les diamants sont éternels

by flying_elliska

Summary

Eliott Demaury is a successful defense attorney with a beautiful girlfriend and a career on the rise.

He's also bored to death.

That's when he meets his newest client. Lucas Lallemant, 28, diamond thief with a dark past.

And he is nothing like the crooks Eliott usually defends. As he spins wild and confusing tales of cursed diamonds, mobster families bent on revenge and shadowy blood feuds, one thing becomes clear: he's playing a long game. And he really, really wants Eliott along for the ride.

Soon his case is all Eliott is capable of thinking about, leading him on a wild chase through the very highs and lows of Parisian society - to face his own demons, to discover the true meaning of family, to find his real place in the world. And to fall head over heels for the most inconvenient man he could have picked in the world.
I am extremely (not) sorry for that cheesy title, this about sets the tone for how this will go.

I hope this is a fun distraction in our troubled times as we try to survive the end of s3 together. I don't have a clear idea of where this will go, and if you're a legal professional you're absolutely welcome to come yell at me, I haven't done more than a few seconds of research, outrageous fun is the purpose and the goal my mecs.

Idea originally from this post crowdbrained by toujours-elu, purplew, xionin and jebentietalleen. Beta-ed by beeexx. So much thanks!
C'est un piège

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART I

_Tout le monde joue_

LUNDI 08:54

It’s Monday, the sky is cloudy and dark, the whole world is grey, and the inside of his mouth tastes like something died in there a few months ago.

Nothing out of the ordinary, then.

Eliott drives into the parking of the Maison d’Arrêt de Paris with only a few minutes to spare. He parks his berline hastily, and wrestles himself into the spare suit he keeps in his trunk for occasions like these. He combs his hair with his fingers, clears the gunk out of his eyes, spritzes some mint spray into his mouth to clear away any remainders of alcohol smells, puts on some cologne, and gathers together his case files hastily. Then he walks to the entrance.

Lucille, his partner and long time girlfriend, is waiting for him there, in a pristine black suit. She scrutinizes him from top to toe, and he can decipher a tinge of familiar exasperation go over her well schooled features, but she is adept at dissimulating it. She kisses the corner of his mouth, and her lips are cold and devoid of any passion, as is the rest of their relationship.

He can’t say anything to her, though. Without her, he wouldn’t have a career - hell, he wouldn’t have made it out of law school. He might be the rising star but she is his pillar, tireless, always picking up the slack when he can’t. And he likes working with her, he does. She’s smart and consistent and rigorous. It's just that their relationship, the past few years, has increasingly felt like a noose around his neck. As his parents started pressuring them to tie the knot, he's had to find increasingly elaborate excuses as to why he can't. And she's started to be suspicious of why, growing more cold and distant everyday. Now even their bedroom has the warmth of an office. And he's been out celebrating with his friends and crashing on couches most of the time, just to avoid the feeling of simmering dread he gets at home.

She doesn't want him to take this case. It's too high profile, she argued. If it was only up to her, she'd have him abandon criminal law altogether and spend the rest of his day prosecuting tax fraud.

He knows, he knows. He needs stability.

He also needs to remember why he wanted to do this job in the first place, and maybe then he will feel less like wanting to pour bleach in his morning coffee.
They walk into the forbidding, sinister building, give up their phones and wallets, go through the metal detectors, and are guided through a maze of decrepit corridors, until they reach a small, badly lit room where their client awaits.

The man in there is nothing like Eliott expected.

From his hasty survey of the file of Lucas Lallemant, 28, caught in the aftermath of a botched robbery where the rest of his crew absconded with 1.5 million worth of diamonds, he was ready to meet some sort of tattooed muscled brute with dead eyes. He didn’t even stop to look at the mugshot. That might have been a mistake.

The man is the exact opposite of that, and it throws Eliott completely off balance. He's not tall or broad by any standards, but even motionless, his presence fills the room.

His face is beautiful, sharp and delicate at the same time, only a slight bruise on one cheek to show he was ever involved in any violence recently. As Eliott enters the room, his features animate, and he turns extraordinarily blue eyes towards him. Eliott feels scrutinized for the second time this morning, but while Lucille's gaze was perfunctory, the man's is slow and...appreciative?

Wait, what?

The man smirks.

"Hello, not that I don't appreciate the company, but you are?"

Eliott shakes himself out of it and clumsily pulls forward a chair. Lucille steps out from behind him and sits down, slapping her file on the table.

"We're your lawyers, smartass."

- Well, that's a shame."

He looks at Eliott only as he talks, and there's no mistaking that look. He's been subjected to that kind of look before, but generally not in plain daylight, and never at his job before. Well, not by a client.

It's a "I'm undressing you in my head right now" kind of look, blatant and shameless, and it makes him want to crawl under the table and throw off his shirt at the same time.

He blames his persistent hangover.

"I really hope you're not planning on talking to the judge like that, Lucile answers. She's known for being very intolerant of bullshit.

- That's too bad, I was definitely planning to charm my way out of prison” Lallemant answers and leans back nonchalantly, still looking at Eliott who wonders all of a sudden why that strategy seems to include him.

Lucille sighs, and steam rolls on.

"Look, they've requested a minimum of 15 years, and they're building up a case to tie at least seven other robberies to you as well. They want to make an example of you to show how efficient their
newest policies are, and you were caught red-handed. Your best option is to be straightforward with us and tell us what info you have on your colleagues that we can bargain with, so we can get you a deal.

- What, you're not even going to try and prove my innocence?” He looks at Eliott only. “I thought that wouldn't be a problem for you. Aren't you the defense lawyer who derailed the most high-profile drug ring bust in the last ten years?

- It was a shoddy case full of jumps in logic and racial profiling”, Lucille snaps back, getting annoyed at where their client seems to be selectively directing his attention. “That's hardly the case here.”

Eliott is still kind of reeling from the implication that this man knows who he is as she continues.

“So please stop playing games. It's not only about the time you'll serve, it's about where they send you. I doubt you'd do well in general population.

Eliott cringes hard at the implications of this. This is not how they do things. He's about to say something but Lallemant is quicker, apparently unfazed but with a hard glint in his eyes.

“Yes, I know, I stole some glittery rocks from a bunch of people who probably didn't even remember they had them in the first place, even less need them, and now everyone wants my ass to be grass, I know how this works. Isn't your job to help me instead of threatening me, though?

- We can hardly…”

Lucille's phone starts ringing and she swears.

“I gotta take this, it's for the Streiser case”, she says to Eliott and walks out of the room briskly.

“Well, I'm in good hands, Lallemant says sarcastically. So what are you, her secretary?”

The little shit...Eliott takes a deep breath. He know he's at a disadvantage, he's been way too transparent since he walked in. But maybe he can use this, too. The man's treating them as if they were enemies for some reason. He's got to build some sort of connection. Get under that glib facade.

“You know, I understand wanting to protect your friends. But they left you alone out there, didn't they? Maybe you need some better friends. We can help you.”

A hint of something dark passes over Lallemant's face, just a fraction of a second, but enough for Eliott to know that he's touched a nerve, before he puts his cool mask back on.

“So we're playing good cop bad cop, are we? I'm sure you can be nicer than that.

- We're not cops, Eliott answers. And I'm not playing. If you want to plead not guilty, you need to help me see things from your perspective, because there has to be something I'm missing here. As it stands, it's completely undefendable.

- Of course you are playing. Who isn't? And yes, you are missing quite a few things. But don't you worry your pretty little head over it. Nothing daddy could blame you for.”

Eliott struggles to contain the monumental wave of annoyance that strikes him then and there. There's nothing he hates more than people bringing up his father when he's done everything to
distanciate himself from him. And that condescending tone?

Lallemant smiles at him, infuriating. Eliott is trying very, very hard to banish thoughts of *I could cut myself on these cheekbones and he called me pretty* to another dimension in his mind. He's pissed now, for fuck's sake.

“Ah yeah, that's not fun, is it? Please leave my friends and family out of this, and I'll extend you the same courtesy.”

He's got a point.

Eliott puts both his hands down on the table, takes a deep breath, and tries to start anew.

“Okay. So what do you want to talk about then?

- Are you familiar with the history of the diamonds that disappeared, Mr Demaury?”

The question is so out of left field, Elliott blinks. Before shaking his head.

“Well, someone has been neglecting their homework, huh? I don't blame you though, the cops didn't get it either. They're remarkably incurious when it comes to certain things. Anyway, yes. The Colibari diamonds. Very specific, recognizable vintage cushion-cut, high color grade, each of the 16 of them worth a fortune. Mined in 1912 in what was then Belgium-occupied Congo, in extremely dubious circumstances. Bought as a wedding present for a young lady of, ah...let’s say interesting family background. Since then, have been popping up as collateral in organized crime deals for most of the 20th century, but after a while, acquired somewhat of a reputation for being cursed after several of those deals went wrong. Lost their appeal, because criminals are a superstitious bunch, and were reintegrated into polite society. However that happened, though, is a bit of a mystery. Which brings us to the Karls. What a lovely little old couple. I wonder how they managed to amass such interesting things in their vaults. Something tells me the diamonds really were the least of it.”

He says the latter with a confidential, almost whispery tone.

Eliott stares at him, confounded.

The chances that this is just another layer of bullshit, like Lucille called it, are very high. And yet. He can't help but feel this is somewhat of a test. He swallows any quips about modern Robin Hoods he wanted to make. He tries to think - what is the most relevant part of what Lucas just said?

“The report said the cops found the safe empty, and there was nothing on the bank records except for the diamonds, he muses out loud.

- Wasn't there? So the cops found the safe right after the robbery, and it was empty?

- The safe was first checked by a bank employee as the robbers fled the scene.

- That's highly irregular, don't you think?

- Are you saying you left something behind that you wanted us to find in that safe? Why?”

Lallemant smiles, and he looks earnest for the first time even though what comes after is clearly a lie:

“Well, now - not admitting I did anything, but even I would know - that would be silly. Are you saying stealing diamonds would not be enough for the lowly thief you think I am?

Eliott ignores him and continues with the same train of thought.
- And why would you not simply take whatever it was with you and release it later...unless it was it being in the Karls’ direct possession that was incriminating, he realizes out loud.

- Well maybe whoever did this considered several options. You know, this is why I'm happy I got you on my case. A cynic would never have this much imagination.”

Eliott is strangely stoked by the pride in Lallemant's voice, which is weird. He's supposed to be in charge of the situation here. He coughs a little and straightens his spine.

“So, if I'm understanding correctly, you are expecting further complications to arise in this case?”

Lallemant leans forward, and Eliott cannot stop himself from inching towards him ever so slightly, captivated in spite of himself.

- “Well, maybe I expect I will make some complications arise.”

His tone of voice, husky and dead sure is as devastating as his blue eyes boring into Eliott's, leaving him nowhere to hide.

“And what about you?”

…

This is completely unprofessional. His client just asked him to meddle in an ongoing legal investigation - well, if he’s understood it right, he refused to say anything else after that weird question. As if it was now Eliott’s turn to provide him with a proof of usefulness, or something.

And he's actually considering it….why ? Because he's bored ? Because he wants to make an even bigger nuisance of himself and stick it to the man ? Because...because blue eyes and a surprisingly deep voice and that air of untoward confidence ?

Lucille rejoins him as he walks out.

“Well, that was a long phone call.”

She sighs.

“I thought I'd let you handle it. I was making a mess of it, I'm sorry. I don't know why he got under my skin like that. You ok taking point on this one ? The Streiser case is really giving me a headache.”

Eliott nods, relieved. He tells her most of what happened.

“He really is full of shit, she says. Another one of those cocky bastards who think that because they're medium smart and lack basic decency, they can bend the whole world to their will. Good luck with that one.” She snorts and he shrugs.

She's probably not entirely wrong.

…
As they separate to go to their cars, she to the court for preliminary hearings and him to their office, she turns one last time towards him.

“But Eliott ? Be careful, okay ? I don't like the timing of this. Your dad and his boss are up for reelection in four months. It's got political manipulation written all over it. I know you can handle it, I'm just...keep your head cool, okay.”

“Don't worry, he laughs with a confidence that is entirely a mask, I'm totally chill. He'll be blabbering in no time.”

Lucille smiles.

“Ah yes, I forgot you're the worst charmer in town.” She kisses him on the lips, warmer than before, and then she's gone.

Eliott sighs. He likes working with her, they're a good team. He just wishes there was an easy way to detangle their personal lives without anyone getting needlessly hurt.

…

As soon as he gets to their office, he grabs the additional police reports waiting for him, pulls every additional information he can find on the Karls, the diamonds, and Lucas Lallemant from their databases, and throws himself into reading like he hasn't since his last big case, the one that made his career.

What he learns makes his head spin.

First, the diamonds. There's definitely a reference to a curse in some true crime articles and they pop up in police reports - but the exact date and provenance ? Nowhere to be found, so what Lallemant said is either fake or insider knowledge.

Second, Lallemant himself. Now, Eliott has very little doubt that he did indeed commit the robbery. And that he's got people out there planning other operations now that their convoluted attempt to show something possibly illegal was in the Karls’ possession failed. If he was in any way reasonable, he would just do his job, try for a plea bargain, leave the rest to the cops, and move on when Lallemant's stubbornness inevitably gets him in trouble. You win some and you lose some, right ? But he's learned to trust the persistent nagging sensation at the back of his mind - why did he do this job in the first place, if not to make sure the right people were behind bars and everyone got a fair defense ? What if Lallemant and his people only did this to unravel a larger crime ? What are his ethical responsibilities then ?

He digs deeper into the man's background. Raised by a working class single mother who was reported to social services for neglect twice when Lallemant was in elementary school, but nothing after that. Brilliant grades, hard working student, graduated with honors, got into the top engineering school of the country. Nothing but smooth sailing until his fourth year - one year before getting his degree. His mother dies, and four months later, he disappears without a trace.
Reappearing six years later after a botched diamond heist, alluding to deeper reasons for his actions.

This has grudge written all over it.

The coroner's report says the mother died of natural causes, heart attack, but he knows how easy that is to fake. The four month delay between the death and the dropout indicate that something other than grief happened. Maybe he happened to find relevant information. Something that prompted him to vanish god knows where.

He takes notes of names and contact details - Lallemand's college roommate. The retired social worker who treated the case of his mother. A few teachers. The detective who investigated the mother's death. He might believe there is something more going on but there's no way he's going in blind about this man.

Third, the Karlss. They are retired now, but the husband used to be a real estate developer. Worked on more than a few public-private partnerships with the city of Paris, and especially closely with the then Urbanism Department Director and now mayor - his father's boss.

Shit. Lucille was right. This is political. He doesn’t know exactly what this means, maybe he is drawing hasty conclusions...but who wouldn’t?

And he thought his last case was going to be the highlight of his career, but this ? This is completely nuts.

As he goes through the witness folder, one pops up. Chloe Jeanson, daughter of the bank director. She claimed Lallemand seduced her in order to get access to some of her dad’s private information.

Well. Lallemand is in prison now. His charm is pretty much the only weapon he has left, and Eliott's probably the only person he has access to that could be receptive to it. He's probably made that clear as day when he walked in with that dumbass face this morning.

He's suddenly struck by the need to verify something and rushes to their front office.

“Alexia, hey, can you remind me quickly how we got on the Lallemand case ?
- Oh, Lucille didn't tell you? He specifically called to request you.”

Eliott sighs. This case has big trouble written all over it.

He's always wanted one of those.
“Alexia, how would you feel going out for some ice cream now?”

...

“So let me get this straight. You've got cursed diamonds, mafia connections, corrupt politicians and an upcoming election, and a thief hellbent on revenge who wants to charm you into spying on your own dad, is that right? Wow.

- Yeah, all in a day's work.

- I am so happy I came to work for you, dude. I thought becoming a paralegal was a mistake for a long time but shit's never boring with you.”

Eliott laughs.

They're sitting on a park bench, enjoying the spring sunshine and the flowers and birds singing. It's a bit too cold for ice cream, but that's always been their thing.

He's so happy he's got Alexia. This is a little pathetic, she's his employee - but she's probably his best friend. The people he parties with are fun, but they don't know anything about him. Alexia does - what he works on, his schedule, his troubles with Lucille, his family problems, even his mental health challenges. And yet she never makes him feel bad or fragile about anything. She's just always there, a breath of fresh air. People often mistake her for ditzy with her bright pink hair, wacky clothes and casual demeanor, but she is extremely shrewd and perspective. She's their paralegal, secretary, investigator - she does everything Eliott and Lucille have no time for. She's the glue of their little firm, basically. And he knows she's more loyal to him than to Lucille. She might be the only one he can talk to about this.

“So what are you going to do about it?

- Hm, move carefully, I guess.

- Ah yeah, because that is totally your style.

- Shut up!

- Whatever you say, boss.”

She only ever calls him boss to piss him off. One of his promises when she came to work for him after graduating was that they would never have to stand on ceremony with each other.

If only things could be so easy with his partner.

He sighs.

“Lucille can't know about this.”

Alexia eyes him suspiciously over the top of her double passion-fruit pistachio cornet with sprinkles on top.

“And what are you going to tell her then, dude? She's smart, she's going to put it together even faster than you did.
- I don't know, she's distracted by her own case. That buys us at least a little time.”

Alexia looks at him disapprovingly.

“Dude, that's not how you keep a fine girl like that !”

Correction, Alexia will be more loyal to him only if she doesn't manage to steal his girlfriend from under his nose someday soon.

Honestly, that would almost be a relief.

He shrugs.

“I know, I just...And she talks to my father all the time. She's closer to the man than I am. She'd go straight to him with anything I find.”

Alexia's mouth falls open.

“Oh okay okay okay wait a minute. You're actually considering this. That your father might have something to do with….whatever this is. And that you might investigate him on some half-implicated clue from a dude just arrested for robbing a bank ?”

The silence is egregious.

Eliott smiles at her, a little bit sheepish. He can't help it. He hasn't felt this excited by his job in ages.

“Is that a yes ? Wow, either you have daddy issues the size of a whole ass mountain, or that dude must have been really pretty.”

He may be able to lie to himself, but he can't lie to her, she'd see right through him.

“How about both ?”

Chapter End Notes

I love the idea of an Eliott/Alexia friendship. Bi/pan solidarity !
Also Lucille is pretty present in the beginning of this AU, so I didn't want to make her into the bad guy. They care about each other, they're just stuck in a situation that's bad for them both.

Anyway, tell me what you think ! Did you like ? What do you think is going to happen next ? Is Eliott's career going to survive ? Who even cares ? How bad is this Lucas really ? Is there an universe where they're not ready to follow each other to hell and back ten seconds after meeting no matter how reckless ? (that was a rhetorical question, of course there isn't)

see you next time xx
La vérité d'abord

Chapter Summary

*Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels*  
dun dun dun  
Our leading man Eliott Demaury discovered the disadvantages of getting to work hungover when he was hit in the face by the charm of his new client, the soon-to-be infamous suspected diamond thief Lucas Lallemant, and lost 80% of his natural Parisian lawyer smoothness. Also daddy issues, Alexia Martineau as badass assistant, and emotional support ice cream.

In this chapter: people talking, wondering out loud, planning, brainstorming, making allusions, flirting in inappropriate places, and maybe even some BANTER. Hold on to the edge of your seats. Also more daddy issues, more awesome assistant Alexia (i love alliterations), and some alliances are made.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to beeexx, who will beta even from the top of a mountain. You rock!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MERCREDI 10:22

Over the next few days, Eliott’s shoebox of an office increasingly starts resembling a stalker’s shrine, with pictures and newspaper clippings and extracts from police reports everywhere on the walls. It’s dramatic and probably redundant, with all the process tracing apps he’s got on his computer. But the bigger the mess on his wall gets, the clearer his head becomes. The physical act of making it is soothing, too, printing and cutting and taping little papers together. And Lallemant wanted him to be imaginative. He does restrain himself from using red string though.

Or putting up a big picture of his client in the middle of it all.

Thank god Lucille and him got separate office rooms after their big success.

That said, he’s starting to seriously consider drawing directly on the wallpaper (that drastically needs
to be changed anyway) when Alexia pushes in an old mobile blackboard she found in a second-hand shop. The thing looks right out of a creepy orphanage from the fifties, and its little metallic wheels make a grating squeaky noise. It’s perfect.

Alexia is friends with most of the people who run second-hand shops in the city, mostly because she gets half her clothes there. But it comes in handy when they need to talk to the ex-homeless people who work there and know what’s happening in the streets better than anyone. Or they need to refurbish their whole office because someone accidentally turned the sprinklers on.

She hands him a big box of colored chalk and sits in his desk chair, looking on amusedly as he covers the board in diagrams and bubbles while she taps on her tablet with her bright green manicured fingers.

“Ok so, he turns towards her when he’s done. We’re basically screwed. They’ve made absolutely no procedural mistakes whatsoever; in fact I’ve never seen cops do such a neat job before, it’s a bit weird.”

“Oh, do you think somebody encouraged them?” She asks, raising her eyebrows theatrically.

“Well, it’s a bit far out, but you know, not leaving out any possibilities. I think with a case this weird, we might need to use our imagination a lot more than usual. So let’s be weary of cops for now.”

He turns back towards the board and taps on the timeline he’s drawn in wiggly lines on the upper half of the board.

“On the surface this plays out as a typical heist gone wrong case. They enter the bank with party masks, take hostages, their specialist cracks the safe, and they use the info gathered from Chloé Jeanson’s father to find the diamonds.” He points at the picture on the wall. Lallemant is the one with a fox mask; all the rest are various types of dogs.

“Then they take some hostages with them in order to get away safely and leave in two cars, eventually releasing the hostages without any harm and disappearing into thin air. But meanwhile, for some reason, Lallemant and one other robber have stayed behind in the bank, hidden in the vents. We’ve got video footage of them leaving three hours after the heist. Lallemant is not wearing a mask but the other guy is. The only thing we can identify him by is the tattoo of a bird on his left ankle. The cops think they were actually the ones with the diamonds and the others were just a distraction.”

“Well, that would be a dumbass plan, if the others got away anyway.”

“Right? But three hours later, though, they get an unknown call that leads them to a car where they find Lallemant in the trunk, tied up, with signs of struggle everywhere.”

“So he’s been abandoned by his friends. Hmm...well maybe I’ve seen too many bad heist movies but...wouldn’t they have shot him instead? Because he can pretty much give them up, no?”

“Yeah, or maybe they wanted us to find him.”

“As revenge? To take the fall for them?”
“That's what the cops think. They're trying to present the story that Lallemant organized all this and was planning to stiff them on their part of the payoff but they turned on him instead.”

“How did they come to that conclusion?”

“Because of what they found in the switch sites: two stolen cars, with busted engines that would make them run out of gas approximately a mile after starting.”

“So they think Lallemant set his team up? But they were expecting it, and they had another way out!”

“Yup.”

Alexia frowns.

“And that explains why he would have organized the heist with him hanging back with the diamonds, then…but why wouldn't he want to give his associates up, then, if they left him behind?”

“The cops are speculating that maybe if he did, they would give them evidence that Lallemant committed even worse crimes.”

“They're framing his silence as evidence he's the big bad guy, then.”

“Yeah. It seems like they haven't even offered him a deal. It's like they don't give a shit about the diamonds, they just want to see him take the fall.”

“And he's helping them as long as he stays silent.”

“Yup.”

“And it's your job to get him to talk.”

Eliott points finger guns at her.

“You got it. Our best option at this point is to convince them that Lallemant isn't the mastermind and he's just the fall guy for someone else, so he should be a witness instead. Or, well, that he did organize it but to unveil a larger crime, but let's set the conspiracy theories aside for now.”

She laughs. “So you basically want to upend the entire trial again. Well at least now I understand why you're thrilled. That's one hell of a puzzle.”

Eliott takes a piece of red chalk and circles the three hours in the timeline between the end of the heist and Lallemant leaving the bank. He’s got so many questions, but he wants to focus on what his client has given him first.

“When I talked to him, he seemed to want me to know that there was something else in the vault besides the diamonds, something that he wanted us to find. Maybe he stayed behind to make sure it did. But somehow, a bank employee got there first.”

“Well, maybe he was actually lying to you. Maybe he wanted the bank employee to find it. Have you been able to talk to the guy?”
“Nope. Impossible to even find a name. I have an appointment tomorrow with the manager of the bank.”

“Bank types are notoriously secretive, though, aren't they?” Alexia’s tone is that of a little kid that has just seen a candy store down the street. Of course she would want to get involved,

“Absolutely they are. There might be more interesting things to be learned by someone, let's say...bumbling around.”

Alexia grins with her entire face.

“Well, I don't have anything important to do tomorrow anyway.”

“Didn't Lucille ask you to re-do our filing system?”

“Oh come on, what are you going to do without me, lawyer that guy into being honest? You know I can maybe see you charm a criminal into talking, but a banker? Hah. No, what you need is some true agents of random chaos.”

Eliott looks at his mess of an office.

“Yeah, filing is overrated anyway.”

______________________________

JEUDI 11:30

The next morning finds Eliott, Alexia and her friend (ex? they’re always on and off, he never knows where to stand with these two) Clara headed for the bank. The weather is beautiful, way too warm for this time of the year, and he’s already sweating slightly in his black pullover and woolen coat. Too many fucking layers, but he’d be cold without them.

As they separate to answer, Eliott wishes the girls good luck.

“And remember, if you get caught, I've never met you in my life.”

“Have a little faith, young padawan.” Alexia says as she turns her lollipop in her mouth. Meanwhile, Clara, dressed in the most low cut flowery sundress Eliott's ever seen, giggles and takes Alexia's arm, and they go stand in line at the counter. Eliott's not sure he should caution this, but Alexia's never let him down before.

He squares his shoulders and goes to his appointment.

…
The bank is still recovering from the heist - there's still impacts of bullets in the wall and broken glass pales being replaced, and everyone is mostly quiet and shifty.

The manager of the bank appears in front of Eliott, wearing a grey suit with the most aggressive shade of salmon shirt ever, accompanied by a sniveling underling with too much gel in his hair.

He puts on his fakest smile.

The man immediately starts explaining that he has very little time.

“You understand, with all the reconstructions and paperwork, we’re already late and we’ve had to hire new people because some of our employees just quit after our “little incident”. Where is company loyalty these days, I’m asking you. And what even are we paying all those therapists that the union sticks us with for. And they had two days off. Two whole days off ! And that union rep won’t get off my fucking back because of ‘undue terminations’. He’s just looking for reasons to stir up trouble, that one, and to think that he would exploit such a tragic circumstance...I’m telling you, this country has been going to shit for a long time !”

This man must be the type that loves listen to himself talk all day. Eliott wants to wallpaper over his face after two seconds. It’s usually Lucille who handles daily contact with annoying people such as these, vaccinated after a long career of working retail in college.

He just demolishes them in court when appropriate.

This is not a case, sadly, where this would be appropriate.

He tries to cut straight to the chase.

“Police reports tell us that one of your employees checked the safes before the police arrived. I’d like to talk to this man.”

“Really ? Who did you get this information from ? That’s not company protocol.”

“The officers saw a man leave as they entered the premises and he said he was checking the integrity of the conservation mechanisms for more delicate elements in their safes.”

“Ah, but...those are usually checked remotely...your officers might have been confused.”

“Or the employee could have been unclear, we have a lot of new trainees, the assistant supplies.”

“Listen young man, the manager says, his tone dripping in condescension, I fail to see the purpose of this. We’ve already told everything we could to the police. My assistant will give you a list of names you can cross check with your officers, but really. Haven’t you caught the guy who did it already ? I hope you will refrain from harassing my employees, they’ve been through enough. They need to focus on returning to normal now.”

And making money for you, Eliott doesn’t say.
No matter how hard he tries to get valid information, the man is slippery and obfuscating as hell. He leaves half an hour later, frustrated. It’s going to be a very long process to get a warrant for the security tapes on a hint the accused probably wouldn’t repeat to anyone else, or to get the cops to identify the man they saw if they even remember at all, which isn’t likely, and accept to talk to him, which is even less likely. Or to do it discreetly, without having to alert the prosecution. He’s just working with smoke signals at this point. He hopes Alexia was luckier.

He waits for them outside, a cigarette in hand to calm his nerves.

Ten minutes later, Alexia and Clara come out, the biggest grins on their faces. Clara is wearing shorts and Alexia’s sweater. Alexia is carrying Clara’s sundress, with an enormous blood stain right in the middle of it.

“Should I even ask ?”

“Hell yeah you should, I want to brag ! Ahaha, straight men are such morons ! But let’s maybe get to the office first, cause we look like we murdered someone right now, and that’s so last season.”

…

“Okay so get this.”

They're all sitting on the floor in his office, with steaming cups of hot chocolate Eliott has prepared for them (it’s one of the rare things he can make in the kitchen without screwing up.)

“I go to the security guard and ask him if they've got any videos of the assault still.”

“Oh wow, the skill.” Eliott quips. “I never could have come up with that myself.”

“Damn right you couldn't have. So okay, and I tell him, please, my girlfriend she really really likes to see stuff that's a bit...violent, you see ? Gets her all worked up.”

Clara lets out an over the top girlish laugh, and then with the most deadpan sinister voice she goes “It really does.”

“Anyway so I wink at him and I can see on his face he's getting all those ideas, so he takes us to his office and starts showing us videos from the beginning, with the robbers coming in and shooting at the ceiling and stuff, and then I show him a video from a heist in Australia where they used a kangaroo as a distraction. And meanwhile my girl gets the controls and skips to the part that interests us.”

Clara shows him a picture of a monitor screen on her phone.
“Ta-daah! I want spa tickets.”

It's not the best resolution, but it's clear enough. The man is average looking, brown eyes, a slight mustache. But it's a start. He takes a deep breath. A start. And it’s ridiculous enough that nobody serious would suspect anything.

Alexia kisses Clara’s cheek. “Institut Dior for you, baby.”

“Thank you, so much”, Eliott adds. “I mean we can't use this in any official capacity and I would get disbarred if people get wind of this...but we can definitely investigate from there. But um, if I can ask, the blood ?”

“Oh yeah ! Well that moron got handsy, so Clara burst a little vial of fake blood all over herself and told him she had explosive periods.”

“Haha, the look on his face though. He totally believed us. He couldn't have pushed us out fast enough.”

“Yeah, it was super gross.” Clara adds, looking super proud of herself.

Eliott bursts into laughter. Wow.

“I wish I could have thrown blood at the bank managers’ face, too. He was all upset about his employees not getting over their trauma quick enough, but he just so happened to be out of town when it happened.”

“Ooh, Alexia wiggles her eyebrows again, do you think that's a clue ?”

Eliott lets himself flop backward, landing on a pile of legal magazines he's been planning to read forever.

“I don't know, I think everything is a clue right now. This morning I caught myself checking out the faces in the crowd wondering if any could be Lallemant's associates. I spent ten minutes looking at diamonds in a jewellery store vitrine as if they were going to talk to me. I even fucking dreamt about it last night.”

“Ooh, you dreamt about the case, huh ? Did it have blue eyes ?”

“Shut up ! No, I was being chased in a maze with shrinking walls again, but this time I was following a trail of diamonds. Except they kept sinking into the ground every time I tried to catch one. So I was always chasing after the next one.”

“Well maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you it isn't about the diamonds.”

Eliott stares at the ceiling. This case is definitely starting to consume him. It's how he works, he should be fine as long as he keeps the rest steady. He's got his meds and his therapist and his friends. He's not an aimless teenager anymore. He can do this.

Clara breaks the silence.
“Well, that seems like a big headache. Honestly I just came to fuck up the patriarchy a little bit. Now I gotta go back to my period art.”

Eliott raises his head in alarm. “What?”

“Ahaha, no I'm kidding. Your face, dude.”

“Uh, I'm sorry but like…” He loves art, and women power, he really does, but stuff with bodily secretions is a bit... much. Clara smiles at him, looking like a pixie out of an acid trip nightmare.

“No but really, you're fine. Have you ever bought tampons for your girlfriend?”

“Um, yes?”

“Then you're fine.”

Alexia nods. “I told you, it's the pansexuality. Hey boss, can I also go to the spa?”

Eliott nods, feeling like the conversation is going over his head slightly.

“Thank youuuu ! Are you coming with us?”

“Not right now I'm not” he answers, looking at his board.

“Fair enough, married to the case, huh? But once we're done with this case, you are, okay? Otherwise I'm kidnapping you and chucking you in a vat of restorative mud, whether you want it or not. Rebellious workaholics need self care too.”

Eliott smiles at her apologetically.

“That sounds nice, actually. You know, once we've solved this.”

He frowns, and rakes his fingers through his hair, all the question marks on his board flashing in front of his eyes.

“Might be a while, though.”

“Well, the mud is not going anywhere.”

VENDREDI 16 : 17
He's going back to see Lallemant. Alone, this time. The prosecution is going to interrogate him on Monday, and they need to figure out a defense strategy.

He’s led to the same interrogation room. Lallemant is sitting in the exact position as he found him in last time. As if he’d been in this room the whole time, just waiting for Eliott.

Shoulders slung back, legs wide open, chair tilted just slightly, shackled wrists pushing him away from the table. Nonchalant, as if he was just waiting for the bus, but studiously so, to take up as much space as possible.

This time, though, he doesn’t turn his head as Eliott enters the room, and his face stays impassible as he watches Eliott sit down. Eliott ignores the strange feeling of disappointment and schools his face into the same mask of circumspection. If he has to work to get them to connect again, then so be it.

But Lallemant doesn’t let him wait long. He seems very keen on taking the initiative, Eliott notices.

“You came without your boss this time, huh ?”

“She's not my boss.”

“Alright, I get it, you're a big boy.” Lallemant’s tone is half-mocking, half cajoling.

Eliott takes a deep breath. They need to be productive today.

“I found the man who got to the safe first.” He slides a printed picture towards Lallemant, who throws the quickest of glances at it.

“Well, that was fast. You're very enthusiastic. Let me guess, you are the type of defense lawyer who secretly wanted to be a bandit when you were little ? You just never had the balls.”

Eliott considers his client carefully. There’s still something very blatant about the way Lallemant looks at him, but he’s cranking the antagonism up a notch. Last time his opening gambit was to treat Eliott like a pretty face that he just happened to bump into and was trying to pick up. Situational comedy. Now, he’s insulting his masculinity. It’s an...interesting superposition. A lot of criminals just treat their lawyers like lackeys. Lallemant is more focused on him than on his possible condemnation.

He’s seen Lallemant’s background. This man is smart. Everyone is playing , he’d said. He made himself a mystery and somewhat of a lost cause, which was exactly what he needed to do to rope Eliott in.

What is he doing this time ? He knows Eliott is game. So maybe now he wants to know what kind of a partner he is.
Well, he isn’t the kind to be intimidated by charming assholes, for one.

“Is that why you chose a life of crime? To let everyone know you had the biggest balls in town?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Well, in my experience, when you need to brag about it, it’s never that great.” Eliott smiles serenely. “But then again, I’ve never stolen any diamonds. Maybe I’m missing something.”

Lallemant laughs, a little surprised and a little bit delighted.

He feels something too sharp and too fast zing through his veins.

He’s missed that smile. Fuck.

How can that be? He’s only ever seen it once before in his life.

“Well maybe you should try it sometime, Lallemant says, cutting through his minute of panic. “It’s really fun. Especially the consequences.” He looks around, as if he’s just now noticing where he is, at the flaky paint falling off the walls, the single naked lightbulb around them and the rusty bars in front of the windows and doors. “The accommodation really is top notch. Very vintage horror movie, very authentic. But the service leaves a little bit to be desired, if I’m honest.”

Eliott leans forward.

“Well, maybe I have an idea on how to make it better.”

“I’m all ears. Will it involve seeing you more often?”

“Definitely.”

Eliott leaves a moment of silence. He knows how to play with implications too. Then he taps on the picture in between them.

“I think it’s called a defense strategy? Ever heard of it?”
Lallemant pouts at him.

“And I thought we were going somewhere fun. You’re like a dog with a bone, aren’t you.”

“Do you want to go to prison?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know. Might have to get back to you on that one.”

Elliot lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Oh no, Lallemant says, don’t do that with your face, you’re going to get lines. Now that would truly be a waste. Let me think. That guy. Yes, I’ve seen him once. Spoiler alert: he doesn’t work for the bank. He’s...let’s say, an independent contractor. Real slippery type. Not easy to catch.”

Elliot frowns. “I’m not a cop. I don’t have the resources to find people who don’t want to be found.”

“Are you telling me you don’t have any friends?”

“Friends, yes...discrete friends, I don’t know. You know, it would really help me if you gave me a little more information. I feel like I’m walking in a minefield right now.”

“And that’s you getting closer to the true meaning of life. You should thank me.”

Eliott laughs. This guy is completely wasting his time. And yet, there is absolutely no part of him that wants to look at his watch.

“Okay then. I’m telling you what I think, you tell me if I misstep then.”

Lallemant nods, slowly, as if he’s doing Eliott a favor by even listening to him.

“Well, I don’t think you did this for the diamonds, or not only. And I think you chose me as your lawyer because you need the connections that I have. I think you’re not telling me things, because you want to give me plausible deniability in case something goes south.”

“Really? That’s very generous of me.” Lallemant’s tone is still joking, but his eyes are grave all of a sudden.

“I mean, you could also be manipulating me to cause damage to my family. But I’d rather go with the first option.”

“Aren’t lawyers all supposed to be cynical bastards?”

“Aren’t all criminals supposed to be morally corrupt degenerates?”

The silence between them condenses, thick as a cloud.
“Honestly, that’s so boring.” Eliott cuts through it. “I’d hope we could do something else, and I could treat you like a person.”

“That’s a weird thing to say in a place like this.”

“I don’t think that’s ever a weird thing to say.”

They’re not smiling anymore. Lallemant looks at him for an age, and it’s an overwhelming gaze, relentless and expectant, as if he’s expecting Eliott’s soul to step out of his skin and come forward. Then he speaks, voice strangely deep, the moment heavy and uncertain.

“Your father.”

Cards on the table, then.

“Oh, right. That bastard.”

“No love lost between you, then.”

“No more than he likes us to pretend there is.”

“Don’t you owe him everything?”

“Every day a little less.” Eliott answers.

“That’s a struggle, isn’t it.” Lallemant says, as if he knows what Eliott’s talking about intimately.

“I wish I started earlier.”

Another silence, another move on the board. But it’s not chess they’re playing. Eliott can’t say if they’re playing against each other or with each other. He can’t say if he’s ever been this honest, this fast with another human being. He wishes he was allowed to smoke in here. His fingers feel all restless.

“If I tell you he’s up to no good, are you surprised?”

Eliott shakes his head.

“So that’s why you’re so eager to believe me, huh. Damn, I really thought it was my smile for a minute. But no, daddy issues. Beats me everytime. I’m a bit worried about your professional ethics, now, though.”

“Now you’re worried about my professional ethics?”

“I mean… you were waiting for dirt like this to come up, weren’t you? Is that why you chose this job?”
Eliott shakes his head again. “No. I guess I just believed it was important nobody got falsely condemned, even those who are convenient fall guys.” That was what he’d told himself for a long time. But now?

“I don’t think I had the balls to even think I would oppose my father, when I chose this job, to be honest. It did make me less afraid of bad people, though. So maybe I was getting ready.”

Lallemant’s eyes haven’t left his in what feels like a whole hour, like magnets to his own. The blue of his irises turned liquid and dark by the lack of sunlight. Impossible to turn away.

“Yes. Or maybe he pushed you in this direction, so you could be useful to him someday. However bad you think he is, your father is probably ten times worse. I think maybe you should be scared again.”

That’s really the purpose of this, then. Lallemant wants to know if he will be too afraid to face down powerful people. His father is the ultimate test.

Above them, the yellowish light flickers, leaving them in obscurity for a few fractions of a second. They don’t move. When it comes back on, Eliott notices how Lallemant’s skin could belong on a renaissance painting, but his eyes are probably too alive to be ever captured properly. He’s never felt such an immediate connection to anyone before. It scares him. He knows he’s about to step into a world he’s managed to keep away from his whole life, even if he always knew it was there.

He wants to move in the direction of the things that scare him, though. He’s tired of distracting himself.

“Maybe. But maybe I want to do something with my life.”

“Don’t we all.”

Lallemant looks impossibly young for a moment as he looks down, rakes his hand through his hair. It stands up spiky for an instant. If Eliott was still in the habit of drawing people like animals, like he did when he was in high school and still entertained ideas of being an artist someday, he would say he looks like a hedgehog. Prickly, but cute.

Where does that idea come from? He’s a fucking lawyer facing his suspect of a client, for fuck’s sake.

Now that he knows more about where Eliott stands, Lallemant seems more open to making a move. “That man, he’s nobody. But he works for someone. He’s going to meet them again. The circles he
moves in are getting antsy with me here and the diamonds gone. It's dangerous, though. I would advise against you going in directly, or send in anyone who could easily be tied to you.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“I considered sending you in blind, you know. See what blows up. It would have been revelatory.” Lallemant said. “But then I realized I don't do that.”

“What ?”

“Punish people for the sins of their fathers.”

He's so serious now, Eliott feels a chill run along his spine.

“And another thing. The Karls had the diamonds because someone trusted them, and they earned that trust. They had a lot of real estate projects with the current mayor in the early 00s, but they did stuff off book, too. Your father might have a copy. In a private location.”

“What a handy coincidence I'm having dinner at my parents’ house tomorrow evening, then.”

“Wow, not wasting any time, huh ?”

“We don't have a lot of time if we want to move to requalify you as a witness.”

“That's secondary. The truth comes first.” He must see the incredulous expression on Eliott's face as he continues, “Believe me, when those who wronged you are free, the whole world feels like a prison, no matter where you are.”

“I hope you're not betting everything on me.” Eliott feels compelled to say.

“Not everything, no. But I guess we're both taking big risks now, huh.”

Eliott nods. If Lallemant’s hands weren't shackled to the table, it feels like they could shake hands.

“So about that defense strategy...how good are you at stalling ?”

Eliott sighs.

“That's what our entire legal system was made for, don't worry.”

…

What Eliott gets from their cryptic back and forth is this : the heist created chaos, and chaos is when maps can be redrawn, new alliances forged, and the guilty come out of the woodwork to cover themselves. Truth has to be bargained for, revealed carefully, built together. Maybe Lallemant is
setting a trap; maybe Eliott is the bait, or maybe he is the jaw of the trap, or maybe he is the trigger. Only time, and his own skill, Eliott suspects, will tell.

So as he drafts plans to question and require documents he knows are going to be useless and are just a way to drag out the procedure, he pushes down all the questions he wants to ask - who exactly wronged Lallemand so bad he was compelled to throw a promising future away and risk going to jail? Why did he hang back after the heist? Did his friends really abandon him?

*Or did he maybe want to get caught?*

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**VENDREDI 21 : 34**

As he gets home, he feels the full force of the day crash on his shoulders.

After leaving the penitentiary, he called a few of his friends, a cop and a PI, the only ones he trusts. Then he stayed at his office for a while, going over case files again and again and again until he knew them by heart. Stalling.

Lucille is waiting for him, curled up in front of the TV in her cosiest cashmere sweater, dinner warm in the oven for him. He feels a sharp pang of guilt. She’s always so good to him. After he’s done eating, he takes her feet in his lap and starts rubbing them, which he knows she loves. She stretches and smiles at him in a way she hasn’t done in months. It’s warm and familiar and for a brief moment, things are normal again.

They tumble into bed together, falling back into easy intimacy, and at first her little breathy moans are a balm to Eliott’s heart, a proof he can still do this. But as his movements become increasingly mechanical, she puts a hand to his chest, and stops him.

“Sorry, this isn’t working right now. You’re not here with me.”

He pulls out of her and rolls off. She draws him close and pets his hair, closing her arm around his neck.

“It’s okay, darling, I know you’re trying.”
Her brown eyes are sad and her tone feels ever so softly condescending, as if she knows he can’t do any better because of his nature, but she’s still willing to care for him. And it makes him so mad with himself, that he accepts this, but he can’t seem to move. He feels so heavy, so tired. In spite of everything, of how she always makes him feel smaller until she can fit him in an easy box, he can’t move. She’s the only safety he’s ever known, and as the world gets darker around him, it feels like letting go would be akin to drowning.

SAMEDI 03:54

Eliott is dreaming again.

The world around him is black and white. He’s turning corridor after corridor, confused, black carpet on the walls and the low ceilings, the floor barren stone, the persistent smell of old tobacco in his nostrils, and of something darker underneath, like wine barrels and humid soil. Far away, a bell is toiling. His limbs feel like rubber.

He sees doors and hallways, but it’s all lost in the fog that is rising from the ground, so thick he can feel it cling to his clothes, and he feels like he’s running from someone, loud angry steps behind him, and they’re getting closer, and the light is further and further away until he’s groping around blindly in the dark, and he knows he’s going to hit a dead end eventually.

Then he bumps into someone. The person doesn’t stumble or budge even an inch.

Instead he’s the one being slammed into a wall, and before he can make any noise, plush lips are catching his, and his dream self’s instinctive response is to kiss back like his life depends on it. He doesn’t know what he’s doing because he’s never been kissed like that in his life. His mind can barely generate a convincing impression of it, but it’s scrambling for the concept of it in pulses of need, and Eliott is being blown apart. There’s a warm tongue pushing into his mouth and a leg nudging his apart and he feels himself shamble forward and cling to the compact, strong, shorter body pressed against him, and he doesn’t feel even feel solid anymore, the heat in his belly making the world melt around them. He feels like he's about to sink to his knees.
And then a brutal ray of light is thrown in their faces, and he sees two shards of bright blue looking at him, piercing his heart, and he wakes up.

For a moment of sheer terror he can’t move, he doesn’t know where he is, and then he’s back in his body, in his bed, Lucille’s breathing regular next to him. A wave of guilt overthrows him.

He’s sweaty, aroused like he hasn’t been in years, and he’s so fucked. Joking with Alexia about a hot client who hits on him is one thing, because it’s so obvious nothing is ever going to happen. But Lucas Lallemant? Lucas Lallemant said he was going to make trouble, and Eliott stepped up to pave the way, and they have an understanding now, and he needs his wits sharp, not wet dreams to quench the pathetic drought of his private life.

It’s a dangerous game they’ve just agreed to play together, and it’s one the sentimental always loose.

Eliott takes a deep breath, one hand on his hammering heart. He’s brought back to the interrogation room, to that feeling of understanding and clarity.

*The truth comes first.*

The rest will have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

vaguely symbolic wet dreams are such a fic cliché, but would you really tell me Eliott doesn’t have vivid dreams? After meeting Lucas no less?

*Next time on Les Diamants sont Eternels* dun dun dun: a majorly awkward dinner party, a funky PI (who do you think it will be?) and some bad, bad news. The plot chickens!!

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Avec qui se battre

Chapter Summary

*Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels* dun dun dun

Our leading man Eliott Demaury finally got to the beginning of an understanding with his client, diamond thief and man of mystery Lucas Lallemant, on the basis of clever banter, daddy issues - and maybe something else yet to be defined between them that is definitely not as professional as it should be. Alexia found out the first solid clue with her use of practical effects, the face of a suspiciously out of place bank employee. Eliott had some couple trouble and then a naughty dream. Which didn't mean anything at all, of course...

In this chapter : An awkward family dinner (officially making this Daddy Issues : the fic), some introversion, the rise of a disaster bi/pan squad, some clever words about parallel universes, some lines being crossed, and things getting positively steamy (by Victorian standards...)

Chapter Notes

Okay I went away for a while to do some #renewskamfrance related stuff but at least I came back with this beast of a chapter. I hope you enjoy.

I figured a lot of the plot too. Fair warning, it's going to be fun and explodey, but it's going to get dark at times too. This version of Lucas, especially, has gone through some shit. I mean, people generally don't do crime for the heck of it. This is where we start to meet some real assholes, too. And there will be angst. But I promise a super happy ending, and the baddies getting what's coming to them in a very cathartic way. With explosions.

tw this chapter for : emotional abuse, (internalized) ableism, homophobia, homophobic slurs. take care of yourselves.

beta'ed as always via Tom Riddle's diary by beeexx <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SAMEDI 20 : 01

Eliott parks the car smoothly in its designated spot in his parents’ private parking.
As they stand in the elevator, he takes a deep breath, and tightens his grip around the bottle of expensive wine he’s carrying. Today, he needs to keep all edges in.

Lucille misinterprets his motion, and tightens her arm around Eliott’s.

“It’s going to be fine, you know. Your parents are harsh on you because they love you.”

It’s a rehash of a conversation they’ve had millions of times. Lucille doesn’t get it. Her family is strict but loving, pushed her to work hard, and now she’s made it. Great studies, prestigious firm of her own, poised to marry into a very old and distinguished family. She thinks she knows “tough love”. She doesn’t get the layers of manipulation, and what else lies beneath Armand Demaury’s polished charm. Maybe because, and Eliott is surprised at the venom that comes with this thought, she isn’t that interested in looking beyond the surface of people.

He doesn’t reply.

They step out of the elevator, and knock on the polished wooden door of the penthouse residence of his parents.

…

Luisa opens the door and takes their coats, as well as the bottle, to the kitchen.

As always, it’s like stepping onto the set of a period movie, everything stately, expensive, heavy with history.

They go to the drawing room, where aperitives await. His sister, Anne-Marie, is already there, with her fiancé, Romain, sitting together on the green brocade méridienne.

Eliott does not get along with Romain. He’s a jurist for a big electronics multinational, and he feels insecure about not being a real lawyer, so he’s always sending digs at Eliott. Anne-Marie thinks it’s good fun. Eliott thinks it’s exhausting. Then again, communicating with his sister has always been difficult.

Luisa comes in with little plates full of foie gras with fresh fig canapés and a tray of small glasses of champagne.

“Your parents will be ready for dinner soon, children. Make yourself at ease in the meantime.”

As Lucille starts making small talk, Eliott wonders how he’s going to get to his father’s private study. He’s not stupid, his father would never leave anything really compromising out in the open. But maybe he can find some kind of clue.
The dinner table is, as always, fit to receive kings: gleaming candelabras, dark table cloth, sprawling centerpiece of red roses and black little berries, perfectly folded linen napkins, shining silverware. His mother is still adjusting it all, looking like a frozen movie still in her deep red velvet dress, her hair in a perfect bun. She zooms in on him immediately.

“Lucille! You really need to take our boy to the hairdresser, that bird's nest takes up all the place in the room.” He stays stoic as she ruffles his hair. He has a lot of practice being treated like an overgrown child. She takes his face in her hands and plants kisses on both his cheeks, then takes the bottle from him. “Thank you for the wine, darling, but we can’t drink that with the veal. Besides, 2014 really wasn’t a great year for that terroir. Who is giving you advice, again?”

She’s in great form.

They sit. She starts serving out braised chicory and sugar peas. And then his father appears from the kitchen in his butcher’s apron in a rush, carrying a dish full of meat still sizzling. Everyone cheers. As his father starts cutting into the roasted veal, the knife slicing through the pink meat like butter, Eliott contemplates how complementary they are. A vision of love as a well-oiled machine.

His mother, for instance, is great at immediate searing dismissal. Just by standing next to her, his father appears to be the friendly one. But it’s an optical illusion. He specializes in long-lasting devastation.

They always make it look so good, though. So smooth, spirited, cultured. The perfect image of a charmed life. Eliott, with his jagged edges and outbursts, never had any chance not to stick out.

The chicory drenched in honey sauce is sickeningly bittersweet, and the meat - he hates the idea of eating baby animals.

He eats anyway, like a good kid.

At least the wine is good.

“So I saw some of my friends from law school again, Romain starts, and we had a very interesting debate. I thought you might like to weigh in, Eliott. Their position was that the death penalty was actually a common good, because of how expensive it was for the taxpayers to maintain prisoners for life. I mean, with the degenerates you work with, you must have seen quite a few that deserved the electric chair, no?”
What the fuck.

“We always used the guillotine in France, Eliott replies. But that was just an uncomfortable symbol for some, I guess.”

His mother’s laugh is sour for a fraction of a second before pivoting into genuine, like a souffle deflating in reverse.

“Our son, the rebel.” What a laugh at parties, isn’t he adorable?

“Eliott, his sister starts, you have always been such a softie. I cannot understand how you can do that work with all those horrible people.”

“A lot of them are not horrible actually, they just made bad choices. And often their circumstances took the good choices away from them in the first place.”

“Ah, my son, always playing devil’s advocate.” His father's tone is jovial. With his sparkling blue eyes, well groomed beard, and salt and pepper curls, he is the image of the benevolent patriarch sitting at the head of the table. Eliott braces himself for what comes next.

“But come on, children, talking about the death penalty at the dinner table, that’s very gauche. You’re going to upset your mother. Eliott, wasn't your last case about a diamond robbery? Now that sounds more interesting to me.”

Huh.

His sister clasps her hands excitedly. “Ok now that, I could understand committing a crime for.”

“Actually, synthetic diamonds are going to be an essential part in of electronics in the future…” Romain tries.

“Ah, but nobody sings songs about synthetic diamonds, do they?” his mother supplies, kissing the sparkling ring on her finger and looking at Eliott's father, who sends her a kiss through the air and a million dollar smile.

Sometimes Eliott hates them so much he can't breathe, and sometimes it seems like they have invented glamour and he wants nothing more than their approval. To be one of them. Easy, gliding through the world like in an old world romance.

“The diamonds my client went after are said to be cursed, Eliott says. They've been changing hands among the mafia for generations.”

“Ooh” his sister goes.

“Yes, everytime they were made part of a deal, the deal went south. And yet”, he embellishes, “it only made them more wanted. Each crime family wanted to be the one that proved more powerful than the curse.”

“But none of them ever did for long, and your client is the latest victim of their deathly allure! How fascinating.” His sister sounds as if she’s enquiring about a circus act or a soap opera.

“I wonder what cursed them in the first place”, his mother says, tone theatrical.

“A tragic crime of passion, it must be.” His father responds, and takes his wife's hand to kiss it. Then he says, looking around the table before dispensing his wisdom,
“Children, passion is the only thing that excuses bad choices. Or good choices for that matter. It's about the fire of it; the power of will. That is the only thing that can change the world. And if it must end in tragedy, then so be it. You must admire that client of yours, Eliott. He failed, but there is more glory in the fall towards greatness than in a timid life that never tries.”

His mother raises her glass.

“Hear hear, the sage has spoken” she mocks her husband affectionately.

They all raise their glass, even poor Romain. He won’t make it to marriage, Eliott realizes. He’s too boorish, too unrefined to sit at this table for long. He can see Anne-Marie forgetting him as the night goes on. Eliott feels a rush of warmth, despite himself. The thrill of being seen as worthy of interest at the grown up table. Of not being the one out for once.

He wonders if his father knows the man he is praising is plotting his demise. He wonders what Lallemant would think. He would probably scoff at the roast and the candles and the pretty words, blow through it like a gale wind. Truth first. Even though he seems just as good at spinning lies. The paradox of it is maddening.

For a moment, he considers letting everything fly. Just sit here, and continue laughing, and keep pretending that everything is fine until it is. He considers that maybe, just maybe, he is letting anger from the past color his view of his father, that he might be a bit shady but no more than most of his colleagues, that Eliott has exaggerated or misinterpreted the things he's seen over the years, the dubious guests and the glimpses of worse. That he will end up looking the fool, shackling his fate to that of an actual suspected criminal, in order to go after people to whom he owes so much.

Lucille, next to him, is caught in the aura of it all. The Demaurys know how to set a mood, that’s for sure. He sometimes feels like she’s more in love with his family than with him. They’re everything she works to become. The class, the stability, the charmed detachment from the world. Power, that hides itself as elegance, polishing away all the angles and blemishes. Masters of the universe at leisure, making it all look effortless.

But that’s all the shallowest level of the game. His father might talk about passion, but it’s greed he really means. Every time he’s let himself get caught in it, he’s starved parts of himself. Beauty, real raw beauty, has nothing to do with this.

Beauty is honesty. Beauty is pushing through pain and misunderstanding. Beauty is wanting more than the status quo, and making connections in hopeless places. Digging deeper.

Beauty is facing the world, and all its rotten roots. Truth. Sometimes you have to use lies as weapons to get there in a fucked up world, but truth, still. He has to believe it’s possible.

Eliott puts his napkin down and gets up.

“Sorry, I don’t think that the honey sauce agreed with me.”

“You have such a delicate stomach, Lucille laughs. After all those culinary experiments…”

He lets the conversation trail off behind him, making noise as he opens the toilet door, and then none at all as he moves through the hallway towards his father’s office.
The room is like he always remembers it. On one side, the fireplace, full of glowing embers, and the two leather chairs in front of it covered in fur rugs. The old, carved stone skull on top of the mantelpiece. On the other, the gigantic wooden desk, made of a massive block of oak, polished only on top, the sides still raw, and behind a beautiful library, full of bound leather tomes. The three large windows, with view on the Eiffel tower.

He feels foolish, like a little kid peeking where he shouldn’t. Anything compromising would be hidden on a server in the Caymans, he knows, not somewhere where a fumbling amateur detective could hazard into it.

Maybe it’s just the symbolic aspect of it, though. Crossing a line.

He looks in the desk’s unique drawer. A leather bound agenda, weekly, full of illegible notes about appointments. He takes a picture of the last few months and upcoming weeks, to analyze later. Then he turns his attention to the lower closed cupboards behind him. As he turns the key slowly, he finds the less aesthetically pleasing books on urban planning, folders full of maps and blueprints.

It would take him forever to even start understanding what this all means. He’s holding something that was made in the 2010s, for some sort of a...river pier ? God, he should have done more research into this.

He takes a deep breath. He remembers the Karls had done a lot of renovation of old properties. He’s even read about issues with archeological digs. He finds something about the year 1997. So there must be somewhere in between.

2003. His eyes land on a riverside project model. Something about caves under the docks of the Seine?

There’s a loud crack of wood in the hallway. Footsteps, pulling him out of his trance.

He puts everything back, lighting quick, closes the cupboard and opens the one he knows the content of, and pulls out an old sci-fi comic book, randomly opening on a page with a space city under a glittering dome.

His father finds him lost in reading.

He chuckles. Eliott's heart drops an inch.

“Ah, my son, the dreamer. Still running away from the party table, huh ? You are incorrigible.”

Eliott puts down the comics, tries to keep his breath steady.

“I'm sorry, I just randomly realized I forgot the name of the alien girl in this one. And I mean, I loved her a lot.”

His father laughs.
“Well, it’s good to hang on to the things that shape you. Now, it’s convenient to find you here, I was going to suggest we have a little father-son talk.” He gestures to one of the chairs and puts a new log in the fireplace. Eliott stands up and goes to sit, trying to relax but feeling himself stiffen nevertheless. His father reaches into the little table in between for a crystal decanter of cognac, the massive faceted stopper glinting in the low light, and two short-stemmed tulip glasses. He pours two little doses of the amber liquid, a bit more for himself.

Eliott resists the urge to make himself smaller. He cannot be a woodland creature anymore. He stares into the fire instead, until his eyes hurt.

“So, his father starts in a soft voice, do you have anything to tell me ?”

His heart stops a little. The silence is a minefield.

“Well, uh, he begins, voice unsteady. Not really. I’m busy with work, and so on. Not much since we last talked…”

His father is staring at him, leonine and unwavering. He brings his hands together, runs at the heavy ring on his thumb. Eliott looks back without looking, tries to make himself transparent. The clock in the corner ticks away, heavy.

Beneath the genial façade, the ice is surfacing slowly. Eliott is transported back to times of being small alone with someone very angry. Someone able to express his displeasure in ways so effective he didn’t need to be anything but perfectly pleasant the rest of the time and still had Eliott trying to predict his every move in terror.

Eliott goes to his happy place, in his head. Trees, chirping birds, old rusted train tracks, a sketchpad. It’s been a while since he needed to do that. But he cannot show fear right now. He needs to feel like he’s got nothing to hide.

It’s like having his soul weighed at the gates. All his flight reflexes are coming back. The pathological need to overcompensate, bluster, hide behind platitudes. All his hard won trappings of independent adulthood meaningless. He’s sit in dark rooms with murderers, and it was easier.

“You’re taking your meds, I hope ?”

He hates this question. He hates it with a blazing intensity, but he’s got no out there.
“Yes, of course.” Eliott tries to stay stoic - the very image of a chemically balanced person.

Finally his father relents, the mask slipping back on in the blink of an eye.

“Ah my son. You lucked out with that Lucille. She’s a good girl, grateful of what she has in life. But you know, people are starting to ask me questions. “

Eliott shrugs, at a loss.

“We’re very busy with setting up the firm I guess. It’s not the best mindset to think about the rest.”

“Ah, that’s an excuse if I’ve ever heard one, young man.”

Eliott lets himself snort, a picture of normal recalcitrance to authority.

“I get it, I get it, you know. I’m a modern man. You’re a free spirit, you like to experiment. But you’re not in college anymore. Soon you will want to settle down, have a family. Why waste time when you’ve found the perfect partner ?”

*You’re not in college anymore. Meaning I didn’t say anything when you had your fun kissing boys, but now it’s time to go back to being nice and hetero and normal.*

Eliott’s anger is beat before it has time to rise, this is a battle he can’t win. His father is so good at staying within an inch of being actually offensive.

“Yeah, but she’s always trying to mother me”, is the next thing that comes out of his mouth, and he wishes he hadn’t. He doesn’t want to bond with his father over Lucille’s back.

“That’s women for you, you know. It makes them feel useful.”

Eliott can’t help scowling.

“I’m traditional, I guess. I’m not much for all that wishy-washy gender stuff. I’m sure it seems fun to you right now, but you’ll see. When the going gets tough, you want a good woman by your side, so you can focus on building a life. Complementarity has its advantages. I thought you’d understand by
now, you especially, with your tendencies to lose it. You need someone stable.”

He speaks about Eliott’s deepest shame so casually, like it's just another dinner table conversation matter. Eliott takes a sip from his glass and tries to focus on the alcohol burn inside his mouth.

“It’s about loyalty, that’s what it is. Loyalty and will. The rest is accessory. But don’t worry. If you don’t believe me now, life will teach you.”

He shrugs. He knows debating his father is no use. The warm feeling from earlier is mostly gone, now. He just wishes he could go home.

“And that new case of yours, then? How’s it going? Expecting some trouble?”

Ah. There it is.

Eliott continues the moody youth charade, leans back in his chair, tries to look bored.

“I don't know, my client is kind of an annoying jerk, I can't get him to be straight with me, I think it's gonna take some time.”

*I'm dreaming of him at night*, he doesn't say.

“No, it's not.”

The temperature in the room drops five degrees. That voice.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You're going to do a clean, quick job of this one.”

“What?”
“You had your fun with the last one, Eliott. Enough of that now.”

“I didn't have fun! I kept some men's lives from being ruined for no good reason!”

“Oh come back down to earth, please. You're in the wrong division for playing heroes. You just wanted to screw with the system, show everyone how clever you were.”

“You can't tell me what to do!”

Eliott cringes the moment his words fly out of his mouth. Creaky, trembling, too forceful, like he's some sort of overly emotional teenager.

His father laughs then, and it makes Eliott feel like he’s struggling to get out of quicksand.

“My dear boy, I’m not telling you what to do, I’m telling you what is going to happen. You’re going to let the prosecution do its job, and let them send that man to prison for a long time, and you will go on to winning other cases. It will not impact your reputation, I promise you. It will barely be a blimp on the radar.”

“Or what?”

“Do you like making a fool of yourself, Eliott? Haven’t you had enough of it already?”

How long has Eliott been scared of his father? For an instant, he’s five again. There’s a towering man in the kitchen, loud voice, suitcases full of cash. Eliott’s mother breaks a glass with her hand, the blood flows, her voice is trembling. He’s hiding behind the couch, watching the scene through the half-open kitchen door. The man pulls out a gun. His words are coarse, vulgar, talking about what he is going to do to their family.

His father steps in. Laughs.

“Big words, Antoine, big words. But you know, you should really shoot me first. Because every slight that is done to me, I demand interests. So shoot me, now! See who comes collecting.”

His father had moved into Eliott’s angle of vision then, and it had terrified him. ‘Shoot me!’ He didn’t care one bit about his family. He was having fun. It was all about the battle of wills. Eventually the man had cowered, and left, and Eliott had seen the look of fear on his face as he left. His mother had broken into sobs.
His father had stepped out and smiled at his terrified son, and crouched down.
“Do you know why that scary man left, Eliott?”
Eliott had shaken his head.
“Because he knows who I am.”

That was the first time he can remember, but it was by far not the worst.

Armand Demaury never gets his hands dirty, because he has a very long shadow. Eliott’s felt it hanging over him, all his life. Every time he’s tried to escape it, he’s failed. He always ends up falling back into the fold. It’s as if the man controls the fabric of reality around him.

But maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe it really isn’t about him, or where he ends up. Maybe it’s just about what he can do in that brief moment of time where he’s running. In that minute of freedom, in the chaos.

*The truth first.*

“You can’t scare me into doing what you want.” He knows the words are lies the moment they come out because he’s already terrified. But it doesn’t matter. He has to make his own truth now. He has to.

‘Big words, Eliott, big words. You weren’t this proud last time you needed us, were you. You know this is the real world, don’t you? Not your artsy-fartsy clique. I won’t be able to save your ass by signing a big cheque, the next time you go loony.”

Eliott looks down.

“Yes, that’s right, boy. I know who you are. And what you are, is unable to stand on your own. It’s baked into who you are. You’re damn lucky you’ve got a supportive family. Without us, you are nothing.”

Eliott tries to swallow through the shame.

“Why is this trial so fucking important anyway, huh?”
His father laughs his question away, and stands up. 
“Ah, no, it doesn’t work that way. Show me you are a man first and I will treat you like one.”

He grabs a tablet off his desk.

“You know, it doesn't have to be hard. I have a friend telling me there’s a big gang-related trial coming up soon and they need more court-appointed lawyers. It would be one of those things you like, shiny, guaranteed to make a splash. You could meet some interesting people, too. People we might want to work with in the future, people with deep pockets. You and your girl would be set for years.”

Holy shit, thinks Eliott. Is he setting me up to become a mob lawyer? The future flashes in front of his eyes. It could be a way to gain his father’s trust. Gain more information. Learn the truth.

“However….if you insist on making things difficult, well…your girl is working on the Streiser case, right? Very delicate, lots of corporate interests tied in it…”

He extends the tablet to Eliott. It’s a copy of personal emails, a few other confidential documents. Eliott pales.

“It would really be a shame if anyone learned that Streiser’s lawyer leaked confidential documents to the press. It would completely sway public opinion. The case would be ruined. Along with your girl’s career, I guess. And your firm wouldn’t be too well off either. You might be able to work as a lawyer again, but her? Rather unlikely.”

Eliott’s newly made plans shatter in his head.

If he ever made it to his father’s circle of trust, he would have to become just as corrupt and morally rotten as the rest of them, and then what would be the point?

That’s how power closes its ranks behind itself.

“You have to learn the value of loyalty, at some point, son. So I’m just making things simpler for you. This is the price of the golden life you live.”
God. Lucille. Faithful, constant Lucille. Who put all her hopes for the future and years of tireless work behind Eliott. It doesn’t matter that their relationship is fucked up. He might not care about his own career that much, but can’t do this to her, and his father knows.

He feels oppressive, unescapable weight bearing down on his shoulders. He’s never going to be free of this, never. Because if he doesn’t rely on his father, he will have to rely on people his father can threaten.

He feels the world narrow around him, and he gets up, as if on autopilot. His father says something he doesn’t capture that includes the word run.

He walks through the apartment as if in a dream, grabs his coat and keys, and flees, heart thumping in his ears, and he drives into the night.

...

He doesn’t realize where he’s going until he's already half there, in a strange fugue state. He parks his car in front of the black gate. The multi key is still on his keyring, and it still opens as he needs.

He walks into the dark, the sounds of the city muffled, the night coalescing around him. His steps are the only thing he can hear, crunching on gravel and leaves. Finally he arrives at his familiar spot, under the tunnel.

He sits on a slab of overturned concrete. His hands are shaking. He grabs a cigarette and lights it, the smoldering tip making a hole in the darkness.

In a way, he's still always here, in that darkness. He's always been there, and all light is an illusion. Grown up jobs, fancy cars, trials, billable hours, prestigious degrees, shiny girlfriends. His hard won independence. Just smoke. He’s still that scared, confused, lonely kid, that knows nobody will believe him.

As his eyes adapt to the lack of light, he starts to see more around him. In the dark he can discern new graffiti, in garish neon colors, piled on each other throughout the years. But underneath, still, covering most of the underbelly of the bridge, sprawling in the dark like a creature crouching, traces and spikes of black and white weather worn and beaten into the concrete, his own.

He hasn’t been here in almost a decade.
This place used to be a refuge, away from the busyness of life. He spent hours here, sketching, sitting under the trees. He loved the feeling of being on the other side of the city - a side that very few could see, a place for wild, wayward and spirited things. Sometimes he’d daydream he would meet a creature here, not entirely human, who would show him their world, tell him terrible and enchanting truths about the world and lure him away. Then, one day, he’d been bold enough to leave his own trace here. It had started as a raccoon, his favorite animal, but it had become a chimera of dreams and nightmares, eyes behind a mask of whirling shadows, claws, a thousand tails, wings, bristles, a mythical thing. It was like he’d poured his soul onto the stone. It had been magical. He’d fallen in love with the idea of life being like that. Flowing, meaningful, crystal clear through the haze. But he’d never been able to make it come true, take his vision out of the shadows.

The last time he’d been here. The memory of that night still haunts him, has been ever since. It was the first time he understood just how low he could get.

Let me guess, you were the type of defense lawyer who always wanted to be a bandit. He laughs out loud, alone, in the dark. No, mister Lallemand, I wanted to be an artist. I wanted colors, I wanted to paint over the world until it was as beautiful as it should have been. I had a chance and I wrecked myself. I made a fool of myself. And then I sought refuge in the dark, where I truly belong. I thought if I could redeem the irredeemable, I could help myself one day. But it's not enough. Those people made bad choices. I was made flawed.

Soon, he's just holding a filter between his fingers. He lights a new one, the smoke catching the errant light.

He's circling closer to the truth.

The truth is, his weakness is cyclical. He can’t fight it. He can’t fix himself. Clinging on to pride, to his reputation. It’s all a fool’s game. The truth is he’s selfish and he’s hobbled and he’s compromised. He should have set Lucille free years ago. He can’t keep stringing her along, unwittingly tied to smiling, charming monsters.

The truth is he’s never been in a position to build anything, because his life stands on quicksand. He doesn’t know if his brain or his father will get to him first, but there’s only one of those he can fight. His teenage self knew it back then. He’s a wild creature. He doesn’t belong in the light. But there’s one thing he can do from this vantage point.

He can fight back against the shadows.
The truth is, Lallemant could intend to wreck him, and Eliott would still keep on digging. Because he’s been waiting for this forever. A reason to make a mess big enough it would shake the world to its core, revealing what’s hiding behind his father’s glib façade. A way to discover if maybe, just maybe, he’s just a man, with big big words.

The truth is, if he caves in now, he will keep caving for the rest of his life. So here it is. He’s got a few moments of light left.

And maybe someone to fight alongside with. That's the big difference. He's always felt so isolated in this, and now there’s someone who’s crafty enough, mad enough, lucid enough. Someone who knows, whose grudge runs deeper, who understands how to navigate hell, with tools and talents and connections Eliott doesn’t have. Someone angry enough to jolt him out of this slumber of a half-life he told himself was safest but really is killing him slowly.

Now he’s got to make that count.

He takes a deep breath, and lets the cold night fill his lungs.

DIMANCHE 00:34

His car is gone. Fuck. With how badly he parked, it's not a surprise, but fuck.

He calls Alexia. He waits half an hour, in the cold, cursing himself. Then she's there, wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe, gesturing from the window of her blue Volkswagen Beetle, telling him to jump in. He sends a message to Lucile saying he's okay and not to worry. He can't face her right now, either to lie or to tell her the truth of what she has invested in.

Alexia looks at him with worried eyes, and makes up the couch for him. He crashes as soon as his head hits the pillow.
He steps off the RER platform and walks a bit, to refresh his mind. It’s not really a nice neighborhood, but it’s nice to get out of the city center. He spent the morning in his office, working on his board, took the metro to work after leaving some croissants for Alexia. Now, he’s going to enlist some help.

He arrives at the high rise with a little time to spare. The elevator is broken so he takes the stairs, and chides himself for being so winded.

He knocks on door 655 and waits.

There’s a loud yelp, the sound of something falling and a door closing.

Three minutes later, Emma Borgès, private investigator, opens the door, her hair a mess, still wrestling into a blouse that has pizza stains on it.

He steps into the entrance, a room that also serves as her office - big formica desk disappearing under stacks of files, a computer that looks decades old, all sorts of mason jars containing strange liquids, surveillance equipment everywhere, empty bottles of whisky, fast food wrappings, and no less than three lava lamps, bathing the room in several shades of pink, violet and blue. It smells like old weed, and makes Eliott feel strangely welcomed.

Emma doesn’t look like the asset she is. That’s one of the things that make her fit for this mission in particular. That and - she’s the least blackmailable person Eliott can think of. She breathes paranoia, lives like a digital ninja, and doesn’t give a shit about social standing. After yesterday, that’s especially refreshing.

She greets him with a fistbump and gestures him towards the only free chair in the room, cracked leather with stuffing coming out of the seams, and sits herself on what looks like a monumental crate of lightbulbs, pushing off a dead looking furry thing that suddenly develops eyes and claws and a furious snarl as it hits the ground, before jumping up to perch on one of the cupboards.

She makes a serious face at him, very deliberate. “Welcome to Borgès Investigations, how may I help you? Whatever your question is, we have answers.” She frowns. “Except if you want me to bug your neighbor’s house because she’s hot, then you can fuck off.”

Eliott raises his eyebrows.

“You really think I would ask you to bug my hot neighbors?”
“Well of course not, I wasn’t talking to you, mister model-face, you can get some just by looking at
women. I was just repeating my new standard customer interaction protocol.”

“That bad, huh ?”

Emma makes a hangdog face.

“Don’t tell anyone this, but it almost makes me miss the police.”

There’s a resounding “ah-ha!” that comes from the other room. Emma pointedly ignores it.

“No but really. What can I do for you ?”

“Do you maybe want to tell Alex to join us ? I need to talk to him as well.”

Emma makes another face.

“He’s not here. I’m not banging him. Fuck. He’s helping me with um. A case. About
disappearing...her eyes roam the room for a plausible excuse...um, lamps.”

“Disappearing lamps ?”

“Yes ? Somebody’s been breaking random street lamps in this neighborhood. Very bad. That’s a
thing I care about now.”

“Didn’t you say they were disappearing ? How are you good at your job when you are this bad at
lying ?”

“No, I swear, okay. They were stealing the um, the thing inside the lamp...you know those street
lamps were designed by le Corbusier in the 70s, right ? So they could totally be reselling parts on the
internet that, um, they could use as a collectionner piece. Like people sell the weirdest things on the
Internet anyway. So like, um, yes. And Alex had a lot of clues to show me. It makes total sense.”

Eliott tries to keep his face straight, but he can’t for long. His friends have been pretending not to be
a thing since forever. Because living out of a glorified garbage dump is fine, but feelings are for
losers.
It's cute, in a way.

“You know I’m not going to judge you, right ?”

“Really ?” Her tone is very blasé. “Not even a little ? Even now that you got your picture in the
newspaper, on top of your great job and shiny wife and shit ?”

Eliott shudders at the mention of the word wife, before spontaneously bursting into laughter. The
violence of it shocks him, but it’s like a balloon has been burst and how all the air is coming out. It’s
nervous and definitely neurotic.

Emma looks vaguely concerned.
“Wow, okay. I feel like we should, like, really talk, as friends or something.” She gets up and pushes a button on the coffee machine, and digs up mugs from somewhere.

“It’s okay, Eliott says when he’s calmed down a little, I’m seeing my therapist on Wednesday.”

“If you say so” she says, relieved.

“Alex should come out, though. I need to talk to both of you. I really don’t care which lamp of yours he’s helping you with.”

“That really is a terrible excuse, huh ?”

“And an even worse metaphor.”

“Okay, Alex, get your ass here’” Emma shouts. “He’s talking literary shit now, I can’t deal with this alone.”

When called, Alex Delano emerges from the room, wearing nothing else than a pair of large boxer shorts. He smiles, and sits on the couch, spreading legs, arms and everything else in plain sight, with a smug smile on his face.

“Hey, bro, how’s it hanging ?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, cover yourself. We have company.” Emma says.

“It’s okay babe, I’m sure we’re among appreciators.” He smiles at Eliott, smug.

“You’re still not my type, sorry.” Eliott laughs. He doesn’t like assholes. Well, his brain supplies, maybe not assholes of the overgrown frat boy type, sure. No. Not going there. Not helping. “I have a little bit more taste than that.”

“Oooh, sick burn, did your daddy give it to you ? You know you just insulted both of us, right. My girl here definitely can tell you something about how I taste, right ?”

She throws an empty hamburger box at his face. Jesus, is this foreplay to them or what ?

Eliott makes a coughing noise.

“So, um, I am going after my father.”

The both of them stop annoying each other and turn their eyes towards him instantly. Beneath their disaster façades, they both have something Eliott prizes very much, and in this instance, very much needs. They’re good at their jobs, and they don’t give much of a shit about consequences in general. He would never tell them this, but he suspects the reason why they constantly keep falling back into each other’s arms is that they both live by the idea of ‘here for a good time, not a long time.’ He knows it’s unhealthy, but he’s not in the habit of psychoanalyzing his friends.
“Your dad? Mysterious fixer scary powerful person we like to make up conspiracy theories about when drunk your dad?”
“Wow, you're getting us in real trouble this time aren't you, Demaury?”

They both sound way too happy.

“So there’s this diamond thief…”

Emma claps in her hands. “Ha! I knew it! Finally! Something interesting! I knew I started this job for a reason.”

“Really? Isn’t it for the neo-noir trash aesthetic?”

“Oh give me a break. I don’t have a housemaid, sorry.”

“She’s got a maid costume, though.”

“So, diamond thief.” Eliott says a little bit more forcefully. He loves his friends, but he’s starting to get flashbacks to that drunken threesome offer, and he does not need a repeat of that right now. Also, this is serious. “And he needs my help. He implied he's got dirt on my dad but he can't get to it because he's in prison.”

“Of fucking course he does, Eliott. Of fucking course.” She looks absolutely stoked, eyes going wide.

Eliott takes out the picture.

“I need to find this man, but most importantly I need to find out who he’s meeting and what he’s doing. So, I need you to tail him. Alex can help with finding him. But the most important thing is nobody can know I'm looking for him. Especially not in the police.”

“Something rotten in the air again, huh?”

Alex, for all his posturing, has no illusions about the inherent nobility of his profession, which is one of the reasons Eliott can actually stand to work with him.

Eliott lets out a laugh that sounds bitter even to him.

“I think, yes.”

“Ah, I knew it”, Emma reclines with a smug grin on her face. “I knew you were going to try and bring down the house eventually.”

“My little anarchist” says Alex, ruffling through Emma’s hair.

“Nah, I'm just bored. It's this or getting old while I wait for my real life to start and the alcohol becomes a problem instead of fun.”
Eliott has a moment of feeling kind of terrible for the three of them, then. Chasing shadows, making conspiracy theories just to get out of facing the tedium of adult life.

Then out of nowhere the cat, who was looking at them all malevolently through half open yellow slits, lets out a growl and jumps on Emma's swaying foot, making noises like a sputtering lawn mower. She yelps and shakes it off, throwing it on it's back. It makes a very uncatlike hissing sound.

“That cat is broken”, she says, trying to reach out to it but it spits and disappears under the couch. “Yeah, fuck you too, Sunshine.”

Of course the demon cat would be named Sunshine.

“So, how off book are we talking, just to be clear ? We're going to break the law, right?”

“I can't ask you to screw up your careers over this.”

“I don't give a shit about my career, Alex says. The only reason why I'm still doing my job is if I don't, next time a dumb kid who looks the wrong color is caught making a stupid mistake, instead of me, he's probably going to bump into someone with much more of a frustrated top dog complex and it's going to ruin his life. I would know. The force is made up of 80% of latent sadists and the rest is all kidding themselves. If I can find a good enough reason to be done with it, sign me the fuck up.”

That's the most he's ever heard Alex talk. Wow, maybe the overgrown jock thing was unfair.

“But you, though. Wonder boy. Are you sure you want to do this ? I mean, I know you're gonna have to, eventually. It's like, your destiny or some shit. But you're only getting one shot. This diamond guy, what makes you so sure he's the one ?”

Eliott looks at his hands. It's true. His main asset is his standing as a lawyer and his reputation, and he can only lose that once.

And there have to be other people in this city with a grudge against his father. Other than an insufferable smart mouth thief who got himself caught. And won't give him the info he needs. And can't stop either flirting with him or insulting him.

*And makes his stomach flutter when he smiles*, his brain supplies.

Yeah, that's a problem. So what gives?
“I think he got himself caught on purpose to attract my attention.”

Alex whistles.

“I don't know if that's super brave or completely insane or both.”

Emma is studying the picture.

“That's some honest to god movie shit, fuck.”

“I mean, how the fuck would the dude know you're pissed off against at your father, like. That's not something you're public about, right? Did he stalk you or something?”

“You're his fucking mark is what you are. Let me guess, he's really charming too.” Emma fills in.

“Yeah, I know. But he actually told me he was planning to use me and he changed his mind.”

“He's totally good-copping you then. Makes you think you have an understanding. Create a connection.”

Eliott feels like shrinking for a minute. He knows how ridiculous what he truly wants to say is. *But we do have a connection. I think he's a good person. He sees me, and I see him. It's the number one rule of his job to remain emotionally distant for everyone's sake.*

Instead, he says something he knows will play well with the nihilists he's talking to.

“Yeah, probably, dude's crafty as shit. But I'm tired of waiting. My dad terrifies people so as far as I'm concerned anyone coming out of the wood works against him, even in this super weird way, is a miracle. Besides, my dad told me to expedite the trial or he'd drown my firm.”

“Holy shit. It's getting real.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck, we are going to need to be crafty bitches, too, then.” Emma leans against Alex. “Okay, Eliott, we're going to find this mystery guy and be on his ass like flies on a turd.”

“Yeah, easy peasy, we got eyes” Alex says, nonchalantly. “Got a lot more camera access recently. Don’t you love protests?”

“Man, this country is fucking broken.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. But dude. You gotta let your thief know that you're the boss and you're not letting him get away with playing you, though. It's like, being unsure of your friends, that's always what makes the most damage.”
“Yeah, I trust in your abilities to be the most charming crafty bitch in the room, model-face. The Demaury smolder has never let us down before, right?”

He nods, and so do they. It's solemn. Like a pact.

They stay silent for several minutes.

Emma pulls out a trilby hat from off the ground and puts it on her head. She then wraps her arm around Alex’s shoulders. Alex scratches her head like he’s petting a cat, and smiles.

“Well, my dolls, here's to a bumpy ride !”

She fishes out a bottle that still contains a trace amount of liquors and takes a swig. Alex takes the bottle from her, and then extends it to Eliott. The glass glints purple and fire in the low light, its contents briefly the most alluring thing he’s seen since Friday.

Eliott shakes his head. He can’t have that interact with his meds right now. He needs to be clear headed. Too much is riding on this.

They make plans for payment, Emma saying she loved him but she still has rent to pay and he can definitely afford it. Then she orders a new computer and phone for him via one of her shady buddies - unhackable, untraceable, with encrypted satellite connections and dark web programs already set up. If his father got to Lucille's documents, well.

As he bids them goodbye, Eliott wonders. His friends are somewhat desperate, yes. But they're also putting their trust in him. It feels more momentous than he knows what to deal with. There are so many ways this could go wrong, and for a minute, he can't even think of a plausible way it could go right.

DIMANCHE 23:45

He spent the rest of the day at his office. He's going to wait for his secure computer to really start digging into his own father's past, or into the Karls’ backstory, or anything of note.

The investigation is still looking for more tangible proof that Lallemant is the big mastermind behind all this. So far, they haven't even found where he lived, or a base his team operated out of. The man is a ghost. It’s good for them. He’s been careful.
So Elliot mostly goes around in circles. Lucille calls him. He doesn’t pick up and sends a message he needs some space to think.

He ends up going home so late that Lucille is already sleeping. Small mercies, he doesn’t dream.

LUNDI 7:45

This time, he’s taken time to get ready. Woke up before dawn, showered, went over his files with a mug of coffee on their balcony, tamed his hair into something more akin to businesslike. Left early enough to avoid his girlfriend. He even put on a freshly pressed suit. He needs to feel in control today.

He finds Lallemant sitting in his usual place, in a grey-blue henley that fits more tightly than his previous sweaters. Tight enough that Eliott can see the fabric cling to compact muscle underneath. Fuck. And fuck his brain for spending his whole commute replaying the question *I wonder what he's like in bed* on a loop no matter how loud he turned on the radio to drown it out.

He tries to compose himself as he enters the room. Lallemant looks taken aback for 0.2 seconds when he sees Eliott, it’s extremely fast but he catches it, and it makes him feel a flash of giddiness. Forget control, is this why he dressed up today?

No, it isn’t. Absolutely not. And it doesn’t feel good to see him. It doesn’t. He’s not happy to visit a prison. That makes no sense at all whatsoever.

He brushes his hair back as he sits down. Lallemant hinted at the possibility of going to war together. They need to be sharp, and Eliott is going to need to get some more information out of this infuriating man. He can’t just go bumbling around his father’s cabinets, that was foolish. He needs Lallemant to know he’s all in, and he needs the man to start sharing more.

Lallemant looks grumpy again.

“You know when I’m woken up this early, I really like breakfast in bed at least.”

Breakfast in bed. Crinkled sheets, messy hair, naked skin.
Eliott puts both his hands on the table and forgoes a smile.

“I talked to my father Saturday. He told me to expedite your process or he would tank my firm.”

“Ah. Consequences. Are you getting jittery now?”

“No. I just think it would be more efficient to strategize together instead of me having to fish for information for hours.”

“Aw, don't you like our little banter?”

*I like it way too much*, he doesn't say.

“I get it, you want to stall. But I'm on your side.”

“Well, I was just enjoying getting to know you. But I can see you're a right down to action guy. And I appreciate you facing your old man. That does take balls. So okay. I want to stall. And I don't only want to stall. I want to make a big stink. I want them to hate me. I want them to think I committed every single unsolved robbery they have in the last fifty years. I want this to become a thrilling saga that everyone on the country has their eyes on. I want maximum attention. And you? You're going to help me get there.”

The media angle. Unexpected. But well. He's made a reputation for himself.

And he can see it all fall into place. The fiend, defended by the son of a politician close to a big candidate. The lawyer known for standing up for underdogs - or sabotage the justice process. Cheap passions, vulgar words, noise. His father would hate it so fucking much. He hates drama he can’t control. It's the exact opposite of what he asked Eliott to do.

It's perfect.

“Hate and love can be really explosive when handled together.” Lallemand lowers his voice.

“And you know what would make the scandal even better?”

Eliott knows.
Oh, he knows.

He shakes his head.

“I would get disbarred so fast I wouldn't make it to pre-trial.”

“Oh, but we're not going to give them any proof. On the other hand, making them think we might…”

Something heated uncurls at the bottom of Eliott's stomach.

“The inspector on the case is a nasty piece of work. Old school guy, real macho. I've been planting the idea I'm convinced I'm going to get away with a small sentence, that I have friends in prison and that it's no big deal. Incidentally, I've been working on making him look ridiculous in front of as many people as possible. And you know what would make him even madder than being made a fool of by a little faggot like me ?”

Eliott cringes internally at the slur, but keeps his face straight.

“Well, being made a fool of by two of them of course.”

“You want us to flirt in front of them ?”

“Oh yeah. And not only that, I want you to be the most parisian lawyer you can be. None of that earnest crap. I want you to be smug and entitled and condescending and convinced you can get me off on a technicality. As new technocratic global elite as you can make it. The guy’s a dinosaur, he's afraid of losing his job. I want you to help me make him so mad he will do all sorts of rash shit trying to indict me for as big a sentence he can get.”

“Mistakes of procedure, you mean.”

“Even misconduct, if we can get that. At some point we will need him out of the game, when it's time to ask the real questions. But right now, for making a fuss ? He's going to be real convenient.”

A chill runs along Eliott's spine, tingling. How many threads does this man hold in that brain of his ?

“You know that's dangerous, right. They're going to try and make your life hell.”

“Oh they can try, alright. But don't worry. I spent ten months in a Thai prison and got out mostly unharmed. I can take a little damage. Besides, I've got lots of friends in prisons around here. Thanks
for the concern, though. But I knew the risks. Now, he says, and he puts his left hand palm up on the
table, as far as the shackles let him go. How about we get into character?”

A Thai prison, holy fuck. What kind of fresh hell did this man crawl out of?

Eliott looks down. It's a nice hand, not very big but elegant, strong, with calluses from intense
physical activity and agile looking fingers. Eliott puts his hand on the table, too. A few centimeters
away, so that they don't touch yet, still the gesture goes beyond their normal interactions.

Lallemand sinks his eyes into Eliott's.

So blue.

This is a stupid game.

Eliott wants to know where it goes. If it can make Lallemand open up...

“Let's say it's a parallel universe.” His voice is low, tone confidential.

“I called on you, my old friend, in my hour of need. We met years earlier, in college. Let me tell you
how it went. You were at a college party, a bored rich kid looking to rebel. I was a bad boy, making
some bad choices and meeting people who were even worse, on a fast slide to hell. You can picture
a leather jacket if that's your thing. You were walking around, your entourage hanging on to your
every word, and you were so fucking bored. And I came in and I saw you, looking like a god of
revelry in a glass case, so pristine. And I knew I had to have you. Mess you up a little”. He marks a
pause.

“And you let me.”

Eliott is so focused on the other man that he doesn't notice what is happening in front of him.
Then there's a brush of skin against his fingertips, and it sends an electric jolt coursing through his
veins.

He looks down; Lallemand has moved his fingers, ever so slightly, and they're pushing at Eliott's
where they touch the table.

Eliott lifts his fingers ever so slightly, and Lallemand's fingers nudge forward, coming to nestle under
Eliott's, past the nails and right against where his skin is most sensitive. So many nerve endings
waking up at once.

Eliott is forgetting how to breathe. Fucking hell, it's only fingers. What is this, Victorian England?
“I looked at you until you saw me. And then it was fucking set. You followed me when I left to go upstairs, and you caught on to me on the stairs, didn't even take the time to move to a secluded place. You were so fucking hungry. Shameless.”

Small strokes to the inner side of his fingers, as if trying to pull him forward softly.

He's going to die. He wonders how a guard hasn't burst into the room yet. He shifts in his chair. He wonders if Lallemant can feel how hard his heart is hammering through his skin. He's a grown ass man. He's had sex before. So much of it. This is fucking ridiculous.

He doesn’t move his hand.

“That first night was so good, we couldn't let go of each other for months. So much to learn about each other. I guess we burned too fast, in the end. Or maybe I had to leave for unrelated reasons. All very tragic. But I still called you in my hour of need, and I can see you've done quite well for yourself. So I wonder, is there anything of the old flame left?”

Lallemant has dipped his head a little, looking at him through his eyelashes, smirking. The fucker.

Alex’s voice echoes in Eliott’s ears. You're the mark. Characters my ass. But the mark for what purpose?

He’s never known if he was much of a fighter. But he is a lover. And there was nothing pristine about him in college.

Strategic foreplay with words and three millimeters of touching skin? Not the weirdest thing he’s done. And he’s got people counting on him now.

He pins Lallemant's fingers down to the table.

“I don’t think it would have gone like that, actually.”
Lallemant is inching forward, and makes no move to get free from Eliott’s grasp.

“Ah yeah ?”

“No, I think I would have wanted to take my time with you. I think I would have seen you first. At one of those parties. There’s always so many people talking out of their asses. College law students are probably the most pretentious people in the planet, but god, they can talk. And I would see you in the middle of all of them, shredding them apart, all their clever little arguments. With so few words, but always the right ones, angry but so precise. An outsider but knowing exactly how to play them. I would have stopped. And I would have seen, and heard nothing but you. But after a while it would have gotten a bit more difficult to focus on what you were saying instead of on that mouth of yours. Fuck, I would have started to think about what you could do with that mouth.”

Lallemant bites his lip, plush and flushing pink under the little corner of white canine. Shit, he’s so beautiful.

“Yeah ? And what would you have done about it ?”

“I would have gotten to you, obviously. Easy.”

“Easy, really ?”

“Yeah. And then I would have asked you out on a date.”

Lallemant’s pupils are blown so wide, and he can see them retract just a nanometer out of shock.

Eliott laughs.

“I mean, come on. I was surrounded by pretty assholes in college. A leather jacket really would not have made me look at you twice. Maybe then you were hot and we banged once and I wouldn’t even remember your name. Wouldn’t be here now. Clever words, though...well, I would have wanted to get to know you more. Would have left a mark. That would be more true to reality, too, wouldn’t it ?”

Lallemant looks away. That’s a first. Has Eliott gotten to him ?
“I don’t think it fits our characters.” There’s a thread of something nervous running through his voice.

“Well, for the macho macho guy, maybe not. We can just be horndogs if you want. But if you want to leak to the press that I’m a sleazeball with questionable ethics, my father will never believe it. He knows me too well. He knows I wouldn’t flip my shit for anything less than true love.” He puts a little bit of a flourish on those words, like they’re ridiculous.

They really are. But they are getting to his client.

*Bandit with a heart of gold, fresh out of Thai prison hell to land himself here, really just wants to be loved.* Ah. Fuck.

“So that’s the good cover story, then?”

“Oh, the best cover story.”

If Eliott is going to have to pretend to only pretend to be attracted to him while he really is and shouldn’t be and pretend they might have a thing together while they don’t but might want to, and Eliott will definitely lose his career over it, then Mr Lallemant is going to have to join him in the pit of compromission. And for a hardened criminal? That’s definitely feelings.

It could be just another layer of the con. That little quiver in his voice.

God, of course it is.

Eliott’s already too in deep to care.

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**LUNDI 9:02**

Inspecteur Derrieux steps into the room with a murderous gaze. He’s tall, broad, with heavy eyebrows, wearing an off-brand, badly tailored trench coat. A cloud of overpowering cologne steps into the room with him, assaulting everyone’s nostrils.

Fragile masculinity, indeed. And the man has a nervous, brusque manner that corroborates.

His partner trails along, a grey slate of a man, grey suit and grey demeanour.

They sit in front of Eliott and his client.
Let the games begin.

“Ah, welcome Marcel! How’s the wife?” Lallemant’s carefree demeanour is back.

The inspector does not react like Eliott did.

“Let’s calm down, you little piece of shit. You can call me inspector or Mr Derrieux. That’s all. If you can’t respect me, we can’t talk.”

“Well, you can come back tomorrow if you want, Marcel. After all, I got all day, and I always loooooooove talking to you.” He’s camping it up.

He can already see signs of temper in Derrieux. He’s going to blow up. It’s already imminent, Lallemant has worked him good.

Derrieux puts both his arms on the table, fists closed, to take in more space.

“What is it with you little pansies getting so uppity lately, huh? What do you think happens to the likes of you in prison, huh?”

Eliott throws a discreet glance to Lallemant, who inclines his head a fraction of an inch.

“Are you using a homophobic slur against my client, Inspector Derrieux? Are you aware this is going on the official record?”

Derrieux turns his bloodshot eyes to Eliott, gaze full of scorn.

“Records can be amended.”

“Oh I wouldn’t be too sure if I were you, Inspector Derrieux. It’s a modern age, Inspector Derrieux. Everything gets out eventually. Technology is quite magical, if you’ve ever heard of it.”

Derrieux’s partner chuckles nervously. Maybe he’s been tasked to control his boss’ temper. Well, good luck with that.

“Maybe we can get back to the case?”

“It’s okay, Marcel. I’m a forgiving man.” Lallemant says. “Now, what can I help you with? I know the police is a little overwhelmed these days, what with all the crime.”

Oh, but Lallemant is good at making himself hated, isn’t he?

“Maybe we can take it right from the beginning, Inspector Derrieux.” Eliott adds. “Walk us through the questions you have, and together, we will reach a rational understanding of the situation, through dialogue.”
Derrieux gets up, threatening in intent.

So does Eliott, and he puts a hand on Lallemant's shoulder.

“You don’t like dialogue, Inspector Derrieux ?”

They stand like there for way too long. Derrieux is obviously used to intimidating teenagers, and people who only understand and respect the language of force. A hammer in a long range gun fight. Maybe they should ease up a little, to make sure he doesn’t go off too soon.

Eliott leaves the table and goes to lean against the wall. A bit more distance. And he wants to see his partner’s face better.

Lallemant looks at him briefly. Is he seeing a hint of appreciation or is that just wishful thinking ?

“Well come on, Marcel, don't be shy. I'm in a good mood today. Had a very very very good talk with my lawyer.”

He leans back, stretches and winks at Eliott, the asshole. Eliott smiles back.

“Go ahead, make jokes. I’ll see you cry soon enough.” Derrieux shrugs, and opens his file. “You’re very proud for a man who was found tied up by his friends in the back of his own truck like a rotisserie chicken. So I’m wondering now, why the hell are you taking the fall ? I look at you and I don’t think loyal. No, what I think is whatever dirt they got on you, it’s even worse.”

“Well, my friends could have a sense of humor, if you can picture such a thing” Lallemant fires back. ”And I have full faith in my legal team.”

“You were planning to set them up, didn’t you ? We found those busted cars.”

“Well, if I actually was friends with the robbers...and I had betrayed them...do you think I would be sitting there ?”

“Well who tied you up then ?”

“Well, that’s a rude question. Maybe I like spending time tied up in the back of my car.”

“Cut the bullshit. We found several of the assault rifles used in the robbery in that van.”

“Well, maybe they just decided they had one hostage too many. How about that ?”

Derrieux scoffs.

“You're not a fucking hostage. I know criminal vermin when I see it. You just think you're above the law, don't you.”

“The law is presumed innocent until proven guilty, Inspector Derrieux. Eliott cuts in. And I'm really
not impressed by your proof right now.”

“But it's okay, he's hard to impress. I believe in your ability to do better, personally.” Lallemant adds in. He's really selling the condescending part.

“Oh, I am going to do better. In fact I'll be doing so good, I am going to make sure you spend the best years of your life between four walls and no one to talk with except your own reflection in the fucking toilet bowl.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat? Because I love my own company, you know.”

“It's not even a good threat. This is the Zaventem diamond case all over again. I've never seen such a shoddy handling of chain of custody for proof. You can play heavy all you want, but as it stands, my client is going to walk out of here in a few months. And every time you open your mouth, you give me more ammunition for when I'm going to sue you into the ground for unlawful imprisonment and abuse of justice. So go on, make us rich. Inspector Derrieux.”

“You already booked the hotel for when I come out, didn't you? Lallemant smiles at Eliott.

“You favorite room.”

“Man, I miss those silk sheets.”

“So do I” Eliott says, and feels nothing but exhilaration at the idea of his career flying out of the window at that exact moment.

Derrieux makes a face of disgust.

“You fucking bunch of degenerates.”

“Choose your words carefully, little man.”

Little man throws the chair across the room. Lallemant doesn't even flinch. He smiles at Eliott instead.

Fuck they're a good team.

…

When Derrieux finally storms out after 30 more harrowing minutes, Eliott is riding one hell of an adrenaline high. He feels like he was born to do this.
But Lallemant is just staring at the wall, and as Eliott sits down again, he feels doubt creep in again. He's following his client's lead but this is not his job, usually, trying to make the suspicions worse.

He just hopes there's a damn good plan beneath this maddening man's shell of nonchalant quips, and not just a chaotic drive to fuck shit up on top of a death wish.

So at least one of them isn't operating blind.

LUNDI 22:53

He’s at his office. He’s worked out of coffee shops all day to avoid Lucille. Made sure all loose ends from his previous cases, invoices and red tape and all, were tied up so he can fully focus on this one. Now he’s set up the couch in their waiting room with a pillow and a blanket for the night, changed into the sweatpants he bought in the corner mall, and is trying to empty his head from the chaos of the day when -

His phone rings.

Unknown number. He can't afford to ignore those.

The voice is a shock.

Low, muffled and a little scratchy, but unmistakable.

“Hey, you wouldn't happen to know where I could find a good lawyer at this time, would you ?”

Eliott almost drops his phone.

‘Mr Lallemant ? How did you ? But you’re in prison - are you still - ”
Lallemant laughs, husky, directly into Eliott’s ear. Shit.

“Ah yeah, I’m still where you left me. But you thinking I’m good enough I could just up and vanish like that, that really goes to my heart, you know. But I just got myself a nice little phone.”

“Are you...in a private space right now ?”

“You bet I am. I’m on my bed and my cellie is keeping an eye out. We’ve got a closed door and he’s got earplugs. Nice guy, Herman. Scary mountain of a man, looks like his parents were siblings, but loyal as hell and a lot more going on than people think. He watches my back and I make him crosswords. And he’s getting the phone tomorrow to talk to his ma.”

He makes crosswords. Of course.

“Crosswords ? Is that how you survived Thai prison ?”

“Well, no, I set up a gambling ring. But the principle is the same. The worst part of prison is how fucking boring it is.”

“Is that why you're calling me ? So late ?”

There’s a pause. Oh, how he wishes he could see Lallemant's face right now.

“Well, you, uh. You never told me how it would go, our first date. You know, in the parallel universe. For, ah. To smooth over our stories, you know.”

The stories. Right.

That's bullshit.

Eliott needs to get up early tomorrow morning. But there’s something about the intimacy of the call, and the neediness of it - Lallemant calling him so late, and not to discuss the details of the case… is he feeling lonely ? Is he just putting in overtime trying to get into Eliott’s head ?

Time to see how one-sided this really is.

“Do you know a place called la Petite Ceinture ?”

“No, what ?”

“Well, it's an abandoned railroad that runs through the heart of Paris. Not a lot of people know about it. I used to go there all the time. It's really beautiful. There's ivy everywhere, it has this out of time sort of vibe. You have tunnels and bridges where street artists have painted amazing things. A lot of them come there to practice. I left my own mural there, as well.”

He can hear Lallemant swear under his breath.
“Of course, you're an artist.”

“Well, I wouldn't say that. Haven't touched a brush or paint in years. The place is still inspiring, though. There's one spot in particular I would take you to.”

“Yeah?” The voice on the other end is so breathy. It makes Eliott want to go on forever.

“Yeah, there's an old abandoned warehouse on top of a bridge over the railroad at some point. You can get there by climbing a rusty emergency ladder and then through a broken latch. It's really old, and so it has this entire wall almost only made with little glass panes set in metal. And the view is beautiful. Plus there's this mural on one of the walls - it's my favorite out of all of them. It looks like a renaissance painting, with a silhouette standing in the shadows, and then in front of them, there's a creature descending in a ray of light, looking like an angel, and reaching out into the darkness. And you can see that the angel's arm is being reduced to dust slowly, but it keeps reaching out. Sorry, I'm rambling.” Eliott could go on forever. He's often pictured doing that, but never with whom exactly.

“I like your voice, Lallemant whispers.”

“I'll keep going then ?”

“Please.”

“Okay, so the place is a bit dodgy usually. But I would prepare it for our date. Clean it up a little, put a tarp and a blanket on the old mattress, hang some fairy lights, put up some candles here and there. Make it look all nice and cozy. I would have brought you there, might have been a bit nervous about it, but I think you would have liked it. Hopefully it would have been different from what you expected. And then I would have busted out some champagne, good stuff, so you didn’t think I was a cheap date. Maybe some nice crisps, some italian ham. We would have eaten, and we would have talked for hours. I would have asked you questions and you wouldn’t have felt the need to evade. Some of the answers might have scared me a little, but I would have told you about my family, too. You would have told me honesty was scary.”

“I would have” Lallemant agrees.

“And I would have told you it was worth it.”

“That sounds nice, Lallemant sighs. Nobody's ever done something like that for me. Parallel universe me is a lucky bastard.”

“We both are, in that universe.”

“Right, because you'd never met another smart person before.”


Lallemant scoffs.
“I’m a fucking criminal.”

“Oh I know a lot of criminals. I am pretty good at knowing those that are really bad people and those who have...issues with the system. And I have a hunch. I don't think you would be a criminal in all universes. I trust my ability to read people. And if I had the chance to get to know you outside of all this and treat you right, I definitely would.”

‘Oh wow, okay. Um.” Lallemant has a little laugh that sounds a little bit embarrassed. “I won’t lie, I had to get you to like me. But now I’m starting to worry I overdid it.”

“Well, if this is too much, please, feel free to hang up.” Eliott says softly.

There is a long moment of silence.

“Lucas.”

“Hm ?”

“In that parallel universe, you would call me Lucas.”

Eliott rolls the sounds over his tongue.

“Nice to meet you, Lucas. I’m Eliott.”

“Um, hi. I need to go, Herman told me the watcher is starting his rounds. Can I...can I call you tomorrow?”

“You can call me anytime.”

“To discuss the case” Lallemant - Lucas adds hastily.

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay, then.”

“Goodnight, Lucas.”
“Um. Yeah. Goodnight.”

He hasn’t said it back, Eliott notices.

The line falls dead. Eliott lets his phone fall on his chest.

He’s probably foolish to trust. He knows. Lallemant probably has plans on plans on plans. He doesn’t seem the type to be stopped by feelings. One moment of late night vulnerability doesn’t offset this.

He’s so screwed.

The possibility of not being the only one makes him happy. If their bond is only made of cold calculations, it’s much more liable to end up badly for one of them - Eliott more probably. A bond stronger than that?

Well, at least they’ll go to hell together.

And besides, sometimes. Even if Lucas is still playing him.

Sometimes being the first to extend trust is the only way to ever get somewhere. Earnest crap. Down to the line, that's who he is.

What else can he do?

Chapter End Notes

yeah they're screwed

*Next time on Les Diamants sont Eternels* dun dun dun : some PLOT attacks, finally.

Also, late night phone calls, where do you think it's going?

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Un pas de plus

Chapter Summary

*Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels* dun dun dun
Armand Demaury is definitely not winning any father of the year awards, that's for sure. But Eliott didn't find skeletons in his closet, yet. However, some threats were made. Lallemant introduced Eliott to a game of his own making, during which they proved they could definitely play well as a team. And then some. Then Lallemant got a phone, and things got...interesting. All for making sure their charade is realistic, of course.

In this chapter : the clarity of impending disaster. women raising their eyebrows at Eliott, unimpressed. late night whispers. ominous backstories. promises are made. pastries. last calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

heyyy finally this one is out.. I had to split it up again. It was frustrating to write because I just couldn't manage to get where I wanted to -those two idiots have just...so much to talk about ? Next chapter will definitely feature some more action and PLOT. But I still felt this was necessary to deepen their relationship and 30k chapters are definitely...too much.

I hope you enjoy

tw : flashbacks to emotional abuse, pretty awful (internalized) ableism, threats. Take care of yourselves.

Beta-ed by fic godmother bêêêx as always <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARDI 23:53

Lucas, Lucas, Lucas.

The litany in the back of his brain won’t stop. It’s bad. It’s been bothering him all day.
And he hasn’t called today.

And he probably won’t now. Too late.

It’s okay, Eliott tells himself. Maybe he didn’t succeed in finding private space. Maybe something else came up. Maybe Herman used up all the minutes calling his ma. Fucking Herman.

Or maybe Lallemand was just playing.

Or maybe he’s afraid to call again. Maybe he spent the day thinking about it and chickened out at the last minute.

Maybe he’s still thinking about it, right now.

His brain conjures up an image of Lucas laying on his prison bed.

Top bunk, looking at his phone, forlorn. Artfully disheveled in the dark, wearing very little. Midnight shadow on a clenched jaw, the light of the screen illuminating his features, finger hovering over Eliott’s name. Exposed neck, golden skin, a hint of sweat. Taut muscles, the cut of a hipbone disappearing under rough linen, a trail of…

Ugh.

This is absolute rock bottom, for a criminal lawyer.

He turns and tosses on his couch under his meager blanket. He really needs to find a better sleeping arrangement because this is breaking his back.

Yeah. The couch is definitely the reason he can’t sleep.

He feels *change* on the horizon and hurtling closer, so close to striking, and there is a purity about it...is it the clarity of impending disaster? Or is this the right path in disguise? He feels a visceral
need to move on, to free himself of the things that weigh him down, thrumming in his veins to the point of restlessness. So he can fully focus all his wits on whatever happens next.

And, well. He's been flirting with another man to the point of constant distraction and near-obsession. Prison or no prison. The talk they had yesterday? The context can only excuse so much.

He needs to break up with his girlfriend.

He grabs his phone and fires off a message to Lucille. *We need to talk. Tomorrow 8pm at the apartment?* and puts it down before she has time to answer.

He adjusts the setting of mute mode so that it lets through ringtones for calls, though.

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**MERCREDI 9:53**

He feels a wave of relief rush through him as he pushes the glass door of his therapist’s office. This is the rare place where it's okay if he is a little bit of a mess.

Linda, as they’ve agreed he could call her, smiles as he comes in. Her short honey brown hair, luminous blue eyes and a brisk, no-nonsense manner give her a grounded energy. He feels calmer already. She’s the first therapist he chose for himself, and he really loves her.

He sits down in the comfy chair in front of her desk. She greets him and gives him time to collect himself.

How can he even begin to explain this? Maybe by being as truthful as he can.

“So, I have to come clean about something...last time we talked...I wasn’t doing all that great.”

“Yes, you mentioned you were having relationship issues.”
He grimaces.

“Yeah, but in general. You know, drinking, not sleeping enough...skipping on my meds...not telling you about it...But better late than never, right ?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. He sighs.

“I just...felt stuck. You know, motionless. As if this was as far as my life got, and from now on it would always be the same and...I thought, well this is what stability is, this is the best I can get. A flat line, it should be better than constant roller coasters, no ? I mean, it’s not like I can afford to be picky...”

He's good with words, but his sentences always get so choppy, in here.

“No negative self-talk in this office, young man.”

He resists the urge to poke his tongue out. She’s only a few years older than him, and this is one of their oldest running jokes.

“You do deserve to be happy. You shouldn’t have to settle. After all, stability comes in many forms, and nothing says it should include boredom. But I do notice you used the past tense there. So, what happened since then ?”

“I felt like I needed to get my shit together because I...well, it’s complicated.” She knows he's been having relationship problems, so that's the easiest shortcut. He looks at the ceiling, to avoid her scrutiny for a second.

“I met someone.” He can’t help but smile a little at the implication. He wonders what Lallemant would say if he knew he introduced him as a romantic connection.

“And...There’s feelings there. There could be a lot more, if I let myself. But...there’s complications.” He takes a deep breath. “He’s got dirt on my father. That’s how we met.”
Linda nods, her face grave, but says nothing, lets him continue.

“It’s all tangled up in one big mess. I am trying to keep my head clear but...I can't stop thinking about him. And I’m doubting my own capacity to approach this rationally... Now I feel like I need to change big things about my life. But what if this is just a whim ? I can't throw my life away because of a whim. Not again..”

“Eliott...you know I will tell you the same thing as often as you need to hear it. Your condition doesn't mean that your feelings or needs or instincts are invalid, even when they're strong. Now, how have you been doing these past few days ?”

“I...okay I guess. Strange. Actually this new thing, it's given me a lot of energy, focus. I don't feel so bored all the time anymore. I'm stressed, though. I'm not having an episode. I'm taking my meds everyday again and I feel mostly fine. But I'm scared this might trigger one at some point. I can't have that right now, I really can't. But I can't walk away either. I'm...fuck.” And that's without even getting into the whole “criminal” thing. “I can’t even tell you all of it. It’s just….”

“That does sound like a lot to deal with. How about we go through it bit by bit ?”

Eliott nods.

“The thing with my dad, first, it's…”

“Okay. We have talked about your dad before. You have also implied several times that you think he is involved in illegal activities, but you have no proof. That is a very difficult situation to be in. Do you want to tell me more about that ?”

“I...I don’t know, it's been a thing ever since I was a child, I guess. At first I just thought it was...he told me “All families have secrets, ours are just bigger, because we have more responsibility” and so on. That he was doing something difficult but necessary for the world, that this was the natural order of things, survival of the fittest, all that crap. I mean, I was terrified. The men he’d have over sometimes, the way they would look at my mother or at us...” Eliott shivers at the memory. “And then I grew up and figured I should tell someone. But before I could manage to I was diagnosed. And when I tried to go to the cops, they called my dad. Like I was just some rambling lunatic...and he told me afterwards, that if I ever tried something like that again…..” He wraps his arms around himself. He can still remember it as if it was yesterday. The smell of the expensive leather in his father's’ car, the rain. His 15-yr old self’s denim jacket, with the overlong sleeves he’d eaten a hole through. The shame.
“Hey, it’s okay, you don’t have to push if it’s too hard.”

“No, I want to.” He needs to, to pin down the demons he’s angling himself to finally face. “He told me if I ever tried something like that again he’d make sure I got locked up in a place that no one ever comes out of, and he’d let them fry my brain until I didn’t remember my own name.”

“Eliott, breathe with me.”

He realizes he’s hyperventilating, then. He looks up at Linda, her calm eyes bringing him back to the present, the up and down motion of her hand as she breathes exaggeratedly.

In and out. He paces himself. Stops wringing his hands.

He's not 15. He's 30 and he's wearing a nice brushed wool peacoat with unchewed sleeves, the weather is sunny, and he's in his therapist’s office. She's good people. It is safe.

“Okay, that’s good”

“I’m sorry, I….”

“Eliott, there is no need to apologize. This space is for you, so you can face those issues in a controlled, safe environment.”

Eliott nods again.

“Okay, first, I want you to know, that what your father did is deeply, deeply wrong. You were a vulnerable minor under his care and using your mental health issues to try and control you like that, that is absolutely despicable. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I do now.”

“And secondly, you’re a grown man now, and he can’t touch you anymore. Besides, that’s not what happens in psychiatric institutions. They’re places of care, not torture. He can’t put you in prison for
being mentally ill. That’s not how it works.”

Eliott wants to believe in this, so badly. But he can’t.

“You don’t know what he...there’s this law, you know ? That if two people you’re related to sign you up for admission, they can take you, even if it’s against your will ? And I know it isn’t usually...but I’m sure he would find a way to twist it.”

“That doesn’t just happen like that, Eliott. That’s for people who can be demonstrated to be a direct threat to themselves or their environment, under very specific conditions, it can’t last forever, and people who are admitted in those conditions are continually provided with legal assistance and medical supervision. It wouldn’t happen without cause, and Eliott, there is nothing in your profile that makes me think this would ever happen to you. Your father might be powerful but he can’t bribe the entirety of the Parisian medical establishment.”

Eliott looks at her, tries to let himself be guided by the conviction in her voice.

“And Eliott ? Dr Blanchard and me, we have been following you for seven years now. We have seen you progress and arrive to a place of stability. We can attest to how hard you worked. They would definitely take our input into consideration, and we would never let something like that happen to you. You’re not alone. Do you believe me ?”

Eliott nods. He still isn’t sure, but he knows that if he lets himself, the fear will paralyze him. So okay. There have to be people his father can’t reach. He has to believe this.

“Do you need a break ?”

“No, I’m fine. I need to sort this out now.”

“Okay. So, you met this man that can help you to prove your father’s wrongdoings. And you believe you are developing... feelings for him.”

“I know it’s crazy. We’ve met, like, three times ? But I feel like….we were meant to meet. He's just. Fuck. And I know maybe it's all getting mixed up. But I can’t get myself to not...I can feel it happen. I can feel myself just...”
“You're relieved to find someone who can help you, someone who finally believes you. It would be normal to form some sort of emotional attachment to this person.”

“Yeah, but he might be playing me. And I need to talk to Lucille...we need to break up anyway. It's been a while since I knew this I guess I've just been scared. We've just being going in circles and the longer I keep it going the longer I am building everybody's hopes up. I know last time I said I wanted to fix it but...it’s been years. I would have found a way already, if it was fixable.”

“Well it sounds to me like a first step already. And you have friends, Eliott, don't you ? Breaking up with Lucille doesn't mean you will be alone. You've created a support system for yourself.”

Questionable. But somewhat true.

“Because of the upheaval this all represents, it must be very confusing to figure out your feelings for this man. So I would advise you to just take your time. You don't have to know right away. You don’t have to qualify your feelings. And yes, sometimes we come to like people we shouldn’t a bit too much, people who aren’t meant for us. But it’s okay. We can just feel the feelings, and let them go. You don’t have to feel trapped by your emotions. They don’t compel you. But in any case, it seems to me like the situation has brought clarity in your life regarding what you need to do. That’s an important thing.”

She’s right. He doesn’t owe Lallemant any declarations of love. They can focus on their partnership and the rest will sort itself out. The more he panics about any possible feelings, the worse it will get. And besides… “Yeah, you’re right. I need to stop hiding and face my father. If I don’t, then who will ?”

“I didn't say that. You are very brave - but know that whatever your father does, it isn’t your responsibility, okay ?”

Eliott scoffs.

“I’m serious. You are in no way obligated to risk everything you have because of what he does. Your own safety and that of the people you love should come first. He has hurt you, and you have a right to protect yourself.”

Of course she’d say that. She’s his therapist. Do no harm, etc. But he isn’t sure how altruistic his
motivations really are. Maybe he just wants to be free.

He shrugs.

She sighs. She knows him well, after all this time.

“You have a big heart, and you want to fix the world. I know that whatever I say, you're going to try, anyway. So promise me one thing, okay?”

“Yes?”

“Don't try to go at it alone, please.”

…

The rest of the session is spent going over some breathing exercises, talking about his life routines and how to keep them up during life upheavals, and discussing the results from his blood tests to keep the lithium levels under control.

As he comes out, he feels somewhat shaken, but also lighter. Taking things step by step took him time to learn, but keeping a cool head in chaos isn’t as impossible as it used to be.

He walks through the street and walks into a bakery on a whim, buys himself a nice little croissant aux amandes. The taste of frangipane and the rush of sugar are lovely. He walks while eating, without caring about getting powdered sugar over his expensive peacoat.

He’s always a bit...surprised, these days, after therapy. It feels good that he still has a check-in every few months but these sessions are so easy compared to how much of a struggle it used to be to even get his ass in that seat, even less open up, every word feeling like it was clawing down his throat in a struggle not to get out.

But now, this, it reminds him of how far he’s come. He can recognize he’s gone through some really tough shit - fighting your own mind in that way is a battle that very few people can even imagine the extent of. In a way, it makes him less scared of anything life could throw his way. As long as he can keep his balance.
And it's a beautiful spring day - sun shining, blue sky, trees sprouting bright green leaves. It makes him want to hang on to small happinesses. It’s sunglasses season, earlier than usual, and there’s a few apple trees in bloom at the end of the street. He licks a leftover of sugar from his fingers after throwing away the paper bag and napkin from his snack, savoring the last hint of toasted almond.

These are the kind of moments he wishes he could catch in a bottle. Understated, somewhat ordinary, but...the little transitions, from one big thing to the next, fragile, where things are rearranging themselves already, too small for him to notice, but already building what’s to come. In these moments he feels like a sapling pushing through the frozen earth through to the sun, brave not by intention but by design, out of pure need. Like his limbs are waking up again after being frozen for so long, and it hurts a little, but in a good way. Like he’s the whole of the sleeping land, seized by spring.

And he’s getting sappy-poetic again. Well, if that isn’t a sign…

He’s not going to think about falling in love right now - except with the world again. And that, that’s always good.

As he walks down a few more streets, though, he starts to feel a little uneasy. A weight on his back, forcing his awareness into working overtime.

Like he’s being watched.

At the corner of a street, he stops for a moment, then turns around, pretending to check on his phone. For a moment he has the impression of something moving very fast to hide. But when he raises his eyes, it’s just people moving at a normal pace, absorbed in their own lifes.

He chides himself. He’s probably imagining things, after falling out of use with the sensation of feeling good.

It’s probably nothing.

He has a very active imagination, after all.

MERCREDI 13:50
As he gets back to his office after lunch break, Alexia greets him with a thick paper file containing the pieces sent by the prosecution. She laughs as he rushes into his mess of an office and digs in. There will be time to confer about everything later. Now he’s a bit too afraid she’s going to embarrass him if he’s totally straightforward.

His good mood quickly tapers off.

The evidence is a lot more damning than his confident persona in front of Derrieux let presume the other day. The video of Lallemant walking out of the bank with one of the thieves, without any sign of coercion, is pretty egregious.

Then again, he could definitely spin it, say that the thief was threatening Lallemant’s family, or something like that. Of course, that would imply his client cooperating, and that’s...not likely.

He sighs.

Then there’s Chloé Jeanson’s testimony - the daughter of the bank owner. She met Lallemant a few months ago at a party, where he helped her take care of her sick friend. She was struck by how considerate and charming he was and made sure to get his number before leaving. They started dating after that. Ms Jeanson makes a point of noting that it took them an abnormally long time to actually sleep together, but she just thought he was a gentleman. She said she fell in love so fast because of all the romantic attentions he had for her, but she always felt like there was something of a façade to the man.

Yeah, right. People always pretend to be so much wiser in hindsight. He reads on.

“So we went on this romantic getaway and I think that’s when he hacked into my phone. When I was under the shower or something. After that he suddenly became so much more distant. When I checked my emails I saw that something I didn’t remember sending had been sent to my father from my inbox, but 20 min later it was just gone in a blip. And then two weeks later he told me it couldn’t work out because he was gay and he’s sorry and shit.”

Hmmm. So she doesn’t have solid proof. Could be put down on her being angry that he was gay and she wanting some sort of revenge and giving false testimony ? In the list of their interactions, she seems to be the initiator 80% of the time, no matter the ‘attentions’ she was talking about.

“I felt so terrible after what happened. Like, he made me actually believe he loved me. I don’t
understand why he did that. He could have just pretended to find me vaguely interesting but then it
didn’t work out, bye, no hard feelings. He could have had access to my phone, then. But he said he
was falling in love with me, that he’d never fallen in love that hard that fast for someone. Like we
had a real connection. I don’t understand why he did that. I mean, was I really stupid to fall for it?
He has this lost boy vibe to him, you know? Like he’s all smooth but he’s actually kind of helpless
under the surface and you want to take care of him. But really? I think he’s actually a psychopath.
He must get off on that shit. Now it’s going to take me fucking years to trust anyone ever again. I
hate him. He ruined my life.”

Eliott feels a chill run along his spine.

Is this a warning he can’t ignore?

He’s taken the criminal psychology modules in school. He knows that antisocial personality types,
narcissists and others usually tagged with the label ‘psychopaths’ like to cultivate emotional
vulnerability in others. That they look like everybody else and are brilliant at playing people,
projecting a façade of emotionality while being totally lacking in empathy and altruistic emotions
themselves, and that they can keep it up for years and years. That they can see making people fall for
them like a game.

Is he just another Chloé Jeanson to Lucas Lallemant?

Part of him doesn’t even care, because the game is just too damn good.

Then there’s always that one voice, that goes Wouldn’t it be just right for you to end up with
someone else who’s fucked up in the head. Like clockwork, even though he’s learned to ignore it
through the years.

And the rest… well, he knows some signs are there. He’s got to proceed with both eyes open. He
can’t get lost in the rush.

There’s something in his gut that tells him, however, that it isn’t the case. He doesn’t know why
exactly, but he’s met psychopaths before. They’re often little tyrants, shifty, unwilling to display
vulnerability, remorse or make themselves targets, charm shallow and self-centered. Nothing but
calculation. The emotion never goes that deep, and it’s something Eliott is good at sniffing out.

He’s been uniquely primed to recognize dangerous people.
His phone buzzes. It’s a message from Lucille, telling him she will be home in time to talk. He sighs, and gets back to work, drafting his own questions for Ms. Jeanson.

At some point in the afternoon a “friend” of Emma calls him, directs him to a shady webcafé nearby - apparently these things still exist -, and gives him his new phone and computer. It makes him feel like he’s landed in a weird nineties spy movie.

He feels eyes on his back the whole time he’s out.

MERCREDI 20:17

He pushes open the door of his apartment with a heavy heart. He doesn’t want to do this. But the longer he keeps the situation as-is, the more difficult it becomes to live with himself.

It doesn’t matter where the chips fall in the end. This is a dead end, and he can’t keep bumping his head against a wall to make it a door.

She’s sitting in the open kitchen at one of their high bar stools, a glass of wine in her hand. She’s wearing her work clothes, impeccable cream colored blazer and skirt, pearl necklace. Eliott can see that her eyes are red and her makeup is fresh, too fresh, as if she’d just applied some more. His heart crimps in on itself.

He can’t help but see an image of the girl she was when he first met her. Fiery, witty, caring. They’d been friends first and then friends with benefits and then in an open relationship before becoming serious. They’d been so comfortable with each other for so long, and they used to have so much fun. But then it’d become all about what they’d gone through together. It’s bonded them together in sometimes unhealthy ways. Their relationship has been dead for years. But suddenly he misses what they used to have. She was his best friend for so long.

And now he will probably miss it forever because he was too much of a coward to let it go, back when they still could have gone back to being just friends. Back when they started to grow apart. But
he was so terrified no one else would ever accept him like she did.

Fear is a bad basis for a relationship, but it's always saturated so much of Eliott's life, he doesn't know what to do without it.

*That’s my teammate, right there*, he thinks. How did he ever let things get this bad?

“Hi” he says as he sits next to her. She looks back at him with a look of raw despair on his face, and he just doesn’t know what to do except hug her.

“You’re leaving me again, aren’t you.” She whispers into his shoulder. She smells like white flowers and fresh laundry. He can’t help but find it comforting. Shit, he doesn’t want to have to do this. But he has to.

“I’m so sorry.” Eliott whispers back.

“Don’t be sorry, just...don’t, this time. Just tell me you’ve changed your mind. Please. We can talk about it, we don’t have to do this. I know we’ve been working too much, but we can do better, okay? Maybe we should take a holiday.”

“Lucille…”

She thinks it’s like any other time. That he’s going to come back eventually. And how could she not? It’s been a pattern.

“Is this about your father pressuring you? You know I don’t care, I can wait. Please...just…”

He can’t take the begging anymore. It feels so wrong, to leave her hoping. And that’s what he’s been doing, isn’t it.

“I’m sorry, I…” He takes a deep breath and steels himself, separates himself from her.

“Lucille, I love you, and I am so grateful for all the ways in which you have supported me through
the years. I wouldn’t have made it through law school without you. But this - us - it hasn’t worked in a while. And I’ve been a coward. I stayed with you because you make my life so easy, and that’s not fair. You deserve better than to be a glorified nurse. I’m so sorry. I think we need to break up. For good this time.”

She looks away from him, puts her glass down. There is a moment of silence.

“Is that it, then.” Her voice is wobbly. “I have seen you at your lowest, I have cared for you, and now you’re punishing me for it? Because you put me in the role of nurse I never wanted in the first place? And instead of addressing our issues, you’re just going to...Walk away? Without a fight? After eight years? Eight fucking years! And you’re not even willing to work on it?”

“Lucille, I...I owe you so much, I know that! And it kills me sometimes but I’m not punishing you...but you can’t hold it over my head either! We just...I just don’t think we want the same things in life, alright?”

“Oh, you’ve been on a self-discovery quest, have you?” There is an edge of venom in her voice.

“Listen, I’m so sorry it took me so long to figure it out. I just can’t keep pretending. And it’s not going to change.”

“And what brought this about?”

“Nothing. It’s been a long time coming.”

“Don’t lie to me.” She stares at him, eyes full of cold fire. “You’ve met someone, haven’t you?”

He shakes his head.

“Lucille, that’s besides the point.”

“Don’t bullshit me, of course it is. This is what always happens. You see someone shiny and you think, maybe this could be the better life I’ve always dreamed about! But then it fails, because the truth is, relationships are hard. And you always come back, and I’m here to pick up the pieces. Well,
maybe one day I won’t be.”

“That’s unfair. I’ve been good since college.”

She has a bitter laugh.

“Well, some patterns never change, I guess.”

“No, it’s not…”

She downs her glass and looks into the distance.

“Have you been taking your meds recently ?”

“Of course I have. For fuck’s sake. This is not...I have been thinking of this for a long time.”

She laughs bitterly.

“Well, I guess it’s okay, then. But I mean, I have reasons to worry. I went into your office, I saw that board of yours. Eliott, that doesn’t look very sane to me… and your father warned me you might get unreasonable about this.”

An ice cold chill runs along Eliott’s spine.

“You talked to my father ? When ?”

“Well, after you left the dinner last time like a fucking antisocial teenager ! Someone had to.”

“Fuck. Just. Lucille, please stay away from my father. He’s bad news.”
“Oh don’t start with that again.”

“Shit, you see, this is why...you don’t fucking listen! Okay, nevermind, nevermind” he adds as he sees rage appearing on her face. He pinches his own nose. “Listen, we’re not important right now. But my dad, he...doesn’t want me to pursue this case.”

“Well, I don’t want you to either. Especially if you’re getting obsessed with the guy. This is unhealthy, Eliott.”

“Don’t make it about my fucking mental state, please. My father told me that if I didn’t drop the case, he would tank our firm, and your career in particular.”

Lucille’s mouth drops open.

“He showed me documents he has on the Streiser case and said he would leak them and make it look like it was your fault and that you’d never work as a lawyer again. Lucille, I need you to believe me when I say my father’s a bad, bad man. All my life, I’ve been scared of him. He’s treated me like shit, and it’s been so much worse since my diagnosis. I’ve seen the people he surrounds himself with. Scary men who come into the house at night with guns and suitcases full of cash, threatening us in graphic details sometimes. I never told you this because I was afraid you’d run. And I should have. As long as you’re in my life, you’re tied to him, and he can use you to hurt me.”

“Eliott, this is...”

“I can’t have that happening, Lucille. In spite of everything, I still care about you too much. And he knows. So I need you to pass off the Streiser case to someone else, and I need you to go on a vacation. And don’t tell anyone where, okay? Preferably somewhere far away.”

“Eliott, you...she swallows. Have you considered dropping the case?”

“No, he replies immediately. I’m tired of running. It’s always going to come back to this. I need to face it sooner or later. And this guy, he has information, that’s all. Right now, I’m gaining allies.”

“And I’m not part of them, huh.” She gets up, serves herself another full glass of wine and puts the stopper back on with a vicious gesture.
“Lucille, this is going to ruin my career. And I don’t really care. But you would. I can quit. You can find other partners. I wish we could keep working together, I really would. But I don’t think it’s likely.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you.”

“I’m not having an episode, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She takes her glass and moves to the couch.

He follows tentatively. They sit in silence for a while, staring in front of themselves instead of at each other.

“You know, a few years earlier I would have tried to stop you, much harder. I would have thought how the hell can’t he see how good we could be together? I need to try harder, to make him. Maybe he doesn’t believe in love, because he’s been hurt before. Poor soul. Maybe I can save him.” It sounds like she’s making fun of him and herself both. “Well, maybe I’ve been fucking stupid. I think you’re just too determined to run your life into the ground. I’m tired of trying to stop you from doing it. And maybe it will take someone a lot of effort to fix me, next. And so it goes around.” She snorts.

“Lucille, I’m so sorry.” He tries to blink back the tears from his eyes.

“Well of course you are. Look at you, all puppy dog eyes. You’re so fucking hard to hate, and that was the fucking trap. Keep me coming back every time like a fucking fool.”

“Lucille, I never…”

“Well I wish I never met you and lost so much fucking time. That’s what you are, a fucking waste of time. Now go, before I start saying shit I will really hate myself for.”

“You mean…”
“Yes, I’m kicking you out. Pack what you need and go. We can arrange for you to pick your things up later.”

“Are you going to leave town?”

She laughs again.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. You can do your dirty business with a clean conscience.”

He stands up ramrod straight and goes to pack. There isn’t much more to say. She was his best friend once, his safety, his home, his anchor. The promise of a happy, stable life. But now she needs to hate him for a while, and he needs to let her. So he gets a few essentials into a duffle bag, and he leaves into the night.

It surprises him, how fast she’d realized it was for good this time. Or maybe it doesn’t.

At least she seems to have taken him seriously.

It hurts that it took ending their relationship for that to happen.

Or maybe it’s ending because it’s the first time in years he’s been so honest.

Does that make him a psychopath, too?

JEUDI 00:48

He’s back on the couch in his office, and he can’t sleep.
He feels raw, as if he’d ripped off a band-aid and skin got torn out in the process.

It’s falling on him all at once. He was aware of it, of course, but now he *knows*. How much having Lucille as a part of his life defined him. Now maybe he’s going to wake up tomorrow and realize he’s a car without a motor, that he can’t function. That he was all bluster and no real talent. Like his functioning adult shape was just an illusion she held up through sheer will and now she’s gone he is going to crumble. He’s panicking about the small things - how to figure out insurance on his own. Where he’s going to live. What he is going to do next time he feels really, really bad.

But he remembers too, all the times where the relationship felt like drowning. The powerlessness. All the little ways he felt invalidated, babied, made to renounce on himself. Never having a leg to stand on to demand better, because he just *owed her* so much and he didn’t have the courage to show that side of himself to anyone else. All the little passive aggressive ways he would retaliate, things that made him despise himself, just to give himself the smallest illusion of freedom.

The things she said to him collide in his brain.

*You’re a waste of time.*

Cyclical noise, messy and barbed and never letting down, growing overbearing, rushing over the horizon of his mind. Like he’s just seeing what awaits him forever.

His phone rings.

All his scattered awareness sharpens to focus on that one sound, like a call for him to come back to his body.

Unknown number. The very same.

Part of him knows that maybe he shouldn’t answer, that he’s in a fragile emotional state right now, that he can’t play a smooth game, that he should set boundaries.

He presses the green button anyway.
“Hello.”

“Hey.”

Lallemant’s voice sounds weirdly breathless, but it doesn’t take more than a syllable for Eliott to recognize it. And god, he can’t lie, it gives him life.

“I have a new number for you to call. It’s encrypted. Can you write it down? I don’t want to send it to you.”

“Go ahead, I’ll remember” Lallemant whispers.

A few seconds later, they’re connected via Eliott’s secure new line.

They stay silent for what is probably not even a minute but feels like a very long time. As if they’re collecting themselves. Touching base. Strange. How does this feel like a safe space? How?

“Do you want to discuss the case?” Eliott asks after a while.

“Why the fuck do you think I’m a good person?”

The question echoes in Eliott’s ear. Abrupt, jarring.

Lallemant sounds weird. Eliott would even say shaken. His voice doesn’t have the control it usually displays. Nervous. Almost angry, but closer to sadness than aggression.

What happened to make it that way?

“What?”
“I mean, do you have a fucking deathwish or something? I wanted to turn you on so I could get you to do what I wanted. I never asked for romantic fucking declarations.”

The bluntness of the question shocks him. It seems that everyone is getting on his fucking case today.

“I don’t owe you an explanation for my life choices.” Eliott snaps back. He’s so tired. He wasn’t expecting this.

“That’s not what I meant. I just…”

Eliott takes a deep breath. This is not how he wants to let out his frustrations. Ever.

“I’m sorry, I just broke up with my girlfriend, I’m a bit on edge.”

“Wow. I’m sorry too, then.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. It’s been a long time coming. What the fuck do you mean do I have a deathwish? You’re the one that got your ass thrown in prison.”

“I...I just don’t get it. Why you are this trusting. Why you’re even talking to me right now. I’m pretty sure you can’t put this in your billable hours.”

Eliott smiles, despite himself.

“Yeah, my accountant would have a fucking heart attack.” He takes a moment to think. “Well, maybe I’m trying to play you just as much as you’re playing me. Is it working?”

“I don’t know, is it working on you?” Lallemant's usual combative flirtiness is just a thin, thin layer over the tense cast of his voice.

Another silence. The silences feel as weighted as the words. How long until the confessions stop sounding like a game? Eliott doesn’t know what to answer. Maybe it is working, but not in the direction either of them intended.
“I still mean it. What was it that made you decide to trust me?”

“I don’t know….a feeling, I guess.”

“I can’t do anything with that.” Lallemant whispers. It sounds like a plea for help.

Elliott feels shaken. Lallemant projects such a façade of fearlessness and control. He wants him back that way for all their sakes but - a little part of him can’t help but feel a little bit flattered. This is probably not a man who lets his guard down easy. Maybe he’s earned it. Or maybe...maybe he’s shaken, too. And he doesn’t know what to do with what is happening between them either.

He thinks. Back to the day they first met. It was little more than a week ago and yet it feels like another life.

“You want to know why I’m helping you? Beyond what’s normal and any kind of reasonable?”

Elliott laughs. This day has been raking him over the introspective coals already, so why not do this now, too. “Well, at first, you were quite the interesting mystery, I have to be honest.”

“So you were bored too, huh?”

“Let me finish. I was bored, but that wasn’t it..The case itself, the potential for trouble, the intellectual challenge...I wouldn’t do this job if I didn’t love that. But that’s still not it, I think.” Elliott frowns, the words coming just before he can speak them, like a stream of consciousness. His voice drops as he continues, aware he’s going too fast, that this is already one confession too far, but he needs Lallemant to know. ”Do you know how long it’s taken me to find someone who is actually willing to go after my father? Everytime I tried to...warn someone people would think I was crazy or just rebellious or I had daddy issues ...”

“I’m sorry you didn’t find anyone else,” Lallemant whispers.

“Well maybe it had to be you.” Elliott whispers back. It’s the closest he can get to forbid himself to utter the word fate, because that would be completely past the pale.

Lallemant is silent, and so Elliott goes on. “But that’s not...” He is really trying to keep his voice
steady. “And I mean, you hitting on me like that...it does take balls, I have to admit, in that environment. It’s was reckless and definitely weird because like... It’s one hell of a bet to make I’m not a homophobic asshole.”

“Let’s say I’ve had to get good at reading people that way. But let me guess... that was not it”

“No, I mean. It could mean you just had a deathwish.” Eliott doesn’t know what it is, but they could both be bleeding out and he would probably still feel the need to tease him. It’s baked into the fabric of their interactions now.

Lallemant laughs, softly and a little bit too close to the receiver, sending a little bit of fritz into Eliott’s ear and making him shiver. Reassuring.

“And last time we talked I thought, wow, so he’s not all witty comebacks, there’s something more going on.”

“It took you that long to figure it out ?”

“No. But that’s when I was sure.”

“But that still isn’t it.”

“No. And it seems like you know how to read people and you have a plan and a very definitive idea of what you want. And it’s nice to meet someone who seems to know what they’re doing for once.”

“But that’s still wasn’t it.” He’s neither confirming or denying - just egging Eliott on now.

One more step forward...

“Also no. And that thing you did with your fingers....”

“Let me guess, that’s totally it.”
“No.” Eliott laughs. “But ask me later and maybe it will be.”

He marks a pause. God, he’s hoping too many things at once right now.

“I like talking with you, it’s like a dance.” It’s so late, Eliott realizes, he’s so tired and out of it, he has no more brain to mouth filter. He’s going to be so embarrassed about this tomorrow. But now, it feels half-real anyway. Like the phone and the dark is their little cocoon. And the more he scours his brain the more he finds the personal and the reasonable are intertwined beyond any possibility of separating them now. He is compromised. Why pretend otherwise? “I liked that you wanted to make trouble. I like the way you look at me, it’s so direct and unflinching.”

“Wow, you’re a tease.”

“Birds of a feather, right? Besides, I don’t give moral validation to just anyone.”

“Validate me, baby.” Maybe he’s imagining things, but Lallemant’s voice seems lighter than at the beginning of their conversation. Like there’s a smile hiding in there somewhere.

“Then you were insulting my masculinity. That was a test, wasn’t it? Really not a good sign when that’s an issue.”

“Maybe it’s just my sense of humor that’s like that.”

“Oh, sure. Or maybe you wanted me to know you were playing a game. And you didn’t feel threatened by me serving you the same back. You were delighted in fact. You wanted to see my cards. And the jokes. You wanted to see if I took myself too seriously or not. And then there were the questions about my father.”

“Maybe I wanted to see more than your cards.”

“Shh, don’t ruin this.” Eliott needs to be dead serious for a second. “And then what you said. The truth comes first. I thought about that a lot. Maybe you had a goal, something beyond money or fame. Something noble or necessary or both. But I didn’t have a way to know for sure, not really. Remains the purpose of the game.”
“And what’s that?”

“Power, of course. You wanted to know preoccupied I was with my own, and how afraid of that of others. That’s how you are choosing your allies. That says a lot about a man.”

“Is that it, then?”

“I saw which answers of mine won you over. And nobody wants someone free and unafraid at their side unless they’re the same.”

“And you think I’m like that?”

“Yeah, I think so. I think you like the give and take. And I mean...you’re obviously confident and you’re not afraid to make outrageous moves but when it comes to something like this, you’re asking me. Because you do care.”

“And that’s it.”

“And that’s it.”

Lallemant exhales into his ear. It’s like his presence is filling the room, all of a sudden, and their breaths are synchronizing, and the dark is pressing against his face like a loving touch.

“I’m trying to get there, but it’s hard. Honesty is hard.” He confesses finally.

“Yes.”

“My past...kind of sucks. And I’ve been trying to leave it behind. Believing that’s possible...sometimes it’s hard. But somehow, you did right away.” He laughs - at himself, or at them both maybe, soft and confidential. “So now I have a little bit of a problem, because my strategy didn’t exactly account for this.”
Elliot’s whacked out of his axis, then.

That Lallemant is being open in return. That he admits he’s made a mistake. The unexpected tenderness of it. That they’re both there contemplating this mistake they’re both making, don’t want to stop making, and taking the full measure of what it could mean.

Part of Eliott wants to press for more, claim he can take it - all the ugly truth. That he won’t stop believing. But there’s a part of this that is so familiar to him. Hiding parts of the truth because he knows it’s, on the surface, without common experience, not palatable or even understandable to most people. That before he opens up, he needs to create a space where he can be seen for what he is, whole, not simplified for consumption. And that remains true no matter what good or bad intentions might be there.

And that’s what they’ve been doing, isn’t it. Creating this fragile space for each other. Relying on misdirections and half-truths, but looking toward making a specific truth possible.

“You can adapt your strategy, then. Because I’m going to give you the time you need”. Eliott finally replies. “Time to prove you are the man you want to be. And after that, the past won’t matter.”

“Even if…”

“Even this is still you playing, I want to tell you that it doesn’t matter.” He casts his words into the ether like an incantation, a ward against impending doom, a bridge over the abyss. “I’m expecting you to surprise me, do you hear me? Even if I can make up all sorts of sinister theories in my head about what you’re playing at.”

Lallemant is silent, like he’s not finding his words.

“And in the meantime, so we’re even, I am going to lie to you sometimes. For instance, I am totally not throwing my life overboard for a stranger I met a week ago and talked to three times. I am not thinking of him at inopportune times and blurring all the boundaries between private and personal, and I am definitely not feeling happy at things I should not be happy about. I didn’t even dream of storming the prison two nights ago. That didn’t happen. And I am just your lawyer.”

“Just my lawyer.”
“But we’re going to keep talking. And then maybe, one day, who knows. Maybe we’ll finally meet in the middle. I will tell you things that might make you want to run very hard in the other direction, and so will you. But in the meantime, if you tell me just enough to do my job, not my job on paper but the job you really want me to do, I won’t hold it against you. And you will work on becoming someone I was right to trust.”

“Fuck, you’re something else. You and your words.”

“You’re not too bad either, you... - I think we should keep playing the game. And see who we become at the end of it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

It feels like something is settling. That nebulous partnership of theirs. Comfort in the shape of chaos. Uncertainty in which something new can happen.

They stay with each other, just like that, for at least a few minutes.

Then Lallemant yawns, and it’s so unexpectedly cute it makes Eliott’s heart grow three sizes and jump out of the window.

“ There’s more we need to talk about but right now I...think I need to go….Um...Save minutes.”

“Call me tomorrow ?”

“Okay, I will.”

“Good.”

“And thank you... Eliott.”
And the line goes silent.

Eliott drops his phone on his chest and looks up at the darkened ceiling.

Oh, wow. *He said my name. In this universe.*

His ears are still ringing for what he’s just promised.

He feels a flurry of emotions he can’t separate from each other - exhaustion, joy, fear, confusion, embarrassment, curiosity, shock, annoyance, affection, impatience. The thrill of daring to make demands. And behind it all, the looming shadow of a ravenous hunger he’d all but completely forgotten he could feel.

He means it. He really does. He doesn’t think Lallemant would be a criminal in any universe. He believes there’s a place where they could be right for each other. And he can’t make it happen through the sheer force of his words but...god he’s aching to try.

For an instant he really lets himself picture it. Meeting Lucas under different circumstances. Would they have connected so fast?

Probably even faster, truth be told. The whole prison-criminal client thing *should* be an obstacle, right? He would have caught one glimpse of those true blue eyes and he would have been completely gone, without any thoughts of propriety in mind.

He lays his hand on his heart. It’s beating so fast. He laughs at himself in the dark, but it’s no sad thing. Now it feels like living all the emotions of months and years of courtship all at once, in a concentrated shot, tension ratcheting up with the thrill of the impossible. Separated by a prison table and chains and camera. Or a phone and miles on miles and walls and fences of barbed wire. And still.

Maybe it's good. If it got much more intense than this he would explode.

He likes what it’s doing to him, though.
Every time they talk he feels like he's gnawing away at the burden of fear on his back. But it's not only that, it's the clarity of it. Despite all the double talk. The paradox of this troubles him. It's like he's talking to another human being without a filter for the first time in his life at the same time that they are spinning this fantasy for each other.

But the fantasy is illuminating everything they want to be true.

Maybe it's all a waste of time, but then it could be a damn good one.

The risks are monumental, but god, to think of the rewards…he can’t even conceptualize properly but the mere possibility of them...

It keeps him up all night.

JEUDI 09:03

“Rise and shine, sleepy head !”

“No !” Eliott throws at the direction of Alexia’s voice, and burrows under his blanket.

Sun floods into his face through the threadbare cloth as the electric blinds go up.

She sits on his legs.

“Leave me alone. I just broke up with Lucille.”

“Is this the beginning of a pity party ?”
She rips the blanket away from his face.

“Are you sad?” She squints. “You don’t look sad.”

Eliott tries to keep impassible, bites his lips but can’t stop a smile from forming completely.

“I am sad. Devastated.”

Alexia laughs at him.

“Yeah, and I’m becoming a nun.”

“You? Getting yourself locked up in a place full of sexually frustrated women? Not that weird.”

“Aww look at you deflecting. No but you know I’m gonna worry right? And I don’t want to worry, I hate worrying, it’s bad for my complexion. But like...last week you call me to pick you up from a park in the middle of a night, now you’re telling me you broke up with Lucille and you’re grinning like you won the lottery? What the fuck?”

Eliott grabs the couch cushion from behind his head and smashes it over his face and groans into it.

When he emerges, Alexia is still looking at him, unimpressed, one eyebrow raised. He relents.

“I don’t know what the fuck, seriously. Lallemant called me last night. To ask why I thought he was a good person. And we talked. And it was nice. We poured out our hearts to each other like it was a fucking pajama party.”

Alexia bursts into laughter.

“Wow. Wow. He wants you to think he’s a - she Does air quotes “good person”? So he has feeeeeeelings? He’s a thief with a heart of gold! You know how to find them, don’t you.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Did it get...you know...naughty?”
He hits her with the pillow.

“No! What the hell! I would never...that would be so wrong! I mean...he’s stuck there...he depends on me... He’s like, vulnerable or something.”

“Oh yeah, totally sounds like a very vulnerable criminal mastermind you got there.”

“Ugh.”

“Dude, he is so into you. And I mean, he’s the one paying you.”

“Not for that!!”

“I mean. If he’s calling you late at night… I’m just saying. That’s weighted, dude.”

Eliott stares at the ceiling and puts on his most put upon face.

“I’m going to fire you.”

“Haha, as if. You know, I’m not judging. The kind of evil thing can totally be a turn on. Like, he’s your nemesis, but there’s this unbearable tension as soon as you’re in the same room, and you’ve been chasing each other for decades, and really he’s the only one who truly understands youuuuu. Like that’s such a common trope, they never make it gay only because they’re cowards.”

“Alexia, my life is not a movie.”

“I’m totally writing the book, though.”

“Well, I’m not waiting decades.” he says, before he realizes what he’s saying.
Alexia smirks at him.

“Well go get’ em tiger.”

Eliott groans and gets up, rushing towards their small lavatory room to freshen up before starting the day.

Washing his hair in the sink really brings back college memories.

JEUDI 21:14

He breathes and stretches from his place on the floor between stacks of files and magazines.

He’s managed to have a mostly productive day so far. Lucille is leaving next week and he went to the apartment to get some more of his stuff. They made an arrangement - she’s going to work from home and he’s going to sleep in the office for the time being. They talked, short and clipped, her face cold and unreadable, and she nodded and he left. Eight years gone, just like that.

God, he needs a break. Living in your office is a dangerous excuse to never stop working. He spent the rest of day trying to dig into the Karl's backstory and their ownership of the diamonds without any luck. He's prepared questions for the cross-examination.

And he's set up an appointment with a journalist for one of the country's top newspapers tomorrow at lunch. He feels both terrified and thrilled at the prospect, because he will need to sell their spin.

He really hopes Lallemant will call this time, because -

His phone buzzes. The new one. Well, that's downright uncanny.

And surprisingly early.
Was someone impatient?

He picks up immediately.

“Hello?”

“If I tell you I actually want to discuss the case, would you believe me?”

“Wow, so miracles do happen. Can I ask what brought this about?”

“Well, maybe I liked our last talk. Or maybe I’m just worried what you’re doing out there all on your own.”

“Oh I do lots of things on my own. That’s never bothered you before.”

“Well maybe I want it to bother me.” Lallemant’s voice is hungry. Eliott is relieved to have the flirty version back. He can’t go for heart wrenching confessions every time, it’s going to kill him.

No, oh god, why are they like this? The fucking case. The case.

“So, diamonds.”

Lallemant clears his voice.

“Yeah, I love diamonds. Diamonds are great.” Is he being awkward now after the vulnerability of yesterday? Incredible. Eliott would believe it was another trick except for how real it sounds.

“Yeah you love them a bit too much, don’t you?” Eliott laughs. He’s in a teasing mood. He can give the lead this time.
“You caught me. My real purpose in all of this was to sleep on a pile of diamonds at night.”

“On a pile of 13 diamonds?”

“Yeah, sure. They would get all up in my business but at least I would feel rich. I mean getting a diamond scratch in your armpit? Getting one stuck in your nostrils? True luxury.”

Eliott laughs. It's like Emma and her lamps, he thinks to himself. Except they should be talking about this in the first place and yet it still feels like a distraction.

“Well, different strokes for different folks, right?”

There's a silence. Like they're both holding back.

“So, diamonds.”

Lamps. Indeed.

“I have an appointment with a journalist tomorrow. So I am going to need a good story. That's our main thing now right? I asked a friend to find the bank guy and I hope she'll come through, but…”

“Oh, the bank guy is not important right now. It's probably a dead end anyway. Let's focus on our story.”

Eliott is a bit taken aback by the sudden dismissal, after the fuss Lallemant has made over that mystery employee. But he's glad they're talking about the case at last, so he moves on.

“Yeah, ok. So she works for one of the biggest newspapers of the country and she says she could get a centre page in the weekend edition. What do you think we could tell her?”

“I'm pretty sure you could tell her anything and she'd believe you, if you really tried.”

“No.”

Eliott laughs.

“What, my first date story the other day didn't win you over?”

“Well I liked it, but that was a bit too good to be true, no? I mean that place probably doesn’t even exist and you were talking out of your ass, like all artists.”

Lallemant calling him an artist makes a warm rush of pleasure settle along the base of his spine. He really knows how to get Eliott where it works, huh.

“Well then I guess I will have to take you there one day and show you it's real. The place, the angel, the whole thing.”

“Guess you will have to.” There is a moment of silence. “I'm going to hold you to that, you know.”

“Yeah, well, get out of prison first.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“For you? I'm not sure. I mean, you could probably crossword your way out of there, right? That's why you're not even listening to your lawyer.” Eliott chides him.

Lallemant laughs again. Eliott feels happy.

“I could listen to my lawyer all day long. I'm just not really the obedient type, I guess.”

“No? That's too bad.” Eliott coughs. No, bad, not going there. “Breaking the law is bad.”
“Well, sometimes being a little bad is fun. Just a little. Just enough.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know about that. I sleep with my penal code under my pillow and I only ever go out to go to church.”

“See, I know that one's a flat out lie.”

“Didn't sell it ? Shame. I’ll have to try harder.”

“That could be entertaining, but pointless. There are no good Christians with a face like yours.”

“Are you still trying to sell me something ? You know I’m on your side, right ? Because all the flattering is weird all of a sudden.”

“Right, I got you with insults only, didn't I ? Kinky.”

“You didn't get squat, you fucker.”

“Say that last word again ? I like how it sounds in your mouth.”

Eliott sighs and drops the phone on his chest. He can hear the laughter coming through, muffled.

_Lucas, Lucas, Lucas._

Suddenly he realises he's lying in the middle of his magazines all spread over the wooden floor of his office, which must have fallen down at some point as he leaned into them but he has no memory of doing it because he was so absorbed in the conversation.

He takes his hand through his hair and looks at the tiny corner of indigo blue sky he can see from his window at this angle, in the gap between buildings. Is that a star he can see, despite the light pollution ? Is this going to be his life now ? Because he could get used to doing this every evening.
He's got a problem.

Every conversation they have, their relationship shifts. They went from antagonistic, strategically motivated flirting to raw confessions late at night to...just blatantly flirting. The excuse of the characters is becoming flimsier by the minute. There's nobody else in the room with them, no one they have to keep up the pretenses for. So what happens when they just stop?

*Lucas* knows very well what he’s doing, and so does Eliott, but this game allows them to crush at the speed of light while pretending nothing is happening and it’s one hell of a drug.

Yesterday in his therapist’s office, step by step seemed like the best option, but the truth is that right now, he wants nothing more than to run down the stairs.

No matter what might wait for him at the bottom.

“You're going to run out of minutes so fast at this rate” he whispers, incapable of staying away, “you might have to write me letters next.”

“Well, good to know you would read my letters, but I lied about the minutes. I have an unlimited plan. I mean it would be fucking stupid to go through all this trouble for a phone in prison and get stumped by fucking SFR. My people are good to me.”

Eliott laughs.

“So ...does that mean you did you get shy on me last time ?”

“Maybe I believe in the virtues of minimalism.”

“Really ? Hang up then.”

Pause.

“What, and let you go to your meeting unprepared ?”

“Oh you’re right ! Parisian journalists can be terrifying. Almost as bad as lawyers, really. I mean, how would I ever manage without you.”
“I’m sorry, I never found you terrifying even for a minute.”

“Well, maybe that’s because I didn’t want you to.”

“Hidden layers, huh? Very well, maybe you can surprise me later, hopefully at the right time. Scary can be good when you know who to scare.”

“Are you going to give me pointers?”

“Would you follow them?” Other pause. “Well, not the journalist, for starters.”

“Promise I’ll be all charm for her.”

“Poor thing, she doesn’t stand a chance.”

“You know I can never tell if you’re sarcastic because your normal voice also sounds that way. Is that perhaps some sort of deflection mechanism?”

“I am not deflecting, I am telling you how charming you are.”

Ouch. Critical hit.

“Well you are definitely deflecting when it comes to talking about the case though.”

“I’m sorry, weren’t we working on our characters?”

“Of course. Why would we want to talk together otherwise? I mean, I have a very important defrozen TV dinner to get back to.”
“And I have an urgent session of watching paint flake off the ceiling that’s sorely missing me. Prison schedule really develops an individual.”

“So charming.”

“Oh, I’ve done my part. Now it’s your turn.”

“Do you mean I should insult her, prevent her from doing her job and call her way too late at night ?”

“No, that’s our thing. Find something else.”

Eliott can’t fucking deal with this.

“Okay, so, um...Diamonds ?” Look who’s lamping out now.

Lallemant laughs. He laughs way too much for a guy stuck in a prison cell. It alarms Eliott as least as much as it pleases him.

“Are you tapping out already ? No more witty comeback ?”

“Oh I have all the comebacks you want, but one thing I don’t have is a reason to give that woman and her readers why they should be convinced to care about a guy who can’t string three serious sentences together and for all I know is just biding his time while his teammates sell his diamonds to buy him a villa in Ecuador for when he gets out on a vice of procedure. And I really don’t want to be known for making that possible.”

“Worried about your reputation, are you. I might have some room for you in my villa, you know.”

“Oh, if you give me something worthwhile, I will blow up my reputation for you. I was waiting for a reason to, anyway. But not for money or a fucking villa, that’s for sure. I’m not that easy. So I think it’s about damn time you gave me some more actual info. Or are you all talk and no trousers ? ”
“Okay, now that’s the proper introduction for my story I was waiting for, thank you. A good challenge. I knew you had it in you.”

Eliott blows air into the phone. How does he always know how to turn anything to his advantage like that? He would make the best lawyer ever.

“But I have to warn you” Lallemant says, his tone suddenly serious. “This is where it starts to get weird, and potentially very scary. I need to know you won’t bail on me.”

“I don’t care about scary” Eliott replies. “And weird is actually pretty much up my alley, actually”

“What, you aren’t a neat little square? Never would have guessed.”

“Go on, talk. Diamonds.”

“Yes, sir.”

Eliott stays impassible at the provocation. Lallemant relents.

“Okay, let’s get ready for some diamond action, then. I told you where they came from. They got mined in dubious conditions, and then they were used as a bride price for a wedding within a mobster family, and then they were used as a collateral for more than a century in deals that went sideways a majority of the time. Then they wind up in the possession of our dear little old Karls. That’s odd, but in itself, not damning evidence. Maybe they just are a harmless old couple who collect rare antiques with a connection to the macabre or the unusual. I mean, who cares about what a pair of old fashioned crooks did way back when, crime has gone megacorporation these days. Who the fuck cares about a set of little stones, right?”

“It’s not about the diamonds themselves”, Eliott realizes.

“Bingo. It’s about what they represent, and why. Have you ever come into contact with one of the beaux voyous during your job?”

“Almost. Turned it down, though.”
“Smart of you. Well, what sets those guys apart from the common criminal, is that they’re obsessed with themselves, really. Their *milieu*, their pride, their codes, their history. And if one thing embodies all that at once - it’s a good old blood feud.”

“A blood feud? Like...revenge?”

“An eye for an eye, until they don’t remember why they even started with it and they’re all walking around blind. Not the smartest way of self-preservation but then again, they are dinosaurs. I did...Some research before setting this in motion. And now I know why. So let’s have a little history lesson. You might want to grab a pen.”

Eliott rolls over and opens the first notebook he can find.

“Go ahead, I’m all ears.”

“Let me take you back to when it all started. It’s the year 1910, and sweet, young Colombe Colibari is in need of a husband.”

“Is this the beginning of a romance novel or something?”

“Well, I certainly hope not, or you have very fucked up conceptions of romance. Now stop trying to distract me.”

Eliott scoffs. “Yeah, how rude of me to distract you.”

“Exactly. So her parents present our young Colombe with possible suitors. You see, Colombe cannot marry for love. Her family has...Certain proclivities. So it’s all about consolidating power, making alliances. And Colombe is exceptionally beautiful. Half the men in the *milieu* want to be the lucky guy. The men she is presented with, however, are mostly thrice her age, friends of her father in need of a third wife, boorish brutes who cannot offer her the charmed life she dreams of. That is, until Constant Rustaing makes an appearance.”

“Constant Rustaing.” Eliott whispers. The name is eerily familiar, but he cannot say why.
“Our man Rustaing is an up and coming businessman, with all sorts of ideas. He believes in strength through unity. He thinks that if the families of the Parisian underground were to band together, they could create an organisation that would rival the age old Italian mafias. Move beyond prostitution and racket into grand scale extortion, intimidate the law, buy themselves a few politicians and most importantly avoid the rise of the Corsican gangs in the South and the Italians encroaching on their territory. He’s a visionary, really, thinking about things that won’t happen for decades. More importantly, for our story, in Colombe’s eyes, he’s the perfect man. He’s still in his thirties, not crumbling, never been married - because our girl is a romantic - and he is irresistibly charming. He tells her they could rule the world together. It’s love at first sight - for her. But to his family, he is the wrong choice - an upstart out of nowhere with a paltry history of botched robberies. So she tries to convince him to elope.”

“Well, that never ends well.”

“Ah but the thing is, he needs the approval of her father more than he needs love. So he goes to Colibari and asks - what can I do to prove to you that I am serious?

So Colibari thinks. What he really wants is to get rid of this upstart. But he also is curious to see if this could gain him something. So he tells him that their main rivals, the Rémieux crime family, have just bought a beautiful diamond necklace for their daughter, who just side her debut in society. It has been the talk of the town, a show of wealth and power, and Colombe has been green from envy. So if Rustaing was serious, he would get the necklace for her - and make sure she could wear it in the open, without being disturbed.”

Eliott could listen to him read the phone book, at this point. But still, he finds himself carried away by the story.

“Now Rustaing is somewhat bothered by this. He is a ruthless man, so he deduces the only way to accomplish this is to get rid of the other family in its entirety. That is not where his problem lies. However, if he is seen to attack another house on behalf of the Colibari, it will endanger his plan of uniting the families. No - the provocation must seem to come from the other side.”

So, he disguises himself as a businessman from the South, who owns boats and wants to work in logistics and could open new trade routes for the families. He goes right into the lion’s den - to the Rémieux and tells them a wonderful story of one upping the Italians. He wines and dines them, brings them to a wonderful restaurant. Then he drops casual lines to the Colibari moving into opium - the Remieux’s territory. Two days, the Rémieux declare war to the Colibari. They kill two of their low-ranking members in a very gruesome way, to send a message.

The day after that, all the elder Rémieux family members drop dead, as well as their youngest daughter and her fiancé, at their breakfast table. In the confusion, Rustaing steals the diamonds. Everyone is now terrified of the Colibari, but cannot blame them as they only defended themselves. Nobody says anything, two days later, when Colombe and Rustaing announce their engagement and she is wearing a beautiful choker necklace studded with 13 cushion cut diamonds.”
“How the fuck did he kill them all?”

“He poisoned them when he invited them to the restaurant. Slow acting poison, takes 72h to take effect. He made a lucky gamble. If they hadn’t declared war, it would have spectacularly backfired.”

“All for some diamonds.”

“Well the diamonds are a shortcut for power, really. Whoever owns them - is able to keep them - owns the symbolic power over the town. Well, at least, back then. Things are so different now, it’s mostly a relic. But still. Like I said, these are superstitious people. And besides, that’s not how the story ends.”

“Well, because that’s too much of a happy ending for our main couple, right?”

“Right. So the newlyweds live on bliss for a while. They go on honeymoon in Switzerland, in the Alps, where Rustaing owns a house. They are supposed to be there two months at first, but for some unknown reason, those two months become six. Then one morning, Colombe shows up on her father’s doorstep, heavily pregnant and in tears. She says her husband is not the man she thought he was, that he is cruel and mistreats her. Her father tells her that she has made her bed and now she must lie in it.

Rustaing comes home, and she goes back to him. In the next few years, he starts to put his plan in motion. He recruits an army of men with particular talents - liars, killers, thieves - the kind that generally know no god or master, except those are completely loyal to him and sow terrors in the hearts of all their peers. There are wild rumors that he is building a secret place in the heart of Paris, that he’s bought a secret hotel to make a Market of Thieves that the common of mortals cannot have access to, a den of iniquity without morals or limits. They say he’s planning to import heroin and opium and drugs that don’t even exist yet at that point. They even say he’s made a pact with the devil that allows him to be at several places at once and to disappear like a shadow.”

“Wow.”

“I mean, most of that is probably nonsense. The man has made one hell of an aura for himself, though. Everyone is both in awe and terrified of him. All the families consult him before making a move. And they’re thriving because they’re too scared of him to go at each other’s throats. The Colibari, though, start to feel a little bit left out, and their relationship with Rustaing sour. He won’t let Colombe see them.”
“That’s one hell of a red flag.”

“Yeah. Tragedy inevitably strikes. Colombe is found dead in mysterious circumstances. Now that’s too much for her family, who hold Rustaing responsible, and they swear revenge. In the middle of the night, they follow Rustaing to his house and plan to kill him. However, Rustaing has disappeared, along with the diamonds, all his money, and his and Colombe’s young son, Edmond. Colibari swears his family will not rest until he has revenge, and convinces many of the families to turn against him and to never do business with him again. They scour the city for him but he remains impossible to find. In the meantime, bad things start to happen to their “businesses”. Rumors start that Rustaing is walking in the tunnels under the city, poisoning people at random, some say he’s become a demon in the flesh. Then the war breaks out. Times are tough for everyone. Most of the families lose sons to the conscription.

Rustaing does well for himself, as men of his type do during wars. He moves overseas, goes into weapons. Rumor has it, however, that his men, loyal to him, still move in the bowels of the city, and work to ruin his enemies. He returns after the war, more powerful than ever, and Colibari is there waiting for him. Him, the boy and the diamonds. In the ensuing scuffle, bullets are shot but when the chaos clears, the only casualty is the little Edmond Rustaing, lying dead at his father’s feet. Now, a male heir, that’s something worth starting a blood feud over. Father Colibari goes mad with grief and drinks himself into an early grave. The rest of them swear to pursue Rustaing and his associates to the ends of the earth. The diamonds are grabbed back by the remaining Rémiex, who reassert their claim over the city. The Italians then move in and take over and start what will become the notorious *French Connection*, the heroin smuggling routes. The diamonds keep being passed around as a symbol of power. The Colibari line continue to kill anyone who they think owed loyalty to Rustaing. Some say Rustaing’s dead and that his ghost is tied to the diamonds - and that’s why anyone who owns them inevitably dies in terrible agony.”

“Hum...you don’t believe in ghosts, do you ?”

“No. But I thought it was funny. I find the other rumor more interesting. Are you still with me ?”

“Um….I still don’t get what this has to do with anything, but yes.” Eliott’s got a feeling he’s not going to like what follows.

“Some say that Rustaing and his organisation still remained in Paris, just way more underground than anyone thought, and that they just changed their way of operating to a more discrete way. Becoming more spies than criminals, really. Almost like a private, secret army in the shadows. That they helped negotiate protection for the French Connection by the CIA and the French secret services during the Cold War, for instance, and had their own hand in it going smoothly until the 70s when it stopped serving their interests and they dropped it. That they worked to provide weapons to both sides during World War and had a hand in art smuggling and war profiteering. And many, many other things.”
Eliott feels a cold chill take hold and settle in his stomach.

“That’s….straight up conspiracy shit. You mean like a shadow organisation sort of thing ?”

Lallemand laughs. It’s not reassuring anymore.

“Are you bullshitting me ? If I tell that to the journalist tomorrow, she’s going to think I’m insane. And what does that have to do with...everything else ? You stealing the diamonds for starters. I mean, what the fuck. And my father.”

The man on the other side of the line remains silent. Eliott feels like he’s just fallen through a funhouse mirror.

“Who did you steal the diamonds for ? What the fuck ? Oh my god. This is insane. I thought...I thought you had a grudge against my father for something he did. I thought it had something to do with your mother, I thought...it was about real estate fraud and corruption or something. But what you’re saying that’s...a whole other category of fucked up. That’s not just my father, that’s...I mean organized crime ? A secret organization ? What the fuck. What the fuck have you dragged me into. What the fuck.”

“Oh come on. I told you it was going to get scary. And don’t tell me you didn't know. Your father must have shown signs of doing shady stuff. The Karls having the diamonds is just the shortest fuse. We’ve been suspecting he was involved for quite a while. Stuff way beyond the level of a corrupt politician. I mean corrupt people they just...they’re just lazy, or regular bad, but your father, he’s something else, isn’t he ? If you didn’t realize that, you must have enjoyed playing the spoiled heir much more than i thought while putting your head in the sand....”

“Don’t fucking patronize me” Eliott says, and he hangs up.

He’s having a panic attack. His heart feels like it's trying to escape his chest. He tries to breathe, puts his head between his knees, but he feels like the ground is opening up beneath him. This is his worst nightmare coming to life - his father as an all powerful, inescapable figure in the shadows. That he’s more than a sadistic asshole - that he’s actually empowered to do all the bad things he’s ever hinted at.

Suddenly he realizes the phone is ringing. He picks up.
“I’m so fucking sorry.” Then when Eliott doesn’t reply. “Are you still with me?”

“My father is a fucking monster. And he...the idea that he could be involved in this, that he could have that much power...it makes me sick.”

“I won’t blame you if you back out.” Lallemant says.

“How much of your plan depends on me?”

“Not that much. It’s okay. “

That’s a lie, Eliott knows. For a moment he’s tempted to take it.

But not a long one.

“How did you stop being afraid?”

One more step forward.

Lallemant inhales.

“ImPLYing I ever did.”

“I mean, come on, look at you! You’re risking everything.”

“Well...when you don’t have that much to risk, it’s easier. I was...I was raised around this shit, you know. I mean, when I was raised at all. It’s not...There are things to me that are harder. Being...a person, I guess.”

Eliott swallows.
“I don’t want to pry but...you know if you ever want to tell me what’s pushing you to....” He’s grasping at straws. He needs to know he’s not alone in this.

“I’m sorry, I can’t...not right now.”

“It’s okay. Whatever you want, I...the truth is, I am afraid. All the time. I don’t think I remember ever not being scared. Of my father, for one thing. I just...Sometimes I feel like I grew up crooked. Because the fear took up so much place. But ever since I started this case I...I feel like I am catching glances of who i could have been without the fear.”

“In a parallel universe.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Silence.

“I’m afraid too.” Lallemant says. His voice is small, whispy, as if he’d let go of the phone and laid it on the pillow next to him. “I...I trained myself not to feel it. Just...whenever anything scared me I would just run at it. Traps, prizes, snakes, cliffs, men three times my size. But now that I’m here I have so much time to think and...I realize the scariest stuff, it’s not that, it’s not what’s outside. It’s what you have in here, and what you’re capable of - or not. And that shit, it never leaves you, no matter how busy you get.”

There’s something so lonely about those words, Eliott is flooded with the wish - the need to hug him, to somehow reach through the distance, so intense he feels almost sick. But he can’t do anything, and he feels so small, and he wishes he could cuddle onto someone, to be held, or jump a month in the past and forget. Because suddenly it feels dark, more darkness than he can handle. But he can’t.

He chose to be there.

“In the end, you don’t stop being afraid.” Lallemant continues. “You just find something you want more, and you hold on to that. For me, it was justice, first.”

Or maybe revenge, Eliott thinks.
“Freedom. For me, I mean.” Or maybe I’m running away. “I mean, aside from the rest.”

They stay a moment in silent contemplation and mutual recognition of the one thing they’re not talking about. Eliott feels calm gradually return as he listens to the breathing on the other side.

He’s terrified, but what else is new. At least he’s not pretending otherwise anymore.

“You know, if this is the size of the thing we’re facing, I hope you have a really fucking good team working on this. Please tell me we’re not alone in this.”

“I have a really fucking good team.” Lallemant confirms. “They’re smart, and sharp, and talented like you wouldn’t believe, and some of them are actually fearless. They’re the best, really, and they’re devoted. We’ve been through hell and back together. And they’re good people - that, I have zero doubts about. I am really looking forward to you meeting them. You might get a message from them but right now...they’re not all super keen on letting you in. I mean. They’re cagey bastards by nature.”

“You mean I have to compromise myself a little first, huh. Before I get a sign from the Merry Men.”

Lallemant is back to laughing, but Eliott can’t find it as reassuring anymore. “I’ll tell them I found my Little John.”

“Well, as long as I don’t have to wear tights...I guess I will have to make my move, then. Show my colors.”

“I can’t wait to read about it once we get that newspaper in prison. You know, in about six months.”

“I’m going to have to read it to you on the phone, aren’t I?”

“Don’t sound so put upon. I’d bet you like the sound of your own voice even more than I do.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe I just like the idea of what it could do to you, that’s all. I mean, my
voice, it’s all I have right now to reach you.”

Shit. Where is that even coming from.

That’s crossing a line. It’s true what they say - some parts of the brain linked to survival really are too close together for comfort.

Oh my god.

But it’s true. He wants to reach through more than he’s ever wanted anything in his life.

“By reading from the newspaper?” Lallemant gives him an out. Or maybe it’s a springboard. His voice does sound strangely high-strung all of a sudden.

“Um, yeah I don’t know I just...um listen, I better go, I need to prepare for tomorrow and…”

“Save minutes?”

Eliott flounders.

“It’s okay, we all get a little shy sometimes. Guess you’ll have to show me what you can do with your voice some other time.”

“Yeah. Thanks for the talk. Um, the information.”

Lallemant laughs quiet and low and private.

“You’re welcome, I guess. Sorry for being the bearer of scary stories.”

“Well, I asked for it, didn’t?”
“Yeah. But still. We’re in this together, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“I won't let them get to you, Eliott.” Suddenly his voice is almost possessive, sending a violent thrill along Eliott's spine. He's claiming Eliott as his to protect. “And they know what I've done in the past. So if they as much as breathe in your direction wrong, I will make them remember why they're scared of me. And that's a promise.”

And he puts an end to the call before Eliott can reply, leaving him hanging there, equal parts aroused and terrified.

Eliott lets out a shaky breath. He feels like he just stepped off a rollercoaster.

_Maybe Alexia is right. My life is a movie._

Murder, mayhem, a demon man...It seems unreal, like something from a half-baked child’s dream. The hints at Lallemant’s ominous past life are even more worrying, tales of cruelty and power plays and grudges of the unshakeable type. Already his mind is spinning with theories and horrors. And he still doesn’t know why he’s after his father.

His deep conviction in basic human decency seems like a very flimsy shield against all of that.

But one thing is certain - there’s nothing confusing about his feelings anymore. They haven’t been extinguished by the fear. They just make him want to hang on tighter.

*Something I want more.*

Chapter End Notes

hint : if you're worried about being a psychopath, you're definitely not one

*Next time on Les Diamants sont Eternels* dun dun dun:
things are going to HAPPEN you're not ready
La vie

Chapter Summary

*dun dun dun* previously on Les Diamants sont Eternels ! secrets were shared on the phone, about secret conspiracies and ruthless mobsters and cursed diamonds, but also about what lies in the heart of our protagonists behind all that *attitude*. Eliott went to his therapist and decided to take thing step by step, which might yet prove a challenge. But he promised Lallemant he would give him the time to surprise him...

in this chapter : things are about to GO DOWN. but maybe not as much as some people would want. A journalist, an artist, some running in the park, evil spinach, a party, sloths, and stains on the couch. Also vodka. And bad news.

And a cliffhanger. Sorry !

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh I really hope you like this one ! Plot's gonna get wild !

Notice the change in rating, hint hint. (see end notes if you want to avoid)

Beta-ed by beeexx who has the best work ethic in town <3 congrats on turning in your essays in time !!!

ps : pansexuality is valid

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VENDREDI 05:58

He’s dreaming. He must be.

He’s lounging on a wooden deck chair, basking in the warmth, the sun sinking into every inch of his exposed skin, making him feel elated and languid. A soft breeze brings smells of sand and salt and flowering trees.
He opens his eyes and the world is a hazy medley of blues and whites. At his side there is the vague outline of a house, sprawling and airy, all clear wood and infinite windows. At his feet, shimmering water.

There is movement on his left, and a man walks past, wearing nothing but the most flimsy excuse for a swimsuit. He's lithe but distractingly muscular in all the right places and Eliott can't help but follow him with his eyes, hypnotized. The man dives into the pool, strong and graceful, feet lifting off the ground and sliding into the water in one smooth movement. The surface barely ripples. He stays under so long that Eliott sits up in worry, so fast his head goes dizzy.

Lallemant emerges, water dripping from his hair and nose, glistening on his skin, a siren rising from the deep. He smiles at Eliott. It's a fond, confidential smile, that speaks of familiarity and comfort. A smile that doesn't need words, a smile that contains all the promises in the world. A challenge in his eyes, blue more vibrant than the sky, as he raises his hand out of the water and crooks a finger, to motion Eliott forward.

Eliott feels as if he's pulled forward by an invisible string, and he stands up and goes gladly, willingly. He wants to drown in those eyes, and in the feeling that rises in his underbelly as he meets them. A breeze sweeps Eliott's hair back, makes him shiver. As he comes closer Lallemant steps backward, closer to the outer edge of the pool that disappears into the horizon.

Eliott follows, and steps into the water without even a heartbeat of hesitation.

The cold is a shock, and when he opens his eyes, he sees only darkness, yawning, oppressive. The water around him is not the contained, safe turquoise of a sunny pool but troubled and endless like the open sea. And he's alone. He can't even see the floor anymore. It's just darkness every which way. Monstrous things lurking could appear at any moment.

He kicks up in a panic and breaches the surface, inhaling lungfuls of brackish air, finding himself in choppy, rough waters, waves slapping his face. As he turns around he can see the coast, hundreds of meters away. There is still a house there, but it looks different - theatrical turrets, baroque and heavy stone, caved in on itself, standing there abandoned and sinister. It reminds him of his grandparents’ old countryside manor, outlined on an angry sky, heavy with storm clouds.

He starts to swim towards it, frantically, struggling against opposite currents with all his might, but then he's hit from behind by a wave, pulled under, and his airways flood with salt water, and he’s lost in the darkness.

He wakes up with a start, drenched in sweat. He can taste salt at the back of his throat.

It takes him awhile to come back to himself, to the couch in his office, solid and firm under his back.

God, his brain is such a dramatic bitch sometimes.
Show time.

Eliott walks into the Palais de Tokyo early, passing through the austere stone pillars on his way to the restaurant and catching a glimpse of his reflection in the glass doors of the entrance.

He looks damn good. He’s made sure of it.

He’s put on his show-off bespoke black suit, trim English fit, peak lapels for a hint of flashiness, four kissing sleeve buttons, last one unbuttoned (to show quality). Crisp white shirt underneath, tieless, two buttons open (one more than completely proper), French cuffs (for class) tied with burnt orange silk knots (for a playful dot of color). Immaculate sneakers for the youthful touch with no-show socks and bare ankles. Hair styled carefully, just the right amount of wild.

A little overdressed, but charmingly so. A well-bred gentleman going through a moment of romantic disarray.

It's a mask. And a lure, all at once. And not as much of a lie as he’d like.

There is a reason why he chose to speak to this particular journalist. She likes to write about...interesting people. Her pieces come across as occasionally tabloid-ish, overly focused on personal details - but she also isn't afraid to ask painful questions. Which is a bit of a mystery, since the newspaper she writes for tends to have a more conservative, wealthy readership. Status quo type people. Maybe she's their little in house touch of rebel frisson. Or maybe she's just good at getting what she wants. And selling the risky to the staid under the cover of style.

And she’s written about his last trial. She poked fun at his ideals but there was admiration in there,
It’s time for a little strategy, and to play the game on his own.

The challenge is to make people root for Lallemant without making him appear totally innocent either. To sell his own part as crucial, intriguing but not worth disbaring on the spot. And of course, to get her to publish a story that is mostly based on speculation, in defiance of most standards of journalistic integrity.

He arrives in the main hall of the museum and realizes he has some minutes to spare, so he takes a look at their current exhibitions before going to the brasserie.

It can’t help but tug at his heartstrings a little.

In another universe, maybe it would be his name up there in block letters.

But when he flips through the little leaflet, he feels a serious rush of annoyance. Piled cans of soda, skulls with rhinestones on them, pictures of undressed girls that look way too close to underage in compromising positions. The absolute worst empty bullshit modern art has to offer, dressed up as gold. Wow, so edgy. *Hurr durr, society is bad I am so smart look at these boobs.* Just another motherfucker with more connections than talent.

Oh, he would have made it here eventually. He definitely would have had the connections.

 Doesn’t mean he would have had anything worthwhile to show.

He moves away at a brisk pace. This is not the moment to get sappy or sidetracked. He needs to be cool, crisp, as sharp and trim as his suit. So he swallows his jitters and imagines a little numbing ice running through his veins. It’s common practice for him. He wouldn’t have gotten where he is otherwise. That’s the choice he’s made, and he’s going to make it count.

…
She’s chosen the restaurant. It’s quiet in there. Eliott sits down in a moss-colored chair, looks at the obsidian-colored reflective tables, the square paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling, the plates of coppery metal hanging on the basalt and granite walls. Majestic, almost austere.

His lunch date arrives. Long straight blond hair, hoop earrings, wrapped in a brightly colored designer coat. She stands out in the mineral surroundings of the restaurant. Theatrical. It reminds Eliott of Alexia for some reason, even if more polished. The way she’s just a little too much, but deliberately. A way that demands space of its own. She has nice dimples, wide green eyes, and an open face that give her an air of innocent enthusiasm. Eliott can only imagine those serve her very well in her line of work.

He gets up and they shake hands. Then he pulls her chair for her. He’s chosen a table with chairs and not a booth for exactly that purpose, to see how she reacts.

She’s flattered. Good.

“Mr Demaury, so happy to finally meet you!” She has a slightly lilting accent that is very pleasant to the ear.

“Thank you for fitting me into your schedule on such a short notice.”

“Well, we prepared a feature on the case already, but then we received your message. Obviously we need your story in there.” She smiles. “If it’s as good as I think it could be, of course.”

“Well, I’ll let you be the judge of that. I can only try to relay the truth as best I can.”

“Really? The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

Eliott laughs and sends a little signal to the waiter, who arrives with two small glasses on a tray, round little crystal saucers on a stem full of clear bubbling liquid, that he deposits on the granite table.

“It’s not on the menu yet, but their last arrival is really good. Thought I’d get us some glasses” he says in a nonchalant yet confidential tone of voice.
“Oh, awesome. “ she says, light and breezy, as she grabs the 80-euro cup of champagne and throws it straight back in one go as if it was a shot of cheap vodka. Then she puts it back on the tray and smiles at the waiter. “That was very nice. Can I have a martini now? They are on the menu but they’re still the best they have to offer.”

She shrugs in Eliott’s direction and smiles wide.

“Sorry, I’m a girl of simple tastes.”


“I mean, three martini brunch, can’t be beat. So, let’s cut to the chase. What do you want to know?”

First bidder loses, Eliott knows from law school. But this is not haggling.

She frowns a little, the very picture of innocent concern. Eliott doesn't trust it one bit, but he can appreciate the craft.

Eliott sighs and takes his hand through his hair, knowing full well it will make him look appealingly troubled.

She pouts a little, raises an eyebrow, eyes remaining cold.

Eliott suddenly has a bird’s eye impression of them having a pointless flirt-off. Wow, what is it with him getting saddled with all those contrary types all of a sudden? It is a buy one get a dozen situation?

At least this one isn't into him. He thought he would have been disappointed because he could have used that but...he's relieved. He's all maxed out on that front. He can still play charisma, though.

His turn to be withholding and mysterious. How did Lallemant do it? Convince Eliott to work with him all the while sharing such a minimum amount of information? It can’t have been for his pretty eyes only, Eliott gives himself a bit more credit than that...

A good story. But even more importantly a chance for Eliott to be the one to unravel the mystery. Interactive, tantalizing. And well, if there’s something that unites their professions - they probably pride themselves in being able to pry people apart.
“Have you ever heard of the Colibari diamonds?”

“Hmm...no, but sounds promising.” She smiles.

They order food. He gets the caramelized Black Cod fish and she the roasted chicken with morel mushrooms. Then he launches himself in a condensed explanation of the story Lucas told him. As he talks, her face is hard to read. She stays silent for a while when he’s done, calculating look on her face.

“Now, that’s an interesting story. But, if I can be bold for a minute...that’s not what I expected. I mean, you’ve built a reputation for yourself - defender of the wrongly accused, human rights, etcetera. But this...this sounds like this client of yours stole the diamonds so he could become king of the mob himself. And you’re...backing him? But then why are you talking to me, that…” He can see her thinking as she speaks. “Unless there’s something else to the story.” She narrows her eyes at him.

“That’s what I’m trying to discover. Lallemant is...he isn’t like other accused I’ve worked with. He doesn’t want me to help him get free, it’s like he doesn’t even care about going to jail. He’s got a strategy there. I’m not sure of what it is. Everytime I think I’ve got him pinned down, he surprises me. But he’s clever. And he wants me to make some noise. I don’t think he would do that if he wanted to be king of the mob. They thrive on opacity.”

“You sound like you admire him.”

“I know he’s playing me.”

“And you’re letting him. I wonder why that might be.”

Eliott leans forward a little.

“I know why he hired me. Do you know who my father is?”

“Yes, of course. He’s the current mayor’s advisor and second in comment. He pops up in so many stories. He’s one of those types that is everywhere and knows everyone, isn’t he?”

“Oh he knows a lot of people, alright. Including the Karls - the previous owners of the diamonds. Small world, right?”
“Why do I get the sudden feeling you’re not his biggest fan?”

“Have you ever known, deep in your soul, that there’s something wrong about someone, but you can’t prove it? But you still know?”

“Why, did he forget your birthday when he was a kid? Refused to buy you a pony?”

“Oh he did buy me lots of ponies. Invited men with guns into our house, too. Sticks with you a bit more when you’re a kid, that one. And of course there’s the fact he threatened to ruin my career if I didn’t expedite the case and get Lallemant sent to prison quick and discretely.”

“Ohhhh, so there’s the human rights part.”

“Listen, Lallemant is a troublemaker. That’s for sure. But some people deserve to be bothered. And those diamonds have blood on them. And there’s an election coming up soon. I can’t connect the dots yet, but I know someone needs to.”

“And I can’t print this, not like that. It sounds like grasping at a lot of straws and getting pally with dangerous people. I thought you would have a little more to give me than smoke and mirrors.”

“Listen, I am going to tell you what I think. The Karl's had those diamonds for a long ass time. And I think they were allowed to keep them because of my father. Maybe they did him a favor. Maybe he wanted them off the table. And maybe Lallemant was off to steal them for himself and get a bit at power. Maybe he got caught and decided to go for my father another way. But I don't believe for a second the timing of all this is a coincidence and neither is me being there. What I do believe is that corruption is a deeply rooted evil, but it hates the light, and when you've got an occasion to make a splash about it, then you definitely should.”

“That's a nice purpose, for sure. But what's your proof? You know, there's another rumor going on around you and your client.”

“And what's that?”

“Well, that you're actually...involved with him. In a non professional manner.”
“Well that's a stupid theory. I mean, he's in prison, isn't he? How would that even happen? Unless you mean I knew beforehand. Do you actually think I'm an accessory to the crime? Do you think I've been plotting this with him from the beginning to get back at my father?” Eliott laughs. “Maybe I'm in the mob, too. Oh that would be funny.”

The journalist leans back in her chair, examining him.

“You know there would be a thousand ways to get back at your father that wouldn't include blowing up your career, right? I mean, with what you're giving me, I can only write a character piece at best, and it's not going to be flattering for you.”

“Yeah, sure. Investigations, being smart about it. Well my father is smart. He's hidden everything. He's always going to win the hush hush game.”

“So you've decided to...be stupid?”

“I've decided to make noise, the kind that doesn't go away. My father is terrified of scandals. He can do what he does because he is the blameless middleman. I've seen the lengths he can go to to make sure nothing tarnishes his good name.”

“Ah, so this is sabotage.”

“But not only. Lallemant tells me something big is about to go down. I'm inclined to believe him. Yes, the man has a...troubled past. But he's brave. He's the type to walk into a fight without blinking, he...doesn't care about power or status and fuck, he may be a piece of shit, but that's refreshing.”

“Don't all criminals have problems with authority?” She sounds very unimpressed.

*Yes Eliott what are your rational reasons for buying into this?*

“Listen, this is my job, working with bad people, and I can tell you the difference. I know when they're trying to game the system, when they're petty egomaniacs, when they're just down on their luck, when they've made bad choices, when they're just violent and cruel. And Lallemant is none of those. He isn't there because he screwed up the robbery. He's too smart for that. And the timing, and
hiring me, that can’t be a coincidence either. Of course, he’s got a game to play. But so have I. This can cause the kind of stink that can’t be washed away.”

“And the rumors, then? You know, that police inspector I talked to was completely outraged. Lack of professionalism, and so on.”

Her tone is starting to seriously annoy him.

“Well, audiences love a scandal, don’t they?”

Her face closes off.

“Yes, because exploiting this sort of thing for scandal is totally a good way to get to the truth.”

“Come on, fascination or disgust, it all amounts to attention, you would know, wouldn’t you? Isn’t that what your writing is all about? Underbelly feelings.”

“I write about human stories. I don’t turn them into a circus.”

Her third martini arrives and as she curls her fingers around her glass, Eliott notices her nails, matte white and filed to points, except index and middle fingers on her right hand. Ohhh, well that makes sense, he thinks. Ah, fuck. He might have miscalculated.

She leans forward.

“I’m going to tell you what I believe. I believe you’re a fucking glory seeker, and you’ve got a grudge against daddy, and you want to air your dirty laundry in public. And maybe the psychopath you work for promised you a cushy little pile of money when he gets out and is done with his turf war. Well, this is exactly the kind of story the world doesn’t need more of. Especially if you want to make jokes of things that shouldn’t be jokes.”

She drains her glass in a few swigs and puts it back on the table forcefully. Eliott feels the conversation is about to reach a premature end if he doesn’t do...Something. Shit.
“Wait...don’t you need this story ?”

“My editor likes me. He will take a raincheck if he has to. Your little tricks don’t impress me.” She stands.

He could call her bluff but...the stakes are too high. He can’t disappoint Lallemant in this, lose his regard.

“I think I’m falling in love with him.”

She sits back down.

“He asked me to pretend we had a thing before. I think...he was trying to piss off the inspector. I think he was also making up excuses to, um. Flirt with me. And something happened between us, and I don’t...” He swallows. “You can’t...I don’t owe you the truth about this.”

“No, but you owe me the truth about something. Our working relationship cannot be based on speculations only.”

“I...okay. My father is a bad man. I don't have proof, but I was a witness to things that can't be explained otherwise. I have been afraid of him for my whole life. And then I talked to Lallemant and I wasn’t scared so much anymore. I don’t know how else to explain it. Hell, I don’t know how to explain it at all. I don’t care about the glory. I really don’t. I want to be free of the fear. I think my father should be the one behind bars. I don’t think Lallemant should be. I think he’s got a crazy plan though...and I have to see this through.”

“You’re willing to stake your reputation on it.”

“I want you to say that I believe that Lucas Lallemant is being framed for the wrong reasons, that he’s being let down by the system, and the reason why he hired me is that I am the only man my father can’t touch, at least not publicly. And yes. I am willing to lose my reputation for it. And if anyone asks, tell them I didn’t start my last case with any certitudes either. And I mean...it must have happened to you. That you don’t have proof but you just know. You just know that there's a story there.”
He's pleading now. He doesn't like to let his desperation show. But...does he have a choice?

They stare at each other.

“Well, that sounds like something I can work with. But framed? I mean they caught the man exiting the bank on tape, didn't they?”

“Well, of course, he broke the law. But they're trying to put at least a dozen other robberies on him. And besides? Those diamonds were falsely acquired, I'm pretty damn sure. And you'll notice they could have stolen a lot of other things in that bank, but they didn't. So simple profit can be ruled out.”

“So...some sort of sacrificial Robin Hood? Is that the narrative you're going for?”

“I bloody well hope it's not just a narrative.”

“Yeah, that would be inconvenient for you I guess. Especially after my article comes out. Because that's going to pretty much tie your fate to him.” She smirks.

Eliott breathes out in relief.

“I want exclusivity, though. On the story, whatever happens after this. When you do start learning real things.”

“Well, I will do my best. When I can speak, I will.”

“You are going to find out the truth, right?”

He takes a deep breath.

“Yeah, even if it doesn't fit the narrative. But...” He can't help but smile a little and be incommensurably annoyed at himself for it. “I think he's not immune to my charms either. I mean...he's been calling me at night, you see. And we've talked for hours.”
She widens her eyes. “I can't print that, can I? Damn.”

“Yes, well, I'm right there with you. I can assure you, I didn't plan for this and if I had to choose a way to go after my father this definitely would not be it. But here we are and if you roast me in your article I will probably deserve it but at least now you can do so for the right thing.”

She rubs at her nose.

“I could make one hell of a psychological profile out of that, you know. But I'm not going to, I'm going to tell a compelling story. I just...what do you expect to accomplish by going public this early exactly? You gotta level with me on this.”

“I know Lallemant's got something planned. I wanted to earn his trust by doing this but personally…”

He leans forward a little.

“I think people have been following me. I think it's an intimidation tactic and I want to say fuck that. I think paradoxically being in the public eye might make me safer.”

“Or it might piss them off even worse.”

He shrugs.

“That depends on how good you are at attracting an audience, I guess.”

“Well then I guess we're gonna have to trust each other, huh? I have a feeling this is going to be a make or break it career moment for me already, so you'd better not disappoint, fancy boy.”

Eliott sighs.
“Well I hope you won't be writing articles about my disappearance soon.”

“Well if you do disappear it'd better be because they kidnapped you and not because you're off canoodling somewhere in South America with that criminal boy toy of yours, you hear me? Because,” she points her finger at him “I will track you down. Don't test me.”

Elliott laughs. She may be a pain in the ass, but he likes her doggedness and in the end, the fact that she was able to read him bodes well for them.

“If I do, I'll promise I'll send you a postcard. With an exclusive on the weather conditions.”

She tssks at him.

“It's too early to make jokes like that. You're gonna have to earn it first. And just to be clear, if Lallemant turns out to be a bullshit artist or some sort of murderous psycho, I will depict you as a naive lovesick fool, are we clear?”. 

“Yeah, well I will probably deserve it, then.”

“Aw, don't worry, at least it will look great on the pictures.”

Ouch. But she is right. It hits him how ridiculous this is. And rash. And ill-advised, if a good story either way.

She rolls her eyes.

“Come on, this isn't the end of the world. I respect you, you know. Everyone is so cynical these days, and look at you! Finding love in a hopeless place! Let's pay and walk with me, I need to get to my next appointment.”

Elliott follows and they pay at the till before going to the exhibition hall.

“I have a meeting with an artist to talk about their work.”
They wait in front of an art piece, hung on the stripped concrete wall, that makes Eliott very uncomfortable. It is incredibly beautiful but looking at it makes him feel like he is falling into his own mind.

It's a gigantic silhouette of a human head on a canvas, background painted black but the head itself is all stars, white and blue and fuzzy, almost twinkling off the canvas. But the most noticeable thing about the piece is how it's reaching outwards and inwards - silicon drops and swirls on the edge of the head sticking out into the air, painted in the same clusters of stars pattern, while the middle of the head is caved in, hollowed out into the wall. The center of it is dark and starless, like a black hole.

“Hey, beautiful.”

The woman who arrives isn't talking to him, but to the journalist, and as greeting, she flat out kisses her on the mouth, quick but passionate. The newcomer has purple hair and a denim jacket covered in paint - definitely the artist. Ohhh.

“Meeting with an artist, huh ?”

“Well, I also like to combine work and pleasure” the journalist winks at him, “except I actually have taste.”

“Baby, you're so mean. What do you think ?”

She's talking to Eliott now, pointing towards the art.

“It's yours ?”

She nods.

“Oh wow. It's uh...I mean it's beautiful. But it's a lot. I mean…”

“An emotion ! Mission accomplished. Art is about being a lot. Everything put on the table ! Worry about the rest later.”
Eliott looks at the both of them, bewildered, wonders why she asked him to accompany her and meet her girlfriend. Is it a weird flex? A cheeky attempt at giving him advice? Queer solidarity or something?

The journalist winks at him.

“And that's how she got the girl.”

Eliott wants to make a remark about how that's strange advice after she spent the lunch grilling him for the ludicrousness of his feelings but they're already lost in a world of their own, so he doesn’t insist as they say their goodbyes and walk into the exhibition, arm in arm, looking besotted to the extreme. Daring, colorful, perfectly matched.

He gets a strange feeling of vertigo as he watches them disappear and looks at that painting in front of him. Is it possible to feel nostalgia for the lives of others? Lives he's never led?

He pictures, for a second, his own art on the wall. Or at least a version of it grown beyond his teenage fumblings. What would it even look like? Loud, sharp, messy, a piece of his soul exposed for all to see. Given legitimacy. He doesn't know if the thought makes him want to rejoice or run away and hide.

In his fantasies, his love also meets him for a tour. Sharp eyed, clever tongued, looking like a heart attack in smart clothes, at ease here like everywhere. Celebrating his success with him, bragging about him until Eliott is all flustered and forgets to even think about hiding.

Eliott doesn't let himself picture more details. He walks out.

The man he notices following him in the street as he makes his way to the metro? Definitely not a fantasy, though.
Lallemant’s laughter in his ears is like music and Eliott is gone, gone, gone. After how their last conversation ended, the gravity of it, he wondered if it would get awkward between them, but no. Their relationship is still easy, makes him lightheaded, like a flight above the clouds with brief moments of flying too close to the sun.

Eliott recounted the events of the day and the tone of pride in Lallemant’s voice made his heart grow three sizes. It feels like a victory for the both of them. A prize he can drag back and throw at Lallemant’s feet. Of course, he’s had to omit certain details of the conversation, like him putting his actual feelings on the table. He just says she was taken by his charm and the perspective of annoying powerful people for the sake of her career.

“I can relate.” Lallemant answers at that. “And yes, I am still calling you charming.”

Is it still time to be bashful? No.

“You're not so bad yourself, you know.”

“Not so bad? Ouch.”

“Fishing for compliments, are we?”

Lallemant sighs.

“You got me. I'm only propping you up so you'll indulge my wounded narcissism.”

“Your narcissism seems fine and healthy to me.”

“I wish. I think prison might getting to me a little bit. The whole being treated like a dog is really cramping my style.”

Eliott swallows. The sharp turn to darkness under the humor is...hard to deal with. Eliott wants to
make a joke, but he really can't. He wants to hug him, but he really can't.

“I'm sorry. That really sucks.”

“Yeah places like these...they usually attract the worst kind of people, and I'm not talking only about the criminals. It's like...a factory to make monsters, you know? It doesn't matter how bad you were when you got in. Once you're in there, you're branded for life. You're disposable. They want you to know they own your ass. Break you down. And it's in the little things. They love to be petty towards you and show you you can't do anything against them. Break your things, call you names. I mean at least in Thai prison it was basically the inmates running the whole thing and if you had an issue you could fight it out. This is basically Mean Girls behind bars. Constant dick-waving notwithstanding. So fucking passive-aggressive. I fucking hate it. I mean, I can take it but god it's so annoying.”

“I know. I mean, I don't, but I campaigned for prison reform as a student and... it's really the worst. The things I've seen...I can't imagine what it must be like from the inside.”

“Yeah, and I think the worst of it is how they want to control every moment of your life. It's fucking humiliating. Fuck, it's like being stuck in camp from hell. And the food is the worst. I get hunger cramps in the morning, and that's when I actually eat at dinner. If I get served that slimey cream spinach monstrosity one more time I might actually commit a crime. It's like green mucus on a plate and it tastes even worse.”

Eliott hates being this powerless, but he can't help but feel a little grateful that Lallemant is opening up like that. That they've arrived at a point of intimacy where he feels like he can talk about that with Eliott, give up a little bit of his mask of invulnerability. Because it had to be a mask. No one comes out of this sort of thing unscathed.

“You can't be sent food, right?”

“Ugh, only for Christmas. Man, I miss beer. And cheese toast. The simple things, you know? They should put that in all the PSA against crime. Don't do it kids, because the food in prison will make your taste buds want to commit suicide.”

“Wow, that bad, huh?”

“Yeah. Listen, if you value our new found friendship at all, I'm going to need you to do something for me, and that is for you to put the phone down, throw that frozen dinner I'm sure you've got
planned for yourself in the fucking trash and find the best delivery food restaurant open in your area and order the most expensive thing they have on the menu and please. Just enjoy your freedom for me for a minute.”

Eliott feels called out. And also all jittery because he talked about their friendship. That's...something, right?

“You know, the brand of frozen dinners I buy is actually pretty decent.”

“I swear I’ll escape just to get on your case, you fucking heathen.”

“Okay, okay! Got my other phone for that.”

Eliott would do anything to distract Lallemant now, to be honest. Ordering himself food is the last thing he can do. He looks at his options on an app. “I’m tired of pizza...that sushi place is wildly overrated and they still serve red tuna even though there’s been a petition….that other one serves wagyu beef, they’re so fake, it would be so much more expensive….maybe thai could be nice.”

“I kind of fucking hate you right now, you parisian hipster, but good for you.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, I asked you to. Treat yourself. You’ve been working very hard lately. Get all the fake wagyu you want.”

The whiplash of the turn from their usually layered flirty back and forth to raw confidence to this ordinary, almost domestic exchange about beer and food makes Eliott woozy as he considers his options. And that was genuine care in Lallemant’s voice, if a little wistful. God. God. Every time it's something new between them.

‘Um, I think I’m just going to order steak and fries at the bistro on the corner. They don’t deliver but they make an exception for regulars in the street.”

“That’s an interesting choice, you like -”
“If you make any meat related jokes right now I’m hanging up, I swear.”

“Okay, okay...no food jokes, huh? I can respect that. Good food is a very serious subject.”

“I'm feeling a little bit of a judgment there.”

“Maybe you should sit in prison for a while, then, see how you like it. Man, when I get out, I'm going to hire a personal chef.”

“For your villa in Ecuador, huh?”

“Hmm. Maybe.”

“You know, I'm actually pretty decent at cooking. When I have occasion to.”

This is a lie. He's actually a disaster with a few occasional flashes of brilliance. But the move was just...well, right there.

“Hmm...you'd look good in an apron, I'm sure.”

He doesn't say and nothing else but Eliott can hear it in his words. He can hear it.

“For you, I'd even get one of those ridiculous hats. Give you the full experience.”

“I can totally picture it. God now I'm hungry as fuck.”

“I’d give you all sorts of nice things to eat. Fill you right up.”

At that, they both burst into nervous laughter, at the exact same time. Of course it was going to
happen. Someone was going to cross the line that separates flirtiness from flat-out ridiculousness, and of course it was going to be him.

“Is that a big vegetable you're holding or are you just happy to see me ?”

“I'll show you what I can do with my big vegetable, you'll see.”

Ah yes, he would paint his face in white with a big red nose if it would mean hearing that laugh again, even just once. So he makes fun of himself, and talks about his famous blueberry-bacon muffins until Lallemant starts doubting his actual cooking skills and asks him if he just bragged to get a place in his villa. Eliott confesses. Lallemant tells him he would have a place regardless. Before adding, five seconds later, that he would still need a janitor. Eliott accuses him of just wanting to put him in all sorts of funky outfits.

Ahhhhh.

His food arrives. He hangs up because the idea of eating while someone is on the phone listening is just too damn weird. The fries are perfectly crispy and the meat is cooked just like he likes and tasty as hell. He chews slowly and stares at his wall and the silence feels so heavy. He hates eating alone.

And he’s going to be doing a lot more of it now.

SAMEDI  08 : 24

He wakes up with a rush of anticipation and dread, twined together. He feels restless as hell, so he decides to go for a run in the park. It's a beautiful day, sunny and warm already, urging him to just...be outside.
He got a message from the journalist yesterday - her article made it to the evening deadline for the weekend edition. She worked fast, damn.

So he's swinging by the news kiosk on his way to the park. And...wow.

There is a secondary headline on the front page - *DIAMOND HEIST CONFUSION* - and then four page spread in the middle of it, lavish and unmistakable. There is a short interview of Inspector Derrieux and Eliott has to laugh at the choice of picture. Very, very unfortunate. A moment by moment replay of what they know about the heist, an interview with the bank director that somehow manages to convey the exact pompous tone of his voice in writing.

And then there's their story. The two pictures chosen to accompany it tell a vivid story that catch the eye immediately. Eliott at the stand during his previous case - flattering, intense, dignified - and one of Lallemant while he was still in college. Wearing a white shirt and a fucking baseball cap - and looking cute as a button, more innocent than Eliott's ever seen him. It's devious framing, really, and it serves them very well. God, she must have her editor eating out of her hand.

He sits down on a bench and reads the article. It claims that authorities seem to want to expedite the process suspiciously fast and are not putting all due efforts into finding the other robbers. It laments the lack of clarity surrounding the case. And then it tackles the story of the diamonds in a circumspect way - blood diamonds tied to the mob and its honor killings and deals going astray - and focuses on them getting in the hands of more respectable families - by coincidence, a taste for the macabre, or something more sinister?

And then it depicts Lallemant as a somewhat misguided idealist betrayed by his more cynical accomplices, who wanted to shine a light on the opacity of power plays in this city but now finds himself muzzled and alone. Then Eliott himself enters the story, as an embattled protector familiar with the abuses of the system. It doesn't allude to the nature of their relationship but...it is heavily implied that there's something else that might drive him. *The fascination is evident in Demaury’s voice when he talks about Lallemant. We won't comment on the rumors about their relationship. Maybe our valiant defender simply has met his match.* It's just left to the imagination of the viewer and their relative level of heteronormativity goggles. The article doesn't mention his father either. But there's one oblique line - *this time, he is taking a stand that might very well upset more than the judiciary establishment but also his very own family, part of Parisian bureaucratic elite* - that definitely brings the point home.

It's a brilliant read, full of drama and romantic tension, accusing nobody outright but charged with implications. The article leans into the attack on bureaucracy and the inefficiency of the public services, which is probably what will make it fly with their right of center audience. But god, the core of it feels almost revolutionary.
Holy fuck. He laughs as he puts it down on the bench, and starts warming up. Then he runs off and god, the first few minutes feel actually heavenly, the sun on his face, the fresh air, the birds, the flowers everywhere, his body waking up and shaking off the numbness not only of the night but of what feels like years.

His last case was good, but to be honest it fell on him. It was routine, he realised there was an abuse of power and he did something about it. He went through the whole thing like a workaholic, pure doggedness and little sleep and liters of caffeine. And he was definitely manic towards the end of it - Lucille had to go to the verdict while he was crashing in his bed. Thankfully it didn't have any consequences beyond him getting a reputation for being very passionate and being so humble he didn't even want to see his own success. He cut it way too close, though. And yes, he made a statement at the stand...when it appeared necessary.

This is going to be different.

He's going to make sure he sleeps and eats properly, exercises, doesn't skip his meds, no alcohol or drugs, and keeps track of his moods. He can't afford to go overboard. It's strange because to many from the outside embarking on this case would look like being self-destructive, but the truth is, it feels like the exact opposite. Putting himself out there like that, taking a stand, making this choice, it's exhilarating. And it's not about Lallemant. Well, not only.

He feels so happy all of a sudden. All around him there's people going about their lives - women holding up boxing pads for one another and practicing kickboxing moves, fitness groups in hokey flashy costumes, owners letting out small and big dogs and getting into impromptu encounters with each others, little grandmas feeding the ducks, businessmen walking to work forgetting to look busy for a second - and at that moment he feels part of it all, and it makes him want to shout out in joy.

His phone, strapped into his armband, starts ringing. He stops and takes a minute to catch his breath before answering.

It's his father. Of course it is. He would usually avoid, pretend to be otherwise occupied.

Right this minute, he doesn't give a shit, though.

“Hello ?”

“Eliott ? Do you have any idea what you've done ? What the fuck were you thinking ?”
“Good morning to you too, dad.”

“Don't get cheeky with me, boy. I told you to let this case go.”

“Yeah, and I told you to fuck off.”

“Who do you think you're talking to? Do you have any idea...you're wearing a name, boy, that is not yours. It is not yours to tarnish, sully, or make a joke of, by associating with common criminals, by spitting on everything your ancestors built.”

“Oh my god, Dad, join the 21st century! The name, that's all you care about, isn't it? You’re actually scared what I'm going to do with it.” He laughs, and it comes out scathing. “Well guess what, I don't give a shit about any fucking legacy. My name is mine. You gave it to me when I was born, and you can't take it back. If you didn't want to, you should have used protection. Now the cat is out of the fucking bag. I am actually my own person with free will.” God, it feels so good to finally get it out, and his father isn’t in the same room to intimidate him. “So you can threaten me all you want, I'll keep going. And Lucille is gone, by the way. We're separating and dissolving the firm. So you can't get me through her either.”

“You're making a grave mistake, boy.”

“I'm thirty fucking years old, stop calling me boy.”

“Where you're going now...you're going to anger people even I cannot protect you from, Eliott. Remember that when this foolishness eventually comes down on you. Remember I had your best interests at heart.”

And he hangs up. What the fuck?

He realised his hands are trembling from the adrenaline - of being unafraid, and standing up for himself - but that last sentence?

His phone rings again. Lucille.
Might as well do it all in one row.

“Elliott, are you okay?”

He sighs.

“Yes Lucille, I'm still not having an episode.”

She sighs.

“I'm worried about you. You can't just expect me to...stop caring, okay?”

“Did my dad send you the article?”

There is a silence that he takes for a confirmation.

“Elliott are you...are you in love with that man?”

“That's none of your business, Lucille.” he bites back.

She swears.

“Oh you are, then. Or you think you are. Fuck. I was almost hoping you were having an episode, you know.”

“That's a real fucked up thing to say, Lucille.”

“Well, I'm being honest. I wished this was another one of your delusions rather than having to face the fact that the man I invested so many years in can be so fucking stupid. What are you going to do,
throw away everything to become his fucking prison wife?"

He could defend himself. But the truth is, he doesn't want to. And he doesn't have to.

“Well, Lucille, thank you for your opinion, it's duly noted. Now please, go on a cruise, get yourself a rebound, enjoy your life, and stop bothering me about mine. Bye.”

And he hangs up. He laughs, alone in the park, as everyone goes about their business around him.

It feels weird, but strangely liberating. He's being rude, he knows. But these people...and their fears about him. They've always been a collar around his neck, keeping him in place. And now...well maybe he is being reckless. But at least, he feels free. And in this moment, whatever threats have been made, he doesn't want to focus on them.

He starts off running again.

DIMANCHE 21:13

“Hey.”

“Hey. I read the article, by the way. My people texted it to me. Great job.”

“So I won't get to read it to you? That’s a shame. Did you see they used a college pic of yours, then? Never knew you were a frat boy. Absolutely adorable.”

“Fuck off.” Oh, is Lucas Lallemant actually flustered?
Eliott decides to take pity on him.

“If you say so. So, what next?”

“Now we wait. My people are, ahh...monitoring some of the fallout of the article.”

Eliott thinks of the bank employee Emma is tracking and of Lallemand telling him to let it go. He doesn't bring it up, because he doesn't know what he will do if Lallemand tells him to drop what is effectively a very good lead. He doesn't want to think about the things that divide them, right now.

“My dad called me this morning. Pissed off, rambling about the family name and honor and shit. I told him to fuck off.”

“Wow, you rebel.”

“Thanks. But he told me something about bad people he would be incapable of protecting me from. And that’s...I mean I spent so much time being scared of him. I never considered there might be worse out there.”

Lallemand sighs.

“Worse, I don't know. But just as bad, definitely.”

“Then why come after my father, specifically?”

“Listen...you know that shadowy organisation we talked about that may be connected to Rustaing, the demon man? Well...we've been tracking them. We have a whole list of potential members and what they've been up to. Extortion, embezzlement, lots of white collar crime, but all sorts of dirty business. Mostly it seems...they help other, worse people to get what they want. They're middlemen. Diplomats of crime. Your father...he's very central, but he's one of the most respectable parts of it. So his reputation can be attacked.”
Wow. Wow.

“But the thing we've understood, and that's lucky for us, is that they're divided from within. We can work with that. But that also means your father's enemies might be a lot less reluctant to come for you now you've put yourself against him, publicly.”

Eliott takes a deep breath.

“You couldn't have told me this before, could you?”

“I...it doesn't matter. It still stands, what I told you. I will protect you.”

Eliott feels a brief flash of annoyance. This is making him feel like an old timey bride being passed from the authority of her father to that of her husband, for fucks's sake.

“Are you sure about that? You can't even fucking defend yourself from slime spinach.”

“Well, I have to spend my resources on my priorities. I'm afraid the spinach is a necessary sacrifice. Your safety is more important to me.”

Wow. A priority. God he's never going to be able to be mad at this fucker for long, isn't he? He's too fucking smooth.

“How noble of you.”

“I know, right?”

Eliott sighs, annoyance turning into endearment against his better judgment. His gaze dwells on the vinyl record player sitting on one of his cardboard boxes and he immediately knows how to get back at him, prove he can be just as smooth. Or well...make his life a little less miserable for a second. Either of those.

“So, um...I can't do anything about the spinach, sadly, but how about a little music?”
“Music ?”

“I'm sure you probably found a way to have music on that phone of yours along with everything else, but my sound system is kind of amazing.”

“No, actually. My setup is just...the essentials I guess. The rest was hard to justify. I'm not really here to listen to music.”

That's an odd way to put it. Like he's punishing himself for something and needs to atone.

“Um...well, if I put the sound on real low, they won't hear it on the other side, right ? Only you ?”

“I...okay. Sure. Let me guess, he says after a pause, you have one of those pretentious old timey vinyl things.”

Eliott groans and gets up from the couch.

“I'll have you know, the sound of them is just something else. It's totally worth looking pretentious over.”

“Let me guess, little bit of jazz ? Elevator music ?”

“You know what, I'm almost tempted to put on dubstep now.”

“Dubstep ? Are you for real ? You have dubstep vinyl ? That's it, I'm firing you.”

Eliott rifles through his collection.

“Well hang up then. I'll have a nice little dubstep party on my own.”
Lallemant sighs.

“Ok, you win. Dubstep sounds better than nothing, where I'm at. I've been so bored ever since they shut down the library. Did you know one inmate tried to shove a book down another's throat? Anyway. Go ahead and break my eardrums if you must. I am at your mercy.”

“Really now? You're in luck, I'm not in a sadistic mood. Dubstep after weeks of nothing, that would be barbaric. No, let's start with something classic, nice and smooth.”

The song he finds is...well, it's difficult, really. But it feels fitting.

He turns the volume down before putting the record in place, starts it spinning and then ever so carefully, drops the needle.

There is a crackle and then the sound is velvet.

“I ain't got no home, ain't got no shoes
Ain't got no money, ain't got no class
Ain't got no skirts, ain't got no sweater
Ain't got no perfume, ain't got no bed
Ain't got no man.”

Halfway through the song, it strikes him that maybe the lyrics weren't the most appropriate. But the song still gives him such strength, and this is something he wanted to share.

“Hey, what have I got?
Why am I alive, anyway?
Yeah, what have I got
Nobody can take away?”

Besides, it's not so much the lyrics as the way Nina sings, right through her pain. It's not a shallow 'chin up and smile' type of message, it's an experience. This record is a live recording, slower than the studio edition, darker too, but to him, more powerful. He feels like the song captures an exact moment he's been in, over and over again, the moment where despair turns to strength, turns to hope again. The eye of the needle.
“Got my hair, got my head
Got my brains, got my ears
Got my eyes, got my nose
Got my mouth, I got my smile.”

It's timeless. Maybe he should have picked something more romantic, a little less solitary but he can't afford to be that obvious right now.

“I've got life, I've got my freedom
I've got life
I've got the life
And I'm going to keep it
I've got the life.”

He can't help but cringe a little at the freedom line. Maybe that was stupid. But it's still true. He feels so alive today.

“Wow.” Lallemant says when it's done. “That was really fucking nice.”

“I'm sorry about the freedom line. I realized that was...too late. But yeah, that song helped me through a lot of dark shit”. When I was recovering from trying to kill myself, he doesn't say.

“Life, huh.”

“I liked life today. Wanted to celebrate that. Share a little maybe.” Eliott doesn't really know how to express what he's actually trying to say, because it's way too much for where they're at.

“Thank you. I...uh. Needed that. The survival thing is...” Lallemant isn't any more coherent. He pauses, then - “It's not the freedom line I took issue with. Ain't got no class, really?”

Eliott laughs, grateful for the out.

“I can see your narcissism is alive and kicking today.”
“Yeah, sure. Fuck, I missed music. Used to play you know. Piano.”

“Were you any good ?”

“Pretty damn good, actually. Went to the conservatory and all. But hmm….haven't played in ages. The type of life I lead isn't really...well, you know.”

“Yeah.”

Oh, he recognizes exactly the type of longing in his voice. It's what he feels every time he looks at a paintbrush. God, if they needed any more things to bond over.

Eliott plays a few more songs instead, and tries to let go of putting caps on what he's allowing himself to feel. He lights a cigarette and blows circles of smoke above him in the empty space. He lets it flow through him, how small and lonely he feels, how powerless. The yearning inside his chest that makes him feel cavernous, hollowed out. All the empty space, in which foolish hopes and half baked fantasies can lurk, immense, crushing. And he welcomes it all. This is life. He feels it and he doesn't allow it to unsettle him. Through it all he keeps his phone close to his ear, and he can hear Lallemant.

Humming.

Eliott isn't sure he's aware he can hear him, but it's so sweet. Like balm on all his wounds. Terrifying criminal, sure, sure. But for Eliott, he's sweet. And that's...wow.

Then, when emotions are more settled, they talk, for hours. It edges back and forth between infuriatingly cryptic, titillating, and strangely comfortable. Like them . It starts feeling less and less like work. It hasn't really felt like work in a while, but now the last sliver of pretense is gone.

What it feels like, instead, is that first time hanging out with your crush, and you both know you like each other but it’s too soon to speak about it, so you just talk about random shit, and it’s so light and so heavy at the same time. The minutes tick by and neither of them can bring themselves to end the call. Lallemant gets quieter - as if talking is becoming difficult for him, but he doesn’t want to hang up. So Eliott just rambles. He talks about random stupid shit, like his regular spontaneous urges to repaint his office wall that he never quite puts in action but has him stapling pots of paint in the back of his closet. He talks about Alexia, wondering if she is actually going to make a move on Lucille now after all her jokes because he loves her but she doesn't give a shit about anything sometimes. He talks about the stuff he's going to have to buy because he doesn't even want any of what he shared with his ex. He confesses he's never actually lived on his own because he moved from home to a flat share in college to a couple's apartment and he's afraid of the empty space.
He pours his heart out, again, because part of him wants to somehow make Lallemant feel part of his life. And because he wants to let Lallemant know that he values this newfound openness that they have. That he can open up safely, whenever he feels ready.

It's getting too late for that now. But the way Lallemant says goodnight? Soft and breathy and almost tender? It's almost as good. Like he's earned it. And that wrecks him.

LUNDI 09:12

He wakes up and he sees a message.

*There's trouble, can't call for a while.*

Well fuck. What is he going to do now?

MARDI 23:44

He tells himself it's fine. He knew this was bound to happen. It might not mean anything. Lallemant probably needs to lay low.
He tries to distract himself. Sorts through his magazine pile, ends up shredding half of them into little pieces. Goes through his boxes, makes a pile for Alexia to donate to her second hand shops. Goes running again, until he's exhausted.

And yet. He can't help his worries from spinning out of control. What the fuck does trouble mean? Is someone after Lallemant? And he can't do anything about it. Just wait.

And the rest of him is just buzzing with anxiety at the thought of it being an excuse - maybe he pushed too much, too fast, him with all his feelings, his corny music, his over eagerness, and fuck - why is he like this -

Without the high, the expectation and the excitement of their daily calls, he's forced to face the facts.

He’s always wanted to fall in love. With love, with someone, with life. Truly, madly, deeply. And even though he likes the impulses it gives him, the courage and the freedom, he's still terrified of the thing itself, of its lure, of his own reactions. The last time he tried, it ate up his head, and ever since he's kept to middling feelings. And now he's hung up on a man he might mean nothing to and he has no way of knowing for sure. God, he hates the uncertainty.

That's the truth.

JEUDI 23:24

The bass is pumping, the night is still young, and Eliott can't get out of his own head.

He's at a friend's party. He wasn't really eager to come...but sitting at home waiting for Lallemant's call all evening for the third time in a row would definitively verge into pathetic territory, so he
accepted his law school friend's invitation.

The dinner - overlong, full of rehashing memories and boasting about their current exploits, reminded Eliott why exactly he partied, drank and fucked his way through law school: so he wouldn't have to talk to people too much.

And well, he's tried to remain discreet about his situation. But they've all read the newspaper, and they love this sort of scandal. All the lawyers in Paris must have read it by now. And these people know he just broke up, they can put the puzzle together. He can't avoid the jokes. The least bad of them are about him having his midlife crisis early. Then there's some graphic, gross ones about Lucille being frigid or not - is that supposed to be supportive? Then there are the ones about sex in prison that are definitely veering into homophobic territory but you know, chill, dude, it's just a joke, we don't care you like taking it up the ass.

Why the fuck is he even doing this to himself.

Ah yes, a distraction.

Now they've turned on the music and turned the lights red, low and strobing. The pristine condo apartment has been flooded by people Eliott doesn't know.

He's been sitting on the couch for a while, wondering what he's doing there or why he's even still friends with these people in the first place. Meanwhile they start sniffing rails off the glass table, surrounded by college girls in miniskirts, their voices growing louder and less coherent as the evening passes.

He feels restless, vibrating at a higher speed than his body, but with nowhere to direct it, strangely dislocated. It's a phantom impression of his worst highs, and he doesn't like it.

A man crashes next to him and beams at him. It takes a moment for Eliott to remember his name... Friend of a friend, tried to hit on him once before learning he was with someone. Definitely laughed at that dropping the soap joke, so not much of a spine. Now he looks at Eliott like getting into his pants is his sole ambition in life.

“Hey, I heard you broke up with your girlfriend, is that true?”

Eliott nods slowly.
“Need some help feeling better?”

Eliott looks at the man next to him. Damien, it's coming back to him now. He's attractive, for sure. Blond, broad shoulders, warm hazel eyes. He won't lie, he would be a good candidate to work out some of his frustrations. He seems willing and sober enough, and maybe it would help him keep him grounded. Work out extra energy, so he can focus on his case. Stop being so fucking desperate for a man he can't have. And part of him, asleep for so long but still there - thrives on being wanted. Lucille had been regarding their intimate time more as a duty than anything else the last few years.

Damien inches closer.

"Fuck, you're so hot."

Not the most imaginative line, really. But something keeps Eliott frozen in place, and somehow that must read as approval, as Damien leans forward and closes the gap between them, pressing his lips onto Eliott's.

Eliott reciprocates with lukewarm enthusiasm - it's his first reflex, he loves kissing, he missed kissing. But this is about as appealing as drinking salty water when thirsty.

Then Damien snakes a hand around his waist, draws him closer, mumbles something about how hot and sexy he is. Eliott is floating above his own body. This is something he can have, that is within his grasp. Maybe this is what he needs, skin on skin, a moment of tangible connection, instead of chasing chimeras. Even if this is nothing like what he truly wants.

Blue eyes, sharp cheekbones, clever hands, a voice he can't banish from his mind, his every fucking waking minute.

He feels how worked up he is, the tension that needs to get released, but it's stuck, he can't express it right now, in those wet, sloppy half hearted kisses and blind groping. It's wrong, wrong, wrong. But this is how he used to cope, a long time ago. A familiar fucking pattern.

His secret phone vibrates in his pocket.

It's an electric jolt to his system.

He shakes off the haze, tears himself free and jumps to his feet. He doesn't even take the time to give excuses or look back, he just answers the call as he walks out of the room.
“Hey.”

The sound of that voice sends a thrill along his spine. It's ingrained now. A pavlovian reflex. Like coming back from the dead.

“Hey.”

“That sounds loud, where you are. I can call back later.” God, the sound of that voice. Like oxygen on the moon. He would crawl on glass for miles not to stop hearing it.

“No! Please don't hang up. I was just leaving.”

He's rushing through the apartment, grabs his coat, and leaves without saying goodbye to anyone. He feels nothing but relief as he leaves, away from the pretense and the inane small talk and the mediocre flirting.

He's in the street and considering calling a taxi - he could maybe catch the last metro but that would imply hanging up and the thought of that is insupportable - when he sees the night bus approach. He makes the decision to sprint towards the stop in a second. The muggy air of the bus hits his face as he jumps in at the last second before the doors close.

He doesn't even consider the line until he's aboard - he’s damn lucky one stop on the itinerary will drop him off a few streets away from his office instead of in any random opposite direction.

The bus is quite full, but he still manages to find an empty seat. Lallemant is, what else, laughing at him as he waits for him to talk.

“It's very nice of you to call.” Eliott throws at him, not able entirely to keep his voice from being rueful.

“I'm sorry, there's been some trouble and I couldn't risk them finding my phone. But I would have tried anyway if I knew it got you so worked up.”

“I just had to run, asshole.”
“Really now.”

His voice is so sly and cocksure, it annoys Eliott.

“And I had to leave a guy at the party.”

“A guy.”

“Yeah, he's been into me forever, and tonight I thought, why not? It's not like I have a lot of other prospects at the moment.”

“Really now. How good for you. Did he make you feel good?”

“Oh yeah, great.” Eliott tries to keep his voice nonchalant, like it isn't a big deal.

Lallemant laughs.

“Great? Wow, the enthusiasm... You know, when I get busy with someone...they don't leave in the middle to take a phone call.” He sounds so smug.

“How do you know I wasn't done?”

“Nah. You're way too high strung right now. I don't think you sound like that when you're fucked out.”

Eliott almost drops the phone.

“Fuck, I'm on the bus, you can't talk like that!”

“Oh, you mean you're in public right now? You mean I can say anything I want to you and you can't say anything back?”
“I can still talk.”

“Oh, but not the kind of thing I feel like talking about right now. You'd get thrown off the bus.”

“You…” Eliott's words get stuck in his throat. Are they actually going there? Right now? Fuck.

“I, however, am all alone in my cell. My roommate had, ah...other engagements. So I can talk about whatever I want. I missed you, you know. Missed our little talks.”

Eliott swallows and looks around furtively. The bus is full of partiers and old drunks. Not too attentive, but also more imprevisible. The old man sitting in front of him has a gaunt, cinematic face, lost in his own world, head hanging half back, rusted nail on a thread around his neck. Around him, young women with faces covered in silvered glitter, wild hair full of twigs and leaves, limbs dirty with mud and dust, tongues colored red from wine, hang on to each other, giggling, attacking each other with half-coherent sentences. A small, shrunken old woman in a translucent raincoat is looking out of the window, her face bitter with loss and despair, staring out of the window as if in deep conversation with herself with her own rage at the world. In the back, a full platoon of drunk college students, lost in their own world of sweaty, chemically-induced bonding.

Eliott feels like he’s stepped into a liminal dimension. Is being drunk by empathy a thing? He’s just had one beer.

“So, you wanted to be kissed tonight, huh.”

Lallemand’s never been so direct before. He sounds jealous, covetous, possessive. His voice like a red hot brand in the night, a line to be crossed. Brings Eliott back to his body, heavy, like waterlogged. He shifts in his seat.

He shouldn't. He really shouldn't. The whole situation is just incredibly uncomfortable. But the thought of hanging up now is unbearable. He thinks of talking about the case to cool things down, but that seems completely ridiculous now. He can't even think straight. They've been flirting for so long it feels like years, and tonight it has him climbing up the walls. He needs something that cuts through his anxieties. Something more than the endless tease. He needs something he can sink his teeth in. He needs something that hits true, that makes it real.

“I...fuck.” He covers his face with his one free hand and leans forward, trying to hide a little bit.
“Yes.”

“So, tell me, before I interrupted you, were you planning on taking that guy home? Or just a quickie in the bathroom?”

“What? Neither. He wasn't…” *He wasn't you*, Eliott almost says. “...a good kisser.”

“So you do have standards. Good to know.”

“Well I don't know about that. Cause I wouldn't be speaking to you if I had.”

Lallemant laughs, low and happy. Eliott feels a shiver run along his back. He's such a mess for this man.

“That's the most backhanded declaration of interest I have ever heard.”

Eliott gulps. It's definitely one, though. Unmistakably one.

“Careful there, you're showing your cards. Might end up thinking you *like* me. I mean, I understand it’s easy to get mixed up with our characters...” Lallemant continues.

Well, that's the understatement of the century.

He watches the empty streets of Paris pass by behind the window. Around him, the passengers are swaying to a tune he can’t hear, surreal background on the edge of his vision. His ears are still buzzing with the aftershock of the party bass. And his patience is fizzling out.

“Feelings talk? Sorry, I’m falling asleep.” Eliott wants him to get to the fucking point for once.

“Ah, sorry. Let me be blunt then. Might end up thinking you want me. Might end up thinking I was the one you wanted to take home tonight.”
“Hmm...maybe.”

“Wow, you're not gonna make this easy on me, are you ?”

“I'm in the bus. You wanted to talk. So you talk.”

He hears Lallemant inhale.

“How long has it been since you've been kissed properly?”

Eliott thinks. The truth is, he can't remember. He and Lucille were good at some point but to be fair...she generally expected him to do most of the work. And he hadn't felt like it in a long time.

“I don't remember.”

“You're starving, aren't you.”

He is. God. And he'd gotten so good at ignoring it until now.

“Fuck, yeah, I am.” He admits.

“I would kiss you right.”

No corny food talk. Nobody is talking about parallel universes. It’s implicit but it’s slipping. Eliott wraps his arms around himself.

“Tell me how.”

“We'd be in a beautiful place. And you wouldn't give a shit. I'd give you reasons to not look at anything but me.” He pauses. “I'd tease you. Watch you. See it in your eyes first, how much you wanted me. I'd make you laugh, get you closer and closer until it would feel natural. Find ways to
kiss you before I actually do, with a look, with a touch, with my words. Because good kissing isn’t just about lips, it’s about everything.”

Eliott feels an inaudible bass pound in his bones. He knows why he got his law degree now. He is going to sue this motherfucker. Making all this fuss about how he’s gonna talk dirty and then ends up waxing lyrical about the buildup to a kiss?

Is he trying to beat Eliott at his own game?

Lame, and lame how much it’s working. Keying him up to eleven over crumbs. He’s on the very cusp of jumping from the bus and giving him a piece of his mind in the most crude way possible.

“And I would drag it out, make you all huffy and worked up, right until you'd be this close to pushing me against a wall and having your way with me yourself.”

Silence.

“And ?”

Lallemant laughs, mischievous.

“Yeah, you'd like that I, wouldn't you? You'd get so mad. You'd love every single minute of it.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not yet. We haven't kissed yet, remember ? I would make you earn it. Make you show me how willing you are.”

Eliott can feel his cheeks getting more heated by the second.

“Yeah, okay.”
“Good. Cause once I start kissing you I don't think I will have any patience left.”

The drop of any pretense of conditionality goes straight to his belly and lights a fire, of the type he won't be able to contain much longer.

Grammatical foreplay. Damien and his “You're so hot and sexy” really didn't ever stand a chance. He’s so incoherent and it still hits the mark. It’s a fucking miracle. Then again, he did volunteer himself for getting played in this way.

“Are you still with me?”

Eliott coughs. “Yeah.”

“You're not going to faint on me when I do finally kiss you, are you?”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, maybe we'll have to hold hands first, take it easy, maybe play footsie, have you home by 9, maybe we'll get to second base in a few months?”

That's it. Eliott jolts up and presses the stop button. He feels as drunk as anyone else on the bus.

“I'm getting off the bus, right now.”

“Oh, but you are mad, aren't you?”

He pushes past the anonymous bodies and the drunken revelers, time distorted, the path to the door an adventure in itself. But just as he finally steps into the street, filthy words flooding his brain and coming to the tip of his tongue, and the bus doors close behind him, just as his feet hit the pavement, Lallemant whispers into the phone

“Shit, someone is coming.”
And hangs up.

Eliott stares at his phone, brutally yanked out of his trancelike state of mind.

It’s already too late when he turns.

Eliott watches the bus leave. He's never felt this frustrated in his life. His first reflex is to think that Lallemant did this on purpose to rile him up. Eliott wants to call him back right away to get back at him.

But then his rational brain kicks in and reminds him of the risks, the more likely reasons for this to have happened. Like, for instance, him calling from a fucking prison cell.

*Down, boy.*

So he walks home, letting the cold wash over him, trying not to think about the phone getting found, Lallemant not being able to call him anymore or even worse, getting thrown into solitary confinement or otherwise punished. He jumped out five stops too early, so he's got quite a way to go, but hopefully the fresh air will do him some good.

As he makes his way through the city at night, he soberes up and realises how screwed he is. Because this isn't about them getting each other off on the phone, even though, it's too late to deny, he really wants that to happen at some point.

It’s how dependent he's become on this. His developing feelings for a man who might end up spending 20 years behind bars, and who either doesn’t care or has a plan to get out that is so illegal and dangerous it would probably either kill him or force him to disappear forever. And that's if the monstrous things in his past don't destroy them both first. How fast they've developed a connection even though they will probably never be able to get to know each other in real life. They'll never get to hold each other through the night or wake up together, never get to learn each other's tastes and little quirks or bicker about routine things or plan for the future together. The most they'll ever get is those brief flashes of playfulness, understanding and stolen pleasure in the dark, before it inevitably turns tragic.

And god, it's going to hurt when it does.
Eliott knows this.

He still can't turn away.

…

It's only a block away from his office when he realises he's being followed.

His heart jumps into his throat. And this time, he can't say it's imaginary, because there is no one else in the street, and it's the third time he's turned his head and seen the man behind him.

Now he can actually hear his footsteps. The man is hulking, a walking mountain. And he's closing in on Eliott.

He thinks of the taser Emma is going to bring him tomorrow. Fuck, the irony if anything were to happen right now.

He starts walking faster, and so does the man. Starts thinking about his father's words. People even I can't protect you from.

He's annoyed at himself for letting himself be so vulnerable. Of choosing words as his weapons at the expense of anything else.

He starts walking faster, and so does the man. He looks around. The street is completely empty, only a few windows still lit up. Who would come down if he yelled for help?

He grabs his phone, and pretends to make a call. In fact, he pretends to call Lucas, as his words echo in Eliott's brain. I will make them remember why they fear me. Maybe this man knows the name. Maybe it will be enough to keep him away.
“Hello, baby, it's me. I'm almost home.”

He pauses, imagines a time for Lucas to respond. What he would answer. It comes to him almost naturally by now.

“I know, but I couldn't wait to hear your voice again.”

“Don't tease me just yet, Lucas.” He says out loud. “Not where I can't do anything about it.” “You're lucky you're in prison.” then he adds, to make it as unambiguous as possible. “God forbid the great Lucas Lallemant doesn't get what he wants right away.”

Yes I am flirting and exchanging sweet dirty nothings on the phone with a terrifying criminal at night in the middle of the street. So keep walking, creep, Eliott thinks, if you know what's good for you.

He tries to sound giddy instead of terrified, laughs and flirts into the empty air, puts on a show all on his own, says things he would never actually say. He doesn't know if he's actually doing something useful or just trying to distract himself so he doesn't run away in panic.

He finally, finally reaches his office building, and, hands trembling, opens the door with the electronic key, and closes it behind him as fast as he can.

The man who was following him reaches the building, and stops in front of the glass door.

He stands there, and just stares at him, like a page of his nightmares come to life.

As his dead eyes glare at him through the glass as if it's going to shatter under the weight of his gaze, Eliott recognizes the man and his stomach threatens to upturn itself in fear.

He's older but just as bulgy and terrifying as in Eliott's memories.

He's seen this man before. He was one of those people who visited his father late at night in suspicious circumstances, he's sure of it, even if he can't remember when, how or why.
Eliott tries to stare the man down, the phone glued to his ear, as his heart is hammering so hard it feels like it's about to crawl out of his mouth. The glass feels like such a flimsy barrier.

But he thinks of Lucas, tries to channel just a sliver of the ferocity he's sensed under the man's charming facade, I *threw myself at men three times my size*, and he stands there and tries not to flinch.

And stands there, because it's becoming crucial, at this very instant, that they know that he doesn't scare that easy, and he imagines a column of smoke and flame at his back.

And stands there, until the man finally relents and leaves, a last murderous, unblinking gaze in his direction.

Eliott stumbles into the elevator, shaking, and doesn't let himself break down until he is in his office, door triple locked behind him. That's when he slides to the floor, and as the adrenaline rush comes down, he feels as if the world has been tilted sideways.

It's finally crashing down on him, the weight of what he's done.

He's always taken it for granted, that he could just go wherever he wanted, do whatever he wanted. But that's not the case anymore. He's publicly declared his allegiance and with it, taken a step into the world of shadows.

Looks like the shadows had been waiting for him all along.
He can't sleep. He feels like he's been thrown into the tumble drier, exhausted but still too much adrenaline in his system to tap out. He's checked the locks on all the doors and windows, pushed a cupboard in front of the door for good measure, and made himself a cup of warm milk, and yet.

He can't stop thinking about the fact that the stalker knows where he lives. He repeats to himself that he is in a building full of paranoid rich people with cameras and state of the art security systems everywhere, but his brain won't let up.

His phone rings. He picks up immediately and cradles it to his ear like a lifeline.

“I'm so sorry, Lallemant starts without any greeting, I forgot the guard was doing additional rounds after the trouble we've had.”

“But you're okay ?”

“Yeah, and he didn't find the phone, so we're good.”

“Thank god.” Eliott whispers, and lets out a shaky breath.

“Are you ok ?”

“No. I walked home and...there was this dude following me. Real shady. I remember him from a late night visit to my dad.”

Lallemant swears on the other side of the phone.

“Fuck. Fuck ! Didn't think they'd move so fast. Fuck ! I’m so fucking stupid. But you ! Going out like that so late, what the fuck were you thinking ! ...Listen, I'm going to give you a number, okay ? And I want you to call it if you're ever in trouble.”
Eliott dutifully writes it down.

“My own personal cavalry, huh.”

“I’m not kidding. Please. I would never forgive myself for dragging you into this if anything happened to you. Promise you will call them.”

“You didn't drag me anywhere. And I'm not helpless, you know.”

“That's not the point. Those guys, they just don't care about the damage they inflict. You've got to be more careful now, I...you can't just walk out alone like that, in the street, in the middle of the night...If one of them decides to send a message or something...and they know you're important now, and I can't…” He sounds like he's two seconds from losing it.

“Hey, hey, it's okay.” Eliott cuts through the rambling. Lallemant sounds so scared for him, it almost puts his own fright to the side. “I got a friend bringing me a taser tomorrow.”

“And the place you're staying in, is it safe?”

“Extra safe. Guardian, cameras, the works. But I'll get a few extra locks and an alarm installed just in case. And I will take my car next time.”

Lallemant breathes.

“Hey, come on, worst case scenario, you'll just get a cheaper lawyer, right? I mean, now that we've made some noise, anyone could do my job…”

“Don't fucking say that, what the hell. That's not fucking funny.” He sounds angry.

“Oh come on, it was a joke.”

“Well, I'm serious. I need you with me, not some random hack.”
“Really? I'm sure you have backup plans.”

“I don't give a shit about….” Then he catches himself, course corrects. “Fuck I never should have hired you in the first place. You're bad for my plans. You're too fucking distracting. I can't stop thinking about you.”

It's the closest thing he's gotten to a confession, and it's expressed as a regret, and the rawness of it punches him right in the gut.

“Well maybe I shouldn't have accepted. My life would have been simpler for sure. Maybe I should have done what my father asked and sent you to rot and go back to my girlfriend and my easy life. Maybe I should have. But you know what? I didn't want to and I still don't. I'm not fucking sorry, even though you drive me up the fucking wall.”

Maybe they do both have a death wish - but that's never what their connection was ever based on.

No, that was the other thing. The thing they can claim by claiming each other.

But he can't do it alone.

There is silence on the other side. They’ve never been this serious. Eliott half-expects to get his heart crushed. He’s ready to beg, actually.

“I'm not sorry either.”

Relief floods him like a hurricane, taking everything along with it in its wake. Torrential, inescapable.

The silence stretches out, in hitching breaths. Where do they go now?

Put everything on the table. He's told him he believed, that he would wait, that he would send food if he could, music, conversation, jokes. Half-confessions. There's really one thing left to put on the
table, right now. A way to say you're not just good, you're a blessing to me. I want to hold you close, right where no fear can survive.

“Hey, Lucas?” He rolls his tongue over the name, intimate, precious.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to hear how our first date would end?”

He laughs again. That's good. The mood shifts. Time to banish fear.

“Let me guess, you would walk me home like a gentleman.”

“No.”

Eliott lies back in the comfort of the dark, all discomfort from the earlier bus ride gone, and focuses all his attention of his voice. Tries to make it inviting, soft, caressing even. To make it say what he cannot demonstrate otherwise.

“No?”

“No, you see, it would be raining outside, so we would be stuck. I mean, going back out through that rusted ladder in the dark, and in the rain? Bad idea. So we would have no choice. We would have to stay inside.”

“Oh yeah, really?”

For a moment, Eliott thinks about waxing poetic over the candles and the painted angel watching over them and the noise of raindrops on the window panes just to get back at him for the bus. But he's tired of waiting. Somehow now the nebulous threats surrounding them seem so much more real, and what they have so much more fragile. Likely they are running out of time and they don't even know it.
It makes him want to hold on tight, to get as close as he can even though it can only be through a phone or in a fucking parallel universe.

So yeah. They're going there, right now.

“Yeah, really. And...so we would have talked yeah ? All evening. But then at some point we would be done with talking, and I would have one last question.”

“Hmm.”

“Can I kiss you ?”

“Yes. I would say yes.” His whisper is almost inaudible, all trace of earlier cockiness vanished.

He can see it if he closes his eyes. Lucas’ profile in the flickering golden light, sharp angles and smooth planes, his pupils so wide he could drown in them, the divot of shadows between his opening lips as Eliott would move ever closer.

Words are going to fail him. There is no way to retranscribe what an experience like this should be like.

But he still has to try. To reach beyond the gap that separates them.

“So we kiss. I'm kissing you now. Fuck, your lips are so soft. You taste so good.”

He closes his eyes, lets himself get lost in the fantasy.

“You’d open up for me and I’d push my tongue into your mouth, and play with your bottom lip between my teeth and...and I'd let you explore, too. Until I figure it out, what you like the most, what makes you just melt against me. I’d have my hand in your hair and hold you in place and you’d hold on to me too and we'd completely lose track of time.”

“Kissing, again ? Is that a fetish of yours or...”
“Shh, baby, no more jokes. It would be so good.” The pet name slips out so naturally.

He's quiet, for a time that drags on forever. And then, it's like he relents.

“Yeah. It would be.”

There it is. He can hear the pain in that voice, the need that hides behind the fierceness, the sheer hunger for contact, for the simple feeling of skin on skin.

Fuck, this hurts.

He puts his own hand on his belly, rucking up his shirt, rubbing his fingers along his skin right under his navel, playing with the first few hairs of his happy trail.

“You'd be so good, baby. We'd get rid of our shirts and then I would go looking for your most sensitive spots with my tongue and lips. The lobe of your ear, under your jaw, your neck, your - I'd leave marks all over you.”

He hears a soft moan on the other side and stops in his tracks. It turns his whole skin into a livewire. He's getting goosebumps.

“Please, don't stop.” Lucas’s voice sounds so wrecked already. He expected the fire, but this spectral tenderness, impossible and haunting, it's killing him.

“Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you? Wearing my marks for everyone to see?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Yeah, I'd mark you up real good. And then... ask you to come closer and you'd crawl into my lap wouldn’t you, so fucking desperate.” He says, as if he wouldn't be the exact same. “And you'd - I would kiss your chest, up and down, all over, play with your nipples, pinch and lick and kiss and bite at them, until they're all red and wet and hard -”
Lucas is panting into the phone.

“Are you touching yourself, baby?”

There's a muffled noise, then -

“I'm sorry, I..it's been so long, please - “

“Good. If I can't, somebody has to. So be real good to yourself, for me, okay?”

“Okay, yes, please, Eliott, don't stop, please.” He sounds so needy, and that discovery thrills Eliott to the breaking point.

He slips his own hand under the elastic of his sweatpants. Drags his fingers along his hardening shaft, root to tip, exhales.

“What do you like, sweetheart?”

“Anything, please, I just want you.”

“Alright. So you're pressing against me and I can feel it, how hard you are, how much you need me. So we're getting rid of our pants, and turns out I brought everything we need.”

“I knew you were - ah - planning it, the rain has got nothing -”

“Shh, it's my story.”

Lucas laughs between two loud breaths. It's the sweetest sound in the universe.
“You're all naked now, all mine. God, you're beautiful. I'm so hard for you, and you're...fuck, you're dripping already, making a mess, so I'm taking you in my hand, playing with your slit, and then taking us both and you're panting in my mouth and I'm jerking us both off and you, you're telling me you want more - “

Lucas moans into his ear, loud and then muffled, he hears a swear -

“Fuck, they're going to hear, I can't…”

“Keep quiet, then. Let me make the noise. Put your fingers in your mouth, baby.”

“Mmmh, okay”

He closes his hand around his own dick then, gives himself a few sharp strokes upwards, hissing at his own forcefulness before settling into a gentler rhythm, feeling the heat spread in his veins like molten gold, the rising pleasure making it difficult to focus on the words, but he has to.

“You're so fucking desperate for me, and I'm going to give it to you so damn good, baby.”

He hears a muffled noise and sucking sounds. Fuck, he wishes he could swallow those sounds with his own mouth right now.

“I’m following the curve of your spine with my hands, every little edge and muscle, wanna give you goosebumps, map you out, make you mine - and then I keep going, until I’m holding your ass in my hands, and spreading you for me, and I'm losing it because you're going at my neck with your teeth, you're sucking bruises into my skin, you're straight up biting, and it feels so good…”

“Because you're mine.” Lucas whispers. Of course he can't keep himself from speaking for long.

“Yes, yes I am. I’m all yours, baby. Ah, fuck…Lucas…” He lets himself moan into the phone, he's not usually so loud but he wants Lucas to hear him as he palms himself the way he likes it, hips rocking up of their own accord.

“I'm slicking my fingers now...teasing at you...rubbing...and then I push one in..fuck you'd be so
told, wouldn't you.”

“Yes, fuck, it's been so long. Fuck, wish you were touching me now.” Lucas whimpers.

“Oh, baby, I'd make you feel so good, so good. And I'm opening you up on my fingers now, nice and slow, feeling you, stroking you from the inside, hitting all the right places, making you lose your mind, until you're all loose and ready, three fingers at least, and god the noises you'd make…begging me to take you…”

“Fuck, Eliott…I need you so bad…Need you inside me..”

God, that voice. Needy and wanton like he hadn't even dared dreaming about, and suddenly the empty space around him feels unbearable, so he turns around, puts the phone on speaker and lays it on the pillow. And then he grinds down onto the leather of the couch, bracing himself on one hand, the foreign contact a blessed relief, and he growls into the phone.

“Fuck yes, that's where I belong, Lucas...hold you up and fuck, you'd sink onto my cock like a dream...so hot and tight…so easy…”

He twists his wrist to jerk himself off the way he likes but fuck, it's not enough, and their moans filling the room together are the only thing that keeps him going, and the thought of that velvet heat around him, and Lucas's face lost in bliss…

“I'd give you the ride of your life...bounce you on my cock until you'd see stars...make you take me so deep you forget your own name, make you fucking scream…”

“Yes, fuck, yes, please, Eliott” Lucas moans. “Eliott, Eliott, ah, fuck.”

He sounds high as a kite, and Eliott tries to hang on to their fantasy, but what he sees now is Lucas in his bunk, writhing in his sheets, desperate and alone, clinging to Eliott's voice as he gets himself off. And the thought of that, along with being stuck here, so close yet so far away, not being able to touch him, makes him feel like he's losing it.

And then Lucas moans in a broken voice, going through Eliott like a bolt of lightning and turning his voice upside down -
“Eliott, I need you so bad - I’m getting out of here. Fuck, I’m getting out of here.”

“Promise me.” Oh god, what he would give.

“Fuck parallel universes” Lucas answers, words slurry as if he’s struggling to hold on to lucidity, rage poking out from under the desperation. “I’m getting out and then I’m coming for you. I don’t...don’t care who stands in our way.”

“I’ll be waiting for you”

“Gonna lock you up in a hotel room, fuck you on every available surface.” He sounds half-feral, and the brutal switching of the fantasy leaves Eliott breathless. “Not let you out for a week. Fuck, a month.”

Eliott bites down on his lip so hard he draws blood, the pressure building at the base of his spine unbearable, grinding down as he fucks his fist, fast and rough like a man possessed. Thinks of them claiming each other like that, pure abandon, nothing else mattering anymore of keeping each other from the world. Of being owned and kept and returning the favor, of finding someone just as ferocious and devoted as he wants, needs to be.


“Fuck, Eliott, I’m coming” Lucas gasps into his ear and Eliott follows shortly after, coming so hard his consciousness whites out, a rough merciless ecstasy that overtakes him for a heavenly minute before spitting him out crumbled on the couch, face pressed onto his phone and lying in a little puddle of his own come.

“Lucas.” he pleads into the phone, and fuck, the come down is so fast and awful as it strikes him how alone he is, everything that separates them. In that moment he’d sell his soul to be able to crawl into his phone and come out on the other side, cover Lucas with his body, cling on to him, kiss him into oblivion and never let go.

But he can't.
“I’m so sorry.” Lucas whispers back.

And he hangs up.

VENDREDI 10:32

“Hey boss ? You alive under there ?”

Eliott pretends to be asleep. Right this minute, he hates the world.

But Alexia is persistent.

“Hey so, you’ll never guess who I met the other day when I was getting out of spin class, that guy you did that project with….did you know he has a kid now ? Yeah, and he looks like your average
suburban dad. Can you imagine, that guy? The guy who was convincing everyone to pose for his butt calendar so they could fund their trip to…

Yeah no, that’s not something he wants to hear about. At all. Which is probably why she’s talking about it.

He emerges and blinks, eyes bleary.

She sees him and her face immediately changes, going from amusement to concern.

“Oh no, what’s wrong, darling?”

He wants to say something blasé and ironic and understated about how his workload is killing him, but what comes out instead is,

“I need to save him, Alexia. But he won’t let me.”

Her face falls even further.

“We get closer all the time and he still won’t let me do my job. Won’t tell me his plan, which means I won’t like it, which means it’s probably extremely dangerous. Best case scenario, he escapes and vanishes without a trace. Worst...fuck everything about this is the worst. Why am I like this, Alexia?” He rubs his hand over his face. The whiplash is killing him. “And I talked to him almost every day this week, and I can hear that he hates prison, who wouldn’t, but he pretends he’s fine, that he’s got everything under control but...I mean he obviously planned to be there but why? And why won’t he let me try to get him off easy? Their case is not that solid, I could rip it to shreds but he doesn’t want me to. He wants us to make a big fuss. He doesn’t give a shit about what happens to him, I think, and I’m there...I’m supposed to help him? I don’t even know what the consequences are going to be? What if I’m helping him getting himself into an even worse mess? I don’t want to do that? And I know there’s my father but fuck...he doesn’t deserve anyone ruining their lives over him, I don’t care what he’s done. And...what if...he's actually a bad person and I'm being really stupid...and...”

Alexia interrupts him and wraps him into a big bear hug. He feels tears prickle to his eyes. Fuck.
“You got it bad for this guy, huh.”

He nods into her shoulder.

“I’m so fucked.”

“Well, I mean, you could have picked better if you wanted like the whole ‘unavailable, impossible to get’ thing. I don’t know...how about an airline pilot? Military or Navy guy? High end chef? Secretly a spy? Conservative politician? Even better, an astronaut.”

He laughs despite himself.

“Ah, that’s better. Oh, I know. How about this morning, we skip work, and we go to the zoo. Whenever I’m sad, I just go stare at a bunch of giraffes, and there, I’m all better. Or sloths. It’s simply impossible to feel bad while looking at a sloth.”

“I don’t know, Alexia, I’ve got so much work to do…”

“You know feeling depressed slows down your brain, don’t you? On the contrary, a shot of sloth to the brain, instant serotonin, helps with brain function. So really, it’s all part of the process. You come back, you’re instantly more productive, you see new connections, you’re one step closer to rescuing your man. Bam! Sloth magic.”

“That’s hard to argue with.”

“I know, I should have been a lawyer.”

Alexia gets up.
“Come on, caveman, freshen up, and let’s go slothing. You get it? It’s like sleuthing because it’s part of the investigation, but with sloths? I’m a genius right?” She frowns at him. “Why aren’t you getting up?”

“Alexia, um….we might need a new couch. Because this one, uhh...there’s a stain on it.”

She looks at him with wide eyes, raises her eyebrows to the sky as if she was going to say something, then bites her lip to prevent herself from laughing and looks away.

“Okay, I’m calling my second hand shop buddies to the rescue, then.”

He nods, relieved she isn’t saying anything.

And gets up to go get changed, wrapped in the blanket.

She bursts into laughter.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry, but what are you, fifteen? You didn’t even clean up after yourself, you filthy animal? We receive people here!! Brand new designer couch too! We can’t even remove the upholstery! I can’t believe you!”

“I’m sorry okay, I tried, but it was late and I’d just gotten stalked in the street by some creep I was pretty sure works for my dad, and then that happened, and I tried to clean up but I had other things on my mind, and I couldn’t find any cleaning products or clean clothes, okay?”

“Wow, dude. That is a lot of information to process all at once”

“I’m so sorry”

“I mean I love hearing about everyone’s sex life, you know me, but stalkers? Holy shit. It’s not sloths we’re going to need, it’s at least baby orangutans. And a giant milkshake.”

“That’s fair.”
“Yeah and we’re getting you cleaning wipes on the way, you nasty person. Yeesh, you’re lucky I’m so unprofessional.”

He gets up and shuffles to the bathroom, blanket tightly wrapped around his middle section, face red.

“Oh my god, that stain looks like Jesus! Do you think I could go viral with this online?”

He’s never hearing the end of this. Hopefully the sloths will do something very cute today and distract Alexia. And him.

He’d rather think of anything except how broken Lucas's voice sounded last night right before he hung up.

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**VENDREDI 21:32**

“There you go. Zap-a-bitch.” Emma says as she drops a box on his lap.

It's the long awaited taser. He gets it out of the box and fiddles with buttons until blue sparks appear.

“Now, I have to warn you, that thing isn't strictly legal, so don't wave it in people's faces, okay?”

Eliott nods, gravely.

“Also, we found your guy.”
“What? Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

“Well, we weren't sure. He's got one hell of a haircut, right out of a dystopian novel or something, it was fucking with the facial recognition software. But then he flipped it up for a second and we caught him. Blablbla. He's staying in a cheap hotel in the suburbs. He isn't doing much at the moment, so we're keeping a close eye on him, alternating. Got cameras on him and shit. If he lifts a pinky, we'll know.”

“Okay. Good.”

He doesn't know what to do with the information but well. At least, it is information, and he sorely needs that.

She pulls a bottle of vodka out of her bag.

“Wanna celebrate?”

She's a really bad influence. Thank god for his new and improved attitude.

He hesitates for a while. He has the sinking feeling that Lucas isn't going to call, tonight, and the thought of being alone tonight is unbearable. And if he does call...well, he can always call a taxi for Emma.

“Can I just let you get you drunk and live vicariously? I promise I won't do anything untoward.”

“Sadly” Emma says. “But okay.”

…

Half a bottle later of their respective drink - pineapple juice for Eliott - and the conversation has taken a very different turn.
“I’m just...with Alex I wonder sometimes if I’m just using him for his penis....”

“What ?”

“He’s a moron. I mean, no, he just pretends to be one. No, like we become morons when we are together. It’s just...I love him, the sex is good, he’s funny and we have fun together and we just fit you know ? But I’m not in loooove with him. Like butterflies in the belly, explosions, and shit. Sometimes I think, okay, time to get serious, you won’t find anything better....But I would hate to lose what we have ? It’s so comfy. Like we understand each other. I don’t know. I feel like I want to spend the rest of my life with him, but not as lovers ? It’s weird.”

“I get what you mean. I felt like that with Lucille a lot of the time before it all got fucked up.”

“Like, I have so much affection towards him. He’s my dude, you know ? But I don’t think I wanna be his girl. I don’t want to do this forever, like just hang out and smoke weed and do dumb shit.” She sighs and takes another long, long swig. “You know what I really...really hate is this idea that once you hit thirty you’re just supposed to stop...living and shit. It’s all babies and taxes and lawns. It’s so hetronorm...he-te-ro-norm...whatever. it’s not cool. I just want to live in a big house with all of my friends, and then love happens, but you have your base. And sometimes, threesomes.”

“That’s still not happening.”

“Ugh, you’re so egocentric. I wasn’t talking about you. We met you too late. You’re not fun anymore, you want the sappy fusional couple shit.”

Eliott snorts and takes a swig of pineapple juice.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s happening any time soon.”

“Oh shut up. Now that you’ve given up the ball and chain, you’re going to find real love any minute now. I just know it.”

“I had phone sex with my client yesterday. You know, the one that's in prison.”
Emma explodes into laughter so suddenly she snorts some of her drink and spills all over herself.

“Oh my god! You messy bitch! Why didn’t you start with that! Okay, I take it back. You win. Oh my god, you win everything. I mean, why? Why are you doing that to yourself? You know you can just quit if you hate your job right? How the fuck did that happen?” Her phone buzzes and she throws it away.

“That’s way too many questions.” Eliott says as he reclines back. This friendship really is mostly them laughing at each other for failing to be functional adults and seeing who’s going to manage to be the bigger mess.

“Was it good?”

“Hadn’t come that hard in years.”

“Wow, without even being in the same room? That's your soulmate right there.”

“Shut up.”

“I mean, that escalated way too fast.”

“Yeah, of course it would be too fast, coming from you, you've been banging the same dude for a decade and you're still pretending to just be friends.”

“Hey, I’m the drunk one, I should do the brutal honesty. Last week, you were still going on about how you were not gonna let you be fooled by this dude.”

“Yeah, well, I lied, because I knew you were going to make fun of me. I really like him, okay?”

Emma sighs dramatically.
“Well, that sounds like a headache. That's why I love talking to you. It always makes me feel less bad about my own problems.”

She lifts the bottle to take a swig, misses a little.

“My one true love.” she says mournfully. “Ugh, Eliott. I think I have an alcohol problem. But it's still less scary than love. Fuck.” She whimpers and lays back on the ground. “It's so scary being close to people, Eliott. Every time I let one close it...just wasn't worth it. I get so scared and insecure, it turns me into someone I hate. That's why it's chill with Alex I...can get away with not caring. But I...ugh.”

Eliott thinks of Lucas's wrecked voice, then, how much it had felt like coming home, for a second, before it was taken from him. And the possibility he won't ever get to hear it again.

“I know, it's scary” - it hurts to speak but he still has to say it - “but I still think it's worth it. Even when it seems like it is going to destroy your life, hell, even if it does. Shutting the door on that, on letting people close...you're not really alive. I'd rather take my chances. I think if we do we might end up being wrecks but it's still better than the alternative. Because that's hollow. That's no fucking way to live. Sometimes you just... have to put everything on the table.”

She lets the bottle slip.

“I wish I had a reason to be a wreck too, like that.”

“I'm sure you're going to find it.”

“Promise ?”

She looks so sad and young and lost all of a sudden.

“Yes.” Eliott whispers back. He feels like he's telling a fucked up bedtime story to an overgrown little girl.

It's sad. But it's still true. Life is like that. Full of doors to open, always more doors, even if what lies behind them is dangerous and probably bad for you. The point is - it doesn't stop. He doesn't know if
it's a blessing or a curse, but it beats standing still.

She falls asleep before he does, and he puts a pillow under her head, a blanket over her and takes the bottle and empties it into the sink.

He lies back down on his couch, staring at the ceiling, secret phone laid on his heart.

It doesn't ring, he knows it won't, and still he waits, like a silent vigil.

VENDREDI 23:34

He's startled from sleep by someone banging on the door loudly, then the noise of keys and a door being open. He grabs his taser in a panic and that's how Alexia finds him, sending blue sparks flying in the dark, before she turns the light on.

“Fucking hell, Eliott, it's just me. Couldn't reach you so I came here. You really need to turn on the news.”

He puts the taser down, half-registering her panicked tone as he looks for the TV remote.

“Alex called me when he couldn't reach Emma, he got some info from inside the police department and fuck, it's really bad…”

The first thing he sees when he finds the 24-7 news channel is the picture of a body bag. Flashing lights, police cars, and behind them, the dark waters of the Seine in the late afternoon light.

“He have received special information that, although the victim's identity is not yet known, he is
suspected to have been one of the perpetrators of the diamond bank robbery that happened earlier this month, as can be seen on this camera footage.”

They show, then, images that Eliott has already seen - Lucas Lallemand, unmistakable, walking out of the bank, accompanied by a man in a mask. Fuck.

“The police were able to recognize the man by his ankle tattoo of a bird, although the advanced state of decomposition since the body was found in the water, make any further identification difficult. However, all signs point to homicide. Our sources indicate that this case might be tied to mob related power struggles. More information to follow as the case updates.”

That's a lot of information for the press to get ahold of so fast after the discovery, he can't help but think.

Eliott mutes the TV.

“Fuck. What the fuck.”

“I'm so sorry, but from what Alex told me, it gets worse. Eliott...they're planning to pin the murder on Lallemand.”

“What ? But that's ludicrous. The man left him tied up, how could he have…”

“They've done an emergency autopsy. Fuck, Alex said he'd never seen them work so fast. The man was poisoned, they say. It's concurrent with a slow acting poison that takes about 72 hrs to take action. So he could have.”

Eliott sinks down on the couch.

“They're going to indict him on Monday. And then...then send him to a higher security prison. General population. With the really bad people.”

Alexia’s voice fades in the background.
On the screen, a blown up image of the man's ankle and his tattoo, a bird holding a branch in its beak, and its counterpart, almost unrecognizable on bloated corpse skin.

A dove.

*Colombe*.

*Colombe Colibari.*

*Rustaing’s gamble to wipe out his enemies.*

*72hrs poison.*

*Your client wants to become king of the mob.*

A war in the shadows, coming to the light, and he is standing on the trigger.

This ruins everything they've worked for but his regrets remain inaudible, as, increasingly, does his common sense. The terrible, terrible blessing of interesting times. Living fearlessly attracts greater and greater monsters. Life, that keeps coming at you.

On the screen, Lucas Lallemant's blue eyes stare at him from his mugshot, cold, deadly, and absolutely void of any kind of humanity. Like shards of ice, or the core of a flame.

He shivers, and in that very moment, he doesn't know if he is more afraid for him, or of him.

Or for himself, as he still wants to get lost in those eyes. Good man, bad man, it doesn't matter.

Love as terror. And there is absolutely no part of him that wants to take a step back.
It owns him now.

Chapter End Notes

end notes:

Well that escalated quickly

Continuing the Skam tradition of everything going to shit on Vendredi in episode 5! yay!

Smut happens in VENDREDI 01:49, approx from the line ‘Do you want to hear how our first date will end?’ to the end of the sequence. Basically they have phone sex, Lucas says he wants to get out to be with Eliott, Eliott promises to wait for him, they get sad because it’s kind of impossible, Lucas hangs up, Eliott is more sad. Sad trombone noise.

Also me before writing this chapter: omg tension danger sexy stuff it’s gonna be so cool Those two sappy shits: spend hours describing their first kiss to each other, horny declarations of eternal support, get all angsty, ugh please you’re messing w my hard boiled noir vibe at least they’re kind of kinky lmao

Alexia and Emma have very similar vibes in this fic as they’re both chaotic bisexuals who are sha0meless when it comes to roasting Eliott (and I love writing them so much.) The main diff is that Alexia has her shit together and exfoliates regularly while Emma lives on old pizza, party fumes and is paranoid as hell and also kind of mean.

did you like the cameo? i considered pulling it after the drama but tbh i wanna do more of those and i can’t not include the only w/w skam couple so. they’re my own characters now, not panphobic. also keep your eyes peeled for more peeps from parallel universes :) i considered making Manon the journalist, but the journalist’s got a very peripheral
role in the story, and I have an idea for Manon that I fell absolutely in love with - she’s going to be introduced into the story quite late, but she’s going to make one hell of a splash.

so how about that cliffhanger? do you hate me now :))))))?

next time: Eliott investigates, faces from the past, miscommunication, despair, drastic decisions
Mauvaise graine

Chapter Summary

Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels* dun dun dun
Our leading man Eliott Demaury met up with a journalist and publicly came out in support of Lucas Lallemant, trying to spin the narrative to their advantage. He snapped back at his father’s attempts to control him once again, told Lucille to go get a life, and had yet another phone-date with Lucas, this time with music. But after not being able to reach Lucas for a while and getting stalked in the street by one of his father’s scary old associates, emotions ran very high. And their last phone call turned into something way more intimate than either of them had planned.

Then the news dropped: one of Lucas’ associates is dead. And they’re trying to pin it on him.

In this chapter: Lucas becomes increasingly withholding. Eliott digs into the past, and falls into the bad type of spiral, leading him to take some risks and make some very, very drastic decisions.

Chapter Notes

sorry for taking so long to update guys! life happened, and to be honest, this chapter killed me to write. i figured most of the plot for the fic, though, so next updates should come much quicker.

that’s right: we’re going to angst-town. Fair warning: you will probably hate Lucas in this chapter. I have to say that he’s got his reasons, but this is still an AU where they’re more flawed versions of canon, and have much darker backstories - especially Lucas. So emotionally healthy coping mechanisms are not part of his vocabulary, and it’s going to take him sometime to come back from that. And Eliott is also in a very unhealthy headspace, leading him to romanticize things he probably shouldn’t. It’s going to have a happy ending, I promise! A lot of what I’m planning afterwards is about them learning to be better. But this is the part where they still very much have to earn it. We will have Lucas POV soon though, which will clear up things. Like in canon, they are also bad at communicating, but the consequences here are...Worse. Don’t try this at home, kids. And take care of yourselves.

warnings for: mild/non graphic suicidal ideation/risky intoxicated behavior, general bad mental headspace

all the thanks as usual to my beta beeexx and also to Gao who made two really cool and on point aesthetics for this fic

and finally to you and all of the amazing feedback I’ve had so far, it's been such a rewarding and validating experience, and I am glad this fic resonated with you, continue being awesome <33333
SAMEDI 23:51

It's not him. It can't be.

Eliott’s been racking his brain all day. And all night before that. He's running on two hours of sleep. He knows he's playing with fire.

He just can't give up before figuring it out. He can't.

Lucas’s not answering the phone. So he's set up a meeting at the prison on Monday. In the meantime, he needs to figure out what to do, and give Lucas options. Be a fucking lawyer, for once.

He's talked to Alex, who's given him the rundown on what's happening at the police precinct. They've been scrambling to find ways to pin it on Lucas, encouraged to pursue that direction at the expense of everything else. And that just screams of pressure from above.

Eliott has to find the real killer before they do. That's the conclusion he's come to. And he has almost nothing to work on.

It's just him and his fucking board. And it’s just as much of a mess as his mind.

He's got Lucas's stories. The victim wore the tattoo of a dove, a flimsy connection to the Colibari family and their murdered daughter Colombe, a century old grudge. So maybe the Colibaris are still alive and kicking, and they wanted the diamonds stolen. And if Lucas is with the Colibaris and he’s going after Eliott’s father...that definitely puts Armand in the camp of the Colbari’s mortal enemies. Rustaing the demon man and his army of shadows.
A century old war, and the diamonds are just the tip of the iceberg.

It's starting to really hit him now, the implications of all this.

So far...it’s been Lucas's voice on the phone, telling ghost stories in between two flirting sessions. The joy of finally finding a way to do the right thing, and the thrill of standing up to his father. He can't lie - he's come to enjoy being the rebel, ever since his last case. The whole catching feelings for his client thing set aside. The stalker was scary, for sure, but there were no real consequences except for his own panic, and reaching out to Lucas for...comfort.

But this ? This is ugly. A man has died. He's put up a picture of the victim's decomposing face along with a blow-up of the tattoo, the dove pattern, almost childish in its initial rendering turned grotesque with its blurred lines on purple bloated skin.

He needs to wake the fuck up.

He's let himself get distracted, as if he was the protagonist of some fucked up romance novel where all the threats are just temporary obstacles to a happy ending. But that's not the genre he's treading into now. This is the realm of sordid pasts and ruined futures.

He's got to keep a clear mind, if he doesn't want to be broken in turn.

So Lucas is probably allied to the Colibari. Is that the friends he was alluding to, his amazing team of smart, good people ? The Merry Men wannabes ? That doesn't sound like anything even near to an accurate description of a mob family. So maybe it was more of a temporary alliance. Maybe it explains the double crossing. Lucas waiting longer at the bank for...what ?

He can't be the killer - even if he poisoned the man, how the fuck did the body end up in the river ? That's a riddle the police will have to solve before they can pin the murder on him, for sure. So it buys him a little time.

Why did they kill the man ? The autopsy says the body had been dead for quite a while before being thrown in the water, that it could even have been kept on ice to preserve it - difficult to say.
So whoever dumped the corpse...they probably wanted it to be found. To send a message.

Messages. It's all been about messages. This is almost like...a propaganda war. Coded displays of dominance. The dove, the diamonds...even him, he realizes with a chill running along his back. If he's the son of one of the shadow army's top dogs, having him come out in support of one of their opponents, even unwittingly...it sends one hell of a message. And he remembers one other thing from the story : that these people are obsessed with symbols, legacies. They'd left Colombe to her abusive husband for years, but it was the death of her son that had really triggered the grudge.

He remembers his father's voice. *You wear a name that isn't yours*. Eliott laughed him off, but...In his world, it could be much heavier.

But if Eliott's support in the press was meant to be a signal as well as a scandal to tarnish his name, Lucas's alignment would have to be pretty clear to the underworld, then. And one doesn't earn being *meaningful* in those circles lightly.

He rubs at his temples. Lucas was eager to make Eliott understand that he was one of the good guys going up against Eliott's father. Who he knew was a piece of shit. And he made sure to test Eliott's loyalties to him.

But what if he's just a bad guy going up against another bad guy here ? What if there is no good guys, and he's just being a useful idiot with his big principles ?

The anguish of that thought makes him sink down on the ground. He's not just been falling for Lucas, he's been falling for this image of himself - brave, bold, a truth seeker. Standing up to the man, stirring up scandal. Having clever flirtations with a white-collar criminal mastermind with a heart of gold he thought he could bring back to the light. Believing he could turn the world upside down through moxie and charisma and wanting it really, really badly.

Fuck, what an obnoxious moron, he thinks and laughs at himself as he contemplates the situation from the outside for a second.

He rolls himself a cigarette, fingers shaking as he repeats the familiar motions, leans against the wall, and contemplates.
Past the anxiety about consequences - part of him is outraged at the idea of being manipulated because he cares about people and human decency. The same part just wants to just drop the case and go built schools for orphans in a war torn country. Or write an instagram post about the futility of modern life and become a monk because the world doesn't deserve him. Or whatever.

Part of him just can't believe Lucas would do that, can't forget how desperate he was for Eliott to tell him he was a good person, how protective he got after the stalker scare...how open and vulnerable and wrecked he sounded that night, that last time they spoke. How he begged for Eliott, those soft moans, those whispered promises, like something right out of a wet dream. That shared moment when they needed each other more than air for a fraction of a second…how the hell could he have faked that…

Fuck, wasn’t he trying to be rational right now ? Yeah, that’s not the upstairs brain at work right there.

He takes a long drag, inhales, lets the hot smoke burn in his throat on the way down.

Part of him doesn't fucking care. Just wants to take his father down no matter what the cost. Steal a car, free Lucas from prison, go all Bonnie and Clyde, drive off a cliff, whatever. Also not a part of himself he wants to let to the wheel. Figuratively or literally.

So what can he choose to be if not a navel-gazing prick, a horny dumbass or suicidally reckless ?

Cautious, maybe.

Step by step. Back at it. Over and over. The climb, the fall, and then back at it. That's what his life is.

And a fucking lawyer.

His phone rings, almost sending him into a tailspin before he realizes it's his regular phone, not his secret line.

It's Alexia.
“Why aren't you sleeping ?”

“Hmmm...let's see...maybe because you were calling me in the middle of the night ?”

“Don't bullshit me, Eliott Demaury, I know you as if I made you myself.”

“Gee, thanks, grandma.”

“No, but seriously, Eliott. You could come to mine, you know. The thought of you staring at that creepy murder board all night...that's not right.”

He contemplates the thought. It would be nice. Alexia's apartment is cozy, quirky and welcoming, just like her. It's a place where problems like these don't exist, where life can be put to rights with a midnight margarita, a late night wrestling show and fluffy bunny slippers.

It wouldn't feel right, bringing the shadows he's struggling with over to that space. Not to mention any possible stalkers.

“That's nice of you to offer but I'll be fine. I'm too tired to move, I was gonna crash anyway.”

“You sure ? At least promise you'll turn the board around.”

“Yeah, I will. I know what's at stake. I need to be clear-headed.”

“Okay, good. See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks for calling, Alexia.”

After he hangs up, he settles in for the night. But he doesn't turn the board around.
He needs to remind himself of what's at stake.

Dread follows him all the way to the prison, like a heavy creep of doubt and anxiety plastered to his back, even before he sees the concrete building looming. His night was short and plagued by faceless monsters, and he can feel the fatigue string through his muscles, dry and cramped.

As he steps out of his car Lucas’ words echo in his ears. *A factory to make monsters.* It rings true in everything he sees around him - the ragged weeds growing through the cracks in the concrete of the parking lot, the walls made of gravel and concrete, the rusted bars running trails on the walls, the despair and desolation of it all. It’s nothing new to him. He’s been here a hundred times, he’s made sure that the people who got sent here and worse actually deserved it - as much as anyone can deserve this. He always saw himself as very separate, walking in his protective pristine suits and sharp language and fancy car, always on the move, never staying, never listening for long enough for any emotion to take root.

But now, well. It touches someone he cares about it and that changes everything. And now it’s like the empathy he’s learned to push down, years worth of it, is resurfacing again, and it makes him feel brittle and heavy and impaired. Doubting all the choices he's made for years.

He wants to turn back and run all of a sudden but he needs -

He needs to see him.

Look him in the eyes.
Find the person he's been talking to on the phone almost every night for the past few weeks. Who jokes about spinach and crosswords, who likes Nina Simone just as much as Eliott and used to play piano, who wants to see Eliott in an apron. Who worries about being a good person. Funny, layered, real. He needs proof that it wasn't all a construction of his mind, that he didn't imagine that hint of warmth and vulnerability below the mask. Reconcile it with the cold and calculating man he first met here.

And he needs more information - he needs to reassure Lucas that whatever horrors might come to the surface regarding his past, Eliott won’t bail. That it’s safe to open up. It's gone from a yearning to a necessity.

Right now he simply doesn’t know enough to be any help. There are too many layers, too many players in the game: Lucas and his friends, Eliott’s father, the shadow organization, the Karls, the Colibari and the dead man possibly working for them, the police and whoever is pushing them to pin everything on Lucas, the fucking Mayor… it’s a minefield, and Eliott needs a map before he steps on the wrong toes. The stakes are too high to fail.

And he needs Lucas to know he is not alone.

... 

He walks through the gates of the prison to the reception and prepares himself to leave his satchel and empty his pockets, but the receptionist stops him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Demaury, your appointment has been cancelled.”

Blood rushes to Eliott’s head.

“What ? I’m his lawyer, you have to let me see my client. Who decided this ?”

“I’m sorry, I thought you knew. you were supposed to have been told, there’s been a miscommunication. Mr. Lallemant has fired you as his lawyer. He’s the one that cancelled the appointment.”
“What? But….”

It feels like the ground is opening beneath Eliott’s feet.

“You…but…we were…” He takes a deep breath and forces himself to be coherent. “I’m sorry, that sounds very unlikely. Can you ask him to come talk to me?”

“We can’t force the inmates to talk to people, sir.”

“That’s not…how do I know you’re not depriving him of council?”

The receptionist’s stony face doesn’t budge even a millimeter.

“You can submit a formal complaint if you wish. The prison administration will process it in 3 to 5 weeks.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not good enough. You know you could get in serious trouble for obstruction if –

“No, I couldn’t.” She says, deadpan, and sighs. “You’re a shit stirrer, aren’t you. Alright.”

She looks to her computer screen and pushes in a few keys. A moment later the printer behind her activates and she slides a piece of paper through the slot in her plexiglass window.

“Here you go, he’s filed a request to be allowed to represent himself.”

“What? But he’s got no legal knowledge whatsoever, this is fucking insane, listen, I need to…”
“What you need to do, sir, is take a step back and calm down before I call security to escort you off the premises.”

Eliott snaps out of the moment and realizes his closed fist is on the window and he’s moved extremely close. He gulps and steps back.

“I'm sorry, no need, I will just.”

He swallows his words, grabs the sheet of paper she's given him and turns tail, cheeks red with embarrassment and confusion.

...

As soon as he's outside and the wind slaps his face he looks at the file, the scrawly writing on it. It's dated from Saturday morning. Laconic, except the 'reasons' paragraph that says 'temperamental divergences' and 'refusing to smuggle me breakfast' and 'I like my own voice better.' The oh so recognizable humor is, in this precise context, a sharp knife below Eliott’s ribs.

If he’s making jokes, then he’s not being coerced, right?

He gets to his car and sits down, unsteadily.

He loses at least half an hour.

...
Only his phone buzzing - the regular one - jolts him out of dissociating.

“Hello, Mr Demaury ? This is Dominique Bravard from le Parisien, I was wondering if I could have your input on the suspicions about your client being guilty of murder ?”

Fuck. How did these fuckers get his number ? Panic grabs at his throat.

“He’s not guilty, alright ? They’re just trying to frame him because they’re too fucking lazy to go after the real murderer. I mean the guy was poisoned and then threw himself into the water as he was dying while Lucas was already in prison ? Give me a fucking break. They just want convictions to show the success of their latest policies and it's awfully convenient for someone higher up.”

“Can you comment on the rumors about your relationship with your client ?” Her voice is all saccharine, dripping with false politeness.

“What the fuck, didn’t you hear what I just said ? I’m talking corruption, I’m talking…”

“Some people are saying your judgment on this case is compromised. Associates of yours have been caught obtaining surveillance data from the scene of the robbery by fraudulent means.”

“What the...what the hell are you talking about ?”

“I mean, if these are the sort of people you surround yourself with, there’s no telling what you will do next, right ?”

“Are you fucking kidding me, since when is Le Parisien a fucking tabloid ? Why the hell do you care about my fucking feelings, that’s none of your fucking business, why don’t you do your actual job for once. It’s about the diamonds, alright ? Leave me and my friends alone so we can do our job.”

“Well, frankly, I question your ability to do that. What are you going to do now that the man you love is in prison, Mr Demaury ? Once poor Lucas faces a life sentence ?”
“Go fuck yourself, you bottom-feeding vulture.”

He hangs up.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

He’s so screwed.

How the fuck do they know about Alexia? He should never have involved her. He should never have let himself be convinced by Lucas to do that weird charade about their relationship. He never should have gone public.

And he definitely shouldn’t have talked to this journalist, accused the whole PJ of corruption, called his client by his first name or lost his shit like that. With those questions, she probably wanted him to, so she could add to her already decided on characterisation of him as some sort of dangerous, unhinged fool acting completely unprofessionally and making up conspiracy theories out of uncontrollable feelings.

What if it was the point of the whole thing? Ruin his credibility? Make sure that if he ever comes out with the truth about his father, no one will ever believe him?

In a moment of awful inspiration, his mind is seized by an image of his father setting the whole thing up. Hiring Lucas, telling him to steal his friends’ diamonds with a macabre backstory, seduce Eliott and then throw him to the wolves.

He shakes his head.

He can’t go there.
Besides, this is too public for his father. He’s always tried to keep Eliott under control through private means. This sort of scandal attached to his name...wouldn’t be worth it.

The one question it revolves around is the same as always.

*What the fuck is going on in Lucas Lallemant’s head?*

Somehow, this surfacing body has changed the game so much he doesn’t want Eliott as a partner anymore. And this thought, of being so carelessly tossed away for strategic reasons, after weeks of soul searching and flirting and anguish and tension and thrills and this incomprehensible feeling that they just fit together - cut short just like that -

Eliott takes out his secret phone, and calls him. Again and again and again, with no response.

He texts him then, *what is going on?* but there isn’t even a sign that his message has been read.

...

The world spirals loose around him, and he feels something is snapping inside him, unravelling.

What is he going to do?

He lays his head on the steering wheel.

He's set himself on this path without any kind of insurance policy.

That's not the real problem, though.

He's opened the floodgates. Standing up to his father, even in such a small way...he can't go back to a cowed life.
But he was counting on Lucas. Without him...he's got nothing. He’s adrift in a storm of his own making.

So there has to be a reason why he's not responding. Eliott is going to find it, and then prove it to him. That it's worth it, them working together. That he’s making a big mistake sidelining him.

There's his feelings too. But he can't do anything about that anymore either. It's too late, too late.

Either they will...somehow, manage to get together, or Eliott’s heart will get wrecked, but there is no going back to the safety of a dull life anymore.

He's lost the road, he's lost the map, he's lost the key, he's lost the will to even try.

So answers.

Whatever it takes.

Whatever it does to him.

LUNDI 11:05

The nursing home looks like death and smells like ruin.
He had set aside this avenue of investigation because of its intimate nature, but now, he has no choice. He needs any information he can get.

He signs in and is accompanied by a nurse with an irritatingly bright smile, to the garden, where old plastic tables, discolored by sunlight, are set here and there on a wall-enclosed field of yellowed grass, surrounded by mismatched chairs. It's a depressing picture.

He is led to where an old woman is sitting, under a gnarly tree still holding on to its dead leaves despite autumn being long gone. She herself is just as dilapidated as this place. Her face is sunken and sallow, and she is dressed in a ratty bathrobe, worn grey with age. She just sits, staring into nothingness, as if so bored she already has half a foot in the grave.

There is something about really old people - about the idea of becoming a prisoner of your own body and mind, forgotten by all, dependent on strangers, nothing but your past mistakes to keep you company. It's Eliott's worst nightmare. But he brushes it aside.

He's on a mission today, a mission for truth and justice.

...

“Rosalie, you have a visitor today, isn’t that nice? This nice young man has a few questions for you.” The nurse talks in a forced happy voice that immediately makes Eliott want to throw her over the wall. He can’t imagine having to hear it everyday.

He sits down in front of the old lady.

“Hello, Ms. Lapébie. I am a lawyer, and I have some questions about one of your past charges - he has a crucial role in a case I’m currently working on. I need you to help me shed some light on the truth.”

She turns her eyes, blue irises and yellow sclera, towards him, head following unnaturally slowly.
“I have helped, many, many children in my time.” She answers in a croaky voice. Well, at least she seems to be somewhat present in her own head. He gets a picture out of his bag.

“Lucas Lallemant. You were the social worker on his case, around twenty years ago. He was investigated twice, when he was about 7 and then 12. I was wondering what you could tell me about him and about his family.”

The old woman takes the picture, and brings it very close to her face.

To his surprise, she remembers him almost immediately.

“Ah yes, I remember him. Got himself in trouble, did he? That doesn’t surprise me. That poor mother of his. All alone with that little troublemaker. He gave her such grief.”

Eliott doesn’t like her tone. Contempt. He remembers that.

“Can you tell me why you got called to look into his situation?”

“Oh, discipline issues.” She squints at the picture. “Yes, the teacher had called about him arriving to school without shoes, in his pajamas, that sort of thing. Issues getting along with the other kids. Then he got caught trying to shoplift. We thought that maybe it was a neglect kind of situation at home, so we looked into it. But it was alright, he was just being difficult. Although I could see that his poor mother was trying her best, you know, she was just overwhelmed and overworked with the father gone. Some kids are just...trouble, you know. Born that way.”

If there was one person he absolutely didn’t want to have the nurture vs nature debate with, it was this lady, but right now, he can’t help himself.

“No, I’m afraid I really don’t. What do you mean?”

“I mean, you know, trouble. Looked at all adults like they offended him just by existing. Always looking for a way to sneak out, to stir the pot. Never sitting still in class. Smart, but crafty, restless. Not listening to instructions. Hiding things. A little snake, really.”
“What did he steal?”

“What did he steal?”

“Does it matter? Candy, I suppose, or some such. It’s the act that matters, the lack of respect.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, what could we do? We got him to the school psychologist for a bit. His neighbors promised to check in, the teacher to keep an eye out for any trouble. It was okay for a while. Then I remember...yes, he started getting into fights, worse and worse ones. That’s when we came around for the second time. He actually pulled a knife on one of the older kids. We thought we would have to send him to an institution.”

“Older kids? Why were they fighting?”

“Boys will be boys, I suppose. But thankfully, that’s when his father came back, and then he started going straight again. Bit of discipline, what he needed probably. So we closed the case. Shame it wasn’t enough but in the end, there’s certain things you just can’t fix.” Her mouth is twisted in disdain. Eliott is absolutely appalled at the lack of compassion in her voice. But he needs to know more. He pushes on.

“Can you remember anything about his father? What he did for a job, that sort of thing?”

She thinks.

“Hm, no. He had a nice car, though. Nice man, very charismatic, the kind you’d remember in a crowd. Bit rough around the edges, probably did a physical job, but a real gentleman. Only had a fling with the mother, turns out, never knew he was a father, but the minute he learned he stepped in to fulfill his responsibilities. It all starts with the family, always.”

Eliott agrees. But not in the way she probably means it.

“Boys need a father, you see. All this talk about modern families…”

Ah yeah. No. He knows exactly where this is going, suddenly, and he puts a stop to it immediately.
‘Mrs Lapébie, do you remember putting a name for the father on file? It doesn’t appear in the records, or on any birth certificate.”

She frowns, a little lost.

“I don’t know, I… we’d just started working with computers back then. Might have gotten lost somewhere. I mean, we were planning on doing a background check but everything seemed to go well with the family afterwards, we didn’t really see the point. And the kid was happy, so. I don’t really know what else to tell you. I got rid of my files when I moved in here. Didn’t really see the point of keeping the records anyway, it’s not like they care about me anyway. I helped so many, you know. But they never seem thankful.”

Wow, what a wonder. Imagine depending on this lady, her smug self satisfied air, her veneration of old fashioned authority, her obvious lack of any sort of deeper understanding. Imagine being a terrified kid running from monsters and facing…that. Might as well ask the wallpaper to rescue you from a burning house. It makes his skin crawl. He remembers being young, and trying to reach out in vain. The horror, the powerlessness of it. The wondering about what’s wrong with you, that you don’t deserve a life like the other kids. It makes him want to throw something in her face, and he realises he’s clenching his fists so hard, he’s almost making himself bleed.

He takes a deep breath.

“Anything that might explain Lucas’s behavior? Something he said to the psychologist? Was he being bullied? Was something going on with his mother? Pressure at work maybe?”

“Why does it matter? Ah, you’re one of those.”

Eliott has had this said about him before. Whatever it alludes to, it’s never flattering.

‘Excuse me?’ He scoffs.

‘An apologist. You need to understand. Psychological reasons and so on. Excuses, is what I call it. You want me to give you a little sob story? I’ve read the papers, you know. I know all about you and your sort. Thieves and crooked lawyers. You’re a snake, too, aren’t you? Well, I am going to tell you what. That kid was bad then and he must be bad now. A bad seed. Not worth the effort. If you want to defend him by telling everyone he had a sad childhood, well, boo hoo. It really was no
worse than most of the children I have to deal with, and they never turned into criminals.’’

Well, she’s already judging him, isn’t she? Might as well commit the crime. He leans forward slightly.

“Is that what you tell yourself to sleep at night? You treated all those kids like numbers on a list, boxes to be checked, but at least most of them never went to prison, so you did alright? You presumed to know kids’ true natures while they still had their lives ahead of them, judged them, put them into a neat little box, but you can’t be fucked to be curious about what is actually going on with them and you’re wondering why no one ever kept in touch? Now I wonder how many you actually let fly under the radar. How many had to go back to abusive parents because you thought they had nice cars and nice smiles. But hey, no disturbance on file, I guess, so it must be okay. What a legacy to leave behind. You must be proud.”

Her cheeks redden, tremble slightly.

“How dare you judge me. You know nothing about me.”

Oh, the sweet irony.

“Well, some people are just bad, I guess. Not worth the effort.”

He gets up and adjusts his tie. Then he takes on his most deadly polite tone.

“I hope you have a nice rest of your life, Mrs Lapebie.”

He doesn’t wait for her answer, leaving her to rot among the withered plastic and trees.
If something was actually happening with little Lucas, this woman would have been the absolute last to realize it. She seemed to have an idea formed about him and never bothered to go beyond and god. The lack of curiosity, the apathy, the indifference. Those are the kind of people who will walk past a mugging and look the other way, and sleep with a peaceful conscience. Cowards.

He still doesn’t know. Those were signs that there was something wrong with Lucas. Well-adjusted 12-year olds don’t pull knives on their classmates.

But what exactly were those monsters that prompted him to lash out? He’s starting to get afraid of what he might uncover. And this feels too private to dig in without asking. It feels sordid.

Eliott is cornered, though. Because Lucas asked him to care, and then he withdrew, and now Eliott is the one left alone teetering above the void. Now maybe every time he walks in somewhere his name is known they will say *I know your sort.*

He wanted to be Lucas’s ally. But now all he’s got left is a puzzle.

And he needs to know.
He leaves his car in an underground parking and emerges in trendy Ménilmontant. He likes this part of the city, vibrant and artsy and charming. It's already getting gentrified as hell, he can tell, but it is still wild enough for him, with the colorful murals and potted plants everywhere running wild, their offshoots piercing through cracks in the concrete, mint and pansies and poppies among the dandelions. The Petite Ceinture runs through here, too, and he's haunted these segments, even if he doesn’t remember them precisely. It calls to him, but he has no time.

...

He arrives at the door of a small townhouse, walls painted soft pink and half-overrun by ivy. There’s several bikes parked next to the door, two of them electric. He finds the right bell next to the little copper plaque wearing a green infinity symbol and the vague title ‘sustainability consultants’.

“Hello, I’m here to meet up with Yann Cazas.”

“Oh yeah, sure! Come on right up, third floor.” The voice coming through the interphone seems friendly enough, thankfully. He really can’t deal with another bitter stuck up asshole today.

...

Eliott makes his way across the miniscule stairs and arrives on the landing of the third floor slightly out of breath. There’s only one door, slightly ajar, also bright green - wow, those guys are not subtle - and he knocks.

“Hey, yeah, come in! I was just about to make some tea, want some?”

The place is an open space office, messy but charming. Nestled right below the slanted roof of the building, apparent beams of lacquered wood, with large half-moon windows on floor levels, letting light flood in from below. Several desks, drawing desks and whiteboards are scattered around, stacked with computers, folders, and blueprints, giving the whole place an air of friendly chaos. Not to mention the model plane hanging from the ceiling or the strange contraption in the back of the room made of glass and tubes and helices, lending it a touch of mad inventors’ lair.

Eliott moves towards the area in the middle, clearly a recreational space with two sofas, green and
blue again, and two huge bean bag chairs. Not to mention a carpet that looks like moss and a little train. Creativity and science working hand in hand. It's lovely.

His host comes towards him with two big mugs.

“So I hope you like honey rooibos because that’s all we have left. Please, sit down !”

Eliott takes the mug and sinks down on the sofa. It's warm in his hand, comforting.

Yann Cazas is tall, broad, with closely cropped curly hair and an easy smile. He’s wearing a tight-fit shirt with a blue-green pattern, jeans and gym shoes that look like they were made out of recycled tires. Eliott didn’t really know what to expect - the job, the place, the electric bike - it all screams bobo parisien - but then again, that’s not even a valid sociological category, and the man in front of him doesn’t exude the type of vapid-self-absorbed energy that usually goes with the stereotype. Most of all, there’s something honest, direct about his eyes. Hopefully, this is not a man who plays games. Eliott wants to like him. And hug him too, a little bit.

‘So, I’m happy you reached out. I was thinking of doing something myself, to be honest. I saw the papers and I couldn’t fucking believe my eyes.’

Hm.

“I mean, I haven’t seen him in a while but the Lucas I knew in college, just like… wasn’t the type to. You know. Rob a bank. And you’re defending him, right ?”

Not technically true anymore. But he’s not willing to let go of that role yet. He nods.

‘I have to be honest, Mr. Cazas …’

‘Please call me Yann, I’m really not that old yet.’

Eliott smiles. “Hah, me neither.”
“Millenials taking over the workplace, finally.”

“Let me guess, you wanted to work at Google.”

Yann sighs sadly. “You got me, but then they took the “don’t be evil” out of their motto and that's when I knew something was truly wrong. I mean, if even their marketing department gives up on pretending to be good?”

Eliott laughs. Good opening. ‘We’re all screwed aren’t we ?’ Yann nods with an exaggerated smile. He likes this guy. “Okay, so...I’m here because I need to help Lucas. But he just...he won’t tell me things. And so I have a problem. I don’t really want to pry into his private life. But I need to understand what happened to him. And you were his college roommate. You were there when he disappeared. I was thinking you might help me understand.’

Yann makes a face.

‘Not talking, huh. Yeah that sounds familiar.’ He must read something alarming in Eliott's expression as he immediately adds. ‘But not in a bad way, alright ? I loved that man like a brother. He was just not...not the sharing type.’

‘He’s in trouble, Yann. And I really, really need something I can use. People he might have hung with, something about his family. Hell, something he was working on, I don’t. I just need to understand why he did what he did. I know it’s not about the money and he keeps hinting at being involved with really terrible people...’

Yann considers him a moment, as if he’s evaluating whether he can trust him or not.

‘Okay so the thing is... I’m not sure I ever understood Lucas. I knew he was really, really smart. Like, first in class with no effort, photographic memory sort of smart. I knew he could be fucking hilarious, and that he was the most loyal guy ever. Like when you had a problem, he would come through with solutions, man.”

He has a soft smile, looking into empty space like he is slipping back into the memory. “One day we were all late for exams because of partying the day before that and he actually found a way to set off the sprinklers in the whole building without being detected. Incredible. The teacher's copies were all drenched, and he was so disgruntled it gave us two extra days to study.”
Eliott can't help but laugh at the image.

“I mean not that he needed it, he wasn’t a big partier and he probably knew the whole program better than the teacher. But it was just for us, you know. That was the kind of guy he was. He stood up for us. Once or twice shithheads from other years tried to start shit with us, and he shoot them down like...best thing I ever saw in my life. Those guys were crying for their mothers when he was done with them. He could reduce someone to ashes just with words, but he only did it to assholes. Fucking fierce. But for the rest, he kept it all close to his chest. I mean, I was his best friend, I can say. But he never talked about his family or his past or the girls he liked. I think he wanted a new start, and I respected that. There were times... he isolated himself a little and I couldn’t really get why but well, it worked best when we gave him his space, you know ? It felt like he was used to carrying a lot on his own.”

Eliott nods. He can relate to that. He sips from his tea. The rooibos is nice, very soothing. He pushes the little train with his foot, and it rolls over the floorboards.

“I know he had things going on he didn’t tell us about. But apart from that, it looked like he was doing pretty well. We were talking about setting up our own company together, you know ? And then poof, he was gone. I talked to him one last time and he basically told me to fuck off. He sounded so distant.” He can feel the pain coming up in Yann’s voice. “I kept wondering, those past few years, what I did wrong, that he cut all ties like that. I mean, should I have reached out more ? Seen the signs that he was in trouble ? I just...it was hard, the communication just dissolving like that out of the blue.’

Yeah, he can imagine. It's pretty much the situation he's in right now, even though he hasn't known Lucas for years. It certainly feels that way sometimes, though. But it indicates a pattern. Lucas doesn't ask for help, he isolates himself.

Goddamit. He can't even say he doesn't understand.

“What do you remember about the time before he disappeared ?”

“Well…” he frowns. “We had our final project proposals coming up and I was really busy, so not as much as I would have liked. And our college really wasn't the type of place to get into trouble with your frequentations, it was mostly wealthy nerds and overachieving scholarship kids. I know he went to other college parties but...nothing comes to mind apart... I remember he was having trouble with his father.”

“His father ?”
“Yeah, real piece of shit apparently. I heard Lucas screaming at him on the phone. I know it had to do about the care of his mother. I think she was sick. Only time I heard him lose his cool. But I don’t think that was very out of the ordinary. Like, I think he just hated the guy in general, from the few things I could catch. Once he told me ‘He’s a bully, and I don’t like bullies’” but he was very very drunk that day and possibly making fun of himself.”

Bloody fathers. Fucking hell. He wasn’t just playing Eliott, then. He was speaking from experience.

“And the other thing...yeah, I remember thinking he was in love with someone.” Eliott’s heart jumps a little at that. “But he wouldn’t tell me who it was. It was really weird, the way he was always shirking the question, but he kept smiling at weird moments and he was upbeat and distracted and weirdly happy and well, you know. But then...his mother died.’

‘I’ve seen that in his file. How did he take it ?”

“Well, not well, obviously. I mean, I know the both of them used to be really close. He didn’t want us to know so he would tell us he would meet up with girls and shit but he was checking up on her a lot ; I only know because I saw them at a café together and they looked so alike, I immediately knew. So yeah, he was devastated. It was like he just...sunk into himself, you know. He disappeared into his studies. That’s why I was so surprised when he dropped out because he told me, right after the funeral, I was worried about him, telling him to maybe take a break - told me he was doing it for her, that he still wanted to make her proud. So I think something else happened, and it had to do with his father.”

‘Yeah, I think so too’ Eliott confesses, and Yann raises his eyebrows sky high.

‘We’ve bonded over our respective daddy issues” he explains, ruefully. ‘Were you able to learn anything else about the guy ? Name, profession ? The guy is a ghost, I can’t find him anywhere.’

‘Well, I know Lucas called him Jacques, never ‘Dad’. And that he went abroad a lot. But that’s about it. Oh and… that he was scared of the guy.’

That Yann was able to figure all this out from such an enigma of a friend points to someone perceptive and caring. And smart, but then again, he too did go to the most prestigious engineering school of the country. And he can’t picture Lucas being friends with idiots.
‘What did Lucas work on? You mentioned final projects...’

Yann laughs.

‘Oh man, what didn’t he work on. The guy was all over the place, he was a real polymath, and they only let him get away with it because they all wanted to have him in their specialty. He changed his plans every two months, he thought about aerospatial, nuclear, telecoms, you name it, and he was good at it all. Did you know the army tried to recruit him, too? He passed their tests with flying colors, too, apparently top markmanship and shit, and he was pretending to be interested but then on the last day he went off on the recruiter about how the army was a rotten institution. The little shit, just wasting their time for fun or something. Someone actually taped the last part of that speech and made a remix out of it, with a little outraged noise from the recruiter, too. It was epic.”

Eliott laughs again. College-age Lucas sounds like a blast. God, what he’d given to meet him earlier...

“I convinced him to go for green civil engineering in the end.”, Yann continues. “Make a better world and so on. He’s always been a pessimist, but I think he liked the idea of us working together.” He shakes his head. ‘Okay, I am not that surprised he robbed a bank. I mean, he’s always had a problem with authority. And he liked the thrill, too. I just...I don’t think he ever cared about money. And he had ambitions. He had such a bright future ahead of him.’’ He gestures around him. ‘I know this doesn’t look like much, but our company is bringing bigger and bigger contracts in all the time, and we can afford to be picky with our clients, make sure they’re in line with our ethics. Soon, we’ll be able to move to bigger offices. We could have already, actually. I’ve been stalling, I guess. I...this place still feels like a little bit like college, you know? Like we’re just friends fucking around. So maybe a part of me still expects him to walk in and join us, finally. Fuck. I miss him. And I’m sorry that just got personal. You just have this kind of vibe that you’re a good guy to talk to. That’s weird for a lawyer, huh.’’

Eliott tries to imagine Lucas here, inventing contraptions to save the planet, goofing around with Yann, drinking rooibos, and his heart crimps in. Yet another unattainable parallel universe. It’s so fucking unfair. He would belong here. In a place with a future. Instead of making crosswords and bamboozling people to get out of jail and who knows what other horrors. It’s almost enough to bring tears to his eyes.

‘It’s fine. It’s good to know he still has people that care, actually.’’

Yann rubs his hand over his face.
‘He’s in real trouble, isn’t he. I mean that article, it seemed to allude to a whole lot of crazy shit. Like mobsters, diamonds, corruption, elections? Wow. I have to be honest, I expected you to be different. Like, more snooty Parisian Elite type.’

Eliott laughs out loud.

‘Well I should have been, but I guess I got a birth defect or something. Still, I can turn it on when it’s useful.’

Yann scoffs.

“Lucky you, then. I don’t think Lucas would have hired you if you really were. Like, he’s always hated people that put on airs, I remember. That’s one of the things that could make him like, so petty.”

‘Wow, that must have been something.’ Yann raises his eyebrows so Eliott tries to rephrase that with a little less involuntary admiration in his tone. ‘I mean, uh. We’ve talked, he tends to get pretty snappy at the guards, it’s pretty funny, I guess.’ Yeah, Eliott chastises himself, make it teenage girl trying to be blasé about her crush, much better. He knows he has to be blushing and he hates being this transparent. Whatever. “He’s good with words.”

Yann laughs.

‘He’s got you too, huh?’

Eliott shrugs.

‘Well, it’s good to know he has people that care’ Yann says, giving him back his own words.

‘Yeah, well, caring is one thing. I wish we could actually do something about it.’

‘I could try to talk to him. If you wanted to, maybe get him to open up a little bit?”
Elliott feels a touch of aversion for the idea, without being able to explain why.

‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea. He’s been so closed off about his past. I don’t think he would want you involved in this. I mean, yeah, I can’t tell you but we’re going to rub elbows with some pretty nasty people there. I think he would be really pissed if he knew I came to see you, actually. I’ve just been running out of options.’

‘Hey, no problem’ Yann raises his hands in the air ‘I was just trying to come up with a practical solution. I mean…I don’t want to criticize your skills as a lawyer, but it sounds like you’re pretty much stuck.’

There is an awkward silence.

“I’m sorry, thanks for trying to help, I didn’t mean to shoot you down, I just…” Elliott doesn’t know how to finish the sentence. Or why he suddenly feels so defensive. This is a guy who knew Lucas before, he’s an asset, he’s… well he’s damn lucky. Elliott replays the conversation in his head and the next question comes out unbidden.

‘Do you think you might have been the one he was in love with?’

Yann chokes on his tea, and puts his mug down on the ground, trying to compose himself.

‘I’m sorry, I…’ Elliott starts, but he isn’t, not really. *Were you the one who let him down?*

Yann smiles at him then, in a way that Elliott doesn’t entirely understand and is too smug for his liking.

‘Why, are you jealous?’

‘No! I mean, what? That’s ridiculous, I’m his fucking lawyer.’

‘So what, you don’t have feelings?’
He must take pity on the expression on Eliott’s face as he continues.

‘Chill, it’s okay, I was just teasing. Yeah, to answer your question, I thought he might have, at some point. But earlier, like in our second and third year. Like there was this weird thing that happened with my ex, I wondered if he sabotaged our relationship. But later on I don’t think it was me. I…” He sighs.

‘You know, I’ve thought about that a lot. Like he was always talking about girls but we never saw him with one, so at some point I started to wonder if he wasn’t like, a little less straight that he let on. And there was this weird period of time where he avoided me a lot, and that thing with my ex. But…I never really did anything, said anything. And I regret it now. I was a bit of a moron, back then, sometimes. You know, with the jokes. I was never homophobic or anything, but I just didn’t pay attention to what I was saying. Made jokes about him not being super manly or tall or kind of being you know, more pretty like a girl. I never thought it bothered him. He always seemed so cool, you know, so unflappable, everyone admired him. So I... I don’t know. Maybe I was a bit jealous. But I...sometimes I think that’s one of the reasons he never confided in me, and I regret it so bad.’’

Eliott sighs.

‘Yeah, those kind of jokes, they suck, I would know. But Yann...Lucas’s gotten involved in some really scary stuff. So if anything, he was probably trying to protect you.’’

Yann looks down at the ground. “Somehow, that doesn’t reassure me. I think I would have preferred the option of him just thinking I was a piece of shit and cutting ties and going to engineer offshore solar farms in Dubai, or something.”

Eliott bites his lip, and pictures Lucas in the middle of the desert with one of those weird flappy khaki hats, on a camel, and he can’t help but laugh, high and a little giggly.

“Yeah I don’t know if I can’t really see him adapting to the desert. Too much sand, not enough people to get a rise out of.”

Yann raises his eyebrows but then laughs, too.

Eliott does like Yann - he has a very grounding, warm energy. And he obviously loved Lucas. He can get behind that.
‘Okay, tell you what. I’m going to go through our old stuff.’ Yann proposes, genial. ‘Like, projects we did in common, school bulletins, text conversations, those things. For clues. And we’re going to stay in touch, okay? Forgive me if I’m reaching but dude, you really look a bit on edge, like you could use someone to talk to. Not about the classified stuff, but yeah.’

Eliott nods.

‘And thank you for reminding me of something important.’

‘What?’

“Well, Lucas’ always been a tricky guy. But you’re right. Whatever he was doing, it was always about protecting someone else. Whether it was his mother or his friends or me. So if you don’t understand him, maybe you should look for that. Whoever he’s protecting.”

Eliott frowns. Wonders.

How is that connected to Lucas going after his father? He’s been so worried about the past. But maybe it’s about the future. About the people his father could threaten next. God, who in the world could that not be.

He thanks Yann; promises to stay in touch. As he walks out, for a few minutes, he feels lighter than he has felt all day, a rush of warmth, a moment of peace. He wants to go back and actually hug him. It does help, to meet someone friend shaped. Who does understand the unique conundrum of caring for Lucas Lallemant. Sees him as a human instead of a problem and...how much it is.

He likes people who are awake to the world around them.

But he’s gotta move on, he’s got - things to do. People to interview. He can’t get too comfortable after one small uptick of his luck.

He walks for a while, through the little streets and side alleys, thoughts racing, the movement helping him think. What can he puzzle together from all this?
Well, Lucas’s father is probably, definitely some sort of mobster. That’s the easiest explanation. Maybe he’s responsible for his mother’s death, too. But that sounds like a very private grudge, not something to drag the whole Parisian underground into.

And if he hated him, why did he step into his world? To get the tools to go after him?

Or maybe he met his own Lucas, tempting him to the Dark Side.

Wait, that’s not what Lucas was doing to him, was it? Fuck. Fuck.

If it was, would Eliott be able to stop him?

He’s confirmed some things about Lucas he already more or less knew: he’s protective, genius levels smart, cagey, possibly prone to violence, he has a mean streak, he’s charismatic. And he hates authority figures and posh people. Like Chloé Jeanson, a dumb rich kid to manipulate, seduce, use and then cast aside. He said *I don't punish people for the sins of his father*, but that’s what he did to her.

So what about Eliott? Is that what he thought of him in the beginning? What about now?

It would really, really hurt, if it was still the case.

But there's gotta be more.

Kind, perceptive Yann would not have been friends with a psychopath. He’d rather trust Yann than the old biddy. Latent homophobia, brain rot, same thing.

Lucas must have been a good person, at least at some point in his life. He’s seen that in his eyes, heard it in his voice. He needs to believe. So that means he can be one again, no matter what happened to him.

Even if he's still in the Dark Side doesn't mean he should be left there.
Nobody should be left in the dark.

And as he walks among the dandelions and the pigeons and the beat up cars, he feels a rush of blood to the head, and he swears to himself he will not turn away, no matter what. No matter how lonely he feels suddenly.

LUNDI 16:35

Eliott is halfway through Pere Lachaise cemetery when his phone buzzes. It's a message from Alex telling him the police are somewhat stalled by their own incompetence, so that’s good. He also notices he has another message on voicemail from earlier this afternoon.

“Hello, this is Cris. I interviewed you. I wanted to let you know that I have an article coming out tomorrow. I am sorry, it's not flattering. I didn’t want to but I heard the rumors and I had to do something. I did some research and ...but I wanted to give you some time to prepare, I guess.”

And another one. From his father. Telling him he’s messed up, but it’s okay. He can still make it alright if he comes back to the fold. He can find him a job in the private sector, help him lay low for a while, if he makes no waves.

Is he scared?

This fucking day.

He looks around at the graves - he was vaguely thinking of visiting Oscar Wilde and his lipstick covered shrine of a tomb, or maybe Jim Morrison, but the closest to him is just an angel weeping over an unknown tomb, copper gone green and shadows growing out of the corners and crannies.
And suddenly, it’s as if he’s not entirely alive anymore either, like his days are numbered - of course they are for everyone, but now he hears the clock tick, and it makes him mad. What does he care about legacy, about his own name? Why does the imminent bombing of his reputation feel like doom even though it felt like a promise of liberation only last week?

He is a fool. He is.

Might as well embrace it.

LUNDI 18:46

Today he’s on a roll.

Tomorrow the world is going to come for his head in the press, but today, he’s doing things.

Today, he's standing in front of the Karls’ home, and he's ringing the bell.

He doesn't see why these old fucks should get to be left alone after owning blood diamonds.

There is a little voice in the back of his head telling him that this is way too risky, that he should
prepare, rethink, strategize, wait, but fuck it. He's done waiting. He needs to do. Something. He's tired of worrying endlessly.

“Hello ?”

“This is Eliott Demaury. I need to talk to you.”

There is a moment of silence, and then the old door buzzes and opens.

Wow, fortune favors the bold, huh.

He finds himself in a very fancy hall, chandeliers, wide spiral staircase, gilded mirrors. He sees his own reflection and it makes him want to laugh. With his suit and expensive leather satchel, he totally fits, but his hair looks like it got caught in an explosion blast.

Whatever. He rushes his hand through it, making it even more messy.

Then he hurries up the stairs and walks through the door that is opened for him as he reaches the third landing.

He finds himself in a parlor - immaculate, in tones of salmon and white and beige, expensive shiny objects on little stands, like a showroom. One is a little porcelain dancer, gracile, her limbs impossibly long - but instead of feet she has anvils for feet, lumpy and pointy and disgracious. It feels so cruel, he thinks, to have made her that way, and he is seized by a sudden need to break the statue off at the ankles and stuff it into his bag. Make her feet that work.

No, that's not what he came here to do. Okay. Wait a second.
Mr Karl is ushered through the door by an uncomfortable maid. He has all the hallmarks of your favorite grandpa: warm smile, bright white hair, crinkles on the side of his eyes, open honest face. Eliott feels like that cat in Saga, all of a sudden, like he needs to open his mouth and hiss *Liar liar liar*.

But no, there’s something else he needs to try first. His mind whirs at a breakneck pace, and he wants to make a woosh sound. Options options options.

Tomorrow Eliott will go down in flames in the press, but today he can still make them believe he has the upper hand. That he has his own shadow men.

Old friends of his father. What do they think of him? Of him showing up here, so brazenly? Can he push them into revealing something they shouldn’t?

‘Hello, Mr Demaury. It’s nice to finally meet you, your father told us a lot about you. Is there anything I can help you with?’

Eliott stares back at him, purposely not answering, letting the atmosphere in the room become more tense by several degrees. Stares him down, until he can see the man’s smile falter just a little bit. It feels strangely thrilling, to be able to elicit that reaction. To not be the indimidated one, for once.

A woman arrives. Pale blond hair, wrinkles, concerned blue eyes, immaculate clothes - the other half of the matching set.

‘My dear Eliott, I wish you had told us you were dropping by. Can I offer you anything to drink?’

‘Sure’ Eliott says, and then walks through to the other room, until he finds a kitchen, the Karls trailing after him hurriedly. He opens random cupboards, finds a glass, opens the fridge and finds a bottle of probably very expensive white wine. He pours himself some. He can hear a little outraged huff behind him. He wonders if Mrs Karl’s indignation comes from his rudeness or the fact that he is using a water glass to drink wine. Both, probably.

But when he turns her face is pristine.
Yeah, these are his father's people alright.

‘Eliott dear, that wine is days old. We could have found you something more suitable, you know.’ Tone of reproach subtle. *If you’d asked*, implied, but gracefully so. Born and bred hostess. Using his name, gently chiding, as if she’d known him since he was a kid.

Mr. Karl is less adept at hiding his discomfort. Behind the affable façade, he is nervous. Eliott wonders why they let him in. It would have been much easier for them to pretend to be busy, take the time to call their lawyer. But here they are, trying to play old family friends.

“So, I’m defending the man who stole from you. Funny coincidence, huh?”

“Well, Paris is a small world, isn’t it?” She chuckles, as if they were sharing an inside joke.

Eliott smiles, without letting it reach his eyes.

“How did you get the diamonds?”

She seems taken aback for just a fraction of a second before putting her smile back on.

Mr Karl isn’t so good at hiding. “You must have read it in the file -”

She cuts through him.

“Now now, Joseph, you know Demaurys can’t be sweet talked out of the room.” She laughs again. It seems as if she’s trying to get on his good side.

Weird. Extremely weird.
He thinks.

What has his father told them about him? He can’t imagine anything but my son, the silly idealist. And yet. These people are afraid of him. He’s nervous, she’s trying to placate. Why? Do they think he’s already part of the game?

Shadow war. They think he is more of a player than he actually is. He suddenly is reminded of his father’s eagerness to keep him from the case. You have a name, you don’t know what that is.

He tries to put himself in their shoes. He doesn’t see these people mingle with the underworld directly. The man is too obvious with his emotions, the woman too caught in her own preciousness. So something bloodless, peripheral enough to allow them to keep pretending everything is normal. They wouldn’t know too much about Eliott’s role, could imagine he’s already a shadow man. And why wouldn’t he be, after all? Aren’t these people big on heritage?

He can see his father charm them into being part of one of his schemes. The thrill of being part of something exclusive, confidential, promising. And then maybe regrets, as they realised too late what it meant, and the feeling of being pulled in deeper and deeper.

Eliott looks around the kitchen. Pictures of smiling grandkids everywhere on the walls. Poses a little artificial, definitely not spontaneous, but there is real warmth there. They have something to lose.

He relents a little, to see if he can reel them in, and for the strangest moment, accepts the mantle he feels hovering above his shoulders.

So what if I was one of them. How would I behave?

“You’re right about that.” He puts his glass down. “Excuse me, I’m being very rude. The thing is...Catherine, can I call you Catherine?” She nods. “You’re old friends of the family, so you must know how my father gets. He’s a bit...hard to get past sometimes. So I figured...it’s time I got out there, met some people on my own. And since chance has brought us to meet again in this case…”

He can see it happen almost imperceptibly - the breath she lets out. Relief.
“Armand is one of our dearest friends. But you are right. He is very headstrong.”

This makes it more obvious in Eliott’s mind. They didn’t want to do this. They were pushed to. And they’re expecting something from him.

He feels like he is on the verge of a breakthrough, that there is something important here and yet he can’t put his finger on it.

Gamble.

“I was really surprised at some of the things my client told me. It was very enlightening. Made the whole thing worth it, really.” See I am a player, and I know things about you.

“Your father really made it sound like you were going on a crusade against him with this.”

Did he now.

Eliott laughs.

“Dear old dad. Well, I guess it can’t be easy. Getting older, watching your children move up in the world.” He shakes his head, with pretend affection. “I swear sometimes it’s like he’s afraid of being replaced. He thinks everything I do is a move against him, whereas I wish we could build together.” Not rocking the boat too much, but presenting himself as a potential alternative.

“Do you ever feel like your father’s line of work might interest you?” Oh, she’s fishing alright.

Eliott leans back against the counter.

That’s me. Eliott Demaury, mobster baby. I don’t know how to file my own paperwork but sure. I can play at scary.
“Well, I like the idea of having a legacy to cultivate. I always feel like my father’s been trying to prepare me for something.” That’s blatantly untrue. If anything else, he’s been actively pushing Eliott away from what he was doing. “But he’s found me a bit more difficult to control lately.” That is true. “You see, the more I learn and…” He pauses. “Sorry, could I trouble you for a glass of water?”

Gotta create some suspense.

Ms Karl smiles, and obliges. Mr Karl is watching him like a spooked owl.

“Of course, I like the idea of having influence. Making great things finally happen. Helping the right people out. That’s how it works, right? My father…ah, he’s great. I worry about his tendency to use and discard people, though. I don’t think that’s very sustainable. And he’s been a bit indiscreet, lately. Leaving trails. It worries me, sometimes. What it could do to our family.”

The Karls are both smiling now. They are reasonable people. And Eliott is frightened at how easy this feels. Playing with their fears.

“But I’m just a newcomer to the game. Maybe I’m not seeing the whole picture yet.” Maybe you should help me see.

Mr. Karl frowns again. He is the most anxious of the two.

“Has he told you anything about what we worked on together?”

“Oh he hasn’t told me anything. But you know. People talk. So I wanted to come and check with you, first, before making any decisions.” Like I have decisions to make instead of staring at my phone all day.

Mr. Karl frowns, and starts “We never wanted those diamonds in the first place, and all this attention is .-”

Mrs Karl cuts him off, speaking fast, as if to reign her husband in.
“Armand is a very dear friend. He has done more for us than anyone. We would never do anything to oppose him, and we were glad to be able to do him a favor for once. But we are, well, a bit worried that the current tensions have caused him to neglect his friends and family. And if he were to have his son at his side, working with him, reminding him of certain things...well that would be good for everyone, wouldn’t it?”

“You really think he would let me?”

“Well, dropping Lallemant’s case would be a good way to show goodwill.”

Eliott feels a prodigious surge of annoyance. So she is trying to reel him in, huh.

“That’s not happening.”

He can’t stop the irritation from showing in his voice. He can be smooth about anything but this. Fucking hell, what is wrong with him. First the journalist this morning, now this. He's a PR disaster. Fucking feelings.

“Well then you really are not ready, after all, young man.” Mrs Karl says, with a matronly composure. “I understand wanting to use him for information, but if you think you can keep him as your pet psycho on a leash, you are more of a fool than your father ever was. It didn’t work with his father, and Armand understood that before anyone else, even if it cost him. And it won’t work with the son. I know what I’m talking about.”

She steps forward and pulls down her pale pink cashmere sweater, to show a thin whitish scar across her trachea, its edges jagged and crude. It looks like it really, really hurt.

“That’s what happened right after Colibari learned Armand had granted us the contracts instead of his own company like promised. He waited for me in my car, and he took out his gun and had me drive to his house. Then he tied me to the seat, and sliced my throat so that I would bleed out slowly and my husband would only find me when it was too late. And I would have to wait, in vain, knowing this. Thank god Armand found me, just in time. Colibari was a brute and a monster, and his son might not wear his name, but he trained with him, worked with him, and to survive that? He must be exactly the same kind of monster.”

She pulls her sweater back and looks at him, grimly. “You think you are the first mob brat to show us a little attitude? You’ll have to do a bit more than ransacking our cupboard like a ten-year old throwing a tantrum for a snack. Yes, we do think that Armand might need a little support. Maybe a little bit of a moderating influence. Maybe by working with you, he would be reminded of the
importance of strong ties, want to set an example. But it’s loyalty he needs, not an entitled upstart. Humility. Hard work. That's how you get somewhere in life.”

Elliott feels like he’s just been hit by a freight train, her last words rushing over his head.


“You really should go talk with your father” she continues. “He loves you, you know. And he worries, as well. If you show him respect, he will give you back that love tenfold.”

The idea of working with his father, taking his orders, learning from him - rears something venomous in him.

“You know, there are a lot of different types of monsters.” He puts his glass down, a little bit more forceful than intended. “Lots of different types of violence.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s a warning. You think you know my father. Well, he showed you a kind face because he needed you. I know him. He uses people, and when he doesn’t need them anymore, he discards them. And it’s already started to happen to you. I know who he is behind the charm. He is a monster. You’re wrong about Lucas, he’s nothing like his father. Neither of us are. And we’re going to bring what they did to the light. And if you’re still on his side, you will fall. You should fucking run while you still can. ”

He probably shouldn’t have revealed this. But god. If there is anything he hates more than anything in the world, it’s people trying to teach him a lesson, being all patronizing.

“So you are on a crusade.” *So you’re one of those.*

Oh god. One of those. Eliott is so fucking done.
The condescendence in her voice. As if giving a damn is some sort of degeneracy.

Really, do they make those people in a factory? Eliott storms out, back to the parlor, where he sees the sculpture, and in a rush of blood to the head, he sees the little dancer, and pushes her off the pedestal before exiting the apartment as the sound of something hitting the ground and breaking in a thousand pieces echoes behind him.

_I’ll show you a fucking tantrum._

LUNDI 21:45

He feels like the ballerina. Shattered. Wired, but all wrong.

He’s in a bar. He couldn’t face the empty apartment. It’s loud. He lets the noise vibrate through him, wishes he could become one with it, nothing but a beat, heavy and overwhelming and ephemeral.

He doesn't really know how it got there, but he's got a beer in hand, so he drinks. And drinks.

This morning feels a century ago.

He’d give anything to go back, to before when he learned he might never see Lucas again.
He did learn a lot from the Karls. This is probably his biggest breakthrough yet.

He wishes he didn't.

So Lucas is a Colibari, and his father is a killer, and Lucas worked for him. He doesn't want to think about what that could mean. Doesn't want to think about Lucas doing those things, slicing throats, terrorizing people.

Colibari had a fallout with Armand. Probably something real estate related, if the Karls were involved. Lucas's mom ends up dead. The Colibari blame Armand, and hatch some sort of a plot to...do what, exactly ? What's the fucking point ? At this point it sounds like nothing more than a mob war. And he's being fought over like a bone by dogs.

The whole thing is giving him a fucking headache.

He feels restless, and the high from meeting Yann is gone now. It's all mixed up now, like he's being pressed into a space that is too small for him to even breathe.

Lucas probably doesn't even care about him anymore. Used him, set him aside, moved to the next stage of his plan. And here Eliott is, pining, tearing himself up, like a pathetic fool.

Why does he care ? Why ?

Oh he knows why. And it's too late, it's too late to do anything about it.

...

Why does he always end up here ?
You're too much, Eliott, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry Eliott I don't feel that way.

You ruined everything, Eliott, for everyone.

Eliott what is wrong with you? You don't know how to love. You're so selfish. You're a waste of time.

So he really was so desperate that's where he had to go looking for love, huh. In the fucking pits.

No, he was just looking for a way to wreck himself. And now it's coming closer and he doesn't like it.

Or it's just all one and the same.

Lucas's eyes, velvet voice, cutting voice. Like cut cut cut, snap snap snap he could see everything unnecessary Eliott was burdening himself with - prestige, success, reputation, fake girlfriend, normal life, comfort - and cut it away, only the essential remaining. The bare bones. Like a sculptor before a block of marble, seeing the sculpture hiding inside. And maybe that's what he needed me to be.

The truth of him, and what he's always coming back to.

I'm a pathetic desperate mess. Worthless on my own. I need someone to cling to, I need someone... and normal wasn't enough, right... because I always need more, and I...

He talks to Lucas in his own head. His own angel of the pit. They used to call Lucifer the lightbringer, didn't they? Shone a light on things that should have remained hidden. Knowledge is a curse, an awakening to pain.

Do I want you to wreck me, save me? Do I want to save you or use you to wreck myself? Is there a difference?
God, what happened to us both. Raised by monsters, huh. And we’re both more similar to them than we want. I can charm people into doing what I want, if I really try, I know that. Scare them, too. I just don’t want to. I want...to start over. I want to be real, truthful. I’m tired of hiding.

Where’s the way out?

And why do you think that either of us can reach it on our own?

...

More bottles come. Shot glasses.

Dancing, lights, a club. People who touch him, kiss him, whose faces or names he can't remember.

They all feel like ghosts. Rain on an oiled canvas, colorless, inconsequential. He doesn't even care about what they do to him. He wishes he could just dissolve. Nothing so dramatic as an ending, no. A fading, a gentle ghosting, no sorrow, no shock, the best for everyone. He's just -

MARDI ???:

The world is a blur, and unbearably sharp at the same time.
Eliott is lying on a park bench, somewhere. The sky is vaguely grey, early morning adjacent. He's in a haze, still drunk, too tired to move, but too wired to sleep. He's not even sure he's wearing his own clothes, and he knows his expensive leather oxfords are gone, replaced by cheap neon flip flops. He would laugh about it if it didn't make him want to cry and never stop.

He’s 18 again, discovering how much the world can hurt. Or he’s 50, all used up. His mouth tastes like bile and cheap coconut liquor, the kind he usually hates.

He doesn’t know where he is or what time it is. By some miracle he still has his keys, and phone, although the battery is dead, and wallet, although his few hundred euro bills are gone.

He wonders where his stalkers went, all of a sudden. Maybe they could have given him a lift.

He knows he’s courting disaster, and he can’t do anything about it. So he just lays there, watches as the sky slowly turns from dull and lifeless to rinsed with porcelain and flowerbud and russet colors. In a moment of clarity, he wishes he could weather his own phases with such grace. Instead of being shredded by his own emotions.

But he’s nailed to the ground, and gravity has never felt more like a condemnation.

MARDI 15:54

He’s managed to crawl back to his office somehow for a few hours of sleep, a shower followed by a gallon of coffee. He can’t find his meds, but whatever, he’s sharper without them anyway.

_No time for fucking histrionics, Eliott. Get to fucking work._
He dragged himself to the municipal archives. Ignoring the newspapers on the way, the hangover, Alexia’s calls, everything else. He doesn’t want to explain what the fuck he's doing, he doesn't want to take a moment to stop and feel everything crumbling, he just can’t.

He’s running out of time, he needs *something*.

The Karls said something about contractors being switched up. They’ve had several property development companies over the years but he’s managed to track down the one that was working for the municipality of Paris in the 90s and he checked which other companies also worked for the city, at the same time, and their first projects. He finds a trace of the one case he managed to get his eye on in his father’s office - along the Seine riverbanks - but there seems to be nothing remarkable about it. The rest is just random. A lot of old apartments being renovated. If his father awarded the contract to his friends, this is obviously nepotism, but there isn’t any apparent price gouging, no projects that take an abnormally long time to be concluded. And nothing that proves any shady dealings, or that the Karls were his father’s friends before that.

There’s one company that stands out, though - carried out a few contracts before the Karls did, but then fell out of the race and were fired from a few projects for unspecified reasons.

The emblem of the company is a stylized dove.

A bit on the nose, but who else would know ? The owner is one Jaques Cantour.

He finds an address. In a quiet middle class suburb, another hour from Paris.

Could he be Lucas’ father under yet another fake name ?

If he is, then according to Catherine Karl, he’s a trained killer.

And it's probably the one man Lucas absolutely won’t want him to seek out.

The thing is, he doesn’t know he can stop himself from doing so anymore.
He finds himself in la Petite Ceinture, again. It looks so different in the late afternoon light. Peaceful, almost charming.

He walks past his old bridge, the usual place, the raccoon chimera graffiti wan and faded in the daytime.

To an old warehouse. The one he described to Lucas in their first date flight of fancy, their parallel universe fairytale turned steamy and desperate.

He doesn’t even know if it’s still standing, he hasn’t been there in a decade, and it takes him longer than he remembers to reach it.

His heart soars in relief when he sees the building, built on a stone bridge over the railway, the grey stone almost golden in the slanted sun rays. It’s covered in graffiti, too, now, and almost all the window panes are broken now. But it’s real, and right now, he need anything he can get.

He still finds the rusty iron service ladder embedded in the wall though, and so he climbs. The old, dried out brambles that run along it tear at his clothes and scratch at his limbs, but he doesn’t stop. Then he pushes the trap door open, with a kick, and crawls in.

The state of the place is a punch in his gut.

There is nothing romantic about this place ; it’s something out of a horror movie. Thick layers of greasy dust, old rusted cans, stains on the wall, garbage bags, dead rats.

And the beautiful angel on the wall is gone, painted over by coarse graffiti, vulgar insults, messy faces with bulging eyes, screaming.
Maybe it was never even beautiful in the first place. But it certainly isn’t now, and nothing can fix that, except maybe a demolition engine.

And that’s just like him, isn’t it. Seeing palaces in garbage dumps.

He gets out as quickly as he can.

... 

His phone rings, on the way back. The secret one. It’s Emma.

“Hey, how you’re holding up ? Hope you didn’t wear a hole in that board of yours yet. Anyway um, our guy’s been moving.. He must have gotten tired of his little couch potato life. He’s gone to the same bar almost every night for the past week. We just thought he was going out for drinks at first but we did some digging. It’s not just any old bar.”

What a surprise. He coughs, tries to get his game face back on, tries to not let the despair show in his voice.

“Really ?”

“Well, it’s a mob bar. Well, it was before it got renovated. Now it’s much more chic. Still listed in the police files as a place of interest, though.”

Obvious. Too obvious. Those thugs really are everywhere once you start looking.

“Eliott ? Do you want us to follow him in there ? See who he might be talking to ? We haven’t found any cameras inside.”

“No, give me a moment. Keep following him. Do you have any more info on what mob exactly goes to the bar ? Territory, that sort of thing ?”
“Not really...it was kind of in a no man’s land, a place to negotiate, neutral ground. A few shoutouts in the nineties between the Corsican Mob and the Italians. It’s...been bought by a real estate firm five years ago. Now it’s a fancy high-concept cocktail bar. But it’s still under watch.”

“Can you send me the name, address, and that of the developers, please ?”

“Sure. Hey, are you okay ?”

He laughs.

“Well, you know how it is. Nothing that a pizza and an all-nighter can’t fix.”

She laughs in turn. Bless Emma and her awkwardness around emotions. She never's never been able to read him for shit, and that's what makes her such a relief to be around at times.

“Okay dude, stay strong. Justice will prevail, right ?”

“Careful, you’re starting to sound like an optimist.”

Emma makes a blegh sound.

“You wound me. I would never. K bye, I’ve got some adulterers to catch in the act. Wish me luck, and no impromptu penis sightings !”

She hangs up.

The name she sends him is neither the Karl’s or the Colibari’s firm. So, still up in the air. Other players in the game. People he hasn't met yet. More ennemies, most probably. Or not, if he finally learns to play his cards without becoming a fucking mess every time Lucas comes up.

He’s got some options. Choose your own adventure.
Visit the bar. Track down Jaques Cantour. Wait for Yann to come up with something more. Dig deeper into the dead man’s past, too. There’s always more digging to be done.

Giving up is not one of them.

Anyone of them could yield unexpected results, or blow up in his face spectacularly. He’s standing in front of the minefield, and he needs to get to the other side.

And there’s only one person who can guide his way through. And he’s going to give him one last chance to do so.

After that, all bets are off.

MERCREDI 8:15

Maison d’Arrêt de Paris.

He would have been there at 6 in the morning if he could. Sleep is overrated these days. He feels as if he’s got battery acid running through his veins. But he has to go on, so he plasters a smile on his face and walks in.

It’s another receptionist there, thank god. His visit permit should still be valid, since administration generally works at a snails’ pace - as long as Lucas accepts, he should be able to talk to him.
“I know my client refused to see me last time. But his demand to represent himself hasn’t gone through yet. In the meantime, I am still his lawyer, technically. Can you pass a message to him, please? Tell him I have a message from Yann Cazas.”

It’s underhanded, he knows. But he’s out of options.

The first thing he notices is the murderous gaze in Lucas’s blue eyes, directed at him this time, without any filter or pretense. He’s not playing. It’s real, and withering, and makes Eliott want to melt into the ground.

The second is the shocking array of bruises on the left side of his face, one black eye, blooming on his cheekbone, down his neck where it looks like fingers, mottling his pale skin purple, yellow, green. God.

And the third thing? Or is it the very first? Seeing him still feels like a breath of oxygen after being nearly choked.

My little fellow bad seed. My Lucas.

Fuck, what have they done to him?

One thing’s sure, he doesn’t want to think about what state the other guy is in.

“Are you okay?” is the first thing that makes it past his lips after he sits down. His voice is all creaky. God this is awkward. He tries with all his might not to think about the last time they talked.
Lucas mouth becomes a very thin line, his jaw barely unclenching as he speaks.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing, talking to Yann ?”

His voice sounds deeper than on the phone, by several octaves.

Eliott swallows. He’s too relieved to be scared, but god, that stare. Cold, unflinching, like he wants to drill a hole in Eliott’s skull. He would believe it, right now, that this man is capable of terrible things.

“You weren’t talking to me. I needed information. And he said he was going to reach out to me anyway.”

“No he fucking wasn’t. You’re not my lawyer anymore. I haven’t talked to him in years, he’s in the past, and my past is none of your fucking business.”

“Well you made your business my business, didn’t you? You can’t just...drop me like that. After everything you...Fuck.” Eliott doesn’t want to sound imploring, but he can’t help it.

“Yes I can. I hire you, I pay you, I can fire you whenever the fuck I want. That’s how this works.”

Nothing else. Lucas's face is cold, merciless, almost bored now. He leans back in his chair, all coiled tension and fake nonchalance, as if to say Next please.

“Now, what was Yann’s message ?”

“I talked to people, you know. I got some addresses. I’m not going to drop this. I’m going to keep digging, and if you don’t want to tell me, then fine. I’ll figure this out on my own.”

Lucas sighs, drops his interlaced hands on the table, and leans forward, just a little, his demeanour not one bit less threatening as he gets closer. Like even talking to Eliott is a waste of his energy. Eliott wants to puke. How did things shift so fast.
“No, I don’t think you will. Everyone knows you’re not my lawyer anymore, now. So what are you going to tell people, huh? Are you going to lie to them? Find out things illegally that will never stand in a court of law? You have no fucking mandate anymore. It’s over. And I don’t think your daddy will be very pleased if he sees you sniffing around. Might put you on a much shorter leash if you do, for real this time. Playtime’s over.”

The mocking tone in his voice cuts deep. Eliott finds himself swallowing down tears all of a sudden.

“I thought we were in this together. I thought you…”

Lucas’ laugh is a cruel version of the one he’s come to cherish.

“You thought what? That because we jerked off together on the phone once, you knew me? That it was true love? Fuck, you really should grow up a little. Stop believing in your own bullshit. And I don’t want to tell you how to do your job, but dude. Maybe you shouldn’t believe the first criminal who makes eyes at you, next time. Go on tinder, get a date, be a little less desperate. Or is the caged bad guy thing really doing it for you?”

Eliott feels so raw. He can’t bear to hear what they had—what they have—reduced like that. He wants to run and hide.

You’re going to make a fool of yourself, Eliott.

“Now, tell me what the fuck Yann’s message was, or get the fuck out.”

Eliott blinks. It’s too late, his eyes have gone wet and blurry.

He can’t believe it; he doesn’t want to.

He struggles to even open his mouth.

He’s a fool,
or maybe it’s faith.

“Yann told me...whatever Lucas does, it’s always to protect people. Even when it doesn’t look like it. It’s what he does. He protects people.”

He can see it, then.

A millisecond, the mask falling off. A flash of fire in those icy eyes. Mouth slackening. A fraction of surprise, of despair before he’s in control again. But it’s too late.

Got you.

You do care. About something.

And Lucas knows that Eliott knows.

The silence hangs over them, like a Damocles sword.

They stare at each other. It feels surreal. So much passes between them and Eliott understands none of it. He’s given so much to this man already and he barely knows him. They fit so well, and they can’t find a way to get through to each other. It’s an utter mystery. Their bond is etched in a language he doesn’t know how to speak.

It feels like forever passes.

Then Lucas looks away.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t help me. You don’t have what it takes.” He's trying to keep it steady, but there's a slight tremble in his voice. A crack in the ice.
“Excuse me?”

“I thought...I thought we could play this good and fair. But we can’t. It’s going to get extremely ugly, and you don’t have a place in that world. I’m sorry.”

Now that. That takes the fucking cake. Patronizing him, he can’t fucking stand.

Eliott gets up. He gets it. And he’s angry, suddenly.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t know me. And you don’t get to make that decision for me.”

Lucas’ jaw gets clenched.

“I’m going to take care of your father. But if you go off on your own, you’re going to ruin my plans. And then we might never get to him.”

“I’m sorry, I think that’s bullshit.”

“What?”

Eliott scoffs.

“You might know what you’re doing a bit better, sure. But you’re in prison. What do you think, that you can take him down from here? He's got half the police and the prison administration in his fucking pocket. They're going to get to you, if they don't already have. I mean, look at your face! I'm starting to think, you know what, you're full of shit. You're not telling me stuff because you just don't fucking know. And I could have access to information you could never get on your own. I know there are some people out there who want me on their side. My name means something to them. It opens doors. It’s leverage.”

Lucas’s smile is acid barely holding back despair.
“And where do you think that is going to lead you, huh, Demaury? Maybe you should worry less about me and more about who you’re going to turn into if you go that way.”

*Oh. Demaury now, huh.*

They truly know how to hit each other where it hurts, doesn't it.

He’s halfway in love with this man, but god. He hates him, too.

“Well maybe I’ll just be joining you, then.”

“I’m not going to be waiting for you, you know.” Lucas snaps back. “If you’re having any delusions that we can *run away together*” his tone gets scathing as he says these three words, “after this, by the way, I don’t do relationships.”

Eliott scoffs again.

“Yeah, that’s obvious.”

Lucas scowls at him, but there’s a hint of panic in there too. Like he can't see that Eliott isn't cowed, that his little charade isn't working anymore.

“If you do this, I don’t think I can forgive you. And believe me. You don’t want me to be mad at you.” He speaks as if he's trying to swallow back the words that come out of his mouth as soon as they leave it, forcing himself to push them out.

It's low. It's so low. They’re fighting dirty now, lower than the ground. He’s just throwing any hurtful thing at Eliott he can, to get him to back down.

Because he cares. He’s an idiot and he cares and he wants to keep Eliott out of danger. And the way he goes about it is infuriating but still. He cares. Eliott can see it. He's trying with all his might to hold it in place, this mask of contempt and violent indifference, and it's shattering him from inside, isn't it? The threat carries self loathing. He's had people wanting to intimidate him, he knows the difference. Lucas is trying to get him to run away. Bluffing with all his might. *Leave me alone for your own*
He swore to protect Eliott once, and he doesn’t seem the type to give that promise lightly.

Eliott knows that, he knows *him*. God he knows him. So far away and yet so close. He’s a fool, but not about this.

Eliott could sing through the anger. He doesn’t know what his emotions are doing, like his heart has released every emotion he’s ever felt into his heart all at once. Like he’s standing in a room with a thousand people shouting at him. It’s too much, it truly is. But he still knows which way he has to go.

He laughs.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’ve seen you too naked to believe in your tough bad guy act. Or well, heard you, I guess.”

Lucas’s look could frighten a bullet into stopping mid-air.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? How much more of an asshole do I need to be to you so that you give up? Do you think this is a game? What is up with these savior fantasies of yours? I’m a bad person, Eliott! You should stay the fuck away from me!”

There’s fear in his voice. Disbelief. Reminds him of that evening. *You can’t just walk out alone like that, in the street, in the middle of the night, Eliott !!!!!!! those people don’t care about the damage they inflict!*

Yeah. Bullseye.

Eliott laughs one last time. It’s no use trying to convince Lucas, really. He’s too fucking stubborn. Well, so is Eliott. He’s going to have to show him that he’s a worthy partner. That’s all.

He gets up, and leaves, and he’s already down the corridor when he hears it.

Lucas shouting his name.
MERCREDI 21:00

Emma’s confirmed that they saw their little bank teller leave his hotel and move towards the Alchemist, mob dive bar turned high concept highly dubious cocktail bar.

Eliott has to start here. Because come on. It's obvious.

This has all been about being seen, since the beginning. A game of faces and shadows.

The more he thinks about it, about how Lucas played his cards, pointed it out to him? It was a plant. A way for Eliott to come here. He wanted him to follow this guy, come here, be seen here. Wanted him to step into the shoes of the Demaury heir, entering the game. Needling his ego, getting him to be daring, telling him secret histories.

Except he changed his mind. Because he started to care. Maybe he started to have second thoughts about wanting to send Eliott right into the lion's den.

But Eliott has no time for fear anymore; he’s found something that’s more important.

So here he is. Maybe it's a trap. It probably is. There's a part of him at the back of his brain screeching at him to stop, to stay away. But he's like a train with no brakes now. He has no choice but to see this through. Fuck caution and step by step and whatever else.

His life was always going to lead here, he just needed the right motivation.
He’s prepared himself, as best he could.

No tasers or knives or wire-taps. The only thing that can protect him tonight is what he can make others believe. His wits and charm are his only weapons.

He’s taken out his custom tailored power suit. Slate grey, double breasted, large shoulders. Relying on mobster classics tonight, foregoing the hat though. He doesn’t want to fall into clichés after all, look like he takes himself a little bit too seriously to be taken seriously by others. Crisp white collar, open for a hint of arrogant casualness. Flip flops in the garbage, brand new oxfords. His most expensive watch, cufflinks. Hair slicked back.

He’s not afraid of standing out.

After all, he knows it now. This was about leading him here. Anything else is just too obvious, isn’t it ? They wanted the Demaury heir to show up in there. And so he will.

And tonight, he’s going to make that name his.

Show Lucas he’s a worthy partner.

... 

He gets out of his car, and walks towards the bar in a straight line.

Past the blacked out front, he’s ushered into a smokey parlor, high walls of black polished concrete and panels of stained glass, as if in a macabre play on a church.
He is met by a man in an equally intimidating suit.

‘Mr Demaury? Right this way, please. We’ve been waiting for you. ’

END OF PART 1

Chapter End Notes

So, how much do you hate me right now? I'm sorry.

next chapter: PART 2 Guerre d'Ombres

into the belly of the beast we go....

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