les diamants sont éternels

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by flying_elliska

Summary

Eliott Demaury is a criminal defense lawyer, and a damn good one. Promising career, perfect girlfriend, he's got it all.

He's also bored to death.

Enter Lucas Lallemant.

His latest client. Witty, too damn charming to be honest, and absolutely refusing to cooperate.

Caught in the aftermath of a diamond robbery, he starts spinning wild tales of cursed jewels, mobster connections, family feuds and shadowy organizations. All seemingly designed for the express purpose to entice Eliott into his dangerous world.

Soon Eliott is risking his career, reputation and safety to get to the truth. And that's just the beginning...going down that road will lead him to face dark secrets set in motion before he
was even born, and sides of himself he'd never even knew existed before. He will learn the true meaning of family and the things that really make him powerful.

And he will fall head over heels in love with the most inconvenient man he could have picked in the entire universe.

Notes

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 jebentnietalleen. Beta-ed by beexx. So much thanks!
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, and go through the metal detectors. Then they 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 an “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 having very little tolerance for 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 what she just said. 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, closing the door behind her.

"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 find a way to flip this to his advantage. There is clear antagonism below the charm, and yet the layers are indicative of…some potential for connection he can build on.

"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?

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.

Lallemant smiles at him, infuriating.

“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?”

Elliott 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.”

Elliott 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.”

Elliott 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 - Lallemant'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 Karls. 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 Lallemant seduced her in order to get access to some of her dad's private information.

Well. Lallemant 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 Lallemant 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.

“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.”

“Ooh, 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.”

“Well anyway 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?”

“Hmm, 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 Elliot 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 every time. 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 Lallemant 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?

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.

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**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 Éternels* 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 beexxx <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 Lallemant, 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, Lallemand 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.

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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.”

“Oh, 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.

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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.
No.

Elliott 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.”

“Aww, 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 Elliott to do.

It's perfect.

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

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

Elliott 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.

Lallemant sinks his eyes into Eliott's.

So blue.

This is a stupid game.

Eliott wants to know where it goes. If it can make Lallemant 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 ; Lallemant 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 Lallemant'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.

“Oh 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.

“Your 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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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 beexx 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 Lallemand 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.”

Elliott 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 Elliott 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.

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**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.

Eliott 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 ?” Eliott 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.” Eliott 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.” Eliott 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 Eliott 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 scour 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 Lallemand’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.”

Elliott 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.”

Elliott 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.”

Elliott 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 scar.”

“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 defrosted 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 sid 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.”

“Yeah, 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 sours. 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 Rémieux, 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 ?”

Lallemant 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.
VENDREDI 12:45

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,
too. Potentially useful.

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 disbarring 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.”

Eliott 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.”

Eliott 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 slimy 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?”

“T'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.

“Eliott 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 Lallemant telling him to let it go. He doesn’t bring it up, because he doesn’t know what he will do if Lallemant 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.”

Lallemant 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.” Elliott 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 l, 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 sobers 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 bulky 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
tight, 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 -
“Elliott, 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 Elliott breathless. “Not let you out for a week. Fuck, a month.”

Elliott 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, Elliott, I'm coming” Lucas gasps into his ear and Elliott 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.

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. Blablabla. 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 whimper 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.

“We 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 Lallemant, 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 Lallemant.”

“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 Colibri.*

*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 !

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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.
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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
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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.
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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 wlw 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
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 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?”

“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 shitheads 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 frequentionations, 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?”
Eliott 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…” Eliott 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. Eliott 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…’ Eliott starts, but he isn’t, not really. Were you the one who let him down?

Yann smiles at him then, in a way that Eliott 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.
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 indiscrete, 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.”

Eliott feels like he’s just been hit by a freight train, her last words rushing over his head.

Colibari ? Colibari ? Lucas's father is a Colibari ? He worked with Armand ? But it went wrong ?
Lucas worked with his own father - a killer ? What ?

“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.
Elliott 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, Elliott. 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 Jacques 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
sake. 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....
Le Patriarche

Chapter Summary

*Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels* dun dun dun
Lucas broke communication and decided to change lawyers, so Eliott, in desperation, went to dig into his past. He found prejudice, worrying clues and a potential ally in Yann Cazas. After an anything but fun night out on the town and sleepless night, he went to pay a visit to his father's old friends and ex-owners of stolen diamonds, the Karls. That's when Eliott started to realize that some people were expecting him to enter the family business - whatever shadowy thing that means remains to be seen. In their last altercation Lucas refused once more to open up but Eliott saw enough behind his mask to be convinced it is his protective instincts that are keeping Lucas silent.

Eliott then made a choice, walking into the mob bar the Alchemist for answers - and to prove to Lucas he can be a worthy partner....

In this chapter : Dark deeds and dark stories are revealed, and another mastermind steps out of the shadows to make a request. Eliott learns what it really means to be a Demaury....

......

Chapter Notes

hey guys long time no see !
okay, I wanted to start and thank all of you who have left me lovely comments here and feedback on my blog (tumblr @flying-elliska) I might not always be the best at answering but I read them all and they're what keeps me writing <3 it really has been exhilarating this response...I love you guys

now to our chapter : this one is very heavy on plot and explanations, very light on Lucas. It is also half of the chapter I wanted to post, but since I am leaving on holidays tomorrow for three weeks and access to wifi will be scarce, I didn't want to leave you with nothing for so long. Hopefully no wifi means a LOT more time to write though and I will come back bearing gifts ^^

it also sets up a lot of the plot for the rest of the fic - indeed, this is really when the main plot kicks in, 73k words in...I'm so sorry, it's going to be a long one. But hopefully you will find it fun. I had fun writing it and i've pretty much decided to go wild with it. We are definitely getting in over the top James Bond-y type plots.

In the words of my beta beexx (the best cat mama and the Robin to my Steve <3) 'sooo extra' lol.

So, hang on to your seatbelts, and don't forget to leave a comment <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes
‘Mr Demaury? Right this way, please. We’ve been waiting for you.’

A chill goes up Eliott’s spine at being addressed in this way. But he schools his features.

This is not the time to flinch.

He is led inside, into a narrow, dark corridor. The only lighting comes from white pillar candles deposited into bronze grooves at the base of the walls. The effect is very dramatic, like he’s entered an old crypt made ready for some arcane ritual. They pass a series of smaller lounge rooms and closed doors.

Eliott’s heart is in his throat, in his ears, pumping like it wants to escape. But he keeps his jaw clenched, lips tight.

These are the shadows he’s always been afraid of in his father’s wake, the ones that gave him that aura of terrifying power. And here he is, diving in head first.

And he is nervous, yes. But at the same time, he’s less scared than he should be. Like he knows there is fear way down but it’s disconnected from his brain. And it verges dangerously close to exhilaration.

He’s here to get some fucking answers.

…

They get to massive double doors of dark old wood spiked through with old iron rivets, that are opened for him, onto a huge room.
Inside, he's not faced with circles of creepy monks, like he was almost expecting. It's very much a bar, albeit a strange one. The walls are dark polished concrete, the ceiling high and vaulted, hung with wrought iron chandeliers. There are several bar units, circular and lit up from beneath, standing on their own. In the middle of each circle, black clad blondes handle all sorts of bottles and fill glasses with smoking liquids. In between, there are seating areas, with little tables and leather couches and seats with low backs. It looks like the kind of place where everyone comes to watch each other.

Eliott is led to the back of the room, up a few stairs to what seems like the VIP-area, on a little stage, and guided to a chair of plush velvet in the very middle. Then the intimidating man leaves.

Eliott is left alone. And all eyes are turned on him. He swallows.

What mask should he wear now?

On the table there is a little silver dish, offering little toasts of dark bread smeared with a black substance - maybe caviar. Eliott remembers tales of poisoned foods and doesn’t touch it.

He doesn’t have to wait long before someone walks up to him.

It’s a man in a dark suit, with blonde hair and icy eyes, who sits down in front of Eliott without introducing himself. He sprawls and stares at Eliott with a mocking stare.

“I think you walked into the wrong bar, buddy.”

Eliott stares back. The man has rosy cheeks and a falsely jovial smile on a boyish face, but there is something about his movements that tell him this is a man accustomed to violence. And not like Lucas, alert and protective, wired to survive. But like he probably enjoys it.

Eliott does not squirm, responds simply,

“No, I’m in the right place.”

“Really? Think this is your time to shine?”
What? What does that mean? He notices heads subtly - or not so subtly - tilted towards them around the room, trying to catch their conversation. They were expecting him. They know who he is. The son of Armand Demaury. Come to reclaim his place in the family, maybe.

Eliott thinks of the bank teller. Lucas wanted him to come here, and then he swerved on his plan. Wanted him to come here and ask questions that would peg him as an ignorant outsider. But then he changed his mind. Had Eliott associate himself publicly in the press, ruining his professional standing. Why? He got so caught up in figuring out Lucas he forgot to ask himself what his own role in all this meant.

He thinks of the Karls, wondering if he was stepping into the family business. Of his father, wanting to offer him a job, telling him there would be people he couldn’t protect him from.

Did Lucas want to protect him? Or was he afraid of the things Eliott could learn here? Of the power he could gain?

He looks at the man in front of him, again, at the room waiting for an answer.

First bidder loses, he knows.

“And what business is it of yours?”

The man smiles, delighted. The effect is chilling.

“Oh I thought that would have been obvious. I mean, won’t a man like you be in need of my services at some point?”

Eliott shivers to think about what this man’s services could be.

“So, are you trying to advertise? Or are you just trying to mark your territory like an incontinent poodle?”
When in doubt, insult people. That’s one of the things he’s learned from Lucas, too.

The man’s grin turns into a grimace.

“That’s rich coming from someone without even one paltry bodyguard. I hope you’re not counting on that little psycho pet of yours to have your back. Because then you really are in for a surprise. That one’s got no loyalty to speak of. And the workmanship? Poor. So messy, it’s like he wants to get caught.” He tut-tuts. “You’re new around here, Demaury, so I’m going to do you a favor and explain a few things. We don’t like show offs. We don’t like entitlement, and heirs swanning in thinking they’re hot shit when they never bothered to climb the ranks properly. And we don’t like degenerates like Lallemant. He’s going to get what’s coming to him, and you won’t wanna stand in our way when he does.”

“Really, Nikolai, threats already?”

The woman interrupting them seems to be cut from the same mold. Tall, fit, wearing all black, long straight blonde hair. An air of perpetual disdain on her face. But at least she’s stopping the conversation from escalating further - which Eliott is itching to do but knows he shouldn’t. So he welcomes her intervention.

She comes to stand at Eliott’s side, sitting on the little leather stool next to his chair. The gesture is clearly meant to indicate she’s on his side, but it is too close for comfort.

“The old man is fucking cracked in the head”, the other man - Nikolai - spits, outright scowling now. “Letting an outsider in like that.”

“Or maybe he’s tired of having to deal with thick-skulled meatheads like you. Why don’t you fuck off back to kindergarten and learn some basic manners first?”

“Fuck you, Ingrid.” He looks at Eliott. “You’ll have to pay one way or another for what you take, Demaury. In fire, and sweat, and blood.” Then he gets up and leaves.

Ingrid sighs.

“All those theatrics, you’d think he has something to compensate for.” She waves her hand nonchalantly and a waiter arrives out of nowhere. He extends a little leather bound menu, long and
narrow, to Eliott.

Inside, on thick creamy ivory paper, are printed a list of names - without prices or ingredients. Names for beverages, he understands as he looks around him, but he hasn’t ever seen cocktails named like this. People are sitting with all sorts of strange glasses in front of them, some fuming, some lit from the inside. The names sound quasi-biblical, by way of the Godfather.


“I wouldn’t go for Hubris, it’s made with the purest grade of alcohol humans know how to make, and you really can’t meet our boss after that. Same goes for Lust, except the effect is...well, more localized.” She looks at Eliott’s crotch in a way that makes him want to cross his legs. “Greed is nice. Made with particles of suspended gold. It looks gorgeous.”

“I’m not really thirsty” Eliott says.

“Well, refusing our hospitality would be very rude. And you don’t wanna be sent to the naughty corner with Nikolai, do you?”

No, no he doesn’t. So is this some sort of weird psychological test?

He swallows. “What about Legacy?”

She sighs. “Legacy is boring. Nice old cognac, one of the most expensive brands on earth, but they’ve done something with the chemicals, so it stays on your taste buds for days.”

Cognac makes him think of his father. So, no.

The Alchemist, huh.

He waves, hoping he will attract the waiter and not look ridiculous. Thankfully another blonde materializes.
"We'll have Greed...for the lady." If Eliott's learned anything, is that any powerful douchebag loves ordering for women without asking them what they want. Except she did say she liked that one, so it can be thoughtfulness in disguise, too. "As for me…"

For one moment he is tempted to take the piss out of all this over the top grandstanding and order a cheap beer and call it Minimalism or some shit but well. He's here now, he's got to play the game, for better or worse.

"I want something you don't have on the menu. Transmutation."

The waitress looks boggled. "Excuse me ?"

"Well, this is the Alchemist, right ? Why don't you turn me some lead into gold ?"

She nods and marches off, clearly used to obey any extravagant order. Ingrid looks at him, thoughtful.

"You're a nerd, huh. The old man is going to like that."

Eliott shrugs “I know how to read, yes.”

Ingrid smirks. “Well, then, around here, you’re already ahead of the curve.”

Isn’t it fun to be pretentious. But hey. He needs allies. Better her than fucking Nikolai.

Ingrid launches into an explanation of the bar’s history and molecular gastronomy. Eliott listens with one ear only, being as gracious and non-committal as he can be. The waitress arrives, after a while, with a little silver tray. She extends a flute to Ingrid, containing a foamy liquid that glints golden. Then she deposits the rest in front of him. One cocktail glass, containing a silver metallic liquid ; and one strange object that looks like a rose made of metal.

Ingrid grins.
“Oh, they usually use those for Curiosity and Temptation. May I?”

He extends it to her. She takes it off his hands and folds all the petals up, and when she shows it to him again, it looks like an apple.

“That’s for Temptation, it opens when it’s like that, but not this time apparently.” She closes her hands again, flattens and re-shapes it until it looks like a little jar. “And Curiosity : Pandora’s box.” She gives it back to him. “So what are we looking for, now ?”

It’s a puzzle, Eliott sees, as each petal seems to be able to connect to others in several ways but snaps back until all have reached their place. A way to say, well you think you’re so clever - why don’t you prove it.

Eliott lets his fingers run over the metal, pushes and pulls, tries to understand how the mechanism works. They seem to be strangely magnetized. Whoever put those together seems to like their references too. The Fall of Eve for Temptation, Greek Myth for Curiosity. He thinks. Transmutation...alchemy...the philosophical stone. The quest to turn lead into gold, but most of all, for eternal life. He’d brag about that one, but to be fair, he owes that one mostly to rereading Harry Potter one too many times as a kid.

He tries to see if he can push the whole into some sort of a stone-adjacent shape, but to no avail - the petals won’t budge from the center of the rose, where there seems to be a sort of hidden compartment. Hmmmm.

It’s all very pessimistic, he thinks. Temptation leads to downfall and ruin, so does Curiosity. He looks at Ingrid’s glass. The foam has gone down, revealing layers of gold through almost viscous liquid - the gold looks less like flakes and more like shards. He looks at Ingrid. Her lips are constellated with gold dust, but as she licks her lips, he can see blood.

My god these people are deranged, he thinks. But the point is clear : greed leads to violence. And a pessimistic twist on the Alchemical quest ? What’s the opposite of turning lead into gold ? He would try to make a turd out of it, but that’s a bit too punk for those people. No….

Ah yes. The pessimistic response to the quest for eternal life : you can’t live forever. Time will get you. And what better symbol for that than….

He twists the lower layer of petals until they face down, and finds he can pull them out and unfold
them. He works, until he gets a complete object in his hands, and he hears something unlock.

‘An hourglass? What does that have to do with…” Ingrid begins.

He opens the mechanism, and there at the core of the rose, encased in velvet, a little vial of clear liquid. He takes it out, pours it into the glass - and like an oil spill catching fire, it spreads and turns it all into metallic gold that glows with an orange undertone.

“Wow” Ingrid says, “Never saw that before.”

He smirks and raises his glass.

“Well, here’s to the many different ways to get to the gold, then.”

They clink their glasses against one another.

“I think I’m going to like this Demaury a lot more” Ingrid smiles.

Well, looks like attending all of his mother’s fundraising galas was good for something after all; he still has charm on his side. He puts on his best arrogant asshole expression.

“That’s good, then. Because I really don’t like to share.”

*Transmutation* burns on his tongue, and when the burn subsides it is delicately bittersweet, with an almost green taste, as if from a sapling tree.

Don’t they say it’s important to burn the land regularly so that old undergrowth can leave way to new life?

Oh he doesn’t want to like this, but he can’t help but feel a little flattered.
Some hours pass. Ingrid is trying very hard to entertain him, he can see it now. She is slightly nervous behind her elegant mannerisms. He indulges her. Tries not to show how bored he is, tries to contain the compulsive bounce of his leg.

Then, finally, they come for him. He notices them immediately: all men, massive, moving in formation. They come towards him and he gets up, and close around him as he follows. Ingrid trails behind them, like a cleaner fish.

They move down yet another corridor, pass several heavy doors, and then a flight of stone stairs. They go down, and down again. It seems like a warren, and the walls are not concrete anymore but naked stone and the mineral, humid scent of cellars and underground caves fill his nose. How the hell does this place go this deep? They're supposed to be in the center of the city. One thing is certain - there is no way he’s getting out of here if they don’t want him to. The thought doesn’t bother him as much as it should.

Maybe Lucas is right; maybe he does have a self-destruction impulse. Or maybe being brave is a drug.

They push yet another door, and step into a round room. Most of it is occupied by a gigantic round table bound in leather. The ceiling is low, and rocky. There are torches on the wall. It looks sparse, almost medieval, a far cry from the excessive luxury he would imagine mobsters to live in. No, this is some Knights Templar sort of shit.

On the other side of the room, a massive fireplace contains a roaring fire. On top of the mantelpiece rests a stone skull, and a shiver creeps up Eliott’s spine as he recognizes it to be an exact - albeit bigger - replica of the one in his father’s office.

And in front of the fire a man sits in a leather chair, turned away from them. Eliott is gestured towards him, to sit in the opposite seat.

“I am glad you are finally joining us, Eliott Demaury. It was about time.”

The man’s gaze is heavy. He is old, face weathered by time, and one of his eyes is milky, as if unseeing. But his gaze is sharp. He is dressed in all black, like his men, and yet the aura of authority that emanates from him is unmistakable. Eliott catches a glimpse of his men bowing to him as they recede to the back of the room.
Eliott is no stranger to being scrutinized by powerful older men who want something from him. He feels like the scene is a funhouse mirror of the last time he talked to his father. The man’s stare is terrifying, something brutal about him, unblinking. Like being observed by a dinosaur - the carnivorous kind. An uncanny, almost inhuman intelligence, older than time itself. And yet; it never reaches the levels of discomfort he feels around his father. He meets it head on and lets it pass over him. Then he remembers he was addressed and responds. He didn’t learn much from Ingrid but she did seem to be very keen on politeness, and so it must be the law of the land.

“Thank you for your hospitality, sir.”

“Did you like your drink?”

“Very much, sir. Especially the aftertaste.”

“Pine bud sap and resin, distilled. It’s not everyday I get such a challenge. And you solved it very fast, too.”

For one moment, the man sounds like a doting grandfather. It’s exceedingly strange. It makes Eliott want to preen.

“So you don’t believe in eternal life?”

The man smiles. “Oh yes, I do, but of a different kind that what alchemists implied. What does the body matter, in the end. Only reputation deserves to endure.”

Ah, that sounds more like it. Eliott feels he’s going to be made an offer he can’t refuse anytime now.

“Don’t you have another mix called Legacy already?”

The old man chuckles.

“Yes, I do. But that brand of cognac isn’t made anymore. Most of the places that produced it have
gone out of business decades ago. I have bought out the other ones and shut them down. There are only a few casks left. That’s what makes is so rare, after all.”

“But it’s ironic, too. Staking Legacy on something that’s almost gone and will never be made again...but that’s the point.” Eliott realizes.

“This place is my still life, the man answers. Beautiful luxury, like fruits on a master painters’ canvas, surrounded by flies. All the vanity of man on display, death always looming sooner than you think.”

Eliott notices, then, that the man’s skin is sallow, unnaturally yellow. His eye bloodshot, his teeth grey.

“Do you know who I am, young man ?”

Eliott shakes his head. He feels instinctively that this is not a man he should try to bullshit.

“My name is Vallès. I am the head of this organization, and your father’s boss. And I am dying. ”

Eliott really, really doesn’t know what to answer to that. Somehow ‘nice to meet you’ doesn’t feel appropriate.

“That is, in a nutshell, what you should know about me. And what should I know about you, then ?”

Eliott scours his throat. He knows he can’t hesitate too much, this would send the wrong message. But what to say ?

Hi I’m Eliott I like sunsets painting cats and lazy morning in bed, I’m a lawyer too haha, but not like in the movies, I will not object to YOU!!. (I knowww shirtless pics are cliché but nice right lol) Swipe right cutie xoxo

Eliott Demaury. 28. Graduate of University Paris-1 Sorbonne, with honors. Fencing team, three times in a row winners of the interregional division. Vice-chair of the social cultural activities committee. Up and coming law firm partner at Guillaume & Demaury. 458 billable hours. Top rate. All the awards. Looks great in a suit. Integrated asskissing option. Will also wash your windows.
Please please please hire me.

Eliott Demaury. My artist statement: the self is a construct, and aren’t we all playing a role anyway? Isn’t there anything better than feeling yourself dissolve in the inextinguible volupty of the contingency of being?

Yeah well I’m Eliott and I’m a lovestruck idiot, what else is there to say.

“I’m here because I want to know what my father has been hiding from me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s been shaping me all my life without me understanding how or why. I want to know.”

“Really? And what are you going to do once you get this knowledge?”

Eliott swallows. How exactly can he put this in a way that won’t get him laughed out of the room, or worse.

“I want certain people to respect me. And...I want to have an impact, I guess. And feel like I’m in control of my own life.”

The old man smiles indulgently.

“You know, I’ve often found that getting what you want isn’t nearly as rewarding as wanting it.”

Eliott frowns.

“Oh don’t get me wrong. Respect, control, and yes, legacy. Those are things worth pursuing. But in my life...I’ve often found that the persons we demand them from are not always worth having the regard of. And yes, he says after a pause, in your case, I am talking about the young man who led you here.”
Elliott blushes violently, and suddenly, he does feel the discomfort.

“Oh I won’t begrudge you the interest. He is a fascinating creature, clever, and uninhibited in ways we all wish we could be. But power, Elliott Demaury, is about learning how to use those men like the good tools they are, without ever letting them set the future - yours or anyone’s.”

Oh this is a callout alright. But at least he doesn’t sense any homophobia in it, which. Somewhat more tolerant mob lord, what a win. This monster will eat you but won’t question your sexuality, isn’t that progress?

“Sadly” Vallès sighs, “We learn this lesson too late. Even the most intelligent of us. It is in the human nature to want to trust. I trusted your father, once, and Colibari, too. Oh yes, and they trusted each other. Thick as thieves, the mastermind and the gangster. I saw that together they were going to change the world. I gave them the guidance I could. I underestimated how hungry they were. Hungry enough to want to eat each other, and the family that nurtured them, and the world after that.”

He coughs, and a man approaches, brings him a tray with a class on it, as well as a few pills in a little plate. Valles drinks and makes a grimace, swallows the pills, then puts the glass back on the tray.

“Having your life depending on those things, it never gets any easier.”

Elliott is caught in a strange moment of empathy.

“A lot of my men warned me against bringing you here. But I wanted to know. After all, you didn’t seem the hungry type. And maybe that is what we need. They told me : a bleeding heart will be ruin for us. The other side is armed to the teeth, they’re gunning to own the future, and you won’t beat them back with fuzzy feelings. But I am sick, Elliott Demaury. I will be dead before the year is gone. I have buried a son, a wife. The future escapes me. Mine only is the custody of the past, and the choice of what to do with it.”

Valles stares into the fire, as if in deep conversation with himself. Eliott’s brain is racing every which way, but he doesn’t dare interrupt.

“You father cares about our traditions, only insofar as it gets him to his goals. I do not know of the true extent of his plans, but the little I know chills me to the bone. He will shape the entire world to
his image if we let him, and I do not think this will be a good thing. Colibari, meanwhile, is bullish, with none of the nimbleness of his son but twice as vicious. He only thinks of territory and reward. He sees power as a pile to sit on, and every slight as theft. I tried to shape them into the heirs I thought they could be, a leader and his right hand man, but something got lost in translation.”

Valles looks at Eliott again.

“I can see you are incredulous. Why is an aging mobster like me talking about values, isn't that ridiculous ?”

Eliott shrugs.

“My father talks about values all the time. It mostly boils down to what makes him successful, though.”

It was true. This was different, for some reason he couldn’t quite grasp. The self-reflection, maybe. His father would never cop to having made a mistake.

“Ah. Yes. And that’s where he goes wrong. You see, men like us, shadow men - any success we achieve is an illusion. Anything we build is already forfeit in advance. The only thing we can strive for is balance. Anything more is hubris. Of course we can have our pleasures, but anything we try to hold on to turns to dust, sooner or later. If we accept it though, then we can fulfill our true purpose.”

“What do you mean ?”

“Well tell me. You are a criminal lawyer, are you not ? You defend the indefensible. Have you not started to understand, by now, how eminently corruptible human nature is ?”

“A lot of my clients made bad choices because they didn’t have better options.”

“Ah but tell me, who made the systems that tangled them like flies in a web ? Humans too, right ?”

Eliott nods.
“The corrupt are not always where we think they are, but in the end, there will always be crime, and there will always be the greedy and the power hungry who think that laws don’t apply to them, and there will always be flawed laws and people who need help and protection where the law won’t go. What we do is bring order to the darkness. A sense of duty, of discipline, so these monsters we rule over don’t eat themselves and the world in the process. A necessary evil, if you will.”

Eliott doesn’t want to believe that. But it makes a strange kind of sense. He likes it better than his father’s grandstanding about willpower.

“Well tell me, you admired your little friend in prison, did you not? And you were able to find the good in him, to trust him somewhat. Or I don’t think you would be here. So you know how to think beyond black and white.”

Eliott nods, tries not to reveal too much with his face.

“Did he tell you about what he did in his past?”

“He alluded to it, but not in detail, and I don’t think I want to learn it from anyone but him.”

“How very noble of you, and how very unwise to refuse knowledge freely offered.”

Eliott can’t stop himself then, he knows he should not, but after so long in the dark….

“What did he do?”

“Well, you must understand. Sons are everything in our organizations. So when our present day Jacques Colibari’s young wife ran away, pregnant, and disappeared into thin air, he almost started a civil war, thinking it was his enemies that killed her. And when he found her again, and the son he didn’t know he had, wearing his mother’s name - Lallemant - it turned out that the boy’s temperament was...not to his liking.

So he tried to undo what he perceived as a soft upbringing...in ways probably too extreme, even for us.” He takes a deep, somewhat rattling breath.” I am telling you this so you understand that my words are not said in judgment. An education like that would have twisted even the most morally upstanding of kids. And young Lucas actually didn’t break for a long time. But his mother’s death provided the impulse that his father’s harsh guidance never did. That is when he joined our ranks,
and after intense training, became one of our most deadly enforcers.”

So Lucas’ father was an abusive piece of shit. It’s no surprise, but Eliott takes no pleasure in being right, this time. Then he frowns; this doesn’t make sense, with the timeline he has.

“He didn’t disappear until months after his mother’s death, though. And his friend told me he was determined to get his degree to honor her memory.”

Valles crosses his fingers, folds them under his chin, and scrutinizes Eliott.

"Ah, I see you have done your research. Very well. It's not his mother's death that prompted young Lallemant to join, but learning of the true manner of it. He learned that the man responsible was so powerful and well guarded, that climbing our ranks, building his own power, would be the only way to ever defeat him. And so he let us turn him into a very frightful tool indeed. But ultimately, he realized there was only one person who could take his enemy down. Which is why you're here today."

"What?"

"You're a smart man, Eliott Demaury. Surely you can figure out who I am talking about."

"My father. He killed his mother, didn't he. You said he and Colibari were rivals. So it could have been a form of retaliation."

Valles nods.

He’s always suspected it, in a sense. But it doesn’t make it any easier to hear.

“But why me? I don’t think I have any skills Lucas doesn’t have. I’m just a lawyer but now I can’t even...And my reputation is shot to hell now, thanks to him...and sure, maybe my father wouldn’t kill me. But I don’t think he would hesitate to find a way to get me out of the game if he really needed to. He’s always made that very clear.”

“Ah, see, this is where you are wrong. Our organization isn’t exactly like anything else out there.
Crime families tend to be traditional, yes. They care about their heirs. But for us, it’s a matter of survival.

You see, when Edmond Rustaing, our founder, was close to death, he foresaw that in the future, his old allies would probably tear each other apart in a quest for power - each other and all he had worked so hard to build. So he built an external agency, whose role was to make sure certain of his rules would be followed.

The most important one states that only the Council of Twelve, of which your father is a part and I am the leader, can make the most important decisions, unanimously.

And the Council of Twelve is constituted of the male heirs, the descendants of his original henchmen. Were one of the original lines to perish, our rule keepers have orders to sink the entire organization. They used to be the keepers of the gold; now they are our bank account holders, nameless, extremely well paid, hidden. Rustaing did this so we would never be tempted to succumb to the number one folly of most crime groups - the endless cycle of revenge, of eye-for-an-eye, dead son for a dead son. And it has worked well for us. We were raised with the idea that we have to protect each other’s heirs, and that whoever would disrespect this rule would be a danger to our tradition, to the very thing that has made us so prosperous through our unity. It is mutual self-assured destruction. So your father might have threatened you. But were he to make any sort of overt move against you, he stands to lose more than his reputation - the regard and trust of his peers, without whom he could never do his business in the first place.”

Eliott is speechless.

“But he never....I was never prepared for this. He kept me away.”

“Yes, and that’s strange, isn’t it?”

Yes, unless...well unless he believed Eliott was so incapable of taking on his place on the council that...

“He wants to change the rules, doesn’t he?”

Valles stares into the fire.

“Oh yes, probably.” Then he turns back towards Eliott. “I know why you are here, Eliott Demaury. You are not here because you care about legacy or respect. You are good at playing with appearances, I will give you that. You walked in here with your head held high, no fear in sight, and made everyone believe you were ready to reclaim the mantle. But that’s not why you are here. You are here because you feel responsible for the sins of your father. And you want to be free of his
shadow. You came here to become a threat to him. I do not believe you would hesitate for a second to sell us all out and send us to jail if it were not otherwise. Until recently, you have always thought of yourself as one of the good guys. The idea of violence repulses you. By all rational readings of the situation, you mean bad news for us.”

Eliott tenses, looks around the room. He is hopelessly outmatched. This is the moment of truth.

“Yet, I have let you walk in here, I have welcomed you, in fact I have mandated Lucas Lallemant to find a way to bring you here. Do you understand why?”

“Because you also want to defeat my father.”

“Well, yes. But this goes a bit further than ‘the enemy of my enemy is my ally.’ You see, the point I was trying to make - you have principles. That’s good. But in your line of work you have been brought to see things from your client’s eyes. And you accommodated your worldview to fit in Lallemant’s actions. I’m sure his charms played a part in that and I take no issue with it. But beyond that, I believe you to have a rare ability - one that few men among our ranks have - to see an issue from many sides, and to withhold making any moral judgments. And I believe whatever made you stand on Lallemant’s side, it was because you saw in him a side of yourself you haven’t let out much to the world yet. This is a side that interests me very much.”

“Why ? I mean you must have other smart people in your organization, I don’t think you would be here otherwise.”

Vallès laughs.

“You should be a bit more careful with that humor of yours, son. Not everyone would be as appreciative. But it must be frustrating indeed, bumbling in the dark. So it is time for a history lesson. I was named head of the organization by my predecessor, and so was he. But Rustaing chose his successor in quite a different way. You have been told of Rustaing’s life and actions, have you not?”

Eliott nods.

“These were different times. Rustaing always had a propension to the mythic, the grand, the dramatic. So, when he felt his strength start to falter he knew it wouldn’t be long before his allies started turning against him, in order to claim the throne for themselves. He knew whomever he chose, it would never be accepted. So he set up a distraction. He organized what we now call the Diamond Games.”
"You mean….”

"Yes, I mean those exact diamonds that started it all, those same diamonds that our mutual friend is now sitting in prison for. Rustaing hid the diamonds, and told all his men that whomever would possess them, six months later day for day, would be named his worthy successor, and the Council of Twelve all agreed they would vote for the winner. The competition unleashed rivers of blood as his henchmen deployed all sorts of plans to thwart each other. Meanwhile Rustaing was free to set up his testament and the future of the organization as he wished. His successor was accepted by all; but that man died without having had time to organize similar games, and so it remained a one-off. The Colibari diamonds were used for collateral, and their sinister reputation kept building. After a while, as we modernized, they were kept out of the way. But nobody forgot the history they carry. And the organization is now more divided that it has ever been since Rustaing’s times. If I were to pick a successor, I don’t think I could convince the Council. My illness has become common knowledge. So when the diamonds were stolen. I think everyone knew what this meant."

"You want to organize them again."

"Yes. And I want you to compete. And win."

Eliott almost chokes on empty air. When he walked into this place tonight, he was half-expecting not to walk out. He thought maybe he could find some allies, talk to people who could tell him more about Lucas. Maybe set things in motion through his presence.

But to be told he should become the next head of an international criminal organization? By participating in a violent, illegal competition?

That’s….

"But…why me?"

"Well, like I said, you would be the only one that your father could not attack directly. You’re an outsider. To be quite frank, I was hoping you would be the most receptive to my vision for the future. But most importantly I know you will be sensitive to my argument. You see, the only man at present who could potentially gather the whole Council behind him is Armand Demaury. Some of the heirs hate him fiercely but he could leverage his influence enough, if he pulled the right strings, if
he used blackmail and promises. I believe he is doing that this very moment, actually. And this does not satisfy me. Not one bit. What it means to be the head of the organization - it means prestige, and power, of course, but it’s a complicated thing. It doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want. However, it also comes with access to a supercomputer that contains all the secrets we have learned about our partners, allies, ennemies, the rich and powerful the world over. The content of it could topple whole states ; and it could incriminate us all. Because we all have things that could come back to haunt us, it stays under lock and key. But if anyone wanted to take a more hands on approach, say, start influencing world politics to their taste - well. And your father has the connections and the political acumen to try, certainly.”

“What the hell do you mean influencing world politics ?”

“You must have heard your father talk.”

“Well I knew he wasn't exactly progressive but I thought...well he's a businessman. He leverages his influence to make smoother deals. He always sounded creepily unconcerned but...toppling states ? That doesn't sound like him. I always thought he benefited from the status quo.”

“Oh but we live in an era, my dear Eliott, where the status quo will soon no longer be an option. The planet is burning, chaos is rising, and the political will to do anything about it is lacking. People are shutting down in fear, like rabbits in the headlights. Soon only a blessed few will be able to enjoy the bounty of life on Earth. And your father wants to be among those who decides who gets what ; how the lines will be drawn in this new world he sees.”

Eliott's mouth feels full of ash.

"Now, don't get me wrong. I am not a good man, not by any means. I am a criminal, not a philanthropist. I have profited from the suffering of others, and delighted in using my wits for some very dark deeds. But I was raised with a sense of my own place in the world. I belong to the shadows. I am the patriarch, keeping my children in check. We take our tally in blood, but not more. And well, now that I am staring death in the face, I have started to reconsider what it means to have a legacy while the world is going up in flames. All my life I have seen how decisions really get made, by the powerful for the powerful. It's robbed me of any idealism. It made me feel justified : the rich and the powerful levy such violence on the rest of us. Our violence is open, it is honest. Why the hell should we not have a seat at the table ? " Valles' face looks otherworldly in the glow of the flames. "But lately I have been thinking : what if true power really is about halting the machine ?”

Eliott raises his eyebrows sky high. That can't be right.
Valles chuckles.

"I know, I know. Very preposterous coming from me. But maybe I have spent my whole life doing what was expected of me. I lost my wife and my son and I kept doing my duty. But the perspective of death is strangely freeing."

"What do you even want me to do? If, I even manage to...I have no clue about how to do this."

"I still have time. I could prepare you. But when it comes to what to do, well. Your specific perspective is exactly what I value."

Eliott shakes his head, speechless.

"But don't worry. I don't think you are as innocent or as clueless as you think you are. After all, I just told you Lallemant was our best enforcer. That means he killed dozens of people. You didn't even blink."

Eliott's heart misses a step. He didn't, did he?

This is all absolutely insane. He takes a breath.

He isn't stupid. He knows the old man must have a hidden agenda; that he will try to manipulate Eliott into accepting it, mold him in the shape he wants.

He also knows that this is the most powerful ally he could get in the fight against his father. This man probably knows Armand Demaury in a way few people ever do. Knows his hidden sides, his weaknesses. He will probably never get another chance like this.

And how long has he told himself that his place is in the shadows? He thinks of his hours spent at la Petite Ceinture in the dark. Of teaching himself how to work with criminals, their quirks and psychologies, how to trick them into opening up, how to keep them under control.

He thinks of his father trying so hard to keep him away from this. Of wishing for so long and so hard that he had the power to do something about him.
Valles makes another gesture. A door in the side of the room opens, and an older man, dressed like a head waiter, brings yet another tray, bearing two little silver shot glasses and a carafe full of a transparent, blood red liquid.

The old man pours.

“So, shall we drink to our new partnership ?”

Eliott thinks of Rustaing’s habit of poisoning his guests.

“Ah, yes. I guess this could look a little ominous. Choose your glass, then.”

“You could have drunk the antidote beforehand” Eliott replies.

Valles chuckles again. He still sounds like a doting grandfather. Eliott feels like he would want to disappoint this man a lot less than he would his father.

“Alright then. Yes, I could be poisoning my rival’s only heir, bringing our whole organization to a stop. Or I could be lying about our rules. I could. Then again, I could not. I guess that’s for you to decide”. He takes a look at the carafe. “Another one of my mixtures. I call this one Trust .”

Eliott tries to parse his options. What choice does he have ? He doubts they will let him walk out of here otherwise, with everything he knows now.

“What about Lucas ?”

“Well, he has played his part, and quite well, I must say. But he can't do much more from where he is. We'll send him another lawyer to stall the process ; it serves us well to have him there in the limelight, making everyone nervous. But you have bigger fish to fry now.”

“He’s in danger in prison.”
"Oh I wouldn't worry too much, he's resourceful. And he's survived worse."

Eliott feels there is something stuck in his throat. He knows he should play this one close to his chest, and yet…

"Oh, my dear Eliott. He’s sunk his hooks in you, hasn’t he? Would it change anything to know he didn't want you to come here because he didn't want you to outrank him?"

Would it?

"If I want to win the games, he could help me."

Valles smiles like a wolf.

Eliott realizes he's talking as if he's already accepted.

Valles does another gesture. Eliott wonders how his men know what each of them mean. A mountain of a man steps forward. He pulls his jacket open and Eliott sees how heavily armed he is.

"This is my man, Nogues. Were you to accept my offer, he would become your bodyguard. Take your orders, too, if you needed a problem taken care of."

Holy shit, he's talking about lending him a killer for hire.

"No offense but I know Lucas has other talents than standing there looking scary."

"Do you now? Oh but you mistake me. I wasn't offering you a remplacement, but a solution."

Another gesture and a wooden case is brought forward and set on the table. Valles opens it. It contains a small gun.
"You were right, our friend Lucas is in danger. The man trying to get rid of him currently lives under the name of one Jacques Cantour. I can give you his address. And then Nogues can give him a visit. Or," he takes the gun out of the box, and extends it to Eliott, "you can do it yourself."

Eliott takes the gun. It's heavy in his hand. He knows how to use it. His grandfather showed him when he was nine. He can still remember.

God, he never was going to turn out normal, was he?

"Now that, for sure, would secure you his obedience. Lucas Lallemant would do anything for the man who killed his father."

This sounds like a trap and a half. A way to compromise him.

"How can I be sure of that?"

"Colibari was the one who killed his associate, one of his men who'd defected to Lucas’ side. Colibari had a very different set of ideas of what should be done with you in our plan. And as it became clear that Lucas wasn't going to follow his wishes... Colibari doesn't take insubordination lightly. He is not of the Twelve; he's our contact in the traditional mob. Everyone here already takes him for a brute. He could have his son killed and nobody would blink. Lallemant's been quite a nuisance for us too lately, deciding to put his own spin on our plan, that little stunt in the press. If, however, you were to give a sign that he is under your protection, well..."

Eliott looks at the gun in his hands. The world around him is strangely inconsistent, vague, far away. Is he really considering murder?

He walked into this place to become Lucas's equal. That was the real reason.

He wouldn’t kill someone over it, though. Not for status or respect or even revenge. He believes too much in the importance of a fair trial, even for the worst of scumbags. He doesn’t want to court the kind of respect that is earned from violence.

But this ...this is Lucas’ father. The abusive scumbag. Who’s still trying to break down his son.
Eliott thinks of little Lucas, and he thinks of himself. The powerlessness, and the fear, and the shame of never being listened to.

Valles is observing him; waiting for him to make a decision.

“I can’t just walk into the house of a big gangster and shoot him down, can I?”

Valles opens his hands, in a theatrical gesture.

“Well, I’m sure if you want to, you’ll find a way. And we would take care of the disposal. We’re quite good at that kind of thing. And this is just the beginning of what you could do.”

It’s a test, once again.

“Maybe I could incapacite him.”

“Ah, yes, but incapacitated enemies are just enemies you gave a motivation to come back at you ten times stronger. Believe me, Eliott, this man does not deserve your compassion. He’s killed hundreds, he’s cruel, he’s a bully, and he wanted to kidnap you and send little pieces of you to your father until he relented.”

Fuck, there’s no way out of this, is there.

Maybe this is what Lucas wanted to protect him from. Having to make this choice. Because...did he think Eliott might actually be tempted?

Valles’ wily gaze seems to follow every single emotion that must be showing on his face, without a doubt.

He takes the tiny glass in his hand. The silver is cool, refreshing.

He’s come this far. And Valles’s made it clear he doesn’t care about Lucas’s wellbeing. He is Eliott’s to protect.
There’s a lot he still doesn’t understand about Lucas’s motivations and plans. But he’s willing to bet Lucas had a hand in meddling in his father’s plans. He risked his life not wanting Eliott to be used as a hostage.

Maybe he’s just another psychopath feeling possessive. Or maybe he was just trying to play his bad cards in the best possible way. And now it is Eliott's time to make the difficult decisions.

The liquid in the carafe swirls with a thousand little silvery particles in the firelight.

"This is the choice we all face sooner or later." Valles says. "What are you willing to do to protect what you claimed as yours?"

Chapter End Notes

okayyyy so does it still make sense to you?

also we have our second cameo, this time it's a bad guy - there aren't that many really bad people in the skamiverse, so i have to grab them in other remakes....as for Ingrid, she will have a very complicated role in this story, but i'm not making her a good guy, i don't have it in me.

in the next chapter : Eliott faces many decisions, and Lucas' team finally reaches out.
Chapter Summary

*Previously on Les Diamants Sont Eternels* dun dun dun

Our leading man Eliott Demaury recklessly walked into the mob bar the Alchemist in search of some answers, after his mastermind thief/crush Lucas Lallemant stopped answering all his calls and fired him, which he did not like one bit. And boy did he get some answers. Shadow leader Vallès, who is dying, wants him to compete in the bloody games which will determine the next head of their secret crime organization. Eliott might have made it work, since his agenda became much more free recently, but he's not really into the murder stuff. That might change, though, after Vallès gave him the name and adress of the man threatening Lucas' life : his father...

This chapter : a confrontation, a reckoning, some revelations, and a message.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is thematically very much the second part of the last one. It was tough to write, because Eliott really goes through some shit in this one. I hope you find it at least illuminating. And this one has a hopeful ending ? Yay.

tw : angst, pretty nasty homophobia, violence, non-graphic allusions to abuse, depressive episode, mild suicidal ideation (see notes for more details) as always take care of yourselves

A big thank you as always to my beta beexx. You're an awesome human ! beware the ditches !

And of course to all of you reading, leaving kudos, commenting, leaving me asks on my blog or being sweet in the tumblr tags. You're powering me through ! thank you thank you thank you <33333333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JEUDI 00:47

The night around him seems to melt as he steps out of The Alchemist. Surreal. A few hours ago he was here, in this exact spot, and yet the entire world was different.
The back of his throat still tingles with a sweet-sour taste. His tongue must be all red now.

*Trust*.

What does he trust in?

Not Valles, that's for sure. He might find the old man strangely likeable but there is no doubt in Eliott's mind he has a hidden agenda. At the same time...Lucas working for or at least with this man isn't a surprise. He's crafty, elegant in an austere sort of way, with an understated approach to wielding power.

Eliott has not made any promises. Instead he said he was going to consider things, and he drank as a gesture of goodwill. Valles gave him the gun and the bodyguard in exchange - although Eliott has no doubt it serves as both a temptation and a way to keep an eye on him.

He's got a small rectangle of paper in his suit pocket, with a number on it. Told to call whenever he made up his mind.

He's got Valles' promise too that, if he were to choose to turn him down, he would make sure Eliott wouldn't be harmed. That he wants Eliott to make a choice that isn't based on fear.

As if. He can't leave Lucas hanging now, can he?

And now they're underway.

Eliott tells himself it's a reconnaissance mission. They have been given a car; Nogues told Eliott that his is too recognizable and that his will be checked for explosives and then driven to a few streets from his office where he can pick it up later. This one is non-descript, but with bulletproof windows.

He doesn't know what he is going to do about "Jacques Cantour." Maybe he just needs to see the man. Maybe then he will know. Maybe somehow he will stop feeling like he jumped out of an airplane and just realized he forgot his parachute. Maybe. Then again, the world of Eliott Demaury,
international crime family heir, shadow conspirator, is full of sinister miracles.

He feels suddenly like he's been caught playing as a kid with his dad's shoes and suddenly they're forcing him to go out into the real world and he can't keep up, he can't even walk. His throat is closing up, and he wants to jump out of his own skin.

He's started to scratch at his own arm, on the side where Nogues can't see him, because he knows displaying signs of nervousness is bad but - he can't stop. Fuck.

The city they drive through is dark, slick, nothing like Eliott can recognize. For a second he wonders if they dimmed the light before realizing the windows are tinted from the inside too. Idiot.

Nogues is impassible. He is really well picked for the job, Eliott thinks. He is big and immediately intimidating, but he has a closed, nondescript sort of face hidden behind a short grey beard. Brown eyes, slightly red skin, very average features, not the type you'd easily pick out of a line-up. And he has an affable manner about him, a little bit like Valles but turned down. Like this man walking around with guns and deadly orders really is just your old uncle who likes building log cabins and forgot to put on sunscreen again and eats too much red meat but you know he's got a good heart under all that gruffness and no sense of fashion whatsoever. Or at least you really want him to have it.

Appearances are deceptive, Eliott knows, and playing with them is the name of the game.

Inevitably his thoughts turn back to Lucas Lallemant. Beautiful Lucas, who must not have had a fun time in prison, looking like he does. But he probably learned to use it early to his advantage, the discrepancy between his delicate features and the sheer ferocity underneath. He must have delivered a chilling surprise to more than one would be abuser. And Eliott had seen only an inking of how he was able to wear the wrath on the surface as a warning to stay away. As a weapon, it must be terrifying.

Even the first time Eliott met him, truth be told, he'd seen the rage. It just wasn't directed at him. More like Lucas had learned to wear his anger with desultory grace. *I don't care to show a fake face to the world anymore.* He'd caught Eliott with careful, teasing reveals of the truth. Not lies.

Eliott also has a double face. But it's not something he can weaponize. It's a pathetic struggle. He pretends that he's a charming, competent grown-up man, while in reality he's a romantic idiot with a broken brain and he can never be anything else.

So it's kind of ridiculous, him pretending to be Lucas Lallemant's avenging angel. But who else is there? Who else cares? Are his teammates actually doing something or are they just fair weather friends and cold colleagues? Did Lucas alienate himself from all the people who actually gave a
damn, like Yann Cazas, in order to protect them, and kept only the company of sharks and wolves? Ending up believing he was just like them? Why the fuck did he get himself in such a precarious situation? Was it hubris? Or that fucking self-destruction impulse?

Oh Lucas, he thinks, why couldn't you just come to me with the truth, instead of going to all that trouble to attract my attention. I'd have fallen for you anyway and we could be doing this together. Or maybe I could have convinced you to run away together. We'd have gotten a boat and sailed around the world, only ever touching ground when and where we wanted to. And the rest of the time, it would just be you and me. He almost laughs out loud. It's really pretentious to think his attention is the only thing at stake. But it's true though, Lucas Lallemant could have walked into his life and ask him to follow him into a life of crime and he would have. It's just doubtful Lucas would have wanted to be saddled with him that long though. Parallel universe Eliott maybe, a stronger, smarter, saner, less sentimental Eliott. But him? He knows this. And yet. He can't do anything just let it all consume him and see where the pieces fall. Even though part of him, maybe his common sense, is trapped in the backseat yelling at him to stop, but it's behind a glass pane and it can't do anything.

They drive into a quiet, middle class residential neighborhood, and arrive in front of a quiet, ordinary house, and Eliott is yanked from his thoughts with no more of an answer but the skin of his arm so raw he wouldn't be surprised he broke through skin. But there is no blood under his nails when he inspects them.

Nogues parks them in the street on the opposite side in front of the house.

"What now, boss?" The man's tone is slightly sarcastic, and Eliott can't blame him. After all this man must have seen and done, to be placed under the orders of a rookie like Eliott...but maybe he sees himself more as a babysitter. Probably.

Eliott breathes deeply to try and settle himself. He feels wired and exhausted, alert and out of whack all at once. Not anything even close to ready.

Showtime.

Until now he's been the naive one, the one that Lucas had to protect. Now he has knowledge and violence on his side, and he wonders if this is what Lucas felt all the time. Like there are no possible
good solutions.

"Can you tell if there's somebody inside?"

Nogues sighs and reaches out to take a small suitcase from the backside. He takes out a strange set of goggles that he tells Eliott are night vision, before plopping it on Eliott's head. Eliott sees a few blobs of orange in each house and he can't for the life of him know what is a person and what is a boiler. Nogues sighs and takes it off him and puts it on his own skull. He fine tunes it and whispers.

"Three significant heat signatures, one downstairs in the kitchen, probably central heating, one small one in the cellar that could be one or several animals, and one upstairs, probably a sleeping person."

He takes off the goggles and turns towards Eliott.

"So, what are my orders, sir?" His face is impassible but again, that mocking inflection.

It makes Eliott want to do something rash to prove himself.

He takes a deep breath.

The thing is, he's not sure he trusts himself either. Rash decisions...he knows this is a dangerous path for him to take.

That wouldn't stop him. But murder? Because that's what Valles was referring to. Jacques Colibari might be a piece of shit, but walking into any man's house at night and shooting him point blank is still murder. Murder with the intent of saving a life, but still murder. Making himself judge, jury, and executioner. And he's built his career on the principle that everyone, even the worst monsters, deserves a fair trial.

He looks at his hands, slightly trembling. He wants to laugh, or maybe cry. All that hand wringing about what he wanted to do with his life. But he's never asked himself this specific question.

"You know," Nogues breaks the silence, "Valles might seem like an affable old man, but if you want to last in our world, you'd do better to take his suggestions as orders."
Eliott feels his heart in his throat again, stuck, suffocating him.

If Colibari was holding a gun to Lucas's head, though, would he hesitate?

No. Of that, he is increasingly sure.

So maybe it's not the killing that's the problem specifically. Maybe Valles is right, maybe there is something merciless and cold within him that would fit in this world.

But this, this feels like killing on command. Like there is a chain of truth here he isn't entirely sure of, like acting on hearsay.

Colibari might be an abusive piece of shit. But this isn't his revenge to take. He's been begging Lucas to let him make his own choices no matter how dangerous, hasn't he?

And he knows, he just knows, Lucas would hate it if Eliott became a killer to protect him. He would blame himself for it. It would be another red mark on his ledger of self blame.

The uncertainty is killing him, though. Doing nothing and waking up to the news of Lucas's violent death in prison would be the worst thing of all.

Why the fuck did he have to be so cagey, throwing Eliott in the deep like that? Fuck him, and fuck everything.

He opens the door and steps out of the car. Nogues rushes after him and grabs him by the arm.

"Where do you think you're going? We need a plan of attack!"

"I just want to talk to him first."
"Are you kidding me? Have you heard anything of what Valles said? That man is incredibly dangerous. You can't just "talk to him".

Eliott shakes him loose.

"Yes, Valles also said you were supposed to do as I say. And right now I'm ordering you to shut up and watch my back. Or is that too much for you to handle?" Eliott knows he's being stupid but the man's sarcasm is impossible to bear when he feels like he has the whole world pressing down on his shoulder.

And talking? It's what he does.

Nogues' face turns somber, but he doesn't say anything else.

Eliott walks up to the door, blue but corroded by years of rust, harsh weather and dust. He rings, and when he isn't sure it works after a while, knocks, once then several times, insistently.

Then he bangs his fist against the door, until finally he hears noise from inside the house, and takes a step back.

The door swings open, and a gun is shoved in his face. Eliott's heart stops for a millisecond, stomach convulsing, every cell in his body telling him to run, but he stands.

The man holding the gun, in contrast to Lucas and Valles, looks exactly like you'd expect a scary gangster to look like. Broad, muscular but with a gut paunch from one too many beers. A badly shaved face with a very red nose, another symbol of alcohol abuse. Tattooed arms, greasy graying hair combed back over a balding head, a stained white tank top, sweat pants. Scars everywhere. This man is a brute and he wants to advertise it.

Those eyes, though. Clever, calculating like a predator animal. And the exact same blue as Lucas's, which is a punch to the stomach all on its own.
They have none of the warmth, though. None of the wit and sense of aliveness. Just cold.

Eliott swallows and speaks, the words coming out nervous and rushed.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you so late but I need to talk to you. My name is Eliott Demaury."

The man's mouth forms a sneer and his tone is halfway between sarcastic and very angry.

"Ah. I see." He lets the silence hover over them uncomfortably. "Think that gives you a free pass to bother people, don't you?"

"No, but my concerns for Lucas's safety do."

The man lets out a scathing laugh. He pursues thick lips, an expression of amused disgust on his face. Whatever is coming is going to be very ugly.

"Lucas, little Lucas, there's always something about him, isn't there. Well then let's discuss, shall we? Once more, once less, what does it matter." He disappears into the hallway, gun held loosely in his hand, and Eliott gulps and follows.

He follows Colibri into a kitchen - filthy, decaying, a solitary naked lightbulb, and strips of fly-catching paper hanging from the ceiling beside it. A faded 2009 pinup calendar on the fridge, the May blonde showing her teeth with empty eyes in an undersized red bikini. A sink full of dirty dishes, empty cupboards as he watches Colibri rummage through them to make himself a cup of coffee. It all looks neglectful, void of any joy or care. He can't help but picture a tiny Lucas sitting at a table like this one and it breaks his heart.

"Your gorilla is staying in the corridor," he says to Eliott matter of factly. Nogues starts protesting but
Eliott silences him with a stare, and he goes.

"I'm sorry if this is not up to your fancy yuppie standards, Demaury, but you'd better wipe that disdain off your face or I'll do it for you."

Eliott's first instinct is to deny, but that would be unproductive, so he schools his face into something more neutral.

Colibari makes himself a cup of black coffee and then sits at the table. He is still holding his gun. Eliott is left to stand there, awkwardly.

"Well, what can you do. This is what a home looks like without a good woman. Can't be helped." His conversational tone is fake, forced. He slurps his coffee loudly. It makes Eliott want to vomit.

The silence stretches on. Eliott finally manages to gather the courage to talk.

"Mr. Colibari, I'm sorry, but I need to know -"

Colibari cuts him off.

"You really have some gall, showing up here, after what your family did to me."

Eliott doesn't know what to respond. He's never been held responsible for the actions of his father like this. He can't defend them. He doesn't even know the extent of them, and if this man thinks he is guilty because of mere association...

"Or maybe you're so fucking full of stupid you don't realize I could just shoot you where you stand."
Colibari raises his gun towards Eliott again, all the while continuing to drink his coffee with the other one.

Eliott swallows. His head feels woozy, his tongue made of lead, his body so distant from his head. He doesn't know which part of him is talking, his head is all scattered, flight and fight mode fighting each other like cats gone rabid.

"If you really want revenge you can shoot me, yes. I doubt my father will care, honestly. But you should leave Lucas alone."

Colibari laughs again. It is a joyless sound. His eyes on Eliott make his skin crawl.

"How ironic. You, defending him. It probably gives you a kick, huh. Rescuing the mongrel from the gutter. Showing him the light. But he's known plenty of people like you, you know. Social workers, teachers. All that condescending well-meaning bullcrap about letting out your emotions and hugging it out and following your better angels. But all you're doing is giving him a signal that you're all ripe and ready to be taken advantage of. Like a chicken to be plucked." He drains his cup and puts it down. "And that's exactly what people like you deserve, trying to make yourself feel good just twiddling at the misery of others. Putting band aids on gaping wounds and calling yourself surgeons." He snorts.

It's as if he is having a conversation with himself, at Eliott. Maybe he is saying things he wanted to say to Armand. It is darkly fascinating, and incredibly disquieting. The man is putting all his worst fears into words, and he knows he shouldn't listen, but. Fuck, he is good with words in a brutal way. Captivating, like a blunt club coming at you in the dark.

"It's not...it's not like that. I'm not on my father's side." Eliott stammers.

Colibari looks at him, like he is just noticing him standing in his kitchen for the first time.

"I don't give a shit. You think it matters, your little intentions and moral handwringing ? Blood is blood. To me, you're only another piece of meat for the grinder. Do you have something to bargain with ? Are you ready to bleed ? Do you have money, information, weapons ? Something real ? Or are you just here to soil my kitchen with that disgusting sentimentality ?"

Colibari has gotten up, hands on the table, staring Eliott right in the face. Eliott can smell his disgusting breath on his face: burnt coffee, old cigarette, rancid bile. It is terrifying. Eliott rarely finds
himself with people who care so little about coming across as somewhat nice, or polite, or considerate. And when he does, they're usually in handcuffs. This is a bully whose brutality is exactly the point. He knows he can get away with it. Because Eliott came here, and is now at his mercy.

Fuck, he's right. He should have waited, found something to bargain with. But now he's here, in the belly of the beast with no weapons, no chips, no nothing.

Well then. He can only do what he's always done in that case. Bluff. Bluff the hell out of it because he is standing at Lucas's metaphorical side now he can't afford to be weak, not in front of this man.

"I came here to let you know. That he isn't alone anymore, and you should watch it."

"Oh, really? I should watch it? Is that a threat?"

He gets around the table just a little, coming to stand uncomfortably close. Then his tone takes on a weird sort of jubilation.

"I know he isn't alone, and I think that's exactly the problem. Tell me, do you know what I usually do to men like you? If you can even be called that?"

Eliott feels a sheer pang of terror run through him, of the type he hadn't felt ever since that evening where he came out of a gay bar with his fling of the moment in college. Maybe being a little too demonstrative with affection, wearing a little too much make-up, and realizing someone was following them. The terror that says run and hide because we know what you are, and we hate you for simply breathing.

It must show on his face. Colibari chuckles, satisfied at having so swiftly torn through Eliott's paltry mask of strength.
"You know, in my time, we made our plans with a little strategy, not how much we liked taking it up the ass. I always knew this would be my little faggot of a son's downfall, but that of the grand Armand Demaury's too? God really must be laughing down at us. How much we both failed as fathers." He puts his hand on his coffee cup, makes it spin on its base. Eliott wants to slap it out of his hand, fear getting superseded by fulgurous anger.

How dare this man talk about Lucas that way. His own fucking father. How dare he reduce what they have to something so vulgar, so prurient.

"I guess my son must be a really good little bitch, then. But you could find better, I'm sure. He must be spoiled meat by now, begging half of the prison to use his ass in exchange for a few scraps...he used to beg me too when I was trying to toughen him up and teach him the facts of life...guess he got a taste for being roughened up, the little pervert..."

Eliott doesn't even realize what he is doing before his fist is flying through the air, towards Colibari's face.

Then things happen in a very fast sequence of events.

Colibari grabs Eliott's wrist before his fist gets to his face, and brutally twists it, sending an agonizing jolt of pain through Eliott's arm. He laughs with glee at Eliott's pain, eyes lighting up wide.

Eliott lets out a yelp of agony, and Nogues comes barreling into the room. He pushes Eliott down on the ground, and total confusion ensues. He hears two gun shots fired.

When Eliott sits up, he sees that both men have been wounded and are lying on the floor. Colibari in the stomach, Nogues in the shoulder. Nogues is preparing to shoot again but before he does, pushed by sheer adrenaline and nerve coming from his only knows where, Eliott wrests the gun from him.
Then he sees Colibari reach for the gun. Ignoring the awful pain in his wrist as he does, he shoots Colibari in the hand before he can grab it. He hits it right through. Colibari lets out an animal grunt of pain as the bullet tears off flesh.

Eliott grabs the other gun, disarms it and puts it in his pocket.

The smell of blood permeates the air, thick and metallic. Eliott thinks he sees double.

On the ground, Nogues is losing a lot of blood. Eliott's brain is yelling at him to do something but he can feel shock creep in.

Colibari laughs, spluttering blood as he does.

"Well at least you had the guts to hit back. He never did. And for that I'll tell you one thing... you little upstart idiot. I'm not the one...the one currently threatening Lucas. I've paid some of my friends to make his time there..."

He coughs, rattling his lungs, and tries to move, heaving like a great beast, but his face contorts in pain as he must realize the wound is too bad. "very difficult, but where's the fun in that if it ends early ? No, it's the old man... must be playing his games again, and here you are... eager for daddy's approval all over again...pathetic."

He spits on the ground. "Now come on, be a real man for once, Demaury, finish the job."

Eliott looks at him, finding it surprisingly easy to be cold, a sudden icy chill taking him over, breaking through panic.

"It's not up to me to decide how you die."

He takes out Nogues' phone and calls the emergency number with it, indicating there has been a
shootout and giving them the address.

"I hope they arrive here in time. I've heard gut wounds are the worst way to go, shitting yourself all over while you bleed out."

He takes the gun with a trembling hand. And shoots Colibari's gun hand again, and again, until it's nothing but a raw, mangled thing. He sees it go in slow motion. This time the man lets out a wheezing cry, swallowing it like he doesn't want anyone to see him express pain. "Don't think you'll be using that one again either. Might want to find other ways to make your arguments in the future, you abusive piece of shit."

Colibari just laughs again between an awful noise of pain, gargles out something incomprehensible.

Eliott wraps his arm around Nogues' intact shoulder and helps him up, and they walk out without looking back at the man on the ground.

... 

They stumble to the car. Nogues instructs Eliott in how to make a compress to stem the bleeding of his wound while he calls for help from their in-house medics and sets up a rendezvous point.

Then they drive, Nogues' ragged breathing puncturing the silence as he holds up the compress with one arm while driving with the other, his face as stoic as ever.

"You should go, kid. Figure yourself out, holy shit. That was the worst case of suicidal recklessness I've seen in a while."

"But you…" Eliott finds it difficult to get the words out, they get all jumbled in his throat.

"I'm going to be okay, it's just a shoulder wound. But you can't be in this with your feelings all mixed up like. It's not good for anyone."
"But Valles....and Colibri..."

"Oh yeah, Valles wants things to go according to plan, but he wants you on his team more than he wants to be mad over a few days' delay. Go. Figure yourself out. Get your head straight. We’ll take care of the rest."

They've arrived at a decrepit 24-7 restaurant bar, neon sign flickering in the night, blurry life signs behind dirty windows. Eliott doesn’t know if he’s in a state to see other humans right now. The world feels completely unreal.

"Call yourself a taxi, wait there in the meantime, and go home, lie low for a while. Keep that gun you nicked with you along with your own."

"Are you going to tell him about Lucas…"

"Kid, everybody knows you're madly in love with him at this point. So do what you have to do. Just figure out what that is."

"Thank you." Eliott says.

He stumbles out of the car, and into the restaurant. It smells like old grease and despair, thick smoke hanging in the air, the barman smoking a cigar in defiance of all regulations. He's one of three patrons, the other ones being a collapsed alcoholic and the other a middle-aged lady in fake fur and too much makeup, probably a prostitute taking a break.

He sits at the bar and orders a cognac. The smell is hateful, the brand infinitely worse than anything he's ever drunk with his father. But at least it's familiar.

He tries to calm down, his heart still going a mile a minute, but it’s hard.

His wrist hurts. His head hurts. Everything hurts. Most of all his heart hurts, for Lucas growing up with such a monster. For himself getting in such a mess. Being stupid enough to fall for Valles' smooth talk. Wondering if the shadow men are going to go back and kill Colibari and frame Eliott for his murder. If any neighbors saw them go in and out. If he’s going to be the one joining Lucas
behind bars and become his real prison wife. If he's screwed up things so bad the best idea is to just run away and change identities. If his wrist is broken. If Colibari is going to make it and come back to kill him just to hurt Lucas more after Eliott was so blatant about his allegiances.

He closes his eyes and all he can see is the bloody stump of the hand he shot off. Feels the pressure of his finger on the trigger and his total lack of hesitation in the moment. Was that him? Didn't feel like it.

The world is an unbearable haze, everything too much. Suddenly he wants nothing more but to stop existing. Each minute is agony. He's so tired of the confusion, of not knowing.

After a while his phone rings. He picks up automatically, like a zombie.

"Hey Eliott, it's Emma. I um. I need your help with something. Alex has found something and uh...better we tell you in person."

She sounds extremely nervous. Eliott feels a pang of fear through his state of numbness. What if someone is threatening her, forcing her to call?

"Where are you?"

He writes down the address. Calls a taxi.

He is so out of it that it's only when they're already half way there that he realizes he is being taken to Alexia's apartment. And his fear ratchets up.

If his friends get harmed because of his stupidity, he will never forgive himself.
He climbs the stairs to Alexia's cosy little studio under the roofs with his gun out, right hand shaking with pain and effort, left hand holding his left wrist to try to keep it steady and compress the pain down.

He has a key to her place on his key bundle still, so he opens it as silently as he can, and holds up his gun as he enters.

He is met only with three concerned faces - Alexia, Emma, Alex - and his therapist, Linda, as well as his psychiatrist, Dr Morton.

What the fuck ?

Eliott lets out a sharp laugh. What the fuck is up with this day, seriously.

"What the fuck is this, an intervention ?"

"Eliott" Alex calls, gently, “can you please lower your weapon ? Nothing to worry about, bro. We just wanna talk."

Eliott lowers his gun in a moment of shock, realizing there is an inch of fear in Alex's voice. That he is scared of him. It feels like a punch in the face, and an out of body experience all at the same time. He disarms the gun and lets it fall to the ground.

"Yeah and what's she doing here, over for a night time chat ?" He says, not able to stop the suspicion and anxiety from overtaking his voice, pointing at Linda. "You think I'm having an episode ? Fuck" he laughs again, holding his wrist "you have no idea the day I've just had, it would be enough to turn anybody nuts." He gets a strong urge to bolt out the door and run away to a place where nobody knows him. This is so absurd. He's been trying so hard not to crack and in the end it didn't mean anything, because their mind immediately goes to...Fuck.

He feels a brief flash of anger. "Actually you know what, fuck you guys. I was so worried, I thought somebody had gotten to you. But now it turns out in the end you're just like Lucille, thinking you're my nurse. Trying to read into my symptoms. Well guess what, you can't help me where I'm going, I'm…"
"Somebody just broke into our office." Linda cuts clean through. "I think they were trying to access our files on you."

Eliott is stunned into silence.

"Listen, Eliott," Alexia pleads "you just disappeared on us without giving any news. We were worried. So maybe this is just a big misunderstanding, but we can talk it out together, yeah? Explain to us what's been happening?"

"I don't have the time. Lucas…"

The thing is, Eliott doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

"Lucas needs you to not be a mess right now" Alex says to him, and his no-nonsense tone is what cuts through the haze. Suddenly, he realizes he is shaking, and someone, probably Alexia, is guiding him to the couch and sitting him down, pushing a cup of tea into his hands. He yelps as he tries to pick it up with his injured wrist.

"Holy fuck, Eliott, what happened to your wrist? Emma, get some ice please."

"I'm not having an episode," Eliott says, pleading with them to understand."I have been tasked to become the leader of a shadowy crime conglomerate otherwise my father will and he will use the power to fuck up the entire world. Or so I've been told."

They all look at him with shocked faces.

Eliott puts his head in his non-injured hand.

"You were right, Alexia, my life is a fucking movie. Kinda wishing I could hit the pause button right
now.”

Emma gives him a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a kitchen towel. The cold relieves the pain a little, but not much. He sits there for a while, trying to cool down and gather himself, tries to figure out what he's going to tell them. But he can't. He can't see how to begin to solve this puzzle. And meanwhile Lucas…

"Eliott...I'm really sorry for asking this but...how long has it been since you last took your medication ?"

Eliott feels a flare of annoyance but he's too worn down to resist. And when he calculates, well...it's been a while.

"Friday." He gives in. "I..." Talking about his possible symptoms in front of his friends feels awfully vulnerable. He doesn't want them to see him tear himself open in an attempt to figure out if he's going off his rocker again.

Thankfully Linda catches on right away.

"Ms Martineau, could we use your bedroom for a moment ?"

Alexia looks at Eliott and he nods in acquiescence.

Alexia's bedroom is the only separate room in her little studio, bright and joyful like her - the complete opposite of how he feels right now. Eliott sits on the bed next to Linda while Dr Morton sits down in the pink wicker chair in the corner of the room, his solemn medical face contrasting absurdly with the purple feather boa on the back of the chair. Eliott abstains from laughing - it really wouldn't play out in his favor.

"So...can you tell me how the past few days have been for you ?"

Fuck, he hates this. He hates this so much. When he's depressed he knows he is. When he's manic he often does too but he doesn't give a shit, thinks it's the greatest thing ever.
But there is always a moment, when he teeters on the brink of an episode, where his brain sneaks up on him. When he overlooks things because it feels so great to feel unquestionably alive for once. Or when he's trying so hard to keep control but he can feel himself slipping and the worst thing is, he's not always right. He's had moments of intense panic at the idea of having an episode and yet in the end he was fine. But the memories of his worst moments, of losing control, are still fresh in the back of his mind, haunting him everyday, shadowing his every emotion. And then sometimes, still, he doesn't know, what is a symptom, what is just him having feelings. He knows he’s intense about life, that he gets anxious often. What should he do, simply put, about being alive as himself ? He thought he had it figured out. Stay stable, avoid excitement or passion, work hard, be normal, watch himself constantly. But that didn't work out in the end, didn't it?

The shame is coiling up, from his belly into his throat. He forces himself to speak.

"I know it sounds nuts but...fuck. I'm not even sure I should tell you anything, you could get into so much trouble...the fact that people have tried to steal…"

"Your private data is safe for now, Eliott. Right now I think we should focus on your personal wellbeing. Tell us as much as you feel you can, and focus on your own emotions."

"I'm not having an episode."

"You don't look manic to me. But you know that's not the only possibility."

"I...know. But I don't feel hypomanic either, I know in that case I feel happy, uncommonly so, you know, I get all excited over stupid shit. But lately I've just been obsessed with this case and scared, and yeah I've done some reckless shit and sometimes it felt like I couldn't stop and I...I don't know - I've felt horrible. But the things that have happened have been so insane...It's...I don't know what's my bipolar and what's just the fact that what has been happening to me is just enough to turn anyone nuts. So like…"

"Why don't you take me through it. Approximate as much as you need to."

"Ok so...I told you about Lucas. Hm... this man I had been defending and I ...caught feelings for him."

Eliott starts retracing his steps, explaining in vague terms what had happened, words rushing out feverish and jumbled. And then he reaches the part that is more difficult to explain. "The first day
after they found the body, Saturday, and then Sunday too, I more or less forgot to take my meds because I was too focused on the case, maybe Monday too a little, but Tuesday I flat out chose not to take them.” He takes a deep breath. He knows he needs to talk about this, because otherwise, it will come back again at a much worse time.

“It's...it's not the first time that happened. My last big case I...in the end I stopped taking my meds too. Because there's this moment before I get an episode...I become so sharp and driven. I stop being so scared of everything, overthinking everything, being such a coward. I'm able to do things. The pressure becomes a good thing… I feel I can take on the world. I didn't tell you this before because I feel ashamed about it. It's like...I hate this condition I have but also like it owns the best of me. And the worst. Sometimes I only really feel myself when...And I...I don't know how to handle it.” He takes a pause, tries to take a breath. He feels so down suddenly.

"I…” He thinks on the events of the last few days. "I went talking to some people. Friends of my father. People from Lucas's past...and I wasn't afraid. I asked them things, I pretended I was going to step into my father's footsteps, tried to intimidate them. It worked a little. I...broke a statue. And then I followed a lead...I met the man both Lucas and my father worked for. And he asked things of me...and then I went to see Lucas's father." And I tried to punch him in the face and shot his hand to hell, he doesn't say. His breathing accelerates. "I wanted to know if he was threatening his son's life."

He lifts his wrist. "He did this to me. He is such a piece of shit...he isn't the one who wants to kill him, though...or I don't know... I don't know. I...it feels like so much. I think I just slept 5 hours total over the last week. I don't know what to do and I don't know who to trust. There is just...this tension telling me I can't stop until I solve this, and it's been building and I...I'm terrified somebody is going to tell me I'm making everything up. Or worse, that I'm not up to the task. My father is...even worse than I thought. I have to stop him. I have to.”

He stops. He knows grandiosity is a symptom. And still. If not him, then who?

“And Lucas...I don't know who's helping him. I think he wants to protect me though and so I have to do the same. I'm...I've never met someone like him. When we talk it's like...lightning. We just understand each other in a way that I never thought was possible...We've only met a handful of times and yet I've been throwing my life upside down for him and I...I swear if you tell me my feelings for him are just a whim because of my illness I'm walking out and you're never seeing me again. I'm sure of him like I have never been of anything or anyone else in my life.”

"I don't believe your feelings are fake, Eliott." Linda answers, voice soft.

Then she hovers her hand over his left wrist softly, and he notices he's been scratching his arm again, leaving welts of red, raised skin. He stops.
"I believe you are going through something very complicated, and needing help through it is only very human. Have you ever heard of mixed states?"

"Yeah, it's like being depressed and manic all at the same time."

"There is such a thing as mixed hypomania, too. Some of the symptoms are increased risk-taking, sleeplessness, impulsivity, and this feeling of tunnel vision you describe, but it doesn't come with euphoria like in regular hypomania - but with anxiety, dark racing thoughts, restlessness. Often also a buzzing feeling."

Eliott feels his heart fall. He remembers being in the car and spiraling after hearing about Lucas firing him. Deciding to do whatever it takes. Had that been his triggering moment? He thinks about Nogues calling him suicidally reckless.

"That sounds...like it could be me, right now, yeah. Maybe just a little bit. Or like...going towards it." The confession is painful. “I need to...not.” He looks down.

Linda sighs.

"I came after your friend called me, out of worry but also because after the break-in, I was worried your emergency plan would no longer be adequate. I don't do house calls, and Dr Morton doesn't either. But...you see I usually keep patient files on a server all therapists and psychiatrists use. And the first attempt was someone trying to access my file from a masked official login. So I thought this was just another doctor making a mistake. But then there was a physical break in. So I figured if we might avoid you getting into the hospital, that might be a good thing. Lucile is still your emergency contact, too. She would be notified. I figured you didn't want to."

"Thank you" Eliott manages to say. "You're really going beyond your normal duties to help me. I don't know what I'd do without…"

"It's no problem, Eliott. I care about your wellbeing. You're one of my oldest patients, and if what you say is true then...that's really not an enviable situation to be in."

'So what now?'}
"You seem lucid enough to me not to need the hospital. I would like for you not to stay alone, though. The most important thing is for you to start taking your meds again. And to rest for at least a few days. We'll keep a close watch on you. See how it develops. But you can take a deep breath, Eliott. It might very well be we caught this one in time."

Eliott nods. He feels no relief, only numbness.

"We might up your dosage a little bit" Dr Morton says. "And have you take a few doses of atypical antipsychotics, to stabilize you. They seem to help the most with mixed states and will provide the most speedy recovery."

Speedy is good, isn't it. Even though it makes him into a vegetable for a few days.

He agrees. Linda says she will come back again in the morning and Dr Morton makes him a prescription, then they leave him in the bedroom.

The first thing he wants to do when he's alone is throwing the prescription in the bin and leaving through the window. It leads out onto the roof and there should be a fire escape somewhere. Or he can just hide until they notice he's gone and go looking for him outside, and he can leave back through the apartment. Pretend all of this never happened. Run, be free, do whatever he wants. Stop worrying about other people worrying about him. All the worry, just gone. Go back to his office and resume working. There has to be a flaw in the accusation's case he has overlooked. Lucas will have to get a new lawyer eventually to replace him. If he has material he talk to whomever he chooses, and...

It's not healthy. He knows. But all he can think of is Lucas in prison, and he -

But no. Like Alex says, he can't help Lucas like this. He needs a grounded Eliott, not an Eliott ready to walk into the night with an injured wrist and a gun to pull god knows what desperate stunt, sending all his friends haywire and probably making a joke of himself. If not worse.

And since Lucas's wellbeing is the only thing on his mind, it doesn't track with his more desperate impulses. He's still rational enough to realize that. It's like a short circuit in his brain. Having his feet tied to the accelerator but also desperately trying to brake at the same time.

He makes another choice. Maybe he's not that worthless in normal times. Because this does not feel like a good state to be in.
He walks out of the room, and addresses his friends, teeth clenched in reluctance.

"I need your help. To distract me. Otherwise I think I might do something stupid."

Eliott sees the relief on their faces, especially as he gives Alex the second gun, the one he took from Colibari.

... 

Then follows one of the strangest nights Eliott has ever gone through. They've made him a splint for his wrist with ace bandages and keep giving him bags of frozen vegetables. Everyone feels hyper aware of him, and it grates on him so much he wants to explode but everytime he thinks about running away there are blue eyes in his mind. And Alex, too, watching him like he knows his struggle. Eliott wonders why he never noticed before the way he is around Emma. Careful not to let anything show, but accommodates her every move, always watching to see if she needs anything, always positioning himself unconsciously. Meanwhile Emma is a sloppy mess as always. It hurts to watch but he would never begrudge Alex the dignity of his choice. It's okay, his eyes seem to say, she just needs a friend right now, so that's what I am.

Love when it comes to it, in the end, is this. Unglamorous work. He called out Lucille for becoming his nurse but that was never the problem. Yes, she took care of him but she never was what he really needed. Tenderness, an element of empathy, of something...she became so distant as she became caring like he was something alien to put behind glass and observe and feed from afar and nothing made him more alienated than her cold gaze of comfort, methodical, a professional. That's not what he needs. He needs someone to know he will hurt for them and with them, and what it means - I am willing to be here through the highs and lows and I will not look away when you're an ugly mess, I will show you mine, and… he's never dreamt of being loved back that way ever but...

They play a strange version of pictionary, making up concepts to draw themselves. Eliott wonders if they all picked such out there ideas to keep him engaged or whether he just has some really weird friends, as he finds himself drawing and then mimicking "the concept of nostalgia but from the future towards now" a "reverse unicorn" and "the gift that ruined Christmas."

Alexia makes them virgin Mojitos and Margaritas. Alex tells some weird anecdotes from his work. They get mad at each other for inane details of the game, then start playing Jenga. It's like looking at his friends through the wrong side of a telescope, making them seem so much further away than they really are. And time seems to both take forever and pass as if in a funhouse hourglass, looping and
stretching without any sense of logic. He finds himself going to the bathroom four, five, six times.
Taking a break from people only to realize he doesn't want to be alone. He's still wearing his fancy
gangster suit but it's hanging all askew. He's repeating to himself in the mirror that he's not having an
episode, but his face looks increasingly wrong, and at one point Alexia finds him hiding behind the
wash basin in a panic over something stupid. They can't convince him to get out, so they move the
party in there. Alex and Emma folding themselves in the bathtub together, Alexia sitting on the lid of
the loo. Eliott doesn't look at them much.

Finally, finally the morning comes. Alexia leaves with the prescription and Eliott's ID and comes
back with pills they watch him swallow. It feels like the worst walk of shame ever.

It knocks his lights off and as he dozes off in Alexia's room, he thinks well maybe if you can't find
the stop button maybe store bought is fine and Lucas never hit his father back and that's the most self
damaging way of proving you're a good person I have ever heard of.

JEUDI ??:??

He wakes up with his mouth full of lead and the certainty that he's not touched back to the ground,
he's crashed into it. Instead of soaring he's been pushed off a ledge. This might not have been a full
blown episode but the depression is still back with a vengeance. He misses his sense of purpose,
however dangerous it might have been. This is... He feels completely lethargic, like it's not blood
running through his veins but opioid liquid. So he stays where he is as the minutes tick by.

Fuck he hates these meds.

The pain in his wrist is still fierce, radiating up to his forearms, and his hand is all red and blue and
swollen. He wonders if it's broken. But it doesn't really matter - in any case he won't take any
painkillers, not with his meds and the risks of addiction.

The overthinking has finally stopped.

He doesn't want to know where or when he is. He just wants to forget he exists. So he closes his
eyes, and waits for sleep to take him again.

He doesn't see any blue eyes.


VENDREDI 10:11

Linda is back. She came by yesterday but let him sleep. This time he is awake, sitting on the couch and forcing himself to eat a bit of toast. Alexia has gone out on business - he understands despite himself that she's been looking for other work and really he can't blame her. But Emma is here now, sitting on the dining table with her computer and surveillance equipment, working on another case while keeping an eye on him.

It's humiliating. He's a grown man, for fuck's sake. He's snapped twice at her already, and she's been this fake kind of jovial that is completely antithetical to her personality. He can tell she is annoyed by him. She's a mess, sure, but always the fun self-sufficient kind. She must be regretting she ever became Eliott's friend now, with him promising her exciting adventures but actually going off on his own and only asking her to go on endless stakeouts and take care of him when he turned into a vegetable. Because that's what he does, he tricks people into caring and then burdens them.

"Care to tell me what you are thinking about?"

"Does this mean I'm going to have more mixed episodes now?" Eliott deflects. But it's a real fear of his. Mixed episodes are known to be the most dangerous, the most life wrecking. And the one episode he had with the most mixed features is also the one where he tried to kill himself.

Linda sighs.
"I don't know what it means. I think you should focus on getting better, right here, right now. How do you feel?"

"Like I want to put my head in the oven", he says honestly, “but don't worry, that's just regular Friday for me. End of the week and all."

She frowns.

"Do you…"

"It's alright, no, I'm not making plans to kill myself, you can relax. It's just the usual background noise. You should probably come back later. I'm going to be too much of an asshole today for therapy to be any good."

Linda gets up.

"You're going to be ok, Eliott. Like always."

A nod is all he can manage before he sinks back into the couch.

Ok, yeah. But he doesn't give a shit about ok. He needs to be better than ok, he needs to be smart enough, strong enough, brave enough. And that…well, when his brain turns into this mush sooner or later, that's always a losing game. Whenever he tries to be better he always hits a wall. So maybe he was a fool for trying to leave Lucille and his stable job and maybe…

What does it matter anyway. It's always the same hamster wheel. Watching paint dry is more interesting. Whatever he does, whatever he tries, whatever stupid hijinks he gets himself into. He always gets back to this. The fucking pit. Glum. Meaningless.
So as it turns out, his wrist is broken. He moved it wrong last night, and was woken by pain so bad he started sobbing. Or maybe it was just a welcome occasion to let himself go. He cried all the way to the doctor's office, not his usual doctor but somebody Linda said they could trust. If he could find the energy, he would be shocked at his therapist's levels of stealthiness. It's like she's been this cagey before. It's almost suspicious.

The doctor is good, doesn't ask too many questions about how Eliott got hurt or why he is in his sweatpants, catatonic while Alexia handles everything.

They do an x-ray and determine he has a scaphoid fracture, which luckily doesn't seem to require surgery and should heal with two months in a cast. He can't write, drive, carry or open anything with his dominant hand, though. So he's basically useless, even more of a damsel in distress. How the fuck can he command any sort of respect while it's on clear display how breakable he is?

The cast is made of fiberglass with blue wrapping, not even the type he can cover in doodles. Not that he has lots of people to write on it anyway.

Alexia handles everything with the grace and patience of a saint. Her manner is so much more welcome than Lucille's ever was. She doesn't look at him like it's the end of the world, she gives him distance, she keeps her warmth and sense of humor. He wishes he could reach out and convey his thanks. But he's not even sure he feels gratitude. It's horrible but he is angry. Resentful that they sprung this on him, that they lied to him. Angry at himself that he let it get so far. Most of all he feels like a monumental idiot. That he has to be babysat and managed like a fragile thing prone to exploding at any moment. He's just, again, in the state to be a pawn in somebody else's game. Maybe that's all he's ever been since the beginning.

Fucking criminal mastermind he is, getting bowled over by his heart and one broken wrist. What a joke. And how the fuck is he going to explain everything to his friends now? They're going to burst into laughter at the idea of him becoming a crime lord to save the world, and they should. The more he thinks about it the more it sounds completely delusional. Going to knock on the door of a known killer at 3 in the morning to ask him to play nice? Completely off your shits, Eliott. For fuck's sake. Maybe he's been having a prolonged episode for more than a month, in fact. The idea that someone like Lucas really likes someone like him, weak and spoiled and inconsistent and credulous...delusional, yes.

And the less he gives or gets any news from the shadow men or Lucas the more distant he feels to it all. Like it happened in another life, another universe, and they're all better off without him anyway.
MERCREDI 20:27

The beginning of the week has gone by in a blur. And the black beast dogging him slowly releases its jaws.

A nurse passed by to test his blood levels under new medication. Dr Morton had him stop the antipsychotics on Tuesday and he feels a little less like the living dead as they drain from his system.

He is left feeling infinitely fragile. And Alexia's apartment, for all cosy and joyful it is, has started to feel stuffy and suffocating. So he's climbed up through the skylight, and is watching the sun setting over the Parisian rooftops.

That's how he knows he is slowly getting better; he notices beauty again. The light falls through holes in the clouds, golden grey and lovely, on wet slate and stone - it rained earlier. It feels fresh and tired at the same time. Washed out, uncertain, but clean. A bit like him.

But better doesn't mean happy. Or even good. Right now, he feels exposed, everything inside ash.

He's learned, over the years, to practice self-forgiveness. He's had to, otherwise he would be so paralyzed by guilt and shame it would drown him. He's had to forgive himself for things most people would have carried for the rest of their lives. Lying. Flaking out on friends. Wasting inordinate amounts of money until his father had to bail him out. Sabotaging his own art career and destroying his friends' artwork. Almost flunking out of law school and only making it thanks to his girlfriend.
Cheating on said girlfriend. Getting STDs because of unprotected sex. Walking outside stark naked until he got caught by the police. Trying to kill himself. Risking his law career and people's lives in the process. Stealing candy and sharpies in a 24/7 store because he has a craving. The laundry list of embarassement is so long.

In fact he probably never completely forgave himself for most of those but he still has to try, do the work. Tell himself he can do enough good, in the end, to balance out the bad, even though he knows he will be on perpetual probation. His entire life.

This is no different. And yet it is, because he knows it is crucial to learn from this. That his life is at a breaking point.

He knows he's been behaving unhealthily. Not sleeping or eating or taking his meds properly, isolating himself. Unconsciously, and now consciously, he knows - he's been courting the clarity of disaster. Like pulling off the switch on a grenade. He wanted to push himself into doing something he couldn't take back. Because he was just so sick and tired of it all.

But disaster isn't lucidity. It just makes a mess. Who knows what would have happened if he'd gone manic this time. He shivers to think about it. He doesn't want to know.

No. But, he realizes, for the first time in his life as he watches the light escape the clouds and play across the rooftops, it's not hypomanic Eliott he has to blame, if anyone. It's himself, before, letting it build up to this point where he believed his only solution was to set himself up to commit mounting drastic acts of self sabotage. Being so afraid of his own emotions that he would hide for fear of being found crazy for them. Cutting himself off from his passions, his real friends. Thinking he could ever be satisfied shambling through life as a shadow of himself, as long as he stayed stable.

He looks back with a sense of burned clarity.

He's narrated the whole chain of events to himself in a peculiar frame, hasn't he. Lucas as this dangerous but inevitable force of nature coming to pull him from his boring stultifying comfort towards his necessary fate. Passion, torment, tragedy. Inescapable behaviors. Facing his own shadows, getting swallowed by them, the thrill of finding a justification for your self destruction. Romanticizing it, because it's still better than the other lie. The lie telling you that you are so damaged your best hope is to mutilate yourself until you fit the biggest cage you could still get away with.

But the truth - doesn't fit either of those stories. The truth isn't so black and white. The truth remains, regardless, this. Episode or no episode.
His father is a monster. Eliott watched him, growing up, and he became certain of it very early. And it was never in his nature to ignore this, sweep it under the rug. Sooner or later, he would have found a way to address it. In a sense, he's been preparing for this his whole life. Instead, they found him first, and now he has to play the cards he's been given. And they're not as bad as they could have been. But this is a fight he was always gearing up to.

Lucas Lallemant. He likes him. They have a connection. He's funny and surprising and clever and so charming. He's brave. He's beautiful. And he is an advantageous ally, no matter what role Eliott wants to make him play in his internal dramas.

He probably also has a very complicated slate of issues to deal with. He's an independent person, who wasn't created to teach Eliott a lesson about life, or such other bullshit. No, they're both their own people, and what they can do is negotiate that to the best of their abilities. And try to help each other out, maybe. As for feelings? He can't deny the pull. But maybe he should keep any drastic decisions to himself until they've actually interacted outside the prison walls.

His friends. Well, he's not happy to draw them into this bullshit. But they're adults. They live in the same world Armand Demaury is trying to push into chaos. They have a stake in the matter. He just needs them to know that this isn't funny times anymore. This is dangerous. And he understands Lucas, he really does. Pulling someone you care about into a dangerous world because you need help, it feels so weak. And terrifying, because it makes stakes so much higher. You can make a strategy out of being careless with your own life, but theirs...no.

Until you understand real weakness is pretending you don't. Need help. At least it is for him.

He can see it clearly for once. His objectives matter more than his pride. He cares about Lucas and wants to see him safe. There is nothing sentimental or delusional about that. It's human.

It's a bet, of course. Lucas might surprise him in a bad way. But it's not self-sabotage, to want to believe the best of a fellow human. He told Lucas he was going to treat him as a person. That's part of it. And Lucas could help him. If he asked. They could do it together. But for that, they have to be grounded. Resist the impulse to become a beautiful tragedy.

He needs...he needs better channels for his emotions. Another person cannot be that, not entirely. He's totally blocked when it comes to art...but there are other ways. He can't just let himself become inert and call it stability. He needs art, beauty, tension, expression. Something true, something real. He needs to learn and to create and to let it flow. It's been drilled into him, that those are futile things not worth his time. But he's starting to see that he can't beat his father by using the same tools as him. God, he's so hungry for these things. And he's been starving for so long.
He used to believe that he would never pull himself out of his dreadful life perspectives without an other person. For so long his art was pure yearning. Maybe in another universe his call was answered. But maybe in this one, he has to save himself first. So he can make space for people in his life, on his own terms.

He takes a deep breath, and for the first time in a long time, he can actually enjoy the oxygen.

…

He stays on the rooftop a long time, wrapped in a blanket, curled on himself.

That's how Alexia finds him.

"Hey, there you are! Been looking everywhere for you."

Her happy tone is forced. Eliott turns around and sees the fear on her face. Maybe she thought she'd find him standing on the ledge.

Fuck, he's an asshole.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you I was there."

"It's okay, I...no you're right, you should have." She sighs. "I'm sorry, Eliott. I feel like I failed you as a friend."

Eliott scoffs. Now that's…

"Alexia, you've basically been my full time caretaker this week."

"Yeah ok but I mean...before. I'm always making fun of things, of you. You know I always believe in being positive. But the truth is...I do it to keep people at a distance, too. Because I don't feel comfortable with their emotions. I just don't know what to do with the heavy stuff. But if i ever made you believe I'm just a fair weather friend...I'm sorry."

Eliott shakes his head.

"Alexia, you...I love how determined you are to keep this perspective. Of fun. You've helped me get out of my self-pitying funks so many time. It's good. It's just that...yeah. I wanted to keep you out of it. You're kind of my fun happy safe place, you know ?"

"What kind of a safe place is it if you can't express your concerns and fears, though, dude ?"

Eliott sighs.

"I guess. You're a better caretaker than Lucille, you know that ? I always thought that I would never make it without her or at least a romantic partner because friends just wouldn't care enough. I didn't want to test that. But you and Emma and Alex...I think I got pretty damn lucky."

He hugs himself. He can't only out the praise.

"But I guess… I was a bit afraid of your jokes too. I mean. I have such a hard time believing in my own feelings. And this thing with Lucas, I know how outlandish it is. I was afraid of you dismissing it as some sort of game or silly whim because I was bored or…"

"You love him, don't you ?"

The big word.

It feels so big. But so does the sky, Eliott thinks, and the city, and the world, and all those feelings inside him. So the word fits. It's the size of what he wants to do with his life.

He nods. Doesn't diminish it with a "but we don't know each other yet" or "I think, but…". So he
falls fast. Maybe it's a character flaw. But he wants to believe he has a good intuition when it comes to that. To people.

Alexia breathes in. Her lovely dark eyes are more troubled and serious than he's seen them in a while, her pink mane fluttering about in the wind.

"Oh...Eliott. I'm happy for you."

She smiles. Yes. Because it's a happy thing. In spite of everything, he feels lucky. He smiles back.

"Seeing you like this" she continues, "it's been...difficult. It made me realize wow, caring for people is scary. Sometimes you want to help them and you can't. And like. I have issues. Half the time I wanted to run away or call your therapist. Or fake an emergency somewhere else. I'm sorry."

Eliott has a rueful laugh.

"That's why you're better than Lucille. She started to believe it was her calling and it warped her whole sense of self. You're just trying to be a good friend and not mess up too much."

"And ? Did I ?"

Eliott shrugs.

"I don't like the way you guys did it. Felt so sneaky. Like I was a ticking time bomb or something. Might need a bit of time to get over it. And hopefully next time I will be able to reach out on my own, you know ? But I get it, the circumstances are nuts, you were scared, and that makes you do stupid stuff. Like, you know. Lie to people or not tell them things for their own good. I would know. I've been there."

Alexia lets out a long drawn out sigh.

"Wow, I'm sorry for that. We're a piece of work, aren't we ?"
"Nah, we're human. Thanks for having my back, human."

"Thanks for making my life more interesting, human." She answers, and rests her head on his shoulder. "You're a badass, Eliott Demaury. You might not be able to give me a job anymore but stuff like this makes me realize I want to know you more. Especially since you're not my boss now. So now I can tell you when you're being dumb about stuff."

"That's never stopped you before. Wait. Did you just quit?"

"Dude. I have not had a job in like. Three weeks."

Eliott laughs.

"Ok, that's fair...And you know. If you ever want to tell me about your issues, I can listen. I know a thing or two about those. Once I'm done with the whole depression thing, though."

"We have a deal, mister. And you can tell me more about that heartthrob of yours. Or you know. Whatever. If you tell me not to make jokes, I promise I won't."

"Lucas actually does deserve jokes made about him." Eliott quips."He hasn't stopped making them ever since we met. I couldn't get one straight answer from him in the beginning. It was so frustrating."

"Oh but you got a gay answer out of him, am I right?" She grins.

Ok, that was a good one.

She raises her palm towards him and he high fives her. "Oh yeah, I did."

His synapses are not firing as fast as they could. But still. Watching wrestling matches once again and chatting about nonsense with one of his best friends? Good way to get them working again.

The conspiracy can wait for tomorrow.
Tomorrow always comes too soon.

He wakes up in a panic. He's dreamt of finding Lucas dead in prison.

He takes a deep breath.

He can't run from his problems forever. He's not 100%, but it's been a week. He doesn't have the luxury of time. He's on his meds, he's not lifeless anymore. And the police hasn't come knocking on Alexia's door yet, so...

What to do next?

He knows he needs to explain to his friends, he charges up his phone for the first time in a week. He notices a shit ton of missed calls and messages.

Among which, of course, the unknown number he knows belongs to Lucas. He's tried calling several times that one fateful Wednesday evening after they talked, after Eliott walked into the Alchemist. And several times since, the last one this very morning. And one message, dated from Monday. I want to talk. It warms Eliott's heart and exasperates him at the same time. The fucker couldn't manage a "please call me" or "how have you been?" or maybe a little "sorry for being such a retentive asshole, Eliott, please be my lawyer again?"

But that's a sign he's alive. And that's everything.
He sends a message to Alex and Emma, for them all to gather at Alexia's place tonight. He sends an extra message to Alex to see if he can run the guns he gave him, the one from the Shadow and the one from Colibari, through analysis. It might be nothing, or it might correlate to some cold case and - any information is good to get. Sending messages with only his left hand is annoying as fuck, having to type in everything with one finger like a grandpa, but what is his alternative anyway?

Alexia's left him to run some errands. He's alone now for the first time in a week. He doesn't have any morbid or erratic thoughts, so that's good.

The situation is still shit, though.

He knows that tangling with the Shadow alone is a stupid idea. He can't stand alone facing Valles, Colibari, his father, corrupt cops, that creepy Nikolai guy...that's too much. He needs his own allies. Emma and Alex are a good start, they're resourceful and probably have useful contacts. He knows Emma knows people online, activists and hackers who would totally be the type to want to dismantle a crime organization from within. Alex probably knows a few cops who actually have principles - retired, most likely. He wonders about Cris, the journalist who burned him. Maybe not the highest levels of professional integrity, but she had guts. If Eliott comes to her with real info...she might know how to make a splash.

He could go through his old law school relations. There were some good people in there. The problem is, he never really bothered to cultivate those relationships. He surrounded himself with assholes because it was easier, because they didn't expect anything of him.

And knowing who he can trust...it's going to take time. Fuck.

He finds himself regretting, briefly, dating Lucille. Because if he hadn't, they'd probably still be friends, and partners. And they were one hall of a team. She'd be good with this - dispassionate, sharp. She wouldn't have had a chance to be blinded by the possibility of becoming a Demaury.

But well, he can't change the past, can he?

He knows what he should do - turn on his secret phone again, and try to get in touch with Lucas. He knows it's an asshole move, not giving news for a week, but then again. Maybe he wanted Lucas to have a taste of his own medicine. And he wasn't exactly in tip top shape.
He can't find it in his suit jacket though. He remembers very distinctly turning it off and putting it in there before he went into the Alchemist. Maybe it fell in his car...or maybe they took it from him when he wasn't paying attention. Shit.

His only way to safely talk to Lucas…

He takes a deep breath. He can get another phone. It's not the end of the world.

He's been wearing mostly Alexia's ex's clothes, and he's floating in them, the dude was a regular giant - and he misses his own wardrobe. He needs to swing by his office anyway.

But first, he decides to go for a run in the park.

JEUDI 11:14

The run was a bit tough, especially when trying not to move his wrist at all; but at least he feels like his blood is circulating again. He's taken a bath, staying in there until his skin got all pruny, using Alexia's fancy shower gels. And he has the excuse that keeping his cast out of water requires some delicate acrobatics.

It's a nice day. And he's had his first real breakfast in quite a while - Alexia's homemade granola with dried figs and coconut shreds. Damn, he's going to have to do some kind of a big gesture to thank her. He doesn't know what yet. He should pay more attention to his friends, fuck.

He's slowly feeling like he's taking human shape again.
He takes the metro to his office and walks the rest of the way.

As he does, he once again gets the impression he's being followed. And sighs. Who is it this time, the Russian Mob? Damn, he's so past caring. This is going to be his life now. He can't go into a tizzy every time something like this happens.

...

He makes it to his office building, his floor, his door. So far so good.

Then when he enters, he notices he left the blinds down so the whole place is in the dark, and the light doesn't work.

He curses and gets out his phone flashlight.

As soon as he raises it, he almost gets a heart attack.

There's people in his office. But they're wearing animal masks.

From left to right, a bunny, a black cat, a sheep...and is that a chipmunk with glasses?

"Holy fucking shit" he swears out loud. "My god, can't you people be fucking normal for once?"

He's just tired of being scared. So he walks to the other wall and pushes the button that makes the electric blinds roll up. It makes a loud noise for a minute, and Sheep lets out a short laugh before being hit in the knee by Chipmunk.

Giggly gangsters? That's new.
In the plain light of day, they look a lot less creepy and a lot more ridiculous.

He remembers Lucas's crew wearing animal masks too, though.

He looks at them and sighs. He so done with the extra bullshit but hey. At this point in his life...maybe it's better to just embrace the weirdness.

"So do you want a beer, or...."

"We have a message for you, Eliott Demaury." Black Cat says, voice muffled by the mask.

From what he can see from the silhouette, it's a woman talking, with dark skin and a black headscarf tightly wound around her skull. Bunny is also a woman, pale skin, blonde hair. Sheep and Chipmunk are both men, white, average height and build, one blonde and one brunette, although Sheep is slouching and Chipmunk is holding himself very straight, as if he's had military training.

"Ok, cool. So do you guys do phones or are you like. An improv theater troupe ?"

Sheep laughs again. Bunny looks at him - Eliott can't even see her face but knows she is annoyed.

Black Cat sighs, in the beleaguered way of put upon leaders everywhere.

"We have a message from Lucas Lallemant." She says, and Eliott's heart leaps out of his chest at hearing the name, despite everything. "He tried to send it to you directly. You know, on your phone." She adds slyly. "Do you do phones, or should we have tried like. Smoke signals ?"

Damn, he walked into that one. But the sarcasm ? Those are Lucas's people alright.
Finally. He straightens up. Instinctively he needs them to approve of him.

"I'm sorry. I had a medical emergency. But I'm all ears now." He vaguely raises his wrist in a sling. He could have had surgery for all they know.

"Good." Black Cat gets a USB key out of her pocket and extends it to him. "Because we're running out of time. We finally got him to open up a little. There's everything you need to know on there. Listen, and then you can make a choice as to whether you're in or out."

Eliott takes the key from her, barely believing his ears.

"In or out...what ?"

"Our team. We've got a spot open, as it turns out. Or more exactly...Lucas wanted us to make you one."

Eliott feels a thrill of unbidden joy. *Lucas wants me on his team. Finally. Fucking finally.*

"Your….wait, what ? What kind of a team are you ? Is this a Shadow thing ?"

"No. Not at all."

"We don't hurt people. We help them. We're the good guys." Bunny adds.

Good guys. Good guys ? Good guys. *You mean someone has an ambition besides being a murderous bastard on top of the bastard pile AND is upfront about it ? Refreshing.*

Seems like the universe is finally throwing him a bone. If this is yet another twisty way to get him to trust someone though, he's going to explode.

"And we've got so much swag, so much styyyyyyle." Sheep adds, clearly the clown of the group. "And explooooosions." He adds, bringing the O-sound to heights it shouldn't go, and especially not with someone who clearly doesn't have a musical bone in his body.
"Shut up, Baz, that's not part of our pitch anymore." Bunny says.

"Yeah" Chipmunk adds, "stop trying to make explosions happen, it's not going to happen."

"We are Lucas's real family." Black Cat continues as if the other three hadn't talked at all. "With our specific combination of skill sets, we help people, those who have found themselves at odds with the powerful. For them, we provide...leverage. Our methods are unorthodox, but we keep them clean. As for our next mission, you know the beneficiary already."

"I do…?"

He swears he can see her roll her eyes. It reminds him of someone.

"It's Lucas." Bunny supplies helpfully. "We're getting him out of prison."

Eliott's first thought is *It's about damn time*. Then, *holy shit.*

"And it's only the beginning of what we need to do. We've got some shadows to shine a light on. This will explain things."

Eliott nods.

Huh.

"Do you mind if I...uh...watch this alone ?" He nods towards the door of his office. "Make yourselves at home, I have...um...water. From the tap."

"We'll be fine." Black Cat says. He can hear a smirk in her voice. "Go do what you need to."
"Okay. Thanks for bringing it to me here. Although you ummm...could have knocked. You know."

"I had to test the security of this place." Bunny says."It's not as good as it looks. I came in through the vents super easy. But at least there's no bomb."

"Ok. Uh. Thanks ?" He has no idea how to respond to that, so he goes to his office and closes the door behind him.

...

As he boots up his secret untraceable computer, he hears Sheep's voice filter through.

"20 bucks says he cries."

"Basile ! That's so insensitive !" Bunny chides.

"No Daphy, I mean even I cried watching bits of it ! It's like, such a story man."

"I'm pretty sure he can hear you. Also, that was not meant for you, you nosy idiot." Black Cat adds.

"I did some editing ! He asked me to !"

"Yeah you bunch of morons. Shut up. No spoilers. Let our Lucas work his magic. And we said no first names." That's Chipmunk.

"Ok, Alvin." Sheep says, and there is a snort.
After that, silence.

...

He finds a video on the key. Clicks.

A window pops up.

The quality is grainy, the image isn’t very well framed. Probably filmed with a phone set on a desk. The background is a bit of bed, a sheet hung for privacy. A prison cell.

Before he starts the video he feels a rush of nervousness. What if Lucas has learned what Eliott has done and is angry? What if …..he wants Eliott on his team, he reminds himself. But what if Lucas asks things of him he can’t give? What if there are conditions to being on his team and he can’t meet them? What if they take him on and he disappoints them, with his mess of a head and broken wrist and lack of any physical skills?

He’s scared, but his need to see Lucas again, hear from him, is stronger. So he hits play.

Lucas appears. He looks…tired. Are those fresh bruises on his face? Eliott’s heart leaps in his throat, fluttering furiously, like a caged butterfly.

Fuck, it’s so good to see him.

He sits. Has a shy sort of smile, eyes low, before quickly raising them to the camera. Angry Lucas is gone, and so is charming mastermind Lucas. This is new.

Eliott is instantly gone for this Lucas. Again.

Oh he is so predictable.
"Hey. Um...I...Okay. Eliott. I wanted to apologize, I guess. I've been...I've been an idiot. Not telling you things. You went off and it made me realize...what the fuck does it all matter, when I don't know..." He clears his throat. Eliott's never seen him like this. Nervous, searching for his words.

"Honesty is hard, right ?" That little smile again. Isn't that what he told Eliott he would say in that parallel universe before kissing him ?

Then, suddenly, he raises his eyes to the camera, sincere, intense. Like he needs Eliott to get his meaning, more than anything else in the world. Eliott feels his breath quicken, his tension ratcheting up, his very life hanging on to the image of Lucas's lips on the screen, on his next world. He remembers their fingertips touching. This is a thousand times worse.

He knows that whatever is coming next, one way or another, is going to change his life forever.

"I need your help. I need you, at my side. That's all there is to it, isn't it ? I thought if I did things alone, I could keep things under control. But that's bullshit. Why do anything if it's to stay alone ? I don't want to be alone. I really don't, not anymore. I don't think you want to be either. I think we can help each other. The way we work together it's ...like magic. And I think we have to, because we can't let them win. And fuck, Eliott, they hate the idea of us together. They hate it so much."

Eliott puts his hand on his heart. It's hammering through his chest, a thousand beats for minute. Why does this feel so much like a marriage proposal ?

Yes baby, you and me. Let's make the whole world mad.

God. Hearing this confession, after all the handwringing, is the sweetest thing. And he knows. He knows how difficult it is. He needs to kiss him more than he needs air. Shit.

Eliott realises he's stretched his fingers towards the screen unconsciously, and hits the pause button. Gets up, walks around. Stretches his arms above his head. Tries to take stock of how he feels.
A great rush of gratitude, of wonder, washing over him. What are the odds that they came to exactly the same conclusions separately? Wow.

Eliott feels an overpowering urge to reach through the screen and hug him.

He presses play again.

"So I guess I'm asking you. Will you be my partner in crime?" At that Lucas has a little daredevil smile, corner of his mouth crooking up, the type that has Eliott melt instantly. But vanishes quickly, soon replaced by something more serious and introspective. The time for games has passed.

Fucking hell.

"I owe you the truth. So here it is. Where it started. Why I did what I did. So we can be on equal ground. So you know what you're getting into and with who. I...those things are not easy for me to talk about." He raises his eyes up, then back to the camera. "I hope you won't hate me afterwards."

Finally. He's going to hear Lucas's story from him. In his own words. And he knows how important that is.

Lucas rubs his chest, as if hearing himself up to speak. Then he goes, voice scratchy and slow, as if each word is reluctant to come out,

"I was raised to believe that talking about these things...it was more than a weakness. It was a death sentence. I'm sorry I left you in the dark, I just lived there for so long that I…"

He trails off.

"Anyway. You've been impacting my life for a hell of a long time, Eliott Demaury. I knew that sooner or later our paths would cross. So I wanted to set the terms. And I think it's time I told you
Chapter End Notes

trigger warnings for this chapter: Lucas's father is a horrible homophobe and threatens to use violence against Eliott, insults him for being not straight, use of f-slur, oblique references to emotional/physical abuse and dubious consent sex in prison. Also breaks Eliott's wrist after he tries to punch him. Eliott shoots him in the hand, description of wounds. Eliott has a mixed hypomanic and mild depressive episode so he's not in a good mindstate, negative self talk, wants to stop existing, etc. But he talks to his therapist in time and gets better before the ending of the chapter.

Eliott getting insulted and threatened: that's mean I'm scared and defenseless
Eliott hearing Lucas get insulted and threatened: it's eating fists time SQUARE UP MOTHERFUCKER (probably needs to train a little tho…)

so did you catch the self-indulgent reference? lmaooo

Comments make me write faster! Or come tell me what you thought about this chapter here: flying-elliska <333

Next time:

The story of Lucas Lallemant
Hey everyone! Wow, sorry for the wait...this one was brutal to write. Because it got over the 25k I decided to split the chapter (again.) The good news? The next one is almost completely written and should arrive in the next few days.

100k huh? Wow. Thanks again so much for all the feedback, comments, asks and generalized love. You all are what keep me writing. There is a lot of time and doubt that goes into this, but in the end it's so worth it!!

We are going back in time with this one and a different format: years instead of clips. The 2019 bits are still from Eliott's perspective as he listens to Lucas's video, but the rest is all from Lucas' POV.

This chapter is a very sad one. Pls take care of yourselves.
Content warnings: ableism, bullying, slurs, internalized (homophobia), emotional/physical abuse (not graphic), difficult content related to mental illness, descriptions of self harm. See end notes for specifics.
At the core of it I want this story be about healing and tenderness winning over violence and conquering your demons and learning how to love healthily. That said...Gotta examine the dark shit first and this is where we really go into it. After all Lucas did not become a mobster for several years out of nowhere lmao.

A few elements of worldbuilding:
For clarity, this Lucas is born in 1990
In France middle school covers ages 11 to 15 (hell on earth tbh) and high school is 15 to 18
POGS are these things.

Beta-ed as always by bееexx <333333 best jan

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2019
"I don’t know where I should start with this. I’m afraid that if I say too little, it won’t make sense. But saying too much... well let’s say there’s a reason I like having somebody else in the room to antagonize. It’s a good way to hide."

Blue eyes seek the camera.

“But I know I’ve had you running in circles for too long. There’s only so long you can do that without losing someone. And I don’t wanna lose you...Not for anything in the world. So...I know I owe you this. But to put it out there...Fuck, I’m feeling like I’m going to confession again. Except, you know. God generally doesn’t talk back. And the priest, who cares. That part is for show. Anyway. Yeah. If you still wanna hate me after this at least you’ll hate me for the right reasons.”

A drawn in breath, decades in the making.

“So it starts with my mom. Because that’s only right. In the beginning, it was only me and my mom. Typical psycho story, right? Except it wasn’t like that. My mom...it was hard for her, more than for most people. But I know one thing for sure. Even with demons on her heels, she never stopped trying, not one day in her life.”

“Le roi des pirates”
Once upon a time...there was a pirate. He had the fastest ship that had ever sailed, with majestic sails the color of the night sky. Some said he could control the winds, and even call storms on his enemies, all with a whistle, like this.

Mama lets out a low whistle, that sounds a little bit like the wind and a little bit like a song. Lucas looks at the heavy rain thumping against the windows, shivers, and curls up further under the covers.

"Some said that he was friends with the creatures of the deep, and they’d seen them swim in the wake of his ship, whales and giant octopuses and mermaids."

Sea monsters are scary, but Lucas is not scared. The air is cold in the bedroom, but in his bed huddled against Mama, it's warm. And comfortable. She smells like flowers and powdered sugar on crepes. And Lucas loves all the funny voices she makes when she tells a story.

“And dragons, too?"

Lucas loves dragons, because they can fly and spit fire and go in the sea, too. They can go anywhere they want.

“Yes my darling, dragons too. Tiny dragons with wings like fish fins, all colored and bright and flying around like butterflies, and bigger sea dragons with shining scales who told him where the best treasures were hidden. He had a gift, you see - all the creatures of the sea loved him, and felt compelled to be in his presence. And so this pirate grew rich, richer even than the King of France. And so did his reputation grow, and he came to rule over the seven seas, and he feared no king or master. That's why they called him the Pirate King."

Lucas can see it when he closes his eyes. There’s the sky he knows, he just replaces the grey towers of the city with the endless sea, shining under the sun.

"But you see, our pirate, even though his name sparked fear in the hearts of all who heard it and his coffers were overflowing with gold, he was not happy. Do you know why?"
“Because he was all alone?”

Mama always talks about how being alone is bad. And he knows being alone is the worst feeling in the world.

“That’s right, Lucas. Because he was all alone. All his crew feared him, and they avoided him as much as they could. And when the dragons tried to be friendly with him, he ignored them. Because his heart had been stolen by a sea witch when he was very young. She loved him, you see, just as all creatures of the sea, but he didn’t love her back, and so she stole his heart. And now he was afraid to let anybody close again, lest they steal something else from him. And so he grew cold and bitter.”

“That’s so mean!” Lucas wraps his arms around himself. Suddenly the sea doesn’t seem very appealing anymore.

“The witch was very mean, yes. And it was never true love. When you really love someone, you want them to be happy, and free. Even if you have to let them go.”

“So the pirate is going to be alone without his heart forever? That’s so unfair. Can’t he take it back?”

“No. The witch was good at hiding. But one day...one day, you see, one day he was on an adventure, and he met someone he really, really liked.”

“Who did he meet?”

“Well you see, on an island on the edge of the world, there was this princess…”

“Ew, no! I don’t like princesses.”

It’s true. He doesn’t understand why the heroes always have to end up with boring princesses who do nothing at the end of the story. Once he read a story about a princess with arrows of fire, she was cool though. But mostly they sit in towers waiting to be rescued. It’s annoying. If he was a hero, he would never want to stop going on adventures, not even for the prettiest princess in the world.
“Alright, darling. Not a princess. Let's say one day, in a bustling tavern, he met a man who had heard that our pirate could talk to dragons. And he needed help to find a lost heirloom treasure. The pirate refused, at first, so the man told him there was treasure hidden with the heirloom. And so they left together.

And the strange thing was - this man was not afraid of our pirate, even though he was rude, and he wore this hat that covered almost his entire face, and some gruesome scars. Some people would have said he was foolish, but this man had travelled far and wide and he had seen really scary things. He had seen the greed, and the cruelty of man. And he knew our pirate was just a lonely man. He could see the pirate’s soul behind all the whispers and shadows, and he could see that it was a good one. So he decided to take a chance on the pirate. He talked with him, and made jokes. And day by day the pirate started to remember how to feel alive again.

And so they arrived at the place the heirloom was buried, on an island at the edge of the world. And when they set foot on the island the man said to his now friend that he was sorry, and that he had lied. There was no gold buried there, only a necklace that had belonged to his family. And because he felt bad he had lied to the pirate, who had now become his friend, he told him he could keep the necklace as payment. But the pirate told him that making his friend was payment enough.”

"He's not mean anymore !"

"That's right. And so, the pirate offered his friend a spot in his crew, and they stayed together. And then our pirate started confiding in the dragons who helped him, and to open up to the rest of the crew. Soon he made another friend, and another, and his crew stopped being afraid of him. And the dragons started nestling in his hat. He had the biggest hat you could imagine, so big it could be mistaken for a sail, and it hid his face but it also made a good nest. And so whenever he went the little dragons with their little butterfly wings went with him, and his life was full of color, and joy, and friendship. He became kinder, and wanting to do good things, and to change his ways. Instead of inspiring fear, he wanted to inspire hope. He declared he would only steal from those merchants who got rich on exploiting others, and the kings who were cruel to their people, and he would welcome on his ship all the men and women who wanted to be free from tyranny.

And then one day, he realized that a miracle had happened.”

“He found the witch and took his heart back ?”

“Oh no, the witch had died. She had been swallowed by a sea monster, and the heart with her, because she never wanted to be parted from it. No, he realized that his heart simply had grown back.”

“Because he was happy now ?”
“Because he found true love in all of his friends. No matter how lost he was, he found his way again. Remember, my darling. Love, no matter what love, can always make you whole again, if it is true. And giving love to people is the most important thing you can do.”

Lucas nods. Then he yawns. Mama's stories usually are not that complicated. He feels that this is a very grown up story, very sad. But beautiful, too. He just doesn't understand how anybody could live without their heart. But he loves pirates. And he wishes he had a ship and a hat full of dragons too.

“Mama, can we make a pirate ship tomorrow? With the kitchen table?”

“I have to work tomorrow, my darling, and you have to go to school, remember?”

“I don’t want to go, it smells and Caroline is being mean to me again. She says my dad left because I was an ugly baby.”

“Oh my darling, that is not true at all. You were the most beautiful baby I have ever seen. She's just jealous. And your dad didn’t leave. He was taken from us.”

Mama's face is always so sad when she talks about Dad. He doesn't like that.

“Was he a bad man? Like the witch? Is that why you never talk about him?”

“No darling, he was a good man. I just didn’t know him very well, that’s all. But know that he is always watching over you, from Heaven, alright? That Caroline is a little harebrained busybody who doesn’t know what she is saying. I will talk to her parents.”

“No, mama, please. Otherwise the kids will say I’m a tattletale. I can handle it.”

“You are very brave, my darling. Now, remember, I would much rather stay here and build a ship with you, but I have to work, so I can earn money so we can get everything we need. And you need to go to school, so you can learn everything you need to be smart and strong when you grow up, and get the life you deserve. Be good tomorrow, and I promise this weekend we will build our very own ship with sheets and brooms, so it’s very tall. And we will go exploring. A little dragon told me that
there will be chocolate hidden in the whole apartment soon. That can be our treasure.”

”Yes ! Chocolate ! Buuuuuut...what if I want to be a pirate when I grow up ? Do I still need to go to school ?”

School is so boring. Everything is too easy, and then he has to wait forever for the other kids, and he has to sit on a chair and stay still all the time. He’d much rather go on an adventure.

“Yes you do. You need to learn how to read the stars, and use a map, and how to steer a boat, and how to organize a crew, and all sorts of things. So first you have to go to regular school, and only later, you can go to pirate school....What is with that face, Lucas ? Don’t you believe me, you little rascal ?”

Lucas laughs when Mama ruffles his hair.

“Ok, I’ll go to school, I guess...but can I get a cool hat ?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

“That’s good, because I want my future friends to be able to recognize me. When I go on adventure.”

“They will, my baby, even if you don’t have a hat. Because you have a good soul. And you’re going to have lots and lots of friends. But in the meantime, you know I love you, alright ? I love you with all my heart.”

“I love you too, Mama. And I’ll get you a huge treasure. So you won’t have to work all the time anymore.”

"You are all the treasure I need, my sweetheart."
“Mama, can you tell me the pirate story again ?”

Mama didn’t come to Lucas tonight, so he went to see her in her room. She is holding a letter, and her eyes are all red from crying, but she pretends she is okay when she sees Lucas arrive.

“Sorry, sweetheart, not now. It’s late and I’m getting a headache.”

Lucas sits on the bed. Mama has been having headaches all the time recently. He needs to be sure it’s not his fault.

“Are you still mad at me for what happened in the Church ?”

“No Lucas. It’s okay. You promised to not do it again, didn’t you ?”

“I did. I won’t do it again, ever. I don’t want to make you sad. But do you think if maybe I asked the priest he could make the mass less long ?”

Mama runs her hand through his hair, to put it back into place like she always does.

“Oh, darling. That’s not how it works. Mass has always been the same, for thousands of years. That’s the point. The outside world is scary and chaotic, but Mass is the same. We gather and we listen to the word of God, and we find peace again. Don’t you like listening to the priest’s stories ?”
“They’re so boring! It’s always the same and nothing happens. I just think if he added a few robots, it would be more interesting. Isn’t God supposed to be interesting? Or maybe you can do the Mass next time. You know how to tell good stories. You could add the bit I made up today where the priest is a robot washing the brain of all the people in the Church and telling him to go out and murder people, but God comes down on a spaceship and stops him because murder is wrong. And you can use my laser from the cereal box that you took away. It can be like the beam of the spaceship.”

Mama smiles at him, like he’s being funny, but he is very serious.

“Hmmm...I don’t think people are ready for that just yet, my darling. Do you know what is cool though? Angels are cool. They’re totally cool. The coolest. Did you know everyone has an angel watching over them?”

“Are angels the little babies with wings? Cause that’s not very cool.”

“No, my sweetheart, real angels are formidable beings, made of pure light. They represent the will of God, and humans cannot see their true form, otherwise they would be turned into dust on the spot.”

“Woah! That’s awesome!”

“Yes, but they can talk to us, though. They tell humans how to be good, and true, and how to keep our souls pure. And they are always fighting demons. Demons are the opposite. They are vile creatures, trying to lead us astray, born from the sins of man. So we have to be careful who we listen to.”

“Okay, that’s pretty cool. So do angels have like, swords?”

“Yes, some of them do. And some have the head of a lion, or an eagle. And some are made of pure fire. But some of them take human shape, and some only live in our hearts. And if you are ever in doubt, or in trouble, you can call on your own personal angel so he can give you strength.”

“Hmm...I think maybe mine is made of fire, and he has a sword also made of fire. And three pair of wings. That would be awesome.”

Lucas likes the idea of having an imaginary warrior friend that always listens to him, a lot.
“Well, maybe. You’ll know, one day. But I know you are my angel, my darling boy. Ever since you came into my life, you gave me all the strength I need.”

“Hmmm...I don’t think the priest would agree, though. He called me a spawn of Satan.”

“He did, really ? Well, I’ll tell you what, not all priests are in touch with their inner angels. I think maybe we are going to change churches.”

Lucas nods. He’s relieved that Mama doesn’t agree with the priest. He can make an effort, too, he guesses.

“Ok, good. Can you tell me more about angels ? They’re not as cool as pirates, but they’re pretty cool.”

“Well, you know when angels are watching over you. That’s when you feel happy. But when they don’t, then you need to pray more. You’ll pray, will you ?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Good. Because humans souls are fragile, you know. And I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Délivrez nous du mal”

1998

(8)
It's the middle of the night when Lucas realizes he doesn't like Mama's games anymore. They have gotten super weird recently, like they have to hide in bushes at the park or go home from the supermarket early or count the stones in the yard to make sure the demons are not playing tricks on them. In the beginning, Lucas loved having such a fun mom.

But then one night Mom comes to his room and shakes him until he is awake, and grabs his arm way too strong, and then it's not fun anymore.

“Mama ? Is something wrong ?”

“Shh, my darling, be quiet. Otherwise they’ll hear us.”

Her face is all weird and shifty in the light of the torch lamp she is holding, and she looks very very scared. She keeps looking around them although there isn’t anything there, eyes looking to the corners in the room and the cupboard.

“Who is gonna hear us ? Mom ? Mom !”

Lucas wants this to be a dream, a joke. He doesn’t want it to be demons. He’s tired of hearing about demons, and angels too.

“They never sleep.”

“What ?”

“Come with me. I made a place for us to hide.”

She gets up and pulls Lucas with her, forcing him to follow.

“Mama, you’re hurting me ! Mama !”

“Shut up, Lucas !”
She never talks to him like that. Lucas wants to cry, but he grinds his teeth so hard it's painful instead, and he doesn't.

...

“Okay my darling, we’ll be safe here.”

Mama pushes him into the broom closet in the kitchen and then comes in and closes the door behind them.

“Why can’t they find us in a closet?”

“I have a cross, alright? And now we will pray. Like I told you, remember? We will pray to God, and to the angels, and we will feel their light around us and within us and no evil will touch us. Okay. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Sitting in the closet in the dark is much scarier than being in bed. He’s cold. He doesn’t understand what is going on.

“Mama, I don’t like this game. I wanna go back to bed, I’m tired.”

“Please, Lucas, please. Please pray with me. Otherwise they will get ahold of your soul, and you will become a bad man, just like your father.”

“Like my father? But you said…”

Mama drops the torch. It makes a clattering sound, that echoes in the silence. Lucas can see her shake and hear small crying noises.

He doesn't know what to do. It's always been her that soothed her when he was scared of the monsters under the bed. He's shivering, he feels so cold and scared and so small, and now he knows
there is nothing at all to protect them from the dark and everything it holds. Nothing at all. He wants to tell her that demons aren’t real, but he knows she won’t believe him. Sometimes he’s not even sure himself.

But he has to make it right somehow. He has to. That’s what a hero would do. So he decides to set the fear aside. He will deal with it later, or maybe never. Maybe he will keep it trapped in a very small box and push it down, all the way down.

He shuffles closer and wraps his arm around her and grabs the light.

"Mama, please don’t cry." He starts even though his throat hurts and his voice sounds weird and weak. "Please, you’re scaring me. I will pray okay? I will pray, I promise. Like this, okay? Our father who is in heaven…”

“Hallowed be thy name…” She continues.

“...Give us today our bread, and forgive us for our trespassing…”

"...As we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation…”

“...But deliver us from evil.”

He hears Mama's breath calm down a little as they pray. But it takes a lot of prayers before she completely does.

“Our father who art in heaven…”

If there's a God, he has to listen, right?
“Lucas Lallemant, you tell me the truth. Why did you steal those things?”

Lucas looks down. He has never seen his mother so angry. But he doesn’t know how to tell her; he’s more sorry for having been caught than for doing what he did. He’s done it plenty of times, but today he got careless. Stupid. And Mom had to talk down the security guard who wanted to call the police and made this huge fuss.

Outside, the wind is rattling the windows, gusts of February rain violently thumping against the glass.

“There was nothing in the fridge again, Mom!”

“Stop playing games with me, Lucas! You’re not a baby anymore. There was plenty of pasta. That does not explain why you stole some gum. And these round pog things? I did not raise you this way!”

Lucas feels a rush of blood to his face. He never wanted to lie to her. He never wanted to bother her at all. It’s just not fair. The words rush out of his mouth before he can control them, all the things he’s been keeping inside, the anger and the hurt and the resentment all at once.

“You’re not raising me at all! You’re never there! You’re always in your room and all we eat is musty pizza with this disgusting fake ketchup! I’m tired of being cold and hungry all the time! I’m tired of eating in front of the TV! I’m tired of being the only one in class without POGS! I’m tired I have such a shitty family and a shitty home and I can never invite friends! It’s not fair! I’m tired of everyone saying my mom is crazy!”
Mama’s face goes all white. Lucas immediately wishes he could take the words back, but he can’t.

“You ungrateful little...do you know how hard I try to keep this family together ?” Her voice is trembling. "Do you have any idea ? How tiring it is...no you don’t, because that’s my job as a mother. And your job as a child is to keep out of trouble, and go to school, and make something of yourself. But instead… do you know how I worry ? How I wonder if demons have gotten to you ?”

Lucas feels a rush of anger. He’s trying so hard, and he just can’t catch a break, and the one time he wants something for himself...For once he wishes he’d just had a normal family. He wishes he didn’t have to deal with all this shit. Sometimes he thinks demons are just an excuse, that she’s just tired of being his mother.

He feels tears rush to his eyes. He doesn’t mean to be such a disappointment, he doesn’t. He just can’t take it anymore.

“Demons aren’t real ! And neither are angels ! You’re crazy ! I’m done with this !”

He turns around, and runs out.

“You can’t just...Lucas ! Lucas, where are you going ?”

…

When his mom finally finds him, Lucas’s anger has died down. He’s been sitting outside for a while, hiding under the porch of another building, and he’d started to get really cold, and scared.

What if she’d gotten so angry and didn’t want to take him back ? What if she left him there ? How would he survive then ?

But she’s not angry when she finds him. She just wraps him in a big wet hug, and Lucas can see she’s crying. She walked outside without an umbrella and her hair is all plastered to her skull and face.
“Lucas? Lucas! Oh my god, there you are! Fuck, I was so scared! You’re alright? Oh my god!”

The fact that she’s swearing shocks Lucas more than anything else.

“Mom, you’re hugging me too tight, it hurts.”

She grabs his face, as if to check if he’s okay.

“You can’t do this to me! You can’t! Do you know how dangerous it is to get out at night, especially in this neighborhood?” She’s shouting at him now.

“I’m okay!” He shouts too.

“My god” She says as she hugs him even tighter, "something could have happened. You’re the most important thing in my life, Lucas. If something ever happened to you…My god. I’m sorry for the things I said. You’re not a demon. I’m sorry if I made you think I didn’t care. I have been going through some things, lately, you know, ever since I lost my job. But I’ll try harder, I promise. I will find another job, I will get you some good food. I will be a good, normal mother again. Just promise me, promise me you won’t ever do something like this again.”

She looks scared, not angry. Lucas feels ashamed of running away. Of saying all those mean things to her. Now that she’s there, he just feels relief.

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“It’s alright, my baby boy. It’s alright. Let’s go home.”

“You’re a good mom. I don’t think you’re crazy. I just hate that you’re sad all the time. You deserve to be happy.”

“I’m happy, I’m happy. As long as I have you, I’m happy.”
They’re sitting in the kitchen now, swaddled in towels, with cups of warm chocolate.

Lucas feels the need to come clean.

“I tried to get my own pogs, you know. I won them off this idiot who was bullying them off the smaller kids but he didn’t even know how to play right. It’s all about the angle and the speed. Then I sold them to the neighborhood kids but cheaper than the shop. Then I made this friend Norman who said he’d found a box full of pogs and we could sell them and split the money but then those older kids came and beat us up and took all my money. And then Norman told me he’d stolen the pogs from his older brother and that’s why he beat us. What a moron. But don’t worry, I got in some punches too.”

Mom puts her palm on her face.

“Oh my god, Lucas. You can’t just get into fights! Don’t you have any sense of danger at all? You’re too small for this!”

“Well, what was I supposed to do? Just let him win?”

“Sometimes, with bullies, the best thing to do is to ignore them until they go away.”

“I tried! They don’t, though. They don’t go away. They’re always coming after me because I am small! And a nerd and I look like a girl and I play with stupid robots and I have holes in my shoes...they only stop when I get angry.”

It’s true. Well at least then they find easier targets to pick on. And he’s quick, too, he can hide fast. Nobody knows he’s found an access to the school roof. But he can’t tell Mom that.

“I’m so sorry, Lucas. I’ll talk to the teacher.”

“No! Do you know what they do to snitches? I don’t want to end up with my head in the toilet.”
“Lucas, listen to me. I know this must be hard. People are horrible sometimes. But you can’t let them make you like them. You can’t start stealing and acting out. Otherwise, they will say I’m a bad mother. They’ll come and they’ll take you away and give you to another family. Is that what you want ?”

Lucas’s heart stops. That’s the worst thing he’s ever heard of. Are they even allowed to do that ?

“No !”

“Listen, my old boss, he was also a bully. But sometimes, you just have to toughen it out. In the end, God will reward the faithful and the good, and punish the wicked, do you hear me ? These bullies, they’re the real demons, they have no love in their heart, and it will destroy them from the inside. But you ! You are smart, and brave, and you are destined for great things. So I want you to focus on your grades, and don’t let them come between you and your future, alright ?”

He looks down at his mug. He doesn’t know if he believes that. His teaches always say he’s smarter than he deserves to be, because he’s a troublemaker. But he can’t disappoint Mom, though. He takes a sip of the chocolate, the warmth on his clammy hands almost painful.

“Ok, Mom. I’m sorry if I was the one to ever make you sad.”

“You never did. I’m sorry I got angry. I was just scared. The world is just a shitty place, sometimes, but that’s not your fault.”

“We can take it on together, right ?”

“Yes, my angel. We can.”

In the end there is a lady that comes check their house and asks all sorts of questions. Lucas can see she does not like him one bit, and she asks all sorts of rude questions to Mama. It’s very scary, but they pass the test. They’re a good team.

The pog empire can wait.
“Do you want more apple pie, Lucas?”

“Yes, please, Miss Capucine. It’s very good. Thank you.”

They’re sitting in the salon of their new neighbors’ house. It’s the strangest house Lucas has ever seen. The walls are bright colors - purple in this room, and green in the entrance, and blue in the kitchen, and yellow upstairs. There are paintings and plants and weird devices and clocks and books everywhere. A pot full of bright orange, tall flowers stands under the window, that look like they come from the jungle. Above the mantelpiece there’s a giant butterfly that looks made of paper. And it always smells like spices and pie. It’s like a place from a fairytale.

Lucas likes it.

“Are you sure you don’t mind watching over him?” Mom is anxious, he can tell. He told her he didn’t need a babysitter anymore, he’s almost ten. But if he has to be watched, this place is pretty nice. And the apple pie is great.

“No dear! What are neighbors for? Go to that interview of yours. Our house could use a bit more children running around, right Eulalie?”

“Absolutely. I told you, Valerie, we have more than enough time on our hands, and your boy is a delight to have around.”
“Bless you. You know, usually I leave him with Miss Normand in our flat, but she’s starting to lose her mind, and I keep feeling like she’s going to forget him.”

Well, that’s one thing Lucas is not sad about.

“I don’t like Miss Normand. Her place smells like dead cat and cabbage and she’s always looking at me weird.”

“Lucas ! Don’t be rude !” Mom reprimands him, but he can see Miss Eulalie smile at him. She looks a little bit like a mischievous pixie, he thinks, with her long braids and colorful dresses. He didn’t know grown-ups could be that way.

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. Here, we only have alive cats. And a parrot. Do you want to meet our parrot, Lucas ?”

“Oh, really ? That’s sick ! Totally !”

“Ok, but on one condition. You can’t say any swear words in front of him. Because he remembers them. Ten years ago, when we got him, Capucine forgot herself, and he still says that one sometimes. We don’t want a rude parrot.”

Capucine looks at Eulalie with laughter in her eyes. She speaks less, but Lucas can tell that she is a very warm person. “Oh cut me a break, babe, you’re just as bad. The sad truth is our parrot swears like a sailor.”

“That’s awesome.” Lucas can’t help but say. It’s like a pirate story come to life. He wonders if he can persuade the parrot to sit on his shoulder.

Mom laughs and then gets up, putting down her plate and grabs her bag.

“Don’t learn anything from him, then, Lucas. You’re already bad enough as it is. Ok, I have to be going. Thanks again, and be good, Lucas, alright ?”
“So young man, I see you’ve found my piano.”

Turns out the parrot was sleeping, so they played board games, and after that Capucine had to take a call and Eulalie went to water the plants in the garden. They told Lucas to have a look around the house if he wanted to. He found some amazing books he wants to ask if he can borrow and a mobile that looks like the solar system. And then he got to the attic, and saw the piano, and couldn’t help it. He’s always wanted to try and play.

The keys ring clear in the dusty air. One note, and then gone. He tries a few different ones. It sounds as if each sound makes the air vibrate around him. He’s never heard a sound so pure. And when he puts them together, it does something to his heart. It’s like a language he understands but doesn’t know how to speak.

He knows he’s being rude though, so when he hears Eulalie’s voice he springs back up in a hurry. His heart sinks. Now he’s not going to be allowed to come back here.

“I’m sorry, Miss Eulalie, I didn’t mean…”

Eulalie doesn’t look mad, though. She looks thoughtful.

“No, don’t stop. Sit down. Who taught you to play?”

“Ummm…nobody. I was just trying something out.”

“Really? What about that air you were just playing?”

“I made it up.”

“Did you? That was lovely. Can you play it again?”

Lucas shrugs. He does. It’s not much.
“How charming. How absolutely charming. That's an earworm, that one.”

“It’s just a few notes.”

“Yes, but that’s the beginning of everything! That’s how all great melodies started.” She sits down next to Lucas on the bench. “You don’t believe me, do you.”

Lucas shakes his head. He’s heard actual music, that’s nothing like this.

Eulalie smirks at him. And then she puts her hand to the keys.

At first she copies the notes Lucas plays. A few times, then faster. And then she adds a few, and a few more. Her hands fly over the keyboard as she plays, and soon it’s a waterfall of notes, and something swells and swells in Lucas’ chest. It’s like the music is alive. It grows and grows until it almost becomes solid. It’s something totally different and yet his few notes are still there. A bit sad, but happy at the same time. Like a ray of sunshine breaking through storm clouds and playing over the sea.

It’s amazing. And when she finally stops, she laughs.

“Wow.”

“See? There was something in there. Nobody starts with a full song. It’s always a few notes, like trees and flowers grow from tiny little seeds. And you, dear, have magic in your fingers, and in your ears.”

"I don't believe in magic anymore, I'm not a baby."

"Well see young man, that's where you're wrong. Magic is not all sparkle and superpowers. The real magic happens in the hearts and minds of people. It's the power to turn sad people into happy people, angry people into kind people. It's the power to create entire worlds for people to imagine. It’s the power to make people listen, really listen to you. And music is but one of the ways to make magic. The question is - is it the right way for you?"
Lucas feels his throat dry up for some reason. He is not used to people taking him seriously.

“I...don’t know. I’ve never tried before.”

“Well, everyone starts out somewhere. And I’m a music teacher, Lucas. I can tell you...if more of my students had first tries like these...my ears would be truly blessed.”

…

Mom is reluctant at first. She says that they don’t have money to pay for music lessons. But Eulalie and Capucine insist. Eulalie says that Lucas has talent and it would be stupid to waste it. Lucas can help around the house a little bit in exchange. Finally Mom tells him he can go if he makes sure that his grades don’t drop below a certain point anymore and he keeps out of trouble. It’s the easiest promise he’s ever made.

In the end he ends up spending a lot of time at their house. They always find things for him to do but he doesn’t mind. They always find a way to make things fun. Capucine helps him with his homework. So now he doesn’t have to wait so long at school for mom’s work to be over.

One evening he’s sitting at their kitchen table, peeling potatoes for the stew that Capucine is making while Eulalie is doing something with the beans. They just had a lesson of music theory. Lucas’ head is buzzing with how full it is.

“Miss Eulalie, is it possible to be in love with music ?”

“Absolutely.”

“I think I am. I think that’s better than loving a person, anyway.”

Eulalie puts her knife down.
“Now, where is this coming from? And who told you that it was only possible to love one thing?”

“I don’t know...I think my mom is still in love with my dad, but he left her, and that’s why she’s so unhappy and she never met anybody else, you know? So maybe it’s better never to fall in love in the first place. Or maybe...to put all your love into something else. Like music.”

Eulalie frowns.

“No, Lucas, you’re wrong. Did your mom ever tell you what really happened with your dad?”

“No, but I pick up on things. I know sometimes, she’s been asked on a date but she always says no.”

“You’re too clever for your own good, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I just wish....I don’t know. Maybe that my dad had never left. But she said to me, once, that he was a bad person. I don’t know. Maybe she should get another husband. I just wish I had a normal family.”

Eulalie’s face drops, all of a sudden. Lucas feels like he’s said something wrong, but he doesn’t know what.

At that Capucine comes around from where she was standing over the stove, and wraps her arms around Eulalie’s shoulder.

“Lucas - you know, there is no such thing as a normal family. Some families look normal on the outside and are very mean to each other. Any family is good as long as the people within love each other. As long as they choose to be each other’s family.” Her face is kind, but her tone is serious.

“What about you, though? You don’t have a husband. And neither does Miss Eulalie.”

Capucine sighs. “Yes, we don’t. And we don’t need one. We are happy like this. Eulalie has taught music to hundreds of children. I live with my best friend, who is the person I love most in the entire world.” Eulalie smiles and she takes Capucine’s hand on her shoulder and squeezes it.”We are a
family, and a good one. Do you believe me ?"

“Yes, I do. Your house is awesome. Your parrot, too.” It’s true. And Lucas loves the idea of living with his best friend.

“Yes he is. And Lucas ? Never let anyone tell you your family is bad because it’s different, alright ?”

Lucas nods.

“You will find love too, Lucas. That’s what you deserve.” Eulalie adds. “Maybe you will fall in love, or maybe not. But you will find people who make you happy. And so will your mother, in time. You can’t just close yourself off from others out of fear, you hear me ? Especially not if you want to play music. Music, in the end, is just a way to express your love.”

“What if I never find the right person to love, though ? Or what if they die, or...”

“Now, you’re too young to be this pessimistic. But listen - if anything ? The universe loves you. Do you know how incredible life on earth is ? How improbable ? Think about all the stars who had to collide, all the things that had to happen, all the people who had to meet for you to exist. That’s nothing short of a miracle. The universe loves you. And you can love it right back.”

“Is that like a God thing ? Because I don’t think I believe in God anymore.”

“Some people call it God. I call it the Universe, some people call it Allah or Jesus or the Dao or Shiva, and the poets call it a thousand things, but mostly they call it Love. In the end I think we all just need something to believe in. But even if you don’t believe - the wonderful thing is, even when you don’t believe ? It’s still there, waiting for you to embrace it, no matter how lost you are. You can come home anytime.” Eulalie’s eyes are shining a little bit, Lucas notices.

Capucine laughs. “Well I call it don’t bother yourself, there will always be reasons to get mad tomorrow. But for now, there is a present to enjoy and I damn well intend to do just that. Now come on Lucas, the potatoes aren’t going to peel themselves.”

Lucas can’t help but think about it for a long time afterwards.
He doesn’t know about God, still, or angels. He doesn’t like the idea of somebody watching everything he does. But he likes - he likes music. Learning about the stars. Math. Stories. Like there is so much to be passionate about. It’s like it makes his brain come alive. And that, that makes him feel like he can do anything, be anything he wants to be, go anywhere he wants to go.

“So my childhood was a bit uncommon. Mom was....She was always going on about angels and demons and souls and the end of the world. At first I just thought it was a game. It took me a long time to understand that those demons were real, only they just existed in her mind.

Sometimes she would spend weeks in her room. Sometimes she’d have hallucinations and wake me up in the middle of the night to pray. Sometimes...she would show up at school in her pajamas, hair all wild, mumbling about things. She had trouble hanging on to jobs. We were poor most of the time. I was a kid, I didn’t know how to deal, so sometimes, I acted out. I did stupid shit trying to get money. I was angry and scared and selfish. I...

But then sometimes she got better, and she was so sweet and funny. She was amazing at telling stories. She would bake and invent games and we’d talk until late in the night. She was just...she was my best friend, then. It was just us against the whole world. And I...okay, yeah. Maybe she should have gotten help. She just was terrified they would take me away. I can’t blame her, I was the only thing she had, you know?
And she loved me, so much. I never doubted that. Even when we had nothing, we had love. We had stories and fun neighbors who’d teach me the piano and the playground behind the apartment lot and the view from the rooftop. I had moments of being truly, really happy. And that’s what I hung onto when things got worse.

I’m talking about this because... I don’t want to paint my life as... this sob story. When I made the wrong choices, they were entirely my own.”

“Un vrai dur”
2002
(12)

His life sucks.

Middle school sucks. He’d just gotten the hang of having friends, too. But now they’ve had to move away to a cheaper apartment, all small and moldy and his room is a closet. So he doesn’t know anyone at his school. He’s the smallest again, and it feels like all the boys around him have been hit with the stupid stick. It all feels wrong, like they’re way too young to be passing around magazines with naked girls to rate them or talking about how they get drunk on rubbing alcohol.

Not Damien, though.

Damien is cool. He wears all black and shitty shoes and he’s a bit weird, but he doesn’t give a shit about what other people think. He’s rude sometimes, but it’s really funny, and he’s not afraid of anyone, not even the teachers. When other kids are mean to him he just stares at them with his sharp green eyes until they shut up. But almost nobody dares to mock him.
He’s a bit intimidating, really, but one day he comes to sit next to Lucas at the cafeteria and tells him that their crew is looking for a fourth man, and that’s that. He doesn’t seem to care that Lucas is a nerd. His two other friends, Amaury and Kevin, are a bit stupid, and they always just do what Damien says, but they’re not *that* bad.

Having a crew really makes life a lot better. Damien's got a BMX bike that they use to do awesome stunts in the abandoned lot behind the school gym where somebody dug up some ramps and slopes. They show Lucas how to do barspins and bunny hops and drops, and even let him try a few times even though he's probably too short and he keeps falling down. Damien says he's kind of crazy, but in a good way, and Lucas likes that. He likes it a lot. And then they all go get ice cream at the McDonalds.

But sometimes it's just the two of them, and they talk. Damien introduces Lucas to all this cool music. They talk about deep stuff too. Damien says there’s no future anyway, and the whole world is shit; but they have to be brave and face it anyway, like men. Lucas's always liked to think about things, but until now he thought it was better for everyone if he kept it inside. Damien just throws everything out, all his pain and anger. It feels very brave to Lucas. It makes him feel some kind of way, to be friends with a boy like that. Makes him want to be a little bit taller, not for the first time but sharper than before, and in a way he doesn’t understand.

One day they're at the lot with the crew and a gang of older guys come and tell them to fuck off, that they're real riders and they don't need a bunch of kids killing their vibes. Damien tells them they should fuck off and that they're a bunch of posers, because he's fearless like that, and that they're a bunch of rotten old fucks, too. There’s a moment when Lucas is afraid that it's going to turn into a fight. These guys are probably in high school, they don't stand a chance. But instead it turns into a contest.

Damien goes first. He shows off his best moves. He's fast, and agile, and Lucas is sort of stunned by how confident he is.

Then it's the turn of the other guy - and he blows it completely out of the water. He does a ninja drop - that's like throwing yourself off the slope with your bike and only jumping on it during the fall - and he finds the time to do a no hander, too. When he lands he looks at them smugly.

"Okay kids, time to go to bed now and tell your momma I'll be around soon, okay?"

They all laugh crassly.
Lucas feels a thrill of anger and before he knows what he's doing he steps forward.

"Wait !"

"Come on, we have to deal with the midget too now ? What are you, like, eight ?"

"Fuck off !" Lucas shouts, and he grabs their bike and he takes it to the highest slope. He doesn't really know what he's doing. Just that at least if he wrecks himself Damien will not be the only one looking stupid.

So when he jumps off he's planning to do a barspin, but his feet are not properly on the pedals and he knows he's going to fail. A beginner's trick and he's going to fail.

An image flashed through his mind. He's only ever seen this on TV on one of those taped shows Damien had them watch, but what the hell -

He throws his feet upward and backward and claps his feet together - and for a moment it feels like flying - before coming back down and he hears someone yell "Holy Shit!".

And then the ground hits before he has even time to properly get back on his bike.

He smashes down on the bike, hitting his face on the handlebars before being sent flying into the ground. The pain is like a clap through his whole body and the next thing he knows he's lying on the ground, head spinning.

"Holy shit ! That was insane, bro ! Look at that tiny ass motherfucker just doing a Superman ! What the fuck !"

"Hey dude, are you dead ?"

Lucas opens his eyes, sits up, looks down. His shirt is covered in blood. Mom is going to kill him. He looks around for the bike. Thankfully, it doesn't seem too badly damaged.
Then he notices Damien staring at him. He can't tell if he's proud, or jealous. All he can say is, he's never had anyone look at him like that before, and it's even better than flying.

...

The older guys clap him on the back and tell him he's welcome to hang with them anytime, tells him he's got one hell of a pair of balls, before going back to their drills. Amaury and Kevin are super enthusiastic and friendly with him, too, which is new.

Damien is silent, though, all the way to the bus stop. But when the bus arrives he smiles at Lucas.

"Guess it's my turn to catch up with you now, huh."

And then he's gone. Lucas feels weird. He tells himself it has to be the adrenaline.

It's still pumping through his veins when he arrives home. He's tried to clean himself up a little with tissues but he's got his cheek scratched and a hole in his jeans and his nose is also bleeding all over his shirt, so. He's still hoping he can sneak to his room unnoticed.

But as soon as he opens the door, his mom calls to him, and he knows he's screwed.

He shuffles to the kitchen, already trying to put on the most sorry face he can.

But all his preoccupations fall by the wayside when he sees his mother has a guest.

It's a man. His mother is busy making coffee. The man directly turns his eyes to Lucas. For a brief moment Lucas feels like he is staring at a movie actor.

He's tall, and broad, and has a rough but handsome sort of face. He wears a denim shirt, and a big expensive-looking watch, and there's something imposing but charismatic about him. He has harsh blue eyes that seem to expect something from him. It makes Lucas very uncomfortable. It's not like his mom to invite people over, and something about him raises his alarm bells. The way he seems to occupy the room, maybe, like he already owns it. He doesn't look like a social worker, though.
He looks at his mom. She seems tense, too. He tries to wait for a signal from her about what to do. But all she does is smile and tell him to sit down. So he does.

"So, Lucas. I'm an old friend of your mother's. You can call me Jacques."

Lucas nods. He doesn't know what to say.

Then his mom seems to notice his current state, and she gasps sharply.

"Lucas Lallemant, what in God's name have you been up to?"

Lucas shrugs. He doesn't want to be told off in front of a stranger.

"Just hanging with the guys." He keeps it purposefully vague; he doesn't want her to worry.

She inhales sharply.

"What, and you expect me to believe your nose just started bleeding randomly, then? Have you gotten into a fight again?"

"No, it's nothing like that. We just took Damien's bike to the park, that's all."

"I knew that Damien was a bad influence! You..."

"Now, now, Valerie. He's a teenage boy!" The stranger cuts in. "What do you expect him to do, sit inside all day and play with dolls?"

Lucas is in shock. He's never had someone to be on his side before.

The stranger - Jacques - winks at him.
"You're a real tough guy, aren't you?"

Lucas, then, can't help but hear the approval in his voice. A note of camaraderie, like he understands something his mother doesn't. And for the first time in a long time, it makes him feel like his life might not totally, in fact, suck.

He sees Jacques come by more often. After a while his mom stops being nervous around him. She starts laughing, and blushing a little too. She puts on nice dresses and invites Jacques to dinner, and he arrives with flowers - and a brand new watch for Lucas, all cool with rubber and glow in the dark hands.

Lucas knows what's going on, he isn't stupid. He doesn't know how to feel about it. It's a bit sudden, and there's something a bit weird, a bit off sometimes with Jacques, like when he smiles it doesn't totally reach his eyes, and his jokes are a bit mean, and he's obviously rich but he doesn't speak about his job, or about where he knows his mom from.

But his mom seems happy - happier than he's seen her...maybe ever. And even though it feels weird to have someone new around so often, Lucas knows it's not okay for him to be selfish.

Jacques seems to want Lucas to like him, too. He brings him more and more expensive gifts. While his mom gets perfumes and new clothes and dinner dates, Lucas gets new trainers, and his very first video game console with three games - it's amazing. Now he's finally gonna be able to have the guys over. Jacques gives him Call of Duty, too, but in secret because he says Mom will probably find it too violent. And it is a little bit - but Lucas is also very, very good at it. He knows he's lucky - for instance Damien's stepdad is a total asshole, always trying to control him as if he was his own son. Jacques isn't like that ; Lucas feels like he's talking to him like an adult, man to man, and he really appreciates it. One evening, he even asks Lucas about his interest in BMX bikes and what sort of bike he thinks would suit him best.

He rushes to school the following morning. He can't wait to tell the guys - they're going to be able to do so much more with two bikes ! But oddly Damien doesn't seem thrilled at the news, and his "Great !" sounds a lot like sarcasm. Lucas isn't the most socially aware but like. He can recognize sarcasm. And it turns into a heavy ball in the pit of his stomach.
From there, things go from bad to worse.

One day, they're at Kevin's house, playing video games. He brought his own games and Kevin and Amaury are having a blast with Call of Duty, but Damien sits in a corner, looking sullen. Lucas wonders what's going on with him. Maybe he has family problems. Lucas feels like a bad friend all of a sudden. He should have noticed earlier. But he doesn't know what to do. Damien isn't the cuddly type, he's all sharp edges. Lucas used to think they were the same, it if they were, wouldn't he know what to do?

Lola comes back with a bowl full of chips. The boys look at her kind of weirdly but then they jump on the bowl. She sits down next to Lucas.

Oh yeah, Lola. So Lucas sort of...has a girlfriend now? It's weird how that happened. A few weeks back she started to want to sit next to him all the time and she invited him to hang out and play video games. She told him he was cute and not like other boys. And then she kissed him. On the mouth. It was...wet. And sticky. Lucas doesn't get the appeal, anyway. But Lola's nice enough, and funny, and he didn't want to let her down, so he figures one more friend is a good thing. Plus he knows having a girlfriend equals good social standing. Nobody treats him like a nerd now. So now they hang together a lot. They've only kissed twice so far. It makes Lucas nervous like he should be doing more but he doesn't know what.

Anyway, they're all hanging out.

He moves closer to Damien, a little.

"Hey, are you ok?"

Damien moves back, suddenly.

"Yeah I'm okay, why the fuck wouldn't I be ok?" There is venom in his voice. Lucas doesn't understand.

Amaury turns his head around and laughs.
"Haha, dude, you've been moping like a little girl. Did you get your period or something?"

Damien's eyes become slits.

"As if anybody wouldn't want to off themselves after spending an entire day with your fat asses."

"Wow, drama queen much?" Amaury laughs again.

"I'm going to...get something to drink in the kitchen." Lucas says to relieve the tension. "Anyone want anything?"

"Oh yeah dude can you bring me a coke? Need to finish this level, this game is just too sick! Any way you could come over again next week so we can finish it?" Kevin asks him.

"Yeah, sure!"

"You're the man, Lucas!"

This doesn't make him as happy as it would have, a few weeks before. He can feel Damien's eyes on his back as he leaves.

He gets an unpleasant thought as he walks to the kitchen. What if Damien is jealous of Lucas doing so well? He hates the idea.

But what if? The truth is, he likes video games and new bikes and even Armand and Kevin, sometimes. But Damien is the best friend he ever had. He would give it all up in a heartbeat if it meant they could be okay again.

He comes back with some drinks.

He opens the door.
Damien and Lola are snuggled together, giggling.

He freezes.

Lola is showing Damien her bracelets. Damien has his arm around her, and they’re sitting way too close. Damien looks up at Lucas, a challenge on his face.

Amaury and Kevin are looking at him. Lucas realizes, suddenly, that he has to say something. He doesn’t want to, he wants to turn away and wash his eyes with bleach. He wants to know why his heart is trying to escape his ribcage.

“What are you doing with him ? You’re my girlfriend !”

“You can’t be my boyfriend.” Lola blurts out. “Damien told me the truth. You’re a fag !”

The word sounds weird in her mouth, out of place, and it falls into Lucas’s ear like the wrecking ball of a destruction machine.

Lucas feels blood rush to his face, and he doesn’t know what to do. He feels cold all over his body, but like his blood is boiling at the same time.

“Yeah, little fag, you don’t know how to treat a girl right, do you ? But I can.” Damien says. He starts running his finger along Lola’s skin then, in a way that feels all wrong.

This is horrible. This isn’t what was supposed to happen.

“You’re my friend !” Lucas stammers. “Friends don’t…”

“I can’t be friend with a fucking fag. Who knows what dirty things you’re even thinking about me right now.”
“What the fuck? Is that true?” Amaury’s voice seems three continents away.

"Didn't you see the way he's always looking at me? Trying to get close to me and shit?"

He knows he should defend himself. Deny. Be nonchalant. Say something back. Punch Damien in the face for trying to steal his girl.

That's not what happens.

Instead, Lucas feels tears well in his eyes. Fuck. They can’t see him cry.

Damien laughs.

“Run to mommy, little fag!”

He runs.

He doesn't stop running until he's home, in his bed, face hidden in his pillow. And he cries. He cries his heart out. And the more he does, the more he hates himself. He hates himself for not having been more careful, for believing he could have friends. And most of all he hates himself for wanting to yell at Lola, not Damien.

...

The news spreads, somehow. The following weeks are the worst of his life. He knows bullying but this is worse. This is mean and horrible in a whole new sort of way. And he can't run off to the roof anymore.

He can't let his mom know. Because then she would start asking questions and he would have to lie to her. He knows what the Church has to say about fags.
It stays with him like he's wearing a brand on his mark, like people are talking about him everywhere he goes. He can't talk to anybody about it. It's too shameful.

Except one evening, Lucas comes home. Jacques is there. They're supposed to go out with Mom but she's running late. He sees Lucas and his ruined clothes - something thought it was funny to pour some weird smelling stuff down his shirt - and sits him down in the kitchen and tells him to talk.

Lucas is so tired and so sad, it just comes out.

"My best friend...told everyone I'm a fag because he wanted to get with my girlfriend. And now nobody will leave me alone."

Jacques looks at him. His eyes are cold, and for a moment, Lucas is terrified.

"Well, are you?"

"No!" The word leaves Lucas's lips before he can think about it.

The truth is, for a moment he was like...He doesn't know. He's confused. It's probably that he'd never had a friend like Damien. But was he really that creepy that he could think...He's seen what fags are like on TV or in rap songs. That's nothing like him. Just thinking about it makes him want to vomit. He's nothing like that, all weird and creepy. It's like they took his feelings, something new and private, and twisted them into something awful.

But most of all he never wants to feel this ashamed ever again.

Jacques considers him.

"Well, that friend sounds like a nasty piece of work. But let me tell you something, son. In this world, if you want respect? You have to take it. It's the only way. Do you know why it's bad to be a fag?"

Lucas makes an appropriate face of disgust but he can't say the words.
"Because, it's all about power. If you let other men walk over you, dominate you, bend you over, do all sort of obscene things to you, how can you have respect?"

He shakes his head sadly.

"I am sorry you were betrayed by your friend. That's the worst that can happen. Stepping to such lows to get a girl? That does not bode well for his future. But you? You're a tough one, I've seen it. You'll be okay. If anything, it will make you stronger. If you do what's necessary."

He gets something out of his pocket, then, and puts it on the table.

Lucas stares at it, speechless.

It's a knife. A little, silver engraved foldable knife.

A rush of contradictory emotions invade him all at once.

All his life, adults have always told him - don't hit back. Be the bigger person. Don't give in to your bullies. Turn the other cheek. Remember who you are.

And they've never done anything to help him.

But Jacques? He may be scary at times. But he's the first to tell him he can do something.

He doesn't have to be a victim.

Lucas puts the knife in his pocket.

…
It takes some time to find the right moment to get the knife out. Of course he doesn't want to use it for real. He just needs to show that he's not afraid.

The problem is - the bullying can come from everywhere. So he can't deal with this in private.

He's going to get in so, so much trouble.

He walks with the knife in his pocket for days. And the thing is...it changes things. He's less scared of people. It feels like a talisman. He's starting to believe maybe he doesn't need to use it after all; that maybe if he shows people he's impervious to their shit they will get bored and move on.

Then he passes the courtyard. A lot of students are gathered in front of the gates, waiting for it to open.

Damien is there, standing with Lola, Amaury, Kevin and a few other people. They all look at him when he passes. Amaury makes an obscene gesture with his hand and mouth. Damien looks at him, eyes cold as ice. He's holding Lola's hand. And then he smiles, and grabs her closer.

Lucas feels a moment of pure hatred course through his veins.

Damien was just fucking jealous. He saw Lucas finally getting some things for once and he couldn't stand it. Because - when he'd first met Lucas he'd been nothing. Damien just wanted people who'd follow him around, like Kevin and Amaury. But Lucas - Lucas had done a Superman, and he'd had Lola, and the gifts from Jacques, and the growing consideration of Kevin and Amaury. And Damien hadn't been able to stand it, so he'd tried to destroy Lucas.

Jacques was right. It was all about power.

Time expands and contracts strangely. One minute, he's realizing things in his head; the next he's standing in front of Damien.

"I need to talk to you." He hears himself say.

Damien laughs dismissively.
"What do you want, little fag?"

"I want you to shut your mouth." Lucas answers. "Stop fucking talking about me."

"Aww, what, you're afraid that…"

Lucas doesn't leave him the time to continue. He gets out the knife and opens it. He can see the smug self satisfaction on Damien's face turn into fear.

"What the fuck, you psycho…” But Lucas has to give it to him, he quickly reassembles himself.

"Are you jealous, you freak? Is that what this is, huh?"

"What, you think I'm into you?" Lucas laughs. It sounds unnaturally loud to his own ears. Eerie, like spoken by someone else. "You whiny bitch? Ooh look at me I'm so special I dress in black and listen to Nirvana! You're a fucking cliche poser!" He sees Damien recoil. And he knows, he knows where to hit to hurt. "Your own daddy fucking left you behind! You had to lie to steal a girl! And why the fuck are you so obsessed with me, huh, are you gay? Fucking pathetic bitch!"

He sees the disbelief and hurt in Damien's eyes, and then his jaw clench, getting ready to come back with a punchline. Lucas knows he can't let him, so he puts the hand holding the knife forward and lunges.

Damien runs. Under the eyes of half the school.

"Holy shit, he's actually insane." He hears Amaury's voice say, tinged with admiration. He knows better than to appreciate it now, though. Those two's friendship is worth nothing. They're just gonna follow whoever the top dog is at the moment

Should he feel pride? Satisfaction? He's made his point now. He's shown everyone he's not just going to lie there and take it.
He feels...nothing. White noise rushing in his head. He knew he wasn't going to hurt Damien, he purposefully held the knife at an angle, turned back towards himself. Didn't he?

This just...it feels so far away from something he would actually do. He can't believe it.

Then he sees the yard supervisor rush towards him. He folds the knife and hides it hastily, but it's too late. The damage is done, and whether he believes it or not, there's going to be consequences.

…

The knife is on the desk, in view of everyone.

The silence hangs heavy in the room as everyone waits for Lucas's mom to arrive. The only noise is the loud ticking of the cheap plastic clock hung on one of the walls.

Lucas is flooded with shame. With every second passing he feels more and more uncomfortable, wishing he'd never done this. Wishing he could just disappear. He's going to have to tell his mom, everything that happened. She will be devastated. She might blame Jacques for giving him the knife. They might take Lucas away, too.

What a mess.

But it's not Valerie Lallemant who strides through the door.

"Excuse me, sir, who are you ?"

"My name is Jacques Colibari. I'm Lucas's father."

Lucas's mouth drops open. He finally only closes it while Jacques explains that he had been estranged from his family but that he is reclaiming his parental responsibilities now. He goes on to say that Lucas has had a troubled home situation for a while now, without a father and a fragile mother, and that he "does recognize the kid is in need of discipline" but after all, boys will be boys, and he probably didn't mean anything by it.
"That said, I do have some questions for you. What exactly are you doing here that can have a boy come home to his parents covered in gasoline?"

He can see several of the staff's faces decompose. Gasoline? Was that the thing they poured on him the other day? Or is Jacques lying? Lucas feels queasy.

"I'm sure you are doing your best. I wouldn't want to have to launch a more official investigation. I don't think it would end up well for anyone."

"The boy's parents will be contacted." The guidance counselor says. "They could press charges."

"Oh, I'll have a chat with them. I'm sure that won't be necessary and we will come to an arrangement. Like civilised folk, you know?"

All the adults in the room nod. Lucas wonders how he is the only one that heard the threat in the word arrangement.

At some point, it's over. Lucas barely heard a word of what everybody has been saying. They get out. Lucas sees Jacques has not come alone, but with another guy wearing a dark blazer and sunglasses, who doesn't talk and just follows them when they get out.

Lucas feels strange, head floating with the lack of consequences, walking out between those two imposing men. Everybody looks at them as they leave.

Lucas gets a glimpse of their faces - there is no mockery now. Fear, shock, surprise, confusion, maybe a little disgust or disapproval, but no mockery. A little awe, too. Excitement, interest, curiosity.

Is this respect?

They go to Jacques's car, a huge black Mercedes that looks out of place in the tiny street.
It's all so weird, Lucas thinks. Everything is weird.

They get in the car, Lucas in the backseat.

"Those fucking idiots" Jacques turns around and starts, "they don't give a shit about you kids, do they? All they care about is their peace and quiet. They could have set you on fire, those other kids, huh, before they'd lift a finger. Did you hear about those teenagers dying because of a game that went wrong in Passy?" Jacques shakes his head. "All that wishy washy we care about you bullshit. You shouldn't trust it, he tells Lucas. It's not real. The only fairness you get in this world is the one you take for yourself."

The other man nods.

Lucas swallows.

"Why...why did you tell them you were my father?"

"Because it's true. I am. It's time you knew the truth, kid."

Lucas draws in a sharp breath. What?

"I...your mother left me before I ever knew she was pregnant. That's the truth. I would never have abandoned you otherwise, Lucas, you know that, right?"

Lucas nods. But no, he didn't know. He doesn't trust himself to speak.

"Good. And I finally found you so now I'm there and I'm going to make things right."

He turns around, and gives something to Lucas.

It's the knife. Double-edged sword.
"Take it. You earned it."

*He has a father. He has a father. He has a father.*

A dangerous, charismatic, powerful father.

It's crazy. He never imagined this was possible.

It's only later that he realizes.

His mother lied to him.

---

"*Ma petite famille*"

2003

(13)

"Lallemand, turn around right this second."

Lucas affixes his smile before he turns around.

“But Madame, I was explaining the lesson to Charlotte. You want us to understand, right ?”
The teacher squints at him.

“Can you repeat what I just said, then?”

“To study a force you have to define the system you are studying, since it’s all relative, so like the body in motion. Bodies in motion are awesome, am I right?”

The class laughs.

“That’s highly inappropriate.”

“What! I was talking about the cow and the train.”

The teacher opens her mouth but the bell rings and everyone rushes out of the class. Lucas sees his friends come towards him but he salutes them and rushes out; he’s got somewhere to be.

His father’s car is parked in full view in front of the school, engine still running. Lucas slides into the passenger car.

“Good day? Keeping out of trouble?”

Lucas shrugs.

“They can’t tell me shit, my grades are too good.”

Jacques laughs.

“That’s my man! Game the system, game the system.”

They drive off, but they don’t take the road Lucas is expecting.
“We’re not going to the shooting rink?"

“What? Ah no sorry. Today,” he smiles at Lucas, “we are doing something new.”

They arrive at a middle-sized shopping mall, park, and make their way into the rundown gallery. It’s a relic from the 80s, with those mirror tiles and pink and blue neon lights everywhere, half of them broken and flickering. Lucas looks at the creepy mannequins in one of the stalls, captive in a glass box. He doesn’t know the place but it reminds him a lot of the supermarket he got caught for stealing in, when he was a kid.

“We’re not going to shop for groceries, are we?"

“No, we’re not.” Jacques stops. “Alright, Lucas. We’re going to go for a little errand. Your mother can’t know about this, ok? And I want you to pay attention, ok? Then we can go to the shooting rink.”

Lucas nods. This is weird. But Mom always gets in a fuss over the stupidest things. And he does love it at the shooting rink.

Jacques brings them into the newsstand kiosk and asks for a pack of Lucky Strikes. The place is busy, bustling, attached to a bar full of old red-faced men watching horse races.

While the clerk turns around to grab the cigarettes, Jacques starts piling up small coins on the counter. He gives the clerk a five euro bill for the cigarettes then asks.

“Hey, could you maybe help me out there? Gotta get rid of some of those ones. Maybe for a ten?”

“Sure.” The clerk laughs. “The more small change I have the merrier.” He gives Jacques a ten, which Lucas sees him promptly put in his pocket, and starts counting the coins.

“Yeah, take your time, I still can’t figure out this euro-shit. Can you imagine, we have the same money as the Krauts now?”
The clerk laughs.

“Yeah, and those bills are ugly as shit, aren’t they? I miss the old ones.”

“Yeah, that computer generated shit, man. Must do a lot of coke up there in Brussels.” Jacques laughs affably.

The clerk frowns. “Sorry, sir, I think I’m missing a coin. One euro.”

“Is that so? Man, I’m sorry. Let me check.”

Jacques gets out his wallet, empties it on the till.

“Ok, there you have it. Tell you what, can we make it a twenty? He starts piling up coins again. Here you have it, one to make it ten, and then two, one, one, one, fifty cents, four times, two, and one, and I think we’re good. I’m sorry for all this metal.”

The clerk gives him a twenty. “Oh no, don’t be sorry, you wouldn’t believe the number of assholes who give me bills of 50 to pay for their cigs.”

“Still, sir, I am much obliged.” He takes the twenty.

Wait, that’s not right. Lucas frowns. If his father already pocketed the ten, he’s just added ten more and took a twenty. The clerk doesn’t seem to have noticed.

Should he say something?

He’s pretty sure this is what his father wanted him to notice, and feels a flush of pride. He looks around him, tries not to look too suspicious.

“You have a good day alright?” The clerk nods, does a little salute, and they get out. Lucas feels lightheaded as they walk out.
When they’re a few stores further, Jacques turns towards Lucas.

“So, did you get it?”

“You took ten euro from him,” Lucas says. “By pretending the money on the till was still yours while you already got the ten you exchanged in your pocket.”

“Very good, Lucas. You’re a quick one, aren’t you?” Jacques’ eyes sparkle with pride. “So, why do you think he didn’t pick up on it? I mean, he must be at the till all day. He’s used to handling money.”

Lucas thinks.

“Well maybe he doesn’t expect people to swindle him.”

“Really?”

“Well not people who look like you, then.”

“Indeed. People are shallow, it’s easy to fool them when you look like they should trust you. And?”

“And you were talking to him about the new bills so he got distracted. And maybe...if he realized he got confused I don’t think he would want to say it.”

Jacques nods. “Exactly. So many people are more proud than they have any reason to be. So, since you seem to understand it very well, why don’t you give it a try?”

He points at the candy shop down the hall. Lucas gulps. He doesn’t really want to do this. It’s cool, but what if he gets caught again? And this is not like a kid stealing a pack of gum. He could get in real trouble.
“What, don’t you think you can do it?”

There’s something about Jacques, sometimes, behind the smile, that scares him. He’s nice, and takes Lucas to do all these fun things. But Lucas gets the feeling that it’s very, very important not to disappoint him. Like you wouldn’t want to see him angry.

He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. He can do it. It’s not his first time, right? Besides, he’s no pussy.

...

In the end it’s not that hard. He knows the right way to act to appear innocent and harmless and a little bit confused with money. But as he gets out of the shop and Jacques fistbumps him, he gets this dirty feeling.

“Don’t worry kid, they won’t figure it out. They’ll just think they made a mistake in counting at the end of the day, that’s all. Now, how do you feel about a movie and ice cream instead? I heard they’re showing Fight Club again…”

...

Lucas likes having a father. Mostly. They move out of their cramped, moldy high rise apartment, into a nice little house in a residential area with a blue door. His room actually has a window. Mom takes a part time job so she has more time to take care of the home and rest. She plants roses in their little garden, Lucas helps her. He can see how much healthier she looks. They have money now - money for good food and central heating and new clothes and games and outings.

It comes with a price tag, though. Jacques has very specific ideas about what his family should look and behave like. When he learns about Lucas’ piano lessons, he laughs, tells him piano is for girls, and signs him up to karate. He wants Mom to always wear dresses and look nice and he makes comments to her when she’s not. He wants to know who Lucas is hanging with and where.

And Mom has more energy to fuss over him now. It's suffocating. Lucas's always been used to doing things on his own. Now he has a strict curfew, he has to explain where and with who he has been all
the time. It's like they're pretending he's just a regular kid, and they're just a regular family, and the stuff before Jacques arrived never happened. It's bullshit.

It's double the bullshit because neither of his parents are normal. He knows Mom is on her paranoid crazy train again, he can see her putting little pictures and statues of angels everywhere in the house and signing herself and mumbling prayers when she walks in front of them. It's fucking creepy. She even puts medals and fucking crosses in Lucas's stuff sometimes. And whenever he goes out of the house she's always telling him to be careful of all the things that could hurt him. It's a different thing every day; traffic or mold or drugs or the fucking avian flu. Lucas is tired of her treating him like glass all of a sudden after having to fend for himself for so long. He is angry that she lied to him. He doesn't want to talk to her anymore.

And his father? He knows something is wrong there, too. Officially he owns several car dealerships. He's a businessman. But he has a lot of money for that, maybe too much money. He's always meeting those suspicious looking people. Macho guys with tattoos and big cars and an air of danger about them. Guys in suits with little briefcases and empty eyes. And Lucas is not fucking stupid. He knows that adults who give you knives and show you how to swindle people are bad news.

And look - it's not that he minds? He's weird himself. He loves going to the shooting rink with his dad and seeing him bribe the owner so Lucas can try. And he loves the look of pride in Jacques's eyes when it turns out Lucas is very, very good at it. It makes sense, that his father would be a criminal. He's always felt like he belonged on the wrong side of the tracks. The freedom and the risk just... fits. It does. He knows he's clever but school is just so dull. It feels like a waste of his talents. They're always on his case about not deserving his good grades as if they care more about him being obedient and docile than about what's in his head.

It's all the posturing and pretending and the playing house that he can't stand. He's not a baby and it's too late for him to get a whole new education. He just wishes he could grow up faster so he didn't have to deal with this sudden eat your vegetables shit. So he could get to the good part of his life. The part where it's all worth something, where he is in control. He wants to walk through life like Jacques does - unafraid, commanding respect, making his own rules.

...
Though he probably should have learned that one way sooner, huh? He doesn't know why it hasn't sunk in yet. He's a bit slow. This time though, it's probably going to stick. He doesn't get to have good things. Not him.

... 

The first time it happens, it's after a few difficult weeks, and somehow he almost felt it coming. He'd known that somehow things had been going too well, that he couldn't last, that it wasn't normal to go to bed warm with a full belly and no immediate storm hanging over his head. He'd started to feel this weird fear out of nowhere.

Mom has been super anxious recently too. Dad's been more busy than usual at work and Lucas gets the feeling it's not going according to his wishes. He's moody and he gets home late. He seems spiteful, pissed, rambling about how some people have it too easy, some people are soft, some people grow fat on the spoils of other people's work. Some people deserve to have their neck wrung in the night. When he says things like that Lucas feels like reality is slowly washing away like dirt on a car window, and what's actually behind it is horrible.

One evening he is very late. Mom has prepared dinner - roasted chicken with mashed potatoes. And then they wait. Lucas wants to go to bed, it's late, he's tired. But Mom insists that they wait; she says she's made an effort and she wants them to have a nice dinner. So they wait, and wait. And wait. Finally they hear the door open and Jacques comes in, his steps heavy.

He stops at the entrance of the kitchen. Lucas can see immediately that he's drunk. His face is red, eyes hazy.

He laughs.

"My little family."

There is something cruel in his tone of voice. He makes a beeline for the fridge, grabs a beer, and looks back, as if he's considering sitting down or not.
Lucas looks at his mother's face. Lips pinched, trembling.

"I made the chicken as you like it, darling."

Jacques snorts. Then he sits down, heavily. "Alright, let's have it then."

Mom gets up and brings the dish from the oven to the table. Lucas can see she is shaking.

Fuck. How long has this been going on? How long has she been scared?

How has he not noticed this before? How fucking blind has he been? Suddenly he feels the ground open up under his feet, a fresh wave of panic surging through his veins.

Jacques grabs the dish and shovels a pilon of chicken into his plate, spearing it open with knife and fork without any delicacy. He spears some meat on his fork, chewing loudly.

"It's fucking raw." He says, sounding as the chicken personally insulted him.

"I'm so sorry, darling, I'll warm it up again." Mom says with shaky voice, grabbing the dish again to put it back in the oven but Jacques stops her, grabbing the dish; when she tries to shake it free it slips out of her hands and crashes down on the floor.

"Don't waste your time," Jacques says. "The outside was burnt anyway." Mom bends down to clean up the mess. Lucas can see shards all over the floor.

"Really makes you think, huh? I mean how hard can it fucking be. I'm working all day to provide, and I can't even get a decent fucking dinner when I come home. What have you been doing all day, huh? Praying to your little angels?"

Mom shakes her head. She's looking down, and Lucas can see how red her eyes are. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll do better next time, I promise, I…"
"Sure. Might as well wait for cows to fly, huh? What a fucking wife you are. Best investment of my life. Should have came with a discount really. 50% off, cracked in the head." He laughs. It's so mean. Months ago he was bringing her flowers and telling her she was more beautiful than she was at 20. Is it really so easy for love to turn into an insult?

Something mad inside Lucas brutally pushes the fear aside, something full of rage that doesn't care if he gets hurt at all, that doesn't care if he is small and young and powerless, something that doesn't care about anything but this.

"Don't talk to her that way."

The atmosphere in the room shifts. Now they're looking at him. Lucas feels his heart jump in his throat. He looks at the knife on the table.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Lucas clenches his jaw. "It's just chicken. It's not the end of the world."

"Lucas." His mother whispers, as if to try and make him stay silent.

Jacques laughs. Then he stops abruptly. His eyes turn from fake warmth to real, venomous ice.

"Go to bed, you insufferable little nerd."

Lucas's heart is hammering in his ears, and his mouth tastes like acid. But suddenly he knows. He can't leave the room.

"No. I'm going to help with the cleanup."

He gets up, his legs barely holding up, and brings his plate and cutlery and glass to the sink.

The situation in the room is so tense.
"Alright." Jacques says. "I see how it is. I'll have to get my own food then." Lucas hears him leave, slamming the door as he gets out of the house.

Then, and only then, he can breathe again. He turns towards his mom. She's just...standing there.

"Oh Lucas" she says. "You shouldn't have made him angry like that."

Lucas feels a pang of betrayal and disgust.

I was defending you, he doesn't say. Instead he storms out of the room, until he's in his bed, door locked behind him.

He goes to sleep hungry, and with the distinct feeling that a line has been crossed somewhere. And that he is going to regret this later.

In that moment, though, he can’t bring himself to. He just feels like a raw nerve - something raw and monstrous, and too big for his body. Terrified, and angry at the entire world. Including himself. Why did he ever think life could go well for him? Stupid, soft little bitch.

....

The atmosphere in the house becomes much heavier. Jacques's friendly mask is slipping, and Lucas has made himself a target. He knows it's only a matter of time before his anger turns towards Lucas, and he's not a match. He's powerless. He can't do anything, and it makes him disgusted with himself. He thinks about running away, but he doesn't. All he cares about is here. He could sooner cut his heart out and throw it in the garbage.

One evening, Lucas is sitting at the kitchen table, when he hears the gravel and motor noises of a car parking in front of the house. His mother is outside, watering the plants. He grabs his books and quickly flees to his room.

He wants to study but he can't. His head is buzzing. So he grabs one of his old books, one he borrowed from Eulalie and Capucine about stars and planets. He knows the book by heart already, only had to read it once for that, and yet he still loves reading it. He goes through the beloved, well
known pages, tries to focus on the diamond rains of Saturn and the possible life under the icy crusts of Europa. He remembers dreaming of donning a spacesuit and flying off, detaching from gravity…

The sound of heavy steps on the stairs brings him back to reality. Every second freezes upon itself, time bloated and distorted, then rush past.

The door flies open, disrupting his attempts at staying calm, making him jump in his chair.

“Well, there you are. Studying again, hm? What exactly do you think you’re going to achieve with all that?”

Lucas doesn't turn around, and looks at the page below, at the star factories of the Orion Nebula, and pretends he is somewhere else.

His chair is brutally yanked back.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, boy!"

Lucas reflexively curls into a ball. His mind is all static.

Jacques bows down, puts his hands on the armrests of Lucas’s chair and laughs, invading his personal space and Lucas recoils but there is nowhere to go. He can smell the liquor and cigarettes on his breath. It's like he is laughing at all of Lucas's hopes; like he is a patsy, a dupe, like all those morons Jacques showed him how to fool. Like it was all a con, but he's bought into it, and now it's too late. And it's same he feels then, blossoming like rot all over his insides.

“What are you, a fucking baby? Not so tough now, are we? Don’t you want to be the man of the house anymore? No?” He straightens up and grabs the book off Lucas’s table. “Wanna stay in here and read your little books?” He takes a page and rips it, slowly. The noise goes through Lucas’s entire being. It feels as if his heart is being ripped in two. Then he does it again. “Well, aren’t you going to tell me to stop?” But Lucas is frozen. He does nothing, until the book is a pile of scraps on the floor.

Jacques sighs. He is disappointed.
“Well, you must hate me now. Maybe you wish I never came into your life. Maybe you want me to go away. But I tell you one thing: you’re damn lucky I am here. See, your mother, she’s not doing that great, is she? One of these days, she’s going to crack. She’s going to need treatment. So you can go run and cry to mommy and get her to kick me out. But then who is going to pay for all this, hm? You?” He leaves a pause, so that it can sink in. “I don’t think so. I walk out of that door, this is going to end up ugly. Best case scenario, you end up in a home, she ends up in one of those overcrowded loony bins where they sedate her all the time and let her stew in her own shit. But maybe you’ll end up in the streets, and then who knows what ways you’ll find to survive, huh, pretty boy like you. But maybe it won’t even get to that, huh? Maybe you’ll come home one day and find the demons told her to slit her wrists, hm?”

Lucas swallows dead air, and for a moment it's like the air is not going through his lungs properly, like he is going to choke.

Maybe if he fills his brain with noise he can just blank out the way they tie strings to his fears and make them dance.

Maybe that’s why he doesn’t entirely process what happens next. Jacques steps forward and grabs his hair and head and yanks up, so that Lucas is forced to half stand. The pain is scalding like fire, as if this scalp is going to be ripped from his skull, and the shock has him go limp, like a puppet.

"Are you listening to me? My house, my rules."

Lucas nods, terrified. He feels like a rabbit tossed onto the highway. Jacques's massive body takes up all the space in the room, he can't see or breathe anymore, he feels like an ant.

The pressure relents. Lucas falls back down into his chair.

"It's your choice, Lucas. Welcome to life. Things have a price."

Jacques leaves. Lucas gets up, breathes mechanically, closes the door with a shaking hand, and puts what remains of his book in the garbage.

Just another bully, as it turns out. Except this one will never leave, and he's got the keys to everything, and there is nowhere to hide. Anger can't help him now. There is not enough anger in the world to help him out.
Jacques makes himself sparse after that. He is barely around. The house is so quiet without him here.

A week later Lucas comes home to find his mother sitting at the kitchen table.

Her back turned to the door, she sits, immobile.

Lucas knows something is wrong even before he sees the trickle of blood on the linoleum floor.

"Mom ?" His own voice sounds tinny, distant in his own ears.

"Lucas ?" She doesn't turn around. Her voice is whisper thin. "I'm so sorry...this is all my fault. I let the demons in again. They were waiting for me to let down my guard, you know. But I'll take care of it. Go hide, my angel."

Lucas's heart spins on a stake, slowly unravelling, until he can taste it in his mouth.

He gets it now. At last. He gets it, in a stroke of lucid horror, he gets it. His mother's demons weren't real, except they were. She ran away from a dangerous man, when she was young and pregnant and alone. Told him stories about how his father was dead because that was better than the truth. Better than to tell him that it was possible to fall in love with a monster and let it ruin you, better than to tell him the human heart is so easily corruptible. But the fear never left, and she needed a name for the unspeakable shadows. Really, how else do you call love that turns to poison ?

And she prayed a thousand times and she washed everything in sight until her hands were bloody and she told her the fears were just delusions too and it was all no use, no use at all.

The dangerous man has found them, and he has anger to redirect and it needs to go somewhere. He
commands the shadows, there's nowhere to hide.

He also wants a son. A *tough guy* to follow in his sinister footsteps. He'll make one by whatever means necessary.

It's an easy bargain, really.

Lucas knows the price of things. He's always known. The price of having a heart is that it will cost you everything.

"No, Mama. We're going to get you some care."

There is no God to pray to, there never was. And no good fathers either. There's just him, and the fear, and once again, he steps aside, and pushes it down even though it has grown so furious and so huge he knows it's going to rot him from the inside out.

He grabs his mother's handbag, finds her phone, and makes a call to the devil.
"My father came into my life later, at a time when I was vulnerable. He came bearing gifts and at first I really thought, wow, the tough times are over. But turns out we weren't the perfect little family he'd dreamed of. So he... well, I'm sure you can guess. I think I knew he was dangerous right from the start, you know. But I thought he was cool, too. He would teach me all these things... I didn't realize he was grooming me into the perfect little criminal.

But he started being mean towards my mom and I...I spoke up. I challenged his authority. He couldn't have it. So I became a target. Well, at least he wasn't hitting her. Started small. Hairpulling, cigarette burns, locking me out of the house, withholding food...I was fourteen the first time he broke my wrist. But he was clever, he made sure it was never visible. And we had an arrangement. I wouldn't say anything, and he would make my mom got the right treatment. That's really fucking twisted, isn't it? He made me complicit in my own abuse. He took everything I loved and twisted it and used it as a weapon against me."

Eliott takes a deep breath, and blinks the tears away, and realizes his fingers are pressing against the screen once more. As if he could reach through, offer comfort. But he's just a silent witness. Some things cannot be undone.

"And the sickest part of it is, I still feel grateful sometimes. That he made me the kind of tough that could survive anything. And that's why I did it, maybe. Why I followed him, years later, even when I'd earned my freedom. Like part of me always knew that I was meant for the darkness. The point of all of this is...well I understand violence very well. I could have laid myself down, I could have left, but I didn't. Instead I picked up the knife. I think in a sense I'd rather be the monster than the victim. And maybe my father made a similar choice like this once, and it's just one big circle. And once you step into it, you're screwed forever.

So...I'm asking you. I know your father is a shithead, I don't know what he did to you and I'm all for justice but please. Consider what you're getting into, the reasons why you're doing this, and the choices that you might not...well maybe somethings and some people are not worth getting attached to no matter how charming they are and...and somethings just keep happening and I can't...I just can't...but I have to tell you how. I almost became him."

Oh.

Eliott, then, almost closes the screen in a pang of despair. But no. He's not walking away from this. He's there. He listens. Some truths, even when they come out years too late, no matter how ugly, are still worth everything.
content warnings
1998: Lucas's mom has a delusional episode involving angels and demons
2002: One of Lucas's classmates circulates the rumor that he is gay, use of f-slur, mentions of bullying
2003: Emotional abuse, Lucas's mom hurts herself (non-graphic, mention of blood), physical abuse (Jacques yanks Lucas by the hair and calls him names, threatens him)
2019 (last one) more mentions of physical abuse

... ughhhh i'm sorry ...

Lucas's Mom's MI was never specified in the show; here I wrote it as a form of paranoid schizophrenia, which tends to include a gradual withdrawal from reality, lack of motivation, psychotic episodes, hallucinations... I have no experience of this personally so I did some research and I hope it doesn't offend anyone. From the point of Lucas it is of course scary. One of the most terrifying things in the world can be to see your parent's behavior change and not knowing why or what to do about it. But as is often the case people suffering from this MI are grossly misrepresented in media; they are more likely to cause harm to themselves than to others. I wanted to show Valerie's struggle but also that she is a very loving person, and that the situation was just generally unfortunate and terrible. I hope that came across.

... Also i think the reason i wanted to devote an entire chapter (and more) to this instead of dealing with it in flashbacks is that, when it comes to emotional abuse specifically, it isn't one thing, it's often a buildup of subtle things that create this climate of fear. And I wanted to take it seriously and study how it worked, not just use it as a prelude to fluff or hurt/comfort. Of course the comfort is coming! but this is not a 'love cures all' type story either. I hope you still got something out of reading this and if something like this ever happened to you, you are so strong, you deserve so much better, and there is a beautiful future waiting for you

... next chapter: the story of Lucas Lallemant, pt 2.
Le monde peut brûler

Chapter Summary

Lucas Lallemand's story, pt. 2

Chapter Notes

wow, holy hell was this chapter difficult to write. i am very happy to be finally able to put it out there.

I think it's the biggest rollercoaster I have written so far. It's very dark, and sad and gritty, but also big capital R Romantic. It's the big feelings.

trigger warnings: oh boy. blood, non-graphic descriptions and allusions to violence, vomiting, minor character death, (internalized) homophobia, ableism...generally unhealthy mindsets and suicidal ideation...our boy is gonna need so much therapy tbh see notes for more details

betaed by beexx as always all the love
this is the last of the big angst chapters for the moment but it was also very necessary to explain why Lucas is the way he is. We find some more familiar faces, this time around...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Joyeux anniversaire"

2006

(16)

It's funny how fast some things change, Lucas reflects. All around him, people are moving, dancing,
flailing. Pretending their best to be fully alive.

He has sunk into the couch so deeply he will soon meld with the layer of greasy dust that covers it, his chameleon instincts on overdrive. He watches as the idiot kid on opposite sides of the table extinguishes his cigarette in the dregs of a glass of vodka; and its incandescent end dies with a hiss. Lucky for him he doesn’t set anything on fire. Natural selection, one of these days...

He can still remember being so weirdly driven as a kid. So sure that something better was coming. Or that he would just fucking make it happen for himself anyway. So many roads to the future coming up to meet him, an endless split on the horizon. Fucking glorious even when his present was lonely, and scary, and shameful.

But now he knows he isn’t a kid anymore. The joy, the curiosity, the hope? All gone. Like he’s driven too fast, past all the parallel universes he used to hold in his heart as possible futures, in his need to survive, and now there’s just this: this weird tension that never stops. Just an electric impulse, like when the doctor hits on the side of your knee after a fall to make sure your leg still works.

Funny what discovering the real world will do to you. He used to think the world was beautiful, waiting for him, but now he knows. Nothing good is waiting for him.

He used to tell himself so many stories. But now, there’s just one: I can make it through this.

This moment, and then this moment, and the next one. Beyond that, he can’t see anything else. He knows what he’s lost, and it makes the despair hanging over him so deep and so deeply scary. If there’s nothing else than this, then…if he stops going for even just a minute, it will catch on, and it will be over for him. He’s a survivor, he can’t let himself grieve for everything that’s still left to lose.

He takes a deep breath.

The headache drills into his skull along with the music, relentless electronic beats, and the loud voices all around him. Whatever music may be, this is the exact opposite. He wonders what sort of sound shooting a bullet through his brain would make.
He drains his glass so he can refill it again. The liquor burns at the back of his throat, too familiar and yet not enough. He’s taken to it like milk, recently. If it was up to him these days he’d stumble through his entire life drunk off his shits. He likes the buzzing numbness. Being less defined as a person. But alertness is survival. *You snooze, you lose.*

He knows he should get up. Sitting here, choking on his own bitterness, he feels like a child throwing a tantrum. He should swallow his directionless anger, it gives too many grips to his armor on the outside. He’s been told to mingle.

What newly minted 16 year old doesn’t want to spend their birthday *mingling* with his asshole father's creepy friends, anyway, huh ? What a life. Winner winner chicken dinner.

*Lucas vs the World, round five hundred sixty three.*

There’s two distinct kinds of creepy here tonight. Lucas's made sure to clock everyone as soon as he got in, made a map of threats, so he doesn’t get any nasty surprises.

First, the usual offenders. Jacques's friends and 'colleagues' - yes men - with some of their kids around Lucas's age - and younger, yikes - now around him in various states of alcohol-induced disorderliness. Families are fucking enablers around here. So *fucking* skin-crawling creepy.

There’s the girl that keeps staring at him from across the room, smacking her sticky lips together, dead-eyed relentless like she knows she’ll get to him eventually. Yeah, that one's a prostitute alright, or at least she's auditioning for the job really hard. And creepy is the drugs going around in plain sight. The bone-deep disgust Lucas feels as he sits among his "peers", a lot of which he can tell are going to end up dead, in prison or on the streets by the age of 25. Best option they have ? Getting absorbed into the *family business*. And they’re taking to it with such enthusiasm. Probably they feel special, all grown up and wild. Lucas feels deeply ashamed to be counted with them. Wishes he could run away.

The other kind of creepy is more discrete, but much more dangerous, too.

The men sitting at the dinner table with his father are very much *not* the running dogs. Everything sets them apart from the first group. They're not drunk, at all. They're alert, sharp, like a pack of sharks in dark suits. The smoke from their cigars has invaded the whole room, blue and thick like fog. These are the ones Jacques wants to impress, and those he dreads having to interact with. He knows he’s smart enough to survive. But he hates what it makes him into.
"Lucas ! Come say hi !"

Here we fucking go.

Happy birthday to me .

Lucas does not want their attention at all. But it was inevitable.

He drags himself out of the couch, to the table, on autopilot. Squares his shoulders. Tries to clear his mind to regain some sort of lucidity. Gives himself a mental slap. Maybe he should have drunk a little less. He feels like a giant bruise.

Be a knife. Be a weapon so you won't be a target.

He feels the weight of Jacques's eyes on him as he sits. The motherfucker is always watching, always. Usually it terrifies him.

But tonight, he is just so done with everything. He almost wants to go drive into a wall. He wishes he could burn in plain sight so that everyone would know how done he is. Is this the drug damage ? The grooves that fear has left into his heart are so deep, they’ve become impracticable.

The lights overhead are way too bright, unflattering neon, casting profiles in grotesque light.

"Ah, so this is Lucas." An older man says. He is the oldest in the room. He has the eyes of a dinosaur. A predator. Lucas knows how to recognize those. "Are you having...fun ?"

"Oh, yeah. It's amazing." Lucas replies, his tone as deadpan as possible, knowing that he’s courting disaster, as he lets himself fall down into the chair pulled out for him. "I mean, who invented alcohol, am I right ?"
"Lucas." The warning tone in Jacques's voice is familiar. It's the one he takes when he wants Lucas to know that if he gets demonstrative in his anger later, Lucas will have brought it on himself. That it was aaallll his fault. That he deserved it. Sick fuck.

Can't hit him in front of his colleagues though, can he. Lucas can tell he needs the approval of these men. He has made efforts. My father, the role model. And Lucas is supposed to be the token of his ascent.

Fucking pathetic.

Fear caged at the back of his brain, flailing, doesn’t connect.

The older man laughs.

"So Lucas. Do you have any specific interests ?"

"Yeah I like playing the piano. And dancing ballet." Lucas says and watches the big vein on Jacques's temple pop out as his temper rises. "and I was thinking of becoming a hairdresser."

Everyone around the table laughs. Ha ha ha. What a funny joke. Yeah, the king of comedy, that’s me.

"He's got expert marksmanship." Jacques cuts through. "Was already hitting bullseye ten out of ten from 50 meters at fourteen. Black belt in karate and jujitsu, too. Thinking of starting him on boxing soon now." He says it offhandedly, but Lucas knows the undercurrent of tension in his voice so well by now. He sees Lucas as a walking extension of his manhood in this room.

Gross.

"The Demaury kid's doing capoeira, apparently, from what I've heard."

Jacques scoffs. "That the thing with the dancing ? Yeah, suits him, that little pansy."
Lucas's airways clang shut.

Oh, here is the real fear then. Just late to the party. Hello again. Any organs shutting down today? Is he even really himself when he’s not scared out of his wits? Thriving under pressure, etcetera. *Yeah just keep telling yourself that so you don’t piss your pants, huh?*

Composure. Now. This can’t be his breaking point. Nope. Not over the fucking *Demaury kid* he keeps hearing about, that privileged little fuck who’s gonna inherit a crime dynasty one day without even lifting a finger. He clenches his jaw.

He traces the outline of a fold in the dark red tablecloth. Counts the crumbs. Baguette, cheese crust, saucisson string, red wine stains. He sees his fingers trembling, and puts them back under the table and pinches himself so hard, it’s certain to leave a bruise.

"Man, he's lucky his daddy has a liberal reputation to maintain. If he were mine I would have put him out of his misery already." That's one of Jacques's henchmen, voice raucous and greasy lips, whose son Lucas has seen doing coke rails off a blonde's tits on the sofa earlier.

Yeah, no misery whatsoever going on there. So wholesome. Fun for the whole family!

"I mean...he's just a confused kid. No discipline. Spoiled." That's René, one of the men that is softer than the others. It gets him laughed at a lot. Lucky for him he's built like a tank. Lucas wishes he was. Then he'd drive over them all. But Rene just stands by. What's the use of kindness, when it doesn't *do* shit? Coward.

"Oh when you get to that point, it's already too late." Jacques says. "Maybe at a certain age you can beat it out of them. But there's some lines you just can't cross." He looks at Lucas, then, like clockwork. He always looks at his son when there’s masculinity issues to be discussed, flaws to be poked at. Lucas feels like a raw nerve all at once and wants to disappear, but that would be too suspicious. Instead he stays put and lets the tendrils of doubt, shame, disapproval, denial, disgust, wrap all around him like whispers, and pretends they're all invisible.

*Stop thinking that about me. It’s not even true. What if it was, huh? But it’s not. It can’t be.*

He bites down on the inside of his lip. The pain helps him remain focused. He tastes blood, flooding his mouth. Are the sharks gonna pick up on it?
"Yeah, better keep our ranks clean." Another henchman adds."Someone should have told Donnie that, huh ?" He laughs. Disgust.

"What do you mean," Jacques says with a terrifying smile that shows too many teeth. "Donnie was just clumsy, walking into that hook like that, making a mess of himself." He stops, lights another cigar. The cherry burns incandescent like a hole through Lucas's retinas. “How unfortunate for us to lose such an upstanding friend. What a mess to clean up.”

"You mean he should have stood up more instead of bending over, right ?"

Gravelous laughs overpower the music. Lucas's head is spinning. He wants to lie down but he keeps immobile, so still his muscles cramp. Tries not to picture what they might have done to Donnie with that hook. A knife. You are a knife. Sharp, cutting through, stainless steel .

When the laughing is done, the attention turns back to Lucas. Now he will be tested. Pretend right, or you die.

"So, my son," Jacques says, tone jovial, "this is a good occasion for you to make some new friends. Can't hang with the hood rats forever, can you ?"

The hood rats is how he refers to Lucas's current gang. His friends are a mess, lives just as broken and ugly as his, but in their defense they've avoided becoming total monsters, which he is ready to bet isn't the case of any of these men. There's Boris, who got expelled for pissing on a teacher's car. Jennifer one, who hits on everything that moves, and Jennifer two, who just hits everything. And Amine, who wants life to be a Fast and Furious movie. Amine - smile so big it eats his face. They spent the day together, in fact, just the two of them, trying to get one of Amine’s brother's broken old cars to start again so they could take it for a spin. They didn’t succeed, but it was still a very good day. Lucas likes fixing things, understanding how they work. He's clever with machines. Amine is clever with...other things. Driving - he’s good at driving. Catch me if you can, he always says to Lucas, even when they're in the same fucking car. Idiot.

Just thinking about this afternoon, those few shreds of unexpected happiness, resuscitates a shiver of a smile in Lucas's lower belly. Until tonight, it’s been his best birthday ever.
He must look too fucking happy for a fool of a nano second. Blood in the water. He drowns the memory immediately, and gets a lungful of shame in exchange. But it’s too late.

Lucas raises his head, and sees, then, crystal clear, murder in his father's eyes. Creeping so close to where he lives.

"I wouldn't want you to get into the wrong sort of trouble, son. I know what a risk taker you are."

“Chip off the old block, huh.” Someone chimes in.

Jacques laughs, low and satisfied.

_God, kill me now._

Any little crumb of joy or pride Lucas has left sink in freefall. Whatever rare moments of happiness he’ll manage to steal for himself, he will always have to pay for it sooner or later, won’t he?

Jacques always knows. Always. Did he watch him with his friends? It doesn't matter how fucking sharp or clever Lucas makes himself; this man will always know how to read his entrails. Nowhere to hide. Kill the weakness inside before he, too, gets made _clumsy_. The dumb whiny little bitch boy still clamoring for love. The heart beating at his ribcage to escape before it dies.

Ah, there’s always family, but that’s not what family is about, huh? Family isn't kind or safe or good, it's a debt you get saddled with at birth and can never repay, it's an inborn noose, it's a trap you never had any choice but to fall for. So graft that big man mask onto your face and run for your life like all the rest. Grow into being scary for any ersatz of freedom. Grow until you know how to bleed red and right, like a real man. Maybe it’ll all feel right, somehow.

_I can make it through this. All other stories are bullshit, anyway._

"Now, why don't you go and find yourself a girl?" Jacques says, the words echoing through Lucas’s skull. “It’s about time you became a man, my son.”

Not a suggestion, but a command from on high. Lucas feels the night spiral out of his control, his throat closing in disgust and despair as he understands what’s expected of him, and the lack of any
"I mean, why wouldn’t you? I saw multiple female heads turn your way earlier. The world is your oyster, Lucas! Happy birthday!"

Round five hundred sixty four. And counting.

"Instinct de survie"

2008

(17)

The motor is running.

Lucas's foot hovers over the gas pedal, adrenaline pumping a steady beat into his veins. His fingers drumming on the steering wheel, restless, kinetic energy building up. These are the times he feels most reconciled with his trash fire of a life. Where the thrill obliterates everything else, and he can blissfully forget. Just the oncoming chase, zero to a hundred and twenty in a chain of successive seconds. Eating empty space like air.

He wants to just go. As fast as he can.

He’s been on a bad spiral recently. He’d gotten kicked out of kickboxing competitions. Got found out to have tricked his way into a weight class two above his own. Back alley steroids, weights sown
into his shorts. Worked, for a while, but then he'd started to see double during matches, and they got on his ass for using street fighting moves, the bunch of prissy fucks, and his already fragile right wrist had started to give in, and they'd started to look into his case more closely, and that'd been the end of it. So he’d gone looking for a fight. Well, go to the right places, and full on nasty fuckers had a habit of coming his way, weirdly enough, even when he wasn't actively looking to start anything. Maybe it came with the territory of being known as the Colibari son. Maybe it was just his face, or his budding reputation.

But beyond that, when he stood still for a minute, everything became so unbearable he felt like punching a hole in reality itself. So Jacques had unceremoniously grabbed him by the neck and thrown him in a new direction. He'd probably figured that having his son start his criminal career with battery charges because of brawls with "gutter scum" wouldn't be a good way to introduce him into the 'elite of crime' he was aiming to get his family into. Kinda low class and all. Gotta have respect and honor, or some other bullshit.

So now he's the getaway driver. Fake ID and all. He likes it. The speed, the agility. It fits him. He's got into very few real chases so far, let's be honest, but the two times he did ? Highlight of his life. Nobody cares how tall you are when you're behind a wheel. And he's quick and clever enough to lose any tail.

It’s unlikely. But then, his whole life is unlikely, like some unholy mutated monster sprung from his kiddie dreams of adventure on acid.

He looks back at the hulking mass of the church the car is waiting outside of. Even in the dark, it's recognizable. By day it's a modernist monster, all post-war concrete and brutal shapes. The Christ inside is made of greenish bronze, face distorted and tortured, and the stained glass behind the altar is a scattered abstract mess. But his mother insists on going there regardless because she likes the priest. She says he is humble, compassionate. Lucas hates everything to do with religion. But the one time he had agreed to accompany her, feeling guilty for all the sins piling up in his corner and wondering how his mom would feel if she'd find out her son had tried to kick somebody's teeth in and halfway succeeded, he'd been inclined to agree. *Forgiveness is the basis of any worthwhile creed*, the priest had said, voice deep and soft. And not like he was trying to sell something, but like he had been there before and it had cost him to make that choice.

Lucas wishes he could believe, sometimes. Get the same amount of comfort that his mother gets from her faith. Get something to sanctify his sacrifices.
But if there's a God for Lucas, it's definitely not that one.

... 

He can't help but wonder why the fuck they stopped there. There can't be much worth stealing in here anyway. And why is it taking them so fucking long, huh?

Three seconds later the doors of the Church fly open, and four masked men jump into the van. Lucas's brain falls into line, adrenaline kick, misgivings evaporating as he punches the accelerator and they speed away into the night.

The bliss is short lived, though.

One of his father's henchmen is carrying the church's collecting box, and the coins inside rattle wherever they take a turn, echoing into Lucas's brain, worse than nails on chalkboard. That's the most ridiculous quarry they've ever gotten. Pocket change from the pockets of old church biddies and assorted Jesus freaks. The Church can go to hell, sure, but in this neighborhood it's barely holding its doors open. This is like stealing the begging bowl of a homeless man. It's just so fucking petty.

Slowly a pungent smell starts to invade the inside of their vehicle. Heavy, meaty, metallic. It really smells like someone died in there. Did they put a dead possum in that collecting box or…?

He keeps his eyes on the road disappearing under their wheels, city lights flashing past, but he can't avoid it. It goes too fast and too slow all at once.

He starts to think about the big, heavy looking suitcase the other two men were carrying. And it starts to dawn on Lucas, clear like wordless horror.
Oh no.

Oh *fuck*. No.

Blood.

Lucas looks at Jacques, sitting in the passenger seat with a grin on his face, eyes almost glowing in the dark. As if he's riding off a high.

Lucas's world folds on itself like wet cardboard, in slow motion. He takes a turn, too fast, wheels screeching, into a roundabout, and it's like the van is going to capsize along with his grip on reality.

Slowly Jacques turns towards him, more teeth in his mouth than ever.

'Don't worry. It'll be your turn soon."

Lucas feels sick down to his very bones.

…
They switch cars under an underpass, Jacques’ goons going for ‘clean-up’ as they drive home.

All the way home, Lucas finds himself in the most violent state of dissociation he has ever experienced. He has to struggle to keep himself from falling apart completely. He half expects everything to roll back like an old tape on rewind, for his alarm to ring and having to go back to school. Or he expects to come home and find it turned upside down, eviscerated, MURDERERS painted on the walls in lurid blood color, windows blown up, insides burnt.

Nothing like that happens. They arrive and pull up in their original spot, in front of the blue door, the same as always.

Thanks to some chemical help, Mom is still sleeping upstairs. She’s been getting so much worse lately, and the therapist has been talking about bringing her in on a permanent basis but Jacques insists on keeping her here. All his possessions under one roof, Lucas remembers thinking. He’d been complacent about it as if it didn’t matter. As if nothing mattered anymore.

Jacques trudges into the kitchen, drops his duffel bag on the table. It makes a heavy, metallic clang. He gets two glasses out, and fills them with clear schnapps, way too full, sliding one over to Lucas, and throwing his own back in two seconds. Lucas grabs the other glass and does the same, mechanically, in three burning mouthfuls. As soon as he's done wishes he didn't, the smell and taste of artificial peach violent and nauseating.

Jacques belches and laughs.

"Nothing better than a stiff one after a good night's work, eh ?"

Lucas nods, numbly.

Jacques laughs at his visible discomfort. "Did we finally find something to get the attitude out of you? You really should come out in the field more, then." Then he pushes the bag towards Lucas. "Get those cleaned up, will you ?"

As Lucas doesn't respond immediately, Jacques chuckles.
"Believe me, you don't want your mother to have to do it." He clamps a meaty hand around the liquor bottle and shambles towards the living room. A few seconds later Lucas can hear the TV being turned on, mindless chatter and distorted laughs.

Lucas takes the bag and makes his way upstairs to the laundry room, as if walking through a dream. His head is swimming, his body seized with cold sweats. Nothing feels real.

He closes the door behind him. This is, strangely enough, the place in the house he feels safest, maybe because Jacques never goes there. Maybe he’s afraid it’s going to make his dick fall off, or something.

He upturns the contents of the bag on the floor - and freezes.

Rags. Knives. Rope. And a blanket - which he recognizes…

No, blood. Fuck. There's blood everywhere. Red going rusted, dark, sticky. The stench of it, cloying, permeates the tiny room. The blood of his mom's favorite priest, because God forbid she trusts in someone else than Jacques…

He lets out a soft sound of disbelief.

This is so vile. So fucking horrible. He has no words for what this is.

He recognizes the blanket. It's his baby blanket, the one he used to crawl under as a kid, that his mom used to build pillow forts with, and that she religiously kept in a box under her bed when he outgrew it.

Now his father is using it to murder people.

And Lucas has blood on his hands. His head spins. Not for the first time, he wonders how much of his father’s cruelty is calculated and how much is instinctive, a function of how he operates in the world, and what it says about the world that it lets him operate so well in it.

And then, pushing past his usual wall of numb burned-out nihilism, he is overpowered by a wave of
disgust and anger, so all-consuming he shakes with it.

Poor little Lucas, SO FUCKING NAIVE. He’s a fucking psycho, what do you think he was doing and getting money from, robbing small convenience stores? Shaking down people for candy after school when the teachers aren’t looking? One year ago he was already bragging about killing a guy for being a faggot. Thought that was a cool edgy joke, did you? You should have seen this coming. Fucking HELL you should have seen this coming.

Without realizing how, he’s on his knees.

He feels like all this time, he’s been building a house of cards made of compromise and denial, and it’s finally tumbling down. And part of him mocks and jeers, tells him he is stupid and weak and overly sensitive and sentimental and what the fuck does he care about a dude he didn’t even know and get all out of sorts over this but the truth -

He can’t do this shit anymore. He can’t. He can't pretend he's fine with this shit. He thought he was buying time, for him and his mom. Every time he was scared and hurt and he said nothing. But this isn’t good. Mom isn’t doing well. I mean, who would? She has to realize something is going on. And it's not because he’s not hitting her that he isn’t hurting her.

And odds are, Lucas realizes with horror, if he does hit her, she’d probably hide it from Lucas. To protect him.

They think they’re buying life. A home. Normalcy. But they’re just putting flowers on top of a pit of bones. For so long now denial has become a secondary nature.

He thinks of the priest, lying in pieces somewhere, because he'd touched their lives in the smallest of ways, offering comfort and safety and guidance. Just being part of Jacques family has made his mother and him radioactive, beacons for horror.

He looks down at his hands. All red and shiny with liquid, viscous against his skin. Already it is starting to feel less strange, the shock of it absorbing into the surreal pattern of his life. The new normal. Corruption reaching backwards and forward in time until the taste of blood in his mouth and nose is the only real thing that exists.

No, this is wrong. Wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong
He grabs the blanket and shoves the last immaculate part of it into his nose, and inhales. Behind the blood, he can still, faintly, distinguish the smell of powdered sugar and flowers.

Maybe it's too late. He can feel the hate simmering at the core of his being, poisoning him through and through. He'll never get rid of it. But maybe it isn't too late. For all it has cost him, he still has his ability to care.

For so long his survival instinct has told him to get rid of it. But going through life without a heart? It would kill him. Or worse.

"It'll be your turn soon."

As if in a haze, he washes the weapons, the blanket, his hands, his clothes. Douses everything in bleach. When he's done, he feels nearly checked-out.

His whole body is cramping, as if violently seized with the need to expel a foreign element. He empties the contents of his stomach in the toilet bowl, but it's not enough.

He finds himself on the rooftop, shivering from top to toe, in a panic-induced daze. It used to be his safe space, back when he was mostly too small to do anything but hide. He's always loved roofs - high up, remote from the world. Untouchable. His safe little eagle's nest. Looking down always gives him this weird thrill, reverse vertigo. He used to think he was closer to the stars that way, but he knows that's bullshit now. And the roof of their little house is dwarfed by the surrounding buildings - there isn't much sky left. Absurdly, then, he misses their old shitty high rise. Life was harsh, back then, but it was honest.

The events of the night claw at his brain. The cold wind gnaws at his face - it's ferocious up here, charged with frost and pollution. Matches his mood.
He feels dirty. Unable to breathe, to move.

He'd wanted a father so badly. Someone to look up to, to take care of things. So he'd ignored all the red flags. He'd taken a perverse sort of pride in being able to take everything thrown his way. Told himself it would make him strong enough, finally.

But for all the bullshit he’s told himself - like a good little dog - yeah Jacques’s a criminal but he’s not a monster, he's just a cool thief sticking it to the man, he’s family, the system is rigged and unfair, he mostly steals from garbage people, he’s an old fashioned man, he’s generous to the loyal and inflexible with his enemies, he’s got a code of honor, isn’t he cool, you can’t cut it on your own you little bitch -

This is the truth of it. Bruises, humiliation, and silent swallowed shame. Blood on a baby blanket. Cleaning weapons and running errands, slowly becoming an accessory to Jacques’ crimes. Forcing himself to sleep with girls he’s not even into, so that his manhood isn’t questioned. The constant fear as background noise. The gut churning, crawling wrongness of it all. He can’t fucking take it anymore.

So far Jacques has known exactly how to use his own self-loathing against him. Grooming his most violent instincts, turning him against the world. Against his mother, even, too. Always disparaging his friends. Making sure he is as adrift and alone in the world as possible, stoking his anger, encouraging him to hit back. Teaching him to solve his problems with his fists, with the promise of violence.

His father is a killer, and he's trying to turn Lucas into the same kind of monster.

And now he is here, his future shrinking in front of his eyes.

The truth is, at some point, he doesn't know exactly when, he trained himself not to want things anymore. Because those were things that could be used against him, expectations and needs and wishes and dreams. So he split them off from himself. He imagined parallel universe versions of himself. One Lucas with a normal, loving family, properly fed in all possible ways, growing into a space explorer, knowing he would always have a home to come back to. One Lucas, with the same mother but no scary mobster father, roughened up by life but pulling through, brilliant student and loving son. One Lucas who became a billionaire businessman, fierce and magnanimous, in a tower of steel and glass. One Lucas chasing the sun, golden and mellow, surfer in Bali, falling in love with the sea. One Lucas who cured cancer. One Lucas who went to the moon. One Lucas who grew into an Intouchable, mobster hunter until his heroic death in a blaze of glory. One Lucas who became a
spy. One Lucas who discovered the true nature of black matter. One Lucas who raced cars and died young but saved five people with his organs and was beloved even in death. One Lucas who could sleep properly at night. One Lucas who, maybe, fell in love.

A thousand Lucas, distant like stars.

He's the Lucas who has to deal with this ugly shit. Broken down to little pieces before he finally faces the truth.

Because of course. Whatever he chooses to do it will be wrong. His father didn’t raise him to be a fighter. He raised him to be an obedient dog.

And he’d let him.

He takes a deep breath. It’s a cold night, like the ones he used to spend outside in his pajamas to make himself sick to avoid school a few years ago. It never worked ; he’s too resilient for his own good.

As long as he can remember - his life has been focused on survival. It was all he could afford to care about. But letting himself be this dogged, starved, fear driven thing - it’s robbing him of his fire, of the very thing that got him through. He used to be hungry, to have dreams that could sustain him forever, dreams big enough to swallow the sky. But he’s splintered himself. And it’s made him brittle instead of strong.

He wants to be a real boy again. He just doesn't know which way to go to get there.

He breathes the cold air in and lets it permeate him. Calm. For all he lost this is what he has been earning, a cold blooded absolute, sharp focus in the eye of any storm. No matter what else gets numb, this stays.

He knows one thing. Forgiveness is not an option. Not anymore.
What *are* his options?

He can't go to the police; he is too implicated. He would end up in juvie at best, and his mom would be alone. And...his father and his colleagues would know he was a traitor. And then they would destroy him. He’s too old to be given a pass.

He could run away. But Mom is too fragile to leave, and Lucas would never forgive himself for leaving her behind. They could go stay with friends - but they have so little, and they would be a burden, and who says those friends wouldn't become the target of Jacques's anger when he inevitably found them again?

He could kill his father. At this point, he really thinks he could. There are weapons everywhere in the house, or he could use poison. There's more than enough info on the Internet. But the thing is...if he does it will turn him into the monster his father wanted him to be all along. Jacques would still have won. Lucas would ruin his life, and Mom would be heartbroken.

No, he has no choice but to play the long game. This is his chance to prove his brains are worth something in the real world, not just good grades.

He starts by showing interest. He actually starts mingling. There is a lot to be learned from his father's lieutenants, when you look past the dubious life choices. Especially the ones further down the ladder, who are just full of hidden resentments and fears. A lot of them know that Lucas is a troublemaker. They don't see him as aligned with his father. They see a scrappy little upstart chafing under a too strict leader, just like they are. He learns a lot about how to use people's expectations as a disguise. How ruling with an iron fist doesn't manufacture loyalty, but fear and lies and
dissimulation. And just how much there is to be won by showing sympathy and camaraderie.

Give him a few years, Lucas realizes with a growing shock, and he could put more than half of these men in his pocket. The errands Jacques sends them on, they say, are haphazard, motivated by cruelty or pettiness or randomness. The pay is weak and the risks are high. Organized crime is not what it used to be. It's a lot less about posturing these days, and a lot more about smart schemes: attacking smartphone trucks, scamming people online, befuddling confused oldies out of their pensions. And well, the bigger ones. Of course protection rackets still exist, but the local influence webs are getting thinner, weaker as gangs become multinational empires. But Jacques refuses to get with the times. Jacques would never be a lackey for those "foreign rats" as he says with a sneer. He wants to be king of his little shitpile. He wants to do things like they've always been done. Blood, fear, status, respect. So his people are missing out. Falling behind.

His reputation, Lucas is starting to understand, is the thing Jacques cares most about, and therefore where he is the most vulnerable. Lucas has learned that lesson well. He is still terrified of his father, but he starts to see the chink in his armor.

The other lesson is one he realizes he can apply a bit later. How do you get rid of a bully?

Well, by asking the help of a bigger bully.

And if there is one bully bigger than his father, it has to be Armand Demaury.

From what he's gathered from his father's least articulate rants after he's had a drink or two, that fucker Demaury

a) is rich enough he thinks everything is a game

b) is a snobbish prick who thinks he's better than anyone else

c) has a son that sounds like the worst entitled brat ever

d) has a perfect pretty wife 'who has probably never been fucked right in her life' (yikes)
e) is the only man who can get under his father's skin enough to become the focus of a level of attention he never gives to anyone else. He seems to be some sort of a rival in the organisational his father and his pack of gangsters are loosely tied to, but in a more advantageous position. Jacques likes complaining about how Demaury and his ilk don't respect workers. Yeah, sure, the proletariat of the stuffing bits of priests in body bags industry is super oppressed, man.

One evening he's hanging out with two of his father's men - René, who's sort of taken him under his wing, and two others, in a run down garage talking about car parts, when they get a call. When Lucas hears the name Demaury, he immediately gets curious.

After a few warnings they let him come along. Lucas can tell they're a little proud of him and a little curious of how Jacques will react.

Jacques is livid when he sees him; but René tells him they need the numbers. And think about it - Demaury didn't manage to get his lazy prig of a son interested in the field yet, did he? René is smarter than he looks. So Jacques throws a threatening behave at him, and lets him come along.

They walk into a bar, but it's very different from the holes in the wall Lucas is used to. It's upscale - high ceilings, flat curtains made of shimmering materials, low sofas, bizarrely shaped chandeliers that look like they cost more than their entire house. Immediately he feels underdressed and he falls in with the rest of the men as they tighten their ranks. Now that they are in enemy territory, no matter their internal squabbles, they are a front.

It's the afternoon, so it's empty save for a waitress cleaning tables and a very muscular barman stocking shelves. They're led to a backroom. Lucas is weirdly thrilled about the idea of seeing some sort of a showdown, to see how his father fares being angry at someone who isn't a terrified 14 year old.

They're led to a big table where a man is sitting.

He's in his late forties, like Jacques, but he looks younger. Tanned, tall, broad, with piercing blue eyes and a handsome face. Expensive, gunmetal grey suit, greying hair carefully coiffed. He's poring over piles of paper. Everything about him radiates power and vitality. In fact, Lucas never would have guessed he had anything to do with the mob at all if he didn't see him meeting the Colibari gang. He looks like he belongs in an add for premium class plane tickets or Rolex watches, one of which he seems to be sporting on his wrist.

He's talking on the phone, something about flower arrangements. When he sees them, he makes a little sign with his wrist, but doesn't hang up. Instead, they have to listen to five minutes of
recriminations about how baby’s breath and orchids don’t belong together and floral foam is carcinogenic.

Lucas recognizes a power move when he sees one, and he can see Jacques’s temper slowly disintegrate from the corner of his eye. He’s torn between a very dark sort of amusement, and concern about repercussions.

Demaury finally hangs up.

"Ah, gentlemen, my apologies. I have to keep the wife happy, you understand, and her annual charity ball for artistic scholarships is one of the most anticipated events in town." He chuckles good naturedly. "So, is this the muscle you brought me ?" He glances at their group, and when his gaze briefly pauses on Lucas, Lucas feels a flight of insecure anger at the amused condescension he can see in it.

"I came to negotiate." Jacques says with gritted teeth. "Where is Vallès ?" Now that's a name Lucas has never heard before.

"You know very well he is busy. Can't we just deal with this between ourselves as grownups ?"

"If I'm being expected to step in and clean up after your mess, Demaury, I deserve a seat at the table!" Jacques's voice is raised too loud, betraying his nerves. Lucas is fascinated.

Demaury doesn't even flinch. He arches a bushy, but perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

"And how exactly are you going to clean up this "mess" you are talking about ? With these fine gentlemen here ? Do you pay them in vats of red wine ? Do you really think this is the way to keep attention away from our project’s issues, just put gorillas everywhere on the site ? Or that boy over there who looks like he should be in school ?"

"Don't mind me." Lucas says before his brain has a chance to shut him up. "I'm just here to learn about flowers."
There is a moment of incredulous silence, in which Lucas wonders if this is the day he's finally gonna end up in real trouble, before Demaury laughs and the tension completely deflates. And absurdly, so does Jacques, and then the rest of the men.

"That your boy, Colibari? Got quite a pair on him, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he is. He's smart enough to start learning the ropes, I'd say. What about yours, still doing his little paintings?"

That's a dig if he ever heard one. He sees a minimal fraction of an emotion go through Demaury's face behind the genial smile.

"Well, I'm afraid he's in Switzerland at this moment, doing an internship with one of our friend's banks. He's considering a change in careers, you see."

"Better late than never, huh?"

"Well, I believe in a well rounded education. And he really is a Renaissance man in the making. Good at everything he tries," Demaury says, the jab just rolling off him like it was just a pleasantry. "You know, if young mister here wanted to stretch his wings a little, I'm sure he could get him a place, too. After all, there's more to our work than cars and brawling, don't you think?"

"He's fine where he is." Jacques says, bullish.

"Are you?"

That sentence is directly addressed to Lucas. Now he knows that if he says something wrong, he's in a position to anger Jacques very, very badly. But this is an opening to establish some sort of rapport with Demaury he can use later. He breathes through his nose before answering.

"I don't know, do they have cars in Switzerland?"

There you go, openness, but enough loyalty to the base. Demaury laughs, and is about to say something else, when Jacques cuts in.
"So, the site. You're off standards, and that tenant union rep is onto you. You should considering offloading. One of my companies could do it. Stay in house, diffuse the blame."

"I don't think so, no. My friends handling this have assured me the story will blow away on its own soon enough. I know, dear Jacques, that you are quite prone to jumping to action at the most minimal amount of trouble, but if you ever plan on moving up in this world, you'll have to learn a little bit more stoicism. Crises will come and they will go, that is no excuse for jumping the gun."

Watching Jacques being condescended to and treated like an impatient idiot is the best moment of Lucas's life. And Jacques's usual response - threats, emotional manipulation, cruelty - have no impact here because there is no way in which Jacques can credibly threaten Demaury. Jacques barged in with his men but Lucas can see the barman looking at them or the big guns milling about at the other end of the backroom or the cameras. Not to mention Demaury's cool demeanor. He's probably had to face this a thousand times. He behaves as if he is the only adult in the room dealing with a temper tantrum.

And Jacques's little bubble is burst.

No wonder his father can't make it past his echelon of the ladder, Lucas muses. He can't stand being around people that aren't his inferior.

Lucas is plenty used to that, though. And seems like he has a new role model.

He realizes very suddenly - Demaury is the man Jacques wants to be, tries to imitate with his expensive cars and suits and genteel charm, but he is just a cheap knock off, bargain bin peach schnapps to thousand euros brandy. Probably birth plays a role, but it's more than that. Demaury is patient, in control, while Lucas's father is a volcano, never far from exploding.

The conversation stretches on and Lucas hangs on to every last detail of it. The crux of it is this: Armand got put in charge of a very important real estate project by the organization, but he messed something up. Now Jacques is trying to use this as a way to bully him into passing the responsibility, the contract - and the money - over to his company. But it isn't working. Armand just lets all the threats glide over him. He is unreachable, remote, untouchable.

Finally Jacques gets thrown a boon. He will provide security agents. But this is nothing, and they all know it. He storms out of the room, and his men scramble to follow him, including Lucas, already dreading who Jacques is going to take his anger out on, but at the last minute, something strikes his
mind. They're almost at the car and he tells René he's forgotten something. As Jacques's car screeches away, he turns back inside straight to Demaury's table. He is having coffee, and he looks up when Lucas arrives, turning his blindingly white teeth towards him once again.

"Well, well, look at what we have here. Did you change your mind about Switzerland?"

"Your son isn't doing an internship, is he?"

He can see, for a fraction of a second, surprise on Demaury's face, immediately smoothed over.

"Well, of course he is? Why wouldn't he be?"

"Because I know what disappointment on a father's face looks like. And shame. And bragging to hide something."

Demaury frowns, then. It is the type of frown one would see on a Greek statue or something: dramatic, dignified.

"I do not like this implication that I am anything but wholly proud of my son's achievements."

"Then why isn't he here, learning the family business? Why do I keep hearing about him but never seeing him? Does he have a birth defect or something?" Lucas bites back.

Demaury sighs. It is, in theory, perfectly controlled, but a tinge too loud.

"Listen, young man. I have a lot of work to do, and I don't have the time to engage in…"

"When did you meet my father?"

"Excuse me?"
"What year? 2001? 2002?"

"Well, we first started collaborating in 2003 but I fail to see…"

Lucas laughs, bitterness overflowing into his heart. It all starts to fall into place.

"You know I didn't grow up with a father. He found us when I was thirteen. Said he'd lost us but recently I've been wondering - a man with resources like that, couldn't he have done it a little sooner? Wasn't very much interested in being a father for a while. But then...he met you. And suddenly it became useful to have a son. That was in 2003, by the way. You're all obsessed with sons. Talking about them constantly I thought that's really weird but now I'm wondering…"

"I'm sorry about your family difficulties, I really am, but I don't see what this has to do with my son."

"There's something wrong with him, isn't there? You're at a disadvantage. You'd be even more so if someone started digging."

"What do you want?"

Lucas takes a deep breath."I want out."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want out of this whole mess. The mobster son of the year competition. That would be convenient for you, wouldn't it?"

Armand smiles at him, like he is a dog learning neat tricks.

"Really? I wasn't aware you and my son were in any kind of competition. But, young man, if you want to demand things from people, learning some manners would be a good first step. Threatening people really isn't the way to go."
"What, you want me to ask for charity instead? Maybe I should go see your wife."

"Well, that would surely be a most outlandish encounter. Purely for entertainment value I would say take your chances, but I have to warn you, my wife is in the business of patronizing artists, not scooping rats from the gutter."

He delivers the insult in a tone just as jovial as the rest. Suddenly Lucas feels very, very small, and realizes how presumptuous he is being. His shoulders slump. He feels like his father, an aggressive mutt yapping at the feet of people.

Armand makes a signal. A guy comes from the back towards him, and bows in front of him. Armand whispers something in the guy’s ear, then he leaves.

Armand returns his eyes to Lucas.

"Sit." He says, and Lucas obeys. "Some things, you don’t get to walk away from."

"But your son gets to go to Switzerland, huh?"

"Young man - Lucas, is it?" Lucas nods. "Very well, Lucas. Don’t ever talk about my son again. Ever." All of a sudden his gaze is pure ice.

Lucas feels a rush of anger mixed with jealousy. For a brief flash he wishes he had a father who protected him like that. But he doesn’t, not in this universe. No use crying over spilt milk. Don’t be a baby, Lucas.

He nods.

"Alright, good." Armand's tone is breezy again. "Well, don't give up hope, you might get to a Switzerland of your own one day. You just have to earn it first."

"What do you mean?"
"Well, I can see that you're clever, quick. And fearless, although certainly too much for your own good. But these are commendable qualities, that given the right education, can be molded into quite the character. It is unfortunate that you were born into...these circumstances."

Lucas feels a flash of old familiar shame for his broken family. But this time, he can't help but agree a little, even if his pride is screeching.

"You want me to spy on my father?"

Armand laughs.

"Well...nothing quite so frontal. Not just yet."

"I need money. To put my mother somewhere safe. She's...unwell. He's a danger to her."

Armand chuckles. "Of course you need money. It's always about money in the end."

In that moment Lucas understands why his father hates this guy. It's just a game to him. Lucas is talking about his mother's life. And Demaury doesn't give a shit. He's had practice seeing lives as pawns in his games.

"Well, like everything in life, you will have to earn it. There's no such thing as a free lunch, after all." He says, in the warm tones of a doting uncle dispensing advice to his favorite nephew.

The guy in a monkey suit comes back from another room, and he puts something down on the table between them. It's a phone. Small, black, unrecognizable.

"Take this." Armand says. "We will be in touch." And then he goes back to the stack of files in front of him. He doesn't need Lucas's approval. He knows he's already got it. Lucas has been dismissed, so he takes the phone, gets up, and leaves, a weird taste in his mouth. He doesn't slam doors, but he understands the urge.

This is not a road he'd ever thought he'd take. But in this case, he can't imagine much worse than the devil he already knows.
When he gets in René's car, outside, he shoots Lucas a worried look.

"Are you sure of what you're starting there, Lucas? He might not look it, but that man is more dangerous than an army of Jacques. Give him a hand and he'll suck your entire soul out."

Lucas shrugs.

"Yeah well, I need to make sure my mom and me are safe. I know Jacques's gonna flip his shit one of these days, he's like a fucking time bomb. I'll worry about my soul later." He looks at René. "Are you gonna rat me out?"

René sighs.

"You know...your father is one of my oldest friends. And I believe in loyalty. But the way he treated Valerie...it was never right. I told him not to look you both up, you know. Ever since he did he's been trying to pretend to be this respectable family man...I don't think it's done him any good."

Lucas wonders, then, what sort of awful tragedy lead a half decent man like Rene to become Jacques's friend, and what kind of monumental blinds he has to wear not to realize what a horrible person he's hitched his wagons to. But he doesn't have the luxury of being picky over potential allies. If the residual guilt Rene feels over inaction can help him keep his mouth shut, then so be it.

"I just...be careful, okay? Don't let yourself be swayed by pretty promises."

"Won't make the same mistake twice."
He keeps the phone with him constantly, always hidden even when charging. Being found out becomes this constant terror. But at least he's testing his abilities to appear inconspicuous in front of Jacques, the ultimate test. And he's pretty solid. He doesn't let himself focus on what he is doing. Instead he focuses on his studies, and setting as much money aside as he can. He finds a new sense of purpose. Letting himself envision a future, no matter how difficult it might be to get there, where he might be free of all this shit, it's a fire inside him.

One day, he gets a message. Time and a place, midday, Saturday. The message auto-destructs a minute after he reads it. He pretends he's going to René's to work on his car.

He takes the RER to the city center, all the way up to a classy hotel rooftop restaurant. It's the fanciest place he's ever been to and he can feel the looks turned towards him, his ripped jeans and beat up tee shirt and shitty shoes. He guesses that's part of the point. Make him feel insignificant while at the same time give him a glimpse of the privileges Demaury affords his allies.

But he's not unfamiliar to having to wear a mask. He has to adapt; he's done it all his life. So he swallows his pride and goes on.

The first lunch pretty much sets the tone for those that follow. Demaury both makes sure that he knows his place, and keeps alluding to potential rewards. He compliments Lucas on his sharpness of mind and determination, while constantly putting down his manners and education. Lucas would feel offended, but he's never been more aware that it's all a game. He cared, maybe still cares about what Jacques thinks. This man is no one to him, just a means to an end. He can’t help but be impressed, see that this man could teach him a lot, but he doesn’t make the mistake of taking his compliments seriously, or be entranced by the offer of shiny gifts. He knows how badly that can go.

It’s not immediately clear, what Demaury wants from him. He slowly starts relating the history and purpose of the mysterious organization he claims he and Jacques are both a part of, the Shadow. It seems so surreal, intangible while they're eating overpriced salads on those sunny terrasses surrounded by businesspeople in designer clothes. Lucas can see he is trying to test Lucas’s curiosity. Lucas gives him just enough to make sure Demaury doesn’t see him as a wasted case. But when he alludes to being on a deadline, to needing out before he graduates, Demaury becomes elusive.

The push and pull is frustrating. At home Jacques is more and more threatening, and less careful with his hits, meaning he’s starting to lose interest in the consequences. Mom spends her time as isolated as possible, and she doesn’t talk to Lucas - they don’t have that type of relationship anymore. He’s
started to look into specialized in-patient care, and the decent ones are generally private and so expensive. Jacques forces him to visit business programmes he has no interest in whatsoever. He registers for engineering school entrance exams, in secret, paying the fees out of pocket, knowing full well that he might not be able to make it. He's the only one taking care of the house. Jacques brings him along on more and more of his jobs, more than one ending in him washing bloody clothes again. He's so tired. And still Armand Demaury continues to make jokes and vague allegations, a glass of expensive wine in hand. It cuts into him. He feels like a dog being taught tricks, and it starts to feed a deep resentment in him.

Something's got to give.

So one day he asks, as they are having little caviar and foie gras toasts,

"What do I do if my father tries to kill me ?"

Armand lifts his eyebrows and laughs. "Don't you think that's a bit over dramatic ? That would put him at a significant strategic disadvantage. The Shadow places a very high value in fostering the next generations. I can imagine Jacques is a little unrefined in his educational methods, but..."

"Oh believe me, I know how unrefined he can be. But right now I'd say he's bordering on unhinged." Lucas cuts through, and raises his sleeve, showing a just-healed ten centimeter long burn scar.

Demaury frowns. There is no hint of compassion on his face whatsoever, but there is calculation.

"I'm sure you're used to cultivating long term assets, or whatever." Lucas goes, the sarcasm thick in his voice, or maybe it's disguised pain at his calls for help being so blithely ignored "but if you don't get the fuck on with it, there might not be anything left to cultivate." He shrugs. "But hey, that would be a simple way to get me out of the way. Maybe you're just keeping an eye on things, huh ?"

Demaury's mouth turns down, as if he's just found a hair in his soup.

"I don't approve of this sort of thing, if that's what you're implying. But the Shadow also believes that a man's home is his castle. I'm afraid I can't help with these things."

"Well then, maybe I will have to kill him then. Will you help me hide the body ? I can't imagine that
the Shadow approves of killing fathers. I don't think they'd want the police looking into my father too closely either."

Again that damned smile: so empty. Lucas remembers reading somewhere that for chimpanzees showing teeth is a sign of aggression.

"Now, now, Lucas. What did we say about making threats?"

"It's not a threat, it's a fact! Otherwise what the fuck are we doing here?"

Armand Demaury's face is never anything but blank, and polite, and Lucas knows he's talking to a wall, and suddenly he feels a wave of despair submerge him. It's not rational - to expect anything from this man - but suddenly he is hit with how many people must have willingly ignored the signs of what was happening to him over the years. And he feels so...worthless. He tries so hard to navigate all the spikes that life throws at him, to keep himself together after he feels worn down to the bone, but it doesn't matter. His 'spiritedness', his 'pluck' like Demaury likes to say - is never going to be rewarded. It's just a trap, a way to keep him running. Maybe Demaury was never going to help him in the first place. Maybe he was just waiting for Jacques to find out, explode, kill his family.

Lucas gets up.

"I'm done with this shit. Either give me something, tell me what you want or I'm out."

"My, my. Quite a temper in this family, isn't there. Are you going to make a scene? Slam a door? Like good old dad?"

Lucas clenches his jaw. If he let himself, he could cry, but he doesn't do that sort of thing anymore. It's an exercise in showing how futile you are to the world. And he's already starting in the negative on that account.

Instead he wonders what it would feel like, for once, to unleash his rage on the world, instead of turning it all inwards. To be able to make men like Armand Demaury really afraid. And, for the first time in his life, he finds himself sympathizing with Jacques.

He sits back down and leans forward.
"Ok, there is going to be a war, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"You wouldn't bother with me otherwise. So Jacques is like...a threat to you."

"There is always a war going on," Demaury answers coolly. "We can hardly afford to lose our heads over every bump in the road, can we?" It sounds more like a ‘royal we’ than an attempt at including Lucas.

King of a slightly larger shit pile.

“Oh wow, then you are into charity. Dearest Mr. Armand, distributor of salads to the poor and downtrodden.”

“Watch that mouth of yours, boy. Believe me, you don’t want to get on my bad side.”


He gets up again.

“Well then, sir,” He says in his most obsequious tone, “I am dreadfully sorry for squandering so much of your oh so precious time, and I shan’t bother you any further.” To complement his words, he bows a tiny inch, and does a frill of the hand.

Demaury sighs.

“You really have no sense of self preservation whatsoever, do you?”

Lucas frowns - he is doing this out of self preservation in the first place - but then Demaury adds, with a strange pinch to his mouth, “I wish my son was more like you, sometimes.”
He takes out a fountain pen from his bag and a little pad and scrawls something on it. Then gives it to Lucas. There is an address on it, a date and a time.

“Be there at least half an hour in advance. Bring a camera, listen well, and hide. If anyone sees you, you’ll be in deep, deep trouble. I wanted more time to prepare you for the...complex politics of our world, but if you want to rush in, then so be it. Just remember...mess this up, and you’re on your own.”

Lucas nods, a little dumbfounded, and then backs out. He doesn’t really see dessert happening after his outburst.

....

So, he finds himself, a little bit after ten, sneaking into a construction site. The very place, he suspects, that his father and Demaury were arguing about. It's very close to the river, and the whole edifice is still far from being done, simply a concrete gridlike skeleton towering towards the sky, with no walls or floors, bitterly cold winds sweeping through.

He finds himself a place to perch : high up on a beam that overlooks most of the place, with a pillar to hide behind. Good thing he isn't afraid if heights : one wrong step and he would break his neck.

The moon is very near full, casting everything in a silver glow. He's tested his camera and mike and they work, but he might have to move closer depending on where the action happens.

This is the most dangerous thing he's ever done. But it doesn't quite compute in his brain, the risk. All that exists in the moment is his pure undiluted focus, every little detail amplified and razor sharp.

He waits.

Then a man arrives. He is in his fifties, tall, dark skin, an affable face but wearing a harried look of worry on his face, carrying a briefcase. He looks at his watch, and then around at the deserted setting.
Ten minutes or so later, a silhouette stalks into the scene. Lucas's heart heaves as he sees Jacques's stark profile cast in the cold glow of the moon, cruel, drained of any color. He walks to the man, and greets him, but at that particular angle, Lucas can't see his face. He has to move.

He takes a deep breath, and, as lightly and silently as he can, gets up, and walks across the beam, to get closer to where the two men are talking. Thankfully he is mostly out of the light, and the men are too absorbed in their conversation to see the shadow sliding across a tarp several meters away. But still, as Lucas moves across, like an equilibrist, it’s as if his entire heart is in his mouth. His body remains perfectly controlled throughout.

He stops when he is at the next pillar. Turns around it, and he can see the men’s faces clearly. He gets his camera out, takes a few pictures first, and starts filming.

“...sure you will be able to run this in your newspaper with all the facts ?”

“Yes, my editor has given me free rein.” Jacques answers, his voice echoing around.

Fuck, the man thinks he’s a journalist ?

Wow. He really, really is in danger. A small voice at the back of Lucas’s head says that maybe he should warn the man, or call the police, but it stays immobile, and so does Lucas. Silent, unnoticeable.

The man gets something out of his bag, a folder, hands it over to Jacques.

“I’ve compiled some testimonies about people who used to live here and were pressured out of their homes.” The man continues. “There’s a dozen more projects like these across the city, but I wanted to show you this one, because…” The man swallows. He keeps looking around furtively.

“Yes ?” Jacques asks, impatient.

“Well, it's...one of the first and...it’s quite emblematic.” He answers. And Lucas is suddenly absolutely certain that it’s not what he meant to say at first.
His voice is trembling. He looks like a family man, Lucas thinks, someone kind and warm who doesn’t belong to this world of shadows. He is trying to be determined, but he has sensed that something is not quite right with Jacques. Jacques, Lucas thinks, has been spending too much time lately walking around like he wants everyone to know how brutal he is. He used to be a good con-man, but he cares less and less about pretending, putting on a front of civility and charm. Or maybe it’s just the frustration of knowing he’ll never be as good at it as Armand Demaury.

As he’s lost in thought, a sequence of events happen very quickly, taking him off guard.

First, the man raises his eyes. And sees Lucas. Lucas remains frozen in horror. Is he going to shout out?

Then, the man raises his bag, thrusting it towards Jacques. At the same time, from this vantage point, Lucas can very clearly see him drop something small, and black, on the ground. Then, he runs.

Jacques sighs, and then walks forward, at a slow pace. He raises his arm, and Lucas can very clearly see a gun, and he hears a muffled sound, and then a thud, and the silhouette of the man, ten meters or so forward, crumpling to the ground.

Lucas films it all, and then, after he is sure to have the incriminating material he needs, he flings himself behind the nearest pillar, and shutters his breath to absolute silence.

He hears steps, a little laugh. Then the sound of something heavy being dragged around.

He doesn’t move.

In fact, he stays there, muscles cramping, absolutely immobile, the events he just witnessed in a loop on his brain, for what has to be hours, but go by in a strange, distorted way.
It’s only when the sky slowly starts to turn grey and light again that he dares to move. Outside the city is waking up. Soon, the work of the day will begin again. He needs to hurry out of here.

As he comes down he’s half expecting Jacques to be there when he comes down, to laugh that little laugh and then shoot him, just as he did the other man. But the place is empty. There’s nothing to show that anybody was ever shot down there.

Lucas arrives to the place the two men were standing, and he notices the makeshift griddle that gives out on some sort of gutter in the concrete. He gets down on his knees, and pulls on the grid, which makes a loud, rattling noise that has him freeze in shock. But after nobody comes stomping his way, he continues what he was doing. There is a big PVC tube in there already, and Lucas tells him it’s probably pointless, that Jacques probably found what the man let fall on the ground. But he wants to make sure, so he starts sliding his fingers under it, in vain at first, but then he follows the slight downward slope of the gutter, until he bumps against something.

There it is.

He extracts it with a lot of patience.

It’s a small USB-stick.

As he pockets it, and leaves the site as discreetly as possible, the implications of the night slowly start to dawn on him.

First of all, by watching everything and saying nothing, he is now officially an accomplice to murder. And secondly, he feels shock, but not nearly as much as he should. He always thought that seeing the real face of his father would paralyze him, terrify him. But he can’t help but think, so this is what all the fuss was about, huh? And it gives him a strange sensation of mastery.

He really needs to get out of this life, before it swallows him whole.

…
He takes precautions. He doesn’t bring the camera or the USB-stick home, opting to hide them in his school locker instead. He makes copies, uploads them online, hides them in places only he knows. And, as an insurance policy, he compresses the files and puts them in an email scheduled to be sent out to the police and several newspapers in a week, unless he cancels it.

The contents of the key are confusing. But as he understands it, it’s about modifications to the constructions plans that are not in the original permit for the luxury hotel slated to be built on the site. Namely, digging. A lot of digging, some towards and under the river. But a lot of it also completely haphazard, and in ways that could compromise the structural integrity of the building. They’ve even hired an archeologist for ‘prevention of damage to the city’s historical patrimoine’, whatever the fuck that means. Lucas knows enough to know that if they found anything significant under there, they should stop the construction. Is that what they’re trying to prevent by killing people ? For a bunch of fucking rocks ?

He goes to his next power lunch with Armand Demaury, his head buzzing with questions. This place looks more serious, more solemn than their usual meetings, as if he’s leveled up - it’s muted, elegant, vibrant with the workings of power. Carpeted wooden floors, golden chandeliers, sedated voices. And as Lucas sees himself in the gilded hallway mirror, he finds that he has changed, too. He doesn’t look like a high schooler anymore. He’s combed his hair back properly, put on a sweater and proper pants, leather shoes. He looks more serious, more steady. He can’t see nervousness, or the sense he isn’t in his place here. Sure, he doesn’t project power, but he doesn’t stick out anymore. He looks like he’s a young ambitious wolf, going places. He can’t help but feel pleased.

As he sits down, Demaury attacks immediately, as if impatient.

“So, you have seen your father at work.”

“Yeah, I have.” Lucas answers, and leaves it at that.

“What an...understated reaction.”

“What, you expected the waterworks ? I’ve known what he does for a while.”

“And this doesn’t faze you ?”
Lucas shrugs.

“Good to know.” Demaury smiles. “So, you have what you need to blackmail your father, then.”

“Blackmail ?”

“Well, of course. Isn’t that what you wanted to do in the first place ? Or go with it to the police. Take him out of the circulation.”

“I can’t do that on my own.” Lucas says. “I would be arrested at the same time, or he would kill me.” But Demaury knew that, he realizes as he sees the man’s expression. He just wanted to implicate him more deeply. He thinks about the digging.

He wonders if it’s not an attempt at reverse psychology.

“You don’t want me to do this.”

“Well, maybe, I wanted you to see for yourself that his whole matter is...complicated. Surely none of our affairs would be ameliorated by implicating the authorities. And dealing with Jacques straight on...he needs to be managed. And for that, you need powerful allies, young man. So making scenes won’t get you very far at all. I’m glad you’re starting to see this.”

Fuck, Lucas is so tired of all the wheeling and dealing. So tired. He tries to see this from a different angle. Detached. What if he wasn’t a 17 year old trying to fight for his freedom and protect his despondent mother and stopping himself from falling into a horrible world. What if he was an outside observer, with the luxury of time and detachment ?

The main mystery remains the question of why Demaury is bothering with him in the first place. He wants to get at Jacques through him, obviously. Maybe disable him so he won’t compete with his son, he thought at first. But Demaury trying to teach him, test him, possibly turn him, points to something else.

What are they competing for ? Who makes the rules of their byzantine world ? There’s always someone to enforce the rules.
“So how do you think I should handle my father?”

“Start by seeing if you can get a little bit more of his perspective on the current events. It would be useful for us.”

Ah, so the spying has to start. He was wondering when this would come. He was getting there anyway.

He’s missing a part of the picture. And there’s only one man he can ask.

“Well, I know how to push his buttons. Might be useful after all.”

“That’s what I like to hear!” Demaury smiles big as ever.

Fucking piece of shit, Lucas thinks, and smiles even bigger.

…

It’s late. He’s sitting in front of the TV with Jacques, watching a football game. The game is good, and their favorite team is winning. The air smells like stale crisps and warm beer. They’re almost...Bonding. It’s so normal, it’s absurd. They’ve both drunk ; Jacques a lot more than Lucas, which can be dangerous, but he doesn’t feel any anger in the air, just drowsiness.

“Hey Dad ?”

“What ?”

“Does that Demaury guy always give you orders ?”

“What the fuck ? What the fuck gave you that idea ?” Jacques lets out a barking laugh. ”No. No he wishes he could. But I have stuff he doesn’t - I can go places he can’t, cause he needs to keep himself clean. He needs the muscle, but he needs - the grit, and the common sense, and - he doesn’t
understand the underbelly of this city, see? I do. I do. That man, he’s just a trick of the light. He’s
 got no substance. Everything he does, all his power, he gets by using other people to do his dirty
 work.”

“So he’s trying to treat you as his underling, but you won’t let him.”

“Damn right? Why you so nosy all of a sudden, boy?”

Lucas shrugs.

“I wanted to know where we stand, that’s all. I didn’t like the way he was talking to us the other day.
 Got reminded by a guy in my class today, one of those trust fund brats, thinks the entire world should
 be at his feet already.” This is not true, but it could have happened.

Jacques makes a sound of disgust.

“Yeah, that’s exactly the type. But don’t worry, Demaury won’t be able to push me out. Vallès
 needs us both.”

That name again.

Lucas feels something shift in the air. He knows there’s one of Jacques’s weaknesses there. He
 knows how to exploit it. He just never thought he’d have the guts to do it before. But recent events
 have made him feel like a slowly tempering blade, subtle and precise like he wasn’t before.

“Yeah, but like...you’re just providing the muscle for that construction site thing, right? I really think
 anyone could do that.”
Lucas tenses, wonders if he’s pushed too far.

But Jacques sighs. He’s in a weird sort of mood tonight, almost melancholy.

“You’re right. There’s something about the way Demaury’s handling that project...it’s too cagey. Like he wants to keep everyone else far away from it. He keeps blowing off Vallès, too. Anyone else would be in deep trouble, but not Mr. Demaury, nooo...that slippery fuck just keeps getting away, but one of these days, I’m telling you, he won’t.” Jacques’s voice speaks of deep resentment and humiliation.

The digging, Lucas thinks. It’s something about the digging. Demaury is sitting on some sort of secret that he doesn’t want anyone else to know. And Lucas has proof.

“He’ll get what’s coming to him one day.” Lucas says.

“Really ? How’d you figure that ?”

“He’s just too fucking sure of himself. He thinks nothing can come for him, he’s too used to being on top.”

Jacques laughs. “Damn right.”

He really doesn’t get the irony, Lucas thinks.

…

In the end, it comes down to this.

He has stuff against the both of them. Angering Demaury, the powerful man in the shadows, and he could unleash hell. Angering Jacques...he knows the consequences of that.
Which trigger does he choose to pull?

In the end, it comes down to simple, ruthless pragmatism: he needs the simplest and fastest way out. He can’t afford to wait for Switzerland. And he knows Jacques, knows how the main functions.

He prepares his exit, to make it airtight. He passes his end exams, and the entrance tests to the engineer school of his choice, both with flying colors. And those for business school, to pretend for Jacques. He has money from online poker tournaments and other odd ends and jobs. He has all his important papers and things in a safe.

Two days after the start of summer vacation, he convinces his mother to pack her bags and leave with him in a car he has borrowed from René. It’s not very hard, she’s a ghost of her former self. He leaves her at a private institution, chosen for its beautiful gardens but most importantly its extremely advanced security. He turned eighteen a month ago, and he’s able to be her legal referent. He warns the staff about an abusive ex-husband to refuse entrance to at all costs and asks to be told about any visits beforehand. He leaves his mom with a kiss on the cheek and a promise to visit soon, and is ashamed at the relief he feels when he’s out of there.

Then he settles on the busiest, most public terrace he can find, in the city center, in view of the Eiffel Tower. Pays for the nine euro coffee with his own money. Opens his laptop. He wants to remember this moment. The start of his independent life. Or the ruin of everything, but either way. A page is being turned. Sheer unfiltered determination sings in his veins and obscures everything else.

He gets his phone, and dials the number.

“My son? Calling me? What a surprise?” Jacques’s voice is jovial, fakely affected.

“Hello Jacques.” Lucas tries to keep his voice as emotionless as he can. “I have a business proposal for you.”

“Business proposal? Really?”

“I’m about to send you an email. It contains information about what exactly Armand Demaury has been doing on his latest construction site. Detailed. With proof. He’s been very very naughty, I think. Don’t think your bosses would approve. I mean, if this got out to the public…”
Jacques laughs.

“And how the hell did you get your hands on that, Lucas ?”

“I have my ways. In exchange, I want out. I want you to leave me and my mother alone. And I want money. Enough to take care of us while I study. Then we’ll be off your hands forever.”

“That’s kind of a serious deal, kid.”

“I’ve opened an account. I want 50000 up front and the same later.”

Jacques whistles. “What do you want me to do for that kind of money, rob a bank ?”

“You can ask your boss as a reward when he gets the info about Armand. Or the profit from the construction sites you’re going to take over. I mean, come on. Don’t tell me you were enjoying this little family charade of yours. Broken wife and a rebel son. Now you have a chance to start over. Besides, I have another bit of info for you. Demaury’s son isn’t coming back from Switzerland. So you won’t lose out on that side, either.”

“I do love a blank slate.” Jacques whistles. “Well well, maybe all the time I invested in you wasn’t a waste after all. I didn’t think I would ever say this, but if this is true...then I am proud of you. Outsnaking the snake. Maybe you did catch on to my lessons.”

I did the opposite of anything you ever taught me, Lucas wants to spit, wishing it were true.

There is a long moment of silence.

“How do I know you’re not bluffing ?”

“I’m going to send you a first page of the documents now.” Lucas answers.

He does. A moment after, Jacques sighs. “Well I was wondering where that went. It was you, wasn’t it. That evening. You were there. I knew I heard a noise. Could have shot you like a bird from a
branch. Now I wonder...how did you know to be there ?”

“Armand wanted me there. He tried to recruit me.”

“But instead you’re turning towards me ? Double double cross ? Blood recognizing blood ?”

“I’m doing what works in my best interest” Lucas answers.

“Very cold, Lucas. Well done. I’m almost regretting having to let you go.”

“And another thing. I have pictures and video of you killing that man. If you ever come near me or mom again, I’m sending everything to the media and the police.”

“Of course.” Jacques chuckles. “Well, you have made my day. Alright, I’ll see what I can do about the money by the end of the day. Sure you don’t want to celebrate ? One last outing to end our association properly ?”

‘No.” Says Lucas, and he hangs up brutally.

The cheerfulness in Jacques’s voice….hits him. He was expecting...anger. Resistance, scorn, another intimidation technique. But this...is as if he didn’t even care. The boogeyman, the perpetual fear and terror of Lucas’s life, and it’s so easy to cast off. As if Jacques never really cared about anything but his rivalry with Demaury, and Lucas and his mother were just pawns, forgotten the very instant they were not relevant anymore. Not even worth of his pride or cruelty. Well, they can have each other, Lucas thinks. He hopes they destroy each other.

But still...it robs him of his moment. He wanted to stand up for himself. An act of independence, bold and fearless. Instead he feels...Dismissed. It stings in all sorts of ways.

But freedom is still freedom, no matter how he got there.

…
As he prepares to move towards his new life, Lucas wonders for a moment. About how difficult it will be to leave the world of shadows that was preparing to welcome him, behind. About the dark things Jacques Colbari and Armand Demaury have planned for the world. About what Lucas could do with the information he has been privy to. About the dead man, and the family who must be missing him, and the people who were forced out of their homes, and the mysterious tunnels dug under Paris everywhere, and the priest and all the other people Jacques has killed and will kill in the future, operating unchecked by the people who know of his sins.

But the truth is, he doesn’t care. He hasn’t had the luxury to care about the world for a long time. And the world never cared about him in the first place, anyway.

So he will pay the price of silence, and he will move on with his life. His life, for the first time in forever. His life, and no one else’s.

Lucas Lallemant is a new man.

Or at least, he tries very hard to be.
College is…different. And it's scary how fast he forgets he was once a mobster's son, cleaning blood from weapons, driving getaway cars, rubbing elbows with killers. He learns to ignore the scars on his body, and to be grateful he won't be getting any new ones.

Of course he needs some time to adapt. He's a starving man at a buffet. All this freedom, it’s disorienting. He has to practice being a regular college student. Or just...a regular human. Without the drugs and the posturing and the constant threat hanging in the air. The brutal drive, the bulldozer weight always at his back. It's disorienting. Sometimes it’s like entire pans of who he was dissolved along with his old life. But he can’t listen to the wall calling him to crash into it anymore.

He made a bet on the future. Now he has to see it through. He’s never going back, not for anything in the world. The past is a yawning maw, waiting to gobble him up as if he so much as throws a glance backwards.

So. Forward, wherever it leads.

A good part of college is that there are a lot of cheap martial arts and combat sports training classes.

For the rest, well - he got lucky with his roommate, Yann. Yann's smart, kind, and warm, and nothing of it fake or calculated. A novelty in Lucas’s world. At first sleeping with somebody else in his room was unthinkable. His body was so wired to high alert he couldn't sleep for weeks. But then Yann invited him along to an evening with his friends and they got plastered to high heavens and ended up sleeping in a pile and somehow his body must have registered it was safe to let down his shields around them.

They're good people. They're dumb college kids, chaotic and messy and challenged when it comes to even the most basic tasks in life, but underneath that Lucas can see the shape of genuinely great people starting to form.

But sometimes...Lucas feels like they are an entirely different species than him. They are so uncalculating, sheltered, unaware of the spaces in which they move. He wishes he had the luxury to be like them. But even trying to be chill feels like a camouflage technique. He is so unused to being around people who lack any sort of an edge.
Yann's not an idiot, though, he picks up on it. One day he says jokingly, *you're our sheepdog*. Lucas feels a pang of anger before he realizes it's kindly meant. *Yeah you're always hanging at the edge like a loner but really you're making sure all our dumb asses are safe and don't get into too much trouble.* And in a way he is right. That's how Lucas had always been with his friends. The protector, provider, inspiration, helper, occasionally leader - but it doesn't make for real intimacy. It's a way to set himself apart, too.

He can't have them come too close, though. He can't have them know how messed up he is inside, how parts of him are missing, how fake he sometimes had to be to appear as a human. They wouldn't get it. He needs a blank slate.

And he lucked out with these nerds. He learns a lot from them. How to be proud of his own intellectual capacities. How to stay up nights embroiled in conversations about how they're going to change the world. How to think about building and creating things instead of destroying. How to let in enthusiasm and curiosity again. It's like a fresh breath of oxygen after an apnea of years.

Yann is the best of them. The way he talks unwaveringly and eloquently about green technology and taking care of the earth without any sort of irony or self consciousness…Lucas feels such second hand embarrassment until he realises nobody is coming to mock or belittle and afterwards, he starts to share his own obsessions. They're more volatile and suspiciously oriented towards warfare for a while, but apart from them getting high and into some vigorous discussions on capitalism (which they agree on sucks) and pacifism (which they don't) nothing happens.

Except them getting closer.

Which of course, of course, becomes a problem. And Lucas is so tired of himself. Of course he would latch onto the first person he feels really safe around in some weird over the top way. And sure Yann is attractive, but he is also extremely straight, and Lucas isn't gay, anyway, he just has a mountain of daddy and mommy issues and all his experiences with sex so far have been extremely fucked up. Because he's been taught to see women as objects to use as a way to prop himself up. But that's behind him now. One of these days, he's going to meet a genuinely nice girl, like Yann but with breasts, and learn to treat her right, and it will be a sign he can finally leave the past behind instead of courting pain.

But that's not what happens, though.

What happens is this.

Halfway through their second year while Lucas thought he'd mostly put the awkwardness to rest,
Yann starts dating a girl, and Lucas feels abnormally jealous, and then they become serious and Lucas...breaks them up. All of a sudden he is a snake in the grass again, applying mobster techniques to college love politics and god, he hates how easy it comes to him still. Advising the girl to lie about a drunken indiscretion, spreading rumors. Yann is really broken up and Lucas hates himself but he can't bring himself to fess up to what he did. And it makes things between them unnaturally tense for a while. It reminds him that maybe, he has no business being here, among normal people, pretending he's inoffensive. Creates this stew of shame and guilt in his head he can't escape, and he feels like he's been punched back into the past. Sleep eludes him once more.

So that's when their friends decide they have both been grumpy for too long and organize an Epic Party Time™ which consists of visiting several pre-parties all over town before crashing a law student party on the other side of the city one of them knows the organisator of. Lucas would rather dump himself in a vat of acid than to go out to party, but he figures he owes it to Yann to try and help him feel better, maybe even put his wingman skills to use.

So he goes.

The location is very upscale, typical law student swanky pretentious shit they didn't prepare for, and they have to argue for quite some time to be let in in their beat up jeans and gym shoes - Lucas moves to the front and does his best young Steve Jobs, soon to be millionaire tech prodigy impression, which gets him a standing ovation from the gang as they're let in and the bouncers' number so he can clue him in when his new trading tips app launches.

Yeah, the bullshit magic is still with him.

The club is packed, tight with well dressed people, mostly older grad students pushing towards the polish of adulthood. Low strobing lights in golden tones and pulsing music, electro mixed with jazz, pretentious working its way up to wild, sweat starting to permeate the air under the smell of makeup and expensive perfumes. They are very far out of their league. Lucas goes to the bar to get drinks. He hears bribes of conversations as he waits, and they're fascinating to him. He could jump in with ease ; even knowing very little about law he can catch patterns of persuasion ; he knows he could have been a brilliant lawyer. Dismantling people's arguments, reducing their lives to little snippets, spinning stories, digging for an angle. Going to war with only words as weapons. But it's yet another parallel universe he can only dream about.

He goes back to his group of lost science sheep, armed with drinks. In this angle he sees how coarse and unrefined they are, with their ruffled shirts and vodka clothes iron steamers and good humored ribbing about how Lucas will have trouble finding a girl here, since they all wear stilt like heels.
"I could find a girl on the moon, losers. And I never met a mountain I couldn't climb." He says with a smug grin of a mask, drains his glass in one go, gives it to one of them and leaves again, presumably to go prove himself.

He feels strange, something restless and hungry buzzing under his skin that reminds him of nights spent outside itching for a fight.

It's not like him to look down on his friends but it's one of these nights where he just wants more and he could just burst with need of it. He moves past Yann, in deep conversation with a girl, listening to her attentively, arm around her waist already like they're long time sweethearts. Yann is good at generating that feeling of instant intimacy. Lucas feels the distant grumbling of jealousy but to his relief, it's mostly gladness that his friend's spirit is not too broken. He deserves to be happy. Lucas's possessive feelings have ebbed away, like acting out proved that the guilt wasn't worth it. He hates being the man in the shadows, pining and prodding and steering from afar. He wants something real he can throw himself into fully.

He wants to be in the middle of his own life for once.

He looks at girls, and there are pretty ones everywhere; but they all seem blurry, vague as if in a dream. He finds himself moving down, to the club's basement. The music there is lower, slower, sultry, the base almost overpowering. The light washes over the people lounging on velvet sofas, golden-red-purple, caressing faces with an otherworldly glow.

Lucas stops at the edge, under the shadow of a stone arcade. Absorbed in the search for the perfect girl who never seems to materialize, his eyes become imprudent.

That's when he sees.

A break in the throng of anonymous party goers and sullen closed faces, dancers moving past. Bodies lounging on low sofas, all unconsciously turned towards the same point.
Midday at the stroke of midnight.

Lucas's heart strikes twice in one beat.

It's weird how it catches on to him; one moment he is aimless and the next, he's struck by lightning. He knows the world is irreversibly altered, but he doesn't get why at first.

Eyes. First. Golden deep, fire green, drowning blue. Sparkling, crinkling at the corners, so expressive they must have their own language. Sunshine playing in water, reaching through, lazy, languid, dancing.

A little smile, devilish sweet.

A face, carved by grace, all fine lines and clever daring curves and chiseled by shadows, and so mobile.

Emotion, everywhere, so intense and pure. No dilution, no coyness, no pretense. Too raw and present for this place of echoes. Hopeful. Waiting to be reciprocated.

The realest person on Earth, caught in a secret moment of tenderness for the world.

And it's not a girl.

Fuck, it's so not a girl.
It's a boy - well.

A man. Definitely a man.

Lucas breathes in, and it burns all the way down.

The guy sits like he owns the place. Legs spread, arms sprawling, head thrown back in laughter. All loose, easy, without a care in the world. It would look arrogant on anybody else, but this one? Him showing off is a gift to the world. He’s the sun, making everything around him shine.

His face is the most compelling thing Lucas has ever seen. It reminds him of the pictures of nebulae from his old books, engraved in his brain, as a challenge to the limits of his photographic memory. *Eta Carinae*, almost gone supernova but not yet. Doubly damning, both sharp and sweet. His expression is a smoulder, wild curls falling in his face, jutting cheekbones like a deer on the move. Strong nose, curious, lips curved in a confidential smile. Dangerously radiant, like the places where stars are born.

And Lucas is completely lost in space. Just looking feeds him in places he’d never known had been starving until now.

For a second Lucas desperately wants him to turn his head towards him so he can know what color his eyes really are - blue, green, grey, gold - and as he turns Lucas thinks it is going to happen, kill him on the spot, but the confusion of lights makes it impossible. He does catch the line of eyeliner circling his eyes, though, how intense and indecent it makes his gaze. In one ray of lilac light he sees that the stranger might be wearing a blazer but underneath, nothing but a shadow of black mesh. He can see the outline of a cut chest, nipples, abs, a feathering of hair, the cut of a hipbone... Fuck.
Lucas swallows, his heart pounding in his mouth, every part of him telling him to flee, to deny what is happening but he can't turn away. The stranger is the most fascinating thing he has ever seen.

And then he's got one arm wrapped around the shoulders of the beautiful brunette girl on his right, and is whispering in her ear, making her giggle. The brunette curls into him and Lucas thinks he knows where this is heading.

But then, out of nowhere, another guy drops onto the couch. Familiar, close, too close. Leather jacket, nascent beard on his skin, undeniably masculine. The beautiful man smiles, delighted, and grabs the newcomers' collar, and draws him in.

For a kiss.

And he disappears behind the broad back of the other man, like an eclipse.

It's like the sky goes dark. A thousand alarms go off in Lucas's head - they are in public, in full view of everyone else, completely exposed. He wants to warn them, yell, slink away in shame, pretend he never saw.

And they don't give a shit. And neither does anybody else.

It's an indecent riot of a kiss, fullmouthed, hungry, and as the other one pulls back for a second Lucas can see naked desire on the sunshine one's face, his full lips slick and bitten red, his blown pupils, and Lucas wants to turn away, embarrassed, but more than anything, with a fiery intensity that fills him with shame and longing in equal measure, he wants to be the other man. He wants that sunshine wrapped around him, arching into him, he wants...

This, Lucas is struck by sudden certainty, is what he is doing in a parallel universe.

Or all of them.

The stranger cups a hand around his ...friend's face, before pulling away and pushing their foreheads together, the tenderness of the gesture searing compared to their earlier voracity. A small private
smile that Lucas knows he shouldn't be seeing. This doesn't belong to him and he should -

The light turns pure gold and as it hits his face the stranger turns, and looks at Lucas. Licks his lips and smiles, hungry, not one bit ashamed of putting himself on display. Reveling in the attention, even.

He is a vision, wild hair, wild eyes, wild everything, like an ancient god of revelry demanding worship, a glam rock idol in a sea of accountants, an earthquake, an impossibility, a cosmic well of inescapable gravity, a stroke of lightning cutting through the safe haze of Lucas's self denial. He tilts his head back, the smile gets bigger.

A challenge. An invitation.

Lucas’s heart shakes like a clap of thunder, almost pulling him apart, and he panics and runs.

He rushes out of the club as if the air had suddenly turned boiling, and doesn't stop until he is outside, leaning against a stone ledge, trying to catch his breath.

Fuck, what the fuck was that?

Oh hell, I am so fucking gay, is the first coherent thought that crosses his mind once he calms down.

Really fucking gay. I wanna go back there and sink to my knees between his legs, open my mouth, and fucking worship him with everything I have, that's what I want.

Well there it is. And he can't help the laughter bubbling up, sharp and short and alone in the night like a madman.
Holy fuck.

He feels like he's just died and come back to life a thousand times. His self loathing is trying to have a *let slip the dogs of war* moment, slurs and denial at the ready, but the moment doesn't let it. It's just too much. It's not love but it is lust, demanding its due, and most of all knowledge, so clear and full and unmistakable it makes him reel like a slap in the face.

And yet, as his friends catch up with him and enquire if he is okay after they saw him rush out, even Yann leaving his date behind, he doesn't feel sad, or ashamed.

Instead he feels thrilled, and inexplicably soft, and so alive. Like he has just triumphed over some sort of nebulous darkness, burned to ashes by the stranger's gaze and born anew. He knows he is probably never going to see that guy again, that it was probably rude of him to stare, that throwing his heart over the top for a guy he's just seen once is ridiculous, that as far as proving himself this is a total failure, that he has a long way to go before he can even utter the words, even less tell anyone and yet. And yet.

Knowledge is good.

And this just is, like the sun and the stars and the blood pumping through his veins, it's part of his nature and it won't be denied, not anymore. And there, in the shock of the moment's surprise, it doesn't feel like weakness.

It feels like the world, finally, is opening up before him. And he has a chance to be part of it.

This is the moment his life truly becomes his own, casting off the shackles of shame of his past. This, this is the meaning of freedom.
He doesn’t see the stranger again before years have passed. But the memory, after haunting his lonely nights relentlessly for months, spurs him to action.

He is gay. He's been like that since forever, if he has to be honest with himself. Crushing on boys, being clueless and unmotivated around girls. Lying to himself so that his homophobic psycho of a father wouldn't beat him into a pulp for failing at being a real man or whatever. Jacques had probably suspected, before Lucas even knew himself, tried to keep him on the straight path with all his jokes and threats. The thought makes him so fucking unsettled he tries to forget it as much as possible.

Of course, now that he's sure, that doesn't mean he has to start going to Pride with glitter on his face or brag about sucking dick or behave like a big fairy.

It's just an urge, an itch he has to scratch. It doesn't say anything else about him. It doesn't have to define him.

So he finds ways to deal with it.

The first one, he meets at a student party. They need very little words to connect, surprisingly, and Lucas starts wondering how much is visible on his face. The guy has soft skin and expressive eyes, and makes even softer sounds when Lucas touches him. It freaks Lucas out badly. He can’t deal with the neediness. He rushes out as soon as the guy falls asleep, nabbing his expensive watch as he goes, before remembering he doesn't do that anymore and feeling so guilty he goes back to drop it in his letterbox.

After that, he makes sure he steers clear of the nice ones. Tells himself he likes it fast and rough, tells himself he's bound to be a heartbreaker.

Tells himself the way his throat closes when he looks at another guy, the claustrophobia that follows him around in the street - nothing but a flaw of character and hey, who doesn’t have those ? It’s not like he’s ever going to have that little picket fence family life anyway - the simple thought of it gives him nightmares. So it’s more honest to let anyone know he’s not looking to build. He's just looking for a means to an end, quick release. Not looking to give up control, or let people close or see the real
him whoever that fucker even is. What he’s got inside, it’s pretty close to a public safety hazard anyway.

So that’s life. It’s lonely, but he’s free.

And then one evening, he goes out.

He’s alone this time, he’s not afraid anymore. It’s wintertime, right before Christmas. He needed noise, distant companionship, something to fill up the emptiness. It’s a very different type of party, in a three story squat in a rough part of town, neon themed, the inside of the place gutted and covered in graffiti. He wanders in, shakes some hands. Gets himself a beer, tries to avoid the holes in the floor.

And on the third floor, in the attic, he sees him. Just like that, out of the blue, as if life came bearing gifts for once.

He’s difficult to miss. Standing in the middle of the room, people in a circle around him, in front of a whole lot of canvases taller than him, set against the wall in a haphazard pile. Once again, the star of the show, drawing gazes from everyone around. He’s wearing a black turtleneck, sleeves pushed back showing his muscled forearms, black form fitting pants - fuck, are those leather? - combat boots, the very picture of an intellectual punk, cheap beer can and smell of weed included.

What a little poser, Lucas thinks. With time, the memory has turned sour in his mind. He tried to force himself to forget, he didn't want to be a creep, but with time his own venom had done the job just fine. He'd grown jealous of someone who could afford not to give a shit, to be so openly flamboyant. Golden Parisian youth, progressive as long as it costs them nothing.

And there he is again. A lot more solid than Lucas remembers, and more human too. More difficult to loathe or lionize.

“Thank you all for coming.” The guy starts, and the room falls silent. His voice is higher than Lucas
expected, softer, a little trembling. As if the audience isn’t hanging on to his every word. “So, hm, I kinda invited you here for…” He laughs. It’s sweet. Oh fuck, it’s so sweet. Lucas tries to collect himself. He’s not this newbie anymore. He’s got his certified gay card. He knows how to let out steam, he’s not this sexually frustrated put upon mess anymore, he’s….  

“I think I needed you here.”

Lucas’s heart makes a jump even though he knows the guy is talking to the audience and what kind of pretentious….oh fuck. He’s still a mess.

"This is a funeral." He laughs, shrugs in a self deprecating way. "For my art career."

Fuck, that is the most pretentious load of drivel Lucas has ever heard.

But that doesn't stop him, apparently. His upstairs brain has gone on vacation.

"Yeah, I was an art student before, weird huh ? But as some of you might know I got into some trouble.” A wave of whispers goes over the room and Lucas wants to laugh. What kind of trouble do art students really get into, overdose on paint fumes or something ? "And it got me thinking...as a society we are so constrained by all those laws we put on ourselves, right ? And they become so real to us and we forget that they're like, totally fictional. So I went into law, thinking maybe I could change the system from the inside."

Lucas snorts. This guy is so full of shit. In fifteen years he'll be growing rich and fat off the spoils of the law just like the others, his brief stint into rebelliousness just a cute story at parties.

"But I still feel like I am wearing a mask a lot of the time. And I think it's because of this.” He points at the canvases behind him. "I had this project that I never got to finish."

He pulls on the middle canvas, bringing it forward. Lucas's detachment falters again.

It's the face of a girl, painted in broad strokes, the focus on how the light catches on her face, giving it a very alive look. In the background there is a group of skyscrapers fading into stormy sky. The thing that stands out the most is a little butterfly on the girl's cheek, that fades into light.
"So this one was for my sister. She was afraid, you know, when she started her studies she was going to end up a corporate shill and I told her...don't worry you'll find a way to do something good. Well turns out...she lost the fear after a while. What a surprise. Being a shill is actually pretty nice. So now she interns at a big corporation that uses child labor. But they love to show strong women in their ads, isn't that awesome ?" Lucas feels the bitterness in his voice and wonders if he wasn't a little wrong earlier.

He pushes the canvas back. "I called my project Polaris. Like the North Star."

He pulls forward yet another canvas, and Lucas draws in a sharp breath. This one is just the ocean, at night, under a starry sky reflecting little silver dancing pinpricks on the water. It's very simple and yet the Milky Way is rendered with an absurd, loving amount of detail and depth. It's even scientifically accurate, something he would not have expected for an art student turned lawyer.

"For my project I asked people...what guides you in life ? You know, like the North Star used to guide sailors through rough seas because it was fixed. I thought, what is the idea that gives you strength ? Even if it's far away, seemingly impossible, what is the dream that guides you forward ? What do you believe in so much you are willing to brave the storm for it?" He stops and sighs. Everyone is hanging on to his every word.

"That one was supposed to be mine, but I was never able to finish it. Ironic, huh ? Pretending to be able to put people's most intimate dreams to paper but not knowing mine. Surely it can't be just this. Emptiness."

He puts his hand in his pocket, and takes out a little silver knife and for a moment, Lucas has a dizzying rush of deja vu, applied to someone else's life. Strange interconnected lines, in a language he doesn't understand.

The stranger takes the knife, and plunges it into the heart of the Milky Way, and pulls. The canvas makes a ripping round, flakes of paint tumbling to the sound, and the audience gasps.

Holy fuck, Lucas thinks, then, what a drama queen.

"Well maybe true freedom is being free of the dreams of the past. Maybe it's looking past at your old hopes and realizing they were holding you back. Maybe all that shit you have heard about all your dreams can come true if you work hard enough are shit. Probably your dreams are shit, too." The guy laughs.

"Maybe you don't have to wait for something that doesn't come, someone or something far away.
Maybe you have everything you need, right here and right now. Maybe the storm is enough. Maybe it's a little less about dreaming or wishing and a little bit more about saying fuck you to those telling you how to live. About setting the world on fire."

That's dark. And incredible, Lucas thinks.

The guy takes a lighter of his pocket next, and takes it to the canvas. The paint colors the flame a toxic green. Lucas finds his theatrics ridiculous but he can't help it. He's mesmerised. By the way this guy just ...puts everything out there, boldly vulnerable.

He's not in love, how could he be? He knows shit about love. But this is how he wants to live. He wants to burn like that. To a place where all his old wounds don't matter.

Then the guy gestures towards the table, which is full of scissors, and other sharp objects. "Please, feel free. It must all go. Try to think about what you're releasing. Set yourself free."

Lucas grabs a pack of matches. And makes sure to remain out of view as he does his part. It is very much an offering, he thinks, as he watches people come together to claw, slash, burn, while the stranger smiles, hugs people, holds hands, laughs, his eyes shining with tears in the dark. So raw it hurts, but isn't this the edge he had been missing. Destruction made beautiful, reflective, holy. Pure. Into togetherness.

Opening up like this, making this a public spectacle of staring down failure, it's either uncommonly brave or incredibly pretentious. Or both. Lucas wipes his eyes, too, before he leaves, and prays one day soon he will be as brave.

"Année miraculeuse"

2013

(22)
The third time he meets Sunshine Boy - the name the beautiful guy has taken in Lucas's brain, on account of his smile, since he doesn't know his actual name - is the one that he will remember most keenly, afterwards.

The context is about the most unromantic he can imagine but that’s okay, he doesn’t do romance anyway.

It's a party again, a big one for international students from all over Paris, in a steamy and over packed maze of a club, beer and cheap liquor sloshing every which way, ground covered in sticky layers of spilled liquid. The bass-boosted eurotrash soundtrack is giving him one hell of a headache, so he's hiding in the bathroom. Well, that and his friends are currently trying to set him up with an exchange student from Poland, who is very lovely but barely speaks either English or French, and doesn't seem to get that Lucas is not at all into her. She's always trying to kiss him and press her boobs into his face. Or the opposite. He wants boobs near his face about as much as he wants to roll around in a vat of cigarette butts, and he's sworn off smoking forever.

Fuck, he thinks as he sits on the cover of the toilet, and looks at the obscene graffiti scratched into the walls of the cubicle, he really needs to come out to his friends.

But the problem with that...he will have to explain to them why he lied, pretended to be into and date girls for so long while hooking up with guys in secret. He doesn't think they would really reject him. They're not that kind of people. But...well, they joke around sometimes. And he couldn't bear them making jokes about him being gay. He doesn't want to be the Gay Friend. He doesn't want their image of him to change. He doesn't want any weirdness, or for Yann to get suspicious, or for them to distance themselves from him because they're afraid he is lusting after them, or something equally creepy.

But fuck, he's so tired of pretending. Coming out to himself was necessary, but it's made him so aware of yet another thing that separates him from everyone else. And sometimes, it feels like there is no end in sight to the tunnels he’s spent his whole life hiding in.

He feels so lost. He’d never thought being free would be so lonely, and so confusing.

He's yanked out of his thoughts by the sounds of someone rushing into the bathroom, slamming the door to his left open in a hurry, and emptying the contents of his stomach violently in the toilet bowl. And again, and again.

Yikes. That sounds like skirting the line of ethylic coma. How much has this guy had to drink, an entire keg?
He hears the guy plop down on the ground and fall against the cubicle wall without any sort of retenue. Fuck, has he fainted or something? His conscience pushes him to speak up.

"Hey dude, are you ok?"

He hears a pained grunt. Well, at least the guy hasn't passed out. Then -

"Fuck man, I'm never doing Jagerbombs again. Ever."

Huh, weird. Why is that voice so fucking familiar?

"That's what they all say." Lucas jokes back.

The guy whimpers, and Lucas hears a thudding sound as if he's hitting his head against the wall softly. Then -

"Hey." The guy's voice comes from closer than before.

"Yes?"

"Do you think true love is real?"

"Uhhhhh ... sure." Lucas laughs nervously. He really isn't sure, at all, actually, but breaking a dude's hopes after he just puked his guts out seems cruel. Plus discussing philosophy with drunks can get real annoying real fast.

"How the fuck am I gonna deal with it, then, huh? I can't even cope with regular life. Everything is too much."

There is such raw longing in his tone of voice, it's like a knife through Lucas's heart. And well...painfully relatable. Why is he here in the first place if not to avoid even the love of his friends? He wraps his arms around himself.
True love would kill him, too.

That's when it hits him, like a midnight spirit train to forbidden lands running along his spine and rattling his heart back from the dead.

Oh fuck. That voice. That voice! Soft like it should be illegal, a little high, a little low, a little scratchy, a little like it knows the tune of his soul.

It's him, isn't it. Sunshine Boy. *Eta Carinae of my darkest skies.*

Because his life isn't already such a weird joke. Of course he would end up talking to the guy responsible for his sexual awakening through a toilet wall.

He clears his throat.

Now that they're there anyway, Lucas feels a strange need to reach out, and let the dude know he's not alone in his existential terror.

The words that come out, however, are less bonding over misery and more something that he completely surprises himself with.

"Maybe true love won't be too much. Maybe it will be just enough. Just right."

Sunshine Boy sinks down, leans against the wall between the stalls, Lucas can see him getting closer through the gap under the stall separator. *Wow, his pants are going to be absolutely disgusting, sitting on the floor of a toilet in a club?* He feels second hand need to run for some industrial grade washing product and a garden hose. *Bet he'd look nice in a wet shirt.*

*Shut up, brain!*

"Yeah, just right would be nice...But I think I have to be right myself for that. I don't think I am."
Fuck. There is such pain in his voice and for the first time in a long time, Lucas wonders. Sees behind the image of the too cool for school artsy student, and wonders what this guy's story is.

He feels a strong impulse to reassure him, out of the blue. Which is ridiculous, because they don't know each other, at all. And yet, it feels like the most evident thing in the world.

"I think you're pretty okay. I mean, most dudes in this position would probably say something nasty to me, not ask about true love."

Sunshine Boy laughs, low and husky, the sound sending shivers along Lucas's skin, and Lucas wants to swear and punch the wall. It's definitely him, yeah. Who else is going to sound that tempting while wasted and sitting on a toilet floor at three in the morning?

"I like your shoes." Sunshine Boy says.

Uh, excuse?

Lucas looks down at the monstrosities on his feet. Ah. Quirky bonding element.

"Thank you, they're knock offs."

He got them at the market. Adidas symbol on the heel, Nike on the front, mixed Christmas and Easter symbols in the motifs in bright colors on a maroon background with electric teal highlights. Whoever made them didn't even try to make them look real. They are ambulant horrors. He loves them so much.

He gets his left foot closer to the separation. The stranger slips a hand under, and taps on Lucas's shoe with two fingers. Two nails painted black, the rest forgotten. A silver ring. His hand looks big, strong, but his fingers look unusually agile. Like they know how to...clever. Gifted. Artist fingers. Lucas wishes he could trace the veins on the surface of the skin, map them all the way up, and...they've never been this close, he realizes. He feels the slight pressure on the top of his foot and he wants to die. He wants so much...fuck.

Oh my god, Lucas thinks, what the fuck is happening.
"It's cute." Sunshine Boy says in the kind of over the top conversational tone drunk people take to pretend they're not drunk. "I like how they put all the symbols together. Temporal dys...dysregulation. Time is a made up social construct, you know...Just like Christmas. And Santa Claus. And the Easter Rabbit."

He sighs very loudly. "You know, it's possible to tell a lot about someone through their shoes. Well, you." He taps on Lucas's shoe again. "I would not mind getting to know better. This shoe tells me that you're an iconoclast. Marching to the beat of his own drum and you know that all the people obsessed with brands are engaged in a foolish race of conformity to consume..." He hiccups. And trails off. "Especially if you're cute. Are you cute?"

"Uh....a little bit?"

Oh my god is this guy hitting on me because he likes my shoes? Who the fuck does that!? "A little bit cute?" Wow Lallemant, smooth. So smooth.

"Did I tell you," Sunshine continues out of nowhere, as if they've already known each other for years, "about that time I took magic mushrooms and I saw Santa Claus? He told me he didn't exist which is pretty ironic all things considered. And I mean, I should have seen the Rabbit, no? You know because of Alice?"

Then, out of nowhere he starts crooning.

"One pill makes you laaaaarger, one pill makes you smaaaaall..." His tone is atrociously false, but there is a smokey, mellow quality to his voice that Lucas can't help but find alluring.

But still. Lucas has been fantasizing about this guy for years, as some sort of unattainable sinful god badass, and turns out? He's a total dork.

The stranger moves his shoes next to his. They're leather, light green going dark at the points, and look very expensive, but not treated with proper care, all scratched up and polished back like the shoes of a wayward dandy.

"Look ! We match."
They don't, Lucas thinks as he looks at their feet. They really really don't. It's the most awful color combination Lucas has ever seen. Which maybe is the point ; this is the guy who burned his own paintings, after all. Has to be above aesthetics standards. Although that definitely doesn't apply to his face.

Aaaaahhhhhhhhhfuck. How is he so fucking adorable ? How is he even real ? How ? Lucas can feel his brain break down.

"Ok, but do you really believe in true love?"

The question takes Lucas by surprise once again, so much so that he stutters,

"I want to. I mean I don't know but..." What the fuck is he on. Yeah, he's probably way drunker than he thought he was.

"I was in an orgy yesterday." The guy continues.

What ??? Is he trying to kill Lucas ? Who the fuck says that to a random stranger in the toilets ? He really is unreal, in a blessed world where the common hang ups or shames don't apply to him.

"It was nice, I mean I was with some lovely friends, it was chill, I like the cuddles, but when it was done it just hit me...That was really not my sort of thing. It felt just so...so lonely, you know ? I always pretend that I don't give a shit about anything and that I'm cool with whatever but the truth is I give too much of a shit about everyone and the truth is, I just want one person I can give everything to. Otherwise I just..." He makes an explosion noise." Is that too much to ask ?"

Oh.

Lucas feels something strange stuck in his throat. The vulnerability in his voice.

God.

He swallows, with difficulty.
"I don't think so." His own voice comes out soft, almost inaudible, as if damaged by hours, years of yelling at the top of his lungs with nobody to hear.

"You don't sound very sure."

"Yeah well. I've seen it all go wrong, so very wrong. But I...I mean otherwise what's the point, huh? Of all the suffering and the struggle and the loneliness? What's the fucking point?"

He doesn't know where the words are coming from. This is a bigger bolder Lucas than he has ever been. Bullshit, bragging, what he thinks the other guy wants to hear...except not.

"If it isn't then what is the suffering for? Just another day of misery after the next? Is this what he struggled to get free for? Absurd. "Yeah, true love had better exist and if it doesn't I don't give a shit. I'm gonna fucking invent it. I promise you, I'm gonna invent it." He laughs. He is having a revelation, as silly as it sounds. "Trust me, I'm an engineer."

The anger, the need, it's all pulled from a secret place he never lets himself look at, except tonight, bolstered by the surrealism of the whole moment. But as he says it he realizes how true it all is.

"Wow." The stranger laughs again, but it's not mockery. It's sweet, it's a bit surprised, a bit desperate. "Have some of that faith to spare?" He sighs. "I don't think I'll ever be myself if I don't know that sort of love, you know. I just need it to happen. It just has to."

He pushes his shoe against Lucas's, in a sly move that leaves him breathless, like a fish helplessly flopping around on day land.

"Shoe guy...you know what? I like your voice and... I kinda want to know your name but... Don't tell me. Let's make a bet. If true love is real, just wear those shoes when you feel brave, and maybe one day, we'll recognize each other. Let's see what fate has in store for us, okay?"

"Like Cinderella at the ball." Do you want to leave me one of your shoes? Lucas laughs. It's crazy. Their own little toilet drunk ass student fairytale.
Suddenly he wants to stay in this moment forever and never leave. No matter that it smells terrible and his head is pounding and he feels half nauseous. This is the most romantic moment of his entire life.

But of course, time marches on.

"Ugh. I think I'm the one turning into a pumpkin." Sunshine Boy sighs and then moves and a second later he is retching again. Lucas takes that as his cue to make his exit. He's not brave enough to stay yet but.

He does. For the first time in forever, he wants to know. What fate has in store for them.

He's going to wear those bloody shoes until they fall apart on his feet, he really is.

…

After that, he starts seeing Sunshine Boy again, everywhere. He must have classes in the same place as Lucas this semester, maybe some technical module. Sometimes he’s with friends, laughing. Sometimes, more often, he’s alone, looking around, lost in thought. Lucas wears his disaster shoes but he never gets close enough to be recognized, never follows him or allow himself to dwell on him more than a few seconds.

He’s working up the nerve, though. And in the meantime, he’s...thinking.

How would he go about it? He’s never thought about doing this before. He knows how to get hookups in clubs. How to bargain for a transaction; simple, emotionless, pragmatic. This is a whole other ballpark.

He doesn’t know how to be romantic. Never been the type. Thought it was all dangerous sentimental bullshit. He can be seductive maybe, in the dark when he’s had several drinks. But to make himself appealing as a person? To go out there and say, well, maybe I’m worth loving, don’t you wanna find out?
That takes a whole other sort of courage.

And he doesn’t want just a one night stand with Sunshine Boy. Orgies set aside, he doesn’t think that’s what Sunshine Boy is looking for either.

He dreams about it. At night but during the day too. Sweet things, that come to him in little fragments, letters of a language he’s a long way from speaking.

Little fingers entangled together. Knowing each other’s coffee orders. Strands of hair brushed away from a face. Goosebumps from feeling the other arrive in a room. Late night drives to anywhere. Shared culinary experiments. Secret phone calls in the night. Staying in a bed after love, rumpled sheets, letting himself be seen when vulnerable. Being always aware of the shortest distance between him and the other, over any distance, and the longing mapping the earth in a whole new way. What’s his love language, he wonders, after he’s forgotten how to speak?

It’s tantalizing and terrifying all at once. Even allowing himself to think about it feels like a miracle. There is always shame drumming on the horizon to the tune of you are not allowed this and with another man ? disgusting but he doesn't let it come close, staying in the safe glow of this new feeling.

He wants to learn how to be sweet. He looks it up online. He's a nerd after all, he likes to research things. How to get your crush to notice you. The answers range from creepy to unbearably twee. He doesn’t think that would work. This guy probably has people throwing themselves at him left and right. He needs to be unique, memorable. How to set up the perfect first date. How to be flirty. How to be a good partner in a relationship. How to be in a couple when you've never been in one before. How do you know you're in love?

This can’t be it; he barely knows the guy. But he feels like it could happen. He feels like a newborn foal stumbling around on fragile legs, learning how to walk again. Sunshine flowing into a room after an eternity of keeping himself shuttered in the dark.

He makes lists of ideas. For first lines, first dates, everything. Trust me, I'm an engineer. What are the parts of a real, healthy relationship made to last? Of real feelings, real attraction? He feels so ill equipped. He has no fucking clue, to be honest. He’s never had a single example in his life. Maybe Yann and his last girlfriend. They’re nice to each other. They’re friends.

Lucas wants to be friends with Sunshine Boy. He wants to get to know him, his interests, his history, his tastes, his hopes for the future. But he wants more than that. He wants fire, passion, something so true and so real he can't deny anything, something he has to give himself over to entirely. He wants
someone he can confide in. He wants long feverish nights that never end and sweet cosy mornings and ambitious mornings and lazy afternoons. He wants someone he can make truly happy and show off to the world. He wants to try his best and forget everything else.

The weirdest thing - he starts thinking of himself as a boyfriend. Someone to be held close and cherished, worthy of touch and affection. It makes him melt and he wants and wants and wants and wants and he can't stop himself and the only thing that makes him better is remembering the longing, the pure need in Sunshine Boy's voice as he prayed for true love that evening in his drunk honesty. "It has to happen. I need it."

Maybe this is Sunshine Boy's story, Lucas thinks, and he himself was created out of thin air to satisfy that story. That would be beautiful. So freeing.

He pictures himself walking up to him, blushing, palms sweaty, voice trembling. Hey baby, you look like you deserve true love to be invented just for you. Can I be the one person you give everything to? No maybe just - Hey, sorry to bother you, um, I was wondering, um, do you maybe want to get coffee one of these days?

It's just a crush, he knows it is. Maybe Sunshine Boy has someone already. Maybe he won't be into Lucas. Maybe they'll try and it won't work. But it's spring. He wants to hope, he wants to dream.

After he freed himself he spent so long cramped up, keeping himself away from other people, as if the nature of his longing made him radioactive, made him into a monster. But in the end - doesn't everyone struggle with these sort of things? All that anguish, maybe made worse by his past, and still. Maybe everyone, inside, is wondering like this. What to do with this enormous capacity and yearning for love that feels too strong to express, too big to put out there, too important to ignore.

It's the spring of his life. He's making plans for the future with Yann and the guys. Yann is talking about how it's possible to fix the planet, about how the science and solutions are there, about how they just need the skill and patience to show it's possible. People are scared, the doom and gloom of the media is eating their brains, they take refuge in denial, but reality isn't that scary to face once you have the right tools. He wants them to specialize in sustainable civil engineering and start their own company. Lucas lets himself imagine it. It takes on a rosy glow in his mind. A life occupied with doing something good. Friends. Warmth. Purpose. A way to be morally upright without having to constantly make impossible choices. Double dates with Yann and his girl.

He is so close to coming out to his friends. It would be a first step towards the sort of life he wants to lead, a trustful life, without shame.
But there is someone else he needs to come out to first.

... 

He hasn't seen Valerie in months. Half a year, almost. Those last few years, he is ashamed to admit, he has avoided her as much as he could. Too much unresolved issues covered by a veil of awkward politeness; it makes him feel horrible. And everytime he sees her she looks so diminished, like a ghost of her former self. He should be doing more, but he just can't deal. A little voice tells him he's just offloaded her here and is trying to forget all about her. The remorse is eating away at him.

He arrives at the little visiting cafe on the side of the main building of the institution she lives in.

She is sitting outside, in front of a little wrought iron table, reading, drinking tea from a porcelain cup, another waiting for him next to it. The stone wall behind her is covered in climbing roses, in full bloom with delicate cream colored flowers with pink and golden hearts.

She looks good, that's the first thing he notices. Her hair is loose, gold streaked through with grey, color on her cheeks. She is wrapped in several layers of brightly colored wool shawls. The wrinkles are apparent on her face, but it makes her appear settled, wise, the simmering anxiety he always associated with her delicate features almost dissolved.

He feels his heart contract in an indistinguishable tangle of grief, love, guilt and fondness.

"Hello, my darling."

She puts her book down, and gets up, and wraps him in a hug. She always seems to smell the same, somehow: flowers and powdered sugar. He wonders if she still makes crepes here, if she is at liberty to do so. There is so much he doesn't know about her life. She grabs his face in her palms, scrutinizes him, and then smiles.

"You look good, my son."

He smiles back, grudgingly. "So do you."
They sit down. The chairs are all unsteady, he has to pay attention not to fall over.

She pours tea for him, and he takes the cup with both palms, the warmth slowly diffusing into his hands.

"I've started a new treatment," she announces proudly. "New medication and I am seeing a new therapist as well. He is really helping. I am learning how to... deal with the past. And accept... things are how they are, and I can't change them, but I can try to make the most of the present. The new meds are a blessing. I finally feel like my upstairs roommates are learning some manners." She says with a smile and taps against her temple.

Lucas's smile wobbles. He finds it so difficult to hear her joke about her mental illness. Normalizing it. Part of him still wants to fight, to deny, to hope it's going to go away, yell that the demons aren't real. There's a low fire of resentment he hates himself for. But he knows he's not entitled to that. He swallows as she continues, a tinge of nervousness in her voice.

She tugs at her shawl. "I had the idea to start a new knitting circle. Do you like this? My friends made it for me. Each one works in a specific color. Mine is blue. That's what we do, we knit for each other and when everyone has enough shawls, we'll make some for the doctors and the nurses, and then the trees, and the people outside. And the world will be covered in yarn, all soft and nice. Wouldn't that be nice? I can't imagine fighting any world wars covered in yarn, can you? Maybe they should let us crazies out once in a while. I think dealing with all our imaginary friends, it teaches you a lot about solving conflicts. World peace doesn't seem that unreachable, from where I sit." She smiles, eyes sparkling with a gently witty glint.

Out of nowhere, Lucas wants to cry. She's her old self still, so imaginative and bright. Always finding ways to make others happy. And her shawl is so full of colors; she is so loved. He loves her so much. He feels like an idiot.

"I'm so sorry, Mama. I've been such a shitty son. I'm sorry I didn't come for so long. I'm sorry."

His mom takes his hand, and shushes him.

"Shh, my darling. It's okay. You had some growing of your own to do, didn't you? You needed some freedom from my shadows, and that's entirely fair. You are the best son any mother could hope for. You are so brave, and you love so fiercely. You have a true heart of gold."
For some reason, it makes him burst into tears.

He hasn't cried in years. She moves close to hold him, and he hides his face in her sweater, as he did when he was a kid, the wool scratching his face. She just holds him, and says nothing.

After a moment he gets hold of himself, and wipes his eyes. The words tumble out of his mouth.

"Mom...I have something to tell you. And I know you might not like it but I have to say it." He takes a deep breath, looks at the precipice he's been standing in front of for all these years. He knows there is a risk she might see it as the work of demons, cast him out for her own safety, curse him to hell. And still, he has to try. He is done with hiding.

So, he jumps.

"Mom...I'm gay."

He sees the slight shock in her eyes, and goes on before she can speak, stumbling over his words.

"I know the Church doesn't like it, and I've tried very hard to not be, but in the end I couldn't. This doesn't define me. I'm still the same person."

"Oh honey." Valerie's eyes are downcast, welling up with tears. She's biting her lip.

"Please don't cry." Lucas whispers. "I don't want to make you cry."

"My son," she starts, "Ever since you were put in my arms twenty two years ago, and I saw how perfect you were, I have loved you. And I will always love you."

Lucas feels a tremendous weight lifted off his shoulders, in an instant, and it makes him breathless. Staggering.
"And if the Church has a problem with that it can go through me" she continues, and smiles at Lucas through her tears."But I am sorry. That you felt like you couldn't say so before. That you ever were afraid to tell me. That I didn't make it clear enough. The idea that you had to go through all this alone, that I wasn't there to…” She stops talking, overcome by emotion, and brings her hand to her face to hide behind it.

Lucas feels tears flow over his face freely. It's the first time he's cried openly in a decade, but in this moment, it doesn't matter. He takes his mother's hand, and grips it tightly.

"I'm sorry, my son. I think you are the one who deserved a better mother." She says, her voice small.

"Don't say that. Don't."

"It's alright, darling. I am learning to accept that...I have an illness, and that is not my fault. But you still deserved better. What you had to go through, at such a young age, it breaks my heart. I leaned on you and burdened you. You deserved a chance to be a kid. Not to have to worry about me."

"You did your best, mama."

"I did." She blinks the tears away. "But up to a certain point. I never should have allowed him back into our lives. I just thought...it would be better for you. With a father. Someone who would provide, make sure you had enough. He told me I wouldn't be able on my own...I didn't think…and the things he was always saying to you about being a real man...my god, I am so sorry."

What a miserable bastard was Jacques Colibari.

"He told me the same, you know. That if he left I wouldn't be able to care for you. So I kept quiet when he…”

One thing out, and the rest follows like a waterfall.

"He played us against each other, didn't he?"
She swallows, pinches her nose. "You know for a long time I was afraid of the influence he would have on you. But I had faith. That you would manage to hold on to the better angels of your nature. And today I am ashamed I ever doubted. I am so proud to be your mother, Lucas."

"I am going to, mom. I promise. And I want you to be happy too."

"I'll be alright, darling. I think I'll always be a bit broken, but maybe that's alright. I will have my ups and downs. But I have good people around me now. For the longest time I thought I was weak because I couldn't make it on my own but now I know - it's a monstrous world that forces any of us to do that. I don't think it's anything to strive for. I just wish I'd known how to ask, who to ask for help sooner. That is something I will always regret."

Lucas swallows. Opens his mouth to talk. But she doesn't let him.

"But that's alright, my son. That's growing older for you. You learn to accept the regret and not let it bury you. Will you forgive me?"

Lucas nods, slowly. This is all difficult to accept, to wrap his head around. But if it's what she needs...

"You never did like princesses, did you?" She laughs mischievously.

Lucas blushes, and pushes his lips together in an apologetic smile.

"Sorry."

"There is absolutely nothing to be sorry for. My darling, you need to write your own story. I have spent too much time wishing I were normal, and that way lies madness, believe me. And you...I am ready to see you thrive. Nothing would bring me more happiness. Just promise you'll come visit a bit more often."

"I will. I'm sorry I... was afraid. I'm bad at handling...this. In fact I'm bad at handling a lot of things. Sometimes it's easier to pretend things don't exist you know? I'm sorry I did it to you."
"It's alright, my darling. We all learn. And you can breathe now. You did it, my brave, brave angel. You got us through. And now you get to be happy, happier than you have ever been. And so do I. We deserve it, after all the unbelievable shit we have been through. Now tell me, my darling, who is he ?"

"What ?"

"The boy that has you looking so glowing and satisfied?"

Lucas blushes violently.

"Oh, I...nobody ! I mean...I...there might be someone. But...he doesn't know I exist. Not yet."

Valerie laughs.

"Well, what are you waiting for ? Introduce yourself. I'm sure it I'll make his world better."

"I'm not sure he'd...like me. I kinda suck at...these things."

"Oh darling, everybody does. And if he doesn't see how special you are, he's a fool."

"Mom…” Lucas turns away, embarrassed. He has to be red to the tip of his ears. "I don't even know him that well. It might not work."

"Well put some work into it, then. You can't be completely clueless about how these things work, can you ? Or do we need to have that talk ?"

Lucas groans. "Please no."

But secretly ? Being teased by his mom about his crush, it's so...normal. He feels the warmth bloom inside his chest.

"If you say so. But I fully expect to be introduced to this beautiful young man one of these days. I am
rooting for you."

Lucas laughs, his heart light. "I will, mom. I mean, uh...if it works out..." He coughs and briefly he can see it, Sunshine Boy sitting at the table with them, like a trick of the light. A growing family.

"Alright, my dreamer of a son. Don't waste too much time dreaming, though, alright? It can be really good to take action. As long as you haven't inherited my taste in men.."

Lucas chokes on his tea. It feels too early to laugh about these things. Then again, she's always had a preternatural amount of grace and resilience.

He nods. She can see how uneasy he must look and moves on.

"Now, did I tell you about the dastardly rivalry between the knitting club and the ceramics group…"

It's okay. They'll figure it out. They have time.

Except no, they really don't.
Of course they don’t.

What he remembers is this.

He is sitting in the dorm common room. Yann and two of his friends are playing table football, bickering. He’s just turned in his midterm paper and his brain is agreeably fuzzy, still full to bursting with fluid dynamics. So he’s just lounging, wrapped in his softest shaggiest fleece bathrobe, a beer in hand, soaking in satisfaction, trying to goad himself into showering.

His phone rings. He ignores it the first time, telling himself that if it’s important people can text or email or leave a message.

Yann makes a joke about André not being able to shoot properly and André munches loudly out of a bag of crisps. The microwave in the corner, bearing unfrozen tacos, beeps softly.

The phone rings again, and again.
“You’re gonna take it bro ? You avoiding a girl or something ?” André laughs. Lucas launches a fluffy cushion at him, and misses. Wow, he needs to sleep. “Or a dude, I don’t know, whatever man.”

Lucas rolls his eyes, and he decides to take it as a sign of open-mindedness and not a jab. He’s trying optimism for once.

He’s going to say something soon and maybe they’ll give him actual advice fitting for seducing a college boy, not like his mom who thinks he should send letters and chocolates "from a secret admirer" like in a 19th century novel.

“Post-essay, man” Yann goes, “Gotta respect the funk. Warrior’s rest, man.” He makes a military salute at Lucas. Ever since he’s shot down the army recruiter they keep making fun of him for it but it’s one of his proudest moments so far.

“I don’t think that expression means what you think it means, dude.”

The phone rings again.

“Are you gonna put that thing on silent, bro ? Cause it’s kind of harshing the vibe, dude.”

“Lol, what are you, a surfer from the eighties ?”

“Totally radical, man. Tubular even.”

Lucas grabs his phone to put it on silent but he sees the caller ID - it comes from his mom's residence. His heart jumps in worry, and he immediately picks up.

"Hello ?"

"Hello ?" It's a woman, her voice distant and papery. "Lucas Lallemant ? You are the emergency contact and closest relative of Valerie Lallemant ?"
"Yes, that's me, I'm her son." Lucas hears himself say, his voice thick and slow like molasses.

"I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, there's no easy way to do it but... there's been an accident. We found your mother in the garden a little less than an hour ago. She's had a heart attack during her evening walk. We were too late. We couldn't do anything to bring her back. She's gone. I am so sorry, sir."

Lucas is faintly aware that he's gotten up and that his beer bottle slides out of his fingers and shatters on the ground, but everything is distant.

That can't be right. The woman's voice sounds rational, his first reaction is. Surely he can make her see that this makes no sense.

"I...but um...are you sure ? I mean what... I mean she was...healthy and everything. She was..."

"I'm so sorry, sir. She's left us. There is nothing we could have done, it was quick and painful, in a matter of seconds."

"But I, um..."

He's still talking when the phone falls to the ground as well.

The boys gather around him. He has the impression of falling from a very, very high distance.

... 

The next months are a blur.
Reality is like nails on a chalkboard. Unbearable.

The boys try to be there for him, but they don't get it.

They don't get him, his life, the breadth of what tied them together, the hurt, the shared trauma, the resilience, the fierce love. How impossibly heart wrenchingly unfair this is. They don't get that it was supposed to be their time, that they would finally be happy, a family, that they would heal. They have only platitudes to offer. He wants to scream in their faces. So he guards his grief fiercely. It's the only thing he has left.

She was just starting to enjoy life again, a little plaintive voice inside says, as if there was anyone to bargain with. I just got her back. This is so sudden, out of nowhere.

He remembers going to the morgue to check the body. How small it was. Lying on a metal slab, away from everything living and beautiful and good. Nothing like her. Hard to the touch. He thought he needed to say goodbye, that maybe it would help, but it didn't.

Instead he remembers his world splintering with the meaninglessness and brutality of it. His ability to assign meaning to anything is completely broken.

He misses her, he misses her so much. She was his family, his only family. And now he feels like
he's completely lost his mooring to the world. He thought he knew pain before, he was an idiot.

He remembers organizing the funeral; he takes most of what is left from Jacques's money, what he had carefully saved for her living expenses. He tries to get her a plot in the lovely little cemetery of the church nearby the residency, a peaceful place surrounded by linden trees and flowers everywhere. But the church refuses, since she isn't "an official resident of the parish". He gets so angry he considers setting the place on fire.

In the end the funeral is a quiet affair: he doesn't invite anybody, not his friends, not his mom's friends at the Institute, no one. He is terrified of the idea of Jacques coming out of nowhere to sully this last moment he has with her. She is laid to rest in a much bigger cemetery, among endless rows and rows of concrete and granite tombs. But he buys enough flowers to cover the entire tomb: white roses and lilacs and lilies and carnations, like a cloud to carry her to heaven. It's a grey day, and there is just him and the priest. He prays in vain for a sliver of sunshine, a sign of the world to bid her goodbye. But there is nothing, just an endless grey sky and a fine drizzle. She is laid to rest as she lived: ignored by everyone except him. It makes his heart swell and rot with anger. The blind injustice of it all.

He throws himself into his studies. He has this vague idea that he's going to be successful if it kills him, in her honor. The calculations are cold and impartial, and so soothe him.

He's cold, all the time. Even when the sun shines, he feels like there is a core of ice at his very core, ice that nothing can melt. It makes him feel inhuman. Like a shadow, a ghost, a wraith. He can't sleep anymore, or he sees the body at the morgue, hollowed from the inside out, or in the tomb, being slowly eaten by insects.
One evening, his phone rings again, and when he picks up, machinally, and he hears the voice of Jacques Colibari, he is...almost relieved.

Give him someone to blame, to get mad at. He can't deal with the numbness anymore.

"Hello Lucas, I'm sorry about your mother. She deserved better."

"Don't you dare talk about what she deserved, you piece of shit."

"It wasn't an accident."

"What ? What the fuck ? Did you kill her ?"

"No I didn't. She was poisoned. But I know who did. He claimed the murder."

"Who ?"

"You know who. He couldn’t stand that I took his pet vanity project away from him. He wanted revenge."

What the…

Again, he feels himself fall - but it's not numbness that catches him. He feels all the blood pool from his extremities to his heart, and this time, it's hate that takes over. Deep, dark, overwhelming hate.
Armand Demaury.

Playing games.

Valerie was out of the game, but Demaury sees the world as his chessboard, no one ever truly untouchable.

He needs proof but in his heart he knows it to be true. It makes sense.

It's his fault, too. Because Lucas had given Jacques the tools to blackmail Armand and take the project over. Because Lucas, in his arrogance, had forgotten the price of things.

There is no way out. Not for him, not when he was seventeen, not now, not ever.

The world can burn, as long as Armand Demaury goes with it.

"What are you going to do about it?" He asks Jacques. Whatever the answer is, he firmly intends to be part of the solution.

…

Going back to the environment he grew up in is exceedingly strange. His father's crew has grown with his influence. Half the men don't know him, the rest eye him suspiciously, like a deserter. Rene
is still there, looking ten years older, but he is cagey, keeping his distance. Lucas wonders if Jacques knows he helped him get away. He doesn't really care, and the solicitous behavior of the man gets on his nerves. He's not here to make friends. He is just here to get justice. Or more accurately, revenge.

It soon becomes clear that nobody really knows what to do. There are rumors going around. Jacques told Lucas to go back to the car dealership where they do their business out of, but he hasn't shown his face yet.

Everyone is antsy, itching for a fight. Lucas gathers that this is just the latest move in a series of escalations. The men feel like they have been personally attacked, as if touching the woman of their boss is a slight done to them directly. Lucas realizes Jacques never told them that she left him but instead that Valerie was fragile, the poor sweetheart, so he put her in a hospital, but that he visited her devotedly every Sunday with flowers - the fucking lying, abusive bastard. And now they all regard her as some pure angel gone too soon. They have even made a shrine of a photo of her when she was young, with candles all around and little white flowers. it plunges him in a deep rage. They don't deserve to mourn her. They were everything she hated.

He wonders what Jacques told them about him. He feels, suddenly, as if the last five years have all been a dream, as if he never left. Everything is unbearably sharp again, his emotions on the edge of a razor, wanting to burn a hole in the world. But he isn't a clueless teenager anymore. He isn't afraid of these men, of what they might think about him. He doesn't have anything to prove. He feels...brakeless, fearless, like he has nothing left to lose. Like grief has set him apart and he doesn't operate with the same rules anymore. Like the darkness that was simmering inside him for so long is bubbling to the surface and he doesn't care to push it down anymore.

…

One evening, he finds himself hanging with Sid, and five of the men. He truly is surprised Sid made it this long without getting shot or arrested - the man doesn't seem to have any impulse control. He's a freewheeling mass of vulgarity, resentment and love of wanton destruction.

Right now, it's exactly the mood that suits Lucas. They're sitting around a big fire in the courtyard, drinking cheap vodka, exchanging stories of hate about Armand Demaury and his men. How everything about him is detestable - his cowardice, his privilege, his deficient masculinity, his snake like qualities, his lack of honor, his smugness, his need to control everything. What they'd like to do if they met him in a dark alley. The million little humiliations his men have wrought upon them.

This is the type of talk that precedes war, Lucas thinks, as he swallows a swig of burning liquor. The stoking of resentment into hate, the drawing of lines, the bonding over the thought of oncoming violence.
"I want to see how I can make his heart stop, too." He says when heads turn towards him. "Like he did my mom's. But I'm going to take my fucking time, I can promise you that."

He can hear approving whispers and snickers.

"Look at him go, the mini-Jacques." Someone says.

"You bet your ass. But there ain't nothing mini about me, bitch. Or do you wanna try me?"

There are hollers and whistles all around the fire. These men are hungry for blood, for violence. If something doesn't happen before the end of the night, they'll turn on each other.

"Hey, did you guys know that the Demaury boy is back in town?"

"Wow, I thought his father just hid him away because he went nuts or something."

"Nah man, he just went on an all expenses paid trip that little fucker, to hide him from us and then he just came back and went to law school. He's been in town for years. Just living the high life."

Lucas feels a stab of jealousy, brighter than the flames in front of him. The Demaury boy, just living his life in blissful ignorance, given for free everything Lucas has fought so hard for and that has been taken from him.

"Well, I know where he is now." Another man says. "Always in the same club with his buddies. So fucking loud. Behaves like he owns the place."

"Maybe we should go teach him a lesson."

"Yeah, teach those Demaurys they don't own this fucking town."
It's a bad, bad idea, Lucas knows immediately. If Jacques were here he would have shot it down. But Jacques hasn't been communicating, or given them anything to do, and these men are antsy and drunk and chafing for bloodshed. So, when a smaller group moves towards their beat up black vans, he goes with the flow.

He finds himself at the back of Sid's van, a combat stick in his hands.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" He can't help but ask.

"Aw Junior, not going soft on us are you?"

"No, fuck no, he can choke for all I care, but Jacques's gonna be super fucking pissed you realize that right?"

"Relax, daddy's out of town for the night. We can have a little fun, can't we? Besides, he's been way too bossy lately. Bit like he's trying to become a Demaury too, ain't it?"

Lucas shrugs. The bat feels heavy in his hands, unreal. It wakes up something in him that's mean and ragged and relentless.

"Now, I don't say we kill the kid, that would be bad for business alright. No, we go in there, start a fight, bash up some of his posh friends a little, and in the confusion we just grab him, bring him to the van, mess him up a little, throw him out, and leave. Just to leave a little bit of a message, see?"

"Heard he was an artist, another man says. Maybe we should break his fingers."

"Nah, he's gonna be a lawyer, right? So like cut out his tongue."

"Just break his back." Another says. "Make sure he'll never walk again."

Lucas is going to be sick. Punching a snotty brat in the face, that's one thing. But this? They're talking about fucking torture. About ruining a man's life.
The van lurches forward inevitably. If he gives up now, they're never going to respect him. He might very well be excluded from the war to come. But this...this is messed up. And if he leaves they're just going to go on without him.

Fuck, he never should have gotten on this van.

The van slows, then stops. They've arrived on the parking of the club. Lucas can see the club building, huge, hear the low pulsing base.

"Alright, everyone know what he looks like, right ?" Sid asks. "Don't wanna end up with a rando rich kid whose blood we have to clean out of the upholstery."

"I don't." Lucas says.

So Sid grabs his phone, looks something up and tosses it to Lucas.

"Meet Eliott Demaury. Your new best friend."

It's an insta profile.

The profile pic is just that of an eye, wide and catlike. Long lashes, blue green hit by light, upturned at the corner.

Then he sees the first picture and he almost drops the phone.

Oh but the universe is playing some sort of cosmic practical joke on him right ?
"Holy fuck." The words leave his mouth before he can do anything about them. Every single man in the van turns their head towards him. Panic hits him.

"I know him." Lucas says. Then, as an explanation, he manages a weak, "I met him at a party, he's an asshole." What is actually happening is that he is trying to keep his heart from running away through his gritted teeth.

Eliott Demaury doesn't have the face expected from a mobster heir in the making. In the picture in question he is laughing, shoulders slightly hunched in as if to make himself smaller. His blue-green eyes are crinkling at the corner, full of tenderness for someone not in the picture, hands outstretched. He looks anything except threatening, or entitled, or smug, or power hungry.

He looks like a ray of sunshine.

Sunshine Boy. The guy he's been crushing on all his time.

He's the son of his worst enemy. The guy he's been taught to hate for a decade. What sort of utter complete implausible bullshit...

It's so absurd that even in his numb, drunk state it hits him like a freight train.

He moves at the same time as the men. Then, three cars past, he feels himself heave - and empties his stomach on the windshield of the car in front of him. It splatters everywhere. The men closest to him swear out loud.

"It's okay, he warbles. Just had too much to drink. Move on I'll be right with you."

The men continue, with a vaguely threatening admonition of "Don't be a chicken, Junior!" and move on towards the club.

Lucas falls to his knees.
He'd forgotten about his crush, in the latest months. He'd thought about it once or twice for sure, but it seemed all so distant, like he wasn't exactly capable of these emotions anymore, like looking at the world from under water. But right now it is enough to reach through all the rage and the drunken need for revenge and the pain; reaches down and strikes the part of him that is wobbly and unsure and that doesn't want to cause others pain.

He's always hated the idea of the Demaury kid, the spoiled brat, who had everything Lucas never had.

But him...He never seemed that arrogant, or entitled - just a dude trying to have fun, a bit messy inside, emotions always so openly readable on his face, yearning for true love. And Lucas's lovelorn growing hopes for a normal loving life. Mom would have loved him, he thinks.

You don't fucking know him, Lucas tells himself. But wanting someone else to suffer just like he did? And he owes Sunshine Boy so much, in a way. Everytime their paths briefly intersected, it changed everything for him. Breathing new life into the most tender and forgotten parts of him, reminding him of the best the world had to offer.

He wouldn't want to do this to anyone; but Sunshine Boy, he might have enough energy to save.

He takes his phone out. What he is about to do goes against every bone in his body. He is about to become the most despised thing: a snitch. A tattletale. A rat.

He types the number with shaking fingers.

17. The number of the police.

He looks up over the car briefly before putting the phone to his ear - the men are waiting in line in front of the club, a massive group.

"Hello? I'd like to report an incident. I'm at a club and I heard this group of guys talking about beating someone pretty badly? I think they have weapons? I don't think...there's at least ten of them I don't think security cam handle them." He puts on his most panicked, unnaturally high voice so they don't recognize him. He doesn't have to reach far for that.
He hangs up as they tell him they will send someone and try to ask for his name. Then he forces himself up, head spinning.

He has to find Sunshine Boy, warn him, tell him to hide.

He gets to the queue just as the men are nearing the entrance, and skips the line to mold himself into the group, with a disapproving look of the bouncer who nevertheless doesn't say anything.

The club is packed, dark, the atmosphere electric. For a brief moment Lucas entertains the hope that they might not be able to find him.

But his heart soon breaks as he immediately sees his silhouette, fluffy hair sticking out of the crowd, laughing, head thrown back, dancing with wild abandon. Of course they would find him. He sticks out - it seems to Lucas there is no one else to look at, in the entire club.

He's wearing a hot pink crop with holes in it, and then nothing, only smooth skin and sculpted muscle until the obscenely low slung leather pants clinging to his hips. Across his cheeks and down his torso Lucas can see, through gaps between moving bodies, streaks of electric blue and golden glitter. It would be enough beauty to raise a zombie from the dead, but Lucas can't help but think about what additional abuse this outfit is going to make him vulnerable to, from these men. It makes all his most fierce protective impulses flare up to an insane degree.

He tries to push his way through the club but people push back, don't let him. The other guys are moving much, much faster and of course they've seen him and are now moving towards him. He pushes faster, and lets the small baton he was carrying slide down his arm sleeve.

There is one brief moment when Eliott Demaury, Sunshine Boy, turns around and his face is caught in a ray of blue light and sees the men coming for him, and his expression goes from elation to confusion to fear.
Then hell breaks loose.

Lucas is violently pushed backwards; one of Eliott's friends step in front of him and is punched in the face. Lucas throws himself forward, ready to grab at whoever of the Colibari men he can get his hands on to slow them down and out himself as the traitor, his stick at the ready.

But he's too far, still too far, and in the confusion - Eliott's friends swallowed in a brawl, security trying to reach them from the corners of the room, scared people trying to run away - he sees the hulking form of Sid wrap his arm around Eliott's shoulders and yank him backward. Lucas can see that he's trying to fight back but his lithe form can't do much against the sheer mass of Sid. So he's being dragged to the exit by the bar, and Lucas has to start actively pushing people. When Sid and another guy manage to drag Eliott through the door and disappear, Lucas feels his heart drop on the ground.

He detangles himself from the crowd, plasters himself against the wall and pushes through brutally, not caring about who he has to topple on his way.

He's almost at the door, when the lights flare on, all of a sudden, and the music stops. From the other entrance cops stream in, yelling at people to drop on the ground.

Lucas vaults for the door and finds himself in a narrow corridor, and runs until he's outside.

There it's chaos, a mounting riot, cops fighting with partygoers and Colibari men, and there are bodies on the ground, and in the middle of the mess Eliott Demaury, not stuffed in any van, has wrestled himself loose. Black eye, split lip, and holding his arm weird, and facing him, Sid. Who he has a knife, a huge butcher knife.

Lucas shambles forward but before he can do anything, a cop in protective gear, out of nowhere, interposes himself, raising a plastic shield against Sid's knife and disarming him.

A quick glance over the scene tells him that the Colibari men have lost the advantage; in less than minutes it will be on lockdown.
He's the traitor. They'll figure it out soon enough. He can't afford to be caught, or even be forced to stay as a witness.

He throws one last look at Eliott Demaury, held up by a friend, still looking beautiful as a heartbreak in the middle of all this violence, to keep this image in his mind forever.

And then he turns, and runs.

…

In one of life's true miracles, nobody stops him. He reaches the night bus and catches one that will bring him back to his dorm room.

He is so incredibly screwed he doesn't even know where to begin. He can't continue with his life. He has to hide. He can't attract any attention to his friends. He needs to disappear, but where? A train out of the city is his best bet. But he's never left. He doesn't know where to go. He'll figure it out. Sleep in a ditch. Anything is better than here.

He makes it into his room. Thankfully Yann isn't there. He stuffs all his most important possessions in a rucksack - papers, money, trinkets, IDs, and beyond that the bare minimum. Then he rushes out.

He almost has a heart attack.

There, standing in the hallway, waiting for him, hulking presence in the darkened space, is Jacques Colibari.
"Hello, my son."

Lucas says nothing, remains frozen like a rabbit in headlights.

"I received a very strange call, half an hour ago, from one of my men. Apparently a...bar brawl that went wrong. Somebody called the cops on them. Arrived minutes after they started fighting. Almost as if...someone had tipped them off...before the fight started. And I have to say, it's not looking good. There's one kid that slipped, possible brain damage. One cop that got stabbed. A whole lot of aggravated assault charges. And of course the fact that they got caught with some very lethal weapons. We're looking at some huge fines, broken paroles, very likely prison sentences. So, I'm trying to understand what happened here. Care to help me out?"

Lucas backs a few steps until he is leaning against his dorm room door. Jacques shouldn't be there. It's wrong. Polluting his safe space.

But the life he thought he had is gone, Lucas reminds himself.

"I don't know." He hazards.

Jacques sighs. "Lucas, I know you were there. Sid told me. You're the only one of the group missing. Don't treat me like a fucking idiot."

Lucas braces himself. "It was a stupid fucking idea. They were going to kill someone. That wouldn't have solved shit."

"Oh it was stupid, alright. But calling the cops?" Jacques shakes his head. "We don't do that, Lucas. We just don't."
"And you're here to what, punish me?"

"No, Lucas, I'm here to help you."

Lucas scoffs.

"I'm serious. They're going to learn why you did it, you know. And when they do, well..."

"I did it for their own good!" Lucas says.

"No you didn't. You could have convinced them to do something else, or called me, if that was it." Jacques steps closer. "But you didn't. You called the fucking police and now they're going to look into my men's background and dig and cost me a lot of bother and for what...the fucking Demaury kid? Have you lost your damn mind?"

Lucas's heart is hammering a thousand miles per hours, and his hand finds the doorknob, and he pushes it behind him in a flight of panic and closes and locks it behind him before Jacques has the time to reach him. He looks out from the window. They're on the fifth floor, in a reconverted office building, and he knows there are no pipes or any other type of support out there on the outer facade, there is no way he can escape without breaking his neck.

"You know there's been rumors," Jacques's voice comes through the door, "about what you've been up to in college. I didn't want to believe them, I thought no, not my son...but this...oh this is going to make everything so much worse for you...especially when the men learn you almost betrayed us to Demaury once already..."

Lucas feels a thick clot in his throat. He looks around frantically for a weapon. An old broom. A pan...a clothes iron...fuck he should have seen this coming, should have planned an escape route, how did he get so complacent...this is his oldest nightmare coming to life...

"Do you know what they're going to do when they find out? Well it's not going to be pretty, I can tell you that. I mean...a traitor and a little faggot? I don't think even the fact you're my son can save you from that..."
"I just want to be left the fuck alone!" Lucas shouts at the door.

"Really? And what about the man that killed your mother then? Are you going to go back to your little life knowing he walks around free and unfettered, without a care in the world?"

Despair claws at Lucas's insides.

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

"I said I want to help you."

Lucas steps closer to the door.

"Armand Demaury is too powerful to be struck down by a bunch of angry hoodlums. And now his son is going to be protected, as well. No - this man is like a spider, at the center of a web. I do not merely want to kill him, or bring him down. No, he deserves to be utterly destroyed. Him and everything he ever built. And that? That needs to be an inside job."

"What...what do you mean?"

"I have been talking to Valles, the leader of the Shadow. He too agrees that Demaury has grown too arrogant for us. But he is too powerful to be pushed aside now. He could take the entire organization with him if we went down. But...with the right type of man, someone who would be known to be neutral, and in conflict with his own people...that could be a very useful weapon indeed."

Lucas swallows. Says nothing.

"You could be that weapon, Lucas. Become it, at least. I know places I could send you...they would train you. Make you strong, unbreakable. Then you could be placed inside the Shadow. Maybe Demaury will try to recruit you again, who knows."

He would never have to fear the Sids of the world again.
"I mean, you need to leave this place anyway. Otherwise they'll come for you, for your little friends...but if I tell them I have sent you away to be put to rights, they will drop it."

"I don't trust you," Lucas says. "How do I know you're not going to …"

"Because, my son, I have put too much time and energy into raising you. You think I've been too harsh on you, I know. But I know the type of man you are and could be. I did it to make you strong, to teach you to thrive in adversity."

"Bullshit."

"I don't care what you are into, Lucas. Sure, it's unfortunate, but in the end, can we help who we love ?"

What ?

"I couldn't stop loving Valerie, even when it was bad for the both of us...I mean the things it brought up in me...made me into a beast sometimes."

*You're a sadistic abuser*, a little voice inside Lucas screams, *I'm gay*. That's not the same thing at all. But the voice gets smaller and smaller.

"I had to take a moment, but I've accepted it. Now how about you do me the same courtesy and hear me out, huh ?"

In a moment of sheer confusion, Lucas throws the door open.

Jacques walks into the door, his oversized presence surreal in the little room. The light of the moon, icy and colorless, floods in through the window, reminding him of another night. Lucas wonders if this is the night he dies.

Instead, Jacques pulls out the desk chair, and sits, and gestures to the bed on which Lucas plops down on. Jacques takes one of his cigars, and lights it.
"There's uh...smoke detectors." Lucas says.

"Well, open the window then, will you?"

A gush of balmy air floods through. It's a beautiful spring night, made for living and loving, not having your life dissolve in front of your eyes.

"I was a bit...unhappy when you decided to leave. But I knew, in the end, you would always come back to us. Because this is the world in which you belong."

"I don't..."

"I saw it in you from the very first time. The rage, the fire, the need to prove yourself. The kind of clever that needs something to chew on. And that force inside of you? You need to let it out. Otherwise it's going to destroy you from the inside. Men like us, we are not meant to be caged, tamed by the constraints of modern society. I understood that too late, but you don't have to do the same mistake."

Lucas doesn't want it to be, but he knows. He knows this is true.

Inside his skull he can hear his mother's voice. *I trust you will follow the better angels of your nature.*

But Valerie's principles, for beautiful and pure that they were, never got her far in this world, did they? All that talk of love and forgiveness and little angels and what it got her was a violent man in her home and the lack of any respect from society and a premature death. Fucking children's stories. Lucas never got anywhere by being meek, and turning the other cheek - what he got for that....

"For men like us..." Jacques starts as he pulls a mouthful of smoke and lets it cascade over his face, and leans forward, "love is a disease. It weakens us, pushes to make choices we never would have made otherwise. I know you've always cared too much... and how it has brought you down...it's the
sort of trap we lay in willingly because we are weak...but don't worry, we can cure you."

Lucas swallows. The air is foul, saturated with smoke.

Jacques gets out something from his pocket. Puts it on the desk with a metallic sound. In the light of the moon, Lucas sees what it is.

A little silver knife.

Time is a flat circle.

He thinks he has a choice, but he really doesn't, does he ? Between love and violence, hate and justice, between self respect and compromise. For him, it's always been one and the same. Figuring out what he can sacrifice in order to protect what he cares about. A thousand little devil's bargains until it became second nature. Steeling himself through the pain of being lost and alone and uncared for, being ostracized and threatened for who he was, being responsible for more than he could ever carry.

He feels it then - love, cavernous and endless and impossibly heavy, and he wishes it were true, that it could go away. And anger, intoxicated by grief, red and scalding and shaking, keeping him alive, ready to turn him into a willing monster. And there's no distinction between the two ; he's drowning. There's no running away. The only thing he can pray for is the blessed far away moment when the caring too much will turn into caring not at all.

In the meantime he will scream at an indifferent world - it should have mattered. It does matters. What is worth living for is worth dying for. Being damned for. This is always what it was coming to, wasn't it ?

If he has to burn, what does he have left to burn for ?
"I have one condition." Lucas says. "I will go along with whatever you and Valles have planned, I will train, I will do whatever is necessary to take Armand Demaury down. On one condition. Whatever our plans for revenge are…"

Jacques smiles, slowly, uncannily slowly, as if he already knows what Lucas is going to say. As if he had laid the trap himself.

"We leave Eliott Demaury out of it."

Chapter End Notes

specific content warnings :
2006 : underage drinking and drug use, casual suicidal ideation, homophobia, f slur, threats of violence, mention of murder 
2008 : allusions to murder, blood, non graphic on page death
2013 : vomiting, death, description of a corpse, non graphic threats and descriptions of violence, f slur, homophobia

ahahh i am so sorry.

congrats to those who suspected that Lucas met Eliott in college. I thought about them hooking up drunkenly but i like the pining aspect of this one better and tbh i want them to remember their first time ; also I just don't believe in a universe where Eliott wouldn't remember Lucas even when drunk - in this one he didn't properly see his face or I think he would have remembered. Also, college Eliott was fun to write but he is such a mess in terms of mindspace, and I think it's interesting to see the growth.

is it a huge coincidence that Lucas keeps meeting Eliott and falls for him without knowing who he is ? ehhhhh kinda lol but you know what this is fanfic we run on
tropes here alright

next chapter is the last one explaining Lucas's backstory and it catches up with the present. We'll meet the Black Cat gang, how Lucas left the dark side to work with Imane and her people, how they planned the diamond heist, and how Lucas fell in love with Eliott in prison.

as always I really want to know what you thought about this chapter, your encouragement and feedback gives me life (and make me write faster ahaha) <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!