He grabs the folder labeled with the book’s name in its entirety, not bothering to read it before shutting the cabinet gingerly and rushing back.

It couldn’t have been any sooner. It’s only about fifty rows away when he pauses, hidden by the ends of the shelves, and listens as the three walk past him. After that, he rushes back to Charles and Callie, who both look bewildered.

“How do we get out of here?” Callie asks, barely audible. “They’ll hear if we open the door.”

“I have an idea, I think,” Charles says. “You’ll probably need to carry me back to the office, though. Also, you’re never allowed to ask me for anything ever again.”

“...alright,” Nemesis agrees, and Charles rolls up his sleeves.

He drops to one knee, and Nemesis can see a faint glow from beneath his bandages, in a pattern quite similar to what he remembers the brands looking like. So they are a manifestation, after all. On the floor, a swirling, roiling mass of shadows appears, expanding to around a meter in diameter.

He gestures to Nemesis and Callie. “You two first.”

“But-” Callie objects, but Nemesis grabs her by the arm and pulls both of them in.

Darkness. Predictably, darkness envelops them. A liquidy, cool darkness, and in it he seems formless, unable to feel any of his limbs. It’s as if he and the darkness are one, merged into one shapeless mass.

Time stops. He’s not sure how long for, but it feels like forever, floating in his surroundings. Becoming his surroundings. Unable to feel, or see, or touch. He feels as if he’s being dispersed in the waves of darkness, like sugar dissolving in warm water. It’s almost relaxing, and, for a moment, he feels as though he might be content to stay here forever.

Then the alarm washes over him. If he stays here forever, he’s broken his promise. And if Callie is there with him, he can’t sense her.

Alarm flashes through him. Where is she? She must be somewhere in the darkness. Is that just wishful thinking? Has she been consumed?

He doesn’t have arms, but he finds himself reaching out, desperately searching for her. And somehow, he feels her, immaterial and fluid, and he tries to pull her towards him, keep her from falling apart more than she already has.
He feels an arm on his shoulder, and the darkness vanishes.

He’s standing by the desk at the entrance to the library. One of his arms is firmly on Callie’s shoulders, fingers digging into her arm in a way he can only imagine is painful. Charles is collapsed onto his shoulder, breathing heavily, gripping his arm equally painfully.

It takes Nemesis a moment to remember how to use his limbs, taking a shaky step forward. His leg lands at the wrong angle and his knee gives out on him - he barely manages to steady himself on the desk.

Charles sighs. “...sorry. I’d’ve warned you, but...no time, I figured.”

“What in the stars?” Nemesis mutters.

“I’ll explain, just…” Carefully, Charles holds out his arm, dropping the Filament onto the desk. Leaving it behind. It can’t be an acceptable thing to take with him. Nemesis supposes that would be like stealing from Catacumba - and not the acceptable thing to steal, information. “Let’s go. Please.”

Nemesis nods, attempting to relearn to walk as he makes his way towards the door. Charles is draped over his shoulder. Callie doesn’t follow them, staring blankly ahead of her, as though her brain has been shut off.

“...we have to take her with us,” Charles says insistently, as though Nemesis isn’t aware of that.

He sighs. There’s really only one way to get her out of here, and he’s not sure if he’s physically capable of it in his current state. Bracing himself as best he can, he lifts her arm over his shoulder, buckling under the weight. She’s far heavier than he expected. Even in his normal state, he’s not sure he’d be able to carry her easily. Like this, it’s downright impossible.

He feels Charles let go of his shoulder, stumble to his other side, and the weight lessens. The two look straight into each other’s eyes. Charles looks haggard, exhausted and disheveled, hair damp with sweat. Whatever he did back there, it took a lot out of him. Charles is still a student, barely out of his teenage years. Nemesis finds himself deeply worried.

Despite the alarming appearance, though, Charles’s eyes are filled with determination. “We’ve got to get her out of here, Jones. Come on. Don’t just stand there like an idiot.”

“I’m not,” he replies, though his heart isn’t particularly in it. He was standing there like an idiot, that’s inarguable. All he can do now is stop doing that, get up, move.

And so he does. He and Charles make their way out of the Catacumba libraries. The elaborate entrance opens into a simple door - thank goodness. If Charles was forced to use more artifice to get them out of here, they just might be trapped in the library forever. Instead, they leave, flanked by the two walls of the entranceway, and exit out into the street.

“Bloody stars,” Nemesis says, as soon as they’re out of earshot of the library. Of course, the building is still visible, looming over them even with only a fraction of its true mass visible. Nemesis feels its presence vividly in the quiet, gloomy side-streets. He doesn’t imagine he’ll ever forget its presence, after today.

By this point, he’s regained enough sensation in his legs that he can, at the very least, support his own weight fairly comfortably. He shifts so that he’s carrying Callie more properly, letting Charles unsteadily lean on him as they continue their walk.
“Might I ask,” he finally says, shocked at how quiet his own voice is. At some point in the ordeal, it seems he’s lost his ability to regulate the volume of his own speech, or perhaps his vocal chords have simply forgotten how to function. No matter how he tries, anything he attempts to say comes out as a hoarse whisper. “What was that? What did you do? Why do I feel like a shoddily-constructed marionette?”

“Interesting metaphor,” Charles says. “Haven’t heard that one before. Usually I hear people say they feel...like they lack internal structure.”

“Aye, that too. But what was that?”

“It was...probably a bad idea, but it was the only thing I could think of. You aren’t...the only one who does stupid things on impulse, Nemesis Jones.” His voice is slow and labored. “Umbraporting...travel through darknesses. It’s something highly experimental that Dr. Burke worked on. It’s not...safe, or reliable. It tends to almost disperse a person’s...essence within the darkness, and temporary disembodiment leaves lasting effects on people. Thankfully, it’s not killed anyone yet, but it’s caused...amnesia, long-term discombobulation, and general unsettlement. It’s a last resort. One I probably shouldn’t have used.”

“No point in thinking about that at this point. Just...do you think Callie’s going to be okay?”

Just as he says that, Callie stirs, just barely.

“With time, probably. What I’m more worried about…” Charles sighs, “Is that I gave them my real name, and certainly they’ll start to suspect something when they notice records are missing.”

“There’s no reason they should,” Nemesis reassures him. “After all, that records room was massive. It’d be like noticing one specific hair missing from your head. It won’t happen.”

“I hope so, but I don’t think this is a particularly good subject to be optimistic about.”

“Maybe so,” Nemesis agrees.

They make their way back to Burke’s, finally. Nemesis has no free hands to open the door with, so instead he knocks by kicking it weakly. Thankfully, it doesn’t take Burke long to open the door, immediately looking horrified at the state they’re in.

“Get inside, goodness, what happened to you?” he asks. “You look like you’ve all just run a marathon.”

They enter. Charles immediately makes his way to one of the couches in the lounge and allows himself to fall onto it unceremoniously. Nemesis carefully places Callie onto an armchair, and takes another chair for himself.

Burke remains standing, looking between the three of them with visible concern. “Nemesis, since you seem to be the most conscious between the three of you, I’ll leave it to you to explain what happened.”

“I’m not your student,” he mutters.

“You aren’t,” he agrees. “But my student appears to be just barely clinging to consciousness, so I’d like to ask you to help me. Would you like some tea, while you do?”

Despite his words, Nemesis thinks Burke is acting rather like a teacher. “Nah, absolutely don’t feel like getting poisoned today.”
“Suit yourself.” Burke shrugs. “I can’t stop you from thinking I’m some sort of mad poisoner, I suppose. Would it make you more or less suspicious if I told you Arthur would vouch for me if he was present?”

“More suspicious. Feels like you’re trying to leverage him against me. I don’t even know what your relationship with him was. You could barely know him at all. You could’ve betrayed him. I’ve no way of knowing, with him not around.”

Burke sighs heavily. Nemesis feels this was probably the answer he expected. “Arthur was a student of mine, back when he was studying medicine. We were colleagues in the early era of the Correspondents’ League. Our relationship was always cordial and professional. I was certainly never close to him, like I was to some of my other students.”

Nemesis glances at Charles, in all his formal clothing, passed out in the lounge. It had been almost like he’d been relieved to be able to finally let go of his consciousness and rest. He’d felt safe enough to do that here, in Burke’s office. “...like Charles?”

“Like Charles, yes. But I’ve taught thousands of students, in my time. I don’t remember the vast majority of their names at this point.”

“That just means you’re old,” Nemesis mutters. It prompts a light chuckle from Burke. “Thousands of students, really? Is there a pattern to which ones you remember and which ones you don’t?”

“There is.” What little amusement there was drops off of Burke’s face, replaced by an almost guilty stare. “It may sound horrible, but I don’t tend to remember students who try their best, complete assignments diligently, and score high on all their exams. The students who go out of their way to impress me never keep my attention. It’s troubled students who stick in my mind. The cleverer sort, who behave more erratically. Sadder. People like you, in fact.”

Nemesis frowns. “You’re not like any teacher I’ve known, then.”

“I am. Those people are the ones that stick in everyone’s heads. It’s just not generally as positive an impression as it is for me.” He smiles ruefully. “People do not especially tend to go into teaching for their empathy.”

“No, they don’t,” Nemesis agrees. “I suppose Charles is lucky you seem to be the exception, then?”

“I hope so.”

The two fall into silence for a moment. Nemesis sighs. “...your husband. He’s the man in the picture on the wall, isn’t he?”

Burke nods. “I’m not sure why you care so much. Yes, that’s him. Henry. My first and only love.”

“I care so much because you’ve been asking me about Mr. Jones. Only fair I bring up someone close to you, too.” Somehow, there’s no satisfaction from it. For once, revenge feels far from sweet. “He’s why you got interested in necromancy, is he?”

Burke chuckles lightly. It’s the last response Nemesis expected. “Common misconception. While I’d love to bring him back, he was still alive when I began my forays into the field. We were married for almost ten years when it happened.”

“My condolences.” And Nemesis is honest, because he realizes how heavy the subject truly is. Even with Arthur Jones’s mere absence, he’s been fraying at the seams. If he were to lose Elias, he
isn’t sure how he would function.

Except that he is losing Elias, and if there’s something he can do to prevent it, it’s yet to present itself. He feels tears welling up in his eyes, abrupt and difficult to hold back. It’s a good thing he has so much practice keeping his emotions in. The last thing he wants to do is cry in front of Burke.

“Thank you,” Burke says, voice soft. “I would say the same to you, but I have faith that you’ll find him. And I might have something that’s of interest to you on the topic, too.”

Immediately, Nemesis sits up, attention drawn despite himself. It’s been so long since he’s had any credible leads that even the exhaustion can’t hold him back.

Burke smiles. “I thought that might get your attention. Essentially, I’m not the only one of Arthur’s old Correspondents contacts who still lives in Omen. I’ve been in touch with some of them, and one of them has responded. She was rather cryptic, but she said she’d have something you would find interesting.”

Nemesis frowns. “How much did you tell her about me? And what does she have?”

“Not much. I simply referred to you as his apprentice.” Burke sighs. “She was cryptic, like I said. Wouldn’t tell me. Said she would show you, though.”

“That’s awfully suspicious, you know,” Nemesis says, knowing that it won’t stop him. Even if this is a trap, it’s worth trying for the sliver of a chance that there might be something, anything, that leads him closer to his goal. “Why am I meant to trust that? Sounds like an ambush, if anything.”

“It does a little bit, I suppose. I can’t stop you from assuming that, but I trust the individual in question fully. She’s one of my most talented students, even if she never was interested in necromancy.”

“Right, then. I’ll play along for the time being,” Nemesis nods, sighing.

Burke hands him a folded piece of paper. “Thank you, lad. I want him to be safe too.”

Nemesis pockets the paper, nodding. “R-Right. Of course. He will be.”

“I believe you,” Burke says, and smiles in a way that’s unnervingly warm.

It’s then that Charles sits up, groggy, rubbing the back of his head. “Jones,” he says, breathlessly.

“Dreadful.”

“I...stars.” Charles pinches the bridge of his nose. “I need to process. Jones, do you need your cat back?”

“Y...Yes, I’d like that.”

“Bloody good, then.” Charles gets up, wincing. “I’m going to get his cat out of my room, sir, and then I’m going to return to bed-rest, because I don’t think I’ll be functional for a bit. Apologies.”

“Oh, er...what happened?” The look of concern on Burke’s face is heartbreaking. Nemesis wishes he had it in him to feel guilty for dragging Charles into this.

“I’ll tell you later, sir.” He stumbles towards the door. “Well? Follow me, Jones. I won’t wait all day. Physically can’t. Think I’ll pass out if I try.”
“Right, I’m coming.” He stands up as well, lifting Callie. This time, he’s not too unsteady to manage.

Chapter End Notes

I've been doing Artfight this month, so if you want, follow me @criminallimes! Or feel free to check it out just to see all the cool tBS fanart!

Also, follow @beaumorts on twitter for updates and content!

I'll be on holiday for the next two weeks. I hope to be able to get the chapter out anyway, but don't be terribly shocked if it doesn't work out.
Nemesis calls Percy the first thing the next day. He and Evie make it to Beaumort’s in extremely good time, and are let in. Monty greets them by the door, purring.

Percy smiles. “She’s doing better, then? Good to see. Artifice really is amazing, isn’t it?”

“She’s cute. Percy, do you think we should get a cat?” Evie agrees.

“I wouldn’t mind that. I think I’m more of a dog person, though. But that’s not why we’re here.” Percy looks seriously at Nemesis. “You said you had something very serious to tell us.”

“I do. Come inside.”

The three make their way up the stairs, and Theory greets them inside. They find their places at the table. Callie has regained consciousness since the day before, but she’s still not entirely coherent. She’s resting now, and according to Theory will simply need to sleep off the effects. Nemesis isn’t one to doubt her medical knowledge, which he’s sure is more robust than his single first-aid course’s worth.

“First off,” Nemesis says, “Charles Dreadful snuck me and Callie into Catacumba to get a guide to the etymologies of all known pre-Al-Mushrite languages so Theory could translate the book we stole from Fitzroy.”

“That’s a good idea,” Percy says. “I hear that place is terrifying, though. I’ve never been, obviously. What’s it like?”

“Whatever you’ve heard about it is probably true, no matter how absurd it may sound. But that isn’t important. What matters is that we couldn’t find the book, but we could find a record of who checked it out last.”

“And that was…?” Percy says, leaning across the table in his excitement.

“Phineas Sterling. Yes, that Phineas Sterling.”

Evie frowns. “He never goes outside, though. Why would he want that specific book badly enough to go to Catacumba? Is he even affiliated with the Institute in any way?”

“I did some research into that, actually. Dropped by the Cabinet and asked the staff in the most discreet way I could manage. One of them gave me this old newspaper clipping.” He places it onto the table. It’s a small section of an article titled ‘NEW ARTIST, STERLING, MAKES STUNNING DEBUT’. The photograph accompanying it displays a red-haired man, disheveled, hair tied back into a ponytail and small circular spectacles sitting on the end of his nose. From what Nemesis has seen, Sterling has barely changed since this photograph was taken, ten years ago or
so. “According to this article, he attended, he graduated, and he’s still considered a friend to the Institute. Just hard to tell with how little he’s seen out and about.”

Percy nods. “...okay. That tracks. What now?”

“What now? I suppose we simply must steal the book from him. I won’t feel especially bad about it. I’ve no doubt he had his eyes on the same volume we just happened to steal. The fact that Elizabeth Calloway is connected to his organization and died in Fitzroy’s theatre makes me think there’s little doubt about it.”

“Then how do we go about this?”

“The gala they’re hosting for the new exhibition, of course.” Evie speaks up this time. “You know, as a co-worker of Morgana Fitzroy’s, I have a legitimate reason to attend. Percy could probably attend for his job, as well. Jones could find a way to sneak into Sterling’s study with that as cover.”

“I’m important and flashy enough that I have reason to be basically anywhere,” Nemesis says. “Or, at least, I look it.”

“I suppose I’m the only one of us four with no excuse to be there,” Theory says. “And yet, I’m the one who needs the book.”

“Oh, you can attend. I’ll come up with an excuse for you. Trust me,” Evie says, smiling...are Nemesis’s eyes deceiving him, or did she just wink at Theory?

“You will?”

Evie definitely winks this time. “Of course.”

Percy looks at Nemesis. “Is that the super concerning thing you called us here for?”

“Nah.” He frowns. “Horatio Guildenstern and Genevieve Merritt are both in town, which means Persephone Cross herself likely is as well. That means whatever’s happening here is significant enough to attract the Chancellor’s attention. And that’s terrifying.”

Percy frowns. “I’m surprised Ms. Alhazred hasn’t said anything. It seems like something she’d notice.”

“I just think she doesn’t want to tell you,” Evie says. “She’s a secretive person. You shouldn’t trust her as much as you do.”

“But she’s my boss...” Percy says, sighing. “Anyway, there’s nothing we can do about the chancellor of the Institute being involved. We’re just five people, one of whom isn’t even conscious right now. We’d be better off just ignoring it for now and hoping it goes away.”

“Reckon you might be right,” Nemesis agrees. And with that, he’s said all he needs to, and he has more important business to attend to. He stands, neatly replacing his chair.

“Where are you going?” Percy says, frowning.

“That’s all I needed to tell you. I’m a busy guy. I have other cases I’m working on, you know.” One singular other case, but it’s the most important case he’s ever worked on in his life.

“Does this mean we need to leave?” He asks, dejected.

“No,” Theory says. “You two can stay.” She’s looking at Evie when she says it, despite Percy
having been the one who spoke.

Nemesis makes his way down the stairs. Behind him, he can hear them talking - Theory says something somewhat funny, and Evie breaks into peals of laughter he would think uncharacteristically enthusiastic of her. Monty says goodbye to him at the door, tail swishing.

He takes the long route by the harbor. There’s always something so comforting about the dull gray skies rolling with clouds, faint light visible on the horizon where the Umbra ends. The light rainfall has gradually begun to dampen his clothing. He doesn’t mind.

The wind blows in from the bay. The papers scattered across the ground are flung into the air. The wind in Omen tends to be strong. When he first arrived, it took him a few days to get used to it. There’s nothing more embarrassing than being blown off your feet by the wind in plain view of whoever is out on the street, he’s learned.

From the harbor, he enters the wrought-iron gates of Omen’s public gardens. Sponsored by the Institute, they collect the strangest and most useful flora from across the world, specifically those with medicinal properties. It’s always nice place to stroll through on a rainy day, in Nemesis’s opinion. His unique opinion, seemingly, because today they’re completely empty.

It isn’t until Nemesis has made it halfway along the garden’s walkway that he notices the mist creeping out from behind an elaborately sculpted topiary. Unlike the light fog that tends to be omnipresent around here, this mist is intense, thick, and familiar.

Salem Riddle is perched atop the topiary, swinging their legs idly as they observe Nemesis, a solid foot and a half below them. Their grin is unsettling, even from this distance. They’re wearing rectangular mirrored glasses on a red chain, silver hair reaching to their waist, dressed in a green jacket and a knee-length black dress. They look nothing like how they did last time he encountered them, but the energy is impossible to forget. Some primal part of him knows precisely who they are.

Their smile is full of shark-sharp teeth, gleaming white even in the sunless weather.

They speak, and their voice sounds like a million whispers. At the same time, he can’t identify a single trait of it. “Well, well. You didn’t expect to see me here.”

He looks up at them. A feeling of terror makes itself apparent. He tenses. “Do you need something? You never told me what you wanted from me.”

“They’re behind him suddenly, and he can’t hear them breathing, even as they lean in close enough that their heads are practically touching. “Tobias Fitzroy has something which is not his,” they hiss. “Something greater than him. It will see the stars again. You will make sure of this.”

They lean back. Before he can respond, they continue. “By the way, you and Hayes are playing a dangerous, dangerous game with that book. Here’s my advice: curiosity killed the cat. Be careful.”

And satisfaction brought it back, he thinks. He tenses. “…do you know where the book I couldn’t
find in Catacumba is?”

“Of course, of course. It was checked out of the library at the same time as the text Hayes has her hands on, by the same person. Of course, they’re in different hands now. Oops!” They grin widely. “Everyone wants to get their hands on it. The people in this country don’t understand what it is they’re fighting over, but they’ll fight over it anyway! Until all of them end up dead, they’ll keep fighting! I think it’s really funny, don’t you, Nemesis Jones?”

“...I think it’s a little sad,” he answers honestly.

“I knew I could trust you,” they say. “You’re not a power-hungry guy, are you? You’ve just got a specific goal. And I wish you good luck with it. You have somewhere to be, don’t you, don’t you?”

“I s-” He glances back at them again, and they’re gone. “...ah. Alright.”

They’re right. He does have somewhere to be. Somewhere important. He’ll try to wipe this conversation from his mind, for the time being.

The building is far less towering than Catacumba. After yesterday, Nemesis is at least grateful for that. Instead, it’s a perfectly average brick building with a simple sign over the door. How refreshing.

He’s shocked that he’s here at all. He knows this must be a trap, after all. He even told Burke as much. And, because Callie is still resting, he’s here alone. Thankfully, he doesn’t have to worry about her, as she’s come back to consciousness and seems coherent enough. No long-term damage, surely. Despite that, she’s exhausted, understandably so. He’s not going to be dragging her with him.

Meanwhile, Theory is continuing to work on her translation unassisted. Nemesis has promised to attend the Cabinet’s banquet and attempt to steal her the book, but for the time being, there’s nothing he can do, and nothing she can do but continue to carve away at it.

It’s fine, in the end. This is the sort of thing he should be going about alone. He steels his nerves and knocks on the door.

And he stands in silence in the street, carriages and people passing by calmly. It feels like several minutes pass, and he’s sure people must be staring at him by now. Finally, just when he’s about to knock again, the door creaks open.

The woman at the door is just a hair taller than Nemesis. She’s dressed in a lab coat, a loose skirt that reaches to her ankles and a simple white blouse visible underneath. Her shoes, a pair of loafers, look scuffed and worn, the buckles having lost all of their shine. She has long, straight black hair, tied up in a messy bun, though many strands have come undone and are hanging down, the longest of them reaching to just above her waist. Her eyes are brown and tired, and her skin is pale, her age quite visible.

Burke’s description of her was perfect. Without a doubt, this is Dr. Lavinia Graves.

She looks disapprovingly at Nemesis. He finds himself just barely leaning on his toes, trying to make himself seem taller. Being the shorter one in a conversation is never something he’s liked. With someone significantly taller than him, there’s no helping it, but in this case, there might be.
Unfortunately, she seems to pick up on his efforts, because she silently raises an eyebrow. **Great going**, he thinks to himself, **now she thinks you’re a bloody dork**. Still, he tries to keep his composure, and clears his throat.

“I’m here on a referral from Aleister Burke,” he says plainly, hoping she understands his meaning.

It seems she doesn’t. She frowns. “Aleister Burke isn’t even a medical doctor. I don’t know why he’d refer you to my clinic.” Her voice is stern and accented.

“I mean, er, you know, I…” He sighs, unsure of how to phrase it. “It’s not for medical reasons, it’s…” He pulls out his compass, struggling not to drop it from nervousness.

She scrutinizes him, then nods. She definitely recognizes the compass. “You must be Arthur’s boy, then.”

“Aye, that’s me.” He tries not to let on how happy the phrase makes him, how he’s practically glowing with pride.

She nods. “You don’t even remotely resemble him.”

He’s more offended by that than he should be, considering that they aren’t related. He nods, though - he can’t disagree. “We’re different people, you see. Did you expect me to be a slightly smaller clone of him?”

“No. It’s just that you look nothing how he described you.”

Nemesis freezes. “*He* being...Mr. Jones?”

“Yes. He described you far less...affluent, to begin with.”

Nemesis feels his heart practically stop. This woman knows who he is. She knows who he was, who he was, she knows…


She quirks an eyebrow. “Did I say otherwise, boy? Dr. Burke said as much. Odd name to choose if you’re presumably hoping to pass it off as not an alias, but I’m not in the business of revealing people’s secrets. Not without something in it for me, anyway.”

He hopes she can’t see him deflate in relief, the nervous twitch of his hands as he adjusts his cap, nodding. “I’m not trying to pass it off as my birth name. I like the flair it provides.”

“You really *are* different from him.” She stands aside, allowing him into the clinic.

“Do you think he would disapprove?” He asks, a touch more nervous than he should be allowing himself to be.

“I haven’t the foggiest.” She shrugs. “He’d probably not understand. Always was a subtle guy. Maybe he picked a flashy apprentice to balance that out, or something. I don’t know. It’s not as if he *confided* in me, precisely. Just sent me the occasional letter from Llygredyg.”

“He never told me you existed, but I knew he had associates in Omen. He didn’t talk about any of them beyond that.”

“Yeah…” she agrees. “Never was the sort of person to talk too much about anything not immediately relevant. He was a horror in university. Talked about nothing but assignments. Not
sure why I liked him.”

That’s right, they had both gone to the University of Duskmoor. Nemesis simply hadn’t been aware they’d been classmates. “Was he very different back then?”

“You tell me. Out of the two of us, only one has seen him in the past seven years.”

He nods. It’s easy to forget that, when Arthur Jones had vanished, he was likely the closest to him of anyone. In any other situation, the thought might make him happy. Now, it just makes him sad. He had been a lonely man, with only an unpleasant teenager for company. How unenviable.

“That doesn’t sound unlike him, no.”

She sighs. “Shame. Hoped by this point he’d have learned to have fun. He’s almost forty. Not much time left for that.” Nemesis thinks to himself that this woman doesn’t seem as though she’s learned to have fun herself.

He can’t say that. The last thing he wants to do is anger his one lead.

He enters. The waiting room of the clinic is decorated comfortably, with furniture in various shades of black and gray, including a table and a plush armchair. It’s not excessively expensive-looking, nor does it veer to the other end of the spectrum. A gray shawl is draped over a metal folding chair, and the tables are all covered with various books and magazines, tossed about with no regard. It isn’t unpleasing to the eyes, but it looks grandmotherly, if anything.

“You’re lucky I don’t have any patients in right now,” she says, sitting down on the rather comfortable-looking armchair. “They would have taken priority over you. Have you ever heard someone being operated on from the next room over?”

“That’s oddly specific. I’ve not.” Nemesis sits down on the significantly less comfortable chair.

“Well, you would have had to hear the screams and the sawing noises from over there,” she says, gesturing over her shoulder with her thumb. “You can hear it rather well from here, I’m told.”

“The screams?” He frowns. “You don’t put your patients under?”

“It depends on the surgery. No need to, if you’re just amputating a leg. I do hear it’s quite painful, but then again, I’ve never had a leg amputated.”

“It is quite painful. Reckon that’s why people use anaesthesia, generally.”

“What would you know of it? Have you had a limb amputated?”

“Nah, but I’ve limbs attached to me and it hurts when they get stabbed, so I can extrapolate.”

To his surprise, she lets out a single quiet laugh. “You been stabbed often, boy?”

“Let’s say I’ve experience with the matter.” He shrugs, as though this isn’t a big deal. “Before I met Mr. Jones, of course. He wasn’t letting me get stabbed under his watch.”

“I should hope not. But I would also assume not. It would be quite unlike him. What I knew of him, at least.”

“He was always concerned about my safety. More than he had to be, even.” He tries his hardest to keep his voice even and steady so as to avoid letting on just how much it stings, remembering.

“Was he always like that?”
“He was remarkably high-strung when I knew him. A lot of people got thrown off by it. He was always on top of everything, almost too much. Nervous. A little bit prone to snapping at people when they were being stupid.” Is it just him, or can he sense the barest hint of a smile growing on her face? “He had no idea how to function around people. Homeschooled when he was younger, apparently, and honestly, it explained a lot about him.”

“He was homeschooled?” It’s not as though Nemesis knows, or thinks he knows, remotely close to everything about Arthur Jones, but that something that major never came up over the seven years they knew each other…

“Allegedly. He never talked much about his childhood, but he mentioned it, once or twice. Had tutors, as he said. Rich uncle paid for them, and for university.”

“Well, I knew about the uncle, at least. I watched the office while Mr. Jones was at his funeral.”

“And how did he cope with him dying?”

Nemesis sighs. “...not great, I think. Didn’t talk much, for a while. Kept to himself. Focused on his work. Drank.”

Graves frowns. “Did he do that often?”

“Not at all. At least, not in front of me.”

“You know, that’s what he told me at one point or another. That he didn’t want to be a bad example, so he made sure he would be sober around you. I suppose it’s nice to hear that he stuck to that.”

Nemesis can’t help himself. He lets out a single laugh. “Trust me when I say it wouldn’t’ve made any difference to me.”

“But it did to him.” She sighs, running her hand through the loose sections of her hair. “He cares about you a lot, you know. Probably more than he wants to. He’s almost allergic to caring about people, but whenever he talked about you he seemed like a different person.”

Nemesis frowns. “That’s news to me. When he talked to me he seemed much the same as any other time.”

“Really?”

“Aye. Anything, he was pretty hard on me. Deservedly so, of course, but he was never exactly...glowing with praise.”

She stares at him quite seriously, brows furrowing. “...well. He was when he wrote to me, so think of that what you will. He certainly did tell me to pass a message on to you, so that at least implies some trust.

“He-” Nemesis can feel himself start. “He what? When? Why did you wait this long to tell me?”

“I didn’t know you were in town, first off. I checked in Citrea Viridia, and people had a lot to say about you. Of course, namely, that you’d-”

“I-I know. Sorry about that, by the way.” He feels panic rising. Half the point of becoming a new person was that this was a conversation he wouldn’t need to have anymore. “It’s not...it didn’t happen like they said, I’m not...I didn’t...I’m not that-”
“I know, I know. He made that perfectly clear to me.” Nemesis feels himself relax. For a moment there, he had felt as though his life was over again.

She shifts slightly. Is that concern or revulsion on her face? “In the last letter he sent to me, he included a section at the end. He said he needed me to pass it onto you.” Graves sighs. “In fact, you know what, I’ll just give you the whole letter. You look like you might be able to use it. Thank goodness Burke met you. Otherwise, who knows if you’d’ve ever gotten your hands on this thing.”

“...yes, thank goodness,” he agrees. His mind is racing - what has Mr. Jones been thinking? He knew he was going to vanish, obviously, or else he wouldn’t have been able to leave the compass behind for Nemesis. Did he plan this? Is this all a test? He wouldn’t do that, would he? He wouldn’t leave Nemesis to fend for himself, would he?

Would he?

Graves stands up, wincing. Nemesis notices her favoring her left leg as she crosses the room. “Let me just...get it from my study. Don’t touch anything, surely Arthur taught you it’s rude to touch people’s things.”

“He’s said something to the effect at some point, I reckon.” And Nemesis is sure he waved him off, because touching others’ things is half of what he does.

The realization that Mr. Jones might be disappointed in the person he’s chosen to be hits him like a bullet. He deflates in his chair, squeezes his eyes shut. Would he hate him? What will he do if he finds Mr. Jones, only to be met with that same look of loathing he’s been trying to escape? What will he do then?

He feels tears well up in his eyes, and he squeezes them tighter shut, hoping he can hide it from Graves. His stomach feels horribly twisted, and there’s a dull, sick feeling in his heart. If Mr. Jones were to ever hate him, he knows he wouldn’t be able to ever recover.

He hears a door close, footsteps following immediately after. Graves sounds nonchalant, when she speaks, but not entirely absent of concern. “Have you had a stroke while I’ve been out, boy?”

“N-No,” he says, hurriedly sitting up. “No, I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Good. I think Arthur would kill me if you got hurt in my office, and I don’t feel like dying right now.” She holds out a thin envelope which has clearly been opened before, and he takes it nervously, turning it over.

The envelope is old and plain white. Written in plain black ink, the return address is in a neat, yet elegant hand which Nemesis could never possibly forget.

With shaking hands, he opens it, taking out the two pages inside and unfolding them. They’re typed neatly, but he would recognize the style of writing anywhere.

“He really wrote this,” he mutters, more to himself than to Graves.
Clearly, though, she interprets this as intended for her. He supposes it’s not surprising, them being the only two in the room and all. “Of course he did. Who else would have? No one else ever sends me letters. People barely even send me mail at all, just the occasional telegram telling me about some or other medical conference that I feel obliged to attend despite my utter disinterest.”

“That’s part of work, isn’t it? Getting telegrams about things you can’t possibly care less about. He used to complain about that all the time.”

“Yes, I can imagine he’d hate that. He hates needless clutter and pointless conversations. He always has.” She pauses. “Speaking of...what he used to be like...I have something else I think you might want to see.”

Nemesis watches as she pulls another envelope from behind her back. Was she hoping to surprise him? From it, she takes a single bit of paper, holding it out to him. A photograph.

It’s old, frayed at the edges, and faded, but he can immediately recognize some of the faces in it. There are three people, university aged, in what looks like a small, quaint cafe. One is immediately recognizable as a younger Graves, with a less tired face and neater clothing. Next to her is a brown-skinned man with neat hair tied back in a ponytail, smiling fondly at the other two.

And on the side, smiling a tired and half-hearted smile, is another man. Even twenty years or so younger, he’s easily recognizable. He looks a little less tired, and his hair is a little bit longer, tucked behind his ears, but there’s the same green eyes, the same square glasses, slightly askew. He’s dressed casually, though neatly - a neat white button-up and brown trousers.

“This was before he started favoring brown tweed, then,” he remarks.

“Yes, that didn’t happen until after he graduated. I kept telling him it aged him a solid ten years, but he said he didn’t mind.”

“It doesn’t make him look that much older.”

She raises an eyebrow. “How old is he? Forty-five, right?”

“Well, he’s never precisely told me. But that seems about right.”

She lets out a single laugh. “Thirty-nine, actually. But I don’t blame you for thinking he’s older. He looked in his thirties when he was twenty-five.”

“He...he’s what now?” Nemesis sighs, putting his head in his hands. “...I can’t believe I didn’t so much as know how old he is. He’s been my employer since I was thirteen, and I only ever bothered to assign him the nebulous age of ‘old’.”

Graves chuckles. “Not that I think he wouldn’t be offended, but he’d also likely be relieved. He’s a remarkably secretive person, so the fact that even his own apprentice wouldn’t know might be a little reassuring.”

“I don’t think he’s quite that bad about it. I just don’t think it was ever on either of our minds. I think I know him pretty well, all things considered. At least, I, er…” He sighs. “I like to hope so.”

“Based on how he talked about you, I think there’s a good chance you do. Like I said, he cares for you greatly.” She smiles, thinly, giving the distinct appearance of someone who hasn’t smiled in years.

Nemesis takes one last long look at the photograph, taking in the image of Arthur Jones’s face. It’s
different, yes, but it’s him, real, smiling. He can’t help but smile back. “Thank you for showing me this. I assume you’ll want it back?”

“Of course. Not that I’d normally begrudge you a photograph, but there aren’t many photographs of the three of us.” She leans over, pointing to the other man. “That’s my husband. Viktor. I’m not very photogenic, so we don’t have many pictures of the two of us together. If I’d’ve known beforehand what would happen, I would have made sure to take more, but when you’re in the moment it’s so easy to assume that you have forever.”

“Is he...is he dead?” Nemesis asks, nervous.

“He is. Died during some…” She frowns. “...society business. Dr. Burke has told you about the Correspondents, I assume. His death at the hands of an Eye was part of what caused us to fall apart. Ever since, I’ve no interest in that sort of thing.”

“That sounds...fair enough. I think Mr. Jones was much the same. He always warned me about how evil societies are. Told me to never get involved. And I’ve not, out of respect for him.” He erases all of Percy’s suggestions of forming a society from his mind.

“And that’s why the two of us have remained in contact. Dr. Burke and Dr. Apollinaire, as well. But the rest of them…” Her face shifts, more concerned. “They’re not trustworthy. They’re still involved in all the secret wars going on here. I refuse to associate with people like that. The last thing I want is to be dragged back into it.”

“That’s perfectly understandable. Truth be told, I don’t like society types either.” He chooses to ignore his associations with Percival Chase, who he, upon reflection, likes a little more than he would like to. “I only ever work with them out of necessity. The thing is that most of them are quite bribeable. I don’t think that’s a good trait, but it’s convenient for me.”

She snorts. “Can’t imagine Arthur taught you that.”

“Oh, he didn’t. Discouraged it, actually. I’ve merely got to get to the bottom of things somehow.”

“Well, I won’t tell him.” She takes the picture back. “Check inside the envelope, by the way. There was something else enclosed that I think you’ll like. And this time, I’ll let you keep it.”

Nemesis looks in the envelope. Inside is another thin sheet of paper.

As he takes it out, Graves smiles. “He said in his letter this was so I could recognize you if I saw you. All things considered, though, it was far from helpful.”

When Nemesis sees what’s printed on the paper, he has to stop himself from audibly gasping, or even bursting into tears.

The picture is taken by the side of the River Aderyn. In it, Arthur Jones is older, more tired-looking, but despite that, he’s smiling. His hair is shorter now, neatly cropped and swept to the side. It’s not the most fashionable style, but it’s practical. He’s dressed in the familiar brown tweed suit, and he looks disheveled, out-of-breath.

The person he’s smiling at is barely recognizable. A boy who Nemesis knows is eighteen, though he looks a sliver younger. He has long, unkempt brown hair, but the same brown skin and silver eyes. He’s dressed simply, and he’s smiling as well.

That’s not characteristic. Nemesis knows enough about this boy to know that he used to scowl, more often than not. But in this picture, he seems happy.
“I remember this,” he says. “This was around two months before he vanished, after I’d managed to track down a rather prolific thief by intercepting a message he sent to his accomplice. We went to get tea afterwards, and he insisted on taking this picture. I suppose now I know why.”

“You say that so casually. Did you do things like that often?”

“No, this was the first time I ever pulled anything like that off. Before that, I mainly just ended up spying on people, which he generally disapproves of. But then, he seemed so genuinely proud of me. He’s not normally…the type to praise me overtly, but he could barely shut up about how thrilled he was afterwards. It was…” He can’t help but smile to himself. “It was probably the best day of my life.”

“He was sparing with kind words, yes. I’m sure he’ll have nothing but praise for you after you track him down. And I believe that you will be able to.”

“I...hope you’re right. I really do.”

“I tend to be right.” She sighs, standing up. “That being said, I’ve got scalpels to clean. Performed a leg amputation earlier today, and yes, I did use anaesthesia. So, for now, off with you.”

“I had been hoping that was a joke,” he admits, “but I can’t always entirely tell and I thought it might be rude to look at my compass when you know exactly what it does.”

“Not rude. I understand why you might want to. In fact, why don’t you get it out now? If you’re anything like Arthur, you’ll want the peace of mind.”

“If you’re alright with it.” He takes out the compass and clicks it open. There’s a purple needle pointing towards Graves.

To his utter confusion, Nemesis notes that the arrow fixed on him is glowing a sliver less than it was the last time he checked. He has to squint, but it’s unquestionable. Somehow, the compass thinks he’s a tiny bit more honest than he was before.

Graves clears her throat. “Everything I said to you today was completely honest, including and especially the things I said about Arthur Jones, the late Viktor Graves, and the Greater Omen Correspondents’ League. The part where I implied I do not provide proper anaesthesia for my patients was a joke, which is a thing that I am capable of telling.”

Fully honest. He shuts the compass and pockets it again. “Er...I really can’t thank you enough. For everything, but…”

“Of course. I know how Arthur always was, convinced everyone was lying to him no matter what it was they were saying. I wasn’t about to let you agonize over my words like he used to, before the compass.” She smiles. “Now get going. And I’ll trust in your abilities. Bring back my best friend, Nemesis.”

“I’ll do my best. I promise.”

After he closes the door behind him, he waits a moment in the street, watching the passerby and observing the soft wind blowing through the trees.

Predictably, the Chases are gone by the time he returns to Beaumont’s. Less predictably, Theory is
Monty greets him at the door, rubbing against his legs. He picks her up with a soft smile, ignoring the fact that her fur will inevitably get all over his clothing. She purrs loudly.

“I’ve never seen a cat get attached to someone so quickly,” he remarks to Callie, who is sitting on the staircase. “Back when I used to feed stray cats in Citrea Viridia, they were scared of me. They’d hiss or scratch, even. Not that it stopped me doing my best to help the unfortunate creatures, but it’s shocking to see how different this one is.”

“She’s very nice. She’s the first cat I’ve ever met, though.” Her voice sounds a bit more quiet. Subdued. Morose.

“Why are you just sitting on the stairs, then?” He sits next to her, holding out Monty.

She pets Monty’s head. “I’ve been thinking.”

“You have? And here I thought you weren’t capable.” He chuckles, ruffling her hair with one hand. “Really, though, what’s been on your mind?”

“I don’t like being left alone, because my mind starts to wander. I start to think about what happened, and...my life. Mysteries that I can’t really solve right now.”

“You mean what happened to Art?”

She nods. “I can’t stop thinking about it. I never realized how strange my life was until I met you. Why would he have chosen to live outside of society? Why take me with him? We’re siblings. That means we have the same parents, right? Then who are our parents? Why did I never get to meet my own parents? Where are they? Why did Art never tell me about them?”

“Those are...” He sighs. “...good questions. Questions I don’t have the answers to.”

“Nemesis?” Her voice is even quieter. “What’s it like...to grow up in society? To be normal? To have parents?

He laughs, despite himself, feeling like the most insensitive person alive as he does it. “I wouldn’t know on the latter two counts. As for the former, I think it’s horrid. But experiences may vary. Like I said, I wouldn’t know what it’s like to be normal.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s right. You don’t have a family.”

“Right. Right, you’ve got me. I don’t have a family.” He sighs. “And before you ask me what it’s like, it’s bloody awful.”

“I figured that much. Art was a little bit much to deal with sometimes, but I’m still grateful that he was there for me. He took care of me my whole life. He taught me everything I know. Even if he was a bit mean and self-absorbed sometimes, he really cared about me. I can’t imagine how I would have managed if I didn’t have him.”

“So you love your brother. That’s good, that’s a good thing.” He smiles. “And I’ll help you find him. Promise.”

“I hope we can. I...I don’t know how, though.” Her hands shake as she stares down at them. “The reason...the reason I’ve been so tired and useless lately...is because I’ve been completely restless, thinking about him. I’ve barely been able to sleep.”
Nemesis thinks back to his conversation with Lavinia Graves. She knew Art as well, so he could have asked her. He was simply too caught up in thinking about his own issues. He tries to comfort himself by rationalizing that she’s distanced herself from the Correspondents, but so has Apollinaire, and so has Mr. Jones. He could at least have asked.

Callie leans closer to him. “Are you okay? You look really upset, all of a sudden.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. You’re the one unable to sleep. I just wish there were more I could do to help. Here I was, celebrating over good news on my case, and I entirely forgot that you’re looking for someone important to you, as well. How…” He takes a deep breath. “...how selfish of me.”

“It isn’t.” She puts a hand on his shoulder, and Monty rubs against his other arm. “It’s not selfish of you to care about people. And it’s not selfish to think about yourself. Who else are you supposed to think about? You’re inside your own brain all the time. No matter how selfless you want to be, it’s literally impossible to think about other people before you think of yourself.”

“I...I dunno,” he says, even though he knows she’s right. “I want to be a good person. It’s so hard to be a good person when you aren’t a good person, but...he thought I could be one, if I tried. I don’t want to prove him wrong.”

“Prove who wrong?”

That’s right. She doesn’t even know who Mr. Jones is. Nemesis takes a deep breath. “My...teacher. Mr. Jones. The man who saved my life. He’s the person I’m looking for, the original owner of my compass. He means everything to me, and he needs me to find him. If I can’t find him, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“...what was he like?”

“Where to start? He was...terrifyingly intelligent. He was hard-working, neat. Strict, sometimes. Most of the time, actually. He was horribly stern to me most of the time, but he was never mean.” He smiles to himself. “He had a temper. I know that much. I never experienced it firsthand, but I saw him lose it at other adults sometimes. He actually slapped the dean of my school. Stern or not, he got angry when people mistreated me. I’d never had anyone do that before. Elias was normally too scared to speak up, and I didn’t blame him. He was getting just as much shit as I was.”

“Art was similar, I guess. He was smart. Not neat, he was more scatterbrained than you are, but he’s nothing if not hard-working. He has a temper. It was directed at me, sometimes, or inanimate objects, but he always apologizes afterwards. He was a bit gruff and mean, but when he was happy, it was wonderful. We’d just sit, look at the stars, and read.”

“Mr. Jones would play the violin for me sometimes. He’s a wonderful violinist.” He smiles wistfully. “And we used to talk about books. He didn’t have much time to read, but I did. He hated Dick Remington, but he’d listen to me talk about it. He really was a remarkably patient man.”

“Art wasn’t patient. But he’s my brother. He’s the only person I ever had. I miss him.” She lowers her head. “The thing I got from Catacumb...somehow, some of his blueprints ended up there. Seeing his handwriting reminded me that he existed. I knew him at one point, even if he’s missing now. I...had to take it.”

“I understand. Really, I do, I had almost the exact same thought today about what little of Mr. Jones’s I have left.” He smiles a little. “...anything interesting in those blueprints? Useful, even?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing any of us would understand. Even Theory, I think. He really was a
one-of-a-kind genius. Like he said, no one else has ever been able to measure up to his skill as an inventor."

That’s the first Nemesis has heard of that. He thinks it makes Art sound rather like a full-of-himself jerk, but that’s the last thing he’s about to say out loud. “Despite that, I’m glad you have it.”

“Thank you, Nemesis. Really.” She smiles weakly up at him. “You’ve been kind to me. Without you around, I have no idea what I would be doing. You’re almost like a second brother to me.”

He’s taken aback by that. “Surely...surely I can’t mean that much to you. We’ve barely known each other for a month.”

“But you do. You’ve kept me from being lost on my own in the city, and you’ve been helping me not fall apart. And you care about me, right?”

“Of course I do, but-”

“So don’t argue with it.”

He laughs. “Alright, alright. I won’t. You know, I...I think Mr. Jones would like you.”

“I’m not sure what Art would think of you. I think you two might fight. You’re both stubborn. But I want to hope you’d like each other.”

“We’ll see when we track him down, won’t we?” He smiles, standing up. “Come on. We can’t just sit here in the stairwell.”

“Right.” She gets up. “Maybe I’ll read some of the books you talk about now. I hope I’ll like them more than your Mr. Jones did.”

He smiles. “I hope so. I don’t think I could take it if you didn’t. No one in my life understands why I like them so much, and it’s a bloody travesty. And, for the record, you’re going to sleep early tonight, because you need to make up that sleep debt. You don’t have a choice in the matter. I’ll lecture you on the complex chemical properties of potassium until you pass out cold.”

“That’s just cruel and unusual…” She giggles. “I’ll try to sleep. Promise.”

The two ascend the stairs, Monty close behind.

Before he goes to bed that night, Nemesis sits by his cork-board, reading the letter over and over again. The voice is so familiar, so undeniably his. Though the content is worrying, there’s something comforting about simply seeing his writing again. The confirmation that he hadn’t simply abandoned him, as well, is enough to make Nemesis smile to himself. Things aren’t hopeless. There’s a goal visible beyond the horizon, and Mr. Jones is cheering for him to reach it.

The code at the end is a little harder to deal with. It looks like a substitution cipher, but all attempts at solving it produce gibberish. Hours later, he’s run out of energy. Pages and pages of calculations with no real results.

Mr. Jones, what do you want from me?

The photograph taken by the river goes to the very backmost section of his wallet. No one can see it, that way, but he’ll know it’s there, and carry it with him. That much is reassuring.
Oh, by the way, keep a very close eye out for tomorrow's appendix. You...really won't want to miss this one. Promise.
Lavinia -

My apologies for the long time between letters. It isn’t that little of interest has been happening - much the opposite. I’ve almost felt overworked, and you know how difficult it is for me to reach that point. It feels as if there’s been nothing but cryptic messages from all ends the past few days, and you know how much I hate those. I saw a man who closely resembled Dorian in the street and nearly had a stroke, which is the last thing my poor brain needs. At this rate it’ll simply disintegrate into dust one of these days. Sinclair keeps trying to involve me in a jewel thievery plot, despite me making my whole-hearted disapproval clear. And I’ve recently received contact from an old acquaintance of ours, as well...

Professor Challenger passed away a month or so ago. He was old, but it’s still sad to me. Am I just sappy, getting emotional over an animal dying? Not even the expressive sort of animal, a catfish. Luke was very subdued over it too. The boy doesn’t deal well with death, I’ve realized. I can’t imagine I was the same at his age, but perhaps it’s for the best. The last thing I would want for him is to be desensitized. His passion is one of his best features.

Recently, he’s managed to solve a few difficult cases with little input from me. I’ve never been prouder, despite how...unorthodox, to say the least, his methods are. It’s staggering, actually, how differently he approaches things from me, but I’ve learned to overcome my initial instincts and see them as skills...as long as he’s not getting himself in trouble with the law or doing anything dangerous, anyway. I’ve never been prouder of him than I have been recently.

Of course, over the past few years, he’s become the majority of my life. I’m far more invested in him than I ever was in my own work. It feels as if keeping him out of harm’s way is my job, at this point. It’s the most rewarding work I’ve ever done, so don’t misread this as me complaining! I understand how Dr. Burke functions a little more now, I think. Just a little.

Unfortunately, the old friend of whom I spoke earlier in this letter has contacted me with a rather impressive ultimatum. He’s been threatening Luke, which isn’t something I can allow to stand. In order to deal with this, I’ll have to be gone for some time. Perhaps indefinitely. I’ve been sworn to secrecy, and there’s a legitimate possibility of my mail being intercepted, so I’m being as vague as possible. But if you see Luke, I need you to pass on the following message to him:

ZWWK YLOOWX GN VLYGNIWU HWXRGRRNKKH
MOLKH LIW ZWRKT ULXW. GSRKTH CROO ZW SLMMWKRKTH HNNK. R YLKG HLA
RV GSWA’TW TNNX NI ZLX VNI HFIW
GSWIW’H LK RHOLKX RK XINCKWX ULK’H ZLA, LG GSW DWIA WKX NV GSW
FUZIL. ROO ZW GSWIW
RU DWIA MINFX NV ANF
RV GSW CNIOX WKXH, ROO VRKX ANF. R MINURHW

Apologies for how cryptic I’m being. Truly, if I had anything else to resort to, I would. As it stands, I’ve no idea what I’m going to do. I never wanted to live this life again. Now it seems I don’t have a choice.

I’ve enclosed an image of Luke and myself, for recognition’s sake. It’s just in case you encounter him, which I’m sure you will. It’s not like him to just let me vanish without a word. If it’s been a long time and he doesn’t find his way to you, I’d appreciate if you could find him yourself, but I don’t doubt he’ll be in Omen within a matter of months. I’ll do my part to try to hint to him that I’ll
be going there, as well.

Apologies for simply dropping this on you. You’re the only person I can trust when it comes to this sort of thing. Thank you, Lavinia.

Your friend,

Arthur Jones
1.12 - Grandioso

It’s a mere five days until the celebration for the opening of the Cabinet’s new exhibition, and there are, of course, preparations to be done. Nemesis can’t be bothered with them, though, when there’s a cipher to be decoded, and so he focuses, day in and day out, on his calculations and his guesses towards potential passphrases, in the hopes that something will give. It doesn’t, and by the third day Nemesis begins to despair of any solution.

Callie is mostly subdued. She keeps to herself, reading over Art’s blueprints to the point of what even Nemesis would consider obsession. It makes him feel all the more guilty that he’s been unable to help her find her brother, no matter how much he tells himself he’s had more pressing issues to deal with.

Theory appears to be attending to business as usual, but Nemesis knows better. He sees how she shuts herself in her room, and his suspicion is confirmed when he notices a far stronger smell of perfume than usual from that side of the loft. Out of the three of them, she’s the only one preparing for the party, as opposed to the investigation. Nemesis supposes that may as well be.

He meets with Percy twice. The first time, they happen to run into each other at the Bitter End, and talk over coffee (or, in Nemesis’s case, tea). The conversation quickly veers off-topic, and by the end they’ve discussed everything from the details of the Dick Remington canon to the weather. They agree to meet again the next day, and this time, their discussion stays on relevant subjects. They decide that Percy will serve as distraction for Nemesis during the exhibition, should he need one, and that Callie would probably be best left home due to her lack of orientation to such events, which Nemesis and Callie had agreed was probably the case beforehand as well. Someone needs to watch Monty, anyway.

Nemesis spends most nights by himself, thinking. Sometimes he walks at night, in hopes, though he’ll never say it aloud, of stumbling upon Salem Riddle. Unfortunately, they remain elusive. He supposes that if they want to speak to him, they’ll find him whether he likes it or not.

He has no choice but to continue in his current path in the unlikely hope that it will, eventually, take him where he needs to go, no matter how uncertain and winding it may be.

And then the day of the exhibition arrives. Callie is left behind to watch Monty and the bookstore, while Nemesis and Theory make their way to the Cabinet, lacking in the over-elaborate carriages and automobiles of the upper class, who make up the majority of attendance. Instead, they merely take the train. The image of Theory in her gown sitting on public transportation is amusing, though not amusing enough that he’ll risk pointing it out to her.

The gown itself is new, black with gold embroidery, ankle-length in the front and long enough to pool on the ground in the back, even with her rather high black stiletto heels, the straps of which wind up her legs like vines. The front isn’t quite as low-cut as last time, and it has elbow-length sleeves, which flare out and reach almost to the ground themselves. It’s an unimaginably expensive piece of clothing. Her hair is in an elaborate braided bun, and her glasses are gold-rimmed. She’s practically unrecognizable.

Nemesis has dressed himself in all black. It’s sufficient, he thinks.
They arrive at the station nearest the Cabinet and disembark. Nemesis is forced to help Theory along, to keep her from tripping on her dress or getting it dirty or, stars forbid, tripping over it and falling. He’s well aware that two adults of similar age holding hands in public will likely be perceived as a couple, but there’s no time to worry about that now.

Outside the station, the Chases are waiting for them. Percy looks distinctly sharper than normal, dressed in a tuxedo, complete with bowtie. Nemesis thinks he looks nice, but he’s a little bit outdone by his sister. This time Evie’s chosen to wear a dark blue dress which flares at the waist, less fancy than Theory’s but still noticeably expensive, and her hair is down, reaching to her waist when not braided. Her shoes are a slightly more practical pair of low-heeled boots. When she sees Theory and Nemesis, she smiles and waves, beckoning the two over.

The moment they reach her, she takes Theory’s hand from Nemesis, carefully nudging him aside. “You look amazing. I, wow-”

“You look, uh-” Theory’s face is redder than a dying star, and she buries it in her hands, overwhelmed. “...pretty-”

Percy glances at Nemesis. “So...were you aware this was a thing until just now, or...?”

“I had my suspicions.”

“So I’m the last person to know?” Percy groans. “Eves...why didn’t you tell me you were dating Theory Hayes?”

“It slipped my mind. Besides, I thought you might not care to hear the details of my life, with how focused you are on your case and how stressed you’ve seemed lately-”

“No, no, no! ” He puts both of his hands on her shoulders, startling her - she barely manages to keep her grip on Theory. “I...want to hear about your life! It would make me less stressed to know my sister is dating someone, you-you dork!”

“Well...okay,” Evie says, surprisingly nonchalant. “Theory and I are dating. You can celebrate if you want.”

“I am celebrating, internally, because I’m proud of you, but not externally because this is a train station and I don’t want to get arrested for disturbing the peace.”

“That’s fair.” She smiles lightly at him. “Come on, then. Let’s not be late. You two were cutting it close.”

“Train’s slow this time of day,” Nemesis says defensively. “Theers, you never really told me you were dating someone, either. And here I thought you wouldn’t’ve been interested in romance.”

She’s so red it’s almost concerning. When she speaks, her voice is far quieter than normal. “You never asked. I would have been perfectly willing to tell you. What, then, are you jealous?”

He laughs. “Jealous?” Of being in a relationship? Definitely, but he can play this off. “Chase isn’t my type, no offense. I have no interest in women.”

“Can’t imagine what that must be like.” She points to Percy. “Is he your type, then?”

Nemesis pauses to think. “You know, it’s not something I’ve ever considered, and I’m going to give this one a suspiciously noncommittal response.”
“No, I’m not his type,” Percy says, winking at Nemesis. “After all, I’m not dark and broody enough.”

“I wouldn’t really say that’s it. It’s just that-”

“-that you’re already interested in someone else, right?” He winks again.

“I-” Nemesis is sure he’s turned red now, too. “That’s beside the point. Let’s drop the subject.”

“That’s fine by me.” He grins. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe.”

“Are you two done?” Theory asks. “We really are going to be late at this rate, and no amount of the train being slow is going to excuse that.”

“Y-Yes, of course, sorry,” Nemesis agrees, grateful for the excuse to never speak about this again.

On their way out the door, he claps Theory on the shoulder. “No emotions, huh?”

Her face manages to get even redder, somehow. “Shut up.”

The Cabinet of Marvels isn’t quite as impressive as the Theatre Obscura, but that doesn’t stop it from towering over the crowds gathered outside as though it’s the largest building in all of Acerbis.

It’s built of white marble, a rare material in these parts, staggeringly expensive. The facade is decorated with long columns, tapering slightly towards the top, creating a striking appearance. At the center of the front wall, a massive clock, the interior mechanisms visible behind a quartz front, announces the time, ticking loudly down towards the opening.

“I hear Phineas Sterling made that himself,” Evie remarks, pointing to the clock. “He doesn’t do much exhibited work anymore, but when he does it’s pretty spectacular.”

“The clock’s new, then?” Theory asks. “I’ve never been here before. Had no reason to.”

“It’s new, yes. And, knowing Sterling’s work, it’ll probably do something spectacular and then self-destruct. He’s a clockworker, but he also has a flair for pyrotechnics.”

“That sounds like a rather unfortunate combination,” Nemesis remarks.

“Maybe, but he’s made it work.”

“He has, I suppose,” Nemesis agrees. Phineas Sterling...he’s the man who is after the secrets of the tome in Fitzroy’s study. He’s dangerous. They’ll need to be careful.

The clock ticks one final time as the minute and hour hands snap into place, marking seven in the evening. A low rumbling begins, and as Nemesis looks towards the ground, he sees a pebble lightly bouncing up and down.

“I told you so,” Evie says, grinning. “Don’t look away or you’ll miss it!”

He looks back at the clock, and he hears a ticking noise, increasing rapidly in speed, as the hands begin to move again - faster and faster and faster, until they’re a blur of steel and gears moving faster than his eye can detect, like the blades of a massive fan.

And then the music starts, grandiose and pompous. He listens hard, but he can’t hear any piano,
just brass and drums. Whatever Elias’s role is tonight, it’s not this. The cymbals crash as the clock seems to lift up into the air, propelled by jets of flame emerging from beneath it. Nemesis thinks it’s a wonder they don’t hit any of the people, or any of the banners hanging off the side of the building, but they somehow all keep from being incinerated.

“Ladies and gentlemen and those who don’t bother with all of that nonsense!” A voice rings out, magnified to extreme volume. “We are gathered here to celebrate the greatest artistic minds of the current era, in a showcase of their masterworks! Tonight’s banquet and reception serve as opening to what may be the Cabinet of Marvels’ single greatest exhibition in its storied history. So, without further ado - let the celebrations begin!”

Next to Nemesis, Percy flinches as the clock explodes in mid-air, sending fireworks in all directions. People are torn between cowering and staring in rapt awe as the multi-colored explosions form full images in the sky.

It seems to be illustrating scenes from the history of the city, the Institute, and the Cabinet. Julius the Great’s conquest of Acerbis, the discovery of Catacumba, the ascension of Persephone Cross as chancellor, Phineas Sterling’s first exhibition. And then the focus shifts, and the scenes displayed are those of monsters and of airships and of the daemons of the Border Wilds and the shows at the Theatre Obscura.

Nemesis wonders if that last one might be a message to Tobias Fitzroy. We know you killed our operative, Fitzroy. We’re going to make you pay. He hopes it is. Even though he disapproves of conspirators on all sides, he can’t help but root against Tobias Fitzroy at every possible opportunity.

And slowly, the fireworks fizzle out. The last of them explode, sending a rainbow of sparks over the night sky like a veil.

The bystanders ooh and aah, then burst into thunderous applause. Nemesis stands amidst them, gaze fixed on the sky. In the distance, a star twinkles. Were the stars always this bright? They can’t have been, can they?

The gathering falls into silence. Nemesis’s ears ring. And then, with a needlessly dramatic click, the doors swing open, creaking loudly. The crowds gathered begin to stream in. Nemesis tries to stay by the Chases and not get trampled, which ends up being easier said than done. It isn’t until the majority of the crowd has crammed themselves in that the four of them join the stragglers.

“Are they really just letting anyone in?” Theory asks. “I didn’t know there were this many important people in Omen.”

“There aren’t quite this many. They let people who aren’t quite as important in so that their attendance numbers look more impressive, at least for the receptions,” Evie replies.

“There are parties that are meant to be more exclusive, on purpose, where they invite a tiny amount of people and then circulate rumors about them to make everyone else feel jealous and out of the loop,” Percy adds. “This isn’t one of them. Tonight is more about numbers. They won’t let just anybody in, but they’ll let us in, and that’s what’s important.”

“So no one actually important is gonna be here?” Nemesis asks.

“Oh, no. Important people are still going to be here. There would be backlash if they weren’t seen at an event this big.” Percy grins. “They’ll just need to deal with the barely-filtered masses, and with us.”
The doors are massive, carved from dark oak, engraved elaborately and decorated with silver filigree. These doors alone would have cost as much as the building which houses Beaumort’s. Expert craftsmanship. Intimidating size.

In front of them stand two rather strong-looking men in suits, arms crossed. The one on the left is taller and more muscular-looking, with a large moustache. The one on the right is heavy-set, with a well-groomed moustache. The security detail.

Evie bows to them. “Evelyn Chase. I’m an actress employed at the Theatre Obscura.”

“Right, of course,” the one on the left says. “You were Anna in Edward and Lucia, aren’t you? You were really good.”

“That was me,” she confirms, smiling politely. “Oh! And this is my date.” She gestures to Theory, who blushes slightly despite herself and waves.

“Yes. Her date. That’s me.”

“What about these two, then?” The one on the right gestures to Nemesis and Percy. “They your other dates?”


“I suppose that’s fine,” the one on the right says, grumbling.

“Wow, I had no idea that you were related to the actress!” The one on the left sounds excited. Nemesis wonders if he’s truly suited for his line of work. “Small world, huh?”

The three pass by, and finally, the one on the left turns to Nemesis. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Nemesis Jones, private investigator.” Nemesis tips his cap. “It’s a pleasure.”

The one on the left frowns, and Nemesis gets the sense it may not, in fact, be a pleasure. “You’re that obnoxious guy that’s been messing with people’s private lives, are you? I didn’t think you would look like an overgrown street urchin.”

“I dunno, Carl,” the one on the right says to him. “I don’t think urchins have hair that nice. Or clothes that nice. Just because the guy talks like an urchin doesn’t mean he is one.”

“If you think I sound like an urchin, you should see actual urchins.” He sighs. “Am I allowed in or no?”

“No,” the one on the left - Carl - says.

“Yes,” the one on the right says simultaneously.

They turn to look at each other. “George, what are you thinking?” Carl says. “This guy’s a nobody.”

“Clearly he’s not a nobody if I’ve heard of him.” George frowns.

“And you’ve heard of me too, clearly, since you recognized that I’m an allegedly obnoxious guy who allegedly messes with people’s private lives,” Nemesis interjects.

“You’re really proving me right on the obnoxious part,” Carl says.
“And yet the fact of the matter remains that you know who I am.” Nemesis looks seriously at him. “Thus, I am a person of some importance, and you should let me in.”

“He makes an awful good point, Carl,” George says. “I mean, I know who he is. You know who he is. That means other people know who he is, and that means the Cabinet gets a boost in status when people mention offhandedly that they saw him here.”

Carl frowns, looking Nemesis over. “...you’re sure this is Nemesis Jones? He looks like a kid.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Wow, he is a kid.” George looks at Carl. “Do you know what this means? This means he’s a prodigy! That’s even more prestigious! Let him in!”

“Okay, fine, fine.” Carl rolls his eyes. “He can come in, but mostly because we’re holding up the line.”

Nemesis enters. The inside is a massive hall, made of a white marble decorated with gold filigree and massive columns. On the walls, climbing ivy leaves are painted in gold, joining together at the domed ceiling to form the image of a massive tree canopy, casting a shadow over everyone inside. There’s no other word for it - it’s beautiful.

Inside, the room is filled with circular tables, each with seven chairs to them. In the distance, a bar and a buffet are both visible, though they’re so far away that Nemesis can’t make out much about them. The attending people mill about. None of them are speaking particularly loudly, but the sheer number means that the room is inevitably polluted with their voices. Nemesis wishes he’d brought earplugs.

Percy, who’s been waiting by the entrance for him, laughs nervously. “For a moment there I thought they weren’t going to let you in, Nemesis. That was pretty intense.”

“It’s fine. Didn’t I tell you I was important?” He grins. “Come on, I want to look around. This place is massive. Have Theory and Evie already wandered off?”

“Yeah, they did pretty much immediately. Said something about going to the bar.” Percy shrugs. “We’ll track them down later. You’re good at tracking people down.”

“Don’t over-rely on that ability,” Nemesis mutters. “It’s not infallible.”

“What was that? I couldn’t really hear you there for a moment.”

“Nothing, nothing.” He waves off the concerned look on Percy’s face. “Come on. Let’s find something interesting.”

“How about…” Percy scans the room, before pointing towards a group of people gathered nearby. “...these guys again?”

Lusitania Renwick, Morgana Fitzroy, and Walter Morrow stand in the middle of a gathering of what look like fans. The three of them are remarkably well-dressed, Walter in a forest-green tuxedo, Morgana in a floor-length deep purple gown and black shawl, and Lusitania in a white dress with gold trim and a short train. Morgana has an arm around Walter, and they seem to be having a pleasant conversation with the people gathered around them.

Lusitania is doing the same, with a hair less enthusiasm. Shuai, Nemesis notices, is conspicuously absent. Has she fallen ill with little warning, or is she so jealous of Morgana and Walter that she...
can’t bring herself to attend an event with them? Is it something else entirely? The one thing he knows is that he isn’t reading too far into this, because there’s no way someone as rich and glamorous as Shuai would pass up the opportunity to be seen at such an event without a very, very good reason.

“Would they maybe get suspicious if they saw me here?” He asks Percy. “I don’t really have the same excuse to be here as I do the Obscura, and I’m not that important. I’m actually pretty sure Morgana is already suspicious of me, but I’m really curious as to why Ms. Zhou appears absent. Surely she wouldn’t pass up an event like this without a good reason.”

“I think you might be right, actually.” He frowns, thinking for a moment. “You could let me talk to them and see what’s up? I can’t lie-detect them, but I can at least tell you what they said. Then we’ll at least have a plausible reason, even if it isn’t true.”

“That’s a good idea,” Nemesis agrees. “That’s an excellent idea. We’ll meet back at the b—” he pauses. He’s intending to suggest the bar, but he remembers Percy’s discomfort at the Obscura. “...the buffet, if that works for you?”

“That works,” Percy says. “You do whatever it is you do in the meantime. I fully expect you to catch multiple murderers in the time I’m away.”

“That’s not going to happen.” He waves to Percy as he makes his way into the crowd, away from him. “Well, good luck, mate.”

Percy chuckles nervously. “Thanks. I think I’ll need it.”

Once he’s away from Percy, he finds himself relaxing just slightly, a tension he didn’t even realize he had dissipating. It isn’t that he dislikes Percy or his company, but it feels like years since he’s investigated completely alone. He finds it refreshing to not have anyone breathing over his shoulder, asking him to explain things, and to be able to think about things by himself, without discussing them with someone else. The second perspective will be useful later, but in the moment, it’s overwhelming.

This was how it used to be, of course. Mr. Jones would give him time to think things over and collect his thoughts before asking him for any conclusions. Percy, good investigation partner though he may be, doesn’t give him the same space.

What brief relief he has is immediately overtaken by the activity in the room. There must be a thousand people crammed into this hall. Though there’s room to spare, it’s difficult to navigate without being forced to shove people aside, and difficult to stand still without being on the receiving end of the aforementioned shoving. Each quiet voice adds up to complete chaotic cacophony, assaulting Nemesis’s hearing and making his head throb. He can already tell he’ll develop a migraine before the evening is over.

He stumbles through the crowd without any clear intended direction, looking for someone, anyone, who looks like they might be worth something. And he finds them rather quickly - in the near distance, Ginny Merritt and Horatio Guildenstern are both dressed far more formal than the last time he saw them, chatting to a tall Beian woman wearing an academic’s robes about something or other. The tassels on it indicate her station, and Nemesis realizes to his mild surprise that she’s Aurelia Wu, the dean of the Catacumba branch of the Institute. Of course, it makes sense that they would be speaking to her.

Nemesis’s immediate thought is that he should listen in, but as he tries to make his way there, he feels a hand close around his arm. His instincts kick in, and he’s about to turn around and break
this individual’s nose, only to be confronted with the timely realization that he is in public, surrounded by some of Omen’s most powerful and snobbish gentlepeople. If he starts a street-fight here, he’s done. Nemesis Jones will have to cease to exist, and that’s if he survives, and if he isn’t in prison.

So instead of driving his fist into this person’s face with the force necessary to shatter bone, which he does suppose in retrospect would be a little rude of him. That thought doubles in intensity when he sees the face attached to the hand. Mustafa Dagher’s pleasant smile has faded off of his face, replaced with alarm. Nemesis wonders why for a moment. Then he realizes he’s taken a defensive stance, fist held aloft, ready to strike.

That would do it, yes.

He laughs nervously, lowering his hand. “Sorry, mate. Reflexes. Please don’t call the constables.”

“I...won’t.” Dagher still looks a tiny bit alarmed, but he releases Nemesis’s hand. “Sorry. That might have been a bit rude of me. I just got excited seeing you again, Nemesis Jones.”

Now that his panic has subsided, Nemesis can get a proper look at Dagher. He looks extremely handsome, hair tied back neatly but just disheveled enough to maintain that careless look, purple tuxedo tailored perfectly, that one earring still dangling from his ear.

And then Nemesis feels a stab of panic again, because he’s pretty sure he never gave Mustafa Dagher his name. Mustafa immediately picks up on this, and smiles charismatically. He appears completely harmless and good-natured, which makes Nemesis unbelievably suspicious.

“Sorry for alarming you. I know I never got your name, but you have a very distinctive appearance, you know. Very eccentric. Being eccentric is very in right now.” He leans in closer towards Nemesis, whispering in his ear. “And I know you’re not affiliated with the Institute, and that you weren’t meant to be in the library. Between you and me, I’m very lax with rules. You’re lucky I was on duty that day.”

“Let me guess,” Nemesis whispers back. “You’re going to hold this over me now? Blackmailing me into doing things for you in exchange for not getting me arrested?”

“No.” He leans back away, smiling. “Actually, I couldn’t care less. I don’t need a private investigator for anything, and I don’t think someone who doesn’t study artifice could help me with any of my schoolwork.”

Nemesis sighs. “Then what’s the point of this?”

“I mean, there’s not a big important point. You’re overestimating how much intrigue I’m involved in. I’m actually just here because my grades aren’t good enough for the universities back home, and I’d rather be the smartest person in a less prestigious university than the person with the worst grades at Eulim.”

“I suppose I understand that enough.” Nemesis desperately wishes he could have been looking at his compass, but it would be far too suspicious to simply take out a pocketwatch and ask him to repeat himself. Nemesis considers himself skilled in the art of discretion, but there would be no way to play it off.

“Well, I’m glad you do, because a lot of people expect me to justify myself.” Momentarily, Dagher’s smile fades off his face. “The reason is that it’s so much easier to get funding for your research and such when you’re the top of your class. And the real reason is that I like to feel
smart.”

“I can relate to that, I suppose. This is, er, awfully personal information to share at a public gathering, though?”

Dagher laughs. “Maybe so, but everyone’s talking around us. No one will overhear. This is actually one of the securest places to have a conversation I can think of. Everyone’s so busy talking that nobody’s listening.”

“Not sure I agree.” Nemesis shrugs. “Right, then. Nice seeing you again, Dagher.”

“I told you, no need to be all distant about it. Call me Mustafa.”

He nods. “Right, Mustafa, then. Thank you for not getting me arrested.”

“No problem.” His eyes widen, and he waves over Nemesis’s shoulder. “Oh, hey! Lucian!”

“Lucian? You don’t mean Lucian Vigenere, do you? He’s not behind me, is he? Please tell me the baron of Semper’s not behind me?”

“I regret to inform you that I am.” The voice is significantly higher and quieter than Nemesis would have expected. He sounds tired, really.

He turns around. The speaker is indeed Lucian Vigenere, looking remarkably underwhelming. He wouldn’t have recognized him in the crowd even if he’d been looking. Up close, he looks even less intimidating. He’s around Nemesis’s height, bone-thin, extremely pale and washed-out looking, as though he hasn’t seen the sun in years. Perhaps he could be handsome despite that, but his clothing, a simple three-piece and overcoat, lend him no impressiveness, and the cane he carries is strikingly plain, black-painted wood with no embellishments whatsoever. Up close, his glasses look too large for his face, giving him the appearance of disproportionately massive eyes.

“Who is this, Mustafa?” He asks. “A colleague?”

Nemesis glances back and forth between the two of them. “I’m just an acquaintance. You two, er, know each other?”

“We’re classmates,” Mustafa says. “This is Nemesis Jones, a private investigator. Nemesis, I think you know Lucian.”

“I...know of the baron, yes.” So he’s friends with the baron. It’s not implausible. Mustafa Dagher seems like the sort of person who is difficult not to befriend. Nemesis bows to Vigenere, sweeping off his hat. “It’s an honor to meet you, Lord Vigenere.” He feels painfully aware of his accent, his mannerisms, his clothing. Normally, it’s not a big deal, and it makes him more distinctive if anything - but this is a baron he’s speaking to. He feels weighed down by fear. “I...admittedly hadn’t expected to see you here, though. You’ve just been sworn into office, aren’t you swamped with work?”

“Of course I am. By your standards, anyway.” Vigenere frowns. “I’m extremely competent at my job. Worry more about yourself than me. Don’t you have cases to investigate?” His tone is biting and sharp. It’s shocking to hear words that harsh coming from someone so unreasonably unimpressive-looking.

“That’s confidential,” Nemesis says, winking at him. Keeping up appearances, even when one is being condescended to, is of vital importance. “Good to hear it’s going well, then. I generally prefer my barons to be competent.”
Vigenere looks piercingly at Nemesis, looking him over with a barely-camouflaged look of disdain. There’s a bit of anger building beneath the surface, but Nemesis forces himself to look relaxed and at ease. The image of a slightly overconfident private investigator is far safer to project than that of someone who actually knows what he’s doing.

“As do I,” he finally agrees. Nemesis notes, with some satisfaction, that he seems to be choosing his words very carefully. Has he been thrown off his rhythm?

“I’ve yet to meet someone who *doesn’t* like their barons to be competent,” Mustafa says with a light laugh. Either he hasn’t picked up on the tension here, or he’s choosing to ignore it. Nemesis reasons that he must be used to Vigenere creating this sort of situation. Lucian Vigenere seems a perhaps frustrating person to be friends with.

“Well, I suppose it would have a special relevance to Lord Vigenere,” Nemesis says. “But my apologies. It must get so dull talking about nothing but your family and work every time you meet someone new, right? We can move on to other topics of conversation.” Or, perhaps, he can simply find his way away from these two. There’s likely little to learn here, and Vigenere radiates unpleasantness.

“Actually, I think you might hate the topic I’m about to propose. I figure you get asked about it fairly often. Perhaps not as often as I’m asked about my job, but quite often.” Vigenere adjusts his glasses. He’s wearing pristine white gloves. “You are investigating the... *incident* which occurred at the Theatre Obscura, yes?”

Nemesis’s heart skips a beat. How would Lucian Vigenere know about that? “Why do you ask?” he says, attempting to at least put on a veneer of coyness.

“The police department here reports to me.” He sighs. “And don’t let that scare you, because I’m not here to chastise you. In fact, I’m here to thank you. Our own police department is notoriously incompetent when it comes to solving crimes like this. I figured it was about time we hired a consulting detective.”

“A consulting detective?” Nemesis pauses, not wanting to tack ‘like Dick Remington’ onto the end. That’s not the sort of thing that would be liable to buy him esteem.

“Yes, a consulting detective. If you’ve ever read Dick Remington, it’s that sort of arrangement.” Vigenere looks at him seriously. Nemesis can’t help but fixate on the constellations of freckles scattered over his face. “Not just for this case, but in general. You’ve made a name for yourself, and your skills have been demonstrated. At this point, I’m willing to take a chance on you.”

Mustafa gasps quietly. Of course he does. It’s a shocking proposal. Nemesis frowns. “The police are really that incompetent, then?”

“Just about.” Lucian frowns. “I have no idea why, but when they get within a few inches of most murders and major thefts they completely shut down. Did you know they ruled the victim’s death in your case to be of natural causes?”

“I’m aware, yes.” Nemesis wonders what angle he could possibly be going for with this. Does he truly not realize the police are purposely obstructive? Is he not the one ordering them to be? He can’t tell truth from lies without his compass, and taking that out now would be rude.

“So what I want is for you to work with the police to actually solve things. I’ll give you access to the resources the department has and pay you a detective’s salary.” He looks at Nemesis pointedly, but perhaps there’s a tinge of desperation to it. Or is that just Nemesis reading too far into it? He
still can’t tell if he’s being played or not. “How about it?”

“Awful public place for a business proposal, first off,” Nemesis says, immediately following it up with a light laugh so that Vigenere doesn’t take it as a serious criticism. Angering him at this stage could be a fatal mistake. “Second off, I don’t want to work with the police in any capacity. So I’m going to propose an alternate deal: I don’t interact with the constables more than I absolutely have to. You get priority when requesting my help, and I get your help should I ever need it. If I need information that the police have, I’ll get it through you. And I’ll stay out of the constables’ way to the best of my abilities.”

“You really don’t trust the police, do you?” Lucian sighs. “Very well. I agree to your terms. I’ll have a contract written up, and we’ll be in contact. For the time being, continue as you have been. I rarely extend offers like this to civilians, especially ones I don’t know.”

“Hm. I suppose you’ll want my mailing address?” Nemesis pulls out a business card, holding it Vigenere-wards.

Vigenere takes it gingerly. “...yes, thank you. I greatly appreciate your cooperation, Nemesis Jones.”

Mustafa, who has been quietly observing their negotiations, finally frowns. “Nemesis, I think I understand what you said about having intensely personal conversations in public.”

“This is just my life now,” he responds dryly. “I’ve lost the ability to be worked up about it.”

“Right, well…” Vigenere adjusts his glasses again. “Thank you for your time, as I said. Now, onto other matters…” His head snaps towards the side, gaze fixing itself on Mustafa. “What brings you here? I thought you were taking extra shifts at the library.”

“Dean Wu recommended I come,” Mustafa says, completely calm despite the degree to which he’s being interrogated. “She said there would be things I could learn from. I wasn’t going to argue with her about it.”

“I suppose that’s fair enough,” Lucian replies.

“Er…” Nemesis cuts in. “Am I still required here, or am I…dismissed?”

Lucian waves a hand. “You’re dismissed.”

“That’s what I thought.” He drifts away from the two of them, watching them continue to talk. He still can’t imagine how Dagher has managed to get onto Vigenere’s good side. Both of them are, to Nemesis, incomprehensible. If only he could have used his compass. They could have been lying about anything they said, and he would have remained none the wiser. Without the compass, he feels powerless and adrift.

How did Mr. Jones manage before the compass? How does anyone manage without a compass? How does any person go about their life not knowing when they’re being lied to? Nemesis theorizes to himself that this may be the root of all evil in the world. If everyone knew when they were being lied to, betrayal would no longer be a possibility. People would be forced to cooperate. Actions would have consequences.

He finds his hand curling around the compass in his pocket. He desperately wishes he could have it out without making himself conspicuous. It feels as though it’s the last barrier between him and complete annihilation. Mr. Jones would know what to do, he thinks, but Mr. Jones isn’t here. Mr. Jones won’t ever be here again, unless he gets his act together.
He finally makes his way to the back of the hall, leaning against the wall and hoping he won’t disturb the intricate images on it. He needs to calm down. He’s useless when he’s this agitated. He takes a deep breath, trying to steady his heartbeat. His head is swimming a little bit less. The noise feels like it’s lessened.

He pulls out his compass. It’s a comfort simply to have it in his hand, feel its weight and see its familiar form. He opens it, and the familiar click feels like home.

The many needles are spinning absently, all lit up. None of them have even chosen to focus on Nemesis. Unfortunately, it seems even if he could find a convenient opportunity to use it without coming off as rude it just might be utterly useless. He’s not sure if that makes him feel better or worse.

“Oh, pardon!” He hears a high-pitched voice, with that glamorous downtown Omen accent. “Forgive me for the inconvenience, but might you know the time? All these decorations, but I simply can’t seem to find a clock.” A woman with black coily hair and dark brown skin, dressed in an elegant purple gown and a purple felt suit jacket, glances rudely over Nemesis’ shoulder at the compass just as he manages to snap it shut. “Oh, sorry, sorry!”

“That’s not a problem.” He pulls back the sleeve of his coat to show her his wristwatch. He supposes the gesture could be taken as an obnoxious display of wealth, but he’s a little bit beyond the point of caring. Her clothing is an obnoxious display of wealth. He figures they’re even.

She smiles wide. “Oh, I get it. It isn’t a watch.”

“...” Nemesis pokes the screen of his watch. “No, this is definitely a watch. At least, I should hope so, considering the amount of money I spent on it. I dunno what about this doesn’t look like a watch.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” She hmphs. “No one carries two watches for no good reason, and that one’s a watch...so the other one must be something else!”

“I-” His breath catches in his throat. Of course, she’s right. He walked directly into that one. “-the other one is...personally significant to me. It doesn’t tell the time. No gears.”

Technically, none of those are lies, but the woman doesn’t look entirely convinced. She’s a striking figure, easily over six feet in height and towering over Nemesis. He does so hate it when people are taller than him, especially by that much. Half-moon spectacles rest on the end of her somewhat large nose. Her eyes are large and brown. Her face, in general, is very round, giving her an endearing appearance.

None of that is what’s alarming about her. What’s alarming is that Nemesis recognizes her. He saw her at the Theatre Obscura, sitting behind Lucian Vigenere in the box intended for guests of honor. Whoever she is, she’s important.

She laughs. It would be a pleasant sound if not for the circumstances. “Sorry, sorry, darling. I feel as though I might have alarmed you.”

“Don’t call me darling.” His response is instinctive, and he has to resist clamping his hand over his mouth immediately after. “Er-sorry. Not trying to be rude, I’”

“You’re just having a spot of bad anxiety, right? That’s fine. Happens to the best of us.” She looks at him kindly. “You don’t look very old. Are you sixteen? Seventeen? Do you have parents around?”
“I’m nineteen,” he answers, perhaps a bit more forceful than he’d like to be. “And I’m fine.”

“You seem out of place,” she observes calmly. “There’s nothing wrong with that, you know. Everyone is out of place sometimes. For instance, I feel very out of place at the book clubs I attend. A mixture of impostor syndrome and everyone around me putting me on such a horrific pedestal. You seem much the opposite.” She stares him in the eyes, looking over the top of her glasses. “It seems like people here don’t think very much of you, and you don’t think very much of yourself, either.”

He stares back at her. This conversation makes him feel horribly uncertain, but one thing remains clear - he’s not going to be the one to blink first. “Do you like to make invasive comments about people at parties? Is that what makes you happy? I’ll not comment on what you said about me, but you should know that people who others don’t think very much of tend to not think much of themselves. It’s almost as if what people say matters.”

“Oh, you’re quite right about that, of course. Goodness knows I used to have such low self-esteem...but that was for a reason, and my circumstances have changed. I now have no reason to have such an unrealistically negative outlook.” She smiles wide. “Being positive is wonderful, and I highly recommend it. No one likes a negative person. If someone says they like a negative person, they’re probably lying. Oh, but I don’t mean to make you feel bad! That isn’t my goal at all. I merely…” The smile ebbs a little, but her stare remains even and unyielding. “...I merely thought you seemed familiar, somehow, but now I can’t imagine how that would have been. Have you been in the news, perhaps?”

“I doubt it.” He raises an eyebrow. “Your monologue very neatly dodged by my first question. Does providing unsolicited psychoanalysis at parties fulfil you?”

She shrugs. “It might.”

“You’re not Dick Remington, you know. You can’t assume your initial assumptions about a person are correct or warranted.”

“Oh, but I am Dick Remington, in a manner of speaking.”

He blinks. Immediately, a rush of frustrated rage threatens to consume him. It’s all he can do to keep himself from driving his fist into the nearest wall or breaking out into tears. He lost.

Familiar words float in the periphery of his mind. “Unacceptable. After all we’ve done for you, losing is unacceptable. All this kindness, and you spit in our face. How disappointing.” His knuckles burn. The sensation is familiar. He wishes it was real, and not a figment of his imagination. He wishes the accompanying blood was there, staining the sleeves of his shirt.

Instead, all he can do is weakly look at the woman, overtly aware of his own patheticness. Though she’s not letting on, that smile still plastered on her face. Is she truly so malevolent, or is his mind painting that condescension over her face? Does it truly even matter?

He feels sick.

“Care to...explain?” he asks. He hopes desperately the shaking in his voice isn’t apparent.

“Well, I wrote the books. So, in a way, I am Dick Remington. All of his thoughts, actions, and feelings, they come from me.”

Nemesis’s eyes widen. “Oh, bloody stars,” he mutters aloud, before he can stop himself. This woman is one of his heroes, and he hadn’t even realized. He feels a deep stab of shame, like a stake
being driven through his heart. Of course she’s sharp. She has to be, to write mystery novels.
“You’re really Ephemera Sutcliffe?”

“The one and only!” She beams.

“I...feel so rude now. I’m a huge fan of yours.”

“Well, don’t let that change how you behave.” She crosses her arms sternly. “Celebrities are just people! Don’t treat me any differently than how you would anyone else! If you think I’m obnoxious, you’d better be upfront about it.”

“I thought you just told me I should be positive.” He frowns. “I just don’t think you have very good social skills. You could stand to be less blunt sometimes.” She’s like Callie in that regard, he thinks. Analyzing people and immediately telling them. She’s not as good at it as Callie, though. “You’re an excellent author despite that.”

Sutcliffe shrugs. “None of what you said is news to me. I’m glad you could be open and upfront with me.”

“Right, er, sorry-” He feels like the most laughable and unpleasant person in this room, which has many people in it. “N-now that that’s squared away, could I...maybe have your autograph?”

“Of course, dear. Do you have anything in particular you’d like signed?”

“Yes, actually. I knew I’d have a reason to carry this with me one day-” he quickly searches through his bag, thanking his lucky stars he brought it with him despite it being so large and tacky, and pulls out an old hardcover volume. The cover proclaims, in silver embossed lettering: “Dick Remington and the Adventure of the Intercontinental 7137”.

“Oh, wow,” Sutcliffe says, taking it gingerly in her white-gloved hands. “This is a first edition. These are really rare these days. You really are an avid reader.”

“Actually, it was a gift from someone who hates mystery novels. Apparently, someone had gifted it to him, back in the day.”

“Ah, I see. I can’t imagine having such bad taste, but at least it went to someone who would properly appreciate it.” She takes out a fountain pen, uncapping it with a click which Nemesis can tell has been made artificially louder for effect. It’s the small things like that, not the world-altering ones, which make him acutely aware of his knacklessness. “Who should I make this out to, then?”

He suppresses his jealousy. “Nemesis Jones, if you will.”

“Oh!” She pauses for a moment. “That’s quite a name. Very unique.”

“Thank you.”

She signs the inside cover of the book with a flourish. “No, thank you. I would be nowhere without my fans.”

“Oh my gosh!” A young girl’s voice rings out. “You’re Ephemera Sutcliffe!”

Nemesis, somewhat upset by the fact that whoever this is has managed to identify his hero where he failed, looks over at the source of the voice. It’s a girl, dressed in a houndstooth skirt-suit and sensible low-heeled boots which reach to her knees. Her skin is brown, her hair braided, and her eyes wide and inquisitive. She looks about sixteen, by his best estimate. Around Callie’s age.
Maybe a little younger.

“I am,” she agrees. “Would you like an autograph too, dear?”

“Yes!” The girl searches her pockets, and frowns. “I don’t have anything for you to sign, though…”

“Well,” Nemesis says, cursing his own natural altruism, “consider this your lucky day, then. I’ve an extra copy of ‘The Adventure of the Screaming Star’. It’s not valuable, since it just came out, but it sure is a Dick Remington book. Perfectly autographable, though tragically paperback.”

He fishes it out of his bag and hands it off to the girl. Despite being less than a month old, the book is worn and slightly dog-eared. She turns it over in her hands. “I haven’t gotten my copy yet. I didn’t realize the cover was so nice-looking. You’re sure you won’t miss this, sir?”

“I reckon I will, since I’m only around halfway done with it. But you need it more than I do right now.” He smiles in a way he hopes is reassuring and not condescending. “I can just buy a new one, even if they’re a little hard to get at the moment.”

“Okay, if you insist.” She doesn’t argue more, turning to Sutcliffe and handing her the book. “My name is Hattie.”

“Hattie. Cute name.” Sutcliffe signs it, pen loudly scratching away at the paper. “Short for Harriet?”

“Yes!” She takes the book, looking at it, seemingly awed. “Thank you so much, Ms. Sutcliffe! And thank you so much, Mr…”

“Jones.” He tips his cap. “Nemesis Jones.”

Her eyes widen. “No way! Really? You’re really Nemesis Jones?”

“In the flesh. Why? You’ve heard of me?”

“Of course!” She’s bouncing up on the balls of her feet with excitement. “Any detective enthusiast knows about Nemesis Jones! You’re a real life Dick Remington! I-I want to be just like you!”

He finds himself freezing. Of all the ploys to get him to let his guard down he’s seen - and he’s seen many - this is by far the most ridiculous. The idea that anyone would want to be like him churns his stomach. His mind wrestles with itself.

It’s a lie. It’s just a lie. She’s trying to stab you in the back. No one would ever want to be like you.

She doesn’t know. She doesn’t realize how repulsive you are. She doesn’t want to be like you, she wants to be like Nemesis Jones.

Don’t lose it, Nemesis. Don’t lose it, you idiot. Don’t make a fool of yourself again. If he saw you now, he’d be so disappointed. He’d be repulsed. What is wrong with you?

He struggles not to sneer at her, not to cause a commotion in this crowded place. Instead, he stares, unable to formulate a response.

Her face twists into a look of concern. Likely feigned concern. He can’t imagine she doesn’t know what she’s doing. He lets out an indignant noise before turning away.

“Are you alright, dear?” Sutcliffe asks. Her concern, as well, is likely feigned.
“Never been better.” It takes him a moment, but he inhales sharply, feeling his heartbeat settle. “Right. Apologies, but I don’t think I’m the best of role models.”

“That’s what my father says,” Hattie agrees. “But I disagree. I think detectives are so wonderful, solving these mysteries for nothing in return but their own thrill of the chase. I’ve always wanted to be clever, and there’s nothing more clever than a detective. Solving mysteries for a living. I can’t imagine anything better.”

Nemesis shakes his head. For the time, he’ll approach this as though she’s being honest, even though he can’t imagine she is. They get the children involved young, in Omen. It’s easy to go from school to organized crime in a matter of days. Agents are everywhere - teachers, parents, friends. Of course, if this is the case, she’ll have his pity. She won’t have his trust.

“Spoken like a true schoolgirl.”

She looks taken aback. He supposes he could have stood to be a little less rude. “What’s that meant to…”

“What I mean is you can’t use Dick Remington as your gospel for what a - okay, to begin with, I’m a private investigator and not a detective, and a consulting detective is a far cry from an actual detective - but to be clear, it’s not really as glamorous as people write it to be, because the realities of the job wouldn’t make for especially good literature.”

“He’s right, you know.” Sutcliffe nods sagely, as though she were the one to say these things to begin with. “He seems disoriented beyond what would be typical for someone in his situation, I’ll grant that, but his statements are completely factual. Being a private investigator is difficult work, and the majority of cases are never actually solved. Dick Remington is an anomaly even in my own canon.”

“And I’m an anomaly in the real world,” Nemesis adds. “But yes, it’s quite thankless work. Half the requests are just to tail someone’s wife and make sure she’s not being unfaithful. The other half are from some manner of criminal. Once I was threatened at gunpoint to solve a case, and they didn’t so much as thank me afterwards. No manners, really.”

Hattie’s eyes widen. “That sounds scary.”

“It was.” He pauses. Is he, perhaps, being too discouraging? “That’s not to say you can’t want to be a private investigator. It’s not entirely thankless, and if it’s your passion, it’s worth pursuing. But be realistic in your outlook. Life isn’t going to be like a novel.”

She frowns. “I...suppose you’re right. I just...it’s my dream.”

“Like I said. Still worth pursuing, if that’s what you want for yourself.”

“It is. It’s what I want for myself more than anything.” She looks at him - up at him, because she’s significantly shorter, short for her age, even. “How did you become a private investigator? That’s not something you can go to school for. At least, that’s not something I’ve been shown how to go to school for.”

“You can’t really go to school for it. I mean, at least not that I know of. I’m sure there are classes you have to take before getting certified, if you’re going about it the normal way.”

“When you say the normal way, that implies there’s also an abnormal way.” Hattie seems only more fascinated. “And you did it the abnormal way, right?”
“I went through an apprenticeship. If that’s abnormal, sure. I did it the abnormal way.” He mentally thanks his lucky stars that she didn’t ask about certification. Bringing it up was a mistake, because Nemesis doesn’t know the first thing about actually being certified as a private investigator. After all, he paid good money for his forged license.

“An apprenticeship...I didn’t even consider that. I suppose I’m too old for those now...Father always wanted me to go to school instead.” She sighs. “That’s such a shame.”

“I’m sure you could still get someone to teach you,” Nemesis says, though he’s beginning to tire of this conversation. To give good-natured advice to someone surely plotting to use him for her own nefarious purposes is exhausting.

“Would you be willing to do it?” She asks.

“Absolutely not.”

She looks upset, and he sighs. On the off-chance (though he doesn’t truly think there’s much of a chance at all) that she’s being forthright and honest, he may as well do his best to not make a teenager cry. “I’m nineteen, barely finished my own apprenticeship. I don’t have the skills required to teach you anything, unfortunately, and my temperament is all wrong for it.”

“Your temperament?” Sutcliffe asks.

“I’m not a very patient person.”

“Well, I’m sorry for testing your patience.” Hattie does look a little offended, if he squints. Oh, well. She’ll get over it. “Thank you so much for the book, and the autograph.”

“No problem.” He waves to her as she leaves.

Once she’s blended back into the crowd, Sutcliffe gives him a serious look. “You nearly lost your mind for a moment there. Do you have a secret phobia of teenage girls?”

“No. I employ a teenage girl. Something she said simply threw me off. It’s fine.”

“Well, it simply makes me curious as to-”

“Pardon the interruption.”

Nemesis and Sutcliffe look up simultaneously at the newcomer. He’s taller than Nemesis but a fair bit shorter than Sutcliffe. His hair is an almost-black dark brown, swept to the side and pinned into a ponytail, strands of it hanging out to give him a more unkempt appearance. His skin is pale, and his eyes are a vibrant green. He’s dressed handsomely, all black and white, immaculately cut tailcoat made of materials which Nemesis reckons cost more than most people make in a month, a green carnation pinned to his lapel. He leans lazily against a crystal-topped cane, and his face is affixed with a carefree grin.

“You’re not too busy, are you, Effie?” he asks. His voice is low, even, and charismatic.

“I don’t think so. Am I?” she asks Nemesis.

“Not at all,” he replies. “Apologies if I’ve been taking up too much of your time.”

“Oh, you’re so polite!” She laughs. “Nothing of the sort, dear. You’ve been nothing but delightful. And it’s always wonderful to meet a fan.”
Nemesis swears he’s told her to stop calling him ‘dear’ already.

The man looks him over. “Goodness, your hair. Ah-oh, apologies, did I say that out loud?” Instead of the more measured accent most of Omen’s Llygredish residents use, he speaks in the northern dialect, giving his voice a wild edge.

“What about my hair?” He twirls a strand of it around his finger, observing the silver color. It’s getting longer again. He remembers watching the strands turn from brown to silver, knowing that it would remain that way for the rest of his life.

“It’s quite striking. You’re far too young for that to be its natural color, so it must be for fashion. I must say, it’s nice to see the youth doing such daring things with their appearance. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it works, it’s very striking. You’re striking in general. I swear I’ve seen your face before, actually, but a little bit...different. I can’t quite place it.” He frowns. “What was your name again?”

“I never gave it,” Nemesis says. “But, er...thank you? My name is Nemesis Jones.”

“Ah.” His eyes widen, just a little - or maybe Nemesis is imagining it. “I see. Nemesis, that’s a curious name. Rexite, isn’t it? But very archaic. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone named that before.”

“Well, first time for everything. It’s not meant to be a name, generally. The person who named me just had a somewhat strange sense of humor. The idea of such a strange and out-of-use name paired with a surname as commonplace as ‘Jones’. And yourself?”

“A strange sense of humor indeed.” The man looks just barely perturbed. “Well, my name is Dorian Dreadful. I’m an old friend of Effie’s and a regular contributor to these galleries.”

Nemesis freezes, momentarily caught off guard. Dreadful isn’t precisely a common name. Would it be rude to ask if he knew Charles? Would he be offended if Nemesis assumed they were related? He decides it’d be better to simply ask Charles later.

Sutcliffe nods. “I didn’t realize you were going to be back in town, Dorian.”

“Well, certain events pulled me back. Ever since buying my first house in Omen, I’ve found it difficult to leave for long. Too much happens here.”

“So you’re an artist?” Nemesis asks.

“No, no. I’m an organizer.” He waves a hand. “I’ve dabbled in painting before, but generally, I’m more liable to be the model than the painter. I do love modeling. Some of my likenesses decorate these very galleries.”

“That’s impressive,” Nemesis says, thinking to himself that it’s not actually nearly as impressive as being a painter.

“Oh, it is, but of course the artists are the ones we’re really here to celebrate.” He smiles. “Of course, I’m a member of the Board of Trustees, so I’ve been able to watch this exhibition be built from the ground up. That these promising students will be able to display their art is wonderful, and seeing it in progress…”

“Ah, you’re a member of the board? That’s amazing.” He’s laying on the flattery pretty thick, he thinks, but this man seems like the type to enjoy it. “So you know the artists involved?” Of course, it all needs to come back to Elizabeth Calloway. That’s why he’s here.
“Yes. They’re wonderful, the lot of them. Hugh Atelier's paintings are spectacular, Kitty Blair’s sculptures are phenomenal, and Lizzie Calloway does some amazing things with gears and scrap metal.” At the end, he looks a little bit more solemn. He doesn’t know Elizabeth Calloway is dead, unless he was involved in her murder. He simply thinks she’s been missing for almost two weeks, so close to her big day.

Nemesis realizes with a pang that Elizabeth Calloway will never see her art exhibited at such a major event. She died before her life could even really begin.

“Of course, Sophronia and Gilbert won’t be quiet about how talented their respective sponsorees are,” Dreadful continues. “Atelier's been Gilbert’s pet project for ages. He found his horse to bet on, I suppose. Atelier has been lucrative. And I think Sophronia genuinely cares for Blair, thinks she has potential. I’m interested in seeing where both of those two go.”

“So Gilbert Banks sponsors Hugh Atelier and Sophronia Ripley sponsors Kitty Blair? Apologies, I didn’t read up on this beforehand, no time.” Gilbert Banks, Nemesis remembers, is a member of the Board of Trustees, who finances projects with the money he makes from his main venture - the Aurum Lex department stores. Sophronia Ripley, on the other hand, is an artist who made her way to the Board after working with the Cabinet for years, known back in the day for her spectacular engineering work. “Did anyone sponsor Elizabeth Calloway?”

“No,” Dreadful says. “And it’s a shame, because I think that she’s just as talented as the other two. Her sculptures are beyond impressive.”

“They are quite something,” Nemesis agrees.

“Oh, you’ve seen them?”

“...at one of the smaller exhibitions, yes,” Nemesis says, remembering Calloway had mentioned something like that.

“Excellent! Don’t repeat this to anyone,” Dreadful whispers, “but I don’t think what’s on display tonight is her best work. Just her most marketable. How stifling of true art…!”

“How unfortunate,” Nemesis agrees, struggling not to tack ‘she’s dead, you know’ onto the end.

“Well, I think you’ll enjoy it regardless. Even a great artist’s worst work is still the work of a great artist.” He laughs, as though this was meant to be funny.

Before Nemesis can make up any sort of response, there’s the ringing of a voice amplifier. “Attention!” Says the voice from earlier. “All guests, please find your way to your seats. Shortly, we will be hearing some words from our Board of Trustees, and then this event can get properly underway.”

“Oh, goodness!” Sutcliffe explains. “That was so very much faster than I expected that. I’d best be getting to my seat!”

She rushes off, and Dreadful chuckles affectionately. “I should be getting back to my people as well, in that case. It was lovely meeting you, Mr…” here, he pauses. “...Jones,” he finishes, finally, as though the name has some sort of significance to him which Nemesis isn’t privy to.

“Lovely meeting you as well.” Nemesis bows, and Dreadful leaves, his cane clicking loudly against the tiled floor.

Nemesis finds his way to the buffet, where he’d sworn to meet Percy. On his way there, he comes
to the conclusion that he’s sure the name Jones does, in fact, have a significance. He’s not about to whip it out in public, but he’s positive that the letter he got from Lavinia Graves mentioned someone named Dorian.

Does that mean his cover is blown? For once, he doesn’t think he has much to worry about. Sure, they’re both Llygredish private investigators named Jones, but that’s where the similarities begin and end. They don’t visually resemble each other, and they’re not actually related. On top of that, the name’s incredibly common. Hopefully, Dorian Dreadful will forget Nemesis existed within the hour. Somehow, though, he doubts it.

He’ll have to ask Graves or Burke about it, once he’s done here.

Right now, there’s no point in sneaking off to try and find the book. The halls are filled with important people. He’ll wait until they’re distracted by the exhibits themselves. For the time being, he locates Percy, who is waving frantically to him, and slides into the chair next to him.

“Thought you’d never make it back,” Percy says. “You really got into the socializing, huh?”

“Not at all,” Nemesis says. “I met Ephemera Sutcliffe, though, so that’s something. Nothing relevant to the case at all, though, I’m afraid to say.”

“Shame, that. I didn’t really find anything either. Apparently Zhou Shuai isn’t here because she’s sick, which could really mean just about anything. What a boring excuse.”

“That’s so anticlimactic. Suppose she actually is ill,” Nemesis offers. “Though, to be perfectly upfront, I doubt that.”

“Me too,” Percy agrees.

The two fall silent, and Nemesis takes the time to observe his surroundings. Evie is sitting next to Percy, and Theory beside her. The two of them are talking eagerly. Something about old Zemlyan plays. The rest of the table is mercifully empty, for the time being. Percy pulls on Nemesis’s sleeve and points to a table several feet away. At it, the Theatre Obscura’s notable actors sit, including Tobias Fitzroy himself. Next to that table, Nemesis spots Kostya Voronov, speaking to a person with black hair and glasses who he supposes must be Hal.

Percy gestures again, and Nemesis follows his hand to look at a slightly farther-away table. Horatio Guildenstern and Genevieve Merritt share their table with Mustafa Dagher and Lucian Vigenere, as well as the Beian woman from earlier, who Nemesis would hazard a guess is the dean, Aurelia Wu.

He also spots Ephemera Sutcliffe at a very distant table. No matter how hard he looks, he can’t find Hattie, but the crowd is massive. She’s likely there somewhere.

To his shock, Liu Jing seems to have crept up on the table, pulling out a chair on Nemesis’s other side. They’re dressed in blue robes, hair neatly tied up. “Hey. You don’t mind if I sit here.” It isn’t a question, but Nemesis nods an affirmation anyway as they sit.

“There a reason you aren’t sitting with the Obscura lot?” Nemesis asks.

“Because I don’t like them. You seem marginally less obnoxious.”

“Low bar, Liu, low bar.”

“You might be right, but…” They sigh. “Well, also, I can’t stand to look at Renwick right now at
all. I just hate her face so much, you know? It’s a really bad face.’’

“I...guess?”

Before this conversation can go any further, Nemesis hears another chair being pulled out. Geoffrey Calloway takes a seat, smiling politely at Nemesis and Percy.

“I had a feeling you two would be here. Did something happen to your friend?”

“Callie?” Nemesis answers. “No, nothing happened. She just doesn’t like large gatherings.”

Calloway chuckles. “Can’t blame her. And neither of you have found anything yet tonight, I assume?”

“Nothing,” Percy confirms. “How is your wife doing?”

Calloway’s expression ever-so-barely darkens. “Same as ever, I suppose.”

Percy is spared the awkwardness of having to continue the conversation by a stranger claiming the seventh and final chair at the table. The stranger in question has shocking white hair in a messy chin-length cut, dressed in a cheap-looking suit and an olive-green overcoat, pale, with gold square glasses and gray eyes.

“Oh, hello,” Percy says, ever the polite one.

“Hey.” Their voice is startlingly monotonous, accented Zemlyan. “Don’t mind if I sit here, do you?”

“Not at all.” Percy smiles welcomingly.

“Cool.” They point to Nemesis. “Nice hair.”

“Oh.” He smiles. “Well, thank you.”

“Is it natural? Just curious.”

“Well, I wasn’t born with it, but it’s natural now.”

“I see…” They nod. “I was born with mine. I was just wondering if you were part Zemlyan or something, because I’ve never seen someone who isn’t be born with hair that color. But it’s from stress, then, or something?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it must be nice to have hair that stands out like that.” They smile. “My name is Nikita Morozov, by the way. I’m at the Institute.”


The rest of the table introduce themselves, and the conversation continues, quiet but polite. Geoffrey Calloway is remarkably somber, like a man reminded of his daughter’s tragic, untimely death. Nikita Morozov is seemingly indifferent, but not impolite. Percy, as always, is animated. Theory and Evie speak mostly to each other, while Jing, curiously, withdraws from the conversation altogether, aside from occasional glances at Nemesis. Something is up with them, he can tell, but he’s at a loss to what.
And then, the lights lower. A spotlight lights up a podium which has been set up on a makeshift stage near the back of the hall, and the audience applauds loudly. The Board of Trustees makes their way onto the stage, and Nemesis has to hold back an audible gasp.

He recognizes Dorian Dreadful, of course. The alarming part is that he recognizes everyone else on this stage as well. He recognizes them because they had shared his very section of the balcony during the performance at the Obscura. The brown-haired woman, the man with the small glasses, the girl with the braid, the sullen-looking boy, and the dark-haired man are all standing on the stage.

So he’d coincidentally been sitting in the same balcony as them? No, that can’t be. There’s no way that was a coincidence. Whatever Salem Riddle is planning…

But he can’t worry about that now. He has something far more immediate to worry about.

Sophronia Ripley is the woman with the brown bun, he assumes, which makes the girl with the braid Kitty Blair. She’s got her hair in a more elaborate braided bun this time, and is wearing a long jade green dress with a slit up to the knee. Ripley, beside her, looks proud, wearing an immaculately-tailored three-piece suit with a white cape over one shoulder. Gilbert Banks is the dark-haired man. Despite the fact that Nemesis knows for a fact he’s extremely rich, his suit is a simple two-piece, black with a matching tie, completely boring. He looks, if Nemesis had to say, uncomfortable on stage. The boy standing beside him doesn’t look any better. He’s not even dressed up at all, still in a paint-stained white shirt and black waistcoat.

And the man at the podium must be none other than Phineas Sterling. His striking red hair is tied back, he’s dressed in a black suit with gold trim, and his spectacles sit almost comically on the end of his nose, perfectly spherical.

“Ladies, gentlemen, gentlepersons, and citizens, welcome to the grand opening of the Cabinet of Marvels’s thirteenth annual spring showcase!”
The crowd applauds heavily. Nemesis begrudgingly claps along, though the Chases’ applause seems far more genuine. Jing and Calloway both abstain from applauding altogether. The latter, he completely understands. The former, he finds much more curious.

Once the applause settles down, Sterling adjusts his glasses, smiling nervously. He gives Nemesis the impression of a schoolboy giving a speech he’s horribly unprepared for, with the sort of anxious disposition that would endear him to his professor and net him a high mark despite his lack of public speaking talent.

When he speaks, it’s with an audible stutter. Whatever bravado he had managed to generate for his opening statement has evaporated entirely. “Th-that is to say, um...we’re thrilled to w-welcome you to our humble exhibition! As is typical of the spring showcase, our major pr-presentations will not be from myself, or Sophronia, or any similarly established faces around here. Instead, today’s exhibit will c-center around the, um, the works of the next generation of artists! Th-three university st-students, all of whom attend the Institute at Catacumba!”

Again, the applause. Nemesis knows it would be rude to cover his ears, but he finds himself wishing it weren’t. The applause is just so unbearably loud.

It dies down again, though. It always does. And when there’s nothing left but a quiet ringing in Nemesis’s ears, Sterling speaks again.

“That b-being said, I w-would like to introduce our wonderful young t-talent!” There’s another smattering of applause, and he smiles sheepishly. “Thank you, thank you. Um...Sophronia, take it away!”

Ripley makes her way to the podium, clearing her throat. Her voice is surprisingly stern-sounding. “My name is Sophronia Ripley, artificer, clockworker, steamsmith, artist, and member of the Cabinet’s Board of Trustees, and it is my pleasure to introduce talented sculptress Katherine Blair!”

Blair waves. Nemesis can tell the act of being called by her full given name is mildly unsettling her. What is it, about people insisting on using a person’s full birth name even in situations where the person never uses it for themself? If no one recognizes her as Katherine, why not simply call her Kitty?

The societal focus on ‘real’ names is something Nemesis will never understand. A name is an identifier, an arbitrary series of sounds assigned to an individual. If an individual is known as one series of arbitrary sounds, there’s no reason to focus on what series of arbitrary sounds they should properly be known as. It’s all quite pointless.

Kitty Blair gets her applause, and Banks takes the stage next. “And my name is Gilbert Banks, president of Aurum Lux and member of the Board of Trustees.” His voice is more even, almost indifferent. He sounds almost less comfortable onstage than Sterling. Almost. “And I would like to introduce the prodigious painter Hugh Atelier.”

Hugh - the scruffy-looking, paint-stained boy - bows awkwardly. He, too, gets his applause, though it’s noticeably less than Kitty got. Something about marketability, Nemesis thinks to himself.

Sterling takes the podium again. “Regrettably, our third artist, the clockworker and artificer Elizabeth C-Calloway, cannot be here today. We pay our utmost c-condolences to her family and
friends, hope that she may somehow find her way back to us. For the time being, we hope that it will bring comfort to those who know her to see her work on display, celebrated by all of us gathered here.”

Another round of applause, though this one sounds more confused than enthusiastic. It makes sense. Few people know what happened to Elizabeth Calloway. As far as Nemesis knows, this is the first public acknowledgment of her disappearance.

Next to him, Calloway visibly deflates. Nemesis wishes there were something he could do to comfort him, but it’s all too conspicuous, too attention-drawing. He settles for giving him a sympathetic look which he’s pretty sure isn’t so much as noticed.

“W-With all of that out of the way, l-let’s have a last round of applause for all of the talent on show tonight!”

He gets the requested round of applause, back to its full ear-shattering force. It’s almost as if the people in attendance have forgotten that Elizabeth Calloway is missing. Next to Nemesis, Calloway looks miserable and defeated.

“Before we b-begin our main event,” Sterling continues, “We’d like to p-present a short musical performance…introducing first, Tobias Fitzroy of the Theatre Obscura!”

Wild applause breaks out. Fitzroy, it seems, is more popular than Sterling. He emerges from the shadows of the hall, dressed just as fantastically expensively as he was at the opening of Edward and Lucia. He smiles wide, teeth bared like a predator. The crowd seems to adore it.

When Nemesis stops to think about it, his teeth remind him of a more subtle version of the effect given off by one Salem Riddle.

“Hello, friends!” He says, and the crowd explodes with cheers. It feels as if these people would applaud him for the mere act of being alive.

He waits for the applause to settle down slightly before continuing. “I am proud to be here tonight on behalf of myself and the Theatre Obscura, a long-time sponsor of the Cabinet of Marvels!”

“It’s not, actually,” Jing whispers to Nemesis. “The sponsorship is a new thing. Last five years.”

“Maybe five years is his definition of a long time?” He whispers back hopefully.

“Maybe he’s just an evil waste of flesh.”

“I mean, I agree. Just trying to be lighthearted about it.”

Fitzroy’s smile only seems to widen. “And I am proud to present the Obscura’s very own resident pianist, the virtuoso who has performed for countless performances of ours to ceaseless critical acclaim - ladies and gentlemen, Elias Fitzroy!”

“He didn’t even mention he’s his son,” Jing whispers to Nemesis. Their voice suggests an immediate desire to commit homicide, and not one which Nemesis can fault them for, considering he shares it.

Any response he might have had, though, is immediately cut short. Fitzroy gestures towards the hall from which he came with one arm, and the crowd begins to applaud wildly. He feels Jing’s attention fix on the shadows.
Elias emerges from the hall behind the stage, walking to it with a steady, almost robotic stride. He’s dressed far more formal than Nemesis has ever seen him, a red dress shirt and black coat trimmed with gold. He looks so uncomfortable, Nemesis thinks, beneath all that thick fabric. Elias has never liked to wear more than one layer if he can help it, but Nemesis supposes Tobias Fitzroy wouldn’t be sympathetic to that.

The applause must be horrible. The attention, overwhelming. Elias hates attention, and here he is, standing on a stage he didn’t choose.

Elias sits down gingerly at the piano bench, and Nemesis realizes that, with the way it’s positioned, he’s looking directly at him. Their eyes meet for a moment - or is that Nemesis’s imagination? Is his mind playing tricks on him, or is Elias’s stare locked on him?

“This is a song of my composition,” he announces. The wording is so un-Elias it makes Nemesis cringe. “Love Letter in E-Flat Minor.” A title which Nemesis would also consider to be distinctly un-Elias. Forget that, he’s never so much as heard him name a piece before.

The audience stirs, seemingly intrigued. Next to Nemesis, Jing wears a completely inscrutable frown. Nemesis, though, finds himself stone-still, unable to so much as breathe for fear of interfering with the music. He wants to hear every note as clearly as he would if he were there, sitting next to him on the bench.

Elias lays his fingers over the keys, carefully finding his starting position. He inhales sharply, and then opens.

For all the buildup, the opening to the song is soft and sweet. The sorrowful melody gracefully floats, building and then fading away. And Nemesis is sure of one thing - that this isn’t the song he heard at the Obscura.

Why would Elias change his song last-minute? Nemesis looks at him, and he finds, curiously, that Elias is staring right back. For a moment, their eyes meet. And then he looks back down at his keyboard as the song begins to pick up pace.

All night, the crowd has never been fully silent. Even during Sterling and Fitzroy’s speeches, one could hear whispers in the background, gossiping or commenting or any other number of things. But now, listening to Elias, the crowd is completely, eerily silent. The only audible thing in the room is the music. No one even dares breathe.

Nemesis understands fully why. He’d experienced it himself, the first time he ever saw Elias sit down at a piano bench. Watching Elias play is the only thing Nemesis has ever experienced comparable to the majesty of the stars themselves. His every movement is measured and yet natural, graceful and yet with a distinct jerky quality to it, like a hinge which has gone perhaps a bit too long without oiling. His hands fly over the keys with inhuman speed despite the fact that his fingers, long and bony, shouldn’t be suited for it.

He transitions abruptly into a new section, and the tone couldn’t be more different. Far removed from the morose, melancholic, slow tone of the opening movement, this is far more excited. Not quite gallant, not quite cheerful, something in-between, something that makes Nemesis’s heart pound so hard it threatens to burst out of his chest and gallivant about the room, which makes him want to get in a swordfight or to run along a rooftop or to kiss someone in secret out of view of everyone else.

Elias’s hands are moving at incredible speeds, slamming on the keys faster than Nemesis can follow them. Where he normally leans in and out with the ebb and flow of the music, he’s instead
hunched over the keys, as though magnetized to the piano. Nemesis rarely sees him play pieces that sound like this.

Elias plays like a man possessed. Were it anyone else, Nemesis might find it frightening. Instead, he finds it beautiful, enthralling. His arms seem to bend at angles that are almost inhuman, and the music only increases the effect.

Up close, Nemesis knows the joints of Elias’s fingers are knobby, some of them looking as though they were put on at the wrong angle. Playing for eight hours straight has consequences, no matter what Tobias Fitzroy might want. As Elias calms down to a more morose tune again, a wave of guilt washes over Nemesis. He’s destroying himself for his art, and here Nemesis is enjoying the result.

The slow pace suits Elias far better, in Nemesis’s opinion. He’s far better at it, and from what he’s told Nemesis, he prefers it as well. He’s precise and careful, approaching it in a methodical and measured way which Nemesis always thought was so elegant. The Elias who sits at the piano might as well be a different person from the Elias of everyday, but Nemesis thinks both of them are wonderful in their own subtle ways.

The slow variation on the opening movement grabs Nemesis’s heart by the throat. It’s poignant and overwhelming, making his muscles tense and his joints stiffen involuntarily. He wants nothing more than to fall to shreds, allow himself to be absorbed into the music and consumed in his entirety.

Even in the cold, mournful notes, Nemesis finds a strange warmth.

Typically, in Nemesis’s experience, when a song is primarily unhappy and minor throughout, it will end on a slightly more positive note. A major triad for the ending, a single shift from a flat to a natural, something to make it end off happier than it began. *Love Letter in E-Flat Minor* does no such thing, Elias finishing on a dissonant tritone chord which feels as though it rends the ear of the listener. Unlike the rest of the music, which ebbed between pianissimo and mezzo-piano, this chord is shatteringly loud. It almost feels as though it was designed to cause as much pain to the listener as possible.

Despite this, the applause is even more earthshaking. Nemesis glances around, trying to re-familiarize himself with all the parts of his surroundings which aren’t Elias. Easily half of the room is in tears. At his table, Calloway is sobbing too much to even stand up for the ovation. Percy has tears silently flowing down his face, and Evie’s cheeks are streaked with the remains of the same. Even Theory has the barest hint of tears building in the corners of her eyes. Nikita Morozov seems less affected, but even they are applauding furiously, on their feet before the last note even ended.

Nemesis, too, is on his feet, hands threatening to shatter from the force of his applause. He whistles loudly - Elias meets his eyes. Is it just him, or does he look a little sheepish? One thing is certain - Elias, too, has eyes brimming with tears.

Next to Nemesis, Jing is cheering loud enough that he can only imagine their throat will be horribly sore in a few minutes. They look perhaps the most affected at the table, next to Calloway, wiping tears frantically away from their face using their shirt sleeve.

Elias bows once, stiff, all the elegance and grace faded. Elias who sits at the piano might as well be a different person from the clumsy, awkward Elias who always looks frozen stiff with anxiety, who Nemesis knows on more than one occasion has whacked him with a billiards cue from an improbable distance. He quickly gets off the stage, visibly uncomfortable now that the music has stopped. Instead of remaining with the artists and the Board and Fitzroy, he escapes back into the hall.
Sterling - who has been dabbing rapidly at his eyes with a handkerchief provided by Banks - claps his hands, settling the crowd down into science. “That was, th-that was, uh, w-wow. Another round of applause for Elias Fitzroy, everyone!”

The applause is granted enthusiastically. Now that Elias himself isn’t here, Nemesis abstains, and Jing next to him does the same. He’s content to stand there, feeling the aftershocks of the music travel through him, giving him that wonderful empty feeling he’s become so used to. He would be more than content, he thinks, to do nothing but listen to Elias play for the rest of his life. He feels the absence of the music like a pull, and in the moment he would do anything to hear it again. He knows the lure of it will follow him even to his dreams.

There’s something to be said for Elias’s powerful knack, that whether he means to or not there’s a good chance he’s been artificially swaying the hearts of everyone who hears him play. But even if that weren’t the case, Nemesis knows he would think it were the most beautiful thing in all worldly existence.

“Well, th-then,” Sterling continues once the applause dies down again. “We’ll be officially unveiling the exhibitions. Each artist will g-give a presentation of their own art, in around an h-hour, beginning with Ms Blair. F-For the time, feel free to wander the galleries on your own, eat, and s-socialize.”

Some music plays, with the familiar phonograph scratching. After hearing Elias, it feels almost like an insult in comparison, but Nemesis supposes it’s fine enough music.

He looks over at Jing, sees them frowning. They wordlessly gesture with their head in the direction of the Obscura’s table. Walter is still wiping tears from his eyes, but Lusitania, who is conversing at high speeds with Morgana, looks thrilled. Fitzroy has returned to it, though Elias is nowhere to be seen, which gives Nemesis a quick burst of relief.

Is the relief because he thinks Elias is unhappy around the people seated there, or is it because Nemesis selfishly doesn’t want him to pay attention to his own family, fiance, and co-workers? Logically, he’s sure it’s the former, but the tiny bit of doubt is enough to deliver a stab of self-loathing. He must be a horrible person.

Next to him, Jing stands up. “Come with me to one of the old exhibits,” they tell Nemesis. It sounds less like an offer and more like a threat.

“Well, if you insist.” He stands up.

Across the table, Theory and Evie stand as well, one after the other. Evie smiles at Theory, and slides her hand into hers. “We’re going to go look at the ancient Zemlyan art exhibit,” she tells Percy. “You hold down the fort here.”

He gives her a thumbs-up and promptly begins to attempt to engage a still-distraught Calloway in a conversation about famous pianists.

Jing and Nemesis take the least-crowded path, into an old exhibit labeled ‘Optical Wonders of the Clockwork World’ - Nemesis recognizes it as Sophronia Ripley’s work.

“She thinks the song was about her.” Jing growls the moment they’ve left earshot. “I can feel it. Her ego is so massive it fills the whole room.”

“If she really does,” Nemesis says, “then she should be aware the song is sad. Not precisely a glowing endorsement of their relationship. I refuse to believe she’s that stupid.”
Jing shrugs. “Elias’s songs make people feel things. That’s a fact. Who’s to say it didn’t make her irrational?”

“I dunno. Reckon the song definitely wasn’t about her, though.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Jing agreed. “I’ve actually never heard that song before.”

“Elias told me he wasn’t going to put his full effort into a song Fitzroy made him write,” Nemesis says, “but really, this is my favorite thing I’ve ever heard from him. It feels like...somehow, it affected me even more than his music tends to.”

“It was pretty good,” Jing agrees, and here he senses a note of bitterness. “Lusitania really is an idiot if she thinks he’d write something that nice about her. He’s never even written songs for people he actually likes.”

“I mean, it’s a big undertaking, writing a whole song. Makes sense.”

“But this one...a love letter.” Jing looks at him seriously. “So, what do you think it was for?”

“What’s that bloody mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

The exhibit’s first room is wall-to-wall mirrors, all four walls consumed except for a small door off to the very side, designed to be as unobtrusive as possible. Nemesis turns his head, looking from mirror to mirror, several reflected versions trailing ever-so-barely behind him.

“Well, that’s interesting, I guess?” He’s of the opinion that seeing one version of himself was more than enough already. “Never seen a mirror reflected in another mirror before. Looks neat.” Indeed, the mirrors reflect each other in an endless cycle, rectangles within slightly smaller rectangles stretching back into infinite illusory space. The farther back they go, the greener they look. “Do you reckon what this means is mirrors have been green all along, and we just haven’t been able to perceive it?”

“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about, Jones.”

“I mean, when you look at the reflections, it’s green, right? I thought...somehow, I didn’t ever think about what color a mirror really was, but they’re green. That’s fascinating!”

Their eyes narrow. “I have no idea what in the world Elias sees in you. You’re obnoxious, you know that? Completely impossible to talk to.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, maybe? I mean, actually, I reckon Elias would agree with you. What happened to us getting along?”

They pause, trying to take that in, then sigh. “You’re an idiot.”

“I’ve been told.”

“You - eurgh.” They yank sharply on the strands of hair framing their face, as if to focus themselves. “You’ve been deflecting this whole conversation, haven’t you? I asked you a question and you’ve done everything in your power to avoid answering.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “If that’s what’s happening, it’s not on purpose.”

“Okay, how about this? I know your secret, asshole.”
That, now, that gets his attention. “That could be a lot of secrets,” he says, even as his hand reaches for his compass - why? It can’t help him in this situation, beyond discerning if they’re bluffing or not, so why is he immediately reaching for it the same way he reaches for his gun in violent confrontations? Is it truly that comforting just to know it’s there?

“Seeing you interact with Elias, I’ve figured out who you are pretty fast.” They take a sharp breath in, sounding oddly labored. “He wrote to me, you know. Every damned month, he wrote to me. And he went on and on about this one guy. It started a little indifferent. He only spent his time with you because he didn’t have anyone better for company. He thought you were obnoxious and a little bit scary.”

Nemesis nods. “I’d had my suspicions at the time.” He’s had his suspicions this whole time, in fact, that Elias only bothers with him out of obligation. To have them confirmed is a relief, even as he feels his heart wring itself.

“But,” they say, cutting into his misery, “he cares about you. After a while, the letters got longer, more flowery. He wouldn’t shut up about how smart you were and how nice you were to him, and how he was only happy when you two were sneaking out somewhere. When you got your apprenticeship he was devastated, you know?”

“I didn’t-didn’t know that, no.” It feels like a punch in the stomach.

“But he didn’t tell you. He couldn’t tell you, because he wanted you to be happy.” They scoff. “Can’t imagine why, considering you up and abandoned him! And even then, he wasn’t mad at you - because, you know, he’s almost never mad at anyone, even when they’re being awful to him! I don’t understand that! I’m mad at everyone, all the time, and I’m mad at you!”

They poke Nemesis in the chest, and he flinches. “Bloody hell, keep your voice down. Chew me out if you need, but let’s not air Elias’s feelings - which he expressed to you in confidence - to the entire gathered menagerie, shall we?”

They pause and sigh, lowering their hand. “You’re right. But I’m still mad at you.”

“Never implied otherwise, or that you couldn’t be.”

“He wrote to me more often after that. Every single weekend, when he got to see you, he’d write to me about it. Talk about how happy he was, as if he wasn’t miserable the other five days of the week.” They scowl. “And now he’s miserable again, more than he has been. And I can’t help him.”

That sentence went somewhere Nemesis hadn’t at all expected it to. Slowly, he nods. “I know he’s miserable. But what makes you think I can help him more than you can?”

“Because you’re the one he cares about.” They wrench their face away from him, but the pain on it is apparent. “Because I haven’t ever been enough for him. He calls me his best friend, but I know you’re the one he really cares about. And if anyone can get him to call off the engagement and get away from the Obscura, it’s you!”

Nemesis laughs humorlessly. “Oh, believe me when I say I’ve tried. He gets horribly defensive. And...I don’t want to assume anything, actually. What if this is what he wants, and I’m trying to take that away from him because I selfishly want him to...to...” he trails off, unable to say aloud the thought which has been rushing through his head the entire evening.

“You want him to...” Jing rolls their eyes. “You’re an idiot. You’re so worried about doing
something wrong that you’re ignoring the fact that he’s clearly suffering. He hates Renwick, he hates performing, he hates the Obscura, and he hates Fitzroy. He’s told me himself.”

“He...he has?”

“Because he doesn’t have anyone else he can trust around, because you’re off being Dick Remington while he’s shutting himself in his room because he can’t stand the people he’s surrounded by.” Their voice dips up in pitch, just barely, and they immediately clamp their hand over their mouth before continuing in a harsh whisper. “And that’s why I don’t like you. Not because he likes you more than me.”

Out of all the things they could possibly have said, that’s about the hardest to formulate a proper response to. He can only stammer indignantly. “What in the world does that have to do with - first off, he probably doesn’t, but also - what does that-”

“You’re an idiot.”

“We’ve well covered that!”

“Right, well, clearly not enough.” They glare at him. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Apparently so.”

They sigh, shoving their hands into the pockets which he wasn’t even aware they had. “You’re the person Elias cares about the most. Not me. About a year ago, I...I told him, I…” They trail off. “No, I can’t say it, can I? Eugh. Fine, I told him I loved him.”

In retrospect, it was obvious, but their sentence knocks the wind out of his sails. All he can do is stare at them with what he’s sure is a rather stupid-looking expression. “You...ah. I see. And he...?”

“Didn’t reciprocate. I think that goes without saying. And it’s not like that’s the part that hurts me. It’s just...” They sigh. “...well, maybe it does sting a little. But what I’m more concerned about is that with all the time he’s spent away at school, he’s drifted away from me. He doesn’t feel as close to me as I do to him, because he had you, and I never had anybody like that except for him. And because he’s not as close to me, he won’t listen to my advice on the subject. But if you talked to him, maybe...”

“If you insist,” he agrees, though he thinks to himself that if the person who has known Elias the longest hasn’t gotten through to him his mind is probably made up. “You...you mentioned knowing my name, you shan’t...tell anyone, will you?”

“Probably not.” They shrug, trying to play off the emotional nature of the conversation. Jing, Nemesis thinks, doesn’t strike him as the sort of person to deal with feelings very well at all. He can only imagine how much it must have taken them to be forthright with Elias to begin with.

Confrontation comes easier to them than confession. That’s something he can relate to.

“Right. Er...thank you for that, at least?”

“Don’t give me a reason to change my mind.” They sigh. “And stop this. At the end of the day, I just don’t want Elias to get hurt more than he has already.”

“We can agree on that, at least.”
“Right.” They exhale, calmer, if barely. “...sorry for going off at you in the middle of a museum gallery. I mean, I’m not actually sorry. It needed to happen. But you’re not allowed to think I’m a bad person for this.”

“I’m allowed to think you’re whatever the stars I want,” he responds indignantly, almost on reflex. “But I don’t think you’re a bad person, no. Just very emotionally high-strung.”

“Yeah, that’s what Elias says, too.” They glance around them, watching their face’s reflection distort in the mirrors. “I don’t want to be in here anymore. It’s making me sick. Just keep what I told you in mind, Jones.”

“I will do, yeah.”

They’re almost to the door when they look back over their shoulder at him. “I can tell you do care about Elias. So don’t let this go on longer than it needs to, okay? I don’t think you’re an awful person.”

“High praise, that.”

“Don’t start being sarcastic with me after I’ve said something nice!”

“Awful loose definition of nice there.” He laughs. “Ah, though, sorry. I appreciate the conversation, even if I’m not exactly sure what I’m meant to do now. I’m here to investigate a murder and all. Tracking down a guy who’s probably halfway home by now wasn’t on my to-do list.”

“He’s not on his way home. Renwick would never let him go like that. So you can find him, if you look.” They stop and smile. “By the way, he’s always admired you. He told me once he dreamed about helping you with cases.”

“He could’ve done any time, though. I’m sure Mr. Jones wouldn’t’ve stopped him, and I surely wouldn’t’ve minded.”

“But he’s not smart like you,” they say, more somber. “That’s what he always said about you. That you’re smart. Well, I don’t see it. I think you’re an idiot.”

“I’m rather inclined to agree with you, actually,” Nemesis admits, sighing. “…right. I’ll find him.”

“You’d better.” They close the door behind them, leaving Nemesis alone in the mirrored room. The longer he stands here, the more he hates it. Assaulted by images of himself from all sides, the massive room begins to feel unbearably claustrophobic.

He finds Percy back at their table. Calloway seems to have gotten just barely more functional, sitting up and with mostly dry eyes, though the tear-streaks are strikingly visible against his pale skin. Nikita Morozov has stood up at some point - he sees them over by the bar, asking someone else to operate the self-operated champagne dispenser for them. It looks, as best he can tell from this distance, to be artifice-based. So they're knackless.

“The exhibit over there is pretty interesting,” Nemesis says, sliding into an empty seat at the table.

“I imagine it is.” Percy looks at him. Somewhere, in-between the serious expression, Nemesis can sense worry. “You’re back awfully quickly. Did something happen? Where did Jing go?”
“They’re fine. I’m fine.”

“Not what I asked, but okay.” He puts a hand on Nemesis’s shoulder, and Nemesis flinches at the sudden touch. “Why are you back here?”

“I needed to touch base with you,” he admits. “I don’t want to run off without informing my investigation partner, so—”

“Partner?” Percy interjects, brightening momentarily. “I, uh, I mean, that makes sense. So what’s up?”

“Should I be leaving you two to this?” Calloway asks. “Personal relevance aside, I don’t want to listen in on confidential talks.”

“That’d be lovely,” Percy replies. “Why don’t you...go get something to eat, and I’ll come get you when we’re done here?”

“Sounds fine to me,” Calloway agrees, getting unsteadily to his feet and walking, in the direction of not the buffet, but the bar.

Percy frowns after him. “He worries me.”

“Me as well. He’s in a bad way. Not that I don’t understand why he is, but it’s a little alarming nonetheless.” Nemesis sits down, sighing. “I’m a private investigator, not a psychologist, certainly not a grief counselor.”

“Right. I’m not that either.” Calloway gone, Percy fixes his stare directly on Nemesis. “So. As we were saying: what happened?”

Nemesis groans recalling it. “Jing and I had a...talk.”

“As I’ve observed.”

“I need to track down Elias...Fitzroy,” he tacks onto the end hurriedly.

“You don’t have to pretend it’s less personal than it is. I know you two are friends, don’t worry.” He pauses, then mumbles: “Still need to get that interview.”

“There’ll be time for that later. For the time being, I need to track him down. And I was thinking...if that ends up taking up the timeframe of the presentation, I might stay here through the night. They can’t stop me sneaking around the place then, can they?”

Percy laughs quietly. “Oh, that’s such a you thing to say, Nemesis. I’ll cover for you, if that’s what you want, and I’ll make sure to tell Theory you’re not dead.”

“I feel dead, honest. And it’s been, what, two hours?”

“About.”

“Well, I appreciate the help, mate.” He claps him on the shoulder.

“Of course.” Percy’s gaze seems to linger on Nemesis’s arm just a moment too long. “Uh...Nemesis?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Chase?”
“Yeah, that’s my surname, I guess.”

He sighs. “You doing alright?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” His speech is far too hurried.

Nemesis shakes his head. “There’s something on your mind.”

“They’re called thoughts, Nemesis.”

“And you have a lot of them, huh?”

“Oh, all the damn time, Nemesis.” He taps his head. “You have no idea how many thoughts’ll fit into this bad boy.”

“Is that you calling yourself smart?”

Percy laughs. “Would I be wrong to do so?”

“Probably not. I’m not the Institute, I don’t get to decide how smart you are.”

“I think I’d value your opinion on the matter, though. Definitely more than the Institute’s.” Percy raises an eyebrow, looking Nemesis in the eye with an almost uncomfortable directness. “Partner?”

“Partner?” Nemesis repeats.

A little bit more hesitant, he continues. “You called me that earlier.”

Ah, so he’s still thinking about that. Nemesis shakes his head. “Not really. I called you an investigation partner, which is different.”

“It doesn’t make much of a difference to me. I guess I’m just…” he laughs. “…sorry, it’s really awkward to talk about myself, isn’t it? It’s so much easier to talk about the news or conspiracies or cases. I just didn’t realize you thought that highly of me.”

“Is that truly such a high compliment to you? I’m just...stating facts, you know. We’re on the same team, we’re trying to unravel the same mysteries, and really, we’re after most of the same goals.” It feels like it should be common sense, but Percy looks painfully earnest. “You work with me on investigations... partner with me on them even. Thus...investigation partner.”

“I suppose all of that makes sense.” And yet, he doesn’t look particularly cheered. “I just worry, Nemesis. I’m not a detective.”

“Neither am I.”

“Well, you know what I mean.” He sighs. “I’m not a private investigator, I’m a reporter, and I’ve only been a reporter for a couple years now. It’s a wonder I got this job at all, actually. I’m pretty young for it.”

“Admittedly, I had just assumed that meant you were some sort of prodigy,” Nemesis says, resisting the urge to wince after he finishes. It’s easy to forget that not everyone is like him. Not everyone has potential.

He thinks Percy has potential, he thinks to himself, with almost an edge of anger. But people in Omen, where everyone who’s anyone is up to their eyes in espionage, have markedly higher standards than the people in Citrea Viridia.
“Nemesis is nothing special here, either. Scary thought, that.

“I mean, that’s what people say, but I don’t just want to report things.” He smiles at Nemesis. He supposes that might be Percy’s default facial expression, regardless of what emotion he’s feeling. Except for that time at Burke’s, he’s never seen Percy without that smile for any significant length of time. “I want to be the one figuring out what’s happening. That’s the Sun’s thing, right? We were founded on the principle of telling the news that nobody else wants to and uncovering the secrets the other papers won’t.”

“I mean, that’s what the front of papers say, yes.”

“And that’s what I always wanted to do!” Just briefly, Nemesis thinks, he looks upset. “You know, a lot of people accuse me of only getting the job I have because my mother used to be a photographer for the Sun?”

“Ah, she did?” Nemesis curses himself for not paying attention to photography credits in newspapers. “Is that why you went into journalism to begin with?”

“Nope. I…” He leans close to Nemesis, whispering. “…it was always what I wanted to do. It was also a convenient path to the Correspondents.”

Nemesis nods. “What drove you to it, before that was a factor?”

“I got tired of the news not actually reporting anything. I like knowing things, and when information isn’t available it makes me angry.”

Somehow, Nemesis can’t imagine Percy being angry. “That’s an admirable reason to go into it. And for what it’s worth, I think you’re probably the best reporter I’ve ever met. I can’t imagine nepotism played much of a part.”

“Ah...really?” And for once, Percy looks visibly uncertain.

“I don’t lie as a rule. So, yes, I’m serious.”

“Well, if you say so…” He laughs. “Sorry. Evie says the same thing, but she’d do just about anything to make me happy. You’re an unbiased third party, so it’s a lot easier to hear coming from you than my sister.”

“I dunno, your sister seems the brutally honest type to me. I don’t think she’d blatantly lie to you, especially if you’ve made it clear to her that you want honesty.”

“That’s the thing, I haven’t really.” He looks almost ashamed now. “See, I worry people will take offense if I make it seem like I don’t believe them. I...tend to worry about being impolite or hurting people’s feelings. Perhaps more than I should be. It’s not helping me, I know, but-”

“Nah, I get it. People get mad at me for questioning the things they say all the bloody time.” He sighs. “Let me tell you a story, Chase.”

“I feel like I might not have a choice in the matter,” Percy says sheepishly.

“Good, you’re catching on.” Nemesis takes a breath and continues. “As you know by now, I was not always the master investigator I am now. Back in the day...I was an apprentice investigator.”

“Especially not Nemesis Jones. You’ll be shocked to hear this, but as a child I was a little bit...rough around the edges, if you will.”

“Uhh...you picked a lock in front of me the second time we ever met.”

“Perfectly reputable people with no histories of criminal activity know how to pick locks sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. I’ve met a lot of rich brats who just think it would be oh-so cool and glamorous to learn things like that.” He grins. “None of them would ever be as good as me, though, you’re right.”

“This feels like a bit of a disorganized tangent,” Percy admits.

“Ah, right. Back to my main point, then.” He makes sure to lower his voice just a bit more. No one ever knows who might be listening in. “I wasn’t the sort of person people thought would ever amount to much. Scholarship kid at a private academy, sure, but no amount of high marks can get someone with my personality a job.”

“I like your personality.”

“You should’ve seen me at thirteen.” He chuckles. “Anyhow, I was given a rather amazing opportunity. A private investigator who was looking into something at my school met me, and he thought I had potential, whatever that meant. So he offered me an apprenticeship.”

“Well, what that means, Nemesis, is that he thought you were smart.”

“Not really. I mean, I reckon I am smart, seeing as I had top marks in my grade, but I don’t know that I’m actually very well-suited to this job in particular. I just...you know, I thought it’d be better than school.”

Percy shakes his head. “I don’t know, actually. School was pretty alright for me. I was actually valedictorian of my class. If it weren’t for the Sun, I’d’ve probably gone to university of some sort.”

“Well, let me just tell you that your experiences in that regard are not universal,” Nemesis says, before continuing. “Regardless, that whole potential thing, it never really fully set in that this adult actually thought highly of me. And at some point, I told him that.”

Percy looks blankly at Nemesis. If he had to guess, he doesn’t really understand where this is going. “So what did he say?”

“He said I was an idiot. Said he’d invested way too much in me to have been lying, and besides that, what’s the point of lying to a miserable teenager? I reckon I didn’t totally believe him even after that, just because of who I am as a person, but it sort of snapped me out of the mindset.” He looks seriously at Percy. “If you’re worried about people feeling obliged to be nice, I assure you that I have no such obligation, and I am rude constantly and to just about everyone. The fact that I think you’re pretty sharp has to mean something.”

“I...I think you’re right, yeah. I never...thought about it that way.” He nods. “Sorry for making this about myself, when you have things to be doing. But thank you. I agree. I think...neither you nor Ms. Alhazred seem like the type to lie to me, especially not about that.”

“Right. Khalida Alhazred. You two are close?” Khalida Alhazred...the editor of the Electric Sun, a known member of the Correspondents’ League - the one who Burke had said was at the heart of the original organization falling to pieces. A curious figure indeed.
“Yeah, we are. At least, I hope we are? I like to think I’m one of her favorite employees.” Percy brightens. “She’s my boss, and she’s the person who got me my job. She’s really stern, but she seems to genuinely think I have potential. I look up to her a lot, really.”

“It’s only natural to look up to one’s employer.” The way Percy describes Khalida Alhazred, he thinks, sounds eerily similar to how he would describe one Arthur Jones.

“I agree. But, for the record, I admire you too. Not just for your honesty.”

“Er...thanks?”

Percy grins. “I admire you. That’s why you’re my rival. But I’ve been keeping you way too long. Go and investigate, will you?”

“Will do.” He stands up, before looking back at Percy. “We really have to find a convenient way of communicating while doing things like this. Coming back to your table each time isn’t unfeasible, but in a different circumstance…”

“You’re totally right,” Percy agrees. “I’ll look into getting some walky-talkies or something. That’d be neat, right?”

Nemesis laughs. “I reckon it will be. I’ll be seeing you, then.”

Percy salutes. “Good luck, partner.”

It isn’t until Nemesis is a good bit away from the table that he realizes what the end of this conversation signifies. No more excuses, he has to find Elias.

The first place he looks are the galleries themselves. Currently, almost the entire guest body is crammed into Kitty Blair’s as she gives a presentation. From what he can see through the shoulders and elbows and fashionably massive hats, her sculptures look interesting enough, but what he can see is precious little.

Instead, he squeezes through the crowds and into the next gallery over. When he sees its contents, he has to keep himself from gasping, but even then, he feels almost as if he’s been punched.

The late Elizabeth Calloway’s beautiful clockwork sculptures line the room. A city street, rendered in wrought-iron and steel scraps, shades of gray giving it a depth which one shouldn’t be able to expect from metal. It’s welded together in places, and attached less seamlessly in others. In the windows of each house, she’s put small lights, glowing brightly against the black-painted walls and ceiling. It’s a perfect recreation of an Omen street at night, and it’s beautiful.

In the street, she’s modeled carriages and automobiles that come to his ankle, and countless tiny metal people, making their way along the sidewalk. Each of them is painstakingly modeled - if he looks closer, he can see tiny faces, carefully burnt in. Artifice can do such amazing things. Sometimes, he really wishes he could do things like that.

But there’s no time for bemoaning the fate which hand has dealt him. He’s lucky to have the room alone to himself, but there’s no doubt that he won’t for long. Someone will mill in, and he’s best served getting all of his investigation done before that happens.

He procures the kinetoscope from his bag, having pre-loaded it with the eye-disc he’d taken from
the statue at Calloway’s. He knows how these things tend to go - one clue leads to another. And indeed, he immediately sees movement, the people in the streets hurrying along towards their fictional destinations, the automobiles and carriages rolling along on their tiny wheels, immaculately sculpted, every individual spoke of every individual wheel in perfect place.

Slowly, they congregate at the center of the street, looking up at Nemesis with their tiny sculpted faces. There’s something so eerie about it, the soulless masses staring for him like Reverenti praying to their Divine, like travelers looking desperately to the stars.

And then they arrange themselves, one by one, into the shape of words. The individual people spell out, in massive letters, ‘HUGH’.

Hugh...Hugh Atelier, of course. There must be something hidden in his painting. Elizabeth and Hugh are - were, in her case - both assuredly involved with the Benefactors. They could easily have coordinated their messages to lead to one another.

He begins to lower the kinetoscope, but he stops before it can fully leave his field of view. In the very corner of the street, three tiny modeled people are isolated, standing together by the door to a building.

The building, he thinks, looks strangely like Calloway’s. In fact, the closer he looks, the more uncanny the resemblance is. And, upon reflection, there’s almost no chance it’s uncanny at all. The street which Elizabeth Calloway recreated wasn’t just any street, but the street on which her family lived.

He remembers the window in her room, covered by thick cloth like a funeral shroud. When she wasn’t working in darkness, he wonders if she would open the window and look out at this very street. After all, she would have had a perfect view.

And the people gathered by the door, he realizes, aren’t just people, either. He recognizes Elizabeth’s curly hair, Ophelia’s unsteady leaning on her husband’s shoulder. The three Calloways look up at the door of their home, together. On their iron faces, smiles are painted. There’s an unsettling glow pouring out from Elizabeth’s eyes.

Nemesis can’t tear his gaze away. Lizzie Calloway’s last memory of her happy family, preserved forever. It feels almost out-of-bounds for him. Another family’s life, torn apart, and here he is, looking at the remnants.

He hopes this is what Lizzy would have wanted. At least her final exhibition, her magnum opus by process of elimination, has this little tribute nested in it. A reminder of the happy life he’s sure she had, before it all came to a screeching halt.

As far as swan-songs go, he’s seen worse.

He lowers the kinetoscope, stows it in his bag again, but he can’t tear his eyes away from the sculpture itself. The corpse of Elizabeth Calloway is still stored in the freezer in Aleister Burke’s office, but her final memory is here, displayed for the world to marvel at.

It’s so strange, to look at a work of art and think about the fact that its creator is dead. It reminds Nemesis when he, far younger, would look at the newspaper clipping proclaiming his parents’ death, day in and day out, damn the consequences. It had boggled his mind, then, to think that those words were about people who were no longer alive.

Their memories faded with time. Elizabeth Calloway’s will as well. It’s only a matter of time. He
can only do his part. He tips his cap to her final masterwork.

“May your memory be a blessing, Elizabeth Calloway.” He can’t stop himself from speaking aloud, but it’s in hushed whisper. It seems only appropriate. He is in a museum, after all.

The statue doesn’t respond, and Nemesis is mired in the deathly silence of the room.

He had been hoping the room housing Hugh Atelier’s works would be similarly empty, but he’s sadly and predictably disappointed. The room isn’t packed like Blair’s is, but it’s got a scattered number of people in it.

Of all the rooms in the Cabinet, this one is the simplest. A simple white-painted room, with paintings hanging on the walls, each with a tiny plaque next to them with the name and medium listed. Most of the paintings are either landscapes or still lifes, but none of them are content to simply recreate reality. Each of them has some sort of distortion to it, whether it be with the shapes or the colors, something not quite right.

He looks immediately to his left, at a garishly colored picture of horribly blurry fruit, painted with expert technique. The plaque beside it proclaims it to be “Fruit, 50x50, Oil on canvas”.

Well, that’s certainly one way to name a painting.

The space devoted to Atelier’s work is far larger than that given to Calloway’s. There are multiple rooms, connected by hallways, and it’s large enough that there’s even a small space in one of the hallways with a nice armchair and window, in case anyone wants to rest in the middle of their trip through the gallery.

He looks out the window. It’s cracked open, just barely, to let the cool air in. Outside, the dark gray evening sky greets him. Below the window, he sees the roof of the next building over, a solid fifteen feet below. The air is refreshing, and the wind is mostly blocked by the windowsill, but there’s just enough of it to lightly bounce his hair.

Enough of that. He traverses the rest of the hallway, finding his way to the end of the gallery. There, on the very center of the farthest wall, a single painting, composed in shades of blue, hangs. It’s rather small for a magnum opus, perhaps one foot by two, but the golden frame it’s in looks expensive and heavy. It’s clearly important, judging by the fact that it’s surrounded in a glass display case - the only painting to be given this treatment. Nemesis can’t imagine how expensive a work of art needs to be to get that treatment.

Standing beside it, Gilbert Banks’s arms are crossed. When he sees Nemesis enter, he looks up. Nemesis figures he’s probably been here for a while, doing absolutely nothing, waiting for guests to arrive.

“Hello,” he says pleasantly, crossing the room and leaning towards the painting so he can get a proper look at it.

With gorgeous and miniscule brushstrokes, Hugh Atelier has painted out a vision of the Omen skyline. In particular, he’s painted the area surrounding Catacumba. With such a tiny canvas, the amount of detail he’s painted in is impressive - though the vast majority of the image is taken up by Catacumba itself, rendered in a deep midnight blue, lighter shades of the color carve out an immaculate imitation of the surrounding area. He can only imagine Atelier has spent many hours observing it. In the sky, the clouds seem to almost form a face, zoomed in on the left eye.

“Ah...hello,” Banks responds. He seems distinctly awkward in person, not the sort of person one
would expect to own a department store empire. “This is Hugh's favorite work from the collection... “Shadows Over Catacumba”, oil on canvas.”

“It’s beautiful,” Nemesis says. “Really, he’s amazingly talented.”

“Hmm. Yes, well, he makes money, I suppose.”

Nemesis looks at Banks, and the man stares back. For once, no compass is required to tell that there’s something beneath the surface here.

“Where is he? Blair's by her exhibit, shouldn’t he be by his?”

“Blair is giving a presentation. He’s got no reason to be here.”

“Then why are you here?”

Banks frowns. “Because I want to be. Is a teenager about to tell me I’m not allowed to loiter in the exhibit I sponsored?”

“I’m not about to tell you you’re not allowed to do anything. I’m just curious, is all.”

Banks's face scrunches up. Nemesis isn’t sure if that look is annoyance or scrutiny. He must be coming off as rather rude, he supposes.

When Banks doesn’t say anything, Nemesis asks: “Is a businessman about to tell me I’m not allowed to be curious when it’s literally my job?”

“Your job?” Banks frowns, before muttering something completely unintelligible. “Right, Hugh's just getting some air. It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“I wasn’t worried. Just curious.” He gestures to the painting. “Since he’s not around to answer questions, would you mind doing it for him?”

“W-Well,” he grumbles, “I could try, I think. But I’m not an artist, so if you ask me about his techniques I won’t be able to answer.”

“Of course. I don’t know anything about painting techniques either, so I’d have nothing to ask.” Nemesis grins, hoping he’s putting Banks at ease, even as he suspects that the man is hiding something. Is he a society agent? Well, of course, he’s on the Board. But does he know who Nemesis is? Hugh Atelier is obviously a part of their plans, but where is he?

Abruptly, he’s hit with the realization that Banks is probably here for a very specific reason. He would have no incentive to loiter by this painting unless he was guarding it. There’s no doubt in Nemesis’s mind that this is what Elizabeth Calloway’s work was directing him to. And that means there’s probably no chance Banks will ever leave him alone with this painting.

“Well?” Banks is annoyed by his momentary silence, clearly. “Ask away.”

“Did he paint this at the actual location?” It seems a fairly simple first question.

“No, no. He took photographs for reference, mostly.”

“I see. That would make sense.” He struggles to think of more questions to ask. “Er...did he have any specific reasons for choosing the subjects that he did, or would he simply paint whatever he fancied?”
“Mostly whatever was on hand.”

“Hmm, I see,” he repeats.

Before he can think of a third question, he hears the sound of clicking heels behind him, and hears a familiar voice.

“Oh, goodness. So this is the last room...what a shame. I should have liked to see more.”

He turns around, barely managing to keep his face from displaying the anger he feels when he hears Lusitania Renwick’s voice. Thankfully, keeping him from managing anything except what he’s sure is a look of complete shock, Elias is standing next to her.

His eyes widen when he sees Nemesis, but he doesn’t say anything, remaining five or so steps behind her.

“Oh, my!” She walks through the door, looking calmly around her, and Elias takes the opportunity to lock eyes with Nemesis before dashing away in the other direction, so eerily silent that even Lusitania apparently doesn’t hear him.

Is he running from her? Is he running from Nemesis? There’s no way to tell, and Lusitania doesn’t even seem to so much as notice that he’s gone.

She does notice Nemesis, however, turning to him with an expression that reeks of disgust. Normally, he would be offended, but he can’t find it in himself to even remotely care what she thinks of him.

“You again,” she says. She seems to note Banks’s presence, though, because she mitigates the clear antagonism of her statement by adding: “are you enjoying the exhibit?”

“It’s nice, aye. I’m just on my way out.”

“I see...” She nods. “Well, have a lovely day, Mr...James, was it?”

“Jones.” He looks at her, meaning to gauge her reaction as he says: “If you’ve not seen it yet, I rather recommend the Calloway exhibit. Stunning, it is.”

“I haven’t yet.” There it is, the tiny bit of strain in her voice that indicates that she’s certainly lying. “But thank you for the recommendation.”

“But of course. Good evening, Ms. Renwick.”

Once he’s past the door he walks briskly, surely alarming some of the more civilized patrons. But he doesn’t stop until he’s nearly out of the gallery, where he sees Elias leaning against the wall, arms crossed and remarkably long, stick-like legs folded.

And Elias, against all odds, smiles when he sees him, oddly suave. “Hello, Nemesis.”

“Ah...nice to see you, mate.”

Really, he’s not sure what he’s meant to say, though he certainly feels, for once, like the less stylish of the two.

Elias laughs, though it’s still quiet. “Follow me... mate.”

“Ah, can’t turn down a suggestion like that, can I?” Nemesis smiles.
Elias pats him on the shoulder. “Nah, you can’t.”

He leads Nemesis out of the gallery. For a moment, Nemesis is so caught up in the excitement of being this close to him again that he forgets why he’s here - that he’s a bad friend, and that he needs to help Elias, and that, try as he might to concoct a strategy, any strategy, he has no idea how to do so.
Elias says nothing as they navigate through the Cabinet, oddly quiet even by his own standards. Normally, he and Nemesis can spend hours in silence without either of them feeling strange, but now, Nemesis feels as though something is horribly wrong. The tension is building, and something is about to snap.

They sneak through the back of the main hall and into an empty gallery, which surely used to house a fascinating exhibit, but currently houses only dust and a few display cabinets covered with white cloths. Elias stops, pressing both of his hands to the wall, as if feeling for something. Nemesis can’t help but stare, because Elias’s hands really are quite distinctive, long and thin and distinctly spider-like. He’d know those hands anywhere.

Finally, Elias finds what he’s looking for, and the shadows around him churn as he presses his fingers down. A section of the wall slides away, revealing what looks like a hidden and incredibly large broom closet.

Elias gestures towards it. “After you.”

“Are we really doing this again, Elias?” Nemesis laughs. “What is it with you and broom closets?”

“Maybe I like them.” He raises an eyebrow. “Or maybe someone really stupid, I forget what his name was, told me that they’re a good place to hide in when you want to have a secret conversation?”

“Elias, I was eleven. You can’t expect me to have been a competent spy at eleven.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Elias pats him on the shoulder. “Get in the closet.”

“Yes, sir.” He gets in the closet. He could never resist such a politely worded request.

Elias follows him in, closing the door behind them with the same method. As always, when he’s forced to use artifice for anything whatsoever, he looks grim afterwards.

The closet is roughly five by ten feet, mostly empty except for a few brooms in the corner, remarkably empty of dust and stains considering what it is. The Cabinet even keeps its closets in immaculate condition, it seems. Elias sighs and sits cross-legged on the floor, gesturing for Nemesis to join him - which he does.

“There a reason we’re crowding into a closet?” He asks.

“I mean, we can just talk out in the open, if you insist.” Elias rolls his eyes. “I just thought it might be harder for her to find me this way.”

Nemesis frowns. Elias is behaving his usual self, which is alarming considering that he’s completely alone with Nemesis. Normally, he’s not half this grumpy, and there’s a genuine sting to his comments.

“Elias…” He sighs, trailing off. Surely there’s something he could say here, anything, but his mind fails to come up with the words. Instead, he deflates, unable to look his companion in the
eyes. Something is very wrong, and it can’t not be his fault. “...I’m sorry.”

He feels Elias’s hand on his arm, pulling him towards him, encouraging him to lean on his shoulder. Elias’s hair has gotten long enough that it curls around his face, obscuring his vision. He’d let it grow out like this before, when he was at school, but he had always cut it when it was time to return home. It was easier to keep it neat that way, he said, and Fitzroy would get angry if he looked too unkempt. Now, it seems like Elias has given up.

Not that that upsets Nemesis at all. A neat and tidy Elias is barely Elias at all.

Nemesis feels Elias’s hand idly running through his own hair, long fingers finally resting just above his ear. “I’m not sure what you’re apologizing about.”

“A lot of things.” So many things he can’t think of where to begin. “I haven’t been a good friend.”

“I haven’t given you a chance to be.” The response is more immediate than he’d expected it to be. “I know what you’re here to say, and the fault in my recent distance rests squarely on my own shoulders.”

Nemesis can’t resist cracking a smile. “Actually, the only thing resting on your shoulders right now is me.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Is Nemesis imagining it, or does Elias’s hand shift when he says that? “It always used to be the other way around, didn’t it?”

“I’m not the one who initiated this, first off. This was your choice.”

Through Elias’s hair, he can just barely see him start to smile. “I guess it was. I mean, it makes more sense this way, since I’m taller than you now.”

Nemesis chuckles. Throughout their childhoods, Nemesis had always been taller by an inch or so - until, at seventeen, Elias finally overtook him by a similarly negligible margin. Normally, Nemesis hates it when people are taller than him, but after years of making fun of Elias for it, it seems only fair that the jokes now be at his expense. “Have fun tripping over your absurdly long legs.”

“Right. Tell me if you need anything from the higher-up shelves.” Elias grins, pulling Nemesis’s head farther into his neck. Now he can’t see anything but hair and the faint light shining through it.

“Elias, I swear this is your attempt to asphyxiate me against your neck. And I’d like to let you know that it’s not working. I can still breathe.”

“Oh, my mistake.” Elias laughs. “Really, though, are you okay? Have I been accidentally choking you?”

“You’ve not, no.” Nemesis sighs. “Apologies. I’ve gotten us on a tangent, it seems.”

“Oh.” Elias sounds disappointed. “And here I was, hoping you wouldn’t notice. I do so hate talking about my feelings.”

“I know, Elias. But we’ve got to.” He pauses, trying to think of a sensitive way to word what he’s about to say, before foregoing that entirely and simply saying: “You’re miserable, aren’t you?”

For a moment, there’s silence. And in that silence Nemesis is terribly aware - aware of how small both of them are, how the people outside this closet couldn’t care less about either of them, how cold it is here in this closet, how scratchy the embroidery on Elias’s jacket is. He feels utterly
powerless, because he knows he is utterly powerless.

And then, Elias inhales sharply. He’s never been one to express his emotions in visible ways - even this is a lot for him. “L...Nemesis, I...yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“That’s what I’m sorry for. For letting that happen.”

“But it isn’t your responsibility to protect me, Nemesis.”

“It might not be, not in any sort of...objective way. No one’s forcing me to. But the last thing I want is to ever see people hurt you. I...” He sighs. “...knowing you’re miserable makes me miserable, you know. You don’t have to worry about me feeling responsible, because I’m a selfish person, and that extends to my feelings about you.”

Elias laughs humorlessly. “Ah. I had thought you might say something like that. You idiot. You complete and total fool. That’s not being selfish. It’s called caring about people, and I think some people in my life could strive to do it more often.”

“But...but Elias, I...”

“No. Shh. Don’t ‘but, Elias’ me.” Elias pushes Nemesis off himself, putting a hand on each of his shoulders and staring directly into his eyes. “Nemesis, you care what people say about you.”

“Well, obviously.”


He doesn’t know that he has a response for that. Instead, he bites his tongue, turning away. He can’t look Elias in the eye, not when he looks so earnest.

Instead, he elects to change the subject. “You don’t want to marry Lusitania Renwick.”

“Oh, obviously not.” Nemesis feels a rush of relief. Why is he relieved? His friend is suffering, and he’s relieved? “I hate her. She doesn’t even like me, either. It’s an arrangement - I get to marry into high society, not tarnish my reputation - not tarnish Fitzroy’s reputation, rather. Lusitania gets status, gets an inheritance, gets to move up in the Guild. Only person it doesn’t benefit is me.”

He takes a deep breath. Nemesis can hear the shakiness to it, and he puts a hand on Elias’s. He hopes it’s comforting.

“See, Nemesis...even though she doesn’t love me, even though she’s never pretended to love me where it counts, she’s...she’s so clingy and insecure. I can’t have a moment away from her, and it’s like she just wants to wring all the energy out of me like I’m a hand towel. I think she likes having the power over me, if anything...because she really doesn’t have any over Fitzroy.”

Nemesis feels his teeth clenching with rage. “I bloody hate her, you know. I just...I didn’t want to say anything, in case you...”

“In case I actually liked her?” He laughs ruefully. “Well, I don’t.”

“Then...then don’t marry her.” Nemesis knows his voice sounds urgent. He feels urgent. “Find a way out of it.”

He sighs. “I wish it were so easy. You’ve offered me ways out before, haven’t you? Told me to run
away with you, just to run away in general. I wish I could, Nemesis. I can’t describe how... jealous I am of you.”

There were many things Nemesis had expected to hear. That Elias was jealous of him did not number among them. He looks up, but this time, it’s Elias who has averted his gaze.

“Jealous? I’m...I’m wretched, Elias.”

“I know. But you’re living your own life. You got a way out, and you took it, and you ran with it. Now you’re living the life you want, and I...” He pauses. “I’m still just letting Fitzroy ruin mine. Every time I think it can’t get worse, it does. And I just let it happen.”

His hands twitch, before squeezing tighter, painfully tight. Elias’s fingers are thin and sharp, and they feel like sticks against Nemesis’s shoulder. He spasms once, and Nemesis can tell that he’s holding in tears.

“I just let it happen,” he repeats, “and why? It’s not because I’m okay with it, and it’s not because I think there’s no way out, or because I like Fitzroy or Renwick. I keep thinking to myself, ‘I’m sure Nemesis would help hide me. I could get away from this. It would be so easy’. And then I don’t. I’m scared, Nemesis, I’m scared of what would happen if I leave.”

“I wouldn’t let him hurt you,” Nemesis says seriously. “I’d kill him if he so much as came near you.”

“I know. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m not scared of dying. I’m scared...because I don’t know who I am, if I’m not Fitzroy’s son. He...in a way, he...”

“He what, Elias?”

“He...” Elias sighs. “I saw, what your childhood did to you. How miserable you were. If...if he hadn’t taken me in after my parents died, I...”

Realization sinks in. “You would have been like me.”

Elias nods. “And it’s...it’s a horrible thought, isn’t it? To think something like that, about someone I care about? But you were always so miserable. So angry. Honestly, I was jealous of that. Of the ability to be angry at the people who hurt you, instead of saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and minding your manners and marrying a woman you hate just to make him happy—”

Nemesis hugs him, pulling him into his chest with perhaps a little too much force. Elias gasps but doesn’t protest, clinging to Nemesis’s chest and burying his face in his neck.

It’s hard to know how long they stay there, silent except for the faint sound of Elias’s breathing. He’s trying not to cry, Nemesis can tell. He can also tell that he’s failing. Nemesis’s grip loosens from the vice it was, until he’s got his arms gently wrapped around Elias, draped over the formal clothing he’s so clearly uncomfortable in.

“I’m jealous,” Elias says again, finally. It’s muffled by Nemesis’s neck, but just audible enough. “I’ve always been jealous of you. Of your anger. Of your ability to stand up for yourself, even when it was a bad idea. Of your intelligence. And of the fact that you got to leave. You got to go out into the world. And now, look at you. Things might not be perfect, but you’re...”

“I’m a lot better off than I was. I’m happier. I’m living a better life,” Nemesis agrees. Even though he isn’t the one who’s been crying, his voice feels hoarse.
“And I...want that too. I want someone to do what Jones did for you. I want someone to show up and offer me a better life. But that’s not...going to happen, is it?”

Elias suddenly clings to Nemesis and sobs. It’s alarming to see someone normally so reserved openly sobbing, and Nemesis has no idea what he’s meant to do. For the time, he hugs Elias tighter, leans down his forehead to rest on his head, and thinks about how horrible it is that Elias is crying and all Nemesis can feel is empty, dull, like he’s just had the wind knocked out of him.

“It can still happen,” he says, finally. His voice is quiet, and Elias doesn’t give any indication that he heard it.

“It can still happen,” he repeats, more force behind it this time. Elias still doesn’t respond. “I feel bloody horrid, leaving you behind like I did. I’m not going to make that same mistake again. If you need someone to offer you a better life, that might as well be me.”

Finally, Elias shifts. “How?” is all he says, sounding breathless and exhausted and miserable.

“Get up,” Nemesis says, before he can think better of it.

“What?” There’s notes of alarm in his voice as he flinches away from Nemesis.

“I said stand up.”

“Why?!”

“Just do it! Trust me!”

“Alright, alright! Don’t shout!” Elias stands up, uncertain and shaky, his legs clearly not doing a very good job of keeping him upright.

“Okay. Excellent. Just-just stay like that.”

Nemesis moves, getting on one knee, staring up at Elias. The eyes that stare back are wide, betraying a lost and scared expression.

He takes his hand. “Sorry, this is really impromptu. Probably not the sort of thing you’d ever want. I mean, er...it’s just a bloody closet, I’ve not got a ring or anything. But if you don’t want to marry Lusitania Renwick, marry me instead.”

Elias’s entire face twitches, the emotion not registering. “Wh-what?”

“What I mean is...if you don’t want to marry Lusitania Renwick, just marry me. You’ve known me for years, you like me enough to at least file your taxes with me, right?”

Elias visibly struggles to process, staring unblinkingly at Nemesis with a look halfway between bewilderment and disbelief. Finally, he says: “N-neither of us pay taxes, Nemesis.”

“It’s not about the taxes. It’s about you not having to spend the rest of your life with someone you can’t stand. Unlike her, I care about your feelings, and I’m not even remotely obnoxious - okay, no, can’t claim that last one, but you’ll be free to divorce me absolutely whenever you want and I shan’t have any complaints.”

“I’m not going to divorce you!” He looks a little more alarmed, as though processing all of it at once, and flinches away. “I just... this is the solution you thought of? Asking someone you’re not even in a relationship with to marry you?”
“Well, it’s not like I was going to ask you to marry someone else.” He sighs. “It’s actually a bad and impulsive idea, so maybe disregard it. If you want something more straightforward, I’ll pay Theory Hayes to hide you in her attic.”

“I have no idea who that is, but living in an attic doesn’t really sound like what I want for the rest of my life. Alright, I’ll marry you.”

“I’m sorry—” Nemesis’s brain lags behind his ears, taking a moment to realize what it was Elias said. “I mean, you - you will?”

Elias laughs. The initial shock having worn off, he seems to be in a state of mild confusion, but not horror. It’s a better reaction than Nemesis would have expected if he actually sat down to think this through. Unfortunately, he hadn’t done that, and now he has to deal with the consequences - that he’s proposed marriage to a person who has never thought of him as more than a friend.

“I will, yeah. It’s not any different from being roommates, right? Just more legally binding.”

“It’s...definitely different, actually. Though, like I said, you can divorce me whenever. Hell, you don’t even have to interact with me at all. We can just go our separate ways if that’s what you want.”

Elias shakes his head frantically, almost looking more horrified by that than he was by the proposal. “Nemesis, half of the reason I dragged you into this closet to begin with is that I missed you. I am not going to agree to go our separate ways after all of this. Marrying someone is a commitment. I’m not going to deprive myself of an actual spouse just for the sake of keeping Lusitania out of my life.”

“Ah...then why did you say yes?”

“I, uh…first off, panicked. I don’t think either of us are really in a place to actually get married right now. You’re too busy, and Fitzroy is still alive. Not really ideal circumstances to start a life, is it?”

“I...I mean, I reckon you’re right. Sorry. It was a stupid idea.”

“I didn’t say that.” Elias drops to his knees beside Nemesis, looping a single arm around his shoulder in a weak attempt at a hug. “I think, logically, it’s a good idea. It’s easier to force someone to marry someone they hate than it is to force them to divorce their existing spouse. But I also think we’re eighteen and nineteen respectively, and you didn’t even buy me dinner first.”

“Right. I’m sorry. The offer of living in Theory Hayes’s attic still stands.”

“Again, who the stars is Theory Hayes?”

“Oh.” Nemesis realizes that Elias genuinely wouldn’t know, and that he doesn’t actually know much about what’s been happening in Nemesis’s life at all. Nemesis simply hasn’t had time or opportunity to tell him about any of it, about Salem Riddle, or Aleister Burke, or Lavinia Graves, or even really Callie.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Theory Hayes is my landlady.”

Elias raises an eyebrow in mock surprise. “You mean you didn’t just sleep in the alleys like you said you would?”
“I don’t fancy the idea of having to wash grime off my clothes, no. Theory’s nice.” He frowns, reconsidering his statement. “Upon reflection, Theory is mean, but she’s my friend regardless. And she owns a bookstore, which is a massive bonus in any living arrangement.”

“You live in a bookstore?” Elias looks surprised, though not upset. “Really are living the dream, aren’t you?”

“I reckon so. Couple things missing from it, though.” He gestures to Elias.

Elias glances at his hand. “...oh. Am I the things?”

“You’re one of the things.”

“And Jones is the other one?” He asks, though Nemesis knows he knows the answer already.

“He is, yes.” It stings less to talk about him than it used to, but there’s still that dull feeling in Nemesis’s chest when he remembers that the man who gave him his life isn’t here to see it.

“I...I’m sorry.” Elias looks at the ground, subdued again. “I know these months have been unimaginably hard for you. I should be here for you, but instead I’m just worried about Fitzroy.”

“He’s a well worrying individual, Elias. I’m worried about him, too. I’m pretty bleeding sure he’s killed the victim in the case I’m working on right now, you know.”

“He does seem the most plausible suspect,” Elias agrees. “He doesn’t tell me anything, not since I refused to...to help him...but I know the Guild has been killing people for years. I’m shocked it took this long for something like this to happen. It’s just like him, parading a corpse in front of his whole theater like that.”

“It really does seem very theatrical, doesn’t it? No subtlety present.” Nemesis scoffs. “Not that I’m eager to make a career as a murderer, mind, but I think if I’d gone in a slightly different direction in life I’d be quite a good one.”

“A murderer-for-hire instead of a private investigator?” Elias thinks for a moment. “I could see it. But I’m glad you’re not. It would really be horrible to have to explain to someone I care about greatly why I can’t continue to associate with a murderer.”

“And I’m glad,” Nemesis agrees, “that you’re such a good person that I would never have needed to explain that to you.”

Elias tenses. “I wish I weren’t, sometimes. You know, I think my life would be significantly easier if I just did what Fitzroy wanted.”

“But then you wouldn’t be you. You’d be a miserable shell of the person I know.” Nemesis’s breath catches in his throat. “You know, the parts of you I like the most are the parts he finds disappointing.”

Elias smiles. “Those are the parts of me I like most, too. It’s mostly thanks to you, you know. You and Jing. I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have people around me who actually care. At some point, when it’s just you telling yourself that you don’t deserve what’s happening, you stop believing it.”

“I felt the same, you know. I was about to give up before I knew you.”

“Were you?” Elias looks skeptical. “I can’t imagine you ever giving up on anything, least of all
yourself.”

“Not really, but I knew it’d happen eventually. I’d give up or die.”

“But you didn’t.”

When Nemesis replies, it’s quiet. “Thanks to you, mostly. Well...and Mr. Jones, but you were there first. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without you, either.” Elias hugs him again, and recoils. “Since when do you wear cologne?”

Nemesis laughs, hugging him back. Elias is so skeletal and cold, but it’s not an unpleasant feeling. The shadows that surround him envelop Nemesis, almost like a second hug. They feel pleasantly cool, like an early spring morning. He doesn’t resist it, clinging back to Nemesis, cologne or no.

“Since I could afford it. What, do you hate it?”

“No,” Elias says. On top of his voice being noticeably muffled by his proximity to Nemesis’s coat, he’s speaking quietly. “It’s nice. It’s fine. Unobtrusive and not unpleasant.”

Nemesis laughs again. “Is that your way of saying you don’t mind it?”

“You wouldn’t do that. You’re too concerned with your appearance.” Elias reaches out a single hand, brushing it through Nemesis’s hair, curling a strand around your pointer finger. “I was right, by the way. This color does suit you.”

“I didn’t question it.” Nemesis smiles. “I’m beginning to like it more than the brown, actually. I do...genuinely appreciate you doing that for me.”

“It wasn’t any problem.”

“But it was. You had to do something you hate doing.”

Elias sighs. “I don’t hate artifice in general. Just...the sorts Fitzroy wants from me. When it’s harmless, or even...helps someone, I don’t mind.”

“Well, it helped me.” He finally pulls his eyes away from Elias, far too aware of how close his hand is to his face, almost brushing against his cheek. “I think I’m a bit more handsome now. Striking, even.”

“You always were handsome,” Elias says. “I mean, I know what you’re about to say, and I don’t
think being covered in scars all the time really disqualifies you from being handsome.”

“I guess-” Nemesis starts, but Elias cuts him off, pulling his hand out of his hair and moving it to touch his tie, before immediately pulling it back away.

“This is silk, isn’t it? You’ve really been spending your money left and right.”

“Well, I had to look nice tonight, didn’t I?” Nemesis grins. “You should see what the other people wore.”


Nemesis rolls his eyes. “Oh, come on. I think you’re just saying that because you like me.”

“I do like you, but I also mean it.” Elias stares him in the eyes, uncomfortably intense. “Just because I said I’m not going to marry you right now, doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re handsome.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh, you mean you weren’t asking me to marry you because you’re in love with me?”

Nemesis is sure he’s turned bright red. He turns away from Elias, stammering incoherently. Yes, I was , he thinks, but he can’t possibly say that aloud, not here, not in these circumstances, not when he hasn’t even fully admitted it to himself yet.

He hears him chuckle. It’s a soft, wonderful sound. Nemesis wonders how he never managed to register how he felt. Looking back, it seems clear. Elias is the sort of person who’s difficult not to fall in love with.

“It’s okay if you are,” Elias adds. “To be clear, I’m not interrogating you. I’m just curious.”

He takes a deep breath, feeling himself tense. Of course, he can’t lie here. Does he even want to lie?

“I might...fancy you a little, yeah.” Towards the end, his voice gives out. “Thought it’d make things a little awkward, if I said anything. It always felt...natural to me, I reckon. Enough that I never even admitted it to myself. You don’t need to worry about it. You can forget this happened. I won’t make it weird - promise.”

Elias laughs again. “Oh, thank goodness. That’s what I thought. If I’d been wrong, that would have been awkward.”

“Oh-” Nemesis chuckles nervously. “You thought what?”

“That being said, you know, I think I will marry you. Later. On the condition that you take me out for dinner first, of course.”

“I, er-” There’s no way he’s heard him correctly. Nemesis looks at Elias in the same way as a fish looks at the fisherman who has cruelly ripped it out of the water. “...come again?”

Elias, damnably direct as always, looks directly back at him. “Like I said, I respect myself. You’ll have to at least take me out for dinner before I commit the rest of my life to you. Don’t be unreasonable , Nemesis.”

“I don’t follow.”
Elias laughs. There’s a rare look of genuine joy on his face that Nemesis so rarely gets to see, and a faint blush is visible against his dark skin. That’s something he’s never seen before. Having admitted his feelings only makes him more aware of how infuriatingly cute Elias is.

Perhaps he should have found a way to play it off. If things weren’t awkward before, certainly they will be now.

“You look like you’re dying.” Elias laughs again. “I just wanted to check, you know. On the off chance I was wrong, that’d make accepting your proposal a little bit uncomfortable. I think I deserve better than marrying someone who doesn’t even have romantic feelings for me.”

“...You deserve better than marrying me in general,” he stammers. “I don’t know what I was even thinking.”

“I might deserve better, yeah.” He smiles. It’s the sort of smile that Nemesis would call ‘punchable’ when on his own face - Elias, of course, is among the least punchable people he knows, but it’s still infuriating, reminiscent of all the times he’d managed to beat Nemesis at some small thing, like cards or winning a bet.

Nemesis has always hated losing in any context to a violent degree, unable to tolerate the humiliation of ever coming in second. The reminder that he isn’t good enough and never will be burns, boiling over into ill-thought-out decisions made in the spur of the moment and always, inevitably, pain.

But when he loses to Elias, it’s a different sort of frustration entirely. Instead of a rapid explosion of rage and loathing, there’s a soft burn of indignation, mixed with a sort of affection. Seeing Elias happy is almost enough to override the immediate rage Nemesis feels towards himself. For once, he’s fine with letting someone else win.

But this isn’t a competition, and he hasn’t lost, has he? Elias continues, with no regard for Nemesis’s internal turmoil. “I don’t really want better, though. I think you’re more than enough for me. Can’t imagine being with anyone else, as it were.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Elias?!”

The smile fades a little, replaced with just a hint of concern. He puts a hand on Nemesis’s shoulder. “What it means is that we’re both idiots.”

“Okay, speak for yourself, but I’m a genius, actually.”

The look on Elias’s face is so painfully soft that Nemesis doesn’t know if he can take it. “I was pretty open about it.”

Nemesis isn’t sure how to describe what he’s feeling. If anything, it’s not unlike being in an emotional state of suspended animation, in complete shock, unable to process anything around him.

And Elias is still there, existing in the same space as him, as though he hadn’t just said what he’d said. Nemesis manages an incoherent “What?”, but he can barely even hear himself saying it.

There’s that laugh again, so hauntingly beautiful Nemesis wishes he could listen to it forever. “See, you’re the genius between the two of us, allegedly. And I’m not about to argue that most of the time - but you’re frustratingly dense.” He flicks Nemesis in the forehead. “I can’t believe you didn’t realize it. I was pretty open about it.”
Nemesis inhales sharply. “I thought - I thought you just thought I was a very good friend.”

Elias frowns. “Nemesis, I told you I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you on multiple occasions.”

“Friends do that!”

He rolls his eyes. “Sure, I guess, but what about all the letters I wrote you? I thought those would be flowery enough to make my point clear.”

“I thought you were mocking the way I write!”

“But what about all the time I spent teaching you to dance? Does that mean nothing to you?”

Nemesis feels himself tense. “I asked you to do that!”

“Yes, well, I agreed, didn’t I?” Elias moves his hand to the back of Nemesis’s head, pulls him closer, forehead to forehead. Up close, his eyes are even more stunning, beautiful and deep brown. “Honestly, I made it about as clear as I could without saying anything outright. I couldn’t have been...public about it. I knew that, logically. I knew Fitzroy would never let it happen, but I wanted it so badly. I wanted to leave society and never come back. All I wanted was you.”

Nemesis shakes his head. “But I thought…”

“You thought what?”

“I used to think, sometimes.”

“I’d like to hope you think a little more often than sometimes, Nemesis.”

“I think all the time, yes.”

Elias smiles. “And I love it when you think. But what did you think, in this specific instance?”

“I thought…” Nemesis tries to steady himself, breathing in. “I realized my feelings for you after coming to Omen. They were there before, they always have been, but I somehow didn’t comprehend it. I don’t think I knew what love was, and I was happy enough being your friend. It wasn’t until you weren’t in my life anymore that I realized just how much I needed you.”

Elias nods, realization visibly dawning. “When you called me-”

“When I called you I was seconds away from telling you that I’m in love with you, and I only stopped myself because I thought for sure you’d be repulsed by the very thought.”

Elias shakes his head, putting his hand on the side of Nemesis’s face, unbearably gentle. “Far from it. As far from it as possible.” For a moment, he looks unsure, glancing down at the floor with a look of nervous insecurity. Then, he turns back to Nemesis, meeting eyes with him. “Would you mind if I kissed you?”

“Would you mind if I kissed you?”

Nemesis can feel blood rush to his face. He can’t imagine how red he is - thankfully, Elias doesn’t comment on it. “I - please. No. I wouldn’t mind.”

Elias waits for a moment, that same tense anxiety overcoming him. His hand twitches against Nemesis’s face. And then, as if jumping from a high place, lightning-fast, he kisses him, and despite the abruptness of it there’s no force, as gentle as anything else Elias has ever done. For someone so terrified of hurting people around him, Elias seems, to Nemesis, entirely unable to
cause harm. It’s tender, a little bit unsure, a little bit scared, but entirely perfect.

It’s Elias who breaks the kiss, as well, immediately slumping over against Nemesis’s chest. “Well, fuck,” he mutters breathlessly. “So that’s what it’s like.”

“It’s, er…” Nemesis touches at his mouth, wishing he could savor the feeling a little longer, but it’s already fading away like water slipping through his fingers. “I…that happened?”

Elias chuckles. “It happened, yeah. I…that was your first time kissing anyone, wasn’t it?”

“Aye, it was. When would I have had the opportunity?”

“No idea.” Elias shrugs. “At some point in your many adventures with the illustrious Mr. Jones? But then again, I suppose you would have written about that.”

“I reckon I just didn’t want to kiss anyone who wasn’t you,” Nemesis admits. “Not that I was aware of it, of course. Nor like I had any opportunities to speak of.”

“Sort of happy you did. And that I’ve never kissed anyone either - not that Lusitania’s not tried, for the spectacle, but I’ve always found a way to wiggle out of it. Not that it’s as important as people pretend it is, but there’s something… nice about being someone’s first, isn’t it?” Elias smiles, face still buried in Nemesis’s coat. “Oh, and by the way, you suck at kissing.”

“I-What? That’s not a thing, you can’t be bad at kissing,” he stammers, feeling himself turning red again.

Elias laughs. “You absolutely can be. And you are.”

“What is that supposed to mean!?” he replies indignantly.

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

“Oh, that’s mean? You should hear half of the things you say about me, you absolute menace.” He affectionately ruffles Elias’s hair, and hears him laugh in response.

He’s not sure how long they stay there, Elias leaned against him, with Nemesis’s hand carefully stroking his hair. In their years of knowing each other, this is the most direct content they’ve ever had, despite how forthcoming with physical affection both of them have been with each other. Somehow, nothing they’ve ever done has been quite like this. Nemesis thinks he must be the luckiest person alive.

Once or twice, he gets the urge to say something, whisper to Elias that he loves him, but that would ruin the pristine silence of it all, shatter the spell.

Finally, though, Elias stirs, looking up at Nemesis with a sickeningly tender expression. “This is real, isn’t it? It’s finally real?”

“Nah,” Nemesis replies, feeling almost dazed. “Nah, we’re both dreaming. And it’s a bloody amazing dream.”

“Don’t joke about that…” Elias slaps him gently, no force behind it, as if he’s brushing his face. “I don’t want this to be a dream. I don’t want this to have to end.”
“It doesn’t. You can stay here. We can hide. Fitzroy will never find you.” Nemesis knows he sounds alarmed, his voice pressured, speech not fully articulated.

“I wish.” Elias smiles ruefully, and in that moment Nemesis thinks he might actually kill Tobias Fitzroy. “I really do. I’ll find my way out. I’ll tell him off. But...not now. Not tonight. If I did it right now, at a time like this, I don’t think he’d hesitate to...to deal with me.”

Nemesis tenses, fingers instinctively reaching to Elias’s chest, where he knows, under the shirt, a horrible scar which seems to never fully heal has itself drawn across his skin. He’s only seen it once, but he could never forget it, the way the red stands out like an angry smear of paint splashed haphazardly over the canvas, the way it’s slightly raised against his otherwise smooth skin. And he remembers what he’s seen far more often - the way Elias winces, the way he seems constantly out of breath. He remembers what Elias told him - that he had desperately tried to exert his own artificial power on the scar, but no matter what he did, it wouldn’t heal.

Elias’s own hand closes around his wrist, as if he’s about to move his hand away, but he doesn’t. He just nods, with a miserable look painted across his face.

“I’ll wait for you. And if you ever need me, I’ll be there. I promise.”

Elias nods again, and Nemesis can see the strain in his eyes. “I should get going soon. Fitzroy will get on my case otherwise. But I’ll be making time to stop by, no matter what.”

“You’d...you’d better,” Nemesis agrees. “I’ll give you my address, and my telephone.”

“I will.” Elias’s face takes on a shadow of its former joy again as his face splits into a grin. “And you’d better be sober when you call me.”

“I will, promise. I swear that’s the only time I haven’t been since I left Citrea Viridia.”

Elias nods, though his demeanor remains one of concern. “You’d better keep it that way. I still worry about you, you know. You’re absolutely horrible at taking care of yourself.”

“I am fine at taking care of myself. In fact, I’m taking care of another person and a cat on top of myself, so I’d reckon I’m actually doing alright for myself-”

“Wait-” Elias’s eyes widen. “Take a couple steps back. You have a cat?”

“Yes. Her name is Monty, which is short for Amontillado, and she’s small and entirely black. She’s very well-behaved.” Nemesis hates how affectionate his voice sounds already. Has it really taken him this little time to become attached to a cat he literally found dying in the street?

“You named your cat after wine?”

“I didn’t see why not.”

Elias laughs. “Well played. Now I have to visit you. Tell her hi for me, won’t you?”

“I will,” Nemesis agrees. “But soon enough, I won’t need to, because you two will be friends. She’s very friendly.”

“I never knew I needed a cat until I learned that I might end up with a cat,” Elias mutters. “Do you have any photographs?”

Conveniently, Nemesis does have one, which he’d taken on a whim a couple of days ago. He fishes
...it out of his bag, and Elias takes it, holding it in both hands and staring at it with wide-eyed adoration. “She’s beautiful.”

Nemesis thinks that Elias is the beautiful one, and that the fond, adoring look on his face makes Nemesis’s heart jump. “She’s just a cat.”

“Well, maybe all cats are beautiful.”

“I’m pretty sure cats are capable of being ugly. I mean, even the ugly ones are charming, so this isn’t me saying they’re bad, but objectively-”

Elias puts a hand on his shoulder. “Sorry. This is an irreconcilable difference of opinion and I have to break up with you now.”

“Ah-” The use of the word ‘break up’ implies that they’re dating. Of course, that does retrospectively seem like a somewhat foregone conclusion from the rest of the conversation, but it wasn’t something that had fully set in for Nemesis until now. “Please don’t joke about that.”

For a moment, he thinks Elias will say he wasn’t joking. Instead, though, he hugs him one-handedly and nods. “Sorry. I won’t.”

“No, er, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to ruin anything-” Nemesis feels himself start to panic, but Elias hugs him tighter and shakes his head.

“You aren’t ruining anything. Trust me when I say that if occasional spikes of paranoia were something I couldn’t deal with, I wouldn’t have been friends for you with close to ten years now.”

Nemesis nods, partially but not entirely reassured. Elias sighs. “I know you’re worried that I’m lying to you. I can tell. When you get really quiet that means you don’t trust me.”

He nods again, the most tentative confirmation he’s capable of. Elias’s face is tinged with pain, and Nemesis feels so horribly guilty.

Elias seems to pick up on that. It’s almost scary how good he is at reading Nemesis. He looks at him sympathetically, speaking in a quiet, gentle voice.

“I’m not angry at you for not trusting me. I know you don’t really trust anyone. I just wish you didn’t have to deal with that.”

“You...aren’t?” he asks, terrified of the answer. Terrified that, at any second now, Elias will change his mind, as he should have years ago.

“No. I know it doesn’t mean anything. I remember you used to write in your letters, sometimes, about how you thought Jones was going to abandon you, or change his mind and decide you don’t have potential after all.”

Nemesis frowns. “That’s different.”

“No really. It’s the same thing, isn’t it? You have a person who thinks highly of you, who you like - because I know you liked him, a bit too much, even, in my opinion - and you’re unable to take it at face value because you can’t process someone having a different view of yourself than you do. So you get scared, and you don’t trust the things they say, even when they’re the things you want to hear. *Especially* when they’re what you want to hear. Am I right?” By the end, Elias is speaking uncharacteristically fast - almost a convincing imitation of Nemesis’s speech.
“Mostly, I reckon,” Nemesis reluctantly concedes. “It’s not just that. Taking these things at face value seems dangerous. What if you kill me? What if you sell me out to Fitzroy? I don’t really think you’d do that, but look what happens to people who trust people. Look what happened to Mr. Jones.”

“I have no idea what happened to Jones,” Elias admits. “I don’t know very much about your life with him at all, remember? Or what happened afterwards. I don’t even know who your new friend is.”

“My new friend?”

“Yeah, you know. The, uhh…” he struggles to find the proper words, “…the girl, the one with the long hair who was trying to keep Jing from ripping you limb from limb the night of the performance.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you.”

“You might have.” Elias smiles sheepishly. “I had a lot on my mind that day, sorry. I’m kind of horrible with names in general, you know that.”

Nemesis can’t help but smile back. Something about Elias’s smiles is so irresistibly infectious. “Right, well…her name is Callie and she’s my assistant.”

“Oh. She’s really your assistant. I thought you were joking about that.”

“Well, she’s not precisely an assistant in the traditional sense,” Nemesis admits. “She insisted on doing something to repay me for the fact that I’m not letting her die on the street, so I let her call herself there, but she really doesn’t do much except take notes for me and occasionally fetch things. Still, she’s nice to have around sometimes.”

“Sounds like it. That’s sort of how I feel about Jing, too. I’ve been calling them my assistant to get Fitzroy off my back, but they’re really just my friend.”

“Jing really cares about you, you know.”

A conflicted, slightly downcast look passes over Elias for a moment, before vanishing. “Yes, I’m aware. They actually…well, apparently, they’ve had feelings for me for a while. It hurt to turn them down, even though we’re still friends. They’re pretty much the only person at the Obscura who’s ever on my side.”

“Is it because of Fitzroy? Is that why you turned them down, I mean?”

Though he asks, Nemesis knows what Elias is going to say before he says it, and his stomach sinks with the weight of an emotion he’d never expected to feel because of Liu Jing: guilt. “No, I mean, not entirely. Mostly, it was because I already knew I loved someone else. But that was part of it, too, knowing they’d be an easy target for him.”

“Elias…do you not think you’d be happier with them than with me?”

“Of course not.” He shakes his head. “Jing will always be my friend, I hope, but I just…I have my reasons for not wanting to commit to a relationship with them. Not least that I’m just not attracted to them.”

Nemesis nods, though he can’t shake the unsure feeling permeating deep through him. “But…if you ever think you’d rather be with someone else…”
“I’ll tell you.” Elias smiles, and Nemesis can tell he’s attempting to reassure him. “Don’t worry. Even if you don’t trust me all the time, I trust you. I know that you, at least, aren’t out to hurt me.”

“Good, because I’m not. I’m out to do the opposite of hurt you.”

Elias laughs quietly. For such a generally graceless person, Elias has an incredibly elegant laugh, light and inarguably cute. “I should hope so. Speaking of hurting me, though, I really need to get going. As much as I would love to spend the rest of the night in this closet—”

“—you can do that—”

“—as much as I would love to,” Elias continues, “I should really be going.”

“Right.” Nemesis searches through his pockets for a scrap of paper and a pen, writing down his address and telephone number with shakier hands than normal.

Elias watches, frowning just barely. “You know, I always wonder how you manage to function with those gloves on. That looks completely unbearable.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad when you get used to it. I wouldn’t say unbearable. Just extremely inconvenient.”

He passes the paper to Elias, who takes it and stares at it, though perhaps, Nemesis realizes, he’s actually staring at his own hands. “I can’t really wear gloves at all. My hands are too weirdly proportioned. They seem uncomfortable, though. Like shoes for your hands.”

Nemesis chuckles. “See, I don’t understand why you find shoes uncomfortable.”

“They’re prisons for your feet, Nemesis.”

“Your experiences in this regard are not universal. Also, how do you deal with the winter without gloves?”

“I don’t think my experiences are universal in just about any regard. And I just keep my hands in my pockets and hope for the best, or, better yet, don’t go outside to begin with.” Elias abruptly takes Nemesis’s hand, carefully staring at the glove.

The gloves, to Nemesis, might as well be a second skin. They’re made of black, worn leather, remarkably soft and nearly paper-thin. They had been custom-made for the purpose of being worn near-constantly, as had served that purpose excellently. But Elias isn’t as acclimated to them as Nemesis is, and it shows in his concerned look as he releases the hand at last.

“But that I’m questioning your decision or saying you’re wrong for doing this to yourself,” Elias says, “but I kind of miss being able to see your hands.”

“Can’t imagine why. Unfortunate business aside, they’re just hands. Completely unremarkable hands.”

“Yes, but they’re your hands.” Elias pauses, then chuckles quietly to himself. “What is it with the two of us and having unusually strong feelings about our hands? Of all the things to have in common…”

It’s not Nemesis has ever thought about before, but he supposes Elias is right. “Not that I believe in fate, but—”
“I don’t believe in fate either,” Elias interjects, “but it feels like things are meant to be sometimes, doesn’t it? A series of fortunate events coincidentally happening in tandem.”

“It does feel like that,” Nemesis agrees.

They pause, standing for a moment in silence, before Elias nods brusquely. “...I’ll be leaving, then. Um. A kiss for luck, before I go?”

“Of course.”

This time, the kiss only lasts half a second before Elias pulls away, a strange look on his face as he reaches for the wall, ready to open the door again.

“I’ll find my way back to you, so don’t piss off Fitzroy and get yourself killed in the meantime.” He smiles, but it’s pained. “I love you, Nemesis.”

“Er-” Nemesis sighs. “Are you okay with...with that?”

“With what?”

“With...with saying that. My name. You hated it, right?”

He smiles. “It’s grown on me a little. It’s a charming sort of stupid.”

“A charming sort of stupid...I can live with that.”

Elias laughs and kisses him again.

By the time Nemesis makes it back to the main crowds, Elias has vanished into them, not even a hint of shadow to find him by. Perhaps that’s for the best - Nemesis knows he wouldn’t be able to stop glancing at him if he was in eyesight. As is, he can’t stop touching at his lips, trying to process what happened in that closet.

Of course, it had all been so quick, ill-thought-out, not particularly how he had expected his first romantic confession to go in the least, but, in retrospect, there are less exciting places for it than a closet off the side of a museum exhibition gala. He hopes no one who sees him thinks anything of the goofy smile he knows is plastered across his face.

It doesn’t take him long to stumble upon a familiar set of faces. Theory and Evie are by the bar, talking over glasses of an expensive-looking champagne, tinted lilac and exceptionally fizzy. Theory has an uncharacteristic smile on her face, leaning over the table. Evie doesn’t seem to react to Nemesis’s arrival, but Theory at least looks up at him, that smile promptly fading. Nemesis supposes, friend or no friend, he isn’t a pretty girl, so this is about what he can expect.

“Good evening, you two.” He hovers by their table. Yes, there’s two free chairs at their table, but he wouldn’t want to be rude and interrupt them without permission. “Mind if I join you?”

The two look each other in the eyes. Theory nods. Evie shrugs. “Sure, we don’t mind.”

He pulls out a chair, sitting down. After the night’s events, he feels exhausted out of nowhere - he has no idea when it set in, but all of his bones feel like rocks, dragging him down. He wishes he had a glass of champagne, but tragically he hadn’t had the foresight to get one. Maybe he should ask Theory where they got it.
He remembers what Elias said. ‘And you’d better be sober when you call me’. Perhaps the champagne is a bad idea, he decides.

“You look like you died,” Theory observes with no hint of emotion. “Like...you’re alright, but you definitely died.”

“That’s how I feel,” Nemesis agrees.

“What happened?” Evie asks. There’s a hint of concern to her voice. As always, Nemesis is shocked to hear anything from her that implies she wouldn’t be alright with the idea of him dying. By this point, he feels as though he should have revised his expectations. It’s pretty clear that whatever traits of hers he assumed were malicious were, in fact, good-hearted efforts to keep her brother from harm by any means necessary.

That’s right, he thinks to himself with no lack of bite. Be less judgmental. You’re a terrible person.

“Not much,” he says to answer her question, hoping that his pause beforehand wasn’t too alarmingly - or, worse, suspiciously - long. “I was just...socializing.”

“Sounds fun,” Evie says. He’s not sure if he’s supposed to glean any specific meaning from that. The word fun, especially in a context like this, can mean many things.

“I don’t think that’s the right word for it, but it was…”

He trails off, because what word could he possibly use to describe the things that have happened since they last saw each other? His mind struggles, but nothing in his lexicon seems sufficient - instead, he merely shrugs.

“It was, yes.”

Evie blinks slowly. “It...was. Okay.”

“You can’t say that and make me think you aren’t hiding something important,” Theory remarks.

“Well, I am hiding something important.”

“Oh.” Evie frowns. “You’re just admitting to it outright? No weird mind games about it?”

“I think you’re both already onto me, so there’s no point in lying.”

Theory nods. “Good attitude to have about it. So what happened?”

“Just because I’ll admit something happened, doesn’t mean I’ll describe it to you in detail.”

“Aww, but what if it was interesting? Was it at least interesting?” Evie asks.

“I guess it was interesting. Interesting to me as it happened, for sure.”

Theory nods. “So you either killed someone, got in a fight, went on an impromptu romantic excursion, committed a crime, solved a crime, saw someone committing a crime which you’ve now resolved to solve, helped someone get away with a crime, became an accessory to a crime-”

“I get it,” he interjects, but she continues as if uninterrupted.

“-stumbled upon a society plot, foiled a society plot, ran into that guy you keep saying you’re
looking for, ran into Salem Riddle, met a really weird person you’re pretty sure is involved in a society plot, or had some sort of interactions with the people from the Theatre Obscura.”

“That’s a rather comprehensive list,” Nemesis says with a sigh. “It was...er...three of those, I think? I’ll leave it up to you to guess which three.”

“That’s no fun,” she says, with a frown. “Okay. I guess: committed a crime, helped someone get away with a crime, met a really weird person you’re pretty sure is involved in a society plot.”

“Oh, my turn,” Evie says. “I’m going to guess got in a fight, committed a crime, stumbled upon a society plot.”

“Come on, I’m not that criminally-inclined, am I?”

Evie shrugs. “From what I heard, you trespass on a regular enough basis that I’d be shocked if you didn’t now.”

“Ah. Make that four, then.” He shakes his head. “But enough of this. You’ll not get answers out of me, save that both of you have missed the mark so far. How have you two been doing, conversely? Committed any crimes?”

“Not really,” Theory says.

“I hope not?” Evie adds.

“If we have, they’re not laws I care about breaking,” Theory says.

“If we have, they’re not laws I even know exist,” Evie says, “and if I don’t know they exist, how important can they possibly be?”

“I’m sure that defense would hold up in court.” Nemesis chuckles.

“Really, though, we’ve done nothing criminal. Just conversation and champagne,” Evie says. “A decent amount of champagne, admittedly. But it’s very good champagne.”

“Aye, it looks it.”

Theory holds out her flute to him. “Would you like some?”

“Woul’dn’t mind.”

He reaches his hand out for it, and she snatches it away. “Get your own, then.”

“Aww, Theers.” He chuckles again, getting to his feet. “I can’t say I didn’t totally expect that, but I had hoped for better from you. Alright. Back in a moment, then.”

It’s halfway to the bar when he hears it - the sound of screaming, coming from the galleries. His heart jumps, then begins to race.

He’s the first in the room to react, immediately spriting in the direction of the noise’s source. He dashes through crowds, not bothering to weave through them, simply displacing everyone in front of him with his sheer velocity. The terrified crowds seem to recognize that he has some sort of authority, or perhaps they’re just scared of the rapidly sprinting teenager, because they let him through with little resistance.

Nemesis’s mind works as fast as his legs. After the first scream, his brain runs through all the
potential scenarios which could be at play - an assault? A murder? A corpse, hidden cleverly in a display case? A fight? Something else entirely? Whatever it is, he needs to know about it. Nothing is insignificant, especially not here, not now.

Of course, it might be a coincidence that something has happened here, at the site of Elizabeth Calloway’s final installation, with Obscura agents milling around. It could not even be a big deal at all. People scream for stupid and inconsequential reasons all the time. Perhaps some rich and obnoxious gentleperson spilled champagne on their lapels. Perhaps someone said something particularly rude and gossipy, and great offense was taken to it. It could be any number of reasons not worth giving the time of day.

But Nemesis, in that moment, isn’t willing to so much as entertain that possibility. When things like this happen, it means something.

Thankfully, he’s fast. Perhaps faster than someone who looks like him should be, really. Nemesis has often been told he looks like he’d pass out after fifteen minutes of semi-vigorous exercise, but the burning frustration he feels whenever people comment on his appearance doesn’t compare to the spiteful satisfaction of knowing that they’re wrong, and proving it.

He’s halfway across the museum almost immediately, crowds parting for him like he’s a ship’s hull and they’re particularly unruly waves on a windy day. The most commotion seems to be coming from Atelier's exhibition, so that’s where he goes, and immediately, he knows he’s right, because some people are rushing out and others are rushing in in a glorious maelstrom of pure chaos.

He knocks aside a tall man in a top hat, rushing through the crowds. Just when he’s about to declare his presence and ask what’s happening, the thing happening makes itself apparent.

Atelier's exhibit is pitch black, not even the emergency lights on. Thankfully, Nemesis has just the thing for this - he wouldn’t leave home without his handy collapsible lantern. He gets it out and open and on, and not a moment too soon, because the culprit already has one leg on the windowsill.

The culprit in question is an individual in a black overcoat, tall black leather boots, and a black scarf which doesn’t expose so much as an inch of their neck. An ornate black-and-red mask covers their face in its entirety, making it impossible to discern any of their features, and a wide-brimmed hat casts even that in shadow.

It’s a bit much, honestly, even for someone trying to hide their identity. All so overdone, in Nemesis’s opinion. If one’s to be a phantom thief, one might as well do it in style. Sure, this conceals the individual’s identity beyond recognition, but there’s no style to it whatsoever - except for the mask, which he’ll admit has a bit of flair.

More concerning than this intruder’s lack of fashion sense, however, is what’s tucked under their arm - Nemesis recognizes, with alarm, that familiar blue shape. Shadows Over Catacumba, in all of its glory.

“Stop them!” screams the man in the top hat who Nemesis knocked over, as the thief kicks the window open in a fluid motion, vaulting out. The painting, as goes without saying, goes with him, out into the nearly black night sky. The thief strikes an imposing figure, illuminated briefly by the light shining from the window before dropping into the shadows.

Nemesis, ever the man of action, follows him, shoving his lantern back into his bag and jumping through after him. Behind him, guests scream. Lucky them. They get a show. They get to watch the heroic private investigator catch the thief.
Or the thief un-heroically tosses the private investigator off the roof to his death, perhaps, but the thought only just barely registers through the haze of adrenaline.

His feet slam into the roof. Thankfully, his ankle doesn’t cave, and he carries the momentum over, rolling diagonally over his shoulder. In a flash, he’s on his feet again, sprinting after the thief as his hand rushes to his pistol.

“Stop!” He yells. “Don’t make me shoot you!” In retrospect, it’s not the most eloquent or creative threat he’s ever made, but one-liners are significantly harder to formulate when one is under actual pressure.

The thief, to his shock, turns around, and Nemesis points the gun at them. The fact that he’s not fond of the idea of actually shooting is one best kept to himself. This thief doesn’t need to know that Nemesis has only ever shot three people, all of them non-fatally, all of them in self defense. That’s not what’s important right now.

The thief stares him down. Or, at least, that’s what Nemesis imagines them to be doing - their face isn’t visible through their mask, but Nemesis can only imagine a smug smirk, a single raised eyebrow. *Come and get me, Jones. If you can*.

Quick as a flash, with no clear cause, Nemesis’s pistol flies out of his hand, clattering down onto the roof a foot or so away from him.

He doesn’t waste any time worrying about how that happened. Overthinking in a fight is a good way to get knocked out fast. Instead, he rushes at the thief, who seems surprised enough at the lack of hesitation that they’re caught off-guard by a cross to the cheek. Nemesis is pretty sure he came out worse in that engagement in terms of sheer damage - the mask is far harder than his gloved hand - but the thief is staggered, and Nemesis feels unstoppable.

The thief stumbles, but only for a moment. Just as fast, they’re back on their feet, swinging back at Nemesis. But everything Nemesis lacks in brute force, he makes up for in speed and finesse, dodging under their arm and aiming a jab to the stomach.

The lack of gun is unfortunate, but it’s not the end of the world. He loses intimidation, a convenient bludgeoning weapon, and the trump card of being able to put a bullet in his opponent. Definitely, it’s a loss. But he’s still got options. He’s still scrappy, he’s still got years of experience winning fights he had no business winning.

The punch lands, forcing the thief back, and Nemesis capitalizes, tripping them. They fall, hard, and Nemesis gets down on one knee, reaching for their mask. He gets his hand on it, and he feels a tap on his shoulder.

An accomplice? He whirls around, and he sees nothing but night sky behind him. Somehow, he’s been double-crossed, but he doesn’t have time to think about how it might have been carried out, or even fully register it, before the thief is on their feet again, aiming a kick at Nemesis.

Immediately, Nemesis can tell this individual isn’t precisely comfortable in fistfights. Their movement is crude, graceless and telegraphed, their balance off, their technique shabby. If Nemesis hadn’t been caught completely off-guard by whatever it was they were doing, he surely would have dodged it easily, and probably followed up in a devastating way.

Unfortunately, he has no time to react before the kick slams into the side of his face, knocking him uneasily close to the side of the building. Below him, the street-lamps of Omen look like constellations, just like the stars flashing through his vision. For a moment, his heart leaps.
He’s stood at the edge of a roof before, looked down at the night city. Somehow, the streetlamps make it seem far more welcoming, kind, almost. It’s easy to forget that if he were to move a few inches to the side, he would hurtle into the night, nothing to break his fall.

Inexplicably, the thief gives him time enough to jump to his feet, move to the center of the roof. They seem more intent on running than fighting. Nemesis runs after them, feeling blood flowing down the side of his face, where his forehead had hit the concrete roof.

“Come back!” He yells. “Coward!”

The thief looks back, and for a moment, it feels as if they just might actually stop and wait for him. But then they redouble their efforts, speeding up. Nemesis is fast, but so are they.

The thrill of the chase becomes mixed with desperation. Nemesis wants to catch this thief, needs to catch them, but his head throbs, and he can feel his vision going blurry. He should be lying down, doing anything but exerting himself, but he has a job to do.

Even determination has its limits, though. He feels his energy give out, just as the thief reaches the end of the wing.

For a brief moment, they turn to look at Nemesis. He imagines the look to be solemn, but he can’t tell through the mask. Then, they turn away from him, and jump from the roof to the next building.

The distance must be fifty feet across, but the thief sails over the dark sky, faintly outlined by the light of the streetlamps. They seem ethereal, floating in a neat arc past and landing lightly on the next building over, showing no sign of their earlier clumsiness.

And then they run off into the distance, and all Nemesis can do is watch, because there’s no way a normal human could ever clear that distance, even if they were the strongest person alive. He’s not sure if he should cry or scream, so he watches, wide-eyed and bleeding, staring at their figure as it vanishes into the distance.

It isn’t until they’re gone completely from his vision that Nemesis processes what’s happened. Rapidly, the adrenaline subsides, and he’s aware of how cold he is out here on the roof, how small he is compared to the infinite black sky, how far the fall from here is. He wants to shiver, cry, curl up on the roof and bemoan his failure, or otherwise to yell curses at his own ineptitude until his throat goes hoarse.

He doesn’t do either of those. He merely stands, stone-still, for far too long, mind empty. After a bit, his capacity for thought returns, bit by bit. The thief is an artificer, obviously, and an adept one. Whatever they did to distract him had to be artifice. The jumping, that somehow had to be artifice as well. Perhaps the boots? Nemesis can’t know for sure, nor even make an educated guess. Frustrating as it is, artifice is one thing he knows very little about.

Finally, Nemesis turns around. Salem Riddle is standing before him, holding his gun out to him handle-first.

Their half-moon glasses somehow obscure the entirety of their face, and reflect light despite there being none. They’re dressed in a floor-length silver gown with a slit up to the knee, held up by thin straps. Despite the fact that their shoulders are entirely uncovered, they don’t shiver. Their hair is mid-length, choppy, and brown. They have freckles, but Nemesis can’t keep track of where they are. All the skin he can see is unnervingly smooth, like a porcelain doll. Obnoxiously, they seem just barely taller than him.
The fog which always accompanies them pools around their feet, faint tendrils curling around Nemesis’s ankles like shackles.

“You dropped this,” they say unhelpfully.

“I’m...well aware.” He takes it gratefully, though, turning it over in his hands. It seems completely unharmed. “Thanks, though.”

“No problem, no problem. Really. It takes nothing out of me whatsoever.” Riddle giggles, and reaches out a hand. “Hey, you know there’s a popular trope in detective fiction where the thief and the detective compare their rooftop fights to a dance. Popularized by one B. Sinclair - ah, you would know that, wouldn’t you, wouldn’t you?”

“I would,” Nemesis agrees. Sinclair had been an associate of Jones’s, not a completely unfamiliar face around the office. Nemesis had found him a bit odd, but not unpleasant. “Why are you bringing this up?”

“Don’t you wish you could have been dancing with that thief?” They ask.

“Nah. Not really. Not an especially graceful sort, were they? Besides, I’d rather not dance with someone else, now that I’m devoted to someone.”

Salem reaches their hand out. “Dance with me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Fair enough.” They withdraw the hand, shrugging. “You truly do love, love Elias, don’t you?”

“I do. Of course I do.”

“More than you love, love the idea of dancing with a mysterious foe on a roof at night, even. I’m impressed. I’m impressed.” Salem smiles, looking intently at Nemesis. “Are you sure you’re actually, actually human, Jones?”

“What sort of question is that?”

They giggle. “Just asking, just asking. I know almost everything, so I know you’re completely human.”

“That’s...reassuring. Was there doubt?”

There’s that infernal giggle again. “You know, when you believe in the inherent monstrousness of humanity as I do, you tend to...you tend to wonder. But keep on convincing me. It’s good to remember there’s always exceptions.”

“The inherent monstrousness of humanity…” It’s a funny statement coming from Salem Riddle of all people, but Nemesis smiles. “I used to think that way too, but there’s good people out there.”

“But are they an exception? Should one’s opinion of humanity be colored by their existence? Food for thought. Food for thought. Oh, but we’ve gotten so, so off-track.”

Nemesis nods. “I had a feeling you weren’t just here to discuss philosophy with me, but I felt as though it would have been rude to say in that wording.”

“Look at you, worrying about being rude. Don’t worry about that. What I’ve come here to say is...well, I think you’ve figured it out already, but this isn’t a separate mystery, at least not entirely.
“Everything that happens with Omen’s organized crime is actually related, and there’s a reason it’s accelerating the way it is.”

“They’re after something,” Nemesis agrees. “Actually, I reckon I know what. I’ve had a hunch for a time now.”

Salem raises an eyebrow, though no emotion is registered on their face. “Oh? Do tell, do

“What does Omen have that people might want to control? Why is the Institute spoken of in the same breath as the societies, more often than not? They’re after Catacumba, aren’t they?”

Salem grins. It’s, as always, unsettlingly large, almost like a gash splitting their face in two. Those teeth are still so, so sharp. “Oh, you’re smart. I was going to spell it all out for you, but you don’t seem to even need that. How impressive!”

“Right. Real bloody clever of me.”

“It is.” The grin fades to a more earnest smile. “So you’ll keep doing what you have been, right, right? I believe in you. Oh, and by the way, by the way, your head should be fine in a day or so.”

“Er...nice to know?”

The wind picks up. The fog is blown up and away, but more of it seems to be generated until it envelops Salem completely. Nemesis watches as it blows away.

A punch hits him in the already-injured cheek, sending him reeling back. He immediately gets his hands up, ready to fight. Is the thief back? Have they realized that they were enjoying this ‘dance’, and come back for more?

No, it isn’t the thief. He recognizes a familiar face, just before that face points a gun directly at his forehead.

Nemesis has pointed guns at many people in his time, as much as it isn’t something he generally likes to brag about. And standing here, at the edge of the roof, mere steps away from a final plummet, the cold barrel pressed squarely against the center of his forehead, he feels even less inclined to brag about it.

Being in a fight is one thing. There’s a certain thrill to it, and even if someone is at a disadvantage they can still win. Being in a fight is exciting, with the pain serving as a reminder that he’s alive and he hasn’t lost yet.

Being held at gunpoint is a miserable, cold feeling. Immediately, every bone in his body tenses and freezes, and he can think of nothing but the fact that, if he so much as twitches, a bullet might find itself passing through his skull, and there’s nothing he can do about it. Sure, he’s alive, but that could change at a moment’s notice. And it’s when Nemesis is about to die that he’s most aware of just how much he wants to live.

Nemesis has seen corpses of people shot through the head before. They were varied, in precise angle and location of the wound, in range from which they were shot, and in the caliber of the weapon that did them in, but one thing always remained consistent - they were gruesome. One wouldn’t assume a simple gunshot to be so destructive, but the skull has a curious tendency to shatter in spectacularly horrifying ways. It’s not a clean death, nor a graceful one. It’s a person’s brain mixed in with a pool of their own blood, horrible outcroppings of bone, a mess which takes hours to clean off a wall. At any moment, his handsome face could become that. There’s no dignity in that.
When one is about to die, Nemesis has learned, often, they can’t help but be reminded precisely how much they don’t *want* to die. Why they *can’t* die. Elias. Mr. Jones. Callie. He thinks about how young he is - a single year into his adulthood, and already about to meet his end at the hands of a standard-issue police revolver atop a building, having failed to capture a thief who wasn’t even that impressive.

The officer he’d met at the station the day after Elizabeth Calloway died wears a face of indifference, but he can see something completely different in her eyes - something eerily familiar. After all this time, he’s forgotten what it’s like to be looked at with that sort of disdain. He’s forgotten what it’s like to know that the person looking at you would be *delighted* to hurt you.

After all this time, it’s shocking to see this sort of bloodlust directed at him again. Part of him wants to break down crying, but the rest of him realizes that won’t save him. If anything it’ll make things worse. He’ll just die a more humiliating death.

“Put your hands in the air,” she demands. “Slowly. No sudden movements.”

He obeys, not able to look her in the eye. This sort of surrender is among the most humiliating things possible, and he feels his face burn - or maybe that’s the injuries. She lowers the gun and handcuffs him, not at all gentle about it, not bothering to so much as allow him to step away from the precipice.

It’s not until she’s done that she speaks again. “Where’s the painting?”

*Oh*. That’s what this is about. She’s somehow convinced *he’s* the thief, despite not even remotely looking like them. If he was the thief, wouldn’t he have just *left*, instead of hanging out on the roof for however long it took the constables to show up? She sure took her time.

He can’t say any of that aloud, because he’s not trying to die. Instead, he simply says: “I don’t know.”

The officer scoffs. What’s her name again? Nemesis swears he remembers - it was on her name-tag, wasn’t it? What was it? Cadogan? Corbin? It began with a C, he remembers that much. “You realize that you’ve been caught, right? There’s no point in playing stupid.”

“I’m not.”

He feels the barrel of the gun against the back of his head. “Shut up and get back inside.”

He’s not about to argue. She walks him back to directly below the window and shoves the gun into his back hard enough that he thinks he’s about to trip and fall flat on his face again, but manages to steady himself. Is this how the horses in the Llygredish countryside where the carriages aren’t enchanted feel? Nemesis thinks the next time he goes to the country he just might need to bring a sack of sugar cubes to feed every horse he sees, as thanks for putting up with this.

Of course, he supposes, there probably won’t *be* a next time he goes to the country, because he’ll be dead. Sobering thought, that.

“Well, come on,” she says, shoving him again. “Don’t waste my time.” What the *stars* is this woman’s name? Crowley, it must be Crowley, surely it’s Crowley.

“I don’t see how you expect me to get up there,” he says, realizing the moment the words leave his mouth that by her standards this is likely horrifically rude. He squeezes his eyes shut, hoping she takes some sort of uncharacteristic mercy and doesn’t shoot him on the spot.
There’s a moment of horrible, uneasy silence, where he feels the revolver leave his back. Then his neck snaps sharply to the side as he experiences the familiar sensation of having a metal object slam into his face at great velocity.

He can’t help but stumble back and fall to his knees as his face explodes in pain. His eyes are still closed, but he can feel the blood rushing down his face, alarming amounts of it - not to mention the blood flooding his mouth. Based on the parts of his face which feel like they’ve been frozen over with cryogenic fluid and then thawed with a flamethrower, the hit was primarily to his nose and left cheek. He can feel the swelling beginning. How unsightly. To think he almost made it through the night with his face intact.

*Whatever will Elias think*, he wonders, before realizing that Elias might never see him alive again. *Well, what will Elias think of that? He’ll be sad, I reckon*, he responds to himself.

He opens his eyes, and his vision is half-obscured by what he can only assume is a horribly swollen face. *Bloody great. Bet I’m hideous now.*

He stands up shakily. It’s easy to never realize how difficult it is to get up without use of one’s arms. Nemesis has certainly never realized how hard it is before, but it is, and by the time he finally makes it upright he’s surely made an absolute fool of himself. The effort is made even more unwieldy by the lightheadedness rapidly setting in on him. His vision feels blurry, and he struggles to keep his eyes fully open.

He feels the urge to dust off his coat, but his hands remain tragically handcuffed behind his back and out of use. So this is the sort of thing he worries about when he’s just had a pistol slammed into his face, is it?

More concerningly, the shirt which had been crisp and almost blinding white just this morning is now horribly red. That’s not going to get out, even with dry-cleaning. It’s not as if it was his favorite, but it’s still a perfectly good shirt, completely ruined now. Even more concerningly, he supposes, that’s a *lot* of blood. It would be tragic for him to die from, of all things, exsanguination from a wound that isn’t even that bad.

The taste of iron is heavy in his mouth. It’s not that unpleasant a taste, really. He could almost get used to it. Warm blood isn’t too different from tea, to a person who doesn’t have taste buds. He runs his tongue over his teeth. Thankfully, none of them seem to have become dislodged. He’s ridiculously lucky, now that he thinks about it. A person who’s been in as many fights as him, and lost a good half of them, has absolutely no right to have all of his teeth intact, but he’s very grateful that he does. Having a mouth full of silver teeth wouldn’t really suit him, he thinks.

“Can’t believe you’re on your feet,” Crowley remarks. Wait, no, Crowley can’t be her name, can it? But it must be, or is his memory really that bad? His head throbs.

He coughs in response. It’s not like he can manage much else.

She rolls her eyes, and turns to the window, yelling: “Can I get a ladder down here?!”

Someone obediently sets one down. Thankfully, it’s a step-ladder, not a rope ladder. Nemesis doesn’t think he’d be able to climb one of those handcuffed on a good day, never mind now, but he’s sure Crowley wouldn’t take no for an answer.

She shoves him with the muzzle of her gun, and he obediently climbs, fully aware of all the eyes on him as he steps through the window. A nice dose of public humiliation just to finish off the night, just what he needed.
People are talking. He can’t make out what any of them are saying. That’s concerning. Normally he can’t stop himself from eavesdropping if he wants to. Right now, all the words blend together into a horrible mess.

A figure cuts purposefully through the crowd. “What the fuck,” Lucian Vigenere sputters inelegantly.

“I’ve caught the thief,” Crawford says. Crawford! That’s her name! Yes, he’s remembered it! He would jump for joy, but he’s in far too much pain, and his delight is immediately spoiled by the revelation that it took him this long to remember. Goodness, he feels downright stupid now.

“Caught the thief?” Vigenere puts a hand on Nemesis’s shoulder, and he flinches instinctively. He’s been hit several times too much tonight to be touched out of the blue, and Vigenere seems to understand this, immediately retracting his arm with a look of disgust - not at Nemesis, but at his injuries. The look he wears is unfamiliar - sympathy. “Stars. Sorry, but stars. Uh, anyway - Jones, did you steal?”

He shakes his head as response.

“Good enough for me. Uncuff him before I have you written up,” he snaps at Crawford.

“But-” she begins, and Nemesis has to laugh, now that he knows it won’t get him killed on the spot. He just got pistol-whipped for something far less rude, and here she is talking back to the baron himself! She glares at him, but he can see the fear forming underneath the indignance.

Good, he thinks, you should be scared. It’s an alarming, vindictive, horrible thought, and for a moment he feels ashamed of it, but then he remembers that she’s the reason he’s bleeding rivulets all over the floor.

“No buts. That’s an employee of the Semper barony you’ve…” he looks at Nemesis, trying to assess his injuries.

“Pistol-whipped,” Nemesis supplies, all too aware of the blood spilling into his mouth.

“...pistol-whipped,” Vigenere repeats incredulously.

“It’s fine,” Nemesis speaks up. “Really. I’ve had worse.”

“If you insist.” Vigenere looks thoroughly unconvincing, then glares at Crawford. “I’ll assume you found nothing of actual use, so you’d best uncuff this gentleman and get out of my sight before I have you written up.”

To her credit, she does so, with no lack of indignation on her face. Nemesis can tell it’s an impressive show of restraint on her part to not just shoot him and Vigenere both, but she doesn’t. Unfortunately, any respect he could have afforded her is overridden by the ever-regrettable pistol-whipping.

And by the time she’s gone, other people have arrived. Mustafa Dagher, both of the Chases, and Theory are all gathered around Nemesis, in various degrees of alarm and concern. Elias isn’t present, but then again, neither is Jing, or anyone else from the Obscura. When he scans the crowd, he can’t locate any of them. Have they left early? Are they in league with the thief? Or are they scared of being targeted?

It’s Vigenere who speaks first. “I’m so sorry, Jones.”
“It’s no problem, really.”

“You look hideous,” Theory remarks, though her face is showing an uncharacteristic amount of concern. Nemesis supposes everyone has their ways of coping with the disfigurement of a friend.

“Ah, I’m aware. Nothing’s changed on that front, then. Maybe I’ll have a cool scar to show off at parties now.”

“Oh, Nemesis!” Percy is actually crying, which Nemesis thinks is a bit of an overblown reaction. “Are you okay? No, sorry, sorry, stupid stupid stupid question no you aren’t okay obviously I’m so sorry.”

Nemesis puts one hand on his shoulder. Boy, does it feel good to be uncuffed. He can thank the stars for that, at least. “Cool your jets, Chase. It’s just a broken nose.”

“Just a broken nose?” Mustafa Dagher looks like he might have a heart attack. “But-but you look like you should be dead, honestly! I can’t imagine how you aren’t!”

“Thanks. Really inspires some bleeding confidence, that.”

“I didn’t mean it like that-”

Evie puts a hand on his shoulder. “Relax. I think he’s coping just fine.”

“Thank you!” Nemesis throws his hands in the air. “Finally, someone here is approaching this calmly! I’ll be fine people, I’ll be fine. I’m a private investigator, getting grievously wounded in the pursuit of some or other villain is what I do!”

The crowd is still murmuring. Always, with the damned murmuring.

Percy wipes tears away from his eyes. “You’re so cool, Nemesis. I’m sorry I can’t be as cool as you. I just...that looks like it hurts so much, I can’t even imagine how much it hurts!”

“It’s fine, mate. I’m not offended, you’re fine. I’m just-” he starts to pinch the bridge of his nose, before realizing that it’s currently physically impossible to do so.

Vigenere puts a hand on Nemesis’s shoulder. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“Just a misunderstanding, I reckon. I didn’t manage to catch the thief, and she saw me out on the roof. And, er, has really bad work practices.”

“Do you need urgent medical attention?”

“I know a guy. I’ll be fine to come back here and work on the case tomorrow, don’t worry.”

Vigenere looks horrified. “But...you’re injured.”

“And?”

He sighs. Nemesis feels like this might have been a little too much excitement for one night. So young and the baron of Acerbis’s most politically prominent region, and now he gets to watch the man he just hired get the tar beaten out of him by one of his own officers. It must be stressful for him.

“I insist on seeing you tomorrow, then. For...contract discussions. For the time being-” he looks at Percy. “Are you his...what is your relationship to Mr. Jones?”
“I’m just his friend,” Percy says through his tears.

“Well, make sure he gets himself medical treatment. Not the ineffective kind, either. The artificial kind. I’ll reimburse you for all costs, tell the doctor the baron sent you.”

“No problem. I’m not going to not get treated.” Nemesis hadn’t even briefly considered the idea that artifice could be used to heal people, but he supposes it makes sense.

“You’d best keep your word. I don’t like liars.” Vigenere gives him a solemn look. “Now get to the doctor, Jones. We’ll leave the crime scene pristine and untouched for you to look over tomorrow, I swear it on my honor as a Vigenere.”

“I appreciate it, your lordship.” He tips his cap - remarkably still on his head after the harrowing night - and bows.

Mustafa Dagher waves at him, though he looks like he’s still processing the night’s happenings himself. “Take care, Jones! I’m so sorry this had to happen!”

He leaves, Theory and the Chases flank him. Percy has grabbed his hand, and doesn’t seem eager to let go, which Theory and Evie both look remarkably tense. On his way out, he notices Phineas Sterling sobbing into Gilbert Banks’s lapels. It’s been not a particularly great night for anyone, he supposes.

Nemesis has seen a lot of alarmed looks in his life, but the one on Lavinia Graves’s face when she sees his horrible, swollen form is pretty impressive.

She rushes over to the door immediately, roughly grabbing Nemesis’s face. He winces in pain as she turns it over in her hands, staring intently at his nose. “What bleeding happened to you, boy?!?” She exclaims, agitated.

“Pistol-whipped,” Nemesis provides, swollen features making it difficult to enunciate properly.

“Pistol-whipped!” She repeats, then sighs. “And I don’t suppose you’ll tell me how this came to happen? Actually, forget it, I don’t bloody care, just get in my office.” She gestures to the Chases and Theory, who wait awkwardly by the door. “And who are these people?!”

“My friends,” Nemesis mutters.

“Well, your friends can wait outside.” She gestures him in, and he looks back at the three of them.

“It’ll be alright, you three.” He smiles in a way he hopes is charming and reassuring, but given the state of his face is probably more horrifying and alarming. “I’ll be fine.”

“I sure hope so,” Theory agrees. “I’ll be hailing a cab. I trust you can do the same, even in your current state. What should I tell Callie?”

“Tell Callie I’ve been injured but I’m fine. I’ll be home soon enough, I hope.” He realizes, to his utter horror, that he’s just referred to Beaumort’s as ‘home’, but if Theory catches it, she doesn’t comment.

“Fair enough, fair enough.”

“Call me tomorrow,” Percy insists. “I need to know you’re okay. Please make sure you call me as
soon as you can.”

Nemesis smiles. Percy’s genuine concern is one of his best features, even if he is overreacting. Then again, he remembers how he was about the corpses at Burke’s, too. It’s pretty clear to Nemesis that, for whatever reason, Percy doesn’t do well with gore in the least - strange as it is to think of a broken nose and swollen cheek as ‘gore’.

“It’s alright, mate,” he says, as clearly as he can muster with the state of his face. “I’ll be fine. I’m getting medical attention. Don’t worry about it.”

“You can’t stop me from worrying,” he insists, but he and Evie leave as well with one final concerned glance back, and Nemesis watches the door shut behind them before he finally follows Graves to her office.

When she sees him, she raises her eyebrow and gestures to her operating table. Fortunately, it seems to be scrubbed clean of blood. Unfortunately, Nemesis thinks he and his still-bleeding face might be about to change that.

“Sit,” she says. “Pistol-whipped. Bloody stars. Is this what you got up to with Arthur?”

“No!” He says, immediately, with a sort of violent intensity to it. Immediately after, he takes a deep breath, steadying his breathing. “That is to say… I never got hurt while he was around. I’m an idiot. He’s not a bad guardian, so don’t…”

“Don’t worry. I believe you.” She pats him on the shoulder. “Sit down, before I just knock you out.”

He sits down. “I’ve had a good amount of laudanum, by the way, in case you’re curious. Maybe a bad amount, actually, on account of being kind of a lot, but I reckon in this circumstance it’s a little justified.” The bottle Aharon Apollinaire had given him had finally come in handy, even if he wasn’t about to waste good laudanum on the poor excuse for a wrist injury it had been prescribed for.

“That was about to be my first step, so thank you for sparing me the effort. Care to tell me why you’ve just got laudanum with you, then?”

“I had it for medical reasons,” he insists. “Aharon Apollinaire prescribed it to me for a wrist injury.”

“A wrist injury…” She hums, then holds out her hand. “I’d like to see this wrist of yours.”

He provides it, and she looks over it with a frown. “You’re aware that around half the bones in your hand have been broken and healed horribly, correct?”

“I’m aware, yes.”

“And that the position in which you hold your wrist is incredibly strange because you’ve clearly suffered multiple injuries which, again, have failed to heal even remotely well?”

He smiles ruefully. “I’ve punched a lot of walls.”

“That’s terrible.” She sighs. “Arthur just let you live like this?”

“No. He was very concerned by almost everything I did, and he kept me out of trouble.”
“Then why-”

“I didn’t always have him.”

She nods tensely, and he can practically sense her going over all the letters Arthur Jones had sent her in her mind, trying to put together a better image of who Nemesis had been when Jones had met him. “He told me. About your hands. But I didn’t imagine the bones themselves would be-”

“Well, they are.”

She frowns, gingerly looking over his hands. “That’s why the gloves, right?”

He nods.

“Bloody awful. Ashamed of your own hands at such a young age...and through no fault of your own.”

“That’s not exactly true. No one told me to mess up my own hands. It’s my own responsibility.”

She clicks her tongue. “You were what, thirteen, when you met him? Not a child’s fault he was forced to those extremes. Shame on your parents.”

“What parents?”

She winces. “Right. Well, it’s the less concerning injury at the moment. I could probably set your bones properly later, though it would be...hard. Old habits die hard, for both people and their bones. For the time being, lie down.”

He does, and she puts a hand on his face, frowning. “I’m going to assume you’d like me to keep your face looking as normal as possible. Can’t just put gloves over that , can you?”

“Aye, but I’m sure it’ll be fine once the swelling goes down.”

“This is the second time your nose has been broken,” she observes. “The first time healed rather well, considering the circumstances. You needed to look closely to be able to tell that anything was up. This time, there’s a good chance you might not be as lucky. I normally only bother with mundane medicine, because if someone wants artifice they can go to the bloody Domus Vitae , but I think it would probably be more efficient and effective to heal you using more aggressive means.”

“Aggressive healing…” he mutters, not entirely following anything he’s saying. Beyond basic first aid, medicine is another of those subjects he never excelled at.

“Sure, think of it that way.” She turns away from him, beginning to rifle through her cabinets. When she comes back, she has a beaker of blood in her hand and long white gloves on.

“Do try to relax while I do this. You wouldn’t want my hand to slip. Oh, and, since I’m obligated to say it - this won’t hurt a bit.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last normal chapter of Movement I! There'll be one more chapter, of a new
type - an Interlude - and then we'll've wrapped up this section.

I hope you've all enjoyed thusfar - please remember to like, subscribe, tell your friends, etcetera. Seriously, though, comments, kudos, and recommendations mean the world to me, and I appreciate each one of them!

Also, tBS has a discord server - DM me on Twitter (@criminallimes) for the link if you'd like. It's not the most active ever, but there's some fun discussion in there.

Thank you all for reading, as always!
Interlude I - Moth Kilby

Chapter Notes

The final chapter of Movement I at long last. We have Number-Chapters and Letter-Chapters...Roman-Numeral-Chapters seem a fitting way to finish the trifecta.

-INTERLUDE I: MOTH KILBY-

Moth Kilby adjusts their hat to sit at a jaunty angle atop their disheveled black hair, grinning, and knocks on the director’s door.

“Who is this?” They hear Tobias Fitzroy ask, followed by the sound of a cabinet shutting quickly, and the door opens. Tobias Fitzroy is gorgeous even on his off-days, not a hair out of place.

(He maintains his appearance with artifice, of course. Alla the famous guys do. Never met a celebrity who authentically looks like themself, never will.)

Tobias Fitzroy is gorgeous at first glance, but the trained eye - and Kilby considers themself trained as they get - notices something amiss - namely, that there seems to be black ink all over his hands. Why he hasn’t simply artificed it off yet perplexes Kilby. If they were able to do any significant amount of artifice, as they know Fitzroy is, they’d be doing it all the damn time, but they repressed their knack quite well as a child and, despite scant experiments, have been unable to train themself back into it.

There’s pinot noir stained on the corner of his mouth. Nasty, Kilby thinks. Use one of those cloth napkins which cost more than my kidneys to wipe it off, will ya? Rich bastard.

“Oh, it’s you. What do you want, Kilby?” Fitzroy asks, flat and threatening.

Kilby blanches. Fitzroy is scary, and all the things they think in their head are better thought than said aloud. Kilby is stupid, and they’ll admit that any day, but they’re no idiot.

“Oh, yessir,” they say, laughing nervously, because Tobias Fitzroy is the scariest person they know, and they know some scary folks. “I’d been thinking, ya know...about my old behaviors and such, and, yaknow, I’m not proud of the person I was, but I was thinking...if there’s any way I can-”

“I don’t have time to deal with you,” Fitzroy says, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, stars, do I know the feeling! Most of the time I feel like I’ve got barely time enough to deal with me, but listen, sir, I’ve changed, listen, I promise. I’ve thought on my behavior, and how it’s been bad - on account of how it’s not been very good and such and all - and I think I’ve changed and I can do better, so if you would-”

Fitzroy’s eyes narrow. He’s suspicious, Kilby realizes, which is never a good thing but is especially not a good thing when the suspicious individual in question commands a criminal underworld and has a difficult-to-comprehend amount of money to spend as he pleases. Tobias Fitzroy is a terrifying man.
If he thinks Kilby’s a threat, well...that’s simply not good news. Not good news at all, no siree, they think, and it takes all their strength to keep them from blurting that out aloud. Moth Kilby has never been a good spy, on account of the fact that they tend to say whatever’s on their mind and say it loudly and confusingly and with starts and stops in strange places.

Interferes with a lot, that. Makes for especially bad spying, though.

They pull their hat down over their face - though, being a top-hat, it doesn’t entirely cooperate, and Kilby feels as if they’re needlessly straining the fabric, so they stop doing that, but then there’s no sensory input and no way to calm themself down so they thread their fingers together and strain until they can feel their joints threatening to crack.

“It’s just that since you fired me I ain’t been able to find work or such and I, well, I know you find me annoying but I think I’m good at what I used to do and I think I could do great if you just gave me a shot and-

Fitzroy leers. Kilby’s heart sinks.

“...you’re gonna hurt me, ain’tcha?”

His eyes barely widen, and he shakes his head, scoffing. “...no, Kilby. You’re too stupid to be a threat, don’t worry. I would never take you for a competent conspirator against me. Thus, there’s no reason to hurt you.”

You hurt lotsa people who ain’t any threat to ya, Kilby doesn’t say, because that would be rude and then Fitzroy would beat them to a pulp with that expensive cane and then where would they be? Dead! And being dead isn’t where they want to end up so they keep their mouth shut and they don’t say anything and they nod, tears building in the corner of their eyes.

Was that bird what ya hung up like a dead chicken fronta the whole crowd a threat to ya?

They don’t say that either.

It’s always a shock when Fitzroy’s face turns sympathetic. Kilby isn’t a good just about anything but they’re a damned fantastic judge of character, and they know Fitzroy’s got no sympathy for just about anyone ‘cause he thinks beauty is pain and right makes might and eighteen-thousand-or-so other catchy slogans you’d hear in primary school.

“Oh, Kilby. Here.” He plucks one of the many rings - Kilby counts thirteen - he’s currently wearing off of his hand and drops it in theirs. “You need money? You need but ask.”

“Th-th-thank you, sir, yessir,” he stammers. “Snot just the money, though. Miss the stage, miss the lights, miss the thrills. Been doing my clown stuff in the streets but it’s not the damn same, is it?”

“I still have your phone number, Kilby. I’ll contact you if we ever need your specific brand of nonsense. Now...shoo. I have work to do.”

Kilby nods, sweeps off their hat, choruses another ‘sir, yessir, yes sir’, and turns on their heels with a smooth and sweeping motion to leave.

“Wait,” they hear from behind them.

They turn around, looking at Fitzroy, who is far more awkward than they’ve seen him in ages. “We could have lunch someday, if you really want me to think you’re mending your ways.”
“Oh!” Kilby hopes it’s not too obvious how immediately they brighten, the corners of their mouth jumping up like a spectacularly well-wound pogo stick. “I would love that! I would love that so much, yessir, that’d be fantastic and I’d be thrilled and—”

“...alright, alright. Wednesday, six in the evening, the Bitter End. Now off with you.”

“Right!” They say, saluting. “By the way, I actually sold my phone for food money a while back, uh, I’ll buy a new one now that I have the needs, uh, um, bye! Seeya!”

They whirl around and rush off, heart pounding with glee, before he can call them an idiot or a clown or some-such again.

The Bitter End? Why, that’s a place the proles and the reprobates eat - for Fitzroy to be seen somewhere so, well, so un-Ritzy is unthinkable, and Kilby has no doubt he’ll have the little cafe shut down entirely so it’s just the two of them. Just the two of them! Why, Why, indeed?

Kilby frowns. No, Tobias Fitzroy would never do something like that. But then again, he used to let Kilby call him Toby and used to give them a job and used to be so kindly for a rich man, but now he’s, what, this shell? A shell usually can have something in it, or maybe not, but the point stands that they’ve run out of ways to metaphorise this and have yet to make up their thoughts in any way that makes sense to them, and surely if it makes no sense to them it’ll make less to any person on the planet with a single verifiable scrap of brain in them.

It’s very hard, they think, being themself sometimes, and they should appreciate some condolences from literally anyone, perhaps as a substitute for the usual choruses of “fuck off, Kilby, you annoying, stupid, idiot clown”.

They’re an idiot clown, they know, but that doesn’t mean they feel good about it. Mostly indifferent, actually.

Kilby frowns and pulls their hat down over their ears again. The feather in it has fallen to the floor - they scoop it up gingerly and stick it back in the brim. The feather is actually a dart, so leaving that lying on the floor would be an idea that would be bad and not very good.

“I can’t believe this,” they say aloud, though they’re not sure what it is they’re precisely disbelieving.

They stomp through the hallways, not bothering to walk normally because who cares, they’ll walk however they damnably want in this most pompous of clown shows, and no one on this damnable planet will stop them!

“Stop that,” they hear a strict, stern, uptight snooty rich-person voice say, and immediately freeze in place, looking back at the source of the noise like a child caught sticking their hair in a cookie-jar by their parent. Moth Kilby would not know about having parents or jars of cookies, but they suppose that’s as good a way of similizing it as any.

“Sorry, sorry, yessir, sorry,” they mutter on reflex.

The man in front of them is tall and well-manicured and quite handsome, hair perfectly curled. His name is John Donahue and he is a costumer, and he’s complained many times about having to costume someone like Kilby who, according to him, is ‘uncooperative’ and ‘stupid’. He’s not very nice, and Kilby thinks Toby would be better off spending his time with someone nice but poor and stupid, like Kilby, than someone rich and smart but really very mean, like John Donahue.
“You’d best be,” he says, and scoffs. Scoffing, by coincidence, is John Donahue’s favorite thing to do, as far as Kilby’s seen of the man.

Kilby scoffs back, and Donahue looks offended. Kilby supposes it wasn’t very much a gesture of solidarity, but they also think they should get a few free insults in without repercussions every now and then. They get insulted such a disproportionate amount. It’s only fair.

Next to Donahue, Morgana Fitzroy is sipping from a flute of absinthe. She looks at Kilby as though they are a rat dragged in by one of the Fitzroys’ seemingly endless supplies of cats.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, more bewildered than upset. “I thought father had fired you.”

“Aha! You thought-correctly, you thought right, but it’s fine, I’m not banned from the premises yet, Miss Morgana, no siree-”

Her eyes narrow. “Why not?”

Why not? Kilby blinks rapidly, and feels as if they’re about to induce a seizure in themself so they stop doing that. “I mean, wh-why aren’t you banned? H-Haha, funny, funny joke, yes, I’m joking - sorry, new boyfriend?”

She narrows her eyes, putting a hand over John Donahue’s mouth before he can answer. “People are banned for a reason, you know. With that Nemesis Jones guy snooping around in our business, it’s tense around here. Father doesn’t want people stumbling on anything, and the murders have made that a relevant concern. No idea who it benefited, killing her, unless someone just really wanted to kill people for the sake of it. At least the other end of his plan is going better...As for John and I...none of your business, Kilby. You don’t have a chance with me anyway.”

“With you?” They scoff. “I’m, like, I know I look young but I’m like ten years older than you. I’m a full thirty-five!”

“You don’t look it,” she comments.

“That’s what I said, but I am old! I’m near your old man’s age!”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Get out of my face,” Donahue adds. “Sorry, but you’re around a three, and I associate with sevens and above only. Anyway, Antony Fairchance and I have that meeting to go to once he’s out of his one with Fitzroy, and I certainly don’t want him seeing me around the likes of you .”

“Hmph!” Kilby exclaims, turning around and obediently leaving. Inside, they’re fuming. Only a remarkably juvenile and insecure individual would be so hung-up on the ten-point scale anyway, and, anyway, anyhow, Kilby is definitely at least a six-and-a-half if you ignore the clothes and go off pure looks. They have nice cheekbones and no rich asshole can take that from them.

They stop a fair bit away from the other two idiots and put their head against the wall and feel as if they might cry. Their hand is curled so tightly around the ring Toby gave them that it feels like it’s going to cut into their hand and break all their bones and that’s not good for someone who makes a portion of their income off juggling.

...he probably wouldn’t want them calling him Toby anymore, not even in their head, they think sadly.

Speaking of Toby...they can hear his voice, quietly, through the wall. Oh, boy! They know they
shouldn’t, but they press their ear against the wall and squint hard even though it doesn’t really help them to listen and listen even harder.

“-important,” Fitzroy says, and then they can’t tell what he’s saying, and then, “-Kilby-” and they squint and strain very hard but they can’t hear what comes after, until, “-dealt with. Make sure of it. I’ll - the money - can’t be allowed to live.”

They recoil from the wall, eyes wide. Of course - it’s all a ruse, of course it is! Tobias Fitzroy thinks they’ve seen too much of something and wants them out of the way, and they know exactly what the something is and that doesn’t make it any more comforting, and they’re just left wondering why he didn’t do it years ago. Maybe he’s still got a touch of a soft-spot for an old friend and he’s willing to make them happy in their last moments before the sniper takes them out or whatever he has planned.

Their breathing is heavy. Kilby, like anyone else, finds death a scary, scary, scary no-good thought that they don’t want to think. They feel nauseous and weak-kneed and unsettled and they realize they only have one place to go for a circumstance like this.

Nemesis Jones, Morgana Fitzroy had mentioned. Here’s hoping the guy’s got some free spots on his docket. Literally a matter of life and death - not a life that matters to anyone, really, but it matters to Kilby, seeing as they’ve only got the one.

...same Nemesis Jones whose bleeding mug was plastered all over the newspapers, they think with a sinking feeling, but they’ll take whatever they can get.

~MOVEMENT I - THE CLOCKWORK MAIDEN - FIN~
2.1 - Lacrimosa

~MOVEMENT II: THE PHANTOM AND THE THEATRE~

The throbbing in Nemesis’s head is unbearable. Artifice is a wonderful miracle which he never realized could be utilized for medical purposes, but it seems to have done absolutely nothing for his splitting headache. He supposes it would be a bad idea to try to fix something localized to someone’s brain, though. Might accidentally turn off their sense of sight or remove their ability to understand spoken language. Better to be safe and let the headache sort itself out.

He sits up, pinching the bridge of his nose and groaning to himself. It’s fine - no one can hear him being pathetic while he’s alone in his room. He doubts anyone even expects him to be awake right now. He’s not sure what time it is. After his return from Graves’s, he’d gone promptly to bed, not expecting to wake up any time that could be considered ‘regular’. Though his mind struggles to form coherent thought, the events of the previous day are burned into his memory. He was offered a job by Lucian Vigenere. He met Euphemia Sutcliffe. He kissed Elias Malik Fitzroy in a broom closet. He tried to catch a thief. He failed to catch a thief. He spoke to Salem Riddle. A constable pistol-whipped him until his white shirt turned red.

That poor shirt. He can’t help but feel guilty about it. It’s not his fault he was bleeding, and yet…

He sighs audibly and stands. His chest and face are still covered in blood, mostly his own but some left over from Graves’s horrid facsimile of medicine. He shudders at the memory of it. Until you’ve experienced it, there’s really no way to understand how horrible the feeling of having all your bones scrape, bit by agonizing bit, back into the proper place is, nor how strange the feeling of rapidly healing skin is.

He would almost say he would prefer to heal normally, but then he looks in the mirror and he sees his face, horribly bruised and bloodstained and tired but still his face. The swelling has gone down almost completely, and the surface-level wounds are healed, with only one tiny, already-fading scar by his nose left as reminder. It’s not particularly large or obtrusive, not quite ugly.

Most amazingly, his nose has been un-broken, moved back to its natural position and orientation. It looks exactly the same as before - Graves had offered to fix the previous break’s visual effects as well, but Nemesis wasn’t willing to sit through several more hours of that torture just to fix a tiny visual quirk. He can breathe fine, and he’s never actually minded how his nose looks. It’s hard to pick up on unless one is intimately familiar with his nose, anyway. Only he and Elias could possibly notice the difference.

He gingerly peels off the blood-stained shirt. The bedsheets and the pillow can be washed, but the shirt is surely beyond repair, more red than white by this point. Nemesis drops it on the floor, where it crumples pathetically. He’ll get that later, probably. When his head hurts less and he can see straight.

Instead, he stumbles out of his room in the direction of the bathroom. Immediately, he hears a gasp, and before he can process what’s happening, he’s been tackled.

He hears loud, anguished wailing. Callie is clinging to his chest, getting his blood all over herself as she cries. Nemesis realizes, to his own alarm, that he’s shirtless, which is something he never likes to be in public. He yelps at the realization, but for once he’s not distraught over it. He’s got
worse things to worry about. “Callie, Callie, what are you doing?”

“I was so worried,” she cries, and he relaxes a little, patting her head.

“Aye, me too. But it’s fine, I’m fine, my handsome face is intact, and I’ll be able to get back on the case right away, so it’s no problem.”

“But you got hurt,” she continues. “You’re bleeding.”

“Not actively. I’m covered in blood. That’s different.”

“Go wash it off, then. Gross.” Theory peeks in from the kitchen, looking indifferent. Hiding whatever concern she might have for Nemesis’s state must be easier with an entire night to practice, he supposes. “And put on a shirt, I don’t need undressed men in my house.”

“Trust me when I say I don’t like this any more than you do,” he says, sighing.

Callie lets go of him. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He ruffles her hair one-handedly, aware of how horrifically bloody her head is becoming. “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Theory scans him with her eyes. “Wow,” she remarks dryly, “I thought you were a wimp.”

“Well, everyone’s wrong once in a blue moon. My kneecaps are still plenty breakable, though.” What she’s referring to is Nemesis’s physique, which, while not remotely approaching muscular, is at least somewhat toned. Certainly, he’s marginally less of a twig than he appears under several layers of clothes.

She glares at him. “Stop being clever and go wash that blood off, idiot.”

“I would so love to do that and then put on a shirt again. Love that more than anything.”

And he goes to do just that, and by the time he’s finished the sink is so horribly bloodstained that he can only imagine how long it’ll take to clean. This is Theory’s bathroom, not his own bedroom, so he cleans it anyway, though with no shortage of quiet sighs to himself. He well and truly feels like he’s paying to be a maid sometimes. Here he is, horribly injured, and still feeling responsible for all the housework. He can’t imagine what it would be like if he was waiting for his face to heal the conventional way.

Finally done, he stumbles back to his room, pulls a shirt from his closet at random and dons it. He picks the white shirt off the ground, lifting it up to the one lamp in his room.

“Goodbye, old friend,” he mutters, and salutes one-handedly before balling it up and tossing it in the garbage.

Then he gathers the pillowcases and bed sheets, and emerges, surely looking so disheveled he can’t hope to step foot outside. He tosses them atop the laundry machine and sighs heavily.

“Can’t hope for any help here, I suppose?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Theory asks.

“It means precisely what it sounds like. I’m the one who does all the work around here, and, you know, I really don’t mind it to some extent, I like working, but it gets a little exhausting when my face has been broken and I’ve still got to worry about keeping everything tidy.” He sighs.
“Or...forget it, really. It’s fine.”

“If you’re that upset by it, you could just not bother. Have you ever considered giving up? I’ve heard good things about it.” Theory sits down on the couch with a large book in her hands, seemingly unbothered.

“But then things would be filthy and in disarray, because no one else would be doing it, and that bothers me.”

“That’s your problem.” She shrugs. “I don’t see what the problem is. This place was messy for years until you showed up. No one’s told me to clean here since Mother left. And your face isn’t even broken anymore.”

“You ever considered the doctor couldn’t’ve gotten rid of the damage it did to my brain?”

“You’re being very confrontational,” she says.

“No,” Callie says, “You’re being unfair to him. You’re not stopping to consider how he feels.”

“Feels? Can’t relate.”

“It’s fine,” Nemesis says. “You don’t have to be mad on my behalf.” Theory is, of course, over-compensating for the shred of concern she showed him yesterday, trying to put up the same front she always does. He can tell that much. He’ll take it upon himself to be the mature one in this situation, he decides, pouring himself a cup of water and drinking it.

Once finished, he looks back at Theory. “Apologies if I ruined your night, by the way. I know you were enjoying your time with Ms. Chase.”

“It’s fine,” she replies. “We see each other often.”

“Do you, now?”

“Yes. She’s given me her hours at the Bitter End, and at the bar where she works on weekends. And I’ve invited her over sometimes, when I know you’re out. Of course, you wouldn’t understand, but she’s easily the least intolerable person in my life right now.”

Nemesis chuckles, despite his sour mood and the amount of pain he’s in. “Least intolerable’, that’s such a you way of wording that. I reckon you really like her, though. That’s good to see.”

“Of course I like her. She’s my girlfriend. I don’t see what about that is so hard for you to understand.”

“...what’s a girlfriend?...” Callie whispers.

“A woman with whom one is engaged in a romantic relationship,” Nemesis answers. “I’ve discussed the concept of romance with you before.”

“It didn’t sound like something Theory would be prone to, from the way you described it,” Callie observes nonchalantly. “Is there a sort of...standard comment to say when you find out information like this? What would a normal person who isn’t stupid like me say in this situation?”

Nemesis frowns. “You’re not stupid, Callie. Most people would just say ‘congratulations’.”

“Congratulations, then.” She turns to leave.
Nemesis sighs and jumps to his feet. “Sorry, I’ve got to deal with this,” he tells Theory.

“By all means, don’t let me stop you.” She opens her book, ending the conversation whether Nemesis likes it or not.

Resolving to speak to her later about how avoiding acknowledging one’s problems by hiding behind a fabricated persona is not a particularly healthy coping skill in the long-term, he follows Callie.

She’s in her own room, which is by far the smallest in the loft, curled up on her bed with her head pressed into her knees. She looks so pathetic that Nemesis almost forgets that he looks just as pathetic. He sits down next to her.

“You’re not stupid. I have no idea what gave you that idea.”

She groans. “Go away.”

“Hm. No.” He frowns at her. “Seriously. Why do you think that you’re stupid?”

“I just...I feel stupid, I guess. I don’t know anything. You need to explain so many things to me that I know are common knowledge. And I can tell you’re frustrated, but I just can’t figure these things out on my own. I’m too useless to know these things without you or Art telling me them.”

“You aren’t stupid,” he repeats. “I don’t know how you would expect to know things you’ve never been told. No one knows things they aren’t told.”

“You know things you aren’t told.”

“That’s simply not true. I can’t pull knowledge out of thin air. Sometimes I can strongly suspect things without being told them, based on existing knowledge, but I don’t know them until someone tells me for sure that they’re true. And you do the same thing, you know. When you first met me, you threw me off with how quickly you managed to point out things about my behavior that most people never notice.”

“I did?” She doesn’t seem convinced in the least, pulling her knees closer into her chest. “I feel like a constant burden. You have to explain everything to me. I can’t help if I don’t know basic things, like what a catfish is.”

“I reckon a lot of people actually don’t know what a catfish is. Not saying I don’t get why you’re frustrated, but that’s a bad example.”

She sighs, not even seeming to acknowledge that. Nemesis feels a brief note of frustration. It’s the least she could do to respond to what he’s saying, even if it’s to tell him he’s awful and wrong. But instead of letting that make him snap at her or say something he knows he’ll regret, he takes a deep breath.

“When we first met, I was scared of how smart you were,” he admits, voice struggling not to shake.

As far as he’s concerned, as far as he’s always been concerned, there’s nothing worse in the world than losing. Winning is the ultimate expression of power - losing, the ultimate humiliation. To have to admit that someone is simply better than him is something beyond that. Nemesis thinks he would rather be pistol-whipped a hundred times than to admit that someone else is smarter than him.
And yet, here he is, with no choice but to do the latter. His headache feels like it’s worsening. A hint of nausea makes itself apparent.

He’s acting childish, is what he is. But he can’t stop himself from behaving this way, he can’t stop himself from feeling the things he feels. And he doesn’t even really think that it is childish. Of course, that’s how he knows another person would describe it, but when he thinks of it, it all seems so perfectly rational and clear. After all, if he’s not the smartest person in the room, what is he? Why is anyone meant to treat him with any level of respect? His personality certainly doesn’t garner any.

Perhaps, he thinks to himself through the headache, the obvious conclusion is that he doesn’t deserve respect to begin with. At least he’s smart enough to figure that out.

It takes Callie longer to respond than normal. When she does, her voice is barely audible, muffled by her knees. “I don’t understand.”

“What is there not to understand? You’re smarter than me, and you demonstrated it within our first hour of knowing each other. I was threatened by that, so I took advantage of the fact that you don’t know anything about the society you’ve had to adapt to and offered you a position that would specifically designate me as the more knowledgeable of us. That’s because I was threatened. I’d rather have you as an assistant than a rival.”

By the time he’s finished, he can barely breathe from how tense he is. It’s all he can do to keep himself from outright crying. He’s already proved himself to be absolutely pathetic, why not take that last step? Why not burst into tears in front of someone who already must think so lowly of him?

“I don’t understand. I’m not smarter than you. How is giving me a place to stay taking advantage of me?”

He laughs, unable to stop himself. “Bloody hell, it’s not that. Calling you my assistant - it’s just a backhanded way of saying I’m so much smarter and more experienced than you, isn’t it? But I’m not smarter than you, not even close!”

“But-but of course you are.” Her response is startlingly immediate, passionate. “I don’t know anything. You’ve been the only one keeping me from falling apart, and you’ve been cracking codes and solving mysteries right in front of me while I couldn’t do anything to help! The only stupid thing about you is that apparently you don’t know what a smart person is!”

He shakes his head. “None of that-none of that is intelligence! Sure, I know tricks to solving codes, and sure, I’ve been showing you around the city. None of that means anything. I haven’t solved anything because I’m a fraud, and you had the right read on me from the moment we met!”

“I never called you a fraud!” Her voice is shaking, and Nemesis can tell how stressed she is. He realizes that, in his efforts to comfort her, he’s inadvertently made the conversation about himself. His head throbs.

“I know. But you pointed out...how I talk about myself. Like I’m a character. It’s hard to know...where the line is, between person and character. I think I sit squarely on the wrong side of it.”

“You...can’t not be a person,” she says. “I didn’t even remember that I said that. It was a throwaway comment about how weirdly you talk. It didn’t mean anything like that.”
“Not to you, maybe. But you don’t...you don’t know what I am, who I was. I wasn’t always Nemesis Jones.”

“I don’t care,” she says plainly. “You’re Nemesis Jones and you’re smart. You can’t make me feel better about my intelligence by insulting your own.”

“I didn’t mean to start insulting myself.” It had just sort of spiraled out of control, he supposes - which isn’t at all a comforting thought. One of the scariest possible things, to Nemesis, is not being able to control his actions. The last thing he wants is to be emotional.

“Then don’t do that. It’s not even that I think I’m all that stupid, practically speaking. I know I’m not hopeless. It just feels like it sometimes, when you and Percy keep having things to offer to investigations and I just feel like I’m there to fetch ladders.”

“Oh.” Nemesis recalls his own experience as Arthur Jones’s apprentice being a lot of fetching ladders, but that’s a perspective she doesn’t have. “I’m sorry. I think part of that is that I don’t bother to fill you in on a lot of things I assume are common sense. I have a bad habit of thinking people are on the same page as me when they aren’t.”

“No, it’s not you. I’m just not really intended to be a detective, I think.”

“You’d best not be, because we’re private investigators.”

She laughs, which he takes as at least a slight improvement. When she speaks, she sounds a little bit less distraught than before. “Really, I’m not good at the whole...interviewing people and finding hidden things. I think I’d be better off doing something more behind-the-scenes. Being an inventor’s assistant your whole life doesn’t really teach you how to get out there and find things.”

“I guess so,” he agrees. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not good at it. I think, with a few years to acclimate to society and learn the tricks of the trade, you’d be plenty good at it.”

She smiles faintly. “Well, your confidence means a lot to me. I know you’re insecure about your intelligence, but I think you’re smart.”

“Well...I appreciate that,” he says, though he wishes that sentiment could come from someone who’s actually been in society for longer than a few months for once. “I just...I am insecure, I guess.”

“That’s fine. I think most people are, around here. When I see people talking, they’re always trying to one-up each other, no matter what the subject is or what sort of terms they’re on. That’s especially true when it comes to intelligence. Everyone wants to be clever. I think you’re one of the cleverest people I know, though.”

“I...can agree with that, I think. People hate losing.” Especially me, he thinks. “It’s not our faults. We’ve all got the thing that makes us act the way we do, the motivator we don’t like talking about. We all have something keeping us from failing. And yet, some of us inevitably fail anyway, because the universe doesn’t care what we can or can’t afford to do. Sometimes things don’t go as planned, and sometimes things keep getting worse and worse, and sometimes you don’t get to be the hero.”

“Something we can’t afford to lose...” She looks seriously at him. “For me, it’s the few people who I’ve been able to get close to. I used to think I knew what it was for you, but I don’t think I do anymore.”

“Well, it’s a lot of things. There’s things I need to live up to, and things that I just can’t cope with.”
Sometimes, those two things are actually two sides of the same coin. He wonders what Mr. Jones would say if he saw him now.

‘Get yourself together, boy’, probably.

“I just can’t imagine how you ended up so insecure. You’re smart, and people know it. You’re infamous. So why is it so important to you that no one ever seem cleverer than you, even for a moment? There must be a reason. You seem like the sort to always have a reason.”

“I do, I reckon, but it could be many things. It could be the fact that I was a scholarship kid at private school, and I had to prove that I deserved to be there with everyone rooting against me. It could be the fact that, even after all these years, I have no idea why Mr. Jones took me on as his apprentice, or what he sees in me. Maybe I’m a naturally prideful person.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair tensely. “...or maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe I just hate myself. Who can say, really? Would it truly be wrong of me to? After all, despite everything happening, I’ve always had the choice. It’s always been me ruining my own life. Wretched, unlovable me, ever hungering for my own suffering.”

“I don’t think it has to be any one of those things. It can be all of them.” She puts a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t hate yourself. That doesn’t help anyone, certainly not you, and certainly not the person who relies on you for her survival. And I don’t think you’re wretched or unlovable, or that your life is ruined. Don’t think everyone else sees things the same way you do.”

“I...you’re right. I don’t actually hate myself, so we’re clear,” he insists. “I hate a person who I used to be. He’s still showing through the cracks in places, but I quite like Nemesis Jones. I like myself better as him.”

Callie sighs. “...you’ve stopped making sense. Don’t bother trying to explain, though, because I don’t think you can ever make that nonsense make sense to me.”

“It’s not nonsense, it’s sense. It makes sense. I’m a genius,” Nemesis responds indignantly.

“To you, maybe. To me it’s incomprehensible.”

Nemesis chuckles. “Fair enough.”

“Just...” She sighs again, looking at him more seriously. “I’m not going to be a good private investigator, and that’s not going to change. You’re barely out of your own apprenticeship, so there’s no way you can teach me properly. So instead, let me do something else. Let me be the muscle.”

“I...never finished my apprenticeship, technically,” he admits. “The muscle? No offense, but you’re smaller than me.”

Callie stands up and effortlessly lifts Nemesis over her head. He gasps in shock, alarmed by the lack of solid ground beneath his feet.

“Bloody stars!” he exclaims. “I- how?!?”

“What do you mean, how? I just lifted you. I think you know how to lift things.”

“Yeah, things. Not an entire person, and especially not one who’s a fair bit larger than you are. That’s not a normal amount to be able to lift.”

“It’s...not?”
Nemesis has to laugh, though it’s more of a fearful chuckle. This height isn’t enough to be scary, but it’s still quite unsettling to be hoist over the head of one’s own teenaged assistant. “It’s really not, even remotely. I think I could barely lift you.”

“That’s strange. I’ve been able to do this my whole life.” She puts him down, frowning and glancing down at her hands. “Is this really that abnormal?”

“Absolutely. You’ve really...this is normal for you?”

She shrugs. “It is, yeah. Art never commented on it, but he was much weaker than me, too. He made me lift a lot of heavy things for his...more ambitious projects. I never thought much of the fact that he couldn’t do it but I could.”

Nemesis frowns. “You never thought much of it?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Do you have a regular exercise regimen which I’ve just never noticed?”

She shakes her head. “I mean, Art actually exercised a good amount more than me.”

“That doesn’t make sense at all. Was Art very sickly, is that why?”

“No. He was in perfect health, he made sure of it. He spent so much time exercising, and he had medical textbooks lying around just in case he had to perform surgery on himself.”

“Well, that’s gruesome.”

“It’s how he thought. I don’t understand what makes something gruesome, but based on what I’ve been told, he thought in gruesome ways. Again, I thought it was normal.”

“None of what you experienced was normal,” Nemesis states the obvious.

“I’m starting to become aware. You’re not even normal, but even you think Art was weird.”

“Precisely.” He nods. “This is interesting news to say the least. I think knowing this will definitely come in handy on cases. To the best of my knowledge me, you, and Percy were a group of three smart, somewhat weak, and knackless people. Good to know at least one of those isn’t true.”

“Oh, I’m not knackless.”

Nemesis can’t imagine what the look on his face is like, but it’s probably quite funny. It takes a moment for what she said to properly set in - somehow, this revelation is more shocking than her inexplicable brute strength. “You...you aren’t? And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I never thought it was relevant. I technically have the knack, but I don’t use it for much and I don’t know how to control it. I’m not...trained. Art taught me how to do a few things specifically to help him with his projects, but beyond that all I ever learned was to repress it. That’s fine with me, because my knack tends to be...destructive.” At her last sentence, she looks ashamed, not meeting Nemesis’s eyes.

“That’s fine. I know another person who never uses his knack for similar reasons. It’s just good to know you’ve got the potential, at least in theory.”

She nods. “And in a pinch I can use it fine. It actually works better when I’m stressed.”
“Well, I hope you aren’t too stressed.”

“I...actually, I’m really stressed about what happened to you,” she admits.

“What...happened to me?”

She gestures to his face.

He runs a hand down it and frowns. “Well, I know I’m ugly, but I’ve never heard it phrased that way before.”

“I meant that you got injured.”

“I know, I know. Just trying to...lighten the mood, I guess.” His hand stops on the bump on the side of his nose, ever-present since the first time it was broken. Normally he pays it no mind, but now he stops. He supposes he’s been injured quite a lot more than most people of his age have. Perhaps someone who doesn’t know why it keeps happening to him would have reason to be concerned.

“Well, you’re not ugly and I’m still extremely worried. No one...no one actually stopped to tell me what happened. I thought you might have died.”

“Oh. They really didn’t tell you?”

She shakes her head.

“There was a theft at the gala, of a painting. A rather vindictive constable mistook me for the thief and delivered a dangerously strong blow to the side of my face using her pistol. I survived, and the baron of Semper himself has contracted me to solve the mystery, so I would reckon in the end I came out the winner.”

“She just...hit you?” Callie seems somehow disbelieving, though not skeptical.

“Is that strange to you, that someone would just up and hit me?”

She nods.

“Well, let me tell you, Callie - if there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years it’s that, for one reason or another, I’m a detestable person.” His voice lowers to a more serious tone. “I can’t explain it, but for some reason or another, people seem to want to hurt me. They always have, since I was a child. I’m not sure if it was me coincidentally rubbing everyone in my life wrong, or something fundamentally wrong with me, but it took its toll, and eventually I became the sort of person you can’t help but hate, because I learned to fight back.”

“You still don’t make any sense. But you don’t have to. Is this...why you wanted to be a different person?”

He nods. “That’s most of why, yes. But it hasn’t really helped, has it? People find Nemesis Jones just as detestable.”

“Well, I don’t find him detestable. And neither does Theory, or Percy!”

He chuckles. “That’s true, yeah. And neither does Elias. Me and Percy...we’ve both got insecurities, but even after we have disagreements we just meet up the next day like nothing happened. That’s completely new. I’ve never had anyone just forgive me without making me agonize over it...except Mr. Jones, I guess.”
“Mr. Jones…” she trails off. “Your teacher. You took your surname from him, didn’t you?”

He nods. “I do…rather hope he won’t be upset when he hears, but it was a matter of necessity.”

“It was?”


She nods. “You do that, then. And I assume, sometime sooner rather than later, you and me and him are going to go out to another crime scene and try to figure things out?”

“You know it! Today, in fact, since I promised Vigenere - get yourself ready, whatever that entails for you.”

“I will.” She waves him out of the room. “Go make your phone call. Don’t let me stop you.”

He obeys, pausing to look at Theory on his way from Callie’s room to his own. She’s still curled up on the couch, having made significant headway into her book. She’s one of the few people Nemesis has ever met who reads faster than him. She looks like she’s enjoying her book. He won’t bother her.

Instead, he picks the telephone up off of the desk in his room. He promised to call Percy first thing, but his hand hovers over the keypad. He really shouldn’t bother, but…

He listens to the familiar whirs as he dials Elias’s number and puts the receiver to his ear. Elias had left by the time the more dramatic events of the night had occurred, and Nemesis has no idea how much or little he knows of what transpired. Is he, himself, okay? Did Lusitania get angry at him for not spending enough time with her? Nemesis feels his heart beat faster at that thought. No, he hopes against hope that isn’t the case.

Thirteen rings later, it’s clear Elias isn’t going to pick up. The most likely explanation, theoretically, is that he’s practicing the piano again. Eight hours a day, was it? No, eight consecutive hours. More overall. He’ll hope that’s it.

He dials Percy’s number next, which he has far less memorized, but the whirs of the dial are equally satisfying to hear. Percy picks up promptly, and when he speaks, he sounds out of breath and excited.

“The newspapers, Nemesis! Have you seen the newspapers?!”

“I haven’t, no. I just woke up like half an hour ago. My head bleeding hurts.”

“Right, right, well, go look now! Right now, immediately! I’ll wait, just please go look!”

Nemesis sighs and obediently puts down the receiver, going to search the kitchen table for a recent newspaper.

Reluctantly, he asks Theory: “Did we get the papers delivered today?”

“Should have. Don’t see why not.” She gestures down the stairs. “Check the mailbox, because I sure haven’t.”

“Alright…” He hates to go outside looking like such a mess, but he has no choice in the matter. At least no one seems to see him as he darts out to the mailbox, yanks the contents out, and quickly but neatly shuts it behind him before scampering back up the staircase into the loft.
“Did you find it?” Theory asks as Nemesis sprints past her.

“Yeah! Thanks!”

“Good. Why the need for speed? Is there something you’re scared of out there?”

“Only public humiliation!” He yells as he enters his room again, picking the receiver back up.

“Alright, I’ve got the papers here. I, er... wow.”

The cover of the Omen Gazette is emblazoned with his likeness. It’s not a photograph. Certainly, it would have been incredibly impressive if someone had managed to take a photograph amidst all that commotion.

Instead, it’s a pencil sketch of Nemesis - very recognizable despite everything. He grins wildly, revolver pointed at the retreating form of the thief. Nemesis notes that they’ve made him far handsomer than he truly is, giving him the sort of boyish good looks he’s always so desperately wished he possessed. The artist neglected to draw the visible marks of injuries long-healed on his face, the tired hint to his expression he’s been far too aware of lately. He looks like a different person. A better-looking person, but not himself.

And at the bottom of the page is a second sketch by the same artist. The man in it is the same Nemesis, but battered and bruised, his face broken, hands cuffed in front of him, on his knees with a pistol to his head. Immediately, there’s inaccuracies - his hands had been cuffed behind him, he had been standing, and by the time he’d made it into the room the pistols had been put away.

The features are the same, though, far handsomer. Even the injury is far less horrifying than it must actually have been. The swelling is omitted in favor of a far more dramatic gash, and a grin standing out brightly against the sea of blood covering his face - an amount which still manages to drastically underestimate how much blood there actually was.

And that grin is the most striking part. Even when portraying him in a situation where he’s objectively lost, on the ground and bleeding and closer to death than he’s been in an unbelievably long time, there’s that grin, confident, cocky even, secure in the knowledge that somehow, despite everything happening around it, everything will turn out in his favor. Even at his lowest point, the artist has depicted Nemesis as someone confident, someone to be scared of. Certainly not someone who has lost.

And at the very top of the page, the front-page headline reads:

CABINET GALA INTERRUPTED BY THIEF; HEROIC PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR MISTAKENLY BEATEN

Nemesis has heard much about his supposed infamy, but this is the first time he’s ever made the front page of a newspaper.

“Yeah, wow is right,” Percy agrees. “You made it on the front page. You’re going to be the talk of the town, I guarantee you. Everybody who’s anybody is going to want to know you now. On the downside, you’re probably going to get hounded by reporters literally all the time.”

“That’s one hell of a downside. It’s going to make investigating anything bloody difficult,” Nemesis sighs. The idea of being hounded by paparazzi is around as far from ideal as he can imagine. “Is there anything else of note about the article? I sort of don’t think I can read it. Head hurts too bad.”

“Not much. They mention you trying to catch the thief, the fact that the painting they stole
was Hugh Atelier's *Shadows Over Catacumba*, and...wait, were you aware that the thief sent a letter in to the *Sun*, actually?"

"Ah, so they didn’t name the officer involved...no, I wasn’t."

"You didn’t learn the officer’s name?" Percy asks.

"I know her name. It's Crawford. Off-topic. What’s that about the letter?"

"Oh...Crawford. I’ve got some dirt on her, certainly. But you’re right, that can wait."

"No, no. Tell me."

Percy chuckles, and Nemesis knows he’s satisfied at having piqued his interest. “Charlotte Crawford is pretty infamous for her brutality. Of course, she’s the daughter of Ulysses Crawford, who’s an absolute piece of work. He’s also the head of the Omen police department, though not without his opposition. He was appointed by the Queen herself, though.”

“Sounds about right. Everyone the crown appoints tends to be terrible. What’s his controversy? Or is it just the brutality?”

“Well...it’s kind of uncomfortable to even think or talk about, actually. He’s kind of unwelcome in a lot of public society because of what it is he teaches...the guy is of the opinion that criminals have lost their right to be considered human. Which is to say, that they aren’t people - understandably, that doesn’t sit well with a lot of the people who work around him. My father is a lawyer, and he hates him.”

“That’s about the most reasonable thing I’ve ever heard. The guy sounds like a creep.” Nemesis sighs. “His daughter’s a piece of work, but I feel bad for her, having to have grown up with someone like that teaching her in her formative years. Never really had a chance to not be awful, did she?”

“Not really.” Percy agrees. “But back to the letter. Our thief actually wrote into the *Sun*. There was actually only one sentence in the letter, but the new development is that, like all phantom thieves, this one’s got a name. And you’re going to be really interested in this letter.”

“Oh?” Of course, phantom thievery is more of an aesthetic movement than a method, so the vast majority tend to have very flashy names, like The Nighthawk or *Le Papillon Rouge*. But, more importantly, this must be one hell of a sentence for Percy to assume that Nemesis would be interested.

“To Nemesis Jones: don’t seek me out if you know what’s good for you. Yours Truly, Ozymandias Nocturne,” Percy reads.

Well, Nemesis has to give it to ‘Ozymandias Nocturne’ - that is one hell of a sentence indeed, and his attention has certainly been obtained. “Do you think, just maybe, it sounds like they’re playing hard-to-get and actually want me to come and try to stop them?”

“That’s what I was thinking, too. They’re trying to start one of those detective of some sort-phantom thief rivalries, like you read about in books, except those aren’t real, right?”

“I’ve actually known of a couple.”

“Well, let’s not make this another one, if we can help it. Seems like a bit of a waste of time to be chasing after one relatively harmless individual.”
“Unfortunately, that might not be an option. I think there’s a good chance it’s related to what happened at the Obscura.”

“How-so?”

“Well, Lizzie Calloway’s exhibit had a secret message in it, which pointed me towards Atelier’s galleries. This was the most dramatically displayed painting there, and Gilbert Banks wouldn’t stop hovering around by it, so I’m fairly sure it was being protected. I think there was some sort of secret message embedded in it, and some society scum has made their way off with it.”

“I see. That’d do it, yes,” Percy agrees.

“Besides,” Nemesis continues, “If all eyes are on me now, I’ve an obligation to impress, lest my positive reputation turn sourer. I need to actually stop this thief like I promised, or people will begin to consider me a charlatan.”

“That makes sense,” Percy agrees, sounding distinctly downcast. “If people make up their minds, there’s not a whole lot one newspaper reporter could do to preserve your reputation. Maintaining a positive public image is a lot more difficult than creating a negative one.”

“And, finally,” Nemesis adds, “the baron himself is offering to pay me for it, and I don’t think that’s a connection I want to allow to fizzle.”

“No, you definitely wouldn’t want to do that,” Percy agrees. “Alright, you’ve convinced me. I’ll take some time off to interview people at the Cabinet about what happened, though I honestly don’t know how much they’d say, especially to a reporter.”

“Probably not much, but the things they don’t say can be just as interesting as the ones they do. Try to keep a transcript, if you can. Maybe record it secretly? That way I can look at it after and we can combine our efforts to figure out what’s happened.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Percy says. “Covertly recording things isn’t a skill I’ve really built up, but I guess there’s no better time to learn!”

“Alright. Good attitude. I’ll be there today, trying to see what I can piece together. If you need pointers, I wouldn’t mind helping you.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage - good luck on your own investigation. Ah - but before you hang up on me, there’s one more thing I’ve got to bring to your attention - oh, and this one’s fun! A word which here means ‘not remotely fun in the least, and actually really concerning’!”

“Oh, boy.” Nemesis chuckles nervously. “My favorite.”

“Basically, I want you to keep that newspaper in front of you. Which is it?” Percy speaks slowly and deliberately.

“The Gazette, sorry if that makes me a traitor.”

“It does. But I’ll get angry about your lack of support for the Sun later - I just want you to flip through to page seven.”


What greets him is a page full of chaotically laid-out articles and continuations of sections from earlier pages. He’s not sure what he’s meant to pay attention to. Is Percy concerned with the results
of the horse races, or perhaps the wrestling matches? Suplexo and Armbarovitch being crowned tag team champions is certainly a long time coming, but he doubts that’s it. Is it the article summarizing the new lectures given by a notable academic visiting from Guo Ji Bei? No, it can’t be-

And then his eyes settle on what it must be, and he frowns. “Bloody stars. Not what I expected.”

For the page proclaims, in suspiciously small print, the death of Elizabeth Calloway. The headline is phrased simply and vaguely, there’s only a small photograph of her, and the text seems to be only three paragraphs long. “Artist and Catacumba Institute graduate Elizabeth Calloway has been declared dead, following her mysterious disappearance a week ago,” he reads aloud. “Her final work was displayed in yesterday’s gala. She is survived by her parents, Ophelia and Geoffrey Calloway.”

“Sad, isn’t it?” Percy comments. “I’m glad she finally gets her closure.”

Nemesis isn’t quite so sure. “ Weird, the timing,” he comments. “I figured the Cabinet’s press team would’ve wanted to confirm it before the exhibit. One of the artists being dead certainly would’ve gotten them in the papers. More attention. It’s not like they didn’t know - reporters are such a nosy sort, I’m sure everyone in the papers and the Cabinet was aware.”

“You have an awfully morbid way of thinking about this,” Percy remarks.

“You know what, maybe it’s on purpose. This way, news of her death is buried under news of the exhibition’s success, so no one really has to hear about it or suspect anything. You know what, I reckon that’s it. Reckon the Guild had it delayed so that it couldn’t be connected to their premiere.”

“That doesn’t disprove my earlier statement.”

“I wasn’t trying to disprove your statement,” Nemesis says. “Just trying to figure out what’s happening here, even if that makes me morbid.”

“Fair enough,” Percy agrees. “I’ll make sure to ask about her when I interview people. See you, Nemesis.”

“See you.” Nemesis replies, and Percy hangs up. Nemesis savors the brief moment of silence left by the empty line, before putting down the receiver. It’s time to collect Callie and get to work unraveling this extremely unfortunate mystery. He has to put all of his focus into this case - and not worry too much about the fact that Elias didn’t pick up when he called him.

He does, indeed, see Percy - rather fast, in fact. Their paths cross around a block away from the Cabinet, when he hears Percy yelling from behind him. When he turns around, Percy has caught up with him, visibly out-of-breath from sprinting. Though it’s a relatively warm day by Omen’s standards (which is to say, a relatively cool day by any other standard), Percy is still dressed in the same suit he frequents, and looks as though he might be overheating.

“I can’t believe I caught you,” he says between deep breaths. “Getting here was awful. I don’t know why in the world I decided walking would be a good idea.”

That explains why Nemesis and Callie have gotten here before him, despite Percy both living closer and leaving earlier. “Why in the blazes did you walk, then? Why would you do that to yourself?”
“Oh, you know.”

“I don’t know, actually,” Nemesis says, sighing. “I wouldn’t be asking if I knew. It all just seems like a lot of trouble to go through for no good reason, and now look at you. You’re exhausted.”

“Well, I...really could have used the exercise! And the train costs money! And, uh, I sort of just wanted some time to think about the case undisturbed.” He smiles sheepishly. “I’m not as quick as you are, Nemesis. I really need to think about things for a long time.”

“That makes sense,” Nemesis admits. “So? Did you come to any epiphanies?”

Percy hangs his head. “...just because I sit down to think of something, doesn’t mean I will. Which doesn’t seem fair when I have to set aside time and exert myself to do it, but...that’s just how life is, right? Sometimes things don’t work out the way you want them to, and you just have to try again until you get it right. No reason to think you won’t, eventually.”

Nemesis nods. “That seems like a healthy attitude to me. Plus, you’ll have more information to think about soon enough. Don’t feel bad for not knowing. Everyone has trouble figuring things out when they don’t have much to work with.”

Percy grins. “Thanks! I don’t feel bad at all, but that makes me feel better anyway.”

Callie, who has been silent the whole time, finally speaks up. “So you got tired walking from your house to here?”

Percy nods. “Yeah, why? That seems fairly normal. Unless you’re a professional athlete, I’d imagine you’d get tired. It’s a long walk.”

“I just...I’m curious why and how people get tired, I guess.” She’s frowning, clearly deep in thought. “I mean, I know why it happens, medically speaking...but I don’t get tired that easily. Only from not sleeping.”

Nemesis thinks back to when Callie had first arrived on Beaumont’s doorstep. She had seemed scared back then, but not tired at all, even though she’d presumably trailed blood through half the city. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time. After all, so much else about the situation was deeply alarming.

“That’s really weird,” Percy remarks. “You sure about that? The way you say that makes you sound...not human.”

“No, it’s possible,” Nemesis says. “Actually, I have a theory about why Callie is so strange sometimes.”

“Oh?” Percy looks intrigued. “I’d love to hear this theory. You always have interesting theories.”

“Essentially,” Nemesis says matter-of-factly, “finding out that Callie is not, as I assumed she was, knackless, changes just about everything.”

“Wait, wait a moment-” Percy cuts in, noticeably shocked. “She’s not knackless?!”

“That was my reaction, too.”

Percy looks confusedly at Callie. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

She shrugs. “I didn’t think it was really necessary. I’m not trained or anything.”
“Right, anyway,” Nemesis continues. “I’m pretty sure Callie’s weird brute strength and inhuman stamina are manifestations. If Theory can shove her hand in fire and drink boiling tea and be fine, and doesn’t need to sleep, none of what Callie is doing seems like a stretch at all.”

Callie frowns. “That would make sense…but for me to have manifestations that powerful would mean that my knack would need to be very powerful as well. The two scale linearly, according to every textbook I’ve ever read.”

“There’s no reason to think it isn’t extremely powerful if you never use it,” Nemesis suggests.

“I guess you’re right.” To her, the possibility seems to be disquieting. “But I don’t want to think about that. It’s scary, being powerful.”

“It’s scary being weak,” Nemesis replies, a little snappier than he’d like to be. “What I wouldn’t give for power like yours…”

“I have to admit, it gets really tiring seeing other people cleave holes in walls or levitate things and not being able to do it myself,” Percy chimes in. “I try to be a generally non-jealous person, who sees people being better than him as incentive to improve rather than a reason to be bitter…but that only really applies to things I can actually improve at, right? Not just things where I’ve been unlucky and simply didn’t develop a genetic potential whatsoever, and especially if that potential is considered normal and not having it is considered abnormal.”

Nemesis doesn’t add that the main thing he would do with a knack is create dramatic effects to intimidate or impress people. It’s far easier to sound justified in one’s envy when the discussion centers around major, world-altering phenomena as opposed to tacky sound effects and light tricks.

“That makes sense,” Callie agrees. “I just…I don’t know. It’s like a weird instinct, but I can’t help but shake the feeling that if I use my knack, something bad will happen.”

“Something bad will happen?” Percy asks, echoing her.

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. I can’t explain it, but I know that if I use my knack…” She shakes her head. “…well, I know that I shouldn’t. And I think the fact that Art never taught me to use it means that feeling is probably right.”

Nemesis, realizing that she’s getting agitated, gives Percy a meaningful look. “And that’s fine. You’ve no obligation to use your knack. There’s nothing out there that the three of us can’t either outsmart or brute-strength our way through. That’s why we’re so effective - no supernatural abilities required on any of our parts.”

Percy smiles unsurely. “Right.”

“Anyway, it’s been a bit since the three of us have worked together. I’ve well missed it, because I think we make a good team,” Nemesis says, hoping to diffuse some of the tension by steering the conversation away from any of their knacks, or lack thereof.

Percy’s face lights up, and Nemesis knows he’s chosen his words correctly. For once, instead of making the people around him viciously angry at him, he’s managed to resolve a somewhat tense and emotionally charged conversation. It feels good, somehow, but he’s not about to rest on his laurels.

“Shall we be off then, team?” He asks. “I reckon the baron’s already been waiting for us.”

“Wouldn’t want the baron to be left waiting,” Percy says with a grin. “Hurry up, then. I’m not the
one he’s waiting for. After you, detective.”

“Private investigator,” he corrects with a good amount of force to his voice.

“You work for the government now, and that means I can call you a detective all I want!”

“Still not part of a law enforcement agency,” Nemesis replies.

“Whatever you say, consulting detective.” Percy grins, as though he’s won or something, which he most certainly has not. “I don’t get why you’re so obsessed with the distinction, either - literally no one else actually cares about it.”

Whatever clever reply Nemesis has formulated is never spoken, however, because they turn the final corner in their approach and see someone else already there, standing idly in front of the Cabinet. A girl of about sixteen dressed in a school uniform - a neat navy blue pleated skirt and matching blazer, knee-high white socks and black loafers. Her hair is in braids, her skin is brown, and she looks eerily familiar. Surely, he’s seen her somewhere before.

The Cabinet itself is far less impressive in the daytime. There are no marvels to be had here - only a boring facade and the leftover signs from the gala. It might as well be just another building. He can’t imagine how a museum created by professional artists and artificers ended up looking this dull and unremarkable. On the door, a small paper is pinned up - from this distance, Nemesis can’t make out what’s written on it, but it surely wasn’t there the night before.

She looks at him, and her eyes widen. “Nemesis Jones!” she exclaims.

He tries not to let on his shock at the fact that she seemingly knows him, but then again, his face is plastered on the front page of every newspaper in town, so he should probably get used to this. “That’s me,” he agrees.

She frowns. “This might sound rude, but your face looks surprisingly intact.”

“Er...thanks? I should hope so.”

A hint of dejection appears on her face, and she looks at him more seriously. “You don’t remember me at all, do you?”

“No in the least, I’m afraid.”

“I thought this might happen.” She tugs nervously at one of her braids. “We barely talked, after all. My name is Hattie, and I’m going to be a private investigator!”

“Good for you,” he says indifferently.

He’s not sure what sort of response she anticipated getting, but clearly it wasn’t that. She immediately looks visibly upset, staring at him as though she’s heard him wrong.

Quickly, though, she manages to get her face back to a more neutral expression. “I just thought you might want to know. Since we’re both trying to solve this case, that makes us rivals. Just a warning in advance - I’m pretty good.”

“...if you say so.” The idea of a sixteen-year-old with presumably no training, formal or otherwise, being a legitimate rival to Nemesis is almost laughable, but he’s not in the proper mood to find her amusing. Instead, he finds her deeply suspicious. Children don’t just spontaneously decide to become private investigators, of all things, and they certainly don’t act on those desires. Something
here is extremely wrong.

“I do say so!” She insists. “I’m going to be the best private investigator in the world, and my career will take off the moment I solve this case!”

Nemesis doubts that. “Shouldn’t you, er...finish school before trying to pursue this highly competitive, dangerous, and taxing career?” He gestures to her school uniform.

She responds, indignantly: “Did you finish school? You barely look any older than me.”

“I’m older than you,” he says confidently, though he supposes there’s a chance she could be nineteen and simply have been held back multiple times - not that the possibility inspires any confidence in her. “I dropped out of school, sure, but it was to pursue a career in the field.”

“Then I can pursue a career in the field, too. And I can actually go to school while I do. It’ll be hard work, sure, but if I succeed that just means extra bragging rights.” She grins, and Nemesis feels a rush of anger.

“If you think it’s about bragging rights, then you have no business pursuing this line of work at all. I spent five years of my life an apprentice, living and breathing my job. It’s not as simple as just deciding to be a private investigator one day. It’s a lifetime commitment, and it’s hard work, and rushing into it will just get you horribly hurt.” Perhaps he sounds a little harsher than he means to, but upon reflection, he thinks he’s alright with that. A little venom in his voice can’t compare to what this girl will experience if she gets on the wrong side of the wrong people. She could end up dead like Elizabeth Calloway, caught up in her search for bragging rights. Nemesis can’t let that happen to her.

Or, perhaps, that’s just how he rationalizes his rude and deeply unpleasant behavior.

“It’s not as simple as that for you, maybe.” She crosses her arms. “But I’m smart, so I’ll be fine. I’ll solve this case before you, so you don’t need to worry about any of that hard work, and you can go do something else with your time. Maybe there’s a lost cat somewhere you need to find?”

There’s something so humiliating about being talked to that way by someone still in school. Sure, they’re probably within five years of each others’ ages, unless this is a remarkably old-looking girl, but Nemesis still feels condescended to. On some level, it’s also threatening. Not in the same way as Callie is threatening, where he knows she has an uncanny read on him. No, this is far less rational, far more desperate - a ‘what if’. What if she’s right, and she shows him up here? What if she jumps in and solves this case with no prior experience? What would he do then?

He’s not going to think about that, because it’s not going to happen (at least, that’s what he has to keep telling himself). Instead, he waves a hand dismissively. The single upside to being rude is that, oftentimes, people will simply not bother to continue putting in the effort to continue interacting with you - perhaps, just this once, he can use that to his advantage.

“Oh, I’m sure you will,” he says in the most dismissive and condescending tone of voice he can muster. “Don’t you have exams to be studying for? I know if I were you I’d be far more concerned about my marks than cases that already have competent people working on them. Isn’t it school hours? Don’t be cutting class to waste your time on things you have nothing to do with.”

She hmph s. “And what if I don’t need to study to do well on exams?”

“That’s what everyone tells themself, and it’s not true.” He waves to her over his shoulder, hoping that the condescension is thoroughly gotten across, before beginning to ascend the Cabinet’s steps.
“I doubt they’ll let you into the crime scene, by the way, and I’m certainly not going to vouch for you. Hurry on back to school. You’ll appreciate this advice in a couple years.”

The girl looks like she’s steaming, but she doesn’t respond. Finally, Nemesis thinks with no lack of satisfaction. Finally, he’s defeated her. Now he can move on to things which are actually important.

Percy and Callie follow him up the stairs. Callie seems unbothered by the large number of them, while Percy’s existing windedness only gets worse and worse as he struggles up the stairs. By the end, Nemesis can tell he can barely stand. It’s almost pitiable, but instead of allowing himself to think that way he offers Percy his flask of water, thanking the stars he’d had the foresight to refill it this morning considering the many other things on his mind.

Percy nods, gulping the thing down in one sip and handing it back to Nemesis. “Thanks. Uh, sorry. Sorry about the...the being like this.”

“It’s no problem,” Nemesis says, re-pocketing the flask. “I can only hope you get better soon.”

Percy frowns. “Better at what?”

“Walking up stairs, apparently. Actually, walking in general.”

“That’s fair,” he admits, taking a labored breath. “Evie keeps telling me I’ll never be able to effectively solve mysteries if I’m this out of shape, and for the first time ever I’m realizing she’s right.”

“If you want to work on that, I’d be willing to help. Not right now, obviously, but whenever both of us are free and not solving any major cases.”

Percy nods. “I’d appreciate that. Uh…” He glances to the side, and Nemesis follows him. In the time they’ve been talking, Hattie has left, silently enough that even Nemesis hadn’t noticed.

When Nemesis looks back at Percy, he’s frowning.

“Something the matter?” Nemesis asks, knowing that if Percy of all people looks that pensive the answer is certainly ‘yes’.

“No really. I just…” he sighs. “I guess I just...feel sorry for her?”

“For that girl? I’m sure she’ll live.”

Percy doesn’t look as sure. “I just...you were kind of mean to her. You could have stood to be a little more encouraging, I mean...I think you were a little bit meaner than you could have stood to be. She’s just a kid, right? You could have at least let her down gently.”

Nemesis rolls his eyes. “I’m sure she’s not devastated by it. She seemed headstrong - annoyingly so. She’s probably not that much younger than Callie, I think she’ll manage.”

“Of course, the fact that she’s my schoolgirl and you’re a major in the field of mystery-solving is not relevant at all.”

Nemesis frowns. “So you expect me to tell a schoolgirl ‘yes, bloody good, throw yourself headlong
into danger you’re thoroughly unprepared for’? I’ve a little more common sense than that, and I’ve a little more respect for the industry than to imply it’s something one can up and choose to do.”

“I think you’re trying to justify it, but you know you were mean to her. You know you would have been devastated if someone talked to you like that.”

“Sometimes it’s okay to be devastated. Sometimes you have to be discouraging for someone’s own good. People with lives and futures shouldn’t be throwing that away for some sensationalized dream that will never be true, because it can’t be. You can’t read one novel and then think you can solve mysteries, that isn’t how it works.” He sighs, making his way briskly towards the door. “I don’t want to fight with either of you right now, so can we agree to drop it and focus on the case at hand?”

“Sure,” Percy agrees, though the look he gives Nemesis is tinged with disapproval.

“Alright,” Callie says as well. It’s always hard to tell what she’s thinking. Does she hate him now? Has her opinion of him been irreparably damaged by this conversation? Nemesis thinks to himself that if she was going to hate him, this is among the worst reasons she could have chosen. He’s done far more hateable things.

The thought occurs to him, as it has once or twice over the years before, that the only reason Arthur Jones would have chosen him over any of his classmates was his circumstance. An orphan with no one in the world who would miss him - cynical, perhaps, but that’s the only sort of person who can be expected to drop out of school and jump head-first into a dangerous and unglamorous career.

So he’s helping that girl, really. He’s keeping her on the right track, keeping her from ruining her future. The only reason he ended up in his line of work is that he didn’t have one. She’s clearly not in the same boat, so he’s only keeping her from throwing away what she has.

That’s what he continues to tell himself as he opens the door to the Cabinet. It’s rather heavy. Perhaps this is the real reason they employ the guards.

Inside, he’s greeted almost immediately by a constable, who seems like he’s about to ask Nemesis, in a not un-threatening manner, what his business here is - but of course, Nemesis is famous now, so he immediately recognizes him and points up a hall. “You’re wanted in the boardroom, Mr. Jones. And who are these two?”

“I’m his friend,” Percy says, seeming to have gotten a little less upset in the time it took Nemesis to open the door, though he still looks horribly winded. “And I’m a reporter for the Electric Sun, so I’ll be here to conduct some interviews.”

“Oh, in that case, you’ll need to fill out some paperwork.” He gestures to a nearby table, on which stacks of papers are sitting. “Need to manage the press, you know.”

Percy frowns. “I’ve never had to do anything like this before.”

“Well, that’s because it’s a new policy. Baron’s orders. Part of his initiative to curtail espionage in Omen. You’ll just need to fill out a set of those forms and send them in - you’ll be notified in twenty-four to forty-eight hours if your request has been accepted.”

“That’s a long time,” Percy sighs, reluctantly walking to the table and picking up a set of forms. It’s closer to a stack’s worth than a folder’s, and Percy looks like he’s just been punched in the stomach.
“Hope you’re good at paperwork,” the constable says, chuckling meanly.

“I’m not…” he says dejectedly. “Nemesis, go on ahead. It seems like I’m going to be busy for a long time…”


“Thanks. I’m really going to need it.” He sits down on the floor, pulling out a pen and beginning on the paperwork with the most superbly unenthusiastic look Nemesis has ever seen from him.

“Alright.” The constable points to Callie. “And who’s this?”

Callie points to herself, as though unsure if she is in fact the subject of conversation. After a moment, she seems to make up her mind, and answers. “I’m his assistant.”

“His assistant? Wasn’t forewarned of that.” The constable frowns. “Not sure what to do in this situation. Protocol doesn’t cover it. I mean, it’d be a bit of an oddly specific situation for protocol to cover, I guess. I’ll have to ask the baron once he’s done with this meeting, but for now you’ll need to wait out here.”

“That sounds fine,” Nemesis cuts in before Callie can object. “Let me just have a moment to speak with my colleagues.”

The officer narrows his eyes suspiciously, then relaxes. “Well, sure. I don’t see any harm in it.”

Nemesis gestures the two of them over, huddling by the table, far away from the officer.

“This is a blessing in disguise,” he tells Callie. “See, if I’m going to be in a meeting, I can’t really properly snoop around here. You, though, you can break into Sterling’s office and see if you can find that book, or anything relevant, really.”

“But how? There’s a police officer right here, he’ll stop me from wandering too far. I’m sure he’s already suspicious.”

Nemesis grins. “That’s where Percy comes in. Percy, you like to talk, right?”

“I guess so,” he says, clearly not knowing where Nemesis is going with this.

“I want you to distract the guard. You’re bad at paperwork, right? Play that up. Ask stupid questions in ridiculous detail. That way, Callie can slip by undetected and get into the office.”

Percy smiles. “Oh, that’s genius! Yeah, I can do that, no problem.”

Nemesis nods, then looks more seriously at Callie. “Do you think you’ll be able to handle this? I know it’s a lot to ask of someone who doesn’t have much experience.” Part of him feels like a hypocrite, telling Hattie she would be out of her depth and then sending Callie to do his work for him.

Callie nods, though. “I’ll do my best, I promise. And if anything goes wrong I’ll scream really loudly until one of you saves me.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agrees. “Good luck, both of you.”

That being done, he turns to the constable. “Would you mind giving me directions to the boardroom? I’m afraid I’m rather new around here.”
The Cabinet is a massive building, almost labyrinthine in its layout. It takes Nemesis far too long to locate the boardroom, passing through hallway after hallway. There’s no reason the back of a museum should have this many hallways in it, he thinks. He’d like to have a word with whoever designed this place.

Finally, though, he finds it, labeled only with a small placard on the wall beside it. He figures it would be polite to knock, so he does so, loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to be rude.

The door is opened by, of all people, Hugh Atelier. He looks even less put-together than he did at the gala, which, shockingly, is possible. “Oh, you’re here,” he says, looking almost a tiny bit excited. As if aware of it, he immediately scowls twice as hard.


He does so. The room is large, occupied most notably by a long, rectangular black table, with a couple vases of flowers placed along it at regular intervals in a feeble attempt to make the drab boardroom look a little more lively. Aside from a single easel at the head, this is the only furniture in the room. Nemesis would stop to wonder why such a small board of trustees would have such a massive room to meet in, but he’s not going to question a good thing, because the amount of people in this room are enough to make it seem crowded, no matter how large it may be.

Lucian Vigenere sits at the head, by the easel. He’s dressed plainly, not even bothering with a waistcoat, and his hair is tied back messily. He looks far more like an exhausted student revising for his finals than the baron of Acerbis’s most prominent region. His glasses are smudged, and he hasn’t bothered to polish them.

Next to him sits the person who Nemesis assumes would normally occupy his spot at the head of the table, Phineas Sterling. His red hair is loose and down, reaching to just above his shoulders. He has visible bags under his eyes, and seems to twitch periodically. Nemesis remembers him sobbing the night before. Clearly, he’s in a bad way.

Next to Sterling, Gilbert Banks looks very much his typical self, if a little tired. Sophronia Ripley sits at the other side of the table, looking no less composed than normal, though next to her, Kitty Blair is wearing a simple blouse and a skirt unadorned except for one row of ruffles at the hem. Neither of them look to be in especially high spirits. Dorian Dreadful waves to Nemesis from his spot beside Ripley - he’s the only person here who seems to be in even remotely a good mood, and is dressed just as handsomely and expensively as he was at the gala.

The final man in the room isn’t someone Nemesis recognizes. Pale, sharp-featured, dressed severely in black and white, with neatly combed light brown hair in a short ponytail. He glares at Nemesis as he enters, and Nemesis can sense the animosity rolling off of him in waves.

Vigenere gestures to the seat next to him, which is empty. “Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Considering the complexity of the case at hand, I have a feeling we’ll be here for some time.”

“You’re late,” the man remarks sharply. There’s a certain click to his words that makes him sound like a particularly mean schoolteacher.

“Don’t be like that, Julie,” Dorian Dreadful says, voice obnoxiously sing-songy. “The poor boy was bleeding enough to turn Drowned Man’s Bay red! No need to be so hard on him. You look remarkably good for someone who had his face broken open, by the way, Nemesis.”
“Thanks,” Nemesis says perhaps a bit brusquely, sitting down where he was told to.

Immediately, Vigenere grabs his face, turning him so that he can see his cheek. Nemesis isn’t sure if he’s more humiliated or impressed with the baron’s speed. After a moment, Vigenere releases him, sighing tiredly.

“Whoever attended to your wounds did an excellent job,” he says, no hint of genuine admiration in his voice or expression. “Good. It would be unfortunate if you had been out of commission for any longer than you were.”

“I thought I told you not to call me that, Dreadful. I still don’t see the need for a hired spy here,” the stern one says, dripping with disdain. “That sort of lowbrow profession is best left to the penny dreadfuls. I don’t mean to question our baron’s decisions, but—”

So he’s not mincing words in regards to his opinion of what Nemesis does and stands for. In a way, Nemesis admires that, but this man is also insufferable. He has to cut in, and so he does. “Well, then don’t question His Lordship’s decisions.”

The man glares at him. “You be quiet. Clearly, you pay far too much attention to your appearance, all flashy and dramatic. Attention that could have gone to your brains. Someone like you would be better off with the Obscura lot than in civilized company. Now put that attention to waste and behave as you’re meant to be - seen and not heard.”

The venom in his voice is enough to chill, but Nemesis has dealt with meaner before. “I don’t believe that one should be required to choose between style and substance. That seems like a rather uninspired way to live.”

“Hear, hear,” Dreadful agrees.

The stern man scoffs. “As if anything about this glorified criminal is stylish or substantial.”

“Lockhart.” Vigenere cuts him off sharply, with a cadence not unlike that of a schoolteacher chastising a student for talking out of turn. “I’ll not have you speaking that way about someone I’ve chosen to place my faith in. Jones is a legitimate businessman with proven results, and tacky hair does not change that.”

“My hair isn’t tacky,” Nemesis insists.

“It is,” Vigenere says.

Lockhart scoffs, not looking Vigenere in the eyes. “I see my council is unwarranted, then. Your funeral.” With no further words, he stands and strides out of the room, shoes giving off a loud, echoing click. The door shuts loudly behind him. For a brief moment, everyone in the room stares in silence at the space where he was, feeling the reverberations of the parting slam.

“...pardon if I sound rude, but who was that man?” Nemesis asks, finally, a little more quiet and tentative than he normally is. Best not to rock the boat more than he has already. One person already hates him. No need to make all the rest follow suit.

“Jules Lockhart.” To his surprise, it’s Banks who answers. “An associate of mine. He’s quite...opinionated. My apologies.”

“I see. What does he do, out of curiosity? What is his relationship with this board?”

“He’s a lawyer. My lawyer.” Banks sighs. “He’s an incorrigibly grating person, my apologies for
not finding some legal matters to burden him with in advance. I should have known he wouldn’t be helpful.”

“It’s not your fault,” Phineas Sterling says from next to him. “He’s a member of the board. Bought his way on fair and square.”

Vigenere clears his throat. “Ahem...that being said, now that he’s left we can finally attend to business properly. Jones, you’ve been brought in as an expert consultant on this case, both because I have faith in your abilities and because you got the best impression of the thief out of anyone. I think we’d all like to clear things up as soon as possible and move on from this...regrettable circumstance.”

“...my exhibition…” Sterling mutters, miserable.

Banks pats him on the back. “Yes, yes. Don’t worry, sales have been increasing, we’ll be able to fund another exhibition quite soon. Maybe this time you could actually present some of your own work?”

“Yes, that sounds splendid!” Dreadful agrees.

Vigenere sighs. “...if we could get back to the point, I’d like you to all tell Jones all of the relevant information. There’s not much at the crime scene itself, unfortunately - the theft happened in plain sight, so there wouldn’t be.”

Nemesis nods. “Out of curiosity, would you mind me talking to these fine individuals in slightly smaller groups? When everyone’s talking at once, it becomes quite difficult to keep track of.”

“That wouldn’t upset me, no,” Vigenere says. “I’d like first go, in that case, for contract negotiation reasons. Jones and I will be out in the hallway, then, if you need us.”

Nemesis stands, following Vigenere outside. As he does, he looks back at the gathered individuals. Dreadful looks mildly amused as ever, Ripley looks judgmental, Blair looks terrified, Atelier looks like he’d rather be anywhere else, Banks looks tired, and Sterling looks miserable.

The door shuts, and Vigenere sighs. “I’m sorry about all of that. They’re a lot to deal with, aren’t they?”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

“I suppose I’m glad you’re not too bothered. Because I am. Bothered, that is.” Vigenere runs a tense hand through his hair, sighing. “Not that I’m upset about the concept of performing my family’s civic duty, but it’s a lot of work, being a baron, you know. Sorting out the police department, sorting out the secret organizations, sorting out the finances...so many finances.”

“Sounds like a lot,” Nemesis admits. His hatred for the government aside, he’ll concede that it sounds rather tricky to juggle. “You seem like an alright bloke, far as rich politicians go...so I’m happy to help you to the best of my abilities.”

Vigenere tiredly smiles - the first expression of positive emotion Nemesis has seen from him thus far. “I’m glad to have your cooperation, Jones. It makes things so much easier for me to have an impartial observer to figure out these mysteries.”

“Impartial?”

“Yes, you know…” He motions vaguely with his hands. “The... organizations active in our fair
Nemesis thinks to himself that Percy and Vigenere are far more alike than anything about them would suggest. Perhaps, if he’s managed to be on good terms with Percy, he might with Vigenere as well.

“You aren’t alone in your thinking,” he says calmly. “Don’t worry - I was taught in an extremely affiliation-agnostic way. You’ll not find any tattoos anywhere on my person.”

“So that isn’t what the gloves are for?”

“Not even remotely.” Nemesis pauses. “...so. You mentioned a contract yesterday.”

“Oh, yes!” The baron ducks back into the room, leaving Nemesis to stare silently at the marble walls. He’s back in a flash, though, presenting a tiny stack of pages to Nemesis. “I hope this isn’t too much to read, but I do assume that someone as meticulous as you would like to, uh, actually read it.”

“You assume correctly.” Nemesis reads through the contract silently, trying to make it through as quick as possible. Though it’s written in dense legal language, there seems to be nothing out of place, nor anything meant to trap him. The terms of the arrangement are simple and vaguely-worded, describing a relationship primarily operating on a quid pro quo basis, with Nemesis asking only for his typical fee and the alliance of the barony, and the barony asking only for the ability to request Nemesis’s help on a priority basis. Some other provisions are made, as far as Nemesis having certain legal powers typically reserved for constables and conditional immunity from arrest. If someone had told Nemesis this sort of thing would be on the table when he was thirteen, he would have called that person a filthy liar. And yet, here it is, black and white and crystal-clear.

He signs with a flourish, and Vigenere signs as well, in his neat and understated handwriting. The two shake hands on it. Vigenere’s handshake isn’t as painful as most of the ones Nemesis is used to. There doesn’t seem to be any intent of one-upmanship, just genuine cooperation. It’s refreshing, if not un-suspicious.

Finally, Vigenere lowers his hand. “It’s been lovely, Jones. I do suppose you’ll be wanting to interview the others, now?”

He nods. “I’m interested in Banks, Sterling, and Atelier in particular. The other three, I’ll try to schedule interviews with at a later date. There’s no reason to bother them more than I have already.” He doesn’t actually believe Blair, Ripley, or Dreadful are involved in any way with the specific case, aside from general society connections which the other three could give him even better insight into, but he’ll have to speak to all of them just to make sure.

Vigenere nods. “That makes sense. I’m sure that you’ll be able to get something out of those three. They seem far less guarded with their words than the rest.”

“And they seem more immediately relevant, as well. How convenient for me.”

“I’ll tell them to get out here, then?”

“No, wait,” Nemesis says. “I have a request of you first. I have a friend, a newspaper reporter-”

“Not the guy who was screaming bloody murder when you were injured yesterday, was it?”
“That’s the one. I promise he’s normally a little more put-together than he was then. He’s been trying to get in for interviews, but he’s being held up by paperwork. Not asking you to bend the laws for him, but since he tends to help me with information-gathering, could you at least rush him to the front of the processing line?”

Vigenere looks contemplative for a moment. “Hmm, yes. What’s his name, then? Who does he write for?”

“T. Percival Chase of the *Electric Sun*.”

Vigenere’s face falls. “Ah, yes, that one. The one who called me ‘high-strung and cold’ and insisted that my father’s death was suspicious, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. Truly the height of journalistic integrity.”

“I don’t think he meant it in a mean way,” Nemesis insists. “He might lack tact to a degree, but he’s very good at sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong, which makes him an excellent source of information that I might otherwise never even think to try to learn.”

“I suppose…” Vigenere runs his hand nervously though his hand. “Surely you’re aware the *Electric Sun* is known to be affiliated with the Correspondents’ League, though. Are you sure you trust this individual?”

“Of course I trust him. He’s a good person, Correspondent or no, and his affiliations just serve to make him an excellent source of insider information.”

“Very well,” Vigenere agrees. “I’ll trust your taste, but I’d like to get a better sense of how trustworthy he is first.”

Nemesis points towards the direction of the lobby (at least, what he thinks is the direction of the lobby). “He’s waiting by the door still, I think. That was an awful lot of paperwork, so I’d be shocked if he finished it this quickly. You can probably still catch him, if you leave right now, and I’ll use my newly-minted authority to handle the rest of these interviews.”

Vigenere looks unsure for a moment, but finally, he concedes. “Don’t make me misplace my trust, Jones,” he says as parting. “I’ve already done far too much of that in my life. Good luck.”

His shoes don’t clack as he leaves. Vigenere is shockingly, refreshingly austere as always.

He re-opens the door, peering back into the boardroom. Hugh Atelier is idly doodling with a pen on scrap paper, Sophronia Ripley is nose-deep in paperwork of some sort, and Dorian Dreadful is reading a book, his posture having become rather obnoxious. Everyone else looks a mixture of mildly worried and deeply bored.

“I’d like to speak with all of you individually,” he says. “I don’t have time today, obviously, but if we could all make some sort of arrangement, that would be-”

“Swell.” Dreadful cuts him off. “I’d love to meet with you at a mutually convenient time - let me look through my date-book.” The date-book is produced, and Dreadful flips through it hurriedly. “Dinner with the Earl of Oriens…party…dinner with Toby…another party…dinners…more parties, hrm. I’m all booked up until next week.”

“A week from today would work fine for me,” Nemesis says. “Could you meet me back here, at the museum? For lunch, perhaps.” Secretly, he’s relieved. A week gives him plenty of time to talk to Charles and ask him what his relationship to this man is.
Dreadful smiles from ear to ear. “That would be wonderful, and perfectly doable. I’ll write you in.”

Sophronia Ripley looks evenly at Nemesis. “I’ll be willing to meet with you as well, but I’m afraid I don’t really do interviews, and I’m quite a busy woman, as is my student. If you’re willing, you could give me your contact information, and I’ll be in touch whenever I have a space freed up.” Her voice is brisk, as though she’d rather have this conversation dispensed with before it’s even properly begun.

“I suppose that works,” Nemesis says, reluctantly, because that was just about the most suspicious answer she could possibly have given. At least at a later date, perhaps he’ll be able to find a way to discreetly apply his compass to her. He gives her a business card.

Blair, he notices, looks nervous. She seems to always look nervous. That makes him worry deeply.

“I could speak with you now,” says Sterling.

“As could I,” offers Banks.

“Me too,” adds Atelier dryly. “I’m a student, I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“That’s great,” Nemesis says. “Shall we find another conference room, then?”

“It’s fine,” Ripley says, standing. “Katherine and I were just about to be on our way regardless.”

“We were?” Blair asks, before hurriedly standing and straightening up. She gives a parting look to Nemesis. That same sad anxiety is still there.

“I won’t interfere, either.” Dreadful stands as well. “This way, I can make my appointment with that nice ambassador, anyway. All the more convenient for me. I’ll be seeing you, Nemesis Jones.”

Is it just Nemesis, or did he just wink?

The door shuts behind him, and the four men are left alone in the room. For a time, there’s silence, save for the scratching of Atelier’s pen against his paper.

“I can’t imagine you were hired just for this one case, honestly,” Banks says at last. “I don’t suppose the baron wants you to look into our potential society connections, or what? I can’t imagine why else he’d have you speak to us alone.”

“G-Gilbert!” Sterling yelps, immediately looking alert and terrified.

“Well,” Banks says, raising an eyebrow, “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“No, actually. He didn’t tell me to speak to you alone - that was my idea.”

Banks rolls his eyes. “But otherwise?”

“Otherwise, yes, you’re correct. I think it’s rather an open secret that you of all people would be involved with the Benefactors’ Circle, Mr. Sterling?”

Sterling looks to Banks, as if unsure how to answer. Banks nods, and Sterling looks far more seriously at Nemesis.

“Th-this can’t leave this r-room.”

“Your secrets are safe with me.”
“Are you sure?” Banks asks sternly. “Why should we think we can trust you?”

Nemesis considers it for a moment, but he supposes if everyone in this conversation is being completely frank, there’s no harm in putting some of his cards on the table. He opens his compass so Banks and Sterling can see it, and sees the needles fixed on them, amber for Sterling and purple for Banks, with a dark blue one off to the side focused on Atelier.

Sterling leans over it, adjusting his tiny spectacles as he stares in fascination. “What a b-beautiful piece of work...it detects s-secrecy, does it?”

“Yes, actually. How did you know?”

“My s-spectacles are enchanted to p-pick up on other enchantments. It helps me r-remember what does what when I’m w-working on a p-project, because otherwise I g-get…a little s-scattered.”

“Well, you have a lot of moving parts to deal with,” Banks says.

“Th-that I do. But I enjoy it...m-most of the time.” He looks back at Nemesis. “Where d-did you get such a f-fantastic object?”

“It’s not actually mine. I’m holding onto it for someone else.” He sighs. “We’re getting off track. I just want to know if this theft had to do with society warfare, which I’m pretty positive it did. After all, you were guarding the painting, weren’t you?” He asks Banks.

“What?” He asks, and the compass picks up sincerity.

“I mean...you were just lurking by it, weren’t you? I figured there was some sort of message hidden in that painting, and you were trying to protect it.”

Banks sighs. “If I had been, then I would be the worst guard of all time, seeing as I eventually left it alone long enough for it to be stolen, right?”

“I...suppose so?” He frowns. “Then why were you loitering by it?”

“Because I was meant to be there to explain things to guests, but I…” Atelier trails off, looking almost ashamed. “…I don’t really like crowds. I came out towards the end, but then everything went dark. And then the painting was gone and you were bleeding on the floor and everyone was screaming. It was...really abrupt.”

Banks puts a hand on his shoulder, as if attempting to comfort him. Atelier seems unaffected. Sterling looks at the two of them with a troubled expression.

“So it wasn’t for society reasons? You can’t imagine why anyone would want to steal it?”

“Aside from any of the other reasons someone might steal a painting? No idea.”

Sterling sighs. “B-By the way...the B-Benefactor’s Circle being a p-proper espionage-based organization, that’s a m-myth. I h-haven’t been doing anything c-criminal. I j-just want to make art and be left alone.”

To Nemesis’s utter shock, he’s telling the truth. “So...so it’s all urban legend, then?”

“As far as I’m aware, yes,” Banks says. “The Benefactors’ Circle does exist, but it’s precisely what it sounds like - a benefactors’ circle. Phineas leading it means nothing more than his name being on the Cabinet’s lease.”
“Well,” Sterling admits, “it does serve one p-purpose.”

“Right.” Banks rolls his sleeve up to his elbow, revealing a tattooed circle outlined on the outside of his forearm. It’s small, and it’s unobtrusive, but it’s clearly there, dark against his skin. “Phineas and I, well...everyone in this city is neck-deep in one sort of espionage or another, and anyone who isn’t is seen as easy pickings. We’ve been keeping up the ruse so that we’d be left alone - and now the rest of the Cabinet’s staff as well, with a few exceptions. Lord Vigenere told us he thought there was a chance that Elizabeth Calloway’s…” he pauses, sharply breathing in. “...death, was a result of society activities. Of someone...assuming we posed a legitimate threat to them, and targeting her for her affiliation. But we’ve never done anything to genuinely provoke that.”

“I see.” Nemesis glances at Atelier. “So the painting was…”

“Just a painting, albeit one I really liked,” Atelier confirms. “I’d like to have it back, but it isn’t like...I couldn’t just paint another one, I guess.” Somehow, he doesn’t seem all that optimistic about it. Of course, no painting can ever be truly recreated. No two strokes are ever identical, and the end product even less so.

“I see. And none of you saw any of what happened? Anything that I wouldn’t have seen, anyway.”

The three shake their heads.


“It was an artificer, I’m sure,” Sterling says. “And th-they didn’t sh-short out the lights. I d-designed them, I’d know...instead th-they created a layer of d-darkness over them. I’ve never seen anything l-like it.”

Nemesis nods. “I have...and if there’s more people out there who can do that, and they’re involved with crime...that’s not really good news for anyone. Well, except them, I suppose...and none of you have any idea who could, or might, have done this?”

Another set of blank headshakes answers his question.

“Okay, then. I, er...I have one last question, but it’s not really related to the case in question at all.”

Banks nods. “Ask away.”

Nemesis gestures to Banks and Sterling. “Are you two...well... you know ...?”

They look each other in the eyes. “We’re business partners,” Banks says.

“Is that... all you are?”

Sterling sighs. “It can’t get out. We...we d-don’t want to make ourselves t-targets. I’m head of a p-prominent organization, and G-Gilbert is extremely rich...in case anyone wants t-to t-target either of us, we, th-that, uh, th-that is to say...it would be c-catastrophic…”

“It’s the same thing with Hugh,” Banks says. “I’m quite fond of him, but I don’t like to say that around company. If I present the front of someone who cares exclusively about how much money something makes me...I don’t seem vulnerable. The people close to me aren’t targets, and I get to live more peacefully. So yes - I am Hugh's guardian, and Phineas is my significant other. And that can never, ever leave this room, understand?”

“It must be difficult,” Nemesis says, “pretending to be someone you aren’t. I understand. I’m glad
you’ve confided in me. I’ll do my best to keep anything from destroying your life.”

“We appreciate it,” Banks says tensely.

“It m-might be a l-little l-late for th-that…” Sterling says tensely.

“Hush, Phineas. It’s just one gala. It’s brought the Cabinet more attention, if anything - you’ll be fine.” Banks loops an arm around Sterling’s shoulders, squeezing him comfortably. “We’ll survive this.”

“L-Lizzie didn’t,” Sterling says, and Nemesis’s heart drops.

“...I don’t know what Lizzie was doing,” Atelier says, voice hardened, though Nemesis can sense a building grief behind them. “I don’t know what she was doing, but she-she was acting weird, towards the end. I wouldn’t be surprised if...she was involved in that sort of stuff. But me, I just...I just paint.”

Nemesis questions if he should tell Atelier about her statue, and finally decides against. Perhaps it wouldn’t be helpful to give these three even more to worry about. “I see. Weird how-so?”

“Oh, you know...secretive, leaving things abruptly, looking around like she’s possessed...the normal stuff.”

“The... normal stuff.” No matter how long he stays here, Omen’s nonchalant culture around espionage is difficult for Nemesis to acclimate to. “Right. I’ll look into her more.”

“By the way, uh...” Atelier looks sheepishly away from Nemesis. Is it just him, or is that a faint pink tinge he can sense to his cheeks? “...I...did you see the article they ran in the Gazette?”

“I did, why?”

“What did you think of the, um...illustrations?”

Oh. So it was Atelier who had drawn those. That explains the quality. “Well, I rather liked them, though I daresay you made me more handsome than I actually am.”

“No, I don’t think I did,” Atelier says quietly, bashful. “But, uh...thanks. Thanks for helping us. The Cabinet - or, well, these two, I guess - they’re the only family I have now. And thanks for liking those drawings, they, um - I’m not very good at drawing people, just landscapes-”

“Based on how good those were, I would never have guessed.” Nemesis smiles in a way he hopes comes off as supportive. “I understand. The last thing I want is to allow a family to come to harm.” Nemesis sounds more solemn than he needs to, perhaps, but he can hope futilely that none of them pick up on it.

By the time he reaches the entranceway, Callie seems to be back. She’s lurking awkwardly in the corner just by the door, and she nods to Nemesis when he enters.

“I looked all I could, but there was nothing I could find,” she whispers to him. “His office is a complete mess. Gears and metal and fireworks everywhere, and papers scattered all around. I can’t imagine how he finds literally anything.”

“Bloody stars. Okay. I don’t know what I expected.” Nemesis realizes, to his horror, that he’d
forgotten to ask about the books. He can’t imagine how the knowledge he already has is compatible with the fact that everything Sterling had told him in that room was true. Had he found a way to fool the compass? If anyone could, it was likely him. Or, perhaps, both are true, somehow? His brain fails to rationalize it properly, and paranoia spikes within him.

“I tried,” she says apologetically.

“That’s fine.” He gives her a single pat on the top of her head. “I know you did. I’m proud of you.”

Briskly, he leaves their corner to look at the other goings-on about the room. Percy and Vigenere are talking back and forth - as Nemesis had predicted, they seem amicable already. But far more interesting is the notable absence of the constable.

“Where’s the bloke guarding here gone?” he asks Percy.

“He, uh, said something about an intruder?” Percy replies. “I didn’t really stress the details.”

“An intruder? Like…” He motions to Callie, out of Vigenere’s sight.

“I don’t know. I hope not?”

Nemesis feels worry building in him. “I see. Er, well...I’m done, so we can be on our ways, if you’ve finished your paperwork.”

Vigenere waves a hand dismissively. “Chase needn’t worry about the paperwork. I’m getting everything sorted out.”

“I still can’t thank you enough!” Percy insists. “I am so sorry I called you high-strung and cold, still! I’ve never been so wrong about anything in my life!”

“Well, no, you’re not technically wrong,” Vigenere says, letting out an uncharacteristic chuckle.

The constable takes this time to return, his arrival telegraphed by a familiar shout from down the hallway. “Let me go!” Hattie shouts, as she’s carried into view. Apparently, the constable has decided that she’s small enough that he can simply lift and carry her, handcuffed. Nemesis isn’t sure if it’s better or worse than being dragged. More comfortable, he supposes, but also more humiliating. Possibly a matter of personal preference.

“Hey, hey,” he says, stepping forward. “What’s going on?”

Hattie glares daggers at him. “They’re not letting me investigate!”

“This girl broke through the window,” the constable offers.

“I was investigating!”

“You were breaking and entering is what you were doing!”

Nemesis sighs heavily. “Hey, hey now. Don’t be getting into arguments with fourteen-year-olds.”

“I’m sixteen!” Hattie interjects indignantly.

“Sixteen, whatever. Put her down and un-cuff her, she’s a kid.”

“I, uh...I’m not sure you have the authority required to make that particular order,” the constable says, looking distinctly nervous.
“He doesn’t, but I do,” Vigenere speaks up. “And I’m issuing the same demand. My department will not be in the habit of arresting children.”

“If you say so…” the constable agrees, reluctantly releasing Hattie. She rubs her wrists - of course, she’s probably never been handcuffed before. It’s not the sort of thing you expect to hurt as much as it actually does.

She doesn’t meet Nemesis’s gaze. “I could have handled it myself.”

“Clearly not.” He scoffs. “You’re out of your element. This is proof that you’re out of your element. Just…just go home, stop putting yourself in these situations. Your parents surely can’t be thrilled by you almost getting arrested.”

She frowns, then turns and walks away, not so much as thanking Nemesis. He watches her retreating back, and he has a sinking feeling that this won’t be the last he sees of her.

“Kids these days…” he mutters.

“Not to question you, Nemesis, but you’re only three years older than her,” Percy says.

“It feels like centuries. In terms of life experience...who knows how massive the divide is?” He shrugs. “But...I can’t really do anything more about this than I already have. So I’ll simply focus on my actual job, and hope that she learns some common sense.”

“That sounds excellent to me,” says Vigenere, clearing his throat. “Again, I appreciate your help, Jones. And yours, Chase, and…” he looks to Callie.

“Callie,” she supplies.

“Well, okay. Callie. I appreciate whatever it is you’re doing as well. Keep doing it.”

Nemesis nods. “She will. We’ll be taking our leave now - we have a lot to mull over after today, and I’ve some meetings to schedule.”

If only Vigenere knew the half of it, he thinks to himself. It feels like everything in the city is related to everything else, a holistic web of lies and unpleasantness. Every time he dives in for answers, he drowns in questions. He doesn’t even know if the answers are out there, buried somewhere under the layers of deception upon deception, or if they’ve faded so far into obscurity that they might as well not exist altogether.
CABINET GALA INTERRUPTED BY THIEF; HEROIC PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR MISTAKENLY BEATEN

At the Cabinet of Marvels’ gala opening, not everything went as planned. Three hours into the event, the lights went out without warning.

Up until that point, the evening had been going smoothly, with guests enjoying exhibitions of art by three students personally selected by the Cabinet’s Board of Trustees - Katherine “Kitty” Blair, the late Elizabeth Calloway [see pg 11], and Hugh Atelier.

Atelier is a painter, and his gallery was well-received. Unfortunately, at eleven o’clock in the evening, the lights abruptly went out, and by the time they came back on, a thief, who allegedly identified themself to the Electric Sun as “Ozymandias Nocturne”, had made their way out the window with “Shadows Over Catacumba”, Atelier's masterwork.

Unfortunately, the night’s twists and turns did not end there! For once brave individual was courageous enough to pursue Nocturne onto the roof. One Nemesis Jones, a Llygredish private investigator with a shadowy personal life, was already giving chase!

Nemesis Jones is a name you might have heard before. Aside from his solving of many cases, such as the Archibald affair and the O’Leary kidnappings of three months ago, he is known for being a friend of prodigious pianist Elias Fitzroy. He’s thought to be competent, if eccentric. And he immediately followed after the thief.

It is difficult to know precisely what transpired out on the roof, in that chaos. The general consensus seems to be that Jones and the thief had a lengthy altercation, in which Jones had nearly managed to secure the thief, but they had leapt across the space between the roof of the Cabinet and the next building over, and vanished into the night. Before Jones could make chase, he was confronted by an officer of the Omen police.

This officer, mistaking Jones for the criminal in question, assaulted him before he could get a word in. He was mistakenly assaulted, and did not bother to fight back as he was brutally beaten. By the altercation’s end, he was handcuffed, his face bludgeoned with the blunt end of a pistol until it was no longer recognizable.

The baron of Semper, the right honorable Lucian Vigenere, was present at the gala, and vouched for Jones. The officer who attacked him was reprimanded, and he was set free to receive medical attention.

There’s no way to say what developments on this case will follow, but Nemesis Jones is certainly a figure to watch. His Lordship has, according to rumor, personally assigned him to catch this “Ozymandias Nocturne”, with full confidence in his abilities. However, currently, the thief remains on the loose, and “Shadows Over Catacumba” nowhere to be found.

Nemesis Jones, Lucian Vigenere, Hugh Atelier, Phineas Sterling, Gilbert Banks, and the Omen police department were all reached out to for comment, with none responding currently. More as this case develops.
At the eventful gala hosted last night at the Cabinet of Marvels, one artist was mysteriously missing. Elizabeth Calloway, known as “Lizzie” to her family and friends, had been missing for at least two weeks before the gala, according to her contemporary, artist Hugh Atelier.

There are rumors and speculations floating about wildly, especially since her body has, to the best of the police’s knowledge, not been found. The Cabinet of Marvels, amidst its other tragedies, will be taking time off to celebrate the life and accomplishments of this amazing woman.

She was the daughter of antiques store owners Geoffrey and Ophelia Calloway, who operated their shop off of Enigma Street in Omen. She had attended classes at the Catacumba Institute of Artifice, and graduated in good academic standing in May 711, having studied mechanical artifice.

The circumstances of her disappearance remain largely unknown, though she was last seen leaving her family’s store to attend a meeting at the Cabinet. She never made it to the meeting. However, as she has finally been declared dead, the family may at least finally find closure.

“My daughter was the most amazing person I’ve had the pleasure of knowing,” Geoffrey Calloway told the Gazette. “I will miss her deeply for as long as I live.”

“She was a good friend and a better artist,” said Hugh Atelier, before refusing to elaborate.

“She was one of the most talented students I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. Always a delight to speak to. Full of potential snuffed out far before its time,” Cabinet of Marvels Director Phineas Sterling wrote in to the Gazette.

Elizabeth Calloway’s name will live the memories of her friends and co-workers, though her time among the living has come to an end.
His time at the Cabinet of Marvels might have given him a lot to think about, but Nemesis can’t seem to unravel those thoughts enough to pull anything coherent from the roiling mass. He drums his fingers on the table impatiently, but the sound isn’t enough to keep him grounded as his attention drifts. All he can process is the smell of coffee, the faint streetlamp light oozing through the windows, and the fact that Elizabeth Calloway is dead and the conspiracy surrounding it threatens to engulf the whole city, him included.

He realizes the waitress has been trying to get his attention for a moment now. How rude of him. Normally, he makes an effort to be as overly polite to wait-staff as possible, to balance out the multitudes of unpleasant wealthy customers anyone in Omen has to deal with on a regular basis. Today, he seems to be too scattered to even properly do that.

“Apologies,” he says weakly. “I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“It’s alright, sir. It’s just that there’s an individual by the door saying they’re with you,” she replies, her posture displaying her clear unease. He supposes it must be difficult to not be scared of someone whose likeness you’ve seen plastered all over the city’s newspapers, broken and bleeding and victorious even in defeat.

With fame comes the inevitable reputation of being a person who is best not crossed. Nemesis appreciates that those around him generally no longer have any incentive for disdain, but the look of fear on this woman’s face almost makes it seem not worth it. It’s one thing for people who might hurt him to fear him instead. It’s another thing for innocent people to look at him as though he’s a snarling wild animal, about to tear out their throats.

“The redhead with the strange glasses, is it?” He asks tiredly. “Let him in, and get me another cup of tea, if that’s alright.”

“Yes, sir,” she agrees. The fear in her voice is clear as crystal. Nemesis feels disgusted at himself.

Alarmingly fast, the individual in question has arrived at Nemesis’s table, fluidly sliding into the chair across from him and leaning across the table on his hands. As always, he’s smiling widely despite the large and nasty scar stretching across his nose.

“Hello, Gallows,” Nemesis says, sighing. “You’re late.”

“I got caught up in something, what can I say?” Felix Gallows leans back obnoxiously in his seat, bringing far too much attention to their shared table despite it being as isolated as possible, a cloistered booth in the back of the cafe.

“By ‘something’, I’m going to assume you mean ‘crime’,” Nemesis says flatly. He’s already exhausted of dealing with Gallows and the conversation has barely even started.

“What of it? Heh.” Gallows’s grin somehow widens, seeming altogether far too large for his face. He looks Nemesis in the eyes, his gray ones seeming so strangely warped by his peculiar yellow-tinted glasses. He’s such a strange-looking individual in general - choppy deep red hair, half of it braided up to the side, pale and washed-out skin, dressed in cobbled-together suit separates in unmatched shades of deep purple. He’s notably broad-shouldered, and has the physique of a person who regularly gets into fights and enjoys it, a fair bit wider than Nemesis and certainly more muscular, despite being shorter. Dealing with him is fairly dangerous. He could easily snap
Nemesis's bones one by one, if given the incentive.

“No, nothing of it,” he sighs. “Thank you for coming out here to speak with me. I know it was probably out of your way.”

“Not really.” Gallows shrugs. “I didn’t have any plans to speak of. Might as well help out a newly minted celebrity, right?”

“I don’t really consider myself a celebrity,” Nemesis says awkwardly.

“Ah, but you are! You headlined the Gazette! Speaking of, what happened to your scars? You did look so impressive with them...at least in that sketch. Maybe whoever drew it was kind to you.”

That had been Nemesis’s thought on the subject as well, but he’s not about to admit that to Gallows. “It’s called medicine, Gallows. Never heard of it?”

“Heard of it, of course. Just curious as to what, where, how, you know. The usual. Anyway, what do you have to ask me about this time?”

Nemesis feels tense, and surely it’s not just because of the fact that the few people in this restaurant are staring directly at their table. Gallows can be a scary guy. “Could we...be a little quieter, perhaps? The things I’m going to ask you are best left discreet, if you know what I mean.”

Gallows nods sagely. “Yes, yes...espionage, conspiracy, organized crime, and of course, murder, I assume. The usual.”

“All of those things, yes. Markedly unusual, though.”

Gallows quirks an eyebrow. His voice is low and curious and, as always, all the more dangerous for how light-hearted it sounds. “...oh? A fun one, for once, then?”

“By your definition of fun, perhaps. Certainly not by mine.” Nemesis sighs, sliding forward the first of the papers he has prepared. A clipping from the Omen Gazette, proclaiming that Elizabeth Calloway has, at long last, been declared dead. Her photograph stares up off the page, smiling an endearingly crooked grin. She’s dead now, he thinks, as he does each time he sees her face. He picks up the newspaper, turning it over in his hands. “Elizabeth Calloway, mm? Thought it might be. Lucky you. Not many people get to work on a case this high-profile.”

“High-profile? No one’s even reported it as a murder. The official ruling is natural causes, and even the confirmation that she was dead was buried ten pages into the Gazette.”

“High-profile to people who know things, I mean,” Gallows says. The constant grin is starting to wear on Nemesis’s nerves. “Anyway, I don’t know who killed her.”

“Obviously not,” Nemesis scoffs. “I wouldn’t be working on this case if you did, would I?”

“Who knows? Maybe you would run after answers to a mystery that’s been solved already. You seem the type.” He pauses. “...oh, heh, sorry. You don’t do well with insults, that’s right.”

Nemesis’s hand clenches itself into a fist, but he says nothing, feeling frustration burn through him. Gallows chuckles sinisterly. “Temper, Jones, Temper. Wouldn’t want to disrupt our...professional relationship, would we?”

Nemesis wishes he were anywhere else. He has to strain to keep himself from flying off the handle,
screaming or punching Gallows or punching the wall or punching himself, somehow, he’s sure he’d find a way. It’s a sickening reminder that Nemesis isn’t as powerful as he thinks, and that no matter how much the common people fear him there are others out there who don’t fear him at all. In the business relationship between himself and Gallows, he’s the one with everything to lose. He’s the one who needs Gallows. No one needs Nemesis, strictly speaking. And that’s why he can do this, attempting to get Nemesis angry just to see the results, just so that he can reinforce how much more powerful he is. This is a game to him.

But Nemesis has to keep his composure. Between shielding his fragile pride and solving the case, there’s no question of which matters more.

He smiles pleasantly at Gallows. “What temper? Of course not.”

Gallows snickers. “Good to hear.”

“Right, right.” He sighs. “Have you any idea of the individuals involved in the covering-up, by any chance?”

“Not especially, I’m afraid.” Here, Gallows looks a hair more serious, twirling his thin side-braid around his finger. “As far as covering up goes, normally Fitzroy bribes people himself, while the Benefactors have Jules Lockhart handle their public relations.”

“Jules Lockhart, in public relations?” Nemesis frowns. He doesn’t have particularly high regard of Lockhart’s social skills - the revelation is genuinely surprising.

“You know him? I’ve heard he’s a sort of...austere guy, but not much beyond that. You don’t happen to know anything that would be useful to me, would you?” He thoughtfully looks at Nemesis. Of course, Gallows may be the one with the power in this situation, but he’s not one to investigate things himself. What he knows, he learns through his network of spies and underlings and, primarily, underpaid goons. A miniature criminal empire of his own, however, isn’t enough to find everything he needs to know. Sometimes, things require an expert’s touch.

Nemesis takes a sip of tea, feeling the warm liquid wash over his mouth and down his throat before responding. “What’s in it for me if I tell you?” Conversations with Gallows are always negotiations, even if they’re not supposed to be - that’s simply the sort of man he is.

“Hmm.” Gallows seems to ruminate over it for a moment. Nemesis, with his lack of desire for money, is a difficult person to actually pay. “I’ll actively re-route my resources towards this case, how about it? And I’ll immediately contact you if there’s any new developments.”

“I don’t think the information I have is worth quite that much, regrettably.” Had Nemesis any information actually of worth to Gallows, he would have set him on the trail of a different case entirely far earlier.

“I’m sure that’s not true. People in your line of work tend to be completely out of the know, that’s true, but the very best of the best tend to find out things that the Postmen miss. I’d be interested in trading information sometime. Gives me an edge over my competition.”

Nemesis nods. Gallows is right that private investigators tend to be several steps behind the informant underworld. More targeted investigation means that they often miss the bigger picture. Postmen have probably solved more crimes than private investigators, all in all - the net is wider, the information more comprehensive. Nemesis would like to consider himself an exception. “You think I’m the best of the best, then?”
“I don’t work with just any private eye who thinks he’s got an outside shot at figuring out some mystery or other. Let me say it like this - I think your talents are wasted trying to piece together scattered facts by staring at the wallpaper or whatever it is you do. I think you’d make a pretty solid informant.”

“Perhaps in another world.” He’s been told similar things many a time, and he doesn’t precisely disagree. His skills are well-suited for sneaking and overhearing. Surely, any one of the spy-kings in Omen knows more than he’ll learn in his lifetime. They could solve most of his cases with ease. The urge is certainly present to give up on the pretense of deduction entirely and join their numbers. He’s clever and good on his feet. Surely, he’d be able to rise through the ranks.

The only thing stopping him is the memory of where he came from, who he almost was. The person he used to be would have relished the idea of leading a spy ring. He, on the other hand, relies on no one but himself. Someone so sure of betrayal shouldn’t rely on others for his information, anyway.

“Regardless, I’m interested in the things you’ve learned.” Gallows leans on his hand. “First off, though, a couple things, related to your case. Supposedly, the Guild is schisming. There’s a small but powerful group of members plotting a mutiny against Tobias Fitzroy and his leadership.”

“Oh. Understandable. Dunno how anyone stands the guy.”

Gallows grins. “Right. Word around the grapevine is Calloway was part of that. All signs point to her being a double-agent for the Benefactors and the Guild. She probably got herself a bit too involved, and got taken out.”

“She’s an agent for the Guild?” That’s new information to Nemesis. “Er-was. Was, sorry.”

“No need to apologize to me. She was, yeah - did set backgrounds for them for a while, apparently. According to Liu Jing, who I’m pretty sure you’ve been spotted in public with, she was way too nice of a person to actually be an agent for anyone, including Fitzroy. I don’t think they realized she worked for the Benefactors.”

Nemesis frowns. “You think there’s a chance she was playing both sides, so to speak? Keeping herself safe while not truly wanting to participate in that sort of activities?”

“Absolutely not. From everything I’ve heard of her, she was playing the Guild, genuinely invested in the Cabinet. She was Phineas Sterling’s pet project, the single student he had chosen to personally sponsor. Her art career was tied entirely to the Cabinet. If you get to live your dream, a little espionage is a small price to pay, right?”

Phineas Sterling, obviously, hasn’t been fully upfront with Nemesis. Just when he’d begun to trust the man, the knife has been twisted - he’d found some clever way to get around his device. He feels a rush of nausea. He’d sponsored Elizabeth Calloway. Most likely, he had manipulated her. He had profited off of the circumstances which lead up to her death. She had trusted him. And most likely, he had taken advantage of it.

“Your life isn’t that small of a price,” he says, thinking, yet again, about her parents, mourning a daughter without even knowing why she died. “If what you’re saying is true, he deserves the fallout. No one should need to die to be part of something.”

“And yet, that’s not how the world works, Nemesis Jones! Maybe if you understood that to be involved you have to put yourself on the line you wouldn’t be such a loner anymore.” He flicks Nemesis’s forehead, smirking. “Don’t look so depressed. You get to solve it, right? Maybe you can
stop anything like this from happening again. I mean, probably not, but maybe.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Nemesis says, sighing. “Is that all you have to say, or is there more?”

“You know there’s more. For instance, Hugh Atelier, the kid whose painting got stolen? He’s one of us.”

“One of-” Nemesis gestures to the part of Gallows’s collarbone where he knows the tattoo sits, obscured by the thin layer of cotton.

“Of course. He was a courier, and a damn good one too. He tried to quit, but you know as well as I do no one ever fully quits these things. I imagine he joined the Benefactors for safety - after all, he’d always loved art. It was how he got messages from one place to another. Disguised them in paintings. Ingenious, really.”

So Hugh Atelier is another piece in the game, albeit an unwitting one. Nemesis supposes the fact that he is unwitting makes him a far better candidate for contact than Sterling or Banks. Perhaps, one on one, he could figure something out from him.

“Do you have his address, perchance? Atelier’s, I mean.”

“I do, but it might not help you much, seeing as he lives a room over from Sterling.”

Nemesis sighs. “Give it to me anyway.”

“If you insist.” Gallows scrawls it onto a piece of paper in his nearly illegible hand and gives it to Nemesis with a flourish. “Your funeral, heading that deep into enemy territory. But I guess you have the baron to protect you now, if rumors are to be believed.”

“They are, but there’s nothing Vigenere can do for me if I’m dead.”

“Fair enough.” Gallows chuckles lowly. “Probably smart. So the rumors about you being a contractor for the baron are true?”

“Last I checked, indeed they are.”

“I see.” Gallows seems to think for a moment. “What’s the baron like, then? As underwhelming as people say he is?”

“He’s no older than me, he dresses plain, and he’s not a particularly gifted speaker. His glasses throw off his face’s proportions and he’s attempting to keep the press out of crime scenes and minimize espionage, so I’d watch out if I were you.” Nemesis rattles off.

Gallows’s face betrays a very brief hint of concern, before returning to its normal indifferent cheer. “Eh, I’ll deal with that bridge when it hatches, so to speak.”

“No one says that.”

“I just did. I’ll make it the fashion. Within a week, I guarantee you everyone in Omen will be saying it.” He smirks, unsettlingly toothy.

“If that happens, I’m moving back to Citrea Viridia,” Nemesis says with an exhausted sigh. “Is that all you had to tell me, then?”

“For now, yes. More might come up, and you’re free to contact me if you need to know anything
specific. I’ll probably know it.” His voice turns more serious. “Now pay up. You said you knew something about Salem Riddle?”

Nemesis nods.

“That fucker’s been at the periphery of my network, but I can’t get them figured out at all. Any tips count.”

“They appear with the fog, and they want me to solve this case for some reason. They seem to know a lot. I feel like they probably know that I’m telling you this right now, and I certainly hope they’re not too upset about it. They usually look different every time I see them, but the eyes are consistently covered, and the teeth are consistently very, very sharp.”

“Ah, well, none of that’s entirely promising,” Gallows mutters. “Appear with the fog, you say?”

“In my experience, at least. I know correlation doesn’t equal causation, but it seemed a fairly significant thing to overlook entirely.”

“And they know a lot…” Nemesis can see the gears in his head turning. “They’d be a valuable asset, then.”

“Good luck finding them, never mind getting them on your side,” Nemesis scoffs. “I’ve told you all I know.”

Gallows frowns. “Alright. That’ll do.”

“Thank you for your time,” Nemesis says, equal parts frustrated at the lack of proper, straightforward revelations and revealed that the conversation is over.

“Right. Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.” He stands up, pushing in his chair with a tired groan.

Felix Gallows apologizing for not being helpful? Nemesis feels like the world has been turned upside-down. “Sorry? Why?”

He looks him more seriously in the eyes. “This case doesn’t just matter to you. The warring, out of the public eye - it’s getting worse. We lost a couple guys a while back. That never happens. Postmen are meant to be a neutral party.”

Nemesis frowns deeper, because Felix Gallows revealing something without being paid for it is downright unsettling. “Do you know who did it? Or at least suspect?”

“The Eyes.”

“The Eyes?” Nemesis repeats. “I didn’t know they actively engaged in espionage. I thought they were just a coalition of rich blokes and society leaders.”

“That’s how it used to be. They’ve had a new inductee recently, and apparently things have been changing. They’re trying to take active control, eliminating anyone who gets in their way.”

“Ah, that’s really not good. A couple rich bastards per society was bad, but all of them working together…”

“Yeah.” Gallows looks spectacularly grim. “I have no idea why I care enough to tell you this, but...be careful. Things are getting more dangerous.”

“I dunno why you care enough to tell me that either, but thanks. You be careful too, mate.”
That grin comes back. Nemesis can’t sense any strain in it, but he knows it’s there, just below the surface. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Somewhat unceremoniously, he leaves. That leaves Nemesis to sit by himself and mull over their conversation.

Surprisingly, he’s not left alone for long. With little pretense and barely so much as an announcement of her presence, Zhou Shuai slides in across from him, flags over a nearby waiter, and orders herself a cup of tea and assortment of scones.

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay. For your own bill, even,” she says when she sees him staring, as though this is the reason her presence might be objectionable.

“You make a habit of crashing other people’s solitary meals out?” he asks.

“Not really. Consider yourself lucky that a famous actress would want to eat with you.” She leans her chin on her hand and smiles.

Despite her words, she’s clearly doing her best to pretend that she is not, in fact, a famous actress. Her clothing, while high-quality and stylish, is far from glamorous - a long gray peacoat, darker gray pleated skirt which reaches nearly to her ankles, gray suede boots, and a gray hat perched elegantly on the side of her head. It’s perfect for blending into the crowd. She’s not even wearing any jewelry, and her face is covered with a pair of large sunglasses. Fashion aside, Nemesis wonders why they even sell sunglasses in Omen, considering that there’s never any sunlight, and often barely any light at all.

“Oh, didn’t you hear? I’m a celebrity now, Ms. Zhou.” He smiles. “What brings you to this humble table, madam?”

She glances around, making sure no one is listening, before leaning towards him again. “Evelyn said you were going to be there.”

She must have heard that from Percy, and passed it on. “She said right. Why are you seeking my company? If this is meant to be an advance, apologies, but you aren’t my type-”

“Don’t be like that.” She frowns. “You and I both know we’re both interested in different people.”

“You’re right. You aren’t my type,” he repeats, trying not to think too hard about what her words imply. “Then why are you here?”

She leans in close, whispering. “Because I’m scared.”

He sighs heavily. “I know you theatre-types like to be dramatic, but that really doesn’t tell me anything.”

“You’re a private investigator. I had expected you to be able to catch on to what I’m saying fast, because you figure things out so well.”

“I regret to inform you that if I could just ‘figure things out’ without anything to work off of this case would already have long since been solved, as well as every other crime and mysterious wrongdoing in the city. You’ll have to speak a little more clearly with me, make sure we’re on the same page. I’m only human, after all.”

She nods slowly. “Sorry. I had just assumed that you were…”
“You’ve read a lot of sensationalized literature,” he suggests, remembering how she had brought up Dick Remington when he interviewed her at the Theatre Obscura.

“Maybe I have. What about it?” She asks, looking mildly embarrassed. After a moment, though, her expression hardens. “I’m here about Walter.”

“What about him? Is Mr. Morrow in danger of some sort?”

She nods. “It’s his... *episodes*.”

“You mean the epilepsy?”

“He’s—he’s not e—” she realizes her voice has been rising without her knowledge and hurriedly lowers it, finishing her sentence in a whisper. “—he’s not epileptic.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being epileptic, you know, aside from the great inconvenience it causes to the person in question,” Nemesis says.

“Of course there isn’t. I wasn’t being defensive, I’m just...frustrated. No one is listening and there’s so few people I can reach out to to begin with...if I want to live, anyway.” Nemesis glances at his compass. She’s telling the full truth, and he supposes he probably could have gleaned that from her body language, anyway. Best to be sure. Always best to be sure.

“Well, I’ll listen. If you don’t think it’s epilepsy, I’ll hear you out. I’m still not convinced it isn’t, though.”

“It’s not seizures at all. He seems more *dazed* than like he’s having a seizure. He only has vague recollections of what he’s doing. He says he feels like a marionette, like he’s being controlled with strings.”

“I don’t think any of that is out of the realm of possibilities to experience during a seizure, really.”

“No, they aren’t,” she agrees, voice dropping to an even softer volume. “But...I experienced it too, recently. And I know I’m not epileptic, but it was...the exact same.”

At that, Nemesis sits up a bit. “Well, that’s alarming. While there’s a chance you both developed it spontaneously, epilepsy’s certainly not *contagious*. No one in your family has had anything of the sort, have they?”

She shakes her head.

“And...I’m not sure how much you know about Mr. Morrow’s family, but do they...?”

She shakes her head again, more insistently. “It came out of nowhere, for both of us. And for me, the first instance of it was when I was...nearby Walter. There was one other person in the room, and it was Mr. Fitzroy.”

Tobias Fitzroy is a name that always gets Nemesis’s attention. He’s sure it’s apparent on his face, because Shuai nods solemnly.

“Is he...this might be a little bit of a hard question to answer, if your memory is of a typical strength, but...when Mr. Morrow has his... *episodes*...typically speaking, is he around Fitzroy?”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head. “He’s not usually with me when they happen. The one time it’s happened with me around was when it happened to me as well. It could be that the only reason
it happened to me was to prevent an eyewitness, because my memory is so foggy - just Walter’s face, and Mr. Fitzroy’s, and the absinthe we were drinking.”

“Wasn’t aware Fitzroy drank absinthe. Thought he was more a red wine guy.”

She frowns. “He does like red wine, but he’ll drink other things fairly often, is that really relevant?”

“Wasn’t aware you drink absinthe, either,” he says, recalling that Shuai had been drinking champagne that day at the Obscura.

“Well, Walter likes it. And if Mr. Fitzroy was the one who offered it to me, it would be dangerous to refuse, you understand.”

“I understand perfectly. That actually sort of plays into my theory. I’m not an expert on every variety of poison in existence, but I’m sure there’s some poison out there that would cause that sort of symptoms. I can look into it, if you’d like me to, and you’re lucky. Since I’m already working on a mystery adjacent to this, I’ll give you a discount.”

She looks uncertain, but nods. “I suppose it makes sense. I was thinking...I think I know what his motive is, as well.”

“Oh?” As much as Nemesis thinks about Tobias Fitzroy - and he does think about him often, he’s the person his mind wanders to when he has nothing else to be angry about - he’s never fully considered what thought process leads him to commit the acts he does. Perhaps it had been an easy out. No need to feel any sympathy for a man motivated only by money and personal glory, and the last thing Nemesis wants is to feel sympathy for the person who has made his beloved Elias’s life a living horror.

“Walter is a handsome guy, right? And charming? You would agree with me, right?”

“I...yes, Ms. Zhou, I get it. I like men.”

She frowns. “I’m not...that’s not the point. You agree with me, right? You think he’s handsome and has a natural charisma to him that makes him both likeable and memorable?”

“I...yes?”

“Well, I think Mr. Fitzroy thinks the same. And on top of it, Walter is the fastest rising star in stage theatre right now. He’s dating Mr. Fitzroy’s daughter. That means he’ll be partial owner of the Obscura when he dies. All things considered, he’s the natural successor to Mr. Fitzroy’s status and legacy.” She lowers her voice even further, leaning in more towards Nemesis. “And I think he’s threatened by that.”

“You reckon...he’s scared Mr. Morrow’s star will one day eclipse his? And he’s trying to...poison him?”

Her eyebrows furrow. “I don’t know what he’s trying to do, I just...please stop him, Mr. Jones. I’m so worried.”

He looks at her sympathetically. The makeup isn’t enough to conceal the lines on her forehead or the bags beneath her eyes. “You look incredibly stressed. Get some rest, okay? I’ll take it from here.”

“I’ll try,” she agrees, sighing tiredly. “But I don’t think I’ll be any less worried until there’s a
solution. If something happens to Walter, I…”

“You really care about him, don’t you?”

She smiles to herself, a fond look briefly erasing her terror. “We’ve been friends ever since we came to Omen. Both foreigners trying to make it in the hostile world of acting...I’m a quiet person, but being an actress was my dream. I had to leave my family behind to do it, but he always supported me. He became my new family, in a way. I…”

The way she trails off tells Nemesis more than anything she ever could have said. “You love him, don’t you? That’s why you weren’t at the gala - you were jealous of him and Morgana Fitzroy.”

She nods. “I know I shouldn’t be. I know I should be happy for him, being with a woman he loves. But I can’t help but wonder, what it would be like...well, I don’t think you need me to tell you how that feels, do you?”

He frowns. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

And here, her expression changes - though she’s no less miserable, her mouth quirks up into a knowing smile. An expert act from an expert actress, expertly shifting the subject to something upsetting to him instead of upsetting to her. “I’ve seen the way you look at Elias.”

“What’s *that* meant to imply?”

“It’s just...it’s clear you care about him,” she says. “You two aren’t just friends, are you?”

He scoffs. “Ms. Zhou, he’s *engaged*. Even if I did have any feelings of the sort for him, it wouldn’t change the fact that he’s already promised to someone else. All I can dream is that Renwick allows me to be his best man, but I haven’t high hopes for the idea.”

He wishes, however futilely, that Elias would just run away with him, as though Lusitania Renwick didn’t exist at all. There’s a part of him, loathe as he is to acknowledge it, which is jealous of her, despite knowing she’s not a rival for Elias’s genuine, uncoerced affections. He had always known Elias would be married to someone else one day, but to actually stare the reality in the face is sickening. He worries that his vehement loathing towards the arrangement is just as much born from jealousy as from concern.

“If only something as simple as the object of your affections being involved with another person could stop love.” She sighs wistfully. “Am I right, though? Or am I merely invading your privacy horribly?”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive,” he points out. “And this conversation isn’t all that relevant to the fact that Fitzroy is being a bastard. I’ve no need for more reasons to hate him or Renwick. I assure you, their personalities are more than enough by themselves.”

She smiles, a thin veneer of amusement over her clear misery. “I’m beginning to get the sense you don’t like actors.”

“It’s because most of the actors at the Obscura are terrible people, not because I’ve got a vendetta. Though I might *start* to, at this rate.” He pauses, realizing how it might come off. “-er, I don’t hate you, though, you’ve done nothing to earn that. Don’t hate Mr. Morrow either, since that seems like it’d be of concern to you.”

She smiles. “I hadn’t expected you to. I don’t hate you either, but I think both of us know I wouldn’t be here if I did.”
“You never know, actually. Sometimes, people go to people they hate for help because they have no other place to go.” He doesn’t particularly like Gallows, after all. “But that’s beside the point. What I mean to say is, er...I’ll help. Don’t worry. It’ll be okay.”

The last sentence feels like a sickening lie. How could he ever say that?

The smiles widens, though she doesn’t look entirely sure. As she well shouldn’t. “I’ll be seeing you. That’s not cursory, by the way - you’re willing to meet me again, right?” She slides him a business card, across the table with an elegant motion.

He frowns. “Well, yes, I’m willing, but...you ordered tea.”

“Well, you get more tea, then. You like tea, right?”

He sighs heavily. “You also said you’d pay.”

Shuai pulls her wallet from her pocket and deposits a handful of bills on the table, all neatly folded. By Nemesis’s quick estimate, it must be at least one hundred crowns. “Bit much for a cup of tea, don’t you think?”

“Keep the change. You need it more than me.”

He scoffs. “Is that your way of telling me I look poor, Ms. Zhou?”

“I...not really, but do you mean to say you’re of comparable financial status to an actress?”

“If not richer,” he confirms. “Have a nice day, Ms. Zhou.” He gives her a small wave goodbye, and she leaves, baffled and concerned, without another word.

With her gone and the tea on its way, that leaves him alone with his thoughts. She’s given him a lot to think about, as is typical of any conversation he’s had lately. Everything returns to one point, like infinite streams running from the same source. He learned this long ago, from a matter-of-fact lecture by an experienced private investigator. Everything is connected, and all events stem from the same source, like ripples. In Omen, especially, things are connected, and no event can ever truly be unraveled from all others.

They come from one source, Arthur Jones had told him, solemn, and they all lead back to the same place. He doesn’t know what that place is, not yet. That’s why the world still needs private investigators.

As he’s deep in thought, he hears the chair across from him be pulled aside. A figure sits down without even bothering to ask permission, and at first, he doesn’t recognize them. Then, he realizes who it is, and has to stop himself from doing a double-take.

Dressed in a simple gray suit and dark blue tie, Mallory has cleaned up rather well. While they don’t look neat, they’ll pass for a lower-class individual of average lifestyle. The bandages over their eye have been replaced with a neat black eye-patch, two thin straps stretching above and below their ear, disheveling their hair in order to hold it in place. They look exhausted, immediately waving over a waitress and ordering coffee.

“You’re paying, by the way,” they say the moment she leaves.

“Okay,” Nemesis flatly agrees. He knows, as the far wealthier individual of the two, that it’s logical. Besides, Mallory looks like they need the coffee. “Might I inquire as to why you’re here? Last we met, I wasn’t aware you precisely enjoyed my presence.”
Their hand twitches against the table and they sharply look away. “Mr. Apollinaire wanted me to speak to you. I...need to get out more often, anyway, it’s not like I was thrilled at the request to see you or anything.”

“I didn’t think you were,” he chuckles, and they glare sharply at him.

“Look, joke all you want. I’m only here on his request. He thinks you’re important, for some reason. Not just another criminal taking advantage of people’s mercy.”

“Nah, I’m certainly a criminal taking advantage of others’ mercy. I’m also, supposedly, quite the important individual, but that’s not really how I think of myself.”

Their eye widens, just barely. Something about what he’s said has visibly confounded them. “You just admit it, then?”

He shrugs. “Why not? If that’s what everyone thinks of me by default, I’ve no reason to disagree. It’s not all I am.”

At some point, he realizes, without ever noticing it, he’s begun to consider himself a good person. The thought itself is enough to cause him a moment of pause, but he manages to keep himself from expressing it visibly. The last thing he needs is for Mallory to ask questions about that.

They frown. “Do you consider yourself human, Jones?”

“Funny you should ask. Don’t tell anyone, but I’m trying to keep secret that I’m actually a swarm of lizards in a trench coat.”

The frown only deepens. “Don’t be clever, Jones. No one likes a clever criminal.”

“My boyfriend likes me,” he says on impulse, unsure what compels him to.

Mallory immediately looks scandalized. “Well, good for him? I...we’ve gotten off topic. You’re aware that you get on my nerves, right? Your private eye skills are sufficient for that?”

“I’m aware, yes.”

“Then act like it.” They glare directly at him, as though looking for a confrontation, but after a moment their expression softens and they look away. “...I’m sorry. I’m letting my initial opinion of you affect my behavior. Mr. Apollinaire doesn’t want me to be hostile to you.”

“It’s not a problem,” is the only response he can think to give. Mallory is an entirely inscrutable person, initially seeming entirely like the average tired and matter-of-fact Omenite citizen, but the closer one looks the more that interpretation falls to pieces until there’s just about nothing left to it. Their behavior is entirely erratic, not following any patterns Nemesis can identify.

That makes him, as horrible of a person as he feels the impulse to study makes him, unbearably interested in them. They’re a mystery, they need to be solved. It’s precisely the sort of thing he’s not meant to use his talents for.

“It’s a problem. Dr. Apollinaire seems...” they sigh. “...he seems like he’s invested in you, which is strange, because he doesn’t know you at all.”

“That must seem strange,” Nemesis agrees, though he has a good idea of where Apollinaire's interest stems from. “So are you here because you’re jealous?”
“That is not why I’m here,” they say, and it doesn’t slip by Nemesis’s notice that they’re thoroughly dodging the question.

“Then why are you here?”

“Dr. Apollinaire needed me to track you down, like I said. He wants to talk to you, and he said you weren’t responding to your phone yesterday.”

Nemesis was unconscious for a long time. Of course, it’s just his luck that someone would attempt to contact him multiple times during that specific period. Well, not luck, he supposes. Apollinaire had probably seen his horribly mangled face in the newspaper and been very, very concerned. Still, it was a rather bad time of him to be out cold.

“I was passed out,” he tells Mallory.

“That sounds like a you problem,” they respond nonchalantly.

Their coffee arrives, and they take a long sip, not looking at Nemesis. They put the cup down softly on the table, and when they finally return their attention to him, they look a hair less irritated.

“You really like coffee, do you?” he observes.

“It’s amazing. Humans make amazing things.”

Nemesis momentarily wants to ask who else is making things, before remembering Mallory’s...situation. Instead, he nods solemnly. “I assume you didn’t get to have coffee before Dr. Apollinaire came around.”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t need to eat or drink - technically, I still don’t.”

He frowns. “That’s right. It doesn’t...fry your circuits or anything? It doesn’t mess with the delicate balance of clockwork which sustains you?”

“It feels like it should, but it doesn’t. From what Dr. Apollinaire told me, an automaton can convert food and drink to energy, just as a human can.”

“A different process but the exact same result. Interesting how that works. You don’t strictly need to eat, though?”

“No, but I want to, because I enjoy it.” They frown, very deliberate, at the cup in their hands. “I’m allowed to do that now.”

“To do things you enjoy?”

“Well, I always enjoyed my job,” they clarify. “But...things outside of it, yes.”

Nemesis, though, can’t shake the feeling that it must be miserable to be an automaton. Created for a specific purpose, unable to deviate from it. Like every bad part of being human, amplified.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m not actually here to drink coffee. It’s just a pleasant side effect.”

“You’re here to bring me to Apollinaire, yes. What if I told you I’m busy and can’t speak to him?”

They pause, legitimately mulling it over. “Well, my first instinct would be to knock you unconscious and drag you back to the house, but that would be difficult to do without the legal
power I used to have, and Dr. Apollinaire would get mad at me. My second instinct would be to tell you to make time.”

“Well, at least one of those would be plausible. Are you always so violent?”

“I’m pretty sure whoever creates Automata Lex makes that a specific feature. I’m an anomaly, in a lot of ways. When Smith and Dr. Apollinaire repaired me, they managed to change some of my personality, too. He says he has no idea how or why that would have happened, but I’ve felt different ever since I woke up.”

“I can’t imagine how someone would change your personality. Perhaps being nearly killed simply gave you new perspective on things,” Nemesis suggests.

They frown. “No, that’s not it. Also, technically, I can’t be killed because I’m not alive to begin with.”

“You seem plenty alive to me.”

“Well, that’s the point of it all, isn’t it? Not everything is what it appears. I appear human, but I’m a machine. You appear...as one thing, but you’re something else, I’m sure.”

“I appear like a high-society gentleman but I’m actually a criminal, is what I get most often. I don’t really commit that many crimes, though, at least not ones that hurt people.” He’s sure to add the disclaimer onto the end, lest Mallory attack him in this crowded space. Thankfully, they don’t look particularly angry.

“Well, on this occasion, you are not a criminal. You are the agent of the law, attempting to solve the cases of the missing something-or-other or the murder in the place as though you’re a penny dreadful consulting detective.”

“I get that last part a lot, you know.”

They raise an eyebrow. “Is it unwarranted?”

“Nah, it’s an intentional image. You’re right, though, I’m not a criminal. Er, tell that to Officer Crawford, though. My cheekbones still don’t feel the same.”

“Oh, your poor cheekbones.” They roll their eye, stopping mid-roll. “Wait, Crawford?”

“Yeah. You know her?”

Their face immediately becomes clouded, eyebrow furrowing as they process his statement. “I...did, before. What did you do to provoke her?”

“Nothing. Just existed in her vicinity. Seems like a ‘brutalize first, ask questions never’ sort of woman, but you probably know her a little better than I do.” To himself, he thinks that Officer Crawford certainly didn’t need a reason - an excuse, rather - to attack him, but he’s not sure if they would become enraged if he said something to the effect. He’ll be careful for now. Fights in broad daylight aren’t good for publicity no matter what end you’re on, and he doesn’t think either of them would benefit from a meeting with the constables at the moment.

“Well, I haven’t seen her in a long time. But when I knew her, everything she did was for a reason.” Mallory sighs, and Nemesis thinks they look remarkably exhausted, and more than a little wistful.

They’ve left their entire life behind. He can relate to that. Missing the life you used to live, though,
that’s foreign to him.

“If Mr. Apollinaire wants to see me, I’m free today. He’s just lucky that I was meaning to ask him some things as it was.”

“You’re the one who’s lucky,” they counter.

He supposes there’s likely no point arguing with them. No matter who’s lucky, the end result is the same. All the money Shuai gave him, excessive as it is, goes towards a luxurious tip for the poor, poor waitress.

The walk from The Bitter End to Apollinaire’s is tense and mainly silent, with Mallory walking briskly ahead of Nemesis. He can’t help but observe them more closely than he might anyone else. Even if they weren’t an automaton, everything about them would be fascinating. The fact that they aren’t human only makes it more-so.

Nemesis, as is his habit, observes silently. Everything about them is indistinguishable from that of a human - the way they walk, the light bob of their hair, all of it is remarkably mundane. They pause to look across the street before crossing, and he sees their eye, gray and perfectly human.

The common phrase holds that a person’s soul can be discerned through their eyes. Whatever a ‘soul’ really is, anyway. He supposes the closest scientific equivalent would be the animus, but as far as he’s read that has nothing to do with eyes. He supposes, if he thinks of the soul as the metaphysical essence of someone’s humanity, it makes a little more sense. The eyes express things, that much is inarguable.

Mallory’s eye is visibly tinged with worry. As human as it gets, worry. What Apollinaire and Artair Smith have created is a far more perfect recreation than Nemesis could ever have imagined. Not a single thing about Mallory suggests anything other than total humanity.

Apollinaire is waiting by the door when they arrive, opening it far too quickly for Nemesis to imagine he wasn’t waiting outside the window, watching them arrive through the shades. He stares at Nemesis far too intensely, before stepping aside to allow him in.

“Thank you for coming, Nemesis.” His voice is tense and laced with worry. “I’m sorry I didn’t get into contact with you sooner. I heard about everything that happened, and-”

“It’s not a big deal. I’m alright, aren’t I? And it’s not your responsibility to care to begin with.” He gestures to his face, in one piece and not even remotely bleeding. “Unless you’re upset that I didn’t come to you for medical attention, in which case: don’t be jealous, I’ll get injured again, there’s enough to go around. Your office is pretty far away from the Cabinet, so it would have been inconvenient.”

“I’m not...not jealous, no.” Apollinaire’s eyebrows furrow, and the concern is mixed with what Nemesis might assume to be frustration. It’s almost as if Apollinaire had forgotten his entire personality between now and their last conversation.

“Well, good.”

Mallory frowns, visibly tensing, as though preparing to break Nemesis’s face again. “Don’t speak to him like that. I brought you here, and I’ll kick you out.”
“No, no you won’t. Sit down, Nemesis, we have a lot to talk about.” Apollinaire waves a dismissive hand towards Mallory, pulling out a chair and sitting down, visibly exhausted.

You’re the one who’s meant to be the doctor here, Nemesis thinks. And the adult, too.

He doesn’t vocalize that, though, and allows himself to be gestured towards the table, where he sits. Mallory stands awkwardly with guarded posture behind Apollinaire’s shoulder.

He looks up at them, tired but not unkind. “You can sit down, dear. Don’t just stand there and look uncomfortable.”

“I...I can’t do that,” they say awkwardly.

“Why not?” Nemesis asks. “Do you...enjoy standing there, like some sort of overgrown moth perched beneath a lamp?”

They bristle. “I’m not human.”

“Forgive me! I had forgotten that automatons are legally banned from sitting down.”

They glare at him, and he can sense that they’re about to snap. “You don’t understand, you-”

“Mallory,” Apollinaire says sharply.

Immediately, the anger fades, and they solemnly pull out a chair. “...yes, sir.”

Apollinaire’s concern seems endless. He carefully pats Mallory on the shoulder, getting no response from them whatsoever. “I’m sorry if I seemed cross.”

“You had a right to be,” they say morosely.

“But I wasn’t. It’s alright. Thank you for bringing Nemesis here.”

They can’t seem to formulate a response, instead going quiet. It’s the most automaton-like behavior he’s seen from them all day, sad and detached. Despite himself, there’s a noticeable touch of sympathy building within him.

Apollinaire turns to Nemesis. “I’m not asking out of jealousy - rather, curiosity - but who did you go to for medical attention? Based on the sketches in the newspaper they did quite an amazing job of...uh...of reconstructing the-”

“She made me not look hideous,” he says nonchalantly. “Lavinia Graves. I know for a fact you know her.”

He nods. “I know her. Um...did Aleister introduce you? Is she...is she doing alright? It’s been a long time since she’s tried to talk to me. I know she has a good reason to be distant, but…”

Mallory stands up. “I’m going to rest, if you don’t mind. It’s been a long day.”

“Oh, yes, of course not,” Apollinaire says, though he looks quietly worried as they exit the room. For a longer time than necessary, he stares at where they were, visibly troubled.

“Are they alright?” Nemesis asks finally. “They seem...er...disturbed? Do they even need to rest? Because that seems like it might have been a blatant lie. And while I’m at it, you do as well. Did something happen? And...where is that horrid creature that tried to shoot me last time I was here?”
“That’s multiple questions. I’ll answer them one at a time.” Apollinaire sighs heavily. “But first, I’ll ask you a question: would you like some tea? No, it is not poisoned. I assure you I would not attempt to poison with you. I know you are far too smart and that any potential murder attempts should be approached from a different angle entirely.”

That makes Nemesis more suspicious, if anything, but thankfully he knows Apollinaire won’t mind if he looks at his device. He does so, and immediately feels a rush of relief. It’s been so long since he’s been able to utilize the device. It feels like returning home after a long day of work.

The device finds that the doctor’s not being deceptive, so he nods, and Apollinaire stands up to put on a kettle, sighing as he does. “To begin with, Mallory left because they were respecting our privacy, I think. They’re very uneasy around others’ conversations. Of course, it’s very sad. I think they could stand to poke their nose into a touch more of my business.”

“Can’t imagine why you think that. I’d hate to have someone so zealous poking around in my business.”

Apollinaire sighs heavily. “Nemesis, do you mind if I confide in you an insecurity, for just a moment? I know that you’re just a child, and I certainly don’t expect you to behave as a therapist for me, but I—well, never mind. It’s a bad idea.”

“Nah, you can tell me, I don’t mind. You seem like the type of person to let your feelings build up out of a misplaced feeling of obligation and then explode later, and I don’t really like it when adults explode at me.”

Apollinaire nods solemnly. “...right. Do I truly seem like the sort of person to have a hidden temper?”

“No. Just real bloody sad.” Nemesis sighs. “Honest, you make me feel a little somber just for being around you. Kinda the same as Mr. Jones was sometimes. Doubt you have his mean streak, though.”

Apollinaire smiles sadly to himself. Is that nostalgia Nemesis senses, reflected in his glasses? Or is it something else entirely? “Am I really like him? I had never expected anyone to say that. We were different as night and day, me and him. He was brusque, I was gentle. At least, that’s how we seemed to be perceived. He was a far kinder person than some thought him to be. I’m sure you know that, though.”

“If anyone thought he wasn’t a kind person, they were an idiot. And I’d have some words for them, and possibly fists as well.”

“I had imagined that would be your response. You and Mallory...you’re less different than you might think, you know.” His voice grows quieter. “I feel guilty, often. A doctor cannot be expected to save every patient. And, in fact, none of them were ever my patients at all. But I can’t help but feel a little remorse for the fact that I couldn’t help Arthur, couldn’t help Lavinia...and that I can’t help Mallory, even now.”

“Can’t help them?” Nemesis frowns. “You gave them a job and a place to stay, didn’t you?”

“And yet they still seem so miserable, Nemesis. And yet they still don’t think they’re a person. What is that, if not a failure on my part to assure them otherwise? Have I not failed to help Lavinia grieve, to be there for her when her husband died, before she cut me out of her life altogether? Have I not failed to help Arthur? When he was working late every night so he wouldn’t have to think about the things he’d lived through, and when he would drunkenly cry himself to sleep when
he thought no one could hear him from the next room over, I could have, I should have done something.” Apollinaire looks miserably at the kettle as it begins to whistle. “Some sort of physician I am. I can provide medicine but I can’t help in any way that matters.”

“He spoke of you kindly, you know.”

Apollinaire looks back over his shoulder at Nemesis, expression shocked. “He spoke of me?”

“Never by name. He only ever called you ‘an old friend’ or ‘an associate of mine’ or some other thing in the same vein, but remembering it, he only ever had good things to say. He worried you would drive yourself mad, trying to fix everyone around you. Surrounded by human misery, you displayed a kindness that he said he missed.”

Nemesis remembers the wistful look his teacher had always worn when speaking about Apollinaire. He can only imagine he, himself, looks overcome with nostalgia, thinking about it.

“He...he did?” Apollinaire looks, somehow, even more surprised. “I had no idea…after we lost contact, I had assumed I was no longer on his mind. Oh, I’m a fool-”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I don’t think any of us truly understand how significant we are to people even when confronted with irrefutable evidence.”

“But Arthur must have thought I hated him when we lost contact.”

“He didn’t. I’m sure he understood.” Nemesis smiles softly. “...can I let you in on a secret? He’s disappeared on purpose, and he wants me to find him. You can come with me, when I figure out where it is he’s hiding.”

“Ah...he did?” Apollinaire frowns. “That sounds...incredibly unlike him.”

“He said he had no choice in the matter. Something about an old acquaintance.”

Apollinaire’s frown deepens. “One of us Correspondents, if I had to guess. Khalida, maybe? Khalida is never good news.”

“Khalida…?”

“Khalida Alhazred.”

Nemesis frowns. The name sounds familiar, but he can’t quite place it.

Apollinaire looks patiently at him, and then it dawns on him, and he shakes his head. “No. No. That can’t be - not the editor of the Electric Sun ?”

“The very same. Surely you knew it was associated with the Correspondents, right? I can’t imagine you wouldn’t have.”

“No, it’s not that. I was aware. I just…” He sighs. Apollinaire looks anxiously at him. Nemesis supposes that, if Apollinaire has confided his feelings in him, he might as well be honest. “...my friend, Percy. The, er...the reporter who was with me last time, he...er’‘never good news’ isn’t precisely how he’d describe her.”

The thought occurs to Nemesis that perhaps Percy hasn’t been completely upfront with him. He hadn’t used his device to check for any insincerity when they had discussed Khalida Alhazred. After all, he’s quite used to Percy’s unnerving brand of complete truthfulness by this point. Has he
become complacent?

The idea that he might have been fooled is enough to make his breath catch in his throat. Abruptly, he’s seized by fear, all-encompassing. It feels nauseating, crushing, as though he’s so deep underwater there’s no hope of him ever being saved.

“Nemesis-” Apollinaire says, scared, but his voice sounds distant and distorted. The waters are loud and tempestuous, and there’s no light shining through them. Nothing left to do but drown.

“Nemesis!” he hears him again, but he can’t respond. The pressure is building. He can’t breathe. A hand rests on his shoulder, so familiar. It’s been so long since anyone has touched him like that. How long has it been, since he vanished? It isn’t as if he’s been counting the days. It doesn’t matter how many days it’s been. They’ve melted into one soul-crushing mass, and Nemesis is drowning beneath it.

He sighs heavily. “It’s fine. It’s fine, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“That’s a lie and you know it, Nemesis.” Apollinaire doesn’t remove the hand from his shoulder.

“I don’t lie,” he insists.

“But you just did. I saw you. I know what a fine person looks like, and it’s not you, not right now. You can’t just insist you’re alright when everyone around you can tell the immense amount of stress you’re under. It’s okay to be overwhelmed sometimes. I think some people need to hear that.”

He straightens, making his posture as stiff and uninviting as possible. “I’m not one of them, though. Because first off: no, it’s not okay, not when my work is life and death and not when my own life is the first one on the line. If my friend is fucking with me, that’s not…”

“I said nothing about your friend. I don’t think he means anything bad, honestly. He seemed an earnest person to me.”

“To me, too,” Nemesis agrees, teeth gritted. “You just can’t ever bloody know who is and isn’t thirsting for your blood, can you? There’s no way to ever know just who it is that’s going to turn you in and smirk at your terrified face, is there? There’s always someone insincere about, and it only takes one mistake to-”

“Nemesis.” His voice is soft, calm, as he tries to nudge Nemesis’s head towards him, make him look him in the eyes. Old and tired, hidden behind the thick lenses of his spectacles, but kind, so genuinely kind that they can’t be genuine. Seeping with good intentions. No one ever has good intentions. Not even someone as wholly good-natured as Aharon Apollinaire. The tiny rational part of him remaining thinks that if this truly is a lie, it’s an unreasonably long con. The rest of him tells that part to be quiet.

Nemesis shakes his head, pushes him away. Apollinaire doesn’t give. His hand curls around Nemesis’s wrist.

There’s a spike of panic. The sound of gloved hand against flesh rings out through the room. Apollinaire’s head twists to the side, abrupt as a gunshot. Nemesis feels tears welling up.

Not again, he thinks, not again, he’d told himself never again. He’d told himself it had been the last time. He’d been lying then, too.
Filthy. Nothing filthier than a lie, except perhaps the person beneath the enigma, screaming desperately for air. There’s a part of him, always has been, fighting for revenge against the good person he’s trying to become. Here, in Aharon Apollinaire’s kitchen, that part of him has won.

“It’s okay,” Apollinaire says again. There’s a pink mark on his face, angry and horrible. His glasses have been sent to the floor, where they lie, cracks spiderwebbing through the left lens. “You’re under so much stress, Nemesis. You’re just like him, just like he always was. I won’t let you follow that same path. No matter how much either of us admire him - and I assure you I admire him beyond words. He was my best friend, and I let him slip away, and I refuse to ever give up on you.”

Nemesis can’t help himself. He bursts into tears, and he doesn’t just think of the man he’s hurt, or the horrible, horrible person he can’t help but become, over and over again. With each thought there’s a stab of pain, each greater than the last - with each thought of Callie, of Elias, of Mr. Jones. Of people he hasn’t seen for far longer. Of people he never wants to see again.

At the center of it all, Luke remains, ever-burning with rage. He doesn’t truly think he’ll ever be rid of him. He’s a stubborn bastard. That’s the thing that makes him feel the most powerless, in the end - that no matter what he does, Luke remains. Luke always remains.

Apollinaire doesn’t waste any time looking alarmed. He pulls Nemesis into a tight hug, and Nemesis doesn’t bother to resist, to tell him that his effort is doomed because, beneath the veneer, there’s nobody left to get through to. Instead, he hugs him back, buries his face in that infuriatingly soft blond hair.

“I’m sorry!” he sobs.

“I’m not interested in apologies,” is the measured reply. “I don’t care about who does and doesn’t punch me. I care about you being okay. You’re just a child, Nemesis. You deserve to rest.”

Nemesis doesn’t know how long he spends in Aharon Apollinaire’s arms, sobbing. Far too long. Far too indulgent of his own misery, time spent wallowing which could have gotten him closer to the answers he seeks. Something bigger than himself, something he can seek without feeling guilty.

Arthur Jones wasn’t an affectionate person. Certainly, he wasn’t the sort of person one could expect a hug from. He wasn’t especially the sort of person who was good to cry in front of, either, though Luke had done it on many an occasion. Either he’d gotten into a fight, or the orphanage director had raised her hand at him again, and he’d had to flee, terrified and sobbing, back to the streets he’d sworn never to return to. He had dragged himself back to the office, every time, sure he wouldn’t be let in. Every time, he was.

Arthur Jones never would have hugged him. Sometimes, he would be in a bad way himself, stumbling disoriented to the door, cursing his damnable habits. Sometimes he would play the violin. Always, he’d make him a cup of tea, and he wouldn’t let him anywhere near the liquor cabinet. He’d let him stay the night. Sometimes, he would place an extra blanket over the couch where he slept. He probably thought he wouldn’t notice.

Nemesis could stay in that dream forever. But finally, the tears dry, and the two stand in silence in the center of the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“We all have our days,” Apollinaire counters. “Let me finally pour you some tea, and let me tell
you about Khalida Alhazred and the fall of the Correspondents. It’s quite a long story. Quite sad, too. It involves a lot of people who, despite my best efforts, I could do nothing to save.”

Nemesis nods.

Apollinaire releases him. Against his better judgement, Nemesis finds himself wishing he hadn’t. It feels so cold now. It always does, when he allows himself to think about it. The dreaded, insurmountable cold is never fully gone.

Apollinaire pours two cups of tea, handing one to Nemesis. The way he stares sympathetically at him makes Nemesis want to cry again. It’s all he’s ever wanted, isn’t it? To be looked at as a person. When did it become something so condescending in his eyes?

He accepts the tea, taking a frantic sip of it. Warmth washes over him - a temporary and welcome respite. “Thanks,” he mutters.

“Of course.” Apollinaire takes a sip of his own tea, and Nemesis can see his hands shaking. He picks up his glasses from the floor, frowning as he looks over them.

“I’ll pay to replace them,” Nemesis offers immediately.

“No need.” Apollinaire pulls a cloth from his pocket and polishes it, and for a moment the soft light around him seems softer and brighter. When he pulls the cloth away, the lenses are good as new, no cracks or even scratches visible, the surface of the lens reflecting Nemesis’s face back at him.

He looks awful. There are tear streaks still visible down his face. His eyes look red and irritated. His hair is disheveled, but not in the intentional, charming way he likes it to be.

“I keep forgetting you can just... do that,” he says hollowly.

“I suppose it must be easy to forget. This might sound awful to you, but I often put effort into solving a problem, only to realize afterwards that I could easily have bypassed it entirely with some simple artifice.” He puts his glasses on, adjusting them carefully.

“That sounds like a lovely realization to be able to have,” Nemesis mutters, no lack of bitterness in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” Apollinaire says dejectedly. Surely, he can’t think of anything else to say to comfort Nemesis. Better that, at least, than insisting that Nemesis somehow isn’t worse off for being unable to do the things other people take for granted. Of all the possible responses, that one is perhaps the most grating.

“Not your fault I was born lacking,” Nemesis insists. “Go on, then. The fall of the Correspondents, and all that dramatic stuff you were on about.”

“Not lacking, just-yes, yes. Of course.” Apollinaire’s expression returns to a solemn point, and he begins to speak with slow, deliberate tone. “There were thirteen of us founders. Artair...Artair Smith, he was a weird guy, but he was the one who brought all of us together. He was somewhat of a firebrand. Despised the monarchy, despised the power struggles happening amongst the common people. He had a fascination with the things beyond simple explanation - the aether and the strange happenings at Catacumba. And he didn’t trust the Acolytes.”

Nemesis nods, and Apollinaire continues: “Dr. Burke was recruited through his studies. In terms of Institute-connected professors, he was about the only one Artair thought trustworthy, and through
him he met three of his students: the doctor Lavinia Graves and the biomechanic Viktor Graves, now married, as well as one I think you’re aware of.”

“Arthur Jones,” Nemesis says.

“Yes. He had somewhat recently had a bad run-in with a member of the Eyes, and was still recovering from it. He harbored a hatred and distrust for the societies which I think Artair saw as potentially very useful. I was recruited through him as well. You see, I’d been providing him medication for some time, and one day Artair accompanied him to one of his appointments, and he immediately recognized me as an Apollinaire and wanted me on his side. Impoverished as I was, it was an offer too good to refuse, though I never wanted any involvement in the espionage itself and told him as such.”

“Wait a moment, wait a moment,” Nemesis cuts in. “Medication? He never told me he was ill -”

“He...was, sometimes. Often, he came in injured, requiring painkillers...if they were used for the intended purpose or not was beyond me, but I would assume...” Apollinaire doesn’t meet Nemesis’s eyes. “…well, I feel rather guilty about it now. At the time, I didn’t…the significance of his condition didn’t precisely occur to me. It wasn’t until years later that I realized I’d been enabling his slow self-destruction.”

“I see,” Nemesis says. “And you being an Apollinaire is significant?”

“Oh, yes. My parents are Acolytes, you see,” he says ruefully. “Powerful ones, and when I refused to participate in their activities I was disowned. And thus, overnight, I went from a wealthy heir to just another poor man struggling to make ends meet...such is life, I suppose. It was difficult to get back on my feet, but I wouldn’t give the life I have now up for anything. A small apothecary and the ability to do good is worth more than any amount of money could be.”

“How...admirable of you,” Nemesis says through gritted teeth.

“Not especially. I did nothing admirable. I only refused to do less-than-admirable things. Regardless, there were seven more of us. Ephemera Sutcliffe, for one - you may know her as the author of the Dick Remmington books.”

Nemesis’s eyes widen. “She was-”

“I know. She doesn’t seem the type, does she? But she actually caught on to our informal organizing and requested to join in. Dick Remmington was partially based on Arthur, you know.”

Nemesis frowns. “He hated those books.”

“Indeed he did.” Apollinaire continues. “Sophronia Ripley, shocking as it may seem, was one of our original members. She was recruited by Smith mostly to help with his experiments, but she was as devoted to our goal as any. She believed the Acolytes were a genuine evil which needed to be exorcised. Desdemona Summers, a magazine columnist, was recruited for her knowledge of the social goings-on in the city. A pair of well-off researchers, Cornelius and Esther Hargrave, were recruited into the effort, and Ivan Riddle was a professor of history at the Institute, recruited for insider knowledge.”

“That didn’t go well, I assume,” Nemesis says, holding himself back from showing any sign of feeling in regards to Apollinaire’s words. The presence of Ripley is surprising, the name Riddle unmistakeable, and the Hargraves...

“You’ll see,” Apollinaire says tensely. “Regardless, that leaves us with one final member: Khalida
Alhazred.”

“The reason we’re talking about this to begin with,” Nemesis agrees.

“Khalida was younger than most of us - around your age, I should think. Perhaps a little older. She was still a university student, around a year out from graduation, but she was valuable because she was an insight into the Acolytes’ workings. A more reliable one than me, anyhow. She had actually grown up a member before fleeing, and thus she knew as much about their rituals, their goals, as anyone else with their tattoos.”

“She left them? And she didn’t get killed?”

“No, because she had our protection. She was a sharp mind, and she managed to almost single-handedly dismantle the Acolytes’ attempts at gaining power, keeping the Eyes handily at bay at the same time. But with power, she changed. She began to push for the Correspondents taking a position of increased prominence, as the Eyes and the Acolytes had both been trying to do. In short, she made us a proper secret society.”

“Is that when the tattoos became a factor?”

“Yes. She recruited more people, going behind Artair’s back to do so. He was already a paranoid person, so he couldn’t abide that. There were already other people, myself included, wary of Khalida’s methods.”

He sighs, running a tense hand through his hair. “Of course, none of us were upfront about it. Nothing like a secret society to teach people how to never directly confront their peers. But then things started going terribly wrong. Riddle went on an expedition to the Border Wilds, never to return. And Viktor…”

He trails off, taking a deep breath. Clearly, the subject is difficult for him to recall. “Viktor was killed after Khalida had told him to go after a member of the Acolytes who, honestly, we probably didn’t need to go after. Lavinia, in her grief, swore never to involve herself with ‘our kind’ again, and cut the rest of us out of her life. Arthur left as well, insisting that his initial distrust of the concept of secret societies was correct - at which point I was inclined to agree with him. The rest of us went our separate ways, one by one, until only Khalida was left, running the shell of the Correspondents. These days, they’re just as despicable as any of the other societies, no matter how nobly they might have started.”

“That’s rough,” Nemesis says, unsure of what else he possibly could say. “And then Mr. Jones and Dr. Burke both went back to Llygredyg, at least for the time?”

“Yes. And Ephemera made a career off of her writing. Desdemona settled down and was married to some accountant or other. The Hargraves died in a zeppelin crash, some twenty years back by now. I took Mallory and redoubled my efforts towards my practice. Artair vanished into thin air, and apparently he’s got a sister now who he never mentioned before - not that he was ever the sort to talk about his home life.”

Nemesis nods, suppressing all the reactions he might have had. “I see. That’s all very...tragic. Er. I mean, that is to say, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s quite alright. I wish I could have done more to help my former associates, but I’m not precisely miserable. At least I can do right by Mallory and Stabby now.”

“Oh, er, speaking of Stabby - what are they and where did you get them?”
Apollinaire frowns tensely. “Don’t speak about them as though they’re a rogue gargoyle. They’re an actual human being, you know.”

“You made the gargoyle comparison, not me.”

“Nemesis,” he snaps, and Nemesis flinches, at attention and with a visceral, electric terror running him through.

“Yessir-”

A gentle hand brushes his shoulder. “Shh, it’s fine. I’m not angry, just disappointed.”

“As if that’s all that much better-”

“I am only mildly disappointed. You can redeem yourself, right now, if you let me speak.”

Nemesis clams up, and Apollinaire continues. “I found Stabby a short while ago, comparatively. It’s only been something like two years by now. An acquaintance of mine, not a friendly one - well, friendly to my family, you could say, um - he stopped by my clinic one day, as he does on occasion.”

“Wait a moment,” Nemesis asks, “you let him just stop by even though you aren’t friendly?”

“If a person needs medicine, their relationship to me is of no concern,” he says sternly. “As I was saying...my acquaintance came to my office, but this time he was holding a child in his arms. I’m surprised the police didn’t detain him, all things considered, but he shoved them at me and begged me to take them in. He said they were an urchin with peculiar manifestations, taken off the streets by the Acolytes when they realized it. The Acolytes are very interested in manifestations, for whatever reason. I agreed to take them in. The acquaintance in question was found dead less than a week later, so I prepared to fight off whoever came for me, but no one ever did. I suppose I’m grateful. I dislike the idea of killing.”

There’s a lot of what he said that necessitates comment. “To begin with, the Acolytes grab kids off the street just because they have strange manifestations?”

“Not usually, but it doesn’t sound out of their purview. Anyway, Stabby’s somewhat of an alarming person, I’ll admit, because they’ve legitimately amassed a following of urchins.”

“So they’re, what? A four-foot-eight gang leader?”

Apollinaire chuckles half-heartedly. “Something to the effect, yes. The children seem to naturally follow the no-nonsense individual with a...striking appearance, I think. I do worry about Stabby, but as long as they’re home every night, we’ve struck up a tense agreement.”

“That sounds like a lot to deal with,” Nemesis says. He thinks, briefly, that this must be how Mr. Jones had felt, but worse.

“I’m more than happy to do it. I suppose...this way, it means I have a direct line to the urchins. I’ve been providing them medicine for some time, as far as they trust me to do so. Some of them are quite militant. Most are just cold and scared.”

Nemesis pauses. When he speaks, his voice is quiet and unsure. “You might think the thing I’m about to suggest is the height of lunacy, but...I think you’d be the right sort of person to start an orphanage.”
“If only I had the money,” Apollinaire says with a forlorn smile.

“Well,” Nemesis says, looking at his hands, when the telephone rings.

For whatever reason, Apollinaire’s telephone has the most unreasonably loud ring-tone Nemesis has ever heard. He jumps, looking frantically around the room in alarm, hand reaching for his gun. Apollinaire sighs - clearly used to this - and picks up the receiver.

“Yes, it’s him. Yes? She’s what? Okay. I’ll be there as fast as I can, hold on.”

When the receiver is put back down, Apollinaire is pale with horror.

“Geoffrey Calloway,” he says simply. “His wife. Um - MALLORY-”

Mallory nearly immediately throws the door open. Nemesis can’t imagine they weren’t listening in, considering their inhuman speed. They’ve thrown a white coat on over their clothing, and they have a bag of what Nemesis assumes are medical supplies thrown over their shoulder. That’s right - Apollinaire had mentioned them helping him with his work.

Apollinaire jumps to his own feet. “I’m sorry, Nemesis. Were it up to me, I would never cut our meeting this short, especially not after having called you over here, but something has come up.”

“Ophelia Calloway?” Nemesis asks. “I can help, Mr. Jones taught me first aid.”

“Arthur,” Apollinaire says, a hint of amusement visible amidst his terror, “dropped out of medical school. But I think I could use all the help I can get.”

Nemesis stands. “I’ll do my best. After everything that’s happened, the last thing I want is for-”

“Right,” Apollinaire tensely agrees, “me neither.” The fear on his face is tangible. It must be bad, then, Nemesis thinks, with a horrible feeling of dread beginning to clutch at him.

It’s so dark one can barely tell shoe from cobblestone by the time they arrive at Calloway’s. The darkness isn’t aided by the fact that the nearest streetlamp has flickered and died out, casting the street into far darker shadow than normal.

Apollinaire knocks on the heavy wood door, a sharp and clear noise ringing out. For a moment Nemesis wonders how his hands possibly could have gotten so pale as to be white, before realizing that Apollinaire has, at some point, donned white gloves.

Mallory stands behind Nemesis, and he can feel the apprehension radiating off of them, staining the air and mingling with the breeze. There’s something so smothering about apprehension.


The three are ushered in, in varying states of hushed and barely-repressed panic. Inside, Calloway’s is a horror, papers and silverware and all manner of other things tossed about as though a whirlwind had swept through, leaving nothing untouched. The path to the bedroom is cleared, and it’s along that path which Calloway frantically directs them, continuing in his muttered “hurry, hurry, hurry-”

And inside that room, the disarray mostly seems to end, aside from the bottle of laudanum knocked
off the bedside table and spilling across the floor, forming a dark and imposing stain. Nemesis might have mistaken it for dried blood if not for the smell, unmistakable and inescapable.

The room seems a fair bit more expensive than the rest of the place, with navy blue carpeting and paneled oak walls. The only furniture are an oak bedside table, well-made but plain, and the bed in the center of the room, a four-poster with navy blue curtains and bed-sheets to match the floor.

In it, Ophelia Calloway looks as though she might as well be already dead. Sheet-pale and stick-thin, weakly reaching for Geoffrey. He takes her hand in both of his, and Nemesis sees silent tears building in his eyes as he stares desperately at her.

She’s dying. That much is clear.

“The other doctor said it was hopeless,” Geoffrey says, tears flowing openly, “but I can’t accept that. I can’t - there must be something you can do, to at least make it easier.”

“I can try,” Apollinaire says solemnly, gesturing for Mallory to hand him their bag. “I can’t promise anything, but I can try. Does she still feel pain?”

“She refused to have it turned off last time. She said it sounded too final, and she wasn’t going to die yet, but-”

Ophelia begins to say something, but she’s cut off by a violent spasm, throwing her neck back with such force Nemesis worries it might have snapped. A fit of coughs overtakes her, and she puts a hand to her face. When she pulls it away, it’s covered with alarming amounts of bright red blood.

Apollinaire kneels by her side, several curiously-designed implements placed on the table and a stethoscope looped around his neck. He speaks calmly and evenly. “Ophelia, do you want me to stop the pain?”

She shakes her head frantically.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she croaks, and even speaking clearly hurts her. Nemesis feels a stab of pain in his own throat. He has to look away.

“Jones,” Mallory says sharply. “Get her some water. A glass, and then wet a towel as well, too. Hurry.”

Are they noticing his discomfort and allowing him an opportunity to escape, or is it a simple request? A glance at them tells him nothing - they’re stony as ever. He chooses to take the opportunity regardless, dashing to the kitchen.

Murder is one thing. It’s almost easier to deal with murder. Murder is deliberately done, and generally the victim is already dead when the investigators arrive on the scene. It’s quick and it’s relatively painless, except for in those exceptionally twisted circumstances that end up inspiring a new surge of derivative penny dreadfuls.

Illness is the consolidation of all human misery into something inevitable and miserable and drawn-out. It’s a graceless end, mired in filth and hopelessness, with nothing much to be done. No matter how he tries, he can’t rid his mind of the images of orphans dying in agony all around him, nothing to comfort them, quarantined and crying, day in and day out.

Things are different in Omen. That’s what he’s always heard, that things are different. The rich and
powerful in Citrea Viridia would be able to afford an artificer for a physician, who could do wonderful things with their abilities, from curing things normally incurable to entirely shutting off a patient’s ability to feel pain. It all sounds so wonderful, and in Omen, he had learned, it was the more standard process.

And yet the misery remains. There’s a limit to what even artifice can do, though Nemesis isn’t fully aware of what that limit is. He supposes it probably varies from artificer to artificer - but Apollinaire is powerful. This is the better life that everyone around him had talked about in hushed breath.

No matter who you are, no matter what you have, death is miserable. Nemesis thinks he would far rather be murdered or killed in a fight than die of illness.

But he’s here for a reason. He turns the brass knob by the faucet with a shaking hand, filling a cup hastily snatched from one of the Calloways’ tall, dusty cabinets. They’re antique, made of a beautiful glass which reflects what little light illuminates the room. The sort of thing they would have come upon in their line of work but found too beautiful to sell, probably. The towel, on the other hand, is just a towel, plain white.

He pours himself a cup of water, too, gulping it frantically down. His head spins, but the cold helps to steady it.

When he returns, Apollinaire is attempting to administer a spoonful of some herbal medicine or another to her, and she’s resisting tooth and nail, spilling a horrible purple-tinged liquid over the already-stained blankets. Mallory is hovering over his shoulder, attempting to calm her into some semblance of stillness. They, too, are failing.

He hands the towel off to Mallory, and they press it to her forehead. “She has a fever,” they tell him, as though this explains anything.

“Er-yes,” he responds, uneasy. None of the basic first aid he’d been taught came close to preparing him for this. He’s out of his depth, watching two professionals attempt to save a person who even he can tell is beyond it. Why Calloway chose tonight of all nights to call them is beyond him. He supposes her condition must have worsened abruptly. Certainly, she’s deteriorated since he last saw her. He can’t imagine the woman he sees in front of him so much as standing.

She turns to Geoffrey, yanking him closer to her. Though both of her hands are clutching his one, she can’t generate enough force to pull him closer. Mallory has to hold her back to keep her from launching herself in his direction with what little strength she can muster, but he leans in towards her, understanding her request.

“She has a fever, Geoff. Don’t worry about me. And get this water away from my face.”
“Ophelia, I-”

She smiles at him, despite the misery etched on her face. It’s haunting, surrounded by the stained blankets, and it fades after a moment. “You’re overthinking. Let me go, Geoff.”

He doesn’t understand, Nemesis can see that clear as day on his face.

He lets her go, and her hand falls to the bed. She looks at him evenly, then closes her eyes.

Society - particularly writers, of any breed - has a peculiar fascination with a person’s last words. Of course, the vast majority of people don’t say anything particularly interesting in the moments before their death. Nemesis has seen precious few people die in front of him, but he might imagine the vast majority of people’s last words to be something like ‘ow’, or ‘ah’. Few get to say anything at all, and even fewer get to say the sort of meaningful, revelatory statement which the novelists associate with ‘last words’.

As far as last words go - and Nemesis knows, in his heart, that they are last words, because once someone’s fully given up on fighting through something there’s no way to stop them dying - ‘You’re overthinking. Let me go, Geoff’ are pretty underwhelming. It means nothing, of course. Even the most poetic of final utterings mean nothing in the face of death.

He wonders what Elizabeth Calloway’s last words were. He knows it doesn’t matter. He wonders what his own last words will be. Will they be screamed defiantly at an enemy he can never hope to overcome, or will they be whimpered in the face of a universe which doesn’t so much as know his name?

He knows it doesn’t matter.

Ophelia Calloway closes her eyes. Apollinaire and Mallory are rushing about, doing medical things Nemesis doesn’t understand. His focus can’t stay on any one thing, and the surroundings begin to swirl, unfocused and blurry. He feels faint, as though he’s the one whose light is fading.

At some point, Ophelia Calloway dies. He doesn’t know precisely when it is, but it becomes apparent to him. The other three stare at her corpse in shocked silence. She doesn’t look dead, Nemesis thinks. She looks asleep, as if she could wake up at any moment, but she never will. If he touched her face, it would probably still be warm.

Mallory’s steely countenance has fallen, replaced with an incredibly human look of abject misery. Their hands shake. An automaton shouldn’t be able to have tremors, but here they are. Apollinaire has a hand firmly on their shoulder. Is he trying to comfort them or steady himself?

Calloway is holding his wife’s hand in both of his, head leaned over onto the bed behind her. Whatever medicine is staining the bed has rubbed off onto his hair, discoloring it a horrible bruised purple hue. He isn’t crying, not yet. He will later, Nemesis is sure. His glasses have fallen to the floor, forgotten.

Apollinaire places his other hand on Nemesis’s shoulder, guiding him out of the room. Calloway is left alone, sobbing now, inconsolable. Nemesis looks back at him, wishing he could stop and help him somehow, but Apollinaire pulls him away.

“I’m sorry,” Mallory says, the moment they’re out of his earshot. “I’m so sorry. I should have done more. When I was mixing the tonic, I should have-”

“Shh,” Apollinaire says heavily. Nemesis can tell that he’s in no place to be offering any sort of comfort. He himself looks so spectacularly tired and ragged that it’s a wonder he’s still on his feet.
“I’m sorry, sir,” they continue, miserable. “I’m-”

“No.” He pats them on the head, hugging them with one arm. They don’t resist - they seem grateful, if anything, though their mood doesn’t seem visibly improved. It would take a lot to improve someone’s mood, Nemesis thinks, after that.

“I’m sorry,” he says himself, blurring it out on pure impulse. He doesn’t actually think it’s a good idea to speak, but the shame weighs heavy on him. “I shouldn’t have come here. I was distracting you. I didn’t know what to do and I-”

“It’s alright.” Apollinaire smiles weakly at him. “You wanted to help. I hadn’t expected you to be able to do anything. You aren’t a doctor.”

“So why didn’t you just tell me to fuck off?” He speaks a little more intensely than he perhaps meant to. Immediately, he feels ashamed, guilt mixing with frustration into a cocktail of self-loathing about to fix over. There are tears pushing against his eyes, pressure building.

He has to restrain himself. This isn’t the place. He isn’t the one who has a reason to be upset, here. He can’t make it about himself. It isn’t anyone else’s fault that he’s useless, after all.

“You wanted to help. You weren’t harming anyone.” Apollinaire sighs. “It was inevitable that she was going to die. She didn’t even... want to live anymore. No matter what you did, I don’t think it would have saved her.”

“It had a better chance of saving her than-” he cuts himself off, seeing the looks on Apollinaire and Mallory’s faces - miserable and tired. Perhaps this isn’t the time to argue. He can feel bad later, by himself, where no one is bothered by it. “-sorry. Sorry.”

“You have no reason to be sorry to me,” Apollinaire insists. “I’m not, admittedly, in a place to assure you of that far more, but I want you to know that I’ve no reason not to be upfront with you. I-I’ll be seeing you, Nemesis, and please do call me, because I’ll worry if you don’t.”

“I will do,” Nemesis agrees, defeated. “Are you going to leave now?”

“We are. I don’t think Geoffrey would appreciate seeing the person who just failed to save his wife about. I’ll call him tomorrow, give my condolences properly and ask what I can do for him going forward, but right now he needs to grieve. People need to grieve.”

“I... goodnight, then,” Nemesis replies weakly.

Apollinaire turns to look at him seriously. The faint light of the kitchen glints off of his glasses. He looks unspeakably worn. “I care about you, Nemesis. I would never blame you for anything, so please take care.”

“I know,” Nemesis agrees, though he still doesn’t believe Apollinaire even remotely. Now isn’t the time to argue over things like that. “Goodnight,” he repeats.

Apollinaire and Mallory leave. As they do, Nemesis notices Mallory’s hand on Apollinaire’s arm, as though they’re the one comforting him - not the one who’s just come out of a fit of guilty apologies. That Apollinaire isn’t as functional as he pretends to be is a given, but that Mallory knows it somehow comes as a shock. With the amount they look up to him, Nemesis had expected them to think he’s flawless.

Perhaps there’s something in knowing your savior’s flaws which only gives you more respect for them.
Nemesis waits for a moment, so that he doesn’t awkwardly re-encounter Apollinaire on the street, then makes his way to the door, careful not to make too loud of a sound, hindered by Calloway’s mildly creaky floorboards. Just as his hand is about to settle on the doorknob, he hears a voice.

“Wait,” Calloway says hoarsely, voice rendered nearly inaudible from crying. “You don’t have to leave, Jones. Stay here. I’ll make you some tea, if you want.”

Nemesis doesn’t look back at him. He’s not sure he can handle seeing his face right now. “Are you sure? Wouldn’t you prefer to be alone right now, sir?”

“I don’t want to be alone,” is the mumbled reply.

Nemesis hears footsteps, and the sound of the stove being turned on. Water splashes against the walls of a kettle. So he’s serious, then.

Nemesis turns around.

Calloway stands hunched over, unsteady and exhausted. His hands grip the white-painted counter, nails carving furrows in the wood. His hair is stained, matted to his face, and his glasses are bent along the shape of his nose, where he’d been lying on them. His clothing is similarly disheveled and stained. Nemesis can’t get a clear view of his face from where he’s standing, but he can just about look past the tear-streaked cheeks and glimpse his hollow-eyed stare.

At least he hasn’t gone mad with grief entirely. That’s good, Nemesis thinks, if anything in this situation can be called good in even the relative sense.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out. In his experience, it’s the last thing people want to hear immediately after the death of a loved one, but he feels the pressing urge to say something, anything.

Calloway sighs heavily. He’s cut off by a sharp intake of breath. At some point, his necktie has tightened, and is now cutting into the skin of his throat. He tears it off with one hand, letting it fall to the floor.

“Thank you. Thank you for caring enough to try,” he says at last, and Nemesis can see him wincing in pain. His anguished sobs have razed his throat. “I should have seen this coming. She didn’t have long left, that was always apparent. I just didn’t realize…”

“You didn’t realize it was possible for it to actually happen, right?”

Calloway nods. “Even after losing Lizzie...it didn’t feel real. It doesn’t feel real, that someone could be here one moment and gone the next...it feels like I’m trapped in a nightmare. It doesn’t feel like it could possibly be real. I don’t feel like I’m alive. I’m experiencing things through a veil. It’s like watching a film, impersonal, dreamlike, but it’s real, all of it. I have no choice, as long as I live, to continue to experience everything that happens around me.”

It’s strange, hearing it put into words. Here one moment, gone the next. Just like Mr. Jones. He isn’t dead, sure, but his absence has left a hole in Nemesis’s heart, and the waters around it have formed a whirlpool as they rush in to fill the void. Nemesis swears sometimes he can still feel his hand on his shoulder, but he’s gone, isn’t he? Part of living in the moment is acknowledging that.

Nemesis feels ill.

“You’re going to keep living, right?” Nemesis hopes the fear in his voice isn’t as apparent as he’s scared it is. “Even if it’s miserable, you’re going to-”
“I have no choice. What else is there? To let experience cease entirely? I can’t abide that.”

The kettle begins to whistle. Calloway sighs and takes it off the stove, pulling cups from the cabinet with slow movements, like a mechanism in desperate need of oiling. He pours them each a cup, sitting down heavily at the table.

“I’m sorry for occupying your time,” he says. “I wish it didn’t have to be like this. My life was so normal, until this began to happen.”

“It’s not your fault your wife and daughter are dead. Don’t beat yourself up over it. I’m happy to help. Wouldn’t be in this line of work otherwise.” Nemesis sits down, staring deliberately at his hands.

Gingerly, he pulls off his gloves. The patchwork of scars and burns underneath, gruesome and grotesque and so familiar, stretches from his misshapen and warped knuckles to past his wrists. The hideous sight feels like a shock to his system. He gasps, picking up his teacup with both hands. His hands burn. He doesn’t mind.

Calloway stares at Nemesis’s hands. “So that’s what you’re hiding. Is there a reason you’re showing me this now?”

“Not really,” Nemesis says, taking a sip of the tea. It’s burning hot. His mouth probably won’t return to normal for days. “I just reckon you’re at a low enough point that it’s pointless to hide from you. Not like you’re about to call me ugly.”

“Not ugly, no. I’m simply...imagining what could have possibly happened to you. You’re still young, and yet you’ve suffered so much...the world is a terrible and cruel place, isn’t it?”

Nemesis nods. “Forget me. I’m fine. Your family is dead. At least the person I lost...I’m pretty sure he’ll be back someday. You don’t get to know that. Your life as you knew it is over.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice,” Calloway agrees.

“I’m sorry. I realize speaking that frankly about it could be rude, and hurt you more.” Nemesis takes another sip of the boiling tea, and he feels the skin on the inside of his mouth begin to flake. “We can talk about something else. Would it make you feel better to hear how I got these scars? None of the stories are very exciting.”

“I don’t think I should know that. It’s something very personal to you, after all. Information like that should be kept close, and only given away to the most trusted of confidants.”

“That much, we agree on.”

The two sit in silence. The tea burns Nemesis’s mouth and throat. The pain is a reminder that he’s alive, that he’s still here, that he’s not quite gone yet. Calloway isn’t drinking. He’s not even looking at his cup, or at Nemesis. Instead, his gaze is locked on the floor.

“I think the name Elizabeth might be cursed,” Nemesis says at last.

“Hmm?” Calloway replies. “What makes you say that?”

“My sister was named Elizabeth too.” It’s the first time in years that he’s acknowledged that he had a sister, never mind said her name. Something about the circumstances has melted away all of Nemesis’s carefully-built defenses. There’s something pushing at him: he needs to speak about himself, before there’s nothing left of him to speak about.
“Oh,” Calloway says, eyes widening in surprise. “Forgive me, I had-I had never considered that you might have a family. You somehow didn’t seem the type - sorry, sorry, that’s a cruel thing to say.”

Nemesis chuckles quietly. “It’s true, though. I don’t have a family. You’re welcome to say it. I just think it’s funny, how your daughter and my sister had the same name, and how they’re both gone now.”

“My condolences,” Calloway says carefully.

“No need. I don’t even remember her. She’s been dead since I was an infant. I don’t know what she looked like, or what her personality was, or the things she liked, or if she would even have loved me. All I know is she went down in flames.”

“My condolences regardless. As someone now rendered family-less, I can’t imagine growing up that way. For a child to experience that...it’s far too harsh.” Calloway leans heavily on his hand, sighing. “Oh, Nemesis. This world is such a horrible place. I should hate to continue living in it.”

Nemesis feels a rush of alarm shoot through him, setting his hair on end. “No!” he shouts. “You can’t die! You can’t!”

“Why not?” Calloway asks. His voice is hollow. “It’ll happen anyway, won’t it? And once I’m dead, it won’t matter.”

Nemesis feels himself panic. It’s difficult to breathe. The room feels suffocating. He wishes he could run. He can’t.

“You just can’t,” he says. “I understand. Because I feel the same way. But you can’t just end it there. If it’s the same in the end, why not live?”

It feels so futile, going through the motions when he doesn’t believe his words himself. The shrieking wind feels heavy in his ears. It’s like he’s back there, staring down into the precipice. Why did he walk away? Why is he still here? What is ‘he’?

Calloway takes a deep breath. “You’re right. It’s all the same in the end. All of us to the same lonely grave. I may as well live to see my daughter’s killer brought to justice. You can do that for me, right, Jones?”

He feels pressure building in his chest. His heart beats rapidly, like a horse in full gallop. He thinks one of these days it just might explode, and solve all of his existential crises for him. But that’s not happening right now. Right now, he - Nemesis Jones, because that’s who he is - nods, nervously breathing in. “I promise.”

He can’t promise anything, and he knows it. For a moment, he questions why this sort of responsibility should fall on him. He’s just a teenager, after all. He never even formally finished his apprenticeship. Why should he be forced to bear the burden of others’ misery?

How can he even think that?, his mind responds. Why is he doing this in the first place, if he doesn’t want to be a good person? What progress has he truly made, if he’s still being this selfish? This man’s wife and daughter died, for the stars’ sakes!

His mind throbs with the start of a building headache. Outside, he can hear rain falling.
He doesn’t know how late it is when he gets home. Far too late. The familiar chiming of the bell at Beaumont’s door is no comfort to him. He stumbles up the stairs. His legs feel like they’re not working properly. Something about them is out of rhythm. Right now, he is less movement than muscle spasm.

It’s late enough that Callie is asleep. Theory watches him pass without asking any questions. He thinks he appreciates that. He’s not sure.

He can barely remember what he said at Calloway’s or what happened earlier that day. It’s a good thing he had thought to take notes, or else perfectly good interrogations might now be lost to the faulty whims of his memory.

He doesn’t bother to take his shoes off before dropping to his bed like a man on the wrong side of the wrong people with weights strapped to his feet taking the final steps off the pier into Drowned Man’s Bay. When did he become the sort of person who cared about taking his shoes off indoors?

Sleep comes.

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When he awakes in his dream he knows he’s dreaming. He can feel his body, asleep, weighing him down with its weary bones and tired head. He looks down at himself. He’s not wearing gloves, and underneath his hands are spotless.

On all sides of him, a storm rages. The rocks beneath him are sharp and unwelcoming, but there’s sea on all sides and no end in sight. Over the horizon, rolling dark clouds obscure the landscape in shadow. The sea-spray should be cold, but it burns him where it hits his skin.

A wave crests, then breaks. He feels his skin dissolving where salt-water touches it.

On all sides, he is surrounded by fog.

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When he awakens, he feels refreshed. Nothing like a good nightmare to eliminate guilt and dread about the previous day’s events from his mind. He stands up, and realizes he’d forgotten to take his shoes off. When did he become such a slob?

Theory is sitting on the couch. When he arrives, she looks at him, and he can sense a hint of nerves in her expression.

“Good morning. Is something wrong?” Without her even needing to ask, he’s by the stove, putting on a kettle. He has a sinking feeling that her anxiety is his fault. The least he can do is make her a cup of tea.

“You weren’t here until horribly late. I was about to go to bed thinking you were missing in action,” she says, masking the concern with a biting sternness. “I thought you might have gotten yourself killed in some alley somewhere. What am I supposed to do without you for a source of income?”
“I dunno. You managed without me before I came along, didn’t you?” He blows a bit of hair out of his face and sets about pouring her a cup. Blisteringly hot, just how she likes it.

“I suppose, worst comes to worst, I’ll still have Evie to buy me things. It’s a good thing you haven’t let all that money go to waste, though. I can’t imagine you’ve actually got a will, for the very likely case of your untimely death.”

“Oh, I do. I’m as aware of the danger I put myself in as you are.”

She pauses, as if unsure how to respond. “Well, it had all best be left to me, then.”

“Mostly Elias and Callie, actually. Sorry.”

He hands her the cup, and she frowns. “Callie I understand, but Fitzroy-”

“He actually hates being called by that surname.”

“Elias, then.” She looks at him directly, searingly direct. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Nemesis sighs. “I might be. Can you really blame me? He’s wonderful.”

Theory shrugs. “I don’t see it.”

“Well, you wouldn’t,” Nemesis agrees. “Why are you asking me about this now? You don’t strike me at all like the sort of person to care about any sort of drama, never mind who I fancy.”

“I care about knowing,” she says simply, as though that explains anything in the least. “Actually, right now I care about knowing what it was you were doing last night. I legitimately thought you might have died and not even warned me in advance. It’s very unlike you.”

Monty, who is curled up next to her, sits up and stretches. Nemesis hadn’t noticed her there, all black and blending in with the cushions. He sits by Theory, scratching Monty’s ears. “Was I really out that late?”

“Alarmingly so. Don’t tell me you lost track of time. That’s very unlike you.”

“It’s not, actually. I have a tenuous at best grasp of the concept of linear time, but that isn’t what happened.”

“Then was it something related to the case?”

Nemesis grins at her. “We were just talking about who I fancy. Who’s to say I wasn’t out doing whatever it is people do on dates?”

“Well, the fact that you don’t know what people do on dates, first off.” She sighs. “It’s clear you don’t want to tell me. If I were a good person, I’d stop pushing it, but I do have a burning need to know absolutely everything, so I’m going to nudge you verbally.”

Nemesis sighs. “Fine. I was watching someone die, alright? Not by choice, I wasn’t committing a murder, it was just...relevant to the case.”

“Calloway’s wife, then. Been a long time coming, from what I’ve heard.” Theory takes a sip of her tea, seemingly indifferent. “How did he take it? Did he wail miserably? Did he beg the stars to take him as well? I’ve never seen someone lose a loved one before. I’m curious.”

“He just cried for a while, and then made me a cup of tea and talked philosophy with me for a
while. Death-related philosophy, that is. He seems pretty depressed, but like he’ll pull through eventually.”

“Death-related philosophy. Like what?”

“Just...what to do after, I suppose. It leaves a pretty big void in your life, losing a spouse.”

She glances at him. “Have you lost a spouse?”

“I’m nineteen, Theers.”

“Just checking.” She glances back down at her cup. “No one close to me has ever died. I suppose I’m just curious what it’s like.”

“Well, no one close to me has ever died, either. But I’ve lost people, even if I’m hoping to find them someday. You’ve experienced that much.”

“I suppose,” she agrees, saying it as though she’s so indifferent, even though he can see her grip on the cup tightening the slightest amount, and the slight grinding of her teeth. He’s spent so long with Theory that her body language has become frightfully easy to read. He hopes the reverse isn’t true as well, but he fears it is. He’s far more emotive than her to begin with.

“What were your parents like?” he asks, a little unsure. The matter of Theory’s parents are a subject one would be wise not to broach. When she’s in a bad mood, and she usually is, all bets tend to be off.

“Normally, I’d tell you not to pry into things that are best left alone. However, that’s your entire business, and mine too, so I’ll make you a deal, Jones.” She closes her book with a resounding thud.

After a momentary silence, in which he confirms that she is not, in fact, about to bludgeon him with the book, he speaks. “Glad we’re on the same page regarding that. What’s this deal, then?”

“You’re also missing someone. You’ll tell me about him, and I’ll tell you about my parents.”

“Oh.” Somehow, he had been expecting something far worse. “Sure, that’s no problem, though I’m not sure why you care. Curiosity?”

“I want to know everything,” she states plainly.

“Right, but even about this?”

“Even about this, yes. My parents taught me to seek all knowledge, as it is the key to ultimate power. Any snippet could be useful. There is no such thing as frivolous knowledge. The ultimate power is to know all there is to know.”

“Oh, is that why you read those tabloids and then hide them under the sink?”

She smacks him in the arm with her book. Heavy as it may be, he supposes he had it coming. He rubs the spot she hit him, wincing. “Right, right. Sorry. You can continue.”

“Look at you, Jones. What if I just decided to stop talking to you? I could do that. Think ahead a moment, you idiot.” She sighs. “My parents were researchers. Father was an alchemi-surgeon, and mother was an astrologer. At least, that’s what their degrees were in. They both studied everything they could get their hands on, and then some.”
“As is the nature of scientific inquiry, I think. I never understood how people could limit themselves to just one field of expertise. It’s why I could never be a scientist.”

“No, you don’t like to limit yourself to poking your nose into just one thing. My mother and father didn’t, either, but their main goal was the power knowledge brought. Because of that, they sought the most powerful knowledge there is - that of artifice. They pushed the science to its limits, and the things they found horrified people.”

“Right. Things like what you did to me.”

She nods. Whatever limited amount of guilt she’s capable of feeling is apparent on her face. “They found out worse things than that. They founded the Beaumort Society as a way of more effectively keeping themselves from facing consequences for their research. I didn’t know all the details, but they sacrificed everything in their search for the ultimate knowledge.”

“The ultimate knowledge being…”

“Aether. The fundamental force of the universe, from which all power springs.” Theory’s voice lowers. “Have you ever wondered why the Beaumort Society is named what it is?”

“I have, actually,” Nemesis admits. “I never looked into it. Thought it was just a family name.”

“It is. Not mine.” At this point, her tone has become hushed, practically reverent. “Antonin Beaumort was a scientist, back in the early days of the Institute - Pre-Catacumba. He worked directly with Persephone Cross, but when he discovered a way to store and manipulate aether, he became obsessed with it. With finding its source. He discovered...that there are manifestations of aether, pure aether, in our world, as there are beyond the Border Wilds and among the stars.”

“In the world?!” Nemesis asks. “But then, how has nobody run into them…?”

“They have. They just don’t talk about them. Anyway, what Beaumort discovered...was that these manifestations are sentient. They’re beings.”

“Come again?”

“In areas of high aether concentration, there were events that seemed...uncanny. Improbable. Deliberate. Beaumort’s theory was that these were the result of beings. He decided that to be one with the aether was the ultimate knowledge. He devoted the rest of his life to his goal.” She leans heavily on her hand, sighing.

“Of course, the Institute frowned on his activities. It didn’t matter. He committed atrocities and tore reality asunder in the name of his work. Many of his techniques have been lost to history, though others have been recovered by researchers such as my parents. In the end, we don’t know if he succeeded or not, simply that he vanished and was never heard from again,” she finishes.

“Ah,” Nemesis says, because he can’t think of anything else to say that wouldn’t anger her. “That’s-”

“Admirable,” she says. “The ultimate sacrifice for knowledge. It’s my dream to die in the pursuit of something greater than my current comprehension.”

“Your dream is to die?”

“The dying isn’t the important part, but I suppose it’s difficult to see what there would be to live for, once you’ve obtained the ultimate knowledge.”
Nemesis frowns. “Facts change all the time. You just keep on experiencing, right?”

“I guess,” she agrees, not seeming fully convinced. “But there must be an end to it all. Everything is finite.”

“And what if you gain the ultimate knowledge, and life goes on?”

She pauses for a moment, clearly unsure of how to respond. After a time, she finally sighs and looks away from Nemesis. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get there, if I get there at all. I’ve told you things. It’s your turn now.”

“My turn. Right. You want to hear about Mr. Jones?” He sighs heavily, scratching Monty’s head in an attempt to ground himself. “What is it you want to know? There’s a lot to say and not enough time to say even a fraction of it. I’d be best served being out of here before noon. Work and such, you know.”

“Must be horrible, not being able to choose when you work and for how long. Glad that isn’t a problem for me.” Despite the humor in her words, when she looks at him it’s cuttingly serious. “First, why do you call him Mr. Jones? He’s your father, isn’t he?”

“He’s not.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I was his apprentice. Still am, technically, never formally finished.”

“I see.” She pauses, taking a sip of her tea with calculated and deliberate movements. She’s thinking, Nemesis observes. Of course, she’s always thinking, but when Theory puts significant contemplation into something it’s clearly visible by her movements and her face. That miniscule crease in her brow that she always gets when she thinks is there, if he squints.

“What happened to him? He’s not dead if you’re still talking about him like this, unless you’re in extreme denial,” she finally asks.

“He vanished,” Nemesis tells her.

“Vanished?”

“Vanished. I got back to the office one day and he wasn’t there. I waited until the night. He didn’t show up. I lived there for weeks by myself, but he never came back. All I had was this.”

The device feels familiar in his hands. Taking it out always feels, at least a little, like he’s returning to a home he never knew he left. He can almost feel Arthur Jones’s presence, as if there’s a little of him in the compass, speaking to Nemesis.

What would he tell him, if that were true? Would he be proud? Would he be angry? Nemesis has no way of knowing, and the answer terrifies him, but the feeling that radiates from the compass is a warm and comforting one. It’s the feeling of coming in from a cold night and sitting by a fireplace. It’s something Nemesis wishes he could feel forever.

“Your exquirit veritas,” she says evenly. “It was his before, then, was it?”

“I didn’t know this device has a name. I just knew he made it. That’s why I was looking for any information about it - figured if someone recognized it they’d recognize him, and maybe...they’d be able to tell me why he left it, of all things, for me. I realize now he left it for me as a tool, and as a
way to keep me sane. There are no answers here.”

“Well, it does have a name. Not that specific device - there’s multiple of them. Persephone Cross developed the original patent, but they’re mainly only used in the highest levels of the legal system...and by some practitioners with a need for them and the skill to create them. My mother had one. It requires an artificer of exceptional talent to create one of those.”

Nemesis frowns. “Ah, well, that’s not really how I’d describe him. More like...proficient but below-average?”

“That’s not right. I can’t even make one, and I’ve tried. It kept coming up with false positives, or else it moved erratically, never focusing on one target. You’re telling me your teacher did better than me ?”

Nemesis remembers what he’d been told about Artair. A genius inventor and artificer… “he might’ve had some help, actually.”

“Help? Was he involved with people on my parents’ level?”

“From what I can tell, yes. He wasn’t exactly the most...forthcoming with information. A little bit paranoid, I reckon you’d say.”

“This is the person you allowed a significant degree of influence over you?”

“I’m no better.”

She shrugs. “I suppose you aren’t.”

The two sit in silence for goodness knows how long, Nemesis listening to the sound of his own heartbeat, steady and even. There’s nothing he can do about it right at this moment, but that doesn’t stop him from feeling crushed by Arthur Jones’s absence.

And then the telephone rings.

“Ah - that’s probably for me,” Nemesis says, because most phone calls to Beaumort’s are for him. He stands up, unsteady on his feet, as though he’s forgotten how to properly walk, and stumbles to the phone, picking it up.

Where has his elegance gone? Surely, at some point, he was more put-together than the wreck he is now, like a ship dashed against the rocks until its sails are ribbons and its boards have been flayed from it. If he strains his mind, he can almost remember when he used to think of himself as glamorous, as almost the sort of person he wouldn’t hate.

“Nemesis Jones, private investigator, how may I help you?”

“Oh, Jones, it’s you. Thank goodness.” To his shock, it’s Lucian Vigenere on the other end, sounding haggard and short of breath.

“Oh! Good morning, your lordship! What’s happening?” Though Nemesis knows Vigenere can’t hear him, he straightens and brushes his hair one-handedly out of his face.

“Nocturne is making moves. A calling card, sent to Goldschmidt’s at Aurum Rex.”

Goldschmidt’s, Nemesis remembers, is a high-end jewelry store. A little too high-end for him to be comfortable shopping there, even with his new wealth. Exactly the sort of place a phantom thief
might target.

“Their letter was a little bit flowery. I’ll let you take a look at it when you’re here, but they said in no uncertain terms that they were going to steal the Star of Oriens.”

“Star of Oriens?” Oriens is a small seaside town to the south-east of Omen, largely unremarkable. “One of the largest recorded diamonds in history, well known for a unique vivid blue coloring. It’s extremely valuable.”

“Well, er...if it’s that distinctive, that means no one who stole it would be able to sell it, right? So what’s the point?”

“I don’t fucking know! Bragging rights!” Vigenere exclaims, uncharacteristically loud. “Sorry, sorry,” he immediately corrects. “I didn’t mean to raise my voice, I’m just-”

“Stressed?”

“Yeah, I’m stressed.” He sighs. “Please just...get over here, Jones. Help keep watch, stop Nocturne when they come.”

Nemesis nods. “Mm. Have you ever considered that this is a diversion, and Nocturne has plans to rob somewhere else?”

Vigenere’s sigh is heavy. “I did not consider that. I’ll leave that up to you, detective - I’m out of my depth in this area. Just, please-”

“Of course. I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t. I’ll be there. Try to calm down, your lordship. As a note of advice, people look to their leadership to be composed in times like this, or they fall apart as well.”

It isn’t until he’s put down the receiver that it occurs to him that he’s just been horribly insubordinate.

He feels heavy, but he’s not about to let that stop him. “Callie!” He shouts, hoping she’s awake enough to hear him. “We have somewhere to be! Get ready!”

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“Whoah. That’s a store?”

“Aye. Impressive, isn’t it?”

If the Aurum Lex department store is smaller than the Cabinet of Marvels, it’s not by much. The sprawling alabaster monument to consumerism occupies the majority of the street, blocking out the landscape. Large and rectangular, it’s a building described by many as ‘minimalist’. Nemesis would prefer the term ‘boring’.

Callie narrows her eyes. “What could they possibly need such a large building for?”

“Well, I reckon it’s only just big enough to store Gilbert Banks’s ego.” Nemesis snickers.

Callie’s look is flat. “I don’t get it.”

“Gilbert Banks owns Aurum Lex, and he’s apparently got a spectacular ego and insatiable lust for money. Funny, when I met him he didn’t behave like that at all, but the joke continues to be
“funny.”

“It’s not funny,” Callie tells him.

“Well, that’s your opinion.” He gestures her after him. “Come on, we’re keeping the baron himself waiting, and that’s never a good idea.”

“You’re the one who stopped to make a bloody joke,” she grumbles, following him. Nemesis notes that he’ll need to explain the concept of regional vocabulary to her later, though he supposes he should be flattered that she’s picking up his vernacular.

The inside of the Aurum Lex is just as boring as the outside. White polished marble walls, with signs proclaiming the newest sales at various shops. The lighting is painfully bright, almost suffocating in its onslaught, an unsettling purple-blue color. Spots dance before Nemesis’s eyes, and he pulls the brim of his cap down further over his face. When he looks to the floor, he can see no shadow from him, or Callie, or any of the objects around them.

On the bright side, there’s no way Nocturne could hide in this lighting. Not a single shadow has survived in the hostile environment.

Goldschmidt’s isn’t difficult to find. Located at the end of the hallway, directly across from the entrance, its sign is large and elaborate. Nemesis frowns, pulling a spyglass from his bag and looking closer at the words.

“What are you looking at?” Callie asks.

“The sign,” he replies. “Bloody stars, that’s carved from actual crystal!”

“Do you think so?”

“I do reckon so, aye. Looks like yellow brucite to me.”

“Brucite? How can you tell? Couldn’t it Topaz? Yellow fluorite? Yellow apatite? Yellow jasper? Yellow sapphire? Any other number of rocks beginning with ‘yellow’? Amber, even?”

“Callie, you’re just naming every yellow rock you know.” He lowers his spyglass. “I don’t know for sure, I’m not a bloody geologist, but it’s surely not jasper.”

“We’re wasting time again,” she says.

“That we are.” He places his hand on the doorknob and frowns. “…bloody stars. Solid pyrite, far as I can tell.”

“How can you tell? Doesn’t pyrite look an awful lot like gold?”

Nemesis scoffs. “Of course not! They’re quite different. Different colors. Pyrite’s more metallic.”

“They’re both metal, though,” Callie says.

“Well, that doesn’t mean they both equally look it.”

He pushes the door open.
Goldschmidt’s is resplendent in its garishness. Everything in the room shines like a star brought to earth, blinding, and Nemesis wishes he had brought sunglasses.

The actual layout of the store is neat - squares of crystal displays nested within one another, all perfectly clear. In the very centre of the room, an elevated glass case holds a startling blue diamond, which illuminates the room with its light glow. It’s spectacular. Otherworldly.

“I don’t believe that’s actually a diamond,” Nemesis whispers to Callie.

“Why not?” She whispers back.

“That’s not how diamonds work.”

“Well, yeah. Okay. I knew that, I just thought you might know something I didn’t.”

The room is full of guards, and from amongst them, Lucian Vigenere emerges, walking purposely towards Nemesis. Though he’s just as buttoned-up as normal, there’s a dishevelment about him, and visible bags beneath his eyes.

“Bloody stars, you look horrid,” Nemesis says before he can think better of it. “I mean, er-you haven’t been sleeping, have you?”

Vigenere leans in, whispering aggressively. “No. No I haven’t, this-this is occupying my waking hours and bleeding into my sleep, okay? I’ve never had to pull all-nighters before, and it’s beginning to impact my mental health.”

“I thought you were a student.”

“Yes, but I’m smart, I never had to-” He sighs heavily, and Nemesis can hear how labored his breathing is. “Listen, I’m stressed, so if you can just-if you can just cooperate and not make it seem like I’m more tired than I am, because I’m pretty sure these guards smell weakness-”

Nemesis chuckles. “Yeah, alright.”

“. . .right. That being said, we’ve business to attend to, haven’t we?” Vigenere straightens, brushing off his lapels. For perhaps the first time ever, Nemesis feels a pang of sympathy for someone born into wealth and power. Vigenere’s lot, though not precisely a disadvantaged one, is clearly wearing on him, and not, Nemesis thinks, because of anything the man himself has done wrong.

“We do,” Nemesis agrees.

“Right. Come with me, then - oh.” He looks at the door. “Your other friend isn’t here?”

“Er...Percy? He’s not, no. Should he be?”

“No, I just...he seemed interesting. I was hoping to talk to him more.”

“I reckon I could give you his telephone number, if you wanted.”

“Um...that would be lovely,” Vigenere says. “Do you think he’d really be alright with that? Me calling out of nowhere, just to talk?”

“Yeah, Lucian, normal people are fine with that. It’s called being friends, you dork. Oh, hello, Nemesis.” Mustafa Dagher, emerged from Nemesis’s blind spot, pats Vigenere on the back.

“Are you sure?” Vigenere asks, unsure.
“Morning, Dagher,” Nemesis replies, accidentally speaking at the same time as Vigenere.

“I’m sure - I thought we agreed you were going to call me Mustafa.”

“Sorry, sorry. Habit.”

“It’s alright, I’m not mad.” He looks at Callie. “Oh, you. I never got your name.”

“It’s Callie,” she says. Nemesis can see the nerves apparent on her face. Of course, she only knows Dagher from the library. She has no idea that he’s completely indifferent to Nemesis’s more criminal activities.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Callie!” He holds out his hand to her, and she takes it. The following handshake is enthusiastic, and Callie looks completely perplexed when it’s over. She isn’t used to handshakes yet, clearly.

“No offense, Mustafa,” Nemesis asks, “but why are you here?”

“He’s a spectro-cartographer,” Vigenere answers.

“Yeah, I knew that. But what-”

Dagher interjects. “Basically, I’m doing something extra, not related to the current threatened theft. Thieves like this, they tend to follow patterns, see - so I’m setting up a way of tracking their movement based on their known locations. It’ll take a bit longer to actually get any use out of it, so you can easily just prevent it from mattering by catching Nocturne today.”

He leans in, whispering to Nemesis. “Actually, I’m mostly here for emotional support. Lucian’s been flying off the handle, if you can’t tell. This isn’t even the type of spectro-cartography I specialize in, but he needs me.”

“Alright,” Nemesis whispers back. “I can see how he’d need it.”

“What are you two talking about?” Vigenere asks, trepidation in his voice audible.

“Nothing, nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Dagher claps him on the shoulder again, chuckling and stepping away - presumably to return to his work.

Vigenere frowns at Nemesis. “I’m worrying about it.”

“It’s nothing bad, promise.”

“Okay, I’ll trust you for the time being. Come with me. We’ve got other things to go over.” He gestures Nemesis halfheartedly towards the centre of the room, and Nemesis follows, with Callie trailing behind.

They pass through the gathered guards, passing Dagher, who is sitting on the ground, fiddling with some large sheets of parchment and oversized crystals. Vigenere stops by the Star of Oriens, standing with a composed severity that Nemesis is sure he’s struggling to maintain.

Nemesis gestures vaguely to the diamond. Vigenere’s eyes follow his motion. “Yes, this is the object of Nocturne’s covetous threat, which we are sworn to protect.”

“Doesn’t look like a diamond to me,” Nemesis remarks. “That color, the way it’s literally glowing...rocks don’t just do that for no reason.”
“It’s not a rock, first off. It’s a mineral,” Vigenere corrects.

“I knew that. Gemstones are called rocks in the colloquial, so I’m right even if I’m also incorrect.”

Vigenere rolls his eyes, though not with a complete lack of amusement. “Okay, okay. You’re correct, though, in that it’s not a normal diamond. To the best of our knowledge, it’s essentially consolidated aether, which is something completely unprecedented.”

“Then why is it here, in a privately-owned jeweler’s, and not in an Institute laboratory or a museum?”

Lucian frowns. “Uh, funny thing, that, people seem to think the best use of it is whatever makes the most money. I’ve been trying to obtain it for the Institute since I got to power, but it’s hard to outbid private bidders even when you have aristocracy funds, and the current owner is hesitant to let go of it.”

“Who is the current owner, out of curiosity?”

“No one knows. They communicate anonymously through Goldschmidt’s’ speaker system, exclusively. They must be independently wealthy, extremely so, to be able to afford it, but not only can they afford it, they’ve thwarted several attempted thefts.”

“Are there often attempted thefts?”

“Oh, yes. Everyone seems to want this mineral badly enough that they’ll risk arrest for it...at least, it seems to be sought after by the riff-raff, if you know what I mean.” He waves a hand dismissively.

“Poor people?” Nemesis offers.

“No, goodness, no!” Vigenere leans in so that he can whisper to Nemesis. “Secret society members, spies, cultists, all that sort. A collective fixation on the Star.”

“Reckon that has anything to do with its-” He gestures to the glowing rock, “-strange properties?”

“I reckon it might,” Vigenere agrees.

“Why have I never heard of this thing, then, if it’s so bloody famous?”

“I don’t know.” Vigenere’s teeth grind faintly - a hint of annoyance finally breaking through. “That seems like it’s something to examine about yourself, more than anything. Infamous detective running about getting in everyone’s business, doesn’t even know about perhaps the only gemstone which comes even close to being a household name.”

Nemesis would have found some snappy comeback, surely, but Vigenere’s tone suggests frustration. Exhausted university student though he may be, Lucian Vigenere is a bad person to make an enemy of - so Nemesis nods, showing some semblance of forced humility, though the shame burns at him. “I reckon you’re right. I had other things on my mind. Never even stopped to consider the local culture.”

Vigenere’s face de-tenses. “It’s fine,” he says. “I know you aren’t from around here. Citrea Viridia must be completely different, right? I’ve never really stopped to consider your culture, either. I hear you don’t even have electric power in Llygredyg.”

“We have a little bit of it. More than we have artifice, certainly. Most of the power is actually
kinetic - from windmills and water-wheels and such.”

Vigenere nods. “Mmm. Fascinating. I’d like to visit sometime, but it’s never really been along my path. Studies always came first, until I had to run an entire region.”

“You should visit Duskmoor someday. Reckon you’d fit right in there.”

“Maybe I would,” Vigenere agrees. “Regardless, there’s some others here you should know about, since they’ll be working with you on bringing this thief to justice, after all.” He gestures to a dark-skinned, short-haired man standing by the Star’s case, looking curiously at the back door, who Nemesis recognizes. “Thomas Marchand, night-watchman.”

Marchand waves to Nemesis. “We’ve met. I’ll be keeping an eye on the place, but I won’t get in your way. Things aren’t actually normally this exciting, so I think you’re more experienced than I am - I’ll trust you to take the lead.”

Nemesis nods. “Nice to see you again. Curious why you’re here, though.”

“I’m a day-watchman at the Obscura and the night-watchman here. Pays the bills, you know.”

“Makes sense, but doesn’t that mean you’ve no time for anything else?”

“Essentially.”

“Don’t you need time to rest and eat and such?”

“Not in this economy.”

“Terrible. I’m sorry.” Nemesis makes a mental note to anonymously send this man a significant sum of money.

There’s a moment where they both stay smiling at each other, unsure how to continue. Then, Vigenere breaks the silence.

“Aurelia Wu - you know her, she’s the dean of the Omen campus of Catacumba - has been keeping an eye on this as well. She’s apparently trying to haggle with the Star’s owner, so she can have it for research purposes, so she has a personal stake in this.”

Nemesis rolls his eyes. “Well, alright. She’s not here, is she?”

“Not quite this moment, no.” Vigenere pauses, then glances around to both sides as if he’s about to cross a crowded street. When he speaks again, his voice is low. “I’m not fully convinced Mustafa’s not here to keep an eye on things for her, though. He’s a student in her department, and they’re working together on the Catacumba mapping project.”

Nemesis thinks back to earlier, when Mustafa had said he was mostly there for emotional support. Why in the blazes hadn’t he given him a scan with his compass? “That’s not what he told me, but I reckon that doesn’t make it any less likely to be the case,” he tells Vigenere.

Vigenere nods. “I want to trust him, I really do. I just, you know...can’t.”

“I understand,” Nemesis agrees, because he does.

“Nemesis Jones!” A familiar voice shouts, shrill and agitated, breaking up the tension.

Nemesis turns on his heels to see Gilbert Banks walking briskly towards him, trailed at a quick
pace by the speaker, Phineas Sterling himself, glasses askew and looking like he just got out of his workshop. Behind them, a little slower, Hugh Atelier seems to shrink from all the guards. Probably not a fan of the attention, Nemesis thinks. And even further behind, stopped to speak to Marchand in rapid-fire Luciellite a little too complex for Nemesis to be able to decipher, is Sophronia Ripley, dressed in impressively wide and flouncy skirts and with a parasol to shield herself from the bright artificial lighting.

“Mr. Banks, Mr. Sterling. Hello,” he says.

“Jones,” Banks agrees, staring him dead in the eye. Whatever message is meant to be communicated, Nemesis isn’t quite catching it.

“Banks,” Vigenere says, businesslike. “You took your time getting here.”

“Sorry, sorry. I had to deal with him,” Banks says sheepishly, gesturing over his shoulder at Atelier.

“Well, why does Atelier have to be here?” Vigenere asks.

“It was his painting which was stolen,” Sterling says defensively. “He’s involved. He has a right to be here. Anyway, as his patron, I-”

“His patron, not his master. You have no responsibility towards him besides the financial, and thus no obligation to him either. Anyway, that was all just a fancy way of saying it’s society business.”

Sterling pales, eyes widening. “You-”

Vigenere scoffs. “I know the entire point of espionage is that it’s secret, but come on, Sterling, you aren’t fooling anyone. You’ve got a stake in this, and so does that boy, and Banks, and all of the rest of you, because the Benefactors’ Circle does as well. Well, me, personally, I’m not going to stand for it. I’m not conspiring against you, and you’d best not be conspiring against me. The office of the Baron of Semper is putting its effort into stamping out these petty squabbles so we might all work in tandem for the sake of the region’s future, and I believe you’re a decent sort by the standards of those you associate with, so you’d best not prove me wrong.”

Sterling has gone pink in the ears. “Why, you-”

Banks puts a hand calmly on his shoulder. “He’s well within his rights, Phineas, and he also isn’t incorrect. It’s okay. We understand you fully, Your Lordship.”

Sterling glances darkly at Vigenere. “Your precious ‘office’ has left its bloody marks on the pages of our city’s history, you know. You’ve been out of the loop, and you’ll continue to be.” Piece said, however, he looks at Banks with what can only be described as gratitude.

“I’m going to go off and...do some studies,” Atelier says, stepping away. Wise, Nemesis thinks, to leave before the situation implodes. Sterling, perhaps sensing similarly, gives him an approving wave.

Implode it doesn’t, however. Because Vigenere does something Nemesis didn’t even remotely expect and simply nods. “I know there’s things I don’t know,” he says, “and those mysteries will be unraveled eventually, but when it comes down to it I don’t care what my family line has done with their power nearly as much as I care what I do with it.”

And to Nemesis’s further surprise, Sterling applauds lightly. “Well spoken, Your Lordship. Well,
I’ll support you in your endeavors, though I’m afraid I don’t actually know nearly as much as you think I do, and that you’ve completely mistaken my reason for being here.”

“Have I?” Vigenere asks.

“You have,” Nemesis says, looking directly down at his compass. Sterling, he can see clear as day in a place which isn’t Omen, is telling the truth.

“Oh! Such a fascinating little trinket!” Sterling remarks, peering over his shoulder. “Useful, very useful, and the craftsmanship is almost...hmm...familiar.”

“Familiar?” Nemesis asks.

“Yes, familiar. Almost as if...hmm…” He shakes his head. “No, I can’t remember.”

A lie, blatant, but Nemesis isn’t going to call him on it. Not here, where so many people are listening.

In the time Sterling spent defending himself, Atelier has struck up a conversation with Mustafa Dagher and Banks is rushing about, discussing various things with security detail that Nemesis knows nothing about.

“They’ve all got men here,” Sterling says.

“What?” Vigenere asks.

“All the societies. Correspondents,” he says, pointing to a man standing nearby Marchand and Ripley. “Know him well, seen him selling copies of the Sun in the train station. And that woman by Ms. Ripley, she’s a well-known reviewer who always gives Fitzroy’s shows just a little more credit than they deserve. And that individual over there by the door, very well-known associate of the Eyes.”

Nemesis’s eyes pass over each of the individuals pointed out in turn. Next to one of them, there stands a familiar teenage girl.

He frowns to himself. So Hattie is playing detective again. He won’t turn her in - he doesn’t wish any harm on her, after all - but he finds it deeply suspicious that she’s here, in a place so teeming with agents.

“No one from the Acolytes?” Vigenere asks.

“Right over there,” Sterling points to a man standing by a distant case of necklaces. “Not to mention this place is utterly teeming with Postmen couriers, but they’re really quite harmless and I wouldn’t be able to morally justify harming them were I you.”

“Good to know,” Vigenere says tensely, clearly not knowing what precisely to do with the information but feeling threatened by the newfound knowledge regardless.

Nemesis drifts slightly away, back towards Marchand, who he had considered a rather pleasant fellow. Now, in addition to Ripley, Banks is there, speaking to them.

“-so the alarm system trips if you touch the glass without entering the specific artificial input, you say?” He overhears coming from Banks.

“It does. I’m - no disrespect intended, sir, I’m shocked you don’t know this,” says Marchand.
“Well, he’s knackless,” Ripley says.

“No, no, he’s right - I should know how this works even if I can’t work with it myself.”

“I’m sure it will be quite alright. You’re an administrator, not manning the cash register. It’s not as if it will ever be personally relevant to you, Gilbert, so I would recommend keeping yourself limited to signing checks and keeping Sterling’s emotions in check, as always-”

Silently, unnervingly silently, the lights go out and the room is plunged into darkness. As if they’re an orchestra being conducted into a break between movements, everyone inside it goes silent, obedient and still. For a split second, it’s like being dead. Nothing to be seen but the lights dancing in front of his eyes, lagging behind the rest of his vision. Nothing to be heard but the sound of his own breathing.

He switches on his flashlight. Ozymandias Nocturne stands triumphant on the sill of a window they’ve just carved into the wall, Star of Oriens tucked under their arm, and Nemesis swears that they look back and meet his eyes, and that they wink.

Then they jump, falling gracefully from view. Nemesis sprints towards the window and jumps.

He isn’t sure what compels him to do it. He falls like a bird shot out of the sky which has yet to realize that it’s dead, graceless and flailing. He would have died, he knows he would have, but for the hand that latches itself around his waist and pulls him to the roof of the Aurum Lex. For a moment he's suspended in air as Nocturne reaches the height of their jump's arc, and the two stare each other in the eyes, though Nemesis can't see Nocturne's through the layers of fabric. How horrible, to be unable to read anything of his opponent's face, but knowing that all the while everything - the shock in Nemesis's expression, the slight pink tint the cold night has lent to his face, his features, still that of a boy despite the broken nose. It puts him on edge.

The moment his feet hit concrete he reaches for the thief's wrist. It’s pulled deftly out of the range of his grasp in just the nick of time, and Nocturne's featureless black fabric-face seems to stare into his eyes. Is that the best you’ve got, Jones?

I’ll show you, Nocturne, he thinks. I’ll show you.

Instead of hitting, he tries to grab, but the flowing tails of Nocturne’s coat stream just barely out of reach. They’re taunting him. Nemesis attempts to trip them, but they leap to the side, aiming a kick to his knee, intending to knock him to the ground, but he dodges it with ease.

The two circle each other, Nocturne light and elegant on their feet, like a dancer. Nemesis can’t see their eyes, but he can feel them staring at him. What do they think of him? Why does he care what they think of him? Who cares if they aren't impressed with his efforts to thwart them?

No, he realizes, he wants them to be impressed with him. He wants them to respect him. He wants them to feel the same. Is this what Percy was talking about? His rival?

No. This is a criminal. A criminal he needs to stop.

The moment ends. It’s Nemesis who lunges at Nocturne. His glove almost seems to close around the Star, but then Nocturne is out of the way at the last second, they’ve slipped the star into their pocket, and they’re grabbing Nemesis’s jacket and shoving him to the side.

Nemesis grins.

Another moment. It feels so still, so timeless, and he can feel Nocturne’s hand on the collar of his
shirt, pushing him away. They’re toying with him, not attacking. Somehow, that makes Nemesis all the angrier.

This time, his fist connects. Nocturne seems almost surprised. Knocked off-kilter, certainly. They swerve to the side, before giving Nemesis a meaningful look back and leaping away.

Their arc is high, above the artificial stars he’s come to expect from Omen’s night-time - they look for a moment as though they might graze the very bottommost tip of the Umbra, but then they’re falling again, not yet exempted entirely from gravity. They land halfway across the city, he should think. The fight is over - no matter how endless it felt, it lasted but a few moments. He can’t follow them, not with his knacklessness.

But, on the bright side, he doesn’t need to. His hand closes around the Star, nestled deep in his pocket. Whoever said pickpocketing wasn’t an important life skill? He thanks the stars that he’s less out of practice than he’d assumed himself to be.

In the corner of his vision, something scrambles, rodentine, across the roof.

He whirls around. Stabby looks up from their position on the edge of the roof, alarm visible in those inhuman eyes. They freeze.

Nemesis drops to one knee. Condescending, he’s sure, but better than threatening. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just curious what you’re doing out here. Will you stay and talk?”

Stabby looks at him tensely, measuring the scale of his threat. Finally, though, they nod. Thank goodness for that.

“Thank you for humoring me,” he begins. It’s always best, he’s learned, to begin with a thank-you. People like to know they’re appreciated, and it makes the thanker seem far humbler in their eyes.

Stabby nods. A tentative, uncertain acceptance.

“I’m wondering why you’re here, and I have a theory. The Star is sought-after by all sorts of unsavory types, according to the baron. Dr. Appolinaire says he’s not involved in this sort of thing anymore, but he’s scared just like everyone else in the know. So he sent you as his agent, did he?”

Stabby shakes their head. Nemesis pulls out his compass to confirm what he already suspected - that they’re being truthful.

“Ah, alright. Was I right about any of it, then?”

They nod.

“Which part was I right about? That he’s scared?”

They nod again.

“Why are you here, then? Oh, er, that’s not a yes-or-no question-”

Stabby looks at him, equal parts annoyed and bemused, as he stumbles over his words.

“Did someone else tell you to come here, or did you come here on your own?” He finally settles on.

They raise their hand, curled into a fist with two fingers extended upwards.
“The second one?”

They nod.

“Why, then?”

They stare at him blankly.

“Right, that’s abstract. Sorry. Bloody stars, how do you communicate with the doctor?”

They make a few hand motions which he recognizes as sign language. Of course. It was typical for would-be thieves in Citrea Viridia to learn a few signs, and Nemesis was no exception. He’d taught some to Mr. Jones, as well, for much the opposite purposes, and more recently Callie. He’s rusty, but competent.

“Well, you should have just said so. I know a few snippets - not fluent or anything, but it’s certainly easier to communicate when we at least have individual words.”

“Yes,” they sign, and then another sign which Nemesis doesn’t recognize.

“Okay. Why are you here, then?”

“Sun,” they sign.

“Sun?” He asks aloud. “What would you need with the sun? You’ve lived in Omen your whole life, right?”

They shake their head frantically, frustrated, and sign multiple words after each other. He doesn’t recognize any of them, except the one for ‘man’.

“A man in the sun? No, no, obviously that’s not it, er...is it your name-sign for someone?”

They nod.

“Appolinaire?”

Another nod, this one more careful.

“You’re doing this for Appolinaire?”

They nod, and sign another word. It looks familiar to Nemesis, but he can’t quite recognize it.

“Come again?”

“Protect,” they sign, then Appolinaire’s name-sign again.

“You’re protecting him? Appolinaire?”

Another nod.

“From the societies? You’re being involved even though he isn’t, so that he’s safer.”

They nod again.

“Jones!” Comes a shout from below - Nemesis recognizes Marchand’s voice. When he looks back over his shoulder, Stabby is gone, vanished into the night, and he’s alone on the roof. The Star of Oriens feels heavy in his hand.
“Yeah. They’re gone. Got away. Will someone catch me if I jump down? I don’t have the knack.”
“I’ll do my best,” he hears Vigenere say.

“Well, that’s very reassuring,” he replies sarcastically, before jumping, no hesitation.

Thankfully, he was right to trust Vigenere, because he feels the air solidify around his feet, keeping him upright and floating. Vigenere is leaning out the window, his hair whipping in the wind, face contorted in concentration, hands stretched out to touch the open air. It’s the only way he can reach Nemesis - long-distance artifice isn’t taught in Acerbis, but the air touching Nemesis’s feet is the same as the air touching Vigenere’s hands. The air itself fills the city, and it’s within Vigenere’s control. Nemesis wonders if this power couldn’t potentially be used for evil.

Regardless, he’s deposited lightly on the ground of the Aurum Lex. Every eye in the room is on him immediately, with varied intentions. Some of these people are agents of secret societies, searching for his downfall. Everything in this city continues to hinge on cryptic goals which he isn’t privy to. One of those goals is the diamond in his pocket.

He steels himself, straightens up his posture. Everything hinges on him. It’s not too late for him to decide that his reputation means more to him than this. He’s sure it couldn’t possibly be that bad.

No.

“They got the diamond,” he tells Vigenere, steeled for the responses. Instead, the room is silent, crushingly so. Perhaps that’s even worse.

Vigenere’s eyes narrow. “They…they did, did they.”

“I reckon I know where they went,” he says immediately, hoping he doesn’t sound as panicked as he is. “I can track them down. I can get it back. I just need a week.”

His eyes narrow further. “A week…very well. Don’t disappoint me, Jones.”

Vigenere turns to leave, visibly exhausted from the effort of the artifice, breathing heavily. Nemesis watches him.

The room seems subdued and tired. Everyone trails out - no doubt to make their future plans. Nemesis thinks they’ll all probably try to go after Nocturne, try to get there ahead of them. Little do they know the target of their search is in his pocket, feeling like a weight.

He’ll try to make a fake and submit it back to Vigenere, perhaps. Hopefully he won’t fall for it. Maybe he’ll be willing to work with Nemesis, but he doubts it. It might come off as if he’s the one with the shadowy goals, if he insists on holding onto it.

He makes it home as fast as he can, not stopping to speak to anyone else. He’s far too tired - he can imagine the headlines tomorrow, but he’s beyond caring. His thoughts are consumed with Ozymandias Nocturne.

Why were they seeking the Star? For the same reason they sought the painting, Nemesis guesses - a reason beyond Nemesis’s comprehension. A reason he has to unravel, for the sake of this city and everything in it.
He collapses onto his bed. His vision swims. He doesn't have time to consider the matter any further before sleep takes him, dragging him down into the dark comfort of unconsciousness.

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The phone rings. How long has he been asleep? He lifts his head groggily, picking up the receiver. “Nemesis Jones, private investigator. Who’s calling?”

“Jones,” he hears Vigenere’s voice, frantic and worried. “Sorry, I think I was...well, I think I was a little harsh on you earlier. I’m sure you can track down the Star, and do it in a timely manner. I’ll hold the papers off as best I can, though I can’t promise anything regarding the society-owned ones...which is most of them.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but did you really call me at...” he checks his watch. “...a perfectly reasonable time, just to tell me that?”

“No. There’s been a corpse discovered, and I think it’s probably related to yesterday.”

Nemesis’s heart falls. If that’s true, then it’s his fault - his snap decision has gotten killed. “It-it is?” He stammers. “I have, er - I have something to confess-”

“You’re a murderer, Jones?”

“No?!”

“Then it can wait. This is urgent, Jones - I want you at the corner of Vice and Highchapel, as soon as physically possible. We can discuss then, but hurry. I mean it.”

With that strongly-worded final statement, he hangs up. Nemesis is left with only the ringtone for company. He’s not the type to refuse orders, especially not from an irritated-sounding baron. With a sigh, he deposits the Star into his safe and begins to work on making himself a little more presentable.
In the spring and summer, and sometimes into early fall, a particular species of tree native to the east of Acerbis, and thus to Omen, tends to shed its white petals in one dramatic moment, sending them fluttering through the streets like snow. They all tend to begin the process simultaneously, and then continue to send petals fluttering down for a few weeks afterwards. Apparently, this year they’ve chosen today - Nemesis and Callie are practically drowning in the petals as they make his way to the river-side, where Vigenere had told him they were needed.

There’s a spectacular mound of the petals gathered on a park bench. Beyond it, on the white-covered ground, a group of people is gathered, as if around a grave as the casket is lowered in. Tall, willowy, ghastly forms, clad in black.

Except Percy. He’s dressed in his normal beige, a colorful streak against the monochrome backdrop. He smiles at Nemesis, even though there’s a dead man right near him. “You took your time getting here. I almost thought I was going to solve the case before you even woke up!”

“Someone’s dead, Chase,” Nemesis says briskly.

His face falls. “Yeah, sorry. Sorry. You’re right. I don’t know why I-”

“People cope differently.” Nemesis remembers how Percy had been that first time at Burke’s, so unsettled by something he and Callie had thought inconsequential, if a little gross. When not confronted with the physical realities of death, one can almost convince himself that it’s not real. Like a plot twist in a mystery. Something to be solved.

“I guess,” Percy agrees, though he looks downcast and guilty.

So he’ll have to sort this out first, then. Percy will be useless if he’s busy indulging his guilt, he justifies to himself as he puts a hand on his shoulder. “Percival Chase.”

Percy looks back at him, alarmed. “Nemesis Jones?”

“I used to be like you. It takes a while to sink in, doesn’t it? For now, that’s a strength. Pray it never does, and solve this case unimpeded.”

Percy nods. “I’ll try. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Don’t make me feel guilty, now.”

“That just makes me more sorry…” Percy sighs. “I’ll try my best, though. Alright. Let’s do this.”

“Let’s do this,” Nemesis agrees.

“Let’s do this,” agrees Callie, having looked awkwardly on as they spoke.

The three burst through the forest of black coats. In the centre stands Lucian Vigenere, covered in a light coating of petals which he hasn’t bothered to brush off. His expression is soft and mournful. “Jones, thank goodness.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Nemesis says. “Sorry I took so long.”

The corpse is on the ground, covered with a black cloth. Nemesis kneels behind it, looking up for the okay before peeling back the shroud.
The corpse is strikingly not at all what he would have expected. A carefully-maintained hairdo, one of those fashionable ponytails tied low with a ribbon. Not a strand is out of place in the front. The face is serene. If anything, just barely nervous.

Blue veins bulge through pale, translucent skin. Just like Elizabeth Calloway, he might have been dead for hours or weeks, and Nemesis wouldn’t know. Frozen in time. The only thing that killed him is that he simply wasn’t alive.

“Bastard,” Nemesis mutters under his breath. “Chase, can you take some pictures for me?”

“I don’t have a camera.”

“Good thing I do, then,” he says, pulling it from his bag and handing it back to Percy.

Percy turns it over in his hands, before pointing it at the corpse. “Okay. Don’t expect these to be professional quality, though. I’m a reporter and not a photographer. People tend to lump those together, but I don’t actually know the first thing about photography.”

“That’s fine. You don’t have to be a professional. Just get a good image of this. Close-up.”

“Okay, if you say so,” Percy says, scrambling to the other side of the body so that he can do just that. He’s incredibly thorough and precise in his work - enough so that Nemesis thinks he might make a decent photographer, if it were what he wanted to do professionally.

Nemesis reaches behind the corpse’s head to attempt to turn it over. His hand brushes over something slightly raised, and he frowns to himself. The shape is so familiar he must have it memorized by now.

He gestures Percy over, mutters “quickly”, and lifts the corpse.

Immediately, Percy sees what he sees and snaps a picture. Nemesis lowers the corpse back down with a resigned sigh. As he releases its hand, he notices a set of spade cuff-links.

“Your Lordship, might I have a moment?”

Vigenere nods. “Of course.”

Callie pulls on Nemesis’s arm to get his attention. “Do you mind if I look at the corpse a bit more? I need to see for myself.”

“Oh course I don’t mind.” He looks at her, reassuringly, and she nods, an inscrutable look on her face, before rushing off to kneel beside it.

He watches her for a moment before turning back to Vigenere. There’s something so strangely off-putting about her, a cold anxiety that threatens to give him chills. Something is wrong, and he doesn’t know what it is, or how he could even begin to fix it.

So he focuses on what he can work on - on Vigenere and on Percy, standing before him. Percy gestures to the two to follow him, and they do, synchronized footsteps with the sound of Vigenere’s cane clacking against the ground to break up the rhythm.

They sit down on a bench by the river, removed from the people. Nemesis sat on one edge, and Vigenere on another, leaning heavily on his cane. Percy sat in the middle, tiredly sinking in against the wood.
“Do you ever get tired, Nemesis? Stuff like this, corpses and everything being connected?” He asks.

“Oh, all the bloody time. Best not to think about it too long, or I’ll get even more sick of it all.”

“My condolences,” Vigenere says darkly. “I’m beginning to tire of it as well, but it only ever gets worse.”

“Well, not necessarily. You’re new to it all, aren’t you? Been off at school the whole of your life. I know there’s societies, and fraternities and such, but no one really gets up to significant espionage in school. Not like this. People don’t... die, usually.”

“If only,” Vigenere chuckles. “But you’re right. It’s not the same at university. I almost miss it. Only caring about how I was going to do on the next practical.”

The three sit in silence for a moment, before Nemesis picks up the conversation. “Well, I think we’re all of the same mind as to what happened to that poor man?”

“Are we?” Vigenere asks.

“Are we?” Percy echoes.

Nemesis looks at the both of them, and the harbor visible beyond. “I don’t know. Are we?”

“He had the same symptoms as Elizabeth Calloway,” Percy says. “Dead without having died. Just...dead. With the veins.”

“With the veins,” Vigenere agrees. “I don’t recognize the symptoms. I never got a look at Calloway’s corpse, but in a way, exactly how either of them were killed doesn’t matter so much as who did it. Did you see the symbol on his neck?”

Percy silently produces the photograph he’d taken. The spade of the Obscura Actors’ Guild burned heavily into the back of the dead man’s neck. Nemesis thinks it might as well be burnt into his eyes at this point.

Vigenere looks seriously at Nemesis. “So he was killed on society business, probably. Such a strange manner of death...such a specific manner of death...and the brand on top of it. I can’t imagine it’s anything else.”

“He was killed by Tobias Fitzroy,” Nemesis says outright.

“Tobias Fitzroy? Kill his own man?”

“A deserter or a double-agent or some other sort of liability, I reckon. Same as Lizzie Calloway was killed for being a double-agent.”

Vigenere’s eyes widen. “Calloway was-”

“She was,” Percy adds. “We’re past the point of doubt on that.”

“Did you check him for symbols of other societies?” Nemesis asks.

“We did, yes,” Vigenere answers. “And, to the best of what we can tell, he’s only a member of the Actors’ Guild.”

“A deserter, then. You know how furiously they go after them. Can’t have anyone knowing the
secrets you’d only disclose to a member, can you?”

“The members aren’t much in the know, though,” Percy cuts in. “At least, not the ones I’ve interviewed.”

“Still more in the know than the average person. Not information you want getting out.”

“I suppose not,” Percy agrees.

“Again, though, doesn’t really matter why he was killed so much as who did it, right?” Nemesis looks to Vigenere. “Do you know anything about him? A name? Occupation?”

Vigenere shakes his head.

“Oh! If you need to know that sort of thing, I have contacts!” Percy offers.

“Ah...you do?”

“Yeah! Well, I work for the newspaper, um...actually, you know that!”

“I do know that,” Vigenere agrees bemusedly. “The Electric Sun, was it?”

“Oh! You remembered!”

“Of course. I, um...don’t take this the wrong way, but I hear the Sun is pretty much owned by the Correspondents, isn’t it?”

Percy tenses visibly. “Um, I mean. Not really. There’s agents, but - I mean, there’s agents from everywhere.”

“I see.” Vigenere nods. “And...I’ve been thinking about you, actually?”

“Oh, you have?” Percy is so nervous Nemesis can almost feel it coming off him in waves. He supposes this is the baron of Semper. He has every reason to be.

“Yes. Chase, Chase...I know I’ve heard that name before.”

“Oh! You might know my father, Albert Chase...he’s a barrister! I mean, wait, you definitely know him. He’s doing something involving your father’s will, isn’t he?”

Vigenere’s eyes narrow. He recognizes what Percy is talking about, Nemesis can tell. “Oh, him. Yes. He’s the state-appointed lawyer for my father’s estate. He’s so different from you I didn’t immediately make the connection.”

“People tend not to,” Percy says sheepishly. “He’s a little stern, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know about that. Not entirely unlike a professor. He’s certainly drier than you are - not that that’s difficult.”

“Haha, yeah. That sounds like him.”

Vigenere sits in silence for a moment before nodding again. “Okay. I’ll want you to get on that, Chase. Good to identify the corpse before the police decide it’s un-identifiable. You know how it is. Someone just accidentally dropped the corpse in a wood-chipper and now we can’t possibly identify it. Just can’t be helped.”
“On it!” Percy jumps eagerly to his feet, bowing as he leaves. “You can count on me, Your Lordship - I promise I won’t let you down!”

“Right. Don’t do that,” Vigenere agrees, perhaps too softly for Percy to hear, as he stares at his retreating back.

“You wanted him out of the way so we could talk,” Nemesis observes the moment Percy is properly out of earshot.

“Great job, detective. Care for a drink? Of tea, I mean.”

“I could go for a cup.”

The two stand. Vigenere leans hard on his cane. He seems to notice Nemesis staring, because he looks back, tired. “You’re just dying to ask me what happened, right?”

“A little bit.”

“It’s okay. People don’t like to admit it, usually, but I think everyone wonders. Broken kneecap, never healed right. Arthritis, too. Not a good combination. I’ve always been a bit on the frail side.”

Nemesis isn’t sure how to respond. Vigenere picks up on this, because he speaks again. “You wanted to talk to me about something.”

“I did,” Nemesis agrees, “But let’s save it for after we’ve gotten our drinks. You want to talk to me about something too, right? No need to make it two separate conversations.”

“I suppose I don’t disagree.” Something about Vigenere seems off, tense.

They arrive at The Bitter End. The waitress at the counter immediately recognizes Vigenere, scrambling to fulfill his order. The chaos extends to the kitchen, where everyone seems to be completely absorbed in his order, forgetting all the other customers’. Nemesis and Vigenere are lead to the quietest, most secure booth in the very back of the cafe.

“Does it ever get tiring?” Nemesis asks. “Having people react like this when you walk in, I mean.”

“‘Get tiring’ implies it was ever not obnoxious.”

“Fair.” He leans on his hands, tented in front of him. “So.”

“So,” Vigenere agrees, unfolding his napkin and tensely folding it over his lap.


“Indeed they did,” Vigenere agrees.

“We should talk about them, probably.”

“I suppose so.”

The two stare at each other in silence as their drinks are delivered.

Vigenere sighs heavily, brings his teacup to his lips, and takes a long sip from it. Nemesis can smell the scent of darjeeling wafting over to him. Finally, Vigenere speaks, not removing the teacup from in front of his mouth. “Are you going to tell me what’s on your mind or not, Jones?”
“I will do,” Nemesis says, though he notes with a hint of irritation that Vigenere, again, sounds precisely like a schoolteacher admonishing him. “I failed to stop the robbery last night.”

“You did. I’m not going to give up on this partnership because of that, though. Everyone fails occasionally.”

“Not me.”

Vigenere quirks his eyebrow. When he speaks, he sounds amused. “Oh?”

“Think about it, your lordship. If I recovered the Star, that would open it to another attempt. If I make it seem like the Star has been stolen, then they go after the thief instead. We’re left to figure out where to go. We can leave the defensive and actually take initiative, for once.”

“That’s a surprisingly solid plan.”

“What’s that meant to imply? ‘Surprisingly’?”

“I’m just saying, I’m surprised. I genuinely thought you had failed to stop Nocturne, and I was ready to make my peace with that. When did you come up with this plan?”

“About right when I put it into action.”

Vigenere scoffs, though it doesn’t seem un-affectionate. “I can’t pretend to understand. I try to never do anything on impulse. When I do, it tends to...well, be regrettable. But if your instincts guide you that well, who am I to complain?”

“You’re the baron of Semper.”

“That I am,” he chuckles.

Nemesis doesn’t say that his reliance on instinct is probably a bad thing, though he certainly thinks it. Instead, he sips his tea.

“So,” Vigenere says.

“So,” Nemesis echoes.

“You’re going to do something with that diamond, right? Or were you just planning to leave it on your mantle and show it off to guests?”

“Now there’s an idea~” Nemesis cuts himself off, before Vigenere can mistake his joke for sincerity. “No, no. I’m going to have Theory look over it, figure out what’s up with it, why everyone wants it.”

“Theory?” Vigenere frowns. “Is that a person?”

“Oh, er, yes. My landlady. Theodora Hayes.”

His face clouds with concern. “Theodora...Hayes?”

“It’s what I said.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”
“Okay. It’s just...isn’t she Ohstanzia and Xavier Hayes’s child?”

“Might be. Is that a bad thing?”

“I hesitate to just outright say ‘yes’, but...” Vigenere sighs, leans down on his tented hands, and looks quite tense. “...well, you don’t know about their experiments, do you?”

“Theory mentioned offhand something about them, once or twice.”

“The things the Hayeses studied were hugely unethical.”

“I gathered.”

Another sigh. “I used to have to read some textbooks they wrote, you know. For classes and such. Ohstanzia’s writing was so disturbingly detached, while Xavier’s was unsettlingly gleeful even when he was talking about horrific subjects. It didn’t surprise me to learn that their experiments had a body count.”

“Terrible,” Nemesis says, not voicing the first thought which came to his mind - that Theory seems to take after her mother - for fear that it might seem insensitive.

“You don’t seem overly concerned.”

“Perhaps if I actually had any firsthand experience I’d be as disturbed as you are. For now, though, I trust Theory, and it’s rare for me to trust anyone, so I should hope that counts for something.”

“Just because you trust rarely, doesn’t mean you trust correctly, Jones. You certainly distrust people who are perfectly trustworthy. I imagine making the reverse mistake is possible, too.”

Nemesis feels his heart sink, because he knows Vigenere is right. “...I reckon so.”

“But I’ll go along with it, because you seem otherwise capable. Just make sure you keep an eye on her activities, if you can. What were you...you and her planning to do with the Star, anyway? Just have her look over it? Run tests?”

“I suppose. I don’t actually know exactly what she’s doing. She’s a talented artificer, and I know plenty but I would never claim to know as much as her - especially about this.”

“Honestly, you might as well claim to know more than her. She’s not university educated, is she? No part of respectable society would ever humor her if she were to arrive on their doorstep.”

“She owns a bookstore. And she was taught by her parents, I surmised.” Nemesis frowns. “Listen to yourself, sir. You sound like a complete knob.”

“A...knob?” Vigenere thinks it over for a moment. “Yes, I suppose I did just sound quite elitist.”

Nemesis hides his surprise. It’s not like the aristocracy to display any degree of self-awareness.

“However,” Vigenere continues, “she’s still a potential danger, intelligence or no. Keep an eye on her. Possibly two eyes, I’m not actually sure how many you have.”

Nemesis lifts his bang to display his other eye, completely intact and functional. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Well, good. I can’t imagine why you wear those bangs like that. You have a nice face.”
“Er...I do?” He’ll have to ask Elias later which looks better. Perhaps it’s been long enough that wearing his hair out of his face again wouldn’t be too awful an idea.

“Yes, anyway,” Vigenere continues. “Don’t take anything she says at face value. She could easily be lying to you.”

“She couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

Nemesis puts his compass on the table with a satisfying thunk, and Vigenere looks closer at it, adjusting his spectacles. “Oh, wow. May I touch it?”

“Absolutely not.”

Vigenere chuckles. “Awful prickly, Jones. Any authority figure but me might find you unbearably obnoxious, you know.”

“I’ve been informed.”

“I’ll be off now. Important business to attend to. Keep in touch.”

“Important business?”

Vigenere’s face sours. “…taxes.”

“Ah. Godspeed.”

Vigenere almost makes it to the door before looking back. “Oh. Do tell your reporter friend that I’m willing to let him interview me. He fascinates me.”

And then the door closes behind him with a quiet jingle.

Nemesis, on the other hand, stays, placing a brief call to Callie on the expensive mobile phone he’d bought for her to inform her where he’d be if she needed him. Conveniently for him, his past self has scheduled his day well. He doesn’t have long to wait until Shuai Zhou’s form is visible through the fogged-up window, dressed in a dark gray overcoat with the collar popped over her face, oversized sunglasses and a fedora obscuring her features. She looks ridiculous.

She sits across from Nemesis with a heavy sigh. “Did I keep you waiting long?”

“Not too long, don’t worry about it.”

She nods, seeming unconvinced. Something about her is deeply subdued - bogged down, as if her coat is soaking wet and she just can’t seem to support its weight.

“You heard,” she says.

“I’ve heard a lot of things.”

“You’ve heard about the disappearance.”

He frowns. “…haven’t, actually.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “I thought you knew everything.”
“Sorry to disappoint.”

The two stare silently at each other.

“I figured I was giving you cue to elaborate on that,” he says flatly after a moment.

“Okay. Let me order something to drink first. I’m so stressed, you know. I feel absolutely parched. I need some caffeine or I’ll collapse on my feet.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Implying the caffeine wouldn’t make you more likely to pass out on your feet?”

“Shut up,” she mutters.

The eyebrow creeps ever-father up his face, like a caterpillar making its way up a wall. “Ms. Zhou, need I remind you that you were the one who called me out here? I am, you know, free to refuse my services to you, if you insist on being rude to the person whose help you are soliciting.”

“Oh, was that rude?” For a moment her eyes flash with something dangerous - a pent-up and restrained anger. It’s all Nemesis can do to keep from flinching back. But the moment passes in the blink of an eye, and she seems all back to her normal self. “I suppose it was. Forgive me. I haven’t had my coffee.”

Nemesis sighs heavily. “...Ms. Zhou, I can tell you’re an emotional wreck, but I’d rather you not take it out on me. Besides the obvious issue of respect, I’m also very tired and nineteen years old, and solving about three murders and multiple disappearances all at once, so forgive me if I’ve little patience or tolerance. If you’d like a therapist, I can probably direct you to someone who could direct you to one.”

“I don’t need a therapist -” the anger flares again, before subsiding. “I just...have to call in sick, that’s all, because the next time I see Morgana or Lusitania’s faces I’ll punch them in otherwise.”

“I fully relate, but see, what you’re doing here is-”

“Do you ever just get so angry at someone that you can’t look at them without wanting to beat their face into a bloody pulp and laugh hysterically? Don’t you think it would be so cathartic to be covered in their blood, to see what’s left of them, and not be able to identify it? To feel their bones crack beneath your hands?”

“Ms. Zhou, this is a public restaurant, and I am not your therapist.”

“Oh, right.” And immediately, the anger is gone again. “Sorry.”

“I do know how you feel, though. If you’d be willing to indulge in a little gossip, I should like to know why it is in particular you hate those two.”

“Oh. You...you do.”

“Lusitania Fitzroy is an unpleasant person, and she happens to be an unpleasant person coercing my best friend into a marriage he’s not thrilled about. Yeah, I know how you feel.”

“Well, yes, I suppose...” she sighs, brushing herself off with a deliberacy Nemesis hadn’t expected from her.

“You’re stressed,” he observes.
“Extremely,” she agrees.

“I can’t pretend I don’t understand why. But, back to business...you mentioned that there’s been a disappearance.”

“I did. A man by the name of John Donahue- he was a tailor, specialized in costumes, and I know he was a close associate of Fitzroy’s. He was a great admirer of his, and of Morgana’s, and now he’s...normally he would be around at least once every three or so days, but I haven’t seen him in over a month.”

“What did he look like?” Nemesis asks.

“He was...he was pale, long dark hair, blue eyes. Handsome, very handsome, always so neat and meticulous with his appearance…”

“Ah.” Nemesis suspects he knows precisely what Donahue looks like.

“And I don’t know if it was Fitzroy who killed him, but I don’t think it was. Because…” she leans in closer, whispering in Nemesis’s ear. “I think he was involved with Ozymandias Nocturne.”

Nemesis’s eyes widen. “Hm?”

“I saw him working on things, sometimes...and I didn’t get a really good look from the images in the papers, but Nocturne’s outfit...I recognized the mask as his work.”

“Ah,” Nemesis says, flatly. So Donahue and Nocturne were involved. An attempt to make sure Nocturne’s identity was a secret even from those who helped to bring it about? He isn’t sure, but it’s the best theory he has at the moment.

He sighs. “Well, if you...if you want my honest advice, Ms. Zhou? Get out of town. Don’t come back until you know Fitzroy’s dead, and the Guild is disbanded. If you really at all think they’d be willing to go after you, you should avoid putting yourself in a position where that’s possible. Go on a nice extended vacation overseas and forget about all of this. Come back when the coast is clear.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking, as well,” she admits.

“And?”

“And I have tickets booked already to visit my family in Guo Ji Bei. I don’t think they’ll care enough to go overseas to kill me...especially if they take it as surrender. But, I…”

“You?”

“I asked Walter to come with me. To...leave everything behind and run away. He told me...he told me he wanted to stay here, with Morgana, and he was so uncharacteristically rude. I…”

“I’m sure there’s nice boys in Guo Ji Bei,“ Nemesis says flatly. “You want my honest advice? There’s no point. He’s not interested - give up. You don’t need him to be happy.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“You need to get out of the country to be alive.” He reaches across the table to flick her forehead, and watches her eyes widen with shock. The fact that he’s the one being hired, not the other way around, gives him leeway to reprimand his clients, and he relishes every bit of it. “You’ll thank me later. Do keep in touch, dear.”
He stands, leaving her with the bill.

Callie is waiting outside for him, looking solemn as before. He puts a hand gently on her shoulder as he walks past her.

She tenses, glancing down at the ground. “How did your...business go?”


“I didn’t find anything. I looked for so long and all I saw was a corpse.”

Nemesis sighs. “What were you hoping to see, if not a corpse?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Something other than a dead person. Something that was going to make me be less upset that he was dead. I never considered death when I was living with Art. Now I have to, and it’s nauseating me.”

“Nauseating you? Why?”

“I can’t explain it. My head can’t stop spinning, and I feel ill. Death is truly something that happens and can’t be avoided. People just...stop existing entirely?”

Nemesis frowns. “Would you like to sit down? Some iced tea to steady you, maybe? I was going to go to Burke’s today, but if you aren’t feeling up to it you’re free to stay home. I’m worried about you, Callie.”

She sits on a bench, and folds her hands neatly over her lap. As he often is, Nemesis is shocked by the smallness of her posture, in contrast to the largeness of her personality. “You really care about me, don’t you?” she says, smiling. “I don’t think Art would have been nearly as patient in this circumstance. I’ll have some tea, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind, my dear.” He rushes to buy some from the nearest street vendor, fretting the entire time. When he returns, Callie’s smile widens.

“Thank you, Nemesis.”

“Don’t mention it. Would you like to talk about what’s troubling you, then? I’m willing to lend an ear, as always.”

She nods, taking a long sip from her iced tea. By the time she’s done it’s half-emptied, and her breathing has returned to its normal rate. She begins to speak, in a voice slightly less muted: “Nemesis, what happens when we die?”

He freezes, not allowing his hesitation to hold him that way for too long. “That’s the cruel joke of it, isn’t it? None of us know, and yet all of us experience it. The leading theory is that the mind in question ceases to exist at all.”

“I can’t wrap my head around what that would be like. Not existing.”

“It wouldn’t be like anything. You wouldn’t exist.”

She lowers her head. “I don’t understand that.”

“I don’t think anyone fully does. Human brains are wired to understand a limited number of situations. Nonexistence is one that we can’t. Just like the concept of infinity, it’s too much for us.”
“It seems like the worst thing imaginable.”

“And yet, no matter how much we fear it, everyone dies one day. There’s nothing we can do to stop it, or even stall it. We can barely even control how it happens. Whether it’s honorable or miserable, it happens, and afterwards, it doesn’t even matter to us that we lived at all, right?”

He sighs heavily. “But we don’t truly know that we cease to exist after we die. The Reverenti believe that after death the animus is absorbed into a sort of slurry, and that all consciousness becomes one, merged with the Great Old Ones. There are those who believe the animus lives on intangibly, simply observing. I don’t know if I believe any of that. But the people left behind live on, and their memories of you do, as well. As far as I’m concerned, that’s the only life after death worth thinking about, because it’s the only one that’s sure.”

She nods. “I understand. But that doesn’t make it easier to comprehend, or think about.”

“We all have this sort of realization, when we’re exposed to death. Some earlier than others. Listen, I was going to go to Burke, see if he’s had a look at the corpse, but if that’d be too much for you you’re welcome to stay back at Beaumort’s.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she admits. “I don’t think I can handle seeing Charles Dreadful talk about dead people right now. He’s so flippant about it…”

“You say that, but I bet he’s even more scared of dying than you are. Or else he wouldn’t be a necromancer, would he? He’s just learned to cover it up with denial and false bravado.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

She stands up from the bench, swaying slightly. “I feel sorry for him, then. Charles Dreadful.”

“Me too. I’ll walk you home, come on.”

Almost immediately after he drops her off, Percy spots him on the street and waves him down.

“Is Callie okay?” He asks. “She looked, uh, really…”

“She’s got the morbs.”

“Ah…” Percy trails off. “Did something happen?”

“The concept of death happened. In the abstract sense.”

“Ah. I guess that’d give anyone the morbs.” He awkwardly coughs. “Anyway, I got a name on the corpse. Positive ID from one Moth Kilby. Doesn’t seem completely trustworthy, but also seemed terrified of me for some reason. Maybe thought I was going to torture them for information?”

Nemesis frowns. “I can’t imagine anyone getting that impression off you.”

“That’s what I thought, too!”

“I’ll have to look into them. Anyway, John Donahue, right?”

Percy deflates. “No matter how fast I work, Nemesis Jones works faster, huh? Yeah, that’s what I was here to tell you.”

“Don’t feel bad. I had a few coincidences work in my favor.” He pats Percy on the shoulder.
“There’s plenty about this situation that’s still really weird. He worked with the Obscura, though, so the theory of him being a Guild defect seems extremely solid.”

“I’ll look more into his background. What about you?”

“I’m off to Burke’s. You want to come with?”

Percy shakes his head. “Sorry, I think I’m just a little too squeamish. You know how I was last time. I’d just get in the way.”

“Fair entirely. I’ll keep you in the loop, Chase. Don’t worry about it for a moment.”

“I won’t be,” Percy says, with a reassuring smile Nemesis can see from a mile away is badly plastered on. A quick glance at his compass the moment Percy is out of eyesight proves the same.

Nemesis finds himself worrying about both Callie and Percy the rest of the way to Burke’s. Caring about people, he decides, is occasionally a curse - especially when one is an emotional incompetent with no idea of what he could ever do to help.

Burke opens the door on the second knock. Evidently, he’d been waiting for Nemesis, because he doesn’t look in the least shocked to see him.

“Same situation as last time, I’m assuming,” Nemesis says briskly. “Me being here is just a formality, really, at this point.”

“Not quite. Come on in, Nemesis. Let me make you tea.”

Nemesis enters. Burke’s horrible little office almost feels homey at this point. A brief flash of memory reminds him that Arthur Jones was once his student. Had he felt the same, stopping by to talk to him after classes?

The office looks much the same as it did the last time Nemesis had been here - a little more disheveled, if anything. The air smells of disinfectant, and Nemesis is disturbed by how familiar it is. On one of the operating tables lies John Donahue, looking, as before, entirely dead. Nemesis leans over his corpse, brushes his hair out of his face.

His eyes are closed. Probably for the best.

Burke leans over Nemesis’s shoulder. “Quite disturbing, isn’t it, when one really thinks about it? It’s unsettling even to me, to see a corpse so lifelike. It reminds me that life and death are closer intertwined than we generally care to think.”

“He looks like he’s at rest, at least,” Nemesis says, though his words feel empty. “Not that he’s actually feeling anything.”

“Whatever helps you make your peace with it.”

“Any differences from the last one?”

“Less trauma, obviously. Calloway was restrained before her death, and he wasn’t. Do you, er, have a name for this one, by the way?”

“John Donahue,” Nemesis says deadly.

“Donahue...right. Donahue wasn’t restrained at all. Moreso than Calloway, even, the only
ascertainable cause of death is that he simply stopped being alive.”

“Which is very worrying.”

“Indeed.”

Nemesis frowns. “You don’t have any theories you didn’t have last time, right?”

“Afraid not, son. Nothing to speak of. I’ve been looking into it, but…”

“You can’t find anything at all?”

“I can’t,” he agrees, hanging his head. “Whatever information is out there, it’s not available to me.”

And then the door bursts open, and Nemesis sees Charles Dreadful rush through it, looking disheveled and shabby and far more like he does walled up in the laboratory than he would ever present in public. “Professor, professor!” he cries. “Have you seen Jones? Oh, Jones. Hello.”

“Hello,” Nemesis says, stepping away from the ever-staring corpse of John Donahue. “You were looking for me?”

“That’s what my speech would imply. Oh, goodness, dead person.”

“Well, what did you expect to see here, precisely?” Burke chuckles lightly at his own joke.


“You think I’m not trying?” Nemesis asks, rolling his eyes.

“Well, no, of course you are. I’m simply all tired of it. Feels like everything in the news has been espionage - how pointless. No one even knows what their own goals are and here they are risking and losing limb and life all in the pursuit of that thrice-damned something.” He crosses his arms, grumbling. “I say, if you give everything up in pursuit of a goal, it had best be your own goal and one you’re thoroughly sure of. Idiots, the lot of them. If I didn’t value life as highly as I do I’d almost not care that they’re killing each other.”

“People are just trying to keep themselves afloat - or, at least, they think they are. It’s not really each of their individual faults they’ve been sucked into this system, is it? Even if they’re perpetuating it, they’re not the ones creating it. They’re not the ones with malicious intent - least, not most of ‘em.”

Charles sighs. “Oh, you’re probably right, but I can’t help but despise it. If someone’s committing crimes, risking their life, actually dying - it had best be for a reason, you know, and a damned good one at that. I don’t believe in killing the vast majority of the time, but if I were to meet one of those people at the top of the ladder pulling these poor people into their sick lifestyle I’d throttle them myself.”

“You and me both,” Nemesis agrees.

“And I,” chimes in Burke, though Nemesis can see his worried expression. Of course, he had himself been a founding member of one of these societies. No matter the activities, he guilt he feels must be tremendous.

Viktor Graves had died under him, Nemesis remembers. And that itself had been the breaking
point. For a necromancer - one who is devoted to reversing death - to cause the death of
another...he can’t imagine it feels particularly good.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Charles says. “You know I don’t mean you. You’re not like that.”

“By all means, Charles - I deserve no favoritism. I did the things I did. I strive to do better now. As
long as we are still alive, there is nothing that cannot be fixed. It is only death which is the end.”
Burke places a gentle hand atop Charles’s shoulder, comfortingly.

The three stand in silence for a time. Nemesis feels ill at ease, as if he’s disturbing a very personal
and private thing. A young adult’s relationship with the teacher who serves as his surrogate father
and inspiration is, in Nemesis’s eye, of great importance and not to be trifled with. Still, he remains
in place.

The worst thing is that he’s heard these words before, from a different source. From a shorter, less
imposing man, who was speaking to Nemesis instead of Charles. How much had Arthur Jones
truly learned from Aleister Burke? Nemesis would wager it’s quite a bit.

“Right,” Charles says finally, sighing. “Jones, I’ve a person I need to introduce you to, who I
reckon can help you with your work. You might find him unsavory, but I assure you his heart is in
the right place, even if he’s a bit...rough around the edges.”

To Nemesis, that sounds like a way someone might describe him. Before he can comment on it,
though, Burke chimes in.

“Charles has a...preference for roguish types. It surprised me too, but it is what it is. I generally
trust his taste in people, so don’t be too alarmed.”

Charles has gone slightly pink in the face, not meeting either of their eyes. “I do not have a
preference. It isn’t a preference if there’s only one of them, and don’t you dare tell Jones, he’s
smart enough to figure it out on his own or else he’s not meant to know it!”

Nemesis can feel the embarrassment radiating off him in waves. It’s almost amusing.

“Don’t you worry,” he reassures Charles. “I doubt he’s worse than me.”

Charles’s expression shifts to one of mild discomfort. “Oh, he’s worse than you. Trust me. He’s
like you if you were around twice as rude as you are now, loved to steal, and had a gun.”

Nemesis produces his revolver from his pocket.

“Oh, stars damn you.”

He grins and pockets it again. “Really, though, I’ve dealt with plenty unpleasant people. ‘Less your
mystery rogue is Felix Gallows himself?’

“N-No! No, goodness, absolutely not - though I do like the name ‘Felix’, I could be attracted to a
Felix - not that Felix, though, he seems like the type to blackmail his own friends and family.”

“He is.”

“Lovely-sounding guy.”

“He isn’t.”

“I don’t like to be blackmailed, Jones.”
“Good thing I’m not blackmailing you.”

“Great. Then we’re on the same page.”

“Indeed,” Nemesis agrees, with a small smile.

Charles, seeming to consider the conversation now concluded, crosses to Donahue’s corpse and looms over it, brushing his hair out of his face with a frown. “Nice cheekbones on this one. Shame all I heard of him was that he was a wonderfully unpleasant person. People’d kill for cheekbones like that.”

“Maybe someone did,” Nemesis jokes. “Really, though, your cheekbones are rather nice, and this is a very strange conversation.”

“Happens, when you work with the dead,” Burke says.

“Sorry, Jones.” Charles smiles apologetically.

“No worries. Just be careful about saying stuff like that in front of Callie or Percy - they’re way more squeamish than me.”

He sighs, turning towards the door. “It’s been nice seeing you both, actually, but I ought to be heading out - it’s been lovely. Dreadful, drop by Beaumont’s tomorrow, will you? And you can introduce me to this rogue of yours.”

“Yes, yes. Very well. I’ve got to return a book I borrowed from her anyway - goodnight, Jones.”

That’s right - Theory and Charles allegedly know each other, though it’s not something Nemesis often remembers. He wonders what a conversation between those two would look like. He supposes he’ll know soon enough.

The wind outside is light and cool and pleasant. He smiles to himself, even though someone has died, and he heads home.
Theory is only mildly disgruntled when she sees Charles Dreadful at the door of Beaumort’s. She lets him in, muttering snidely at Nemesis that he’d best stop inviting people to her bookstore on such short notice, and he takes his top hat off by the door with a soft smile.

“Lovely to see you both,” he says warmly. “Is Callie here as well?”

“She’s not feeling quite up to dick,” Nemesis says, right as Callie walks down the stairs. When she sees him, he can tell she’s taken aback. He was just talking about how strange and pitiable Charles was yesterday, so her reaction is entirely in order. He feels a stab of guilt.

She manages to have far more decorum than him, though, bowing politely to Charles. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Dreadful.”

“Er...Charles is fine, and, actually, it’s doctor Dreadful if you’re going to be that way,” he responds, distinctly uncomfortable.

“Didn’t realize you had a doctorate,” Nemesis says. “How old are you, even? You look far too young to have a doctorate.”

“Twenty-five, but I’m what you’d consider a prodigy, Jones.”

“Me too, mate. Nothing special about that. Everyone and their uncle’s a prodigy.” He hides his shock at Charles’s age - he really doesn’t look any older than twenty-two.

“Dreadful got a medical degree and never shuts up about it,” Theory provides. “And he doesn’t even use it. He studies necromancy instead.”

“I use my medical degree,” he says defensively. “I volunteer. Just because I haven’t sold my soul to the Domus doesn’t mean-”

“No-one cares,” Theory says, and Charles glares indignantly at her but says nothing.

“You look young for twenty-five,” Nemesis observes.

“Does he?” Callie asks.


“Ah, yes...beyond the typical, my family tends to age very slowly, slower the more they use artifice. My father still looks like he’s in his late twenties, even though he’s around twice that old.”

Ah. Nemesis had questioned Dorian Dreadful’s relationship to Charles, but now that he’s said that it’s difficult to mistake. He’d assumed someone so young-looking couldn’t be Charles’s father, but if he’s actually far older, that changes everything.

“I, er...about your father. I met someone at the gala, and...”

“He was there, was he? Eugh.” Charles rolls his eyes. “We’re estranged, before you say anything. We haven’t spoken in almost ten years, not since I left for uni, and I’m not eager to speak to him again. It’s nothing particularly complex - he wasn’t around when I was a child, and I don’t feel the same connection to him I reckon most feel to their fathers. No need to be concerned.”
Nemesis glances at his compass. Charles isn’t lying to his face, but he’s not telling the full truth either. If he thinks about it for a moment, though, he doubts it’s intentional. A person’s relationship with their father is a very personal thing, especially when it’s bad - he’d be better served not prying.

“Would you like to sit down? Some tea?” he asks Charles.

Charles grins in response. “Thank you! That’d be lovely.”

Theory pulls out a chair for him, and another for herself, and a third for Callie, and a stool from downstairs for Nemesis. Nemesis, meanwhile, puts a kettle on and stares at Charles. The doctor seems muted after the earlier conversation, even as he reaches down to pet Monty as she rubs against his feet, remarking with less vigor than typical on the tenacity of life. So his father is truly a sensitive subject.

And what is someone with a dead mother and an absent father if not an orphan?

“It must seem selfish to you,” he finally says, awkward. “You’re an orphan, and here I am, complaining about my father. How thoughtless and unpleasant I must seem to you.”

“Not at all. We all have our own lives, our own problems. Sometimes it’s better to be alone than around bad people.”

“Better to be alone, you say…” Charles looks down at the table, clearly thinking, but says nothing more on the subject.

“Did you enjoy the book I lent you?” Theory cuts in rudely.

“Oh, yes! Yes, I did...it was for a problem I was working on, where I was attempting to work with corpses that had already partially decomposed. Namely, the alchemical cloning of decayed tissues into something resembling live tissue…”

She quirks an eyebrow. “And what conclusion did you reach? Is it possible?”

He scoffs. “Of course it’s possible. There’s nothing in the world that isn’t possible with enough effort. Did I figure it out, you mean? Almost. What I found was that there were generally tiny scraps of something living within the dead, and that if I physically increased the size I could produce scraps of living tissue which could then be cloned...though there’s an impressive amount of clean-up work required to make this work on any large scale.”

“Just artificially hone in on the living tissue bits and expand them to cover the dead ones. That way you use every bit of material you have, and there’s no clean-up. It should be possible, albeit tricky, but for someone who studies both medicine and artifice and is very aware of the differences between living and dead tissue...”

His eyes widen. “You’re a genius.”

“Oh, I know,” she says, not especially smugly - just as a neutral statement of fact.

Charles is already on his feet, looking enraptured by the realization. “Oh, it was right there in front of my face! I can do so much with this! Entire new bodies - this will revolutionize the making of homunculi! This is going to be the most important thing I’ve worked on since I wrote my doctoral thesis!”

She scoffs. “Your thesis was underwhelming, by the way. It was all other people’s research and not
nearly enough of your own ideas and experiments."

“Do you not know what a thesis is?” He shakes his head. “Regardless, Ms. Hayes, I - and I’m sure Dr. Burke as well - would love to speak to you more about this over a nice glass of wine and a few autopsies some-day, because we’d be fools to not recognize your potential as a researcher, but right now I’ve other priorities. I’d like to steal Jones for a while, if you don’t mind too terribly.”

She rolls her eyes. “Please, by all means, keep him if you want.”

“Love you too, Theers,” Nemesis grumbles, standing up with a sigh. He gestures to Callie, who puts on her coat and follows after him.

Charles puts his hat back on, and smiles as he holds the front door for both of them. If anything, he at least seems to have enjoyed his talk with Theory. Nemesis shudders to think of what it would be like to watch them converse for any longer. He fancies himself smarter than most, and better-read, but he’s no academic, and he’s certainly no doctor. Theory Hayes and Charles Dreadful seem to be in a league above him.

“Are you really trying to make a homunculus?” Callie asks as they exit.

“Not trying, I have. Just not a particularly good one, ever.”

“Forgive me for asking,” Nemesis asks, feeling spectacularly dumb, “but why would that be so difficult? What makes a homunculus different from, say, an automaton?”

Charles scoffs. “Sorry, sorry. It’s not that silly of a question to someone outside the field, actually.”

Not a silly question for someone who’s stupid. Nemesis’ face is burning. This is why he hates being around people smarter than him.

Charles continues, seemingly not noticing Nemesis’s shame. “An automaton is a collection of circuits and gears which moves in a way imitative of life through artifice. They are not sentient. I presume your only up-close experience with automata is Dr. Apollinaire’s creation?”

Nemesis nods.

“Mallory is a more convincing imitation of sapience than I’d imagined possible, but they’re not really even an automaton anymore. They’re a homunculus with an automaton’s nervous system wired into it - as for their consciousness, I can’t say. They certainly seem to feel - do they experience, or is it just a convincingly programmed imitation? Mallory is the only one who will ever know that.”

“An automaton inside a homunculus…” Callie frowns. “So a human body being piloted by a machine?”

“Just about.”

“That’s...unnatural. Unsettling. That shouldn’t happen,” she says firmly.

Charles smiles. “Why not, dear? Flesh is merely flesh and the mechanical is merely mechanical. Neither is sacred, and neither is profane. At the fusion of alchemy, mechanics, artifice, and medicine lies the secret to immortality, they say. Hence, why most necromancers study a secondary discipline.”

“This is all very fascinating, Dreadful, but have you implied homunculi are fully sentient?”
“Not yet, but…” He frowns. “To begin with, a homunculus is a type of construct. A construct is anything made purely through alchemy or artifice - something not organically of the world.”

“But you can’t make something from nothing, right?” Callie cuts in.

“Common misconception, that. From absolutely nothing, yes, but if you’ve a base to work with you can build anything onto it. And that includes the flesh. Alchemy studies the changing of matter, but it can only go so far. It cannot create impulses where there are none. Artifice, on the other hand…”

“Yes, it changes absolutely everything, doesn’t it?” Nemesis agrees, bitterly. “So Baron is a construct, then? And you re-animated him through artifice.”

“Precisely. But we’ve never managed to so much as reproduce a human consciousness. They can learn to mimic human consciousness, but it’s not the same.”

“Why not?” Callie asks.

“Well, you see,” and here Charles launches into an explanation so full of jargon and technical speech that Nemesis can’t begin to understand it, and Callie looks like her head is spinning, too. Charles, unaware entirely, rambles on, and he seems happy enough that it feels mean to interrupt, despite how obnoxious he is and how impossible it is to get a single word in edgewise.

“If that makes sense,” he finishes, and Nemesis smiles politely even though it hadn’t made any sense at all. They’ve gotten all the way to the Lethe in the time it took him to explain whatever it was he’d explained, and Charles gestures them across the bridge. It’s fairly empty today, and the petals are mostly swept away. A shame.

“It’s very pretty outside,” Callie says in an attempt to change the subject.

“Have you ever considered teaching, Dreadful? Reckon you’d do a good job of it,” Nemesis asks, steering the subject right back. Callie looks quietly miffed but says nothing in response.

“Oh, as Dr. Burke’s assistant, I actually teach some of his classes. It’s difficult but rewarding. I don’t think the students take me very seriously, though.”


“Maybe. But I’m also one point seven meter without shoes, and I weigh three stone soaking wet, and I look...how old do I look, Jones?”

“I had imagined you to be my age. Nineteen or twenty or so,” he admits.

“Well, I’m twenty-five. It wasn’t this bad when I was nineteen or so, but it got noticeable the more I was meant to age. I’m sure I’ll be thanking my lucky stars when I’m forty and look twenty-five, but it’s a little obnoxious now, you know, that they think I’m one of them.”

“I can imagine,” replies Nemesis, remembering the reaction of the guards at the door of the Cabinet.

“And it’s bloody annoying. And when you factor in the fact that I’m slight of build, and ill-looking, and effeminate, it’s not precisely easy to be taken seriously.”

“Well, I reckon you’re book-smarter than I am.”

Callie stares at Nemesis, wide-eyed, taken aback by the idea that Nemesis would ever say anything
like that. And Nemesis is honestly taken aback by the fact that he admitted it, despite it being obvious that an academic would be better-read than a private investigator with a fake identity.

“No offense, Jones, but I’d hope so. I’m supposed to be book-smart.”

“Well, I reckon you’re doing a rather good job of it.”

“...thanks,” he mutters, and Nemesis gets the sense he isn’t much impressed by the compliment. Does he find it patronizing?

The rest of the walk is awkward and silent. Callie hovers by Nemesis, unsettled.

Finally, they arrive at a quiet part of town by the harbor. The squawking of sea-gulls follows them down to Mallory Street, which is a wider lane from which the labyrinthine harbor district spiders off. Charles gestures for them to follow him, and walks a route he clearly knows by heart until he reaches the door of a large warehouse, sandwiched gracelessly between two others, wholly unremarkably.


Well, that’s a strange passphrase if he’s ever heard one. Still, the door swings open. Behind it is an urchin of perhaps eleven or twelve years old, looking not too scruffy by urchins’ standards.

“Doctor here to see you, sir!” He shouts into the back of the warehouse.

“Why didn’t you just say that, then?” Nemesis hears a voice shout back, in the same unmistakable south Citrea Viridian accent he grew up hearing all around him. “Let him in!”

“He has guests!” The urchin yells back.

“Well, fine, let them in, too!”

The door is propped open so that the three can enter. Inside, it looks much as one might expect from a warehouse, stacks of crates in various states of disrepair, except for the back of the room, on a large platform, where a massive gilded chair is set in the middle of the room. Next to it are several shabby-looking couches, and in the center of the floor stands a large dining-table. Various street-rats and criminal-looking people mill about, but all of them turn to stare at the newcomers.

A man who looks to be in his mid-twenties, with short hair the color of straw, longer in the front than on the sides, handsome and well-maintained, sits on the chair. He’s dressed, in contrast, in cheap clothing and a long canvas jacket. A crown is perched atop his head at an angle. He waves to Charles without standing, and Charles waves back, gesturing for Nemesis and Callie to follow him up the platform.

The moment they’re at the top, the crowned man grins. “You’ve brought me Nemesis Jones, as you said you would! And...some girl, who will identify herself presently, but first - you’re in the presence of a king, aren’t you?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t be rude, Jones!” Charles snaps.

“No, no. This guy’s got an attitude - I like that.” The ‘king’ stands from his ‘throne’, just barely taller than Nemesis but taking full advantage of his half-inch advantage to stand scarily in front of
him. He flicks his hat off his head, and Callie catches it beautifully.

“Are you quite done?” Nemesis asks.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Charles raises an eyebrow. “You aren’t mad?”

“Not at all, not at all. This guy reminds me of myself, a little, if I were a little more effeminate and significantly shorter.”

“We must have different definitions of ‘significantly’,” Callie deadpans, and Nemesis feels his heart swell with pride and love for her.

The ‘king’ frowns. “...alright. Anyway, let’s talk business. We’ve got a back-room just for this, so...follow me.”

He gestures them after him into a room in the back, completely undecorated, and sits on the edge of a crate like a school-boy sits on his desk when talking to his friends. Callie sits on the floor, and Nemesis leans against the wall, and Charles sits beside the ‘king’, cross-legged on the desk like a tailor.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Jones,” the ‘king’ says. “My name’s Dean Beckett, and I’m the captain of the Mallory Street Pirates.”

The Mallory Street Pirates...Nemesis had had a hunch he was dealing with them, and he’s glad to hear it confirmed aloud. Despite the threatening name, they’re essentially a merchant’s guild for the less fortunate, serving as a way to help various ne’er-do-wells band together and mutually profit. Not to say that there’s no theft involved, of course. That would be a lie. But in a city caught up so often in the flurry of the societies, to be dealing with a mere thief collective is relief beyond words.

“So what’s your gimmick?” Nemesis asks. “Are you a pirate captain, or a king? I’m getting mixed signals here.”

“I’m a pirate captain. I just stole a crown and figured it’d be fun to pretend to be the sort of respectable person I’m not as equal parts mockery and genuine fantasy, you know?”

“Familiar with the trope, yes.”

“Good. Then we’re on the same page.” Beckett smiles evenly, and loops an arm around Charles’s shoulder to pull him closer. Charles, surprising Nemesis, doesn’t resist, and Nemesis looks pointedly at the two of them with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, sorry. I should clarify that we are ...involved, he isn’t just being creepy,” Charles offers, stumbling awkwardly over the words in a manner very unlike his typical eloquence.

“Never would have taken you to be each others’ type,” Nemesis remarks.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Beckett asks.

“It means,” Charles says smugly, “that he thinks I’m too good for you.”

“Oh. Well, he’s not wrong,” Beckett says with a laugh. “Anyway, Charlie here is our volunteer medic. Does things pro bono and keeps people injured in whatever scuffles patched up. I sort of
underrate his work - he’s a blessing. Really.”

“I’m the only thing keeping this lot alive, and I don’t get nearly enough credit for it.”

“No you don’t,” Beckett agrees, and kisses Charles on the cheek. “I’ll be sure to show you my gratitude in full later, when it’s just us and no one’s talking business.”

“Well, that isn’t now,” Nemesis insists. “So, please, get to the point.”

“Right, right, right.” Beckett grins, not letting go of Charles. “So, I’ve got problems sometimes that you could probably help me solve. And I’ve got information sometimes - stuff even the Postmen miss.”

“Not much, I’d reckon,” Nemesis shoots back. “Their net is pretty wide, and, really, how many of your guys do you think aren’t double-agents? You don’t have that much to offer me - especially considering my new employer.”

“New employer?” Beckett asks.

Nemesis laughs. “Oh, wow. You know even less than I thought. I work for Lucian Vigenere, mate.”

Beckett stares wide-eyed at Charles. “He’s a bloody peeler ?!”

“Not...not precisely.” Charles is clearly holding in laughter. “He’s fine, he’s fine. He’s just on Vigenere’s payroll. I don’t think it’s changed his morals any.”

“...good. I need someone a little less than above-board. Can’t trust the government to do anything right, especially not when you’re literally a pirate captain and would very much like to avoid a trip to the gallows.”

Nemesis shudders. Though he’s never been tangibly close to meeting that fate, the gallows hang heavy over the heads of those like him, who operate on the wrong side of the law. It’s not a threat now - not now that Lucian Vigenere is personally invested in his continued life - but as a child, he remembers the sickening feeling he felt whenever he happened to be in the area during a hanging. The feeling that one day that could easily be him.

There had been one occasion, particularly sickening, on which a police officer had caught him, then-fourteen, trespassing on private property. The glee with which he had informed Nemesis of his inevitable execution had stayed with him for hours after, even after Arthur Jones, uncharacteristically softly, had hugged him for what felt like hours later that day, and assured him that he wouldn’t him to come to harm.

And yet, for months after, he hadn’t been able to rid his mind of the thought of himself at the gallows, and he wondered to himself if Arthur Jones would return to his old habits - to drink and to misery and to having nothing in the world to live for - after Nemesis was gone. The thought is somehow worse to him than the idea of himself hanging.

After all, death’s victims are not only the ones who die but the ones left behind.

“You alright, Jones?” Charles asks.

“He gets like this sometimes,” Callie offers as anxious explanation.

“Like what? I’m fine, mate, don’t be worrying about me.”
“If you say so,” Beckett agrees, though his face betrays his concern.

“What were we talking about? No, right, if your issue is related to one of my current cases I don’t care if you can’t pay me. If someone’s driving in one direction anyway the least they can do is let people hitchhike, right?”

“Reckon I can pay you, though.” Beckett grins slyly. “Least, if you’re in the market for information about one...Ozymandias Nocturne? If not, though, I completely understand—”

“You have information about Nocturne?” Callie asks. “Nemesis is interested in that.”

“Shut up and don’t tell people what I am and am not interested in,” he snaps at her. At some point, though he didn’t realize it, Nocturne became a weak point, and finding them became a matter of pride. He failed to stop them once. Technically, he failed to stop them again, when they escaped capture, even if the Star is safe with him. His career may well hinge on fixing his mistakes.

And it’s frustrating, moreso, because Nocturne is barely even competent. That they’ve gotten away from Nemesis has been the result of one thing and one thing alone - his knacklessness. Had he been able to chase after them...or, even, if they hadn’t been able to move like that - Nemesis would have caught them handily the first time, and he knows it. Really, he’s the one who’s come out on top here. To put up such a fight even when knackless should be a victory by almost any standard.

The thought feels hollow. He knows he’s lying to himself. He’s lost. He can’t lose again.

“It’s been all over the papers, don’t worry. You and Nocturne are the story of the year. I’ve heard all sorts of crazy speculation...that the entire affair is an elaborate hoax designed to raise your public profile, that Nocturne is working for the government, that you two are secret lovers...it’s a lot to sift through. All I know is you’re trying to catch him. Unless that first one is correct...which I know it isn’t for a fact.”

Nemesis raises an eyebrow. “For a fact, you say?”

“I know more than you might think. That being said...a crew member of mine has a very pressing and life-threatening issue. They want you to tail someone they think is about to order a hit on them.”

“A hit on them? They someone high-profile?”

Beckett grimaces. “...you’ll see.”

“Couldn’t’ve found any more ominous way to phrase that?”

“You’ll see,” he repeats.

“Don’t be like that, Dean,” Charles says quietly. “Kilby is perfectly delightful.”

“Aren’t they, though?”

“Well, no...” he glances away. “But they don’t mean harm. I think they’ve a certain charm to them in the same way an opossum you find living in your floorboards might.”

“Oddly specific metaphor,” Callie observes.

“Lived experience.”

“Ah.”
“I like opossums…” Callie mutters. “They’re like if rats were bigger.”

“Most people consider that a negative thing,” Charles observes.

“You have a skeleton abomination as a pet, mate, shut up,” Nemesis says.

Charles shuts up.

“That said,” Beckett says after a moment, patting Charles gently on the shoulder, “let’s talk to them. I reckon you’ll find what they have to say quite interesting.”

“‘Interesting’ can mean a lot of things,” Nemesis comments, but he’s already on his feet, and Callie follows.

“You’ll see.” Charles looks more seriously at Beckett. “Does anyone here need me, by the way? I assume nothing urgent, since you didn’t call me or anything.”

“Broken leg on one fellow. Run-in with the cops turned nasty. You know how it is.”

“Sounds plenty urgent to me.”

Beckett stands and opens the door. “KILBY!” he calls. “Private investigator here to see you! And bring Lowell, the doctor’s here too.”

“Sir, yessir, Captain!” Shouts a shrill voice. Up the stairs at an alarmingly quick pace comes a willowy individual with pale and sunken features, sharp black make-up contrasting heavily against their skin. They’re dressed in a black morning coat, though they’re far from standard formal dress with their scuffed-up shoes and untied bow-tie draped loosely around their neck, and it isn’t morning, anyway. Their top hat sits at a dangerous angle atop their messy chin-length black hair, looking as if it might fall off if given the slightest reason. Slung heavily over their shoulder like a sack of stolen bank-notes is a man who looks to be in incredible pain, hopping up the stairs on one leg.

They must be Moth Kilby, then. Nemesis thinks the opossum comparison is apt.

He tips his hat to them, and they tip theirs back, carefully lowering their companion to the floor. They’re obnoxiously long, towering over Nemesis and everyone else in the room, with spindly and arachnidoid limbs, more worm than person. “G’day, sir,” they tell Nemesis, “And you must be Nemesis Jones, sir, I’ve heard lots about you, I have - didn’t expect you’d be this young, though.”

“People tend not to.”

The man on the ground - Lowell - groans. Charles is immediately by his side, gesturing to Beckett, who lifts him onto the chair and rolling up his pant-leg so that the injured limb can be more easily accessed. Immediately, Charles is pulling off his gloves and unwrapping the bandages beneath. Nemesis, of course, knows what’s coming, but to his surprise, Kilby seems un-bothered when Charles produces a scalpel and slices open the tattooed skin of his arm.

He mutters something under his breath, and the blood freezes as it falls, then gently lowers itself onto the man’s leg. He’s far more delicate here than he was with Monty, frowning as the blood swirls on the surface of the skin but doesn’t sink through it. He mutters more words - Nemesis recognizes some of the Archaic Acerbic.

He’s heard of artificers speaking to themselves to guide themselves through difficult processes. He’s even seen Mr. Jones do precisely that, when working on some finicky project or another. But
Jones spoke plain, modern language. Nemesis knows that specifically-trained artificers speak in Archaic Acerbic, for reasons ill-explained to the likes of him - something about technical minutiae - but it’s difficult, and it requires training, and it reminds him of just how smart Charles Dreadful is.

Maybe he would be that smart, if someone had given him the chance, and if he hadn’t been born knackless. No use in dwelling on it.

“This is shattered badly,” he comments, in modern speech. “I’ll do what I can, but it might take multiple attempts. There’s shards of bone mixed in with the-”

Kilby puts a hand over their face, and Beckett frowns. “For the sake of the more squeamish people here, let’s not go into detail. Though I’d be willing to hear the details later over a glass of chianti, if that sounds like something you’d like.”

Charles looks bemusedly at Beckett, even as he continues to shift the blood around on Lowell’s leg. “You’re not right in the head, you know that?”

“Oh, says you.”

“I am not supposed to be right in the head,” Charles says with a chuckle. “You lead an organization.”

“Aren’t you a teacher sometimes?” Callie asks.

“Details, details. Stop distracting me before I accidentally rearrange this poor man’s bones into the wrong positions.”

Lowell looks distinctly terrified, and Callie and Beckett obediently clam up. The blood which has been swirling on the surface suddenly drops beneath it, and Lowell grits his teeth as Charles mutters in Archaic and Nemesis can see the skin on Lowell’s leg bubbling and distorting horribly as everything melts and re-forms and slides into place. Charles’s face is twisted with concentration. One wrong twitch of a hand, one wrong thought, and Lowell is disfigured. This is the immense sort of pressure that comes with ultimate power.

Finally, Charles sighs heavily, and a significantly smaller amount of blood shoots up from Lowell’s leg to wrap back around his arm, settling into the wound and healing it with only a faint discoloration, which corrects itself after a moment. “Be careful - it won’t take weight well for a bit. It was shattered bad. Take it easy on that leg for a bit, and check in with me in around a week to make sure everything’s still in working order.”

“Thanks, doc,” Lowell says, rubbing his leg with a nervous hand. “It doesn’t hurt at all. Just feels a little weird.”

Nemesis remembers how it had felt when Dr. Graves had fixed his face. He certainly doesn’t miss the experience. ‘A little weird’ is a deep under-statement. He’s amazed Lowell isn’t recoiling in disgust and discomfort.

Then again, people who live here are probably more used to artifice-as-medicine than Nemesis is. He shouldn’t judge.

“Say nothing of it,” Charles insists, re-pocketing his scalpel. “I didn’t get a medical degree just to not use it, so don’t insist you’re in my debt, either. This is pro bono. If you insist on making it worth my while, do so by not being injured in the future. You’re welcome, by the way. I’ll help you to wherever you’ve been resting, if that’s alright with you. Don’t want you ruining that leg
“Thanks, doc, if you say so,” Lowell repeats, allowing Charles to help him to his feet.

“I’ll be back,” Charles tells Beckett, before muttering something in Archaic, lifting Lowell with an ease Nemesis would have thought reserved for someone far stronger than Charles looks. Perhaps appearances are deceptive here, as Nemesis’s are.

Beckett watches Charles leave before sighing quietly. The look on his face is one of quiet adoration which Nemesis recognizes easily. After all, it’s the one he knows he wears when he looks at Elias. It looks so jarringly human on a face like Beckett’s. This man is, of course, a hardened criminal. The pistol, worn openly on his belt like a mark of pride, speaks to that. And yet he stares at Charles Dreadful’s retreating form like a lovestruck idiot, that goofy crown still crookedly perched on his head.

“He’s really something, isn’t he?”

“Certainly. I think you’re very lucky.”

“I am,” he agrees. “What would I be doing without him?”

“Crime, I reckon.”

Beckett laughs. “You’re right, but it wouldn’t be the same without him around to keep me alive. I never knew how wretched I was until I started feeling things like this, you know.”

“I know how you feel.” And he does, even though Elias and Charles couldn’t be more different.

“It’s the best feeling in the world, isn’t it? I can’t believe he’s real.”

“Like I said,” Nemesis agrees. “You’re lucky.”

“Erm...anyway.” Beckett looks away sheepishly. “Kilby has some words for you, as it were. Rather serious ones. Best to steer back to that topic.”

“You can take your time if you want. I’ll wait,” says Moth Kilby.

“No, you won’t,” Beckett says. “Go on and tell him what happened, Kilby. It’s more important than my...feelings.”

“Your feelings are plenty important, I should think, really, I should,” Kilby says, theatrically frowning. “You can’t discount your feelings just because they’re your feelings. We all have feelings, and they’re rather quite important to us as we feel them, on account of course of the fact that we’re feeling them - for instance, I’m feeling a sort of dread and terror and very general unpleasantness because I rather believe an old friend of mine is having his associate arrange for my death, which is a scary and unpleasant thing of him to do and rather upsetting to me, on account of the fact that my friend may want me dead and be in fact putting that exact act into motion. Goodness me.”

Kilby talks a kilometer a second, and it’s all Nemesis can do to follow along. Though their speech has many twists and turns to it, labyrinthine as Catacumba, it actually all quite makes sense when one removes the flowery bits and pulls the loose threads out. “You think your friend is going to have you killed? Why?”

“Well, I overheard him talking to a man I know - I know him to be one of his employees, that’s
where-from, they work together - I heard him telling him something about ‘Kilby’ and ‘get rid of’
and some things involving payment so safe to say something’s up and wrong and I’m all in the
middle of it. Maybe I’ve seen too much, maybe I think that might be maybe it, plausibly…”

Callie frowns, eyebrows furrowing. “…I don’t follow, sorry. I’m not as sharp as Nemesis is when it
comes to understanding people. Who’s going to kill you, and why?”

“Oh, goodness, this is going to sound so positively paranoid. So distinctly psychotic. You’ll think
my persecutory delusions are spiraling completely out of control, but Tobias Fitzroy is having an
associate of his pay someone to off me!”

“That’s right, you’re the person Percy mentioned as confirming John Donahue’s identity. You
work at the Obscura. Makes sense, I don’t think you’re paranoid.” Nemesis says, realizing too late
he’s far too nonchalant for someone who has just had that bomb-shell dropped on him. Kilby looks
unnerved.

“Percy? You mean the guy with the very sharp pen who kept forebodingly scratching at the paper
with it until I told him everything?”

“…sure,” Nemesis agrees. “He’s actually completely harmless, I hope you know. Like, beyond
harmless. Wouldn’t want to hurt you if he could.”

“I’m pretty sure just about anybody can hurt also anybody if they really set their mind to it and put
some elbow grease into the doing of it.”

“Maybe so, but he won’t, I assure you.” The idea of Percy Chase hurting absolutely anyone
remains laughable. “Tobias Fitzroy, on the other hand…”

“Tobias Fitzroy,” Kilby agrees dejectedly.

“I’ll deal with it for you. Don’t worry. At least, I’ll find out what’s going on, okay?”

“Okay,” Kilby says. “And I also have some information that might interest you, regarding the
Calloway situation. Awful, isn’t it? Awful. That poor girl...all this nonsense must have been so fun
until it had a body count, don’t you think?”

“Did it ever not have a body count?” Callie asks.

“Not that I know of. I’ve no idea how I’m alive,” Kilby admits. “I’ve nearly been on the wrong end
of someone’s knife multiple times. Funny enough, the first time it was Toby who...well, not
important.”

“Maybe I’ll press that statement later,” Nemesis says calmly. “But for now, I’m more than willing
to take you at your word and work with you. Better safe than sorry when it comes to matters of life
and death, always.”

“Good way to look at it,” Kilby agrees. “Though the fear that I’m only saying that because it’s my
life on the line is an ever-present one.”

“Don’t worry, mate. Nothing wrong with fearing for your life.”

“Oh, I hope not!”

Nemesis puts a hand on their shoulder. “We’ll figure things out, don’t you worry.”
Kilby looks gratefully at Nemesis, and Nemesis feels a strange, dull feeling inside of him. Another link in the chain. Another person sucked into the potentially-fatal violence surrounding Omen. Only this one, he can save. What, then, will he do if he fails?
Nemesis’s feet dangle off the edge of the branch. Behind him, Callie clings to the trunk of the main tree, the pair of opera glasses she borrowed from Theory clutched tightly in her hand.

“I know it might be a little too late to ask this, but are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Callie, Callie, Callie.” Nemesis looks up at her, lowering his spyglass for just a moment. “One of us here is a poor lost girl from out of town and possibly out of country, though her accent would admittedly suggest not, unsure of anything around her and tragically ignorant as to the purpose of a toaster.”

“I was trying to mess with you. You literally saw through it.”

“Tragically forced to wait however-many years before getting her first taste of tea-”

“Art preferred coffee, that’s not fair!”

“How sad. Anyway, the other of us is Nemesis Jones, private investigator extraordinaire, known for his ceaseless dedication to getting to the bottom of every case and his countless successes, so I think you ought to trust me a little more.”

“Maybe I ought to,” she replies evenly, “but I don’t yet.”

“That’s alright. We’ll get there. For now…” He adjusts his spyglass so he can get a clearer view of the doorstep.

“It’s been an hour. No one’s shown up.”

“They will, believe me.”

“I don’t.”

Just as she says it, Nemesis hears the sound of an automobile pulling up to the curb. “Oh, ye of little faith,” he says with a grin. “Our mark has arrived, and fifteen minutes earlier than the message I intercepted said he would, too!”

“You brought us here two hours early? Why?”

“In case he arrived early, which he did.”

“By fifteen minutes!”

“You can never be sure.”

Callie sighs. “Do you always do things the hard way?”

“Whenever possible.”

The mark comes within view. He’s tall, with short, slicked-back hair, unfashionable but businesslike. A pair of rectangular, wire-rimmed spectacles sits on his nose.

The mark’s name is Antony Fairchance, and he is an actuary employed by the Aurum Rex corporation. And he is waiting for another individual - who makes herself seen soon enough. Short
and stick-thin, her red hair in a wild, curly mane around her face, dressed in a sharp waistcoat. Rhiannon Davies, assassin extraordinaire. Nemesis’s heart skips when he sees her - he’s never been this close to a hired killer before, especially not one of her renown. He feels equal parts awed and terrified.

She was the last person he expected to see here. He supposes Fairchance is fairly rich, but Davies normally wouldn’t go for a target this low-profile. It must be quite the sum - or else she knows it’s Fitzroy that’s involved.

She stares Fairchance dead in the eyes as she cleans her nails with a switchblade. Nemesis wants to comment snidely to Callie about how unsafe that is, how insecure she must be to need to do that to intimidate someone, how her hands will probably be bleeding later, but for once in his life he has the sense to keep in mind that he’s close enough to see the freckles of a woman who could kill him and think absolutely nothing of it through his spyglass.

“Don’t waste my time,” she tells him. Nemesis can hear her clearly through the listening device he planted in the area the day before. Her voice is low, amused-sounding, accented North Llygredish. “Hurry up and pay me. I don’t have all day.”

“Of course, of course.” The fear on his face is clear, and, Nemesis thinks, reasonable. Rhiannon Davies is the most dangerous woman in Acerbis, by some accounts. Easily disputable accounts, yes, but that she’s even in the conversation is something to be spoken of with hushed awe.

Nemesis watches as Fairchance rapidly fishes in his knapsack. Finally, he produces a smaller sack, opening it so that Davies can inspect the contents.

Even through the spyglass, he can see her lick her lips. “Fantastic. Good man. I’ll be quick about it, don’t you worry. They won’t know what happened. The deed will be done within the week, and Fitzroy can rest easy...for now.”

Nemesis sighs and collapses the spyglass, leaping carefully out of the tree. He lands with complete grace, which surprises even his. Callie does well, though her cape briefly snags on a branch and she has twigs in her hair. Nemesis gingerly brushes them out.

“What were they saying?” she asks him, finally, in a quiet, scared voice.

“Just talking about payment. All I needed was the confirmation.” He tosses the receiver over his shoulder, before remembering how much it cost and rushing back to pick it up. Callie watches him search in the bushes, but he comes up victorious, before fetching his hat from the ground beneath the branch which knocked it off.

He adjusts it, expression turning serious. “On that note, we ought to hurry. Dear Mx. Kilby ought to know how serious this threat is.”

“How serious is it?”

“Well, Acerbis’s most terrifying assassin is after my client.”

“That sounds serious.”

“It is serious.”

“That would explain why it sounds like it.”
Whatever Nemesis had thought might be Moth Kilby’s day-job, he hadn’t expected this. Though a certain part of him hadn’t imagined them doing anything outside of their career in so-called ‘piracy’, he’d known logically that very few people would have that as their sole vocation. What he hadn’t expected was to see them on a street-corner, playing an impressive riff on an accordion while tap-dancing.

“Oh, Jones - hello!” They exclaim when they see him, nervously grinning ear to ear. They don’t pause their playing, nor their dancing. Nemesis would find it rather amusing in any other circumstance.

“Do you mind going somewhere to talk, Kilby? I reckon you’ll have a lot to say about what I have to tell you.”

The accordion playing abruptly ceases, though Kilby is left frozen halfway through a ball-change. “Oh. Of course. Will my residence do?” They ask, strained.

“That’ll work fine,” says Nemesis. Beside him, Callie nods.

“I didn’t know you were an accordionist, Mx. Kilby,” she says evenly. “I can’t actually tell if you’re good enough, so no comment..”

Kilby frowns unseriously at her. “Ah, ouch. That would smart if I had any pride left to wound, but thankfully what little I began with is extremely depleted at this point - on account of people aren’t nice to me and for generally good reason. You’re right, though. I’ve been slacking off with my practicing.”

“Art - my brother - always said practice was the only way to get good at things. Except for me. He said I just get things on my first try without having to practice.”

Nemesis frowns to himself - because now that he thinks about it, she’s absolutely right. He’s never once seen her struggle to grasp a skill, and that’s incredibly disconcerting and a little bit upsetting. He wonders what it must be like. Generally, unless he shows immediate potential for something, he immediately gives up on it. The things he shows potential for - admittedly, many things, perhaps more than do most - he pours hours upon hours into, tearing himself to shreds over every minor mistake and barely-notable imperfection. Callie simply doesn’t deal with that, does she?

A few months ago, he thinks, he would have been absolutely furious at the thought. He might have cried, alone, ashamed. Now, he just feels numb, and a little robbed. It’s not as if her life is perfect, or she doesn’t have her problems, even when it comes to the ever-important self-esteem, but he feels a dull ache of jealousy. If only he had never had to worry about things like that! How much happier would he be?

No use thinking about it. No use making himself sad. That’s never productive.

The three of them walk to Kilby’s house, and for once Kilby is silent, barely saying anything except for nudging Nemesis and Callie in the proper directions. Unsurprisingly, they’re lead again towards the docks. This time, though, instead of a warehouse, it’s a winding street off the main one, into a shabby and tired-looking neighborhood. In places, tree branches litter the ground, some almost the size of Callie. Omen has bad storms every once in a while, and Nemesis supposes they either hadn’t bothered to clean up after the last one, or hadn’t had the resources.

The further in they get, the iller he feels. Here he is, a high-society gentleman, perfume wafting off of him and mixing with the sea-smell and the stench of who-knows-what floating through the streets. It’s not as if he hasn’t been places like this before, but he never felt like this.
He’s changed. Is that a good thing? Is the person who steps foot in this neighborhood better than Luke? Nemesis likes him better, and that’s how he thinks of himself now - ‘Nemesis’, not ‘Luke’, features in his internal monologues. But who is Nemesis? Why is he Nemesis? Is he truly better? Or is he just what the people around him, the sneering people, thought was better? Mr. Jones, whatever his reasons, had chosen Luke to be his apprentice. Elias had, somehow, against all odds, fallen in love with Luke. Is it egotism that makes Nemesis hate him, a smug sense of superiority for being the things society prizes? Did he change for all the wrong reasons?

And for the first time, he questions them - the daydreams, the idea of glamour and the idea of being better - who was it that said there was something wrong with Luke to begin with? It was people he despised, terrible people, and the people he liked always seemed okay with him.

Is his dream wrong? Was he played, like a fiddle, all along?

He feels himself tensing, but he can’t stop, can’t let this on. Neither of them even know who Luke was, and Kilby barely knows Nemesis, either. What does it matter? What does it matter? Luke is gone, and there’s no going back now - he’s Nemesis until he dons another mask, and chances are that will never happen. He hopes it will never happen. He’s tired, tired of running, tired of wanting to be something else.

He can’t disturb the people around him. There’s no time for introspection. And anyway, he can’t consider that maybe he messed up, maybe he thought wrong, maybe he failed - that simply isn’t possible. Luke was miserable. Nemesis is happy. Of course he made the right choice.

“You know,” Kilby says uncharacteristically glumly, cutting Nemesis off before he can ruminate any further, “I sort of feel bad for you kids, having to be here. Uh, anyone who has to be around here, really. Wish I had something a little nicer to show you two. Been spending so much time with Captain Beckett and with the Obscura it’s almost easy to forget this is where I’m from.”

“Don’t worry about it a moment. It’s not like I haven’t seen worse,” Nemesis replies immediately.

“Seen worse, maybe. Not... sat down for tea.”

“You’d be surprised, the sorts of people I associate with. Mx. Kilby, that your surroundings are in ruins is no fault of your own, nor is it the fault of anyone who has ever lived here. You understand this, surely.”

“Yeah, I mean...I don’t really need a wealthy teenager to explain the concept of poverty to me, actually. I’m not as stupid as you think I am.” They pull their hat down over their forehead. “I’m just sorry it might not be up to your standards.”

“My apologies. You’ll find that my standards are far more moral than they are material, Mx. Kilby. But I understand why you would be wary of me in my current state.”


Kilby cracks a weak smile. “No, no, don’t worry about it. I’m not wary, just...frustrated? Frustrated, you know, on account of my best friend - the person I thought of as my best friend, rather, that person - he might be trying to kill me. He’s trying to kill me, right? Oh, this is my house.”

It’s barely a ‘house’. More of a shabby shack deposited with no thought in the center of the street, droopy and dying. Kilby grimaces before opening the door to pure blackness, producing a collapsible hurricane lamp from their jacket pocket and unfolding it, before flicking it on. It
illuminates dusty hallways with cobwebs occupying the corners, papers and various knick-knacks strewn all over the place.

“Goodness,” Nemesis remarks. “You don’t even try to keep this place clean, do you?”

“Well, I don’t see why I should. It’s not like I have a knack to do it. Anyway, the lighting system here is artifice-based, and it needs a reaction to kick-start it, and I can’t do that, on account of being knackless, and that making it impossible for me to do something like that. I hear there’s devices for that these days, but they’re not something I have access to. Oh, but...you could do it, probably.” There’s nothing in their voice that implies that this makes them happy. If anything, they sound ambivalent.

They’ve given up, Nemesis realizes.

“I’m knackless too,” he admits.

“...huh.” They stare him over evenly, dark hair reflecting the light of the hurricane lamp. Their eyes, framed by disheveled fringe, look blank and exhausted and hopeless. “Wouldn’t’ve assumed. Obviously. Seeing as I assumed in the other direction. Sorry about that, assuming. You know what they say, makes an ass out of-”

“I’m not knackless,” Callie, silent up until this point, offers. “I can start it up. Just tell me where.”

“Are you sure?” Nemesis asks. There’s a reason she doesn’t normally use her knack, even if he isn’t necessarily privy to it.

“I’m sure.”

“Right there,” Kilby says, pointing to what looks like a switch on the wall.

Callie nods, seeming far too grave for something so minor, and places her hand over the switch. She lightly lids her eyes, and the sconces all spark to life at once, burning so brightly Nemesis can feel his eyes watering, pink light searing them. It’s horrid. It’s unnatural. And it’s warm, despite it.

“So warm...” Kilby remarks. “I swear they’re not meant to be that bright. Toby used to turn them on, back when - well, nevermind. Would either of you like some tea? The kettle works normally, I promise. About the only damn thing around here that works. Hah!”

They kick the wall, wince dramatically, and speed into the kitchen. Nemesis and Callie share a concerned look.

“They’re not all mentally here, are they?” She asks.

“Absolutely not,” Nemesis agrees, “but I wouldn’t be if I were them. Living in Omen, not being rich or ordinary, it really must drag on you. I mean, I’d unraveled more than them before I came to Omen, and I can’t imagine I’ve faced half the hardship they have.”

“I worry about you sometimes.”

“I worry about me all the time. I worry about you sometimes. I worry about Kilby right now.”

“...me too,” she admits.

“What you did with the lights, it was-”

“Overkill, right?” She sighs. “Art always told me repressing my knack was the only way to keep it
“Not that I have first-hand experience, but I’m not fully sure that’s how it works.”

“That’s how it works for me. Look how bright it is in here!”

“...well, it’s also rather warm,” he adds. “Pleasantly toasty. So I don’t altogether mind it.”

“Fire kills people.”

“So does tripping over wires or dropped things in the dark. We’ll cross those bridges when we arrive at them, dear.”

She doesn’t look convinced, but silently files into the kitchen after Kilby. Nemesis removes his coat, drapes it over the crook of his arm, and follows her.

Kilby is by the stove, frantically striking a match. Each attempt, they mutter a frantic curse-word and try again. Finally, the familiar *whoosh* sounds faintly, and they hold up the lit match. The light of the fire is barely visible, washed away in Callie’s searing pink glow.

They light the stove, put the kettle on, and sigh again. “I would ask you about your tea preferences, but all I have is some jasmine that I think is three years old at minimum. Thank you for coming out, regardless.”

“You’re paying us to do this,” Nemesis says, almost as if he’s scared of Kilby knowing he cares if they die or not - which, obviously, he doesn’t, because why would he? It doesn’t affect him.

“Well...to be clear, not in money. You saw me, I’m a glorified beggar. I just...I know some things from the time I’ve spent in the Obscura. Things which may be of use to you, on account of being sort of insider information everyone assumed I’d be too dumb to pick up on.”

“Information means a lot more to me than money does. And if it makes you feel any better, you’re not a bad accordionist.”

“Told you, I’m out of practice,” they repeat, a little gruffly.

“You’re the best accordionist I know,” Callie offers.

“I’m the *only* accordionist you know.”

“That’s actually not true. My brother used to play, but he wasn’t exactly what you’d call...good?” She winces. “You sound better than him, anyway.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Art played the *accordion*?”

“In his spare time. He wasn’t good at it, and he didn’t practice much,” she re-affirms. “He could probably have been good at it if he’d really wanted to, but he was the sort of person to get frustrated quickly and give up if he wasn’t immediately good at something.”

Ah. Just like Nemesis, then. He always feels so strangely offended by that.

“He used to play it whenever he had nothing to work on,” she continues. “It was awful.”

“The accordion is one of those instruments people consider obnoxious. I know, on account of it being the reason I chose to play it, and all.”
“You want to be obnoxious?” Nemesis asks.

“It draws attention. Attention draws money. It’s what I have to do to be an efficient beggar, you know?”

“Does it work?” Callie asks.

“To an extent. I suppose I’ve been scraping out this meagre living, have I not? I eat out sometimes.” They reach into their pocket, and take out a gorgeous ring, gold and inlaid with rubies. “Got this the other day. Yet to pawn it, been in too dire of emotional straits, but isn’t it gorgeous?”

“It is,” Nemesis agrees.

Callie looks at it, wide-eyed. “It’s so...pretty. Someone just gave that to you?”

“Not just gave it to me, gave it to me with the intention of selling it. Which I will do, because goodness knows I need the money, on account of I’m poor, and, you know,” they gesture vaguely at their surroundings.

They lower their head. “But I’ll feel a bit sad about it, since it’s so pretty. And the person...the person who gave it to me did me a huge kindness. Feel strange to just sell that on and pocket the cash.”

“Sentimentality isn’t worth your life,” Nemesis comments.

“Hmm. I suppose you’re probably right.”

The kettle whistles. Kilby pours three cups of tea and sits at the table, slumped over it. Nemesis and Callie join them. The heat of the teacups joins with the heat from the lights.

“So they’ve got someone after me?” Kilby asks morosely.

“Not just anyone. Rhiannon Davies.”

Their eyes widen. “...no way. No way it’s really her.”

“Either her or a convincing impostor. Either way, I reckon you’re quite in danger. Honestly, were I you I’d skip town. I’ll help you cover costs, if you need.”

Kilby’s eyes widen. “But I’m your client. I’m paying you. There’s nothing in it for you, covering costs. You can’t possibly mean that.”

“Truth be told, it’s a selfish offer. I’ve let a lot of people die on this case, and I don’t really want you to be another of them. Especially not for a reason as bad as not having the money to get out of town. Anyway, I’m getting information out of you. To someone like me, that’s far better than money.”

“To someone like you?”

“Someone independently wealthy.”

Callie stares at him. Part of her usual blank look seems more distinctly sad. “Nemesis, you don’t mean that, do you?”

“I know you don’t have the most perspective for this, Callie, but I am quite wealthy, to the point where missing out on individual payments or buying someone a train ticket is far from a big deal.”
“But that isn’t why you don’t care. You’re a selfless person, and I know you’d pay for their ticket even if you couldn’t afford to. I don’t know why you pretend otherwise.”

*Because that would make me seem weak.* “Callie,” he sighs, “what did we say about psychoanalysis in public places? Mx. Kilby, I’d like to hear the things you have to say, please. I don’t have all day, and neither do you, if what I saw is to be believed.”

Their eyes widen with fear, just for a moment. “Ah...yes, that’s true. Um. To begin with, I’m an old friend of Tobias Fitzroy’s. That might sound difficult to believe, because these days I don’t think Toby cares about almost anyone, but he wasn’t always the way he is now. He saved my life back when he was just getting started in his acting career. And the acting career lead him up, and up, and then the Guild became the thing it is today. I was never a member, before you ask. It’s part of why we drifted apart.”

Nemesis nods. “This is going somewhere, I presume?”

“Are you and Fitzroy enemies now, because you refused to join the Guild?” Callie asks.

“That would make sense, wouldn’t it? No, we aren’t enemies. At least, I didn’t think we were. As far as I was aware, most of why he began pushing me away was because I’m not glamorous. I’m poor, and I’m stupid, and I’m a little odd - more than a little odd - and I’m stubborn and I refuse to change and become just like him. And he’d rather be associated with prestigious people like Frederick Vigenere or his boyfriend Dorian or his late wife, Jane, or any of the others he spends his time with.”

“Wait,” Callie asks, “he was close to Vigenere?”

“Wait,” Nemesis asks simultaneously, “don’t tell me he’s screwing Dorian Dreadful?”

Kilby laughs. “Oh, how little you know. I think Dorian and Toby are each other’s favorite affairs - but it’s not as if both don’t have plenty others. Toby didn’t care when Jane died at all. Didn’t seem to affect him remotely. I don’t think he and Dorian care about each other on an emotional level, either, but they like to insult people together and spend the nights locked in one of their rooms. Dorian never much liked me, but he’s nicer than Toby is, I’ll say that. Low bar. Did try to come onto me once, but I’m not looking for that sort of thing. Least he respects that.”

It all lines up with what Nemesis knows of Dreadful. He wonders what things must have been like for Charles, growing up with a man like that for a father. As kind and approachable, comparably, as Dreadful seems, he can’t blame Charles for not being on good terms with him. The last thing he’d imagine a family life with Dorian Dreadful to be is stable.

“I suppose that makes sense. Playboys continue to play, it seems. What about Vigenere? I wasn’t aware they had a relation beyond working together sometimes.”

“Vigenere was one of the people who got Toby to his current social standing. I think he was like a mentor to him, honestly, but he was also a massive source of money. He seemed genuinely upset when he died, more-so than Jane. In fact, he’s seemed uncharacteristically shaken ever since. But that’s part of what I want to talk to you about - everything at the Guild is devolving. Morgana mentioned to me that it’s been tense in the guild, but I could have sensed it anyway. You’re actually scaring them, somehow.”

“Am I, now?” He tries to hide the satisfaction he feels upon hearing that - though, admittedly, it’s fighting its way up through a deep layer of intense concentration and sadness. He’s grown to hate the Obscura business, more than his usual cases. Even getting one up over Tobias Fitzroy barely
seems worth celebrating in context.

“You are. And Morgana said, what she said was that - was that the murder brought undue attention, and she can’t imagine what whoever committed it was trying to do, so that makes me think maybe it-”

“-the Guild wasn’t responsible for the murder?” Callie cuts in, shocked.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Morgana’s fairly in-the-know, and I don’t think she expected me to pass on that information to anyone, because I think she knows I’m going to be dead soon and thinks I’m too stupid to protect myself or conspire against the Guild.”

“If so, that…” Nemesis frowns. “...no, the Guild has to be responsible. Unless it was a Circle double-agent trying to bring the law down on Fitzroy…”

“A double-agent?” Callie suggests. “Someone who Calloway thought was betraying the Circle with her, but actually wasn’t?”

“With what I’ve seen of the Circle, I heavily doubt it.” It seems like it would have been one of the first things Phineas Sterling told him, were it the case.

“Then what?”

“That’s what we’re here to figure out, now isn’t it?”

“I wish I could tell you more than I know, but I can’t.” Kilby clears their throat. “Another thing is that...Donahue and Morgana were a thing, I think. Just before he vanished.”

“Donahue and Morgana were what? I thought she was with Morrow!”

“She is. She just...I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know. I think she fills the void in her life with relationships or something, I can’t imagine she actually has any romantic feelings for him, because he was an unpleasant person and I don’t think she’s very upset that he was dead. If anything, I’d imagine she was involved in his downfall.”

“Hm?”

“See, Donahue designed Ozymandias Nocturne’s outfit. I saw it in his notes, a couple times - it’s been a work in progress for a while. Nocturne is definitely tied to the Guild, and I don’t know how long they’ve been waiting to deploy them, but now that they have...maybe Donahue had to die, to tie up loose ends.”

Callie frowns. “But Donahue and Calloway had the same notably strange cause of death. If one of their deaths benefited the Obscura and the other didn’t, then…”

“That’s right strange,” Nemesis agrees.

“And I wish I could answer all these questions for you, but I don’t know much.”

“I know,” Nemesis says, “And I appreciate all you’ve done for us.”

“And I all you’ve done for me,” Kilby agrees. “If only things were ever enough.”

“You never know.” Nemesis hopes he doesn’t sound too choked up. “Maybe this time they will be.”
He drops Callie off by Beaumort's and walks briskly to one of his favorite spots: a set of trees growing inexplicably in an alley not far from Beaumort's. It's quiet and no-body frequents it, and the trees are tall and winding, blocking it from outside view. Leaves fall softly, still, in the light breeze, and Nemesis pulls his pistol from his pocket and shoots a hole in one. And in another, and another, until he's emptied his chamber, and he reloads and tries again. He never misses.

End Notes

Updates, ideally, at least twice a month, on the thirteenth and twenty-seventh.

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