Saving Primary Sanders | A Sander Sides Story

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Saving Primary Sanders | A Sander Sides Story

by DariusAndElusive

Summary

Thomas Sanders is a famous celebrity, and he gets a death threat! Logan is assigned as his Chief of Security, Roman gets to be his bodyguard, Patton is happy to be his personal assistant, Remy becomes his chauffeur because why not and Virgil is also in there somewhere. Hair brained shenanigans ensue.

If you like a light funny story with plenty of spit-takes, slapstick, smexy jokes and sass, this might be the story for you! Also, the fourth wall, who is she?

This is a Human AU of the Sander Sides characters, all characters belong to Thomas Sanders and I'm but a poor fanfiction writer.
Assemblification

Chapter Notes

Greetings fanders! Here's a funny little story I came up to have some fun with the Sander Sides because honestly I feel we see these poor guys be angst ridden a bit too often. This story originally appeared on my Wattpad account, FYI. Here's the first chapter, and I hope to post one every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0300 h

Let me set the scene.

You got one job to do, moon. Look mysterious and forbidding, peeping out in between clouds of darkness. No wait, the sky was dark, except for the pinprick of stars, so I guess the clouds were whatever the colour clouds are at night. Alright, we got the sky sorted out, let's look down.

We are on Dionysus Boulevard, which the richest and greatest of actors and movie moguls call their home. Anyone who was someone in the Biz has ended up in one or another of the white portico flanked houses for an awards ceremony after party or an interview swept under the rug.

At this time of the night, only the flickering yellow lamplights keep the shadows at bay. You could not hear even the loudest snore of a celebrity, except for one overbred poor little pug that lived in the house in the corner. Alone. The pug had its own home. Its mistress lived across the road.

Oh look, there's a figure slouching down the road. He is in black, of course. Sneaking glances at the golden letters on every gatepost. The fact that the package in his hand is only wrapped in brown paper and string was enough to prove that he most certainly did NOT belong here, as what denizen of Dionysus Boulevard would stoop down to the level of brown paper, when Swarovski crystal encrusted wrapping paper would do?

He stops in front of a house. Now this house is important to us, so listen carefully. It has a more modest and simple design than the rest, but it makes up for that by having walls in every colour of the rainbow and looks as if made of tiers of icing. This big gay cake house belongs to a certain Thomas Sanders, acting extraordinaire, angelic of voice, and all-round ray of sunshine.

Our mysterious visitor – no, intruder – climbs over the gate and creeps up to the front door. It has a wreath of holly and a jack o’ lantern hanging above all year round, either because the owner of the house has an absurd fascination with both holidays, or he was just too lazy to take the decorations down. The man shoves the package through the slot for letters and newspapers and hightails it back to the street.

He turns around to face the house. His swallow features twist into a grimace of glee as he raises his hands dramatically, looking like a demented scarecrow in a fourth-grade production of The Wizard of Oz. He cackles.

"Bwahahaha, now I got you –"
The front of the house explodes.

He is abruptly cut off and thrown across the road from the shock wave from the blast.

He lies there stunned for a second, whiles sirens start blaring up and down the boulevard, because if there is one thing its residents care for besides fame, it was the fear of someone disturbing their beauty sleep. Dammit, plan foiled, thinks our villain, wishing he set the timer on the bomb for a minute or two longer.

But, true cape swirling moustache twirling villain he is, he simply could not leave without a speech.

"BWAHA – CRRRRRRK"

The heat off the flare left him with a parched throat. He is turning out to be as buffoonish as a cartoon villain. But cartoon villains were notoriously good at fleeing the scene of crime, and that's what he does. He is annoyed that he doesn't have supersonic shoes, an invisible jet or an underground drilling machine thingy to escape on but running was good enough for now.

And tonight isn't a failure. Thomas Sander was dead.

(Between you and me, dear reader, Thomas was definitely NOT dead, coz then I won't have a story to tell. But let our diabolical friend have his moment.)

0400 h

Across town, in a lonely bachelor pad, a phone buzzes on a spick-and-span bedside table. Logan, the youngest candidate ever to pass the Chief of Security Certificate with honours, wakes up, puts on his glasses and answers the call. He listens, a frown of concentration making his prematurely care worn face even sterner.

"Yes, Sir," he says with a note of finality. "The safety of the Primary is of my utmost concern until further development. You have my word."

"I trust you, Craggers, failure is not an option. Now make a move."

He puts the phone down. He almost couldn't believe his luck. He is determined to ace it, be the best, as 'good enough' was not in Logan's vocabulary.

His first assignment.

Saving Primary Sanders.

0500 h

Another phone rings. I mean I'm sure plenty of other phones rang throughout the city, but this is what's important to us.

Patton is already up. He is getting ready to go feed the pigeons on the church steps, then to the ducks in the park pond and finally to whoever turning up at the shelter today morning. He picks up the receiver and jams it between his ear and shoulder as he takes a loaf out of the bread bin. He
0530 h

Roman stares at himself in the eye in his mirror. He needs to look his finest today morning.

He pats the tufts of hair at the crown of his head, which have the annoying habit of standing on end. He slicks them down with a generous amount of silicon gel. Next, he shaves his facial hair within a millimetre of precision, following the regulation guide to the small print. He puts on a spotless white shirt, a little black bowtie, followed by sleek black trousers and black leather shoes polished so sharp you could see your reflection in them. He adds the faintest dusting of black eye liner for good luck, sad that the one who usually put that on was no longer here. He cuts his nails to the quick, something he should have done before, but he had a bad habit of leaving things till the last minute. Then he straps on his most prized possession: a shoulder holster that runs down to his hip where rests a standard issue pistol.

You see, this wasn't an ordinary job interview.

He is applying for the post of Thomas Sanders' bodyguard.

Less than an hour ago, he was surprised when he got a text from his Superior at The Dignitary Defence Division, telling him to haul ass to Thomas Sander's house on Dionysus Boulevard at 6.00 am on the dot. Surprised, as it was rare for a freshly minted bodyguard to get an assignment right out the gate, for Roman only passed out from the Bodyguard Academy last week. But that surprise soon turned to the thrill of first kill.

He looks at himself in the mirror. He finally gets to put his skills to practice, his training to use at last! He squeals in glee and does an impromptu tap dance out of excitement

He is ready.

Well, not quite. There was one thing more.

His actual pride and joy, a neatly pressed midnight black blazer. He spent all he has on getting the best tailor he could find to custom make him a blazer to out-blaze everyone else's. He works hard to keep himself in shape, and he wants to show off his hard-earned results. Besides, he knows that his job would demand split second action on his part, and no off the rack blazer would be able to put up with the strain of a lunge and roll. It was no hidden secret that guys in his trade judge each other based on their blazers, and Roman wants to make a good first impression.

He picks up his blazer of the coat hook, and stops dead when he realises that there is a big splotch of week old red wine down the front. Shoot. He has not dry cleaned it since the graduation bash!

He flings the poor little coat across his studio apartment into an overflowing laundry hamper. He did not even get to meet his Primary, and he is already flunking it.

Who will have a last-minute coat to spare?

He reaches for his phone.

"Roman? Wassamerrer?"

"Hi, Dad!"
"Oh. It's you. What's up Roy Boy? Hm... It's still early in the morning so it can't be a pity call to check on your old man's arthritis. Are you in trouble?"

"What? No!"

"Doing the Mark Wahlberg impression from The Happening? Dang, you must be feeling down in the dumps! Got a pimple? Out of rent money? Boyfriend dumped ya again?"

"Daaaaaaad. Yes, to all three, but I don't need help with those... I need a blazer." Roman tries to sound as pitiful as he possibly could.

"You can have my old one... it won't closer over my beer belly now!"

"I'm on my way!"

Roman peeks into his mini-fridge, finds it empty, shrugs and runs out. He will be late to report at this rate, and he doesn't have the money for a taxi, but running fifteen kilometers every morning for four years ensured that he is not going to give up.

0545 h

Patton is in shock.

The Thomas Residence is in ABSOLUTE chaos. There is a gang of builders swarming over the front façade, fixing last night's damage. That is all very well, but why did they insist on shouting as loudly as they can? He has been to the house many times before, and he remembers that the lobby used to be warm and friendly... now debris litter the floor and pictures hang crooked on the walls. Worst, there is an ugly brown scorch mark by the blown up front door, right over the spot where the welcome mast had been.

Patton flicks through the papers on his clipboard in confusion. How on Earth did anyone manage to do this job? There is so many things to keep track of! He adjusts his glasses and tucks a pencil behind an ear.

"Dolan Janus, I presume?"

Patton turns to see a tall bespectacled man standing behind him, clad in tan trench coat and brief case in hand.

The stranger doffs an unassuming brown fedora and holds out his hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr Logan Craggers, Chief of Security, and I've been assigned to protect Mr Thomas Sanders. You are his Personal Assistant, I believe?"

Patton stares at Logan open mouthed, their hands still linked.

"Well?" prompts Logan impatiently, redacting his hand.

"Um..." Patton blinks. He shakes himself and replies. "Oh gosh, no, I'm not Dolan, I'm his twin, Patton Janus."

Logan frowns. The similarity is uncanny. "Very well. Where is your brother?"

"He kinda.... blew up."
"BLEW up? How? Since when do people spontaneously combust?"

Patton points to the scorch mark on the floor.

"Oh." Logan is silent for a moment. "I am sorry for your loss."

Patton nods. "We've never been that close, but he was my twin after all. Wanted to die in a fiery ball of flame, so I hope he is happy somewhere out there. Thomas gave me a call today morning and asked me if I could fill in for Dolan, as he needed a new Personal Assistant. It was all really quick, and I don't think I still really get that poor little Dolan is, you know..."

"Ah." Logan waits patiently till Patton composes himself. Dealing with familial trauma not connected to the Primary was the least of his concerns. "We will be working together on this investigation then. How many years of experience do you have as a PA to a VIP under threat?"

"None... I've never been a PA, like at all."

Logan swallows a groan. "That is unfortunate, but if Thomas specifically requested for you, there is little I can do. Try to keep up, or I fear I must remind you that I have the authority to have you replaced."

Patton bobs his head and salutes, convinced that is the best way to respond. The clipboard slips out of his hand and papers join the scattered mess on the ground. Patton gets on his hands and knees and starts collecting as many as he could reach for.

Logan stifles a grimace and picks up a hospital report. "Good. The Primary has been given a clean bill of health." Thomas Sander was at home last night, but his bedroom is at the back of the house, well away from the radius of the explosion.

Logan hands Patton the paper. "Kindly correspond with the Hospital and arrange his release first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Logan." Patton springs up, jamming the papers under the clip again.

"I prefer Mr. Craggers."

"But that's such a scary name!"

"Scary or not, it is my name, and it will be to the interest of us both if you refer to me as such."

Patton nods, not trusting himself to speak.

"Walk with me." Logan sets off down the hall. Patton trots obediently by his side.

"Is the Private Investigator here?" asked Logan.

"No... she called this morning. Said her husband was inconvenienced and she won't be able to make it."

"That's an explanation, not an excuse. A yet unknown homicidal killer just attempted to murder a celebrity, and she can't be bothered to turn up to her assigned case because her husband has a cold?"

"Her husband actually fell off a boat and got caught in a net and the fishermen are holding him hostage and she shot a fisherman and is circling their sloop in a speedboat and the police are circling her and the fisherman and that's all I know for now but I will update you once their
daughter charges her phone."

"Ridiculous. Tell PI Desperanza that she better makes it here in an hour. Or else I will make sure she gets sued for gross negligence and misconduct. Can the Dignitary Defence Division spare another PI?"

"I called the 3D –"

"Why on earth did you call a cinema? I do not want a Dick Tracey knockoff!"

"That would be super cool but no the 3D is the –"

"An unnecessary abbreviation for the Dignitary Defence Division?" Logan guesses.

"You're so clever! The 3D said if we want we can send a request but their in-mail pile is taller than an Elephant's Thigh"

"Elephant?" Logan blinks. "Well that stuffy department will take another week and a half to even open our letter and then they'll promptly send us a janitor. This place can use one, though." Logan steps around a stain of questionable origin in the carpet.

He reaches the end of the corridor and looks around. "Does the Primary have an office I can use?"

"Thomas hates offices. He hates to become The Man."

"Am I supposed to sit on the roof and work? All I ask for is a desk!"

"Thomas was never one to sit at a desk. He does have one in the library though."

"Excellent."

Logan strides into the library, and his jaw drops in surprise. There are a few books on the shelves, but the majority of the space is taken up by a colourful array of soft toys. Action figures and puzzles and dollhouses dot the floor, and origami creations hang on streamers from the roof. Thankfully, there is a broad wooden desk and a sedan chair looking ironically out of place in the middle of it all, and Logan immediately takes refuge in it.

"Does Thomas have a child?" he asks in confusion. "It looks like an arts and crafts shop and Toy Store had a barfing match here."

"No... Thomas made all of this, I think."

"Well... each to his own I say." Logan sweeps a herd of stuffed giraffes and zebras off the table. "I think we are set."

"Yay! Where can I sit?"

"Well look under that pile of costumes, there's enough room there for a desk under that big poofy.... Princess ball gown. Actually, throw it out, that shade of lime green is hideous."

Paton gasps. "You like Princess ball gowns?" He claps his hands excitedly.

Logan's unamused expression says it all.

"But then how do you know if this one's ugly?"
"I reserve the right to have an opinion on what colours are aesthetically pleasing. Now, as much as I would like to gab about fashion backward princesses, we have work to do."

"Aye Aye, Cap'n!" Patton clicks his heels and puts on a Pirate hat.

Logan sighs. "Just bring in the candidates for the bodyguard."

"Ooooh. That sounds so fancy and secretive! Thomas is finally going to have a bodyguard!"

"This is no fun and games, Patton. Now chop chop."

0600 h (Okay, it might be a little bit after that!)

Roman near skips down Dionysus Boulevard instead of walking, he is so pumped up with anticipation. It isn't too difficult to recognise Sanderville (That is what Thomas's house is called) as it is surrounded by police tape, and the entire front of the house is missing. Roman ducks under the tape, flashes his bodyguard badge to a sleepy policeman, and goes in.

He wonders down a corridor looking at the framed film posters. He is actually in Thomas Sanders house! Even better, he might become his personal bodyguard! Talk about a wish come true! Roman has been his biggest fanboy since Thomas played the lead in a wacky Disney Channel series, and just last year he voiced the first gay prince in the latest Disney animated movie. That shot him to worldwide fame overnight, and it made Roman mad that anyone would dare try and murder him.

A perky looking man in a pirate hat bounces up to Roman, all corn yellow curls and smiles.

"Hello! You must be one of the bodyguards!

"Pleased to meet you, sir. I am Roman Bronze." Roman gives a firm handshake.

"Oh!" Patton giggles. "You don't have to call me Sir! My name is Patton, but you can call me Pat or Pats or Patty or…"

Roman laughs, unable to ignore the other's infectious giggle. "I think I'll stick with Patton."

"Stick to the basic, that's nice!"

"I'm anything but basic!" Roman grins from the corner of his month and clicks his tongue.

"I can see that! Now where are the rest?"

"The rest?"

"The rest of the bodyguards!"

"Uh... I don't see anyone else."

"But there must be more!"

"It can't be... was my application the only one sent to you?" Roman feels a tiny tinge of pride. Out of all the graduates, his Superior thought he was the best? Boom, baby!

"Hm... The 3D must have made a mix up with the emails."
Roman's face falls.

Patton makes a few calls, and his face falls too. "Anyways, come on in!"

"Wait," says Roman. "I need to get into the zone."

Patton looks on in interest as Roman roll back his shoulders, straightens his stance, sets his jaw firm and narrows his eyes. "I'm ready."

They enter Logan's office. Logan looks up from his laptop screen. There is an ink stand and note book to his right, a bottle of water and family photo on his left. When did he have time to arrange his table?

"Here's Roman Bronze, Mr Craggers!" says Patton.

"Reporting to duty, Sir!" says Roman, nodding at Logan, watching carefully to see if Logan would expect a handshake.

He doesn't. "Take a seat, Bronze."

Roman looks around the room, sees no chair, and perches himself precariously on a rocking horse.

"Where are the rest?" Logan turns to Patton.

Patton twiddles his thumbs.

"Speak up!" barks Logan.

"Um... well, one of the candidates is 92 years old, and the retirement home refused to let him out. Two other candidates were snapped up by a dignitary who said he'd pay more, and the last candidate said this was too far from her home, and she doesn't like to commute."

Logan blanches. "That is unacceptable!"

"We could ask the 3D send more."

"We don't have time for all the paperwork!" Logan turns to Roman. "You'll have to do."

Roman stands up tall. "I assure you Chief Craggers, Sir, I am more than capable of being much better than 'do'."

Logan is pleased by the way he is addressed. Roman clear knows how to respect his superiors. "Let's see." He glances through Roman's documents. There aren't many. "It seems you have no experience at all?"

"This would be my first assignment," admits Roman. "But I have put in the required hours of field work and I graduated best top in my physical class."

Logan raises an eyebrow.

"Uh... I was the best, and top of my class?" Roman backtracks.

"Very well. We shall test you. Patton, would you mind acting as bait?"

"I love to play the victim!" Patton claps his hands.
"All your life, no doubt. But I have a different role for you to play. Go sit in my chair." Logan moves to the front of the room next to Roman, while Patton sits down. "Patton, you are an evil villain." Patton squee, picks up a cat plushie and strokes it menacingly. "And you are protecting an important key hidden in the cupboard behind you." Patton smiles like a mako shark. "Bronze, you got to disarm Patton and recover the key in a minute. You will start..." Logan checks his watch. "Now!"

Roman darts forward, and throws the ink from the pot at Patton's face and the water from the bottle at the cat, with one hand each. While Patton wails, Roman rolls over the table. With the same momentum, he slams his shoe heel against the lock, breaking it with one blow. He rifles through the shelves and drawers, one eye on Patton desperately swatting his face with the wet plushie. Roman can't see the key anywhere. Time is running out! AAAAARGH!! He rattles the cupboard in frustration, and a picture frame falls out. Its backing springs open revealing a key. AHA! Roman scoops it up.

"I did it!"

Logan hands Patton the ghastly hued princess ball gown to clean himself with.

He taps his chin thoughtfully. "Your tactics are most unorthodox, but you get mad results, Bronze."

"Thank you, sir!" Roman beams.

"Why did you throw water at the soft toy, though?"

"If it was a real cat, that would have caused quite the distraction."

Logan nods. "But you found the key by pure dumb luck. You missed the clue I kept for you." He points at the notepad. Among a bunch of doodles was an arrow pointing out the frame on his desk.

Roman grins sheepishly. "I will try my best to do better, Sir, if you give me the chance."

"Your performance was adequate. However, it is unlikely you'll be called upon to use your brains on the field. Let us test your offense. Shoot that rope."

Roman whips out his gun in a smooth maneuver and pulls the trigger. The rope is neatly severed, holding on by one thread or two.

"Excellent. Now let us check your defence: Protect Patton."

The rope snaps and a chandelier falls down from the ceiling towards poor Patton. He looks up and screams blue murder in a pitch so high a glass shatters in the next room.

Roman leaps into action. He throws himself over Patton, pinning him down with one hand to make sure his panicked wriggling wouldn't make him hurt himself accidently. He raises the other arm to protect his own head, and braces himself for the impact. The chandelier lands.

Roman has managed to get himself and Patton right in its centre, and not one single spoke or candle had hurt them. Roman gingerly grasps the chandelier and tosses it aside.

Logan is impressed, despite himself.

"First," he says to Patton. "Sorry for endangering your life two times in as many minutes. Please go
"I think I need to lie down," says Patton, and staggers out of the room, the disgustedly dyed princess ball gown trailing behind him.

"As for you Bronze, you are hired. I am sorry for having doubted you, and I'm glad to have you on the team."

"Proud to be a part of it, Sir!"

"How did you guess it was the chandelier?"

" Noticed it as soon as I came in. It's straight out of The Phantom of the Opera. Knew it was gonna come down at any moment."

"Huh. I like the way you think. Report to work tomorrow morning at the Jubilee Hospital, Mr Sanders will be released and you will be responsible for the Primary's safety at all times and costs."

Roman nods, a glimmer in his eye.

"Also, wear a black tie next time. That bow is preposterous."

Roman swats his neck self-consciously. Logan shakes his hand, and sends him to the hospital to keep a look out for trouble while Thomas recovered.

He looks around the room. "I might grow to like this place. It has many surprises," he tells himself. He sat down on his chair, and springs up realising it was wet, and he probably had a patch of ink on his back. Surprises indeed.

Patton slips into the room, two mugs of soup in his hands. "One for me and one for you!"

"You are too kind, Patton. I do not deserve this after the way I made use of you."

"Oh tosh. Occupational hazard. Also, another occupational hazard – there are no bowls in the house, so that's why I put the soup in a mug. That or the blender, that's the only big vessel Thomas owns apparently."

Logan simply smiles and takes a sip, feeling the warmth spread through him.

"Is that your family?" Patton gestures at the photograph on Logan's desk. In it was Logan, looking as serious as usual, with a pretty woman by his side and two children, a boy and a girl before them, chortling cheekily at the camera.

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"A topic for a later discussion."

"Oh." Patton kicks his legs back and forth as he sits on Logan's desk, wondering if they could ever be friends.
It is the end of the day, and Logan inspects the front of the building. It is surprising how much can be restored in one day. The façade looks good as it ever had, and Patton had instructed to add a banner over the door, loudly announcing 'COULD BE GAYER'.

Patton prances up to Logan. "It looks great doesn't it?"

"As good as it gets, I suppose. But shouldn't you have asked Thomas first?"

"Somebody told me that was his first sentence as a baby! He would adore it!"

"I'm sure he would."

"Oh! By the way, Thomas's driver just called and said he's too scared to work for him anymore. Such cold feet! One bomb goes off and people stop being loyal!" Patton huffed.

Logan facepalms. "How many more setbacks must we go through?"

"Not to worry! I already called Dignitary Defence Division and asked them if they could spare one."

"SPARE?" Logan's nostrils flare. "Demand that they send me their best chauffer in the city!" He takes out the keys to Thomas's car out of the pocket of his trench coat, and jangles them in annoyance.

"Well, they found someone. I called him, and he just woke up."

"Just woke up? It's five in the evening! What kind of lifestyle does he lead?"

"We can find out! He should be here any moment."

Logan scans the road and sees a man sauntering up. He wears black t-shirt and jeans, with a white windbreaker on. A brown satchel hangs across one shoulder. Sunglasses perch on his nose, and a plastic coffee cup nestles in his hand. He walks up to them with swagger.

"I have arrived. Missed me?" he says with a flourish and hands Logan a card.

Logan looks down at the card, expecting a name but sees something else entirely. The capitalisation is off, he notices:

BITe my ChEeky asS.

"Bite my cheeky ass... Bitches?" says Logan, confused and a tad scandalised.

"Wow! Ruuuuude. We just met!"

Logan brows jump around like big brown beetles. "Who are you?"

"Aw... No 'how are you doing's? It's okay, I'll go first." He flicks his hair back. "Hiya, Inspector Fudgit. You can call me RG and I'm here to babysit your little car!"

"First, are you the chauffer we were promised? Second, it's Chief of Security Craggers, to you, whatsyournamE." You could hear ice bergs splinter in Logan's voice.

Patton checks his clipboard. "Yes!" he stutters. "This is Remy Goor and he just got his licence to be a Dignitary Chauffer."
"I find that hard to believe." Logan eyes Remy up and down. "You look like someone that we should check the boot for, not trust behind the wheel."

"Don't you come at me, Susan! Your words are water off my back." Remy takes a swig of whatever was in his cup, which was probably not water or even coffee for that matter. "And I can't call you chief of whatever thingy, boss. Hm... CSC – nah too boring. Cass Cragg? Cos Gus? Bah, too easy." His eyes sparkle. "Got it. I henceforth christen you Cheese Crackers."

Logan splutters incredulously as Patton dissolves into a peal of laughter.

"And who are you, my pretty?" Remy turns to Patton.

"I'm Patton Janus, the new PA for Thomas Sanders!"

"Sanders, eh? Voted cutest giggle at the Teen Choice Awards?"

"Yes! You can call me Patton or Pat or Patty or Pattoncakes or –"

"Yes! Now how busy is our highness? Does he travel a lot or stay in bed all day? Don't tell me I have to be here on time!"

Logan is not used to being ignored when he is in a position of authority, so he steps in between Patton and Remy.

"Ahem," he intones. "I will email you a schedule and I expect – no, demand – that you follow it. But first, I need to check whether I should let you fifty feet near the Primary." He takes the clipboard from Patton and runs through Remy's documents, which are once again few in number. He frowns. "Have you ever driven a dignitary before?"

"Oh honey, don't come at me! I haven't driven a car before." Pushing his sunglasses onto his hair, he winks. "Just thought it might be fun to drive a big ol' celeb around and scooted over to the place with three big Ds on the door and got my licence last week. And here I am, basking you with my presence. Ta da!" He throws his arms in the air and nods his sunglasses back into place.

"An amateur! How am I supposed to get anything done here?" Logan passes the clipboard back to Patton and rounds up on Remy. "Can you even drive, you jumped up rooster?"

Remy shrugs. "Watch me." He neatly snatches the keys from Logan, moonwalks down the drive way and hops into Thomas's car. "See ya!" He waves through the shutter, and takes off with a speed that would make a sportscar lie down and rust.

Logan and Patton stand staring at the trail of swirling dust and leaves.

"I guess he hired himself," says Patton.

"More like stole our car." Logan pinches the bridge of his nose. "Not that we had a choice in the matter."

"Yeah, but we finally completed assemblification!"

"Patton, please, I have a lot on my plate, spare me the Pattonisms."

"It's just my cute and quirky way of saying that we got our team together."

Logan chuckles. "Yes, and quite a raggedly bunch we are. It intrigues me that all of us are on their first assignment. That is quite the coincidence. And we still need to find a detective to solve the
case and identify the murderer."

"Yes, but we are off to a good start."

"I wish I share your optimism."

"Aw! Go get some sleep. Thomas insisted that you can make yourself at home here for as long as necessary."

"Thanks!"

Patton pats him on the shoulder and they head indoors.

1800 h

Across town, the assassin to be assembles his gun. A book lays on the table next to the gun, open to a page titled "Assassination for Dummies: How to Assemble your Murder Weapon" subtitle "Guns".

The Assassin sniggers. He slides the last cartridge into the barrel. Perfect!

He picks up the gun, but it kicks back on its own volition and spits out a bullet. The Assassin squeaks and ducks under the table as the bullet ricochets all over the room and finally imbeds itself in a picture of a guy with brown hair, and a smile as bright as the sun.

Well, maybe I need more practice, thinks the Assassin grumpily. He glares through his long bangs at the bullet hole between the eyes of the man in the picture. But then, my dear, you will be mine. Tee hee hee.

Chapter End Notes

Please do comment and let me know your thoughts!

Question of the Day: Who do you think is the assassin?

See you on Monday!
Razzieattack

Chapter Notes

I love the way this story is shaping up! I got the whole thing planned out, so I only need to get around to writing the whole damn thing. XD

0900 h

A pair of soft canvas shoes taps their way across the polished floors of a hospital lobby, and bump into the clicks and clacks of a pair of pointy-toed shoes pattering past.

"Good Morning, Patton, I hope you had a good night's sleep?" says the calm and collected owner of the soft canvas shoes.

"Oh, my goodness, there you are, – Lo – Craggers – Mister Crackers – Noooo!" wails the man tottering in the pointy toed shoes.

"Is anything the matter?" asks Logan, slightly concerned, taking in the other's frazzled appearance. He still looked like a kid from college, he thought, I might have to take him to a clothes boutique to kit him up to look like a personal assistant worth his salt.

"Oh, nothing's the matter!" Patton chirps brightly, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "I'm always this loosey goosy in the morning. But you're here now! You can tell me what to do! But first I NEED MY COFFEE!" He rushes to a vending machine and gets himself a coffee that is more parts water than milk or coffee that looks like brown paint, and I suppose tastes exactly like brown paint, if you ever had the misfortune to take a sip of it.

"Dear gods of beverages! You can not possibly drink that slop!" cries Logan. "Here, have mine." He hands his half-full takeaway cup from the Patisserie and Coffee Stop around the corner.

Patton takes the cup and chugs it in one go, his eyes watering as the hot liquid sloshed down his throat. At least it woke him up, and left him jittery for a good two hours.

"Tut tut," Logan mutters as he drops both cups in the trash, one empty, one full. "I hate to waste coffee, but that coffee isn't good even for the rats." He turns to Patton, who was visibly buzzing. "Are you feeling better?"

"Better!" Patton's voice squeaks up half a dozen octaves. "I feel top of the world! Let's go destroy the razzies! They've been calling me all night demanding to talk to Thomas and now I can go chase them all away! Onwards!" Patton charges down a corridor, his gait unsteady like a bee drunk on honey.

"The razzies?" questions Logan, following him.

"See for yourself!"

They came around a corner. The corridor ends at the door to Thomas' hospital room. Well, it does, but they cannot see the door, or anything else for that matter. The entire corridor is full wall to wall...
with journalists and reporters and cameramen with notepads and microphones and camcorders, scribbling and shouting and flashing as they write and question and photograph the hottest unfolding story of the week that will soon be splashed across every frontpage and TV screen and mobile phone of the city's newspapers and broadcast news and YouTube channels. After all, it is not every day when a rising star's front door gets blown up. For the past day, news outlets screamed exaggerated reports of bomb craters and published the outrageous theories of the culprit behind it all, because who does not like a bit of celebrity drama?

However, there was someone not from the paparazzi in the corridor too, and that someone was Roman. He is trapped in a valiant effort of halting the Razzi from breaking down the door in their eagerness to be the first to interview Thomas.

"Okay, you guys need to calm down!" bellows Roman, dark circles under his eyes. He pretty much acts as a human buffer, bracing himself against the door like a starfish. A man of scrawnier build would crumple like wet tissue against the onslaught, but Roman is holding on just fine. "I've told you a million times YOU CAN'T SEE THOMAS! He is recovering fine, GO HOME." He swallows a few choice swears as a pen almost spears him in his eye, a microphone whacks against his Adam's apple and a camera jams itself in his arm pit.

The reporters shout back:

"How hurt is Thomas?"

"Is Mr Sanders ever going to act again?"

"Is it true all his purple hair burnt away?"

"I AM NOT IN A POSITION TO MAKE A COMMENT!" booms Roman, and promptly gets punched in the nose for his trouble. It is by the fist of an extremely tough reporter (with a reputation to match) ready to do whatever it takes to get through, be it jumping up and down like a kangaroo on pogo stick, which is his current tactic.

Roman winces. If they aren't going to play nice, neither will he. He grins, grabs the offending marsupial from the shoulders, and gives him a hard push back. Have you ever pushed someone in a crowd? If you were mean enough to do that, you will know exactly what happens next. The throng of journalists and reporters and cameramen – and even a poor janitor who was stuck in their midst for the past hour – all tumble back like a wall of dominos, their tangle of paraphernalia mixing with their cries of horror and surprise.

Logan and Paton leap back to avoid the crashing wave of humans. Now that everyone was flat on their backs, the pair sees Roman standing at the other end, huffing and puffing.

"Bronze!" barks Logan. "Did you just shove everyone on to their butts?"

"Yes, Sir!" says Roman standing at attention, shamefaced.

The crowd starts to get up.

"DID YOU LOSE YOUR DAMN MIND?" Logan roars, and they cower back onto the floor again. "You are supposed to protect Thomas, not strike out human shaped bowling pins!"

"He hit me!" whines Roman, pointing at the amateur boxer. "It was in self-defence!"

"See?" Patton tugs at Logan's sleeve. "Don't be too mad, you'll get a heart attack, and even though we're in a hospital, that can't be good."
Logan is half mollified.

The crowd staggers upright, looking warily between the two groups at each end of the corridor.

"Um..." says Roman. "You can ask Mr Craggers your questions."

They pack pounces towards Logan and Patton.

"Is Thomas still alive? Can you give us a statement?"

"Who are you, and what is your connection to Mr Sanders?"

"Is it true his butt was blown away?"

Logan raises his arm above the horde, and everyone immediately shushes, as he did cut an authoritative figure. "Personnel of the media, I am Mr Logan Craggers, Chief of Security, in charge of Mr Thomas Sanders' safety. No part of his body was hurt by the explosion two nights ago, and no, we do not know who the guilty party is. That is all I have to say. We will have a press conference once he is ready. I kindly request all of you to be good enough to leave in an orderly manner. For shame, you are all responsible adults, acting like rabid monkeys high on candy canes. Let that poor janitor go, and allow this kind doctor to pass through, you are blocking him from his duties."

He gestures towards a doctor that came around the corner, pushing a trolley of food and medicine before him.

The swarm pauses for a second, then their cacophony of voices rises again. Logan sighs at the mentality of the mob, and Roman gets ready to do some more self-defense.

But Patton won't stand for this, not when he feels the energy of caffeine pumping in his blood. He jumps onto the trolley and dramatically waves his hands looking like a mime having a seizure, and loudly proclaims: "Good people! You have over stayed your welcome. You must leave right now" he pauses, and everyone leans forward expectantly. "Because". Their eyes widen with anticipation. "We've received an anonymous tip... that there's a bomb!" A collective gasp.

"And," says Roman, catching onto Patton's plan. "It might be right here, right now!" Faces colour with fear.

"We might die any second..." intones Patton in a hushed hoarse whisper. A ragged muffled whimper passes through the gathering.

"RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!" Roman shouts as loud as he can.

The doctor squeals and springs onto the trolley, holding onto Patton. The crowd jumps a foot in the air, and thunders past screaming bloody murder. The gaggle of frightened people surges around the corner, taking the trolley along with them, a screeching Patton and doctor on top of it.

Logan flattens himself against the wall to avoid the worst, and dusts himself once they are gone, smiling at Patton and Roman's antics though he knew he must scold them later. He comes face to face with the especially hands-on reporter, the go-getter who punched Roman.

"Hullo, Mr Craggers," he says with a cocky smile. "I'm Bluff Chicanery, freelance reporter, and I am to get to the bottom of this story. There are a lot you are not telling the press."

"I reveal all that I am at liberty to." Logan matches Bluff's smile with a smirk of his own. There is
something in the man's eyes that puts Logan on guard. "There is nothing you're going to get out of me, besides one piece of advice."

"Ah! We're getting somewhere!" He held up his recorder.

"Indeed. Your yellow polka dot tie does not go with your black pinstripe coat at all, your multi-coloured socks do not match, and you badly need to floss. Not the best presentation for a reporter I must say."

"Bah! You can't distract me with your nonsense!"

"But I assure you that this is no nonsense. The bomb threat is very real, and there is a bomb disposal unit somewhere in the building, you might as well ask them all your questions."

"I am positive there's no bomb or a squad."

"You question my credibility?" asks Logan smoothly, raising one eyebrow. Roman catches it, and hiding a grin, fires his gun behind his back.

Bluff jolts and looks around him uncertainly.

"Scram," hisses Logan, and Bluff does so, the kind of run you will expect of an octopus, limbs out in all directions and not nearly fast enough for all the effort. Logan is pleased, knowing that he had just sent him off on a wild goose chase in search of an invisible bomb squad.

Patton, finally free of the stampede, limps around the corner, and is promptly bowled over as Bluff cartwheels past him. Logan, with a wry smile, goes over and helps Patton up. The coffee is still keeping him alive, so he wasn't too hurt. The doctor, however, when he finally did make, looks like a crash of rhinoceros had run over him, which is probably not too far from the truth.

Logan picks up a cup of water – which had miraculously survived – off the trolley and hands it to him. "Here you go. You need it more than Mr Sanders."

"Oh no! I can't possibly have a patient's water! That would be taking away their most precious resource!" says the doctor.

"Well lot of hospital regulations were broken today, and one more cannot hurt, especially for a good reason" Logan squints at his nametag. "Alright then, Dr Emile Piccani, let us proceed to Mr Sanders' room. He must be hungry."

The doctor takes the cup and sips it peacefully, humming a tune that Logan couldn't place. Patton can however and bounces in delight.

"Pabracadabra! That's the Gravity Falls theme!"

"Yes! I think there so many life lessons we can learn from those characters!"

Logan tunes out their excited conversation until they reached the door, where Roman has apparently fallen asleep on his feet. He snores like a bullfrog with a fly stuck in its throat.

"What is the matter with him?" wonders Logan. His daily level of crazy has multiplied after he started this job.

"Aw... he must be tired. He's been protecting Thomas from the Razies for over a day! The poor chap needs some sleep!" Patton pats Roman on the shoulder.
"We can't leave him standing here looking so... disorderly."

"Well, let's take him inside!"

Dr Piccani holds the door open, and Logan and Patton drag the slumbering giant in and put him in a chair reserved for visitors. Roman settles in with a sigh of exhaustion.

Logan approaches the bed. Thomas Sanders lay there, cuddling a big fluffy white pillow, blissfully unaware of the commotion just outside the door a few minutes ago.

Patton sits down next to him, his face softening as he looks down at the sleeping man. "Mama always said that he could sleep through a thunderstorm, even if it was literally raining cats and dogs."

"Have you known him for long?" asks Logan. He does not know much of Patton's life before they met, even though he had read up as much information he could about The Primary. The Janus twins' names appeared quite often in his story.

"Since when we were born!" Patton rubs his nose thoughtfully, reminiscing days cast in the golden hue of nostalgia. "He was born two months before my brother and I and we lived next door in the cutest little neighborhood you could imagine! So different from these parts of town... I can't imagine playing on these streets! We three grew up together, and we did everything together. We invented stories of dragons and witches and manticores and chimeras and dragon witches and manticore chimeras and dragon manticore witch chimeras (don't ask). Then one day, when we were around fourteen, I think, we all thought it would be super fun to audition for an open call for a Disney Show. Thomas was sure Dolan and I would get the shot, coz we were twins. But I knew it was Thomas' shot to take all along. And I was right! He landed the leading role. I was thrilled but Dolan was never the same after that. Things never could go back to what it was for the three of us. Thomas was never home, he was always too busy. Dolan realised that auditioning as half a twin lessened his chances, so he just didn't tell me about the auditions he went for." Patton wipes away a tear. "He never really had the luck to make it big. But he tried so hard, Mr Craggers, he never gave up. Thomas asked him whether he could be his PA one day. Dolan told me that he didn't want his pity, but I begged him to take the job as that might be the break he was waiting for. Like who knows he might bump into the next agent or producer who might want I hire him? I wish I didn't ask him... look where he ended up. Gone in one second. I'm only happy I was around to step in, Thomas needs a friend close by."

Neither of them moves, and the only sound in the room is the fluttering of paper as Dr Piccani checked Thomas' vitals.

"Are you happy with where you are now?" asks Logan in the gentlest voice Patton has heard so far.

"Yes," replies Patton. "Happier than I possibly thought I could be. I get to look after one of the most amazing people I've met. What more could I ask for?"

"True." Logan slides his hands in to the pockets of his trench coat.

The both of them lean towards each other instinctually, and their shoulders bump.

"Mr Sanders is good to go," says Dr Piccani, careful not to ruin the moment. "I can give him a clean bill of health. Call me if you need anything!" He left quietly.

Logan nods at Patton, and he tenderly shakes Thomas' shoulder. "Wakey wakey Tom Tom! We came to take you home!"
Thomas opens his eyes blearily. "Patton! You came!" He hugs him close. "And who is this?" Logan extended his hand stiffly and introduces himself.

"Thank you so much for doing this!" says Thomas, and he means it. "I was so scared when that bomb went off! I hate to think there's someone out there who wants me dead... I wish I could talk to them and find out what went wrong and work things out."

"Just doing my job, Sir," says Logan. "The safety of the Primary is of my utmost concern until further development. You have my word."

Both Patton and Thomas giggle.

Logan frowns. "Did I say something funny?"

"Well no," says Thomas, before dissolving into another fit of chuckles. "It's just the way you say it!"

Logan scowls and is about to make a cynical reply when Roman turns in his chair wanting to get more comfortable and falls off flat on his face with his butt in the air. But that does not wake him up, though the fly in the bullfrog's throat must have escaped as he stops snoring.

"And who is that?" asks Thomas, bemused.

"Oh, that's Roman Bronze!" cries Patton. "He's your bodyguard! He's awesome, he threw ink in my face, but he saved me from a falling chandelier, but he shot it down first but that's because Logan asked him to, but he was just testing him so no one's actually trying to kill me."

"Glad to hear that!" Thomas sits up. "But we can't leave Roman on the floor! Put him on the bed, I might as well use that as an excuse to finally drag myself out and face the day."

The three of them aren't exactly sure how they managed to get Roman on to the bed, but he was soon happily sailing off to the land of nod in a sea of comforters.

The door swings open and crashes against the wall, and a lady walks in briskly. Her impeccably set auburn curls toss around a pointed face like a Siamese cat. She is in a salmon pink pantsuit with a diamond studded phone case clutched in one hand. Patton's lower jaw drops in surprise. It is the woman in the photograph on Logan's desk.

"Oh Thomas! So nice to see you up!" Her laugh makes the edges of her eyes go all crinkly like a spider web as she hugs Thomas.

"Hi Ari! Nice to see you so soon!" Thomas turns to the other two. "Meet my manager slash agent, –"

"Miss Arachne Svengali. We meet again." Logan voice sounds as if he is gargling shards of glass.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here, Mr Logan Craggers?" Arachne's voice sounds as if she downed a glass of vinegar with a puff of helium on the side.

"I am here on duty. A notion you are unfamiliar with."

"You haven't changed an iota, still swinging the same old axe."

"You are the expert on battle axes, seeing that you are one."

Patton sprays some air freshener between the bickering pair. "To get rid of the bad vibes," he
"Um... you two know each other?" asks Thomas nervously.

"Yes, we have had the pleasure of crossing swords before," says Arachne, trying to make light of the situation.

"En Garde. But that is in the past and now we are in a professional environment, so will you shake my hand, Miss Svengali?" Logan puts his hand out as if he is going to stick into a garbage disposal chute.

"That is not all I intend to shake you up with, but it's a good start." She grabs his hand as if she enjoys the crackle of cartilage and makes two sharp up and down motions and releases.

"Now that we are acquainted, may I ask why there's a strange man sleeping in Thomas' bed? I knew the day would come, but a hospital bed? Seriously?" She fans herself with a lace handkerchief.

"Do not put your beak nose into things that do not concern you, Miss Svengali," drones Logan.

"My face is perfect! It better be, my plastic surgeon ain't cheap. And as the person responsible for Thomas' career, his success, his image, I have all the right to put my nose into everything concerning him! I'll peck out the truth!"

"So, you agree your nose is like a beak?" asks Patton innocently.

"No, Dolan 2.0, that is NOT what I meant, thank you very much."

Her high-pitched shriek wakes up Roman, because there are some noises even a sleep deprived brain cannot block out. He bounds out of bed, one hand on his gun, and the other out in front of Thomas. "Who is this? Is this the killer? One wrong step and I will scream! No, I mean, I'll pin you to the ground!"

"ME! THE KILLER?" If Arachne's hair burst into flame right then, it would be too good to be true.

"She isn't the killer. Roman, back down without making a fool of yourself." Logan motions Roman to step away, and he does so looking even more shamefaced than ever.

"Who is this mad man?" Arachne pats her face with the handkerchief.

"My bodyguard," says Thomas, passing a look at Roman that said everything was okay. Roman visibly became less stressed.

"Oh, really? And he doesn't know I'm your Manager? Next he'll be waterboarding your parents if they come to give you a chocolate cookie!"

"He was protecting Thomas just as he is supposed to!" Patton crosses his arms stubbornly. "You must be glad that no one can attack Thomas while he's around. Also, you can't mention a chocolate cookie and not give me one, Now all I can think of is Chocolate cookies. Tons and tons and tons of gooey brown crunchy...."

"Um... okay," she agrees, backing down for now.

Logan's expression is so stony that Roman knows that he is not off the hook yet.

"Now that we're all calm again, can we make a move?" asks Logan in a world-weary voice. "The
Primary got the all clear. We can take him to his house now."

"Can I trust you to not mess that up, or do I need to come with you and make sure you arrive in one piece?" Arachne arches a styled eyebrow.

"Are you trying to play nanny, Miss Svengali?"

"I'm concerned! Your men are idiots!"

"We will be fine, especially if you aren't around to be a bad luck charm."

"Well I never!" She gasps. "Alright, another thing I simply must ask. I was told that the paparazzi are here, and I came prepared to have a nice long chat with those delightful people, but I can't find any! All I saw were a whole lot of people running all over the place like headless chickens, one half screaming that there was a bomb, and the half searching for it to catch it on video! It's utter chaos."

"Oh my. I am so surprised."

"One even said the army is here to sweep for landmines."

"Is that so? How shocking!"

"Are you mocking me, Mr Craggers?"

"Now why would you think that?"

"Sure you had nothing to do with the bomb rumour?"

"I'm sure the paparazzi is delusional enough to believe anything."

She squints her eyes, and Logan narrows his own to meet her gaze resolutely. Neither backs down until she turns away towards Thomas.

"Thomas, darling, we need you back making public appearances as soon as we can! And don't forget, you got nominated for a Berry! The awards ceremony is just around the corner too! We got a lot of work ahead of us!"

"Ooooh!" Thomas claps his hands like an excited walrus. "I totes forgot about that!"

The Berries are one of the many awards handed out this season, and Thomas is nominated for his voice work in the Disney Film released last year. If you ask anyone, they will say he had the Berry in the bag, but Thomas of course says there are way more talented voice artists out there who deserve it more. All in all, hype was high and whoever wins, Thomas will be front and centre at the ceremony.

"Patton, please make note of every engagement Thomas has for this week, and draw up a schedule. We need to be prepared to do surveillance of everywhere he has to make an appearance at, especially the venue of the awards ceremony." Logan snaps his fingers at Patton, who immediately starts jotting down notes. Patton plans to organise them on his tablet soon afterwards.

"Hm... you seem to have this under control." Arachne smirks.

"Indeed. Now if there isn't more you must ask of us, do leave, or do you wish to poison the air for longer?"
"You do that on your own with that vintage – and by that, I mean expired – hair gel you wear. But I do have several matters to look to, mostly knocking some suited executives around until they agree to everything I demand. You see, I have Thomas' best interests at heart." She hugs Thomas again and trips out of the room, blowing butterfly kisses at the rest of them.

"No, she didn't! She stole my move! She stinks!" cries Patton indignantly. Logan nods at him, and Patton squirts the air freshener again. Roman sniffs the sweet smell, falls back onto the bed and drifts off.

1030 h

"Where's Goor?" asks Logan, looking at his watch for the sixtieth time in thirty minutes. There is no sign of Remy or Thomas' car anywhere. Logan's eyebrows do their familiar dance of the beetles, clearly showing he was getting more and more annoyed by the second. He looks up and down the road, which is curiously empty for that time of the day. Maybe the mall downtown announced a sale and all the ratty t-shirt and sweatpants clad pedestrians rushed off whooping in glee.

Logan, Thomas, Patton and Roman are standing on the bottom of the steps of the hospital entrance, looking for all the world looking like a bunch of pre-schoolers waiting to be picked up by a neglectful guardian who is probably getting their toenails done at a foot spa nearby.

Patton holds onto Thomas, though the latter does not really need the support. He spent yesterday in hospital just because he liked the excuse to stay in bed all day, not necessarily because he was hurt. Patton insisted that they put Logan's fedora and trench coat on Thomas to disguise him, and when Patton stamps his foot and pouts his lips, nobody has the heart to tell him no. Logan's long coat drowns Thomas, and the hat is jammed down to his nose, making him feel more like an overwrapped snowman than a cool incognito runaway.

Logan feels underdressed in his shirtsleeves. Roman offers him his blazer, but Logan politely refuses, fully aware that Roman has been beating off profusely sweating mouth breathing media persons in it for the past twenty-four hours and more. Roman himself isn't fully awake, and keeps turning in circles humming merry-go-round jingles and doing random handstands. Patton gave him a cup of coffee from the vending machine, and it definitely did not help.

A low rumble fills the road as a hulking black vehicle looms from the distance. Logan glances at it in puzzlement. What can it be?

A stretch limousine screeches to a halt in front of them. Patton and Thomas go ooooooooooooooooooooh and jump and up down like excited puppies while Roman hugs the side of the car in a bout of sudden affection.

The shutter on the driver's door lowers and Remy's head pops out. "Hiya there, cheese crackers! Like my new wheels?"

Logan facepalms. "Where did you get this? Please tell me you didn't buy it off the black market!"

"Garn! I just swapped the piece of junk I had with this at the Diggy Deffy Divvy. They let me have anything I wanted, and I didn't wanna pass up on this beauty."

"That is most definitely against our protocol... I'm afraid I must ask you to return it to the Diggy – apologies, I mean the Dignitary Defence Division."

Remy's lip quivers. "Please please please can we keep it?" choruses the rest of them, looking
Logan sighs, feeling like a nanny looking after a bunch of toddlers. He wished he had a more left-
brain oriented person on his team. "Well they did let him have it. We might as well keep it until
they realise the error."

Remy blasts the horn. "I like you cheese cracker, ya not a straight lace after all!"

"YAY!" Thomas, Patton and Roman tumble into the back of the limousine. Roman has the
presence of mind to sit Thomas down away from the windows, his excitement waking him up
thoroughly. Patton immediately raids the built-in mini fridge, and pulls out a packet of peanuts,
Thomas' favourite.

Logan sits shotgun. "You're late, Goor. I specified ten o'clock sharp in the email I sent."

"No one has time to read emails, chump. I got here in style, that's what counts!" Remy swerves the
limousine and takes off at a break neck speed usually reserved for chase scenes in action movies.

Logan stares moodily out the window, his precious emails insulted. Patton taps on the plexiglass
separating the driving compartment from the rear, and Remy presses the button to slide it down.

"Logan! Want some peanuts?" asks Patton cheerily.

"It's srumpdiddylumpcious!" comes Thomas' crunchy voice from the back, his mouth full of the
tasty dried legumes.

"No thank you, I'm allergic," replies Logan.

"Remy?" Patton shoves the packet at Remy.

"Thanks, boo. Wouldn't mind if I do!"

"Eyes on the road, Goor," snaps Logan. "No eating while driving."

"You're no fun, spoilsport. Don't like ya again."

Patton's face retreats, and is replaced by Roman's.

"Um, Chief Craggers, Sir?" he asks nervously. "Can we stop for a minute to pick up my laundry?"

"Request denied, Bronze," says Logan, exasperated. "We are escorting The Primary to his house,
not running your personal errands."

"Please? It's really important to the assignment! Crucial, life or death, save the day kinda
important!"

"No, Roman! We will NOT be making a detour to collect your boiled and dried garments!"

"It won't take a minute! I'll be back before you know it!"

"It's not a matter of time, it's a matter of principle!"

"We're going past it! Right there!"

Logan opens his mouth to say no once more but Remy has already pulled the limousine to a stop
before a rundown apartment building.
"Thank you, sir!" says Roman before Logan can protest. He jumps out of the car in one smooth action, leaving the others to rattle like dice in a can as the car bounces in reaction.

He sprints up to a wizened woman standing at the peeling dirty brown door. Her face is the kind that has a perpetual look of disgust, as if there's a bad smell under her nose. She hands Roman his blazer, now shining brightly after a full dry clean. He begged his landlady yesterday to please run it by the laundry for him, please. She agreed because Roman could charm water out of a stone.

"I'm too good to you, kid. Don't make a habit of this. You might want to look at this too." She hands him a letter.

"Thank you thank you thank you!" Roman picks her up and spins her around. He tosses his dad's blazer at her, puts on his own, pockets the letter and hurries back to the car.

Remy wolf whistles. "Dayam gurl, you look fine! Show off them pecs and ass!"

Logan rolls his eyes, but notes that Roman clearly has put effort into making the blazer artistically agreeable and practically satisfying as possible. Good for him.

Patton gives him a hug and Thomas a fist bump.

"Oh, my gods, guys! You don't have to do this!" Roman blushes, loving the attention. “Don’t stop!”

"Now that all of us are clothed appropriately, can we finally continue?" asks Logan. "Or I suppose Remy wants to go to an all-day nightclub and Patton wants to go buy all of us more food than we can eat?"

"Now that you mention it –" begins Remy.

"Remy, shut up," says everyone.

Patton taps open his tablet. "But we do need to get groceries. It's the first thing on my list. We're running low on ammunition for hunger!"

"I meant it as a rhetorical question, but very well, Patton," says Logan. "Goor, take us to the nearest retail store that sells food, drinks and goods needed to stock a kitchen."

Remy grumbles and turns the limousine in the direction of the supermarket.

1100 h

The assassin steps on to the topmost step of a long flight of stairs leading to the rooftop of the tallest building overlooking Parade Street. He carries on his shoulder a long black bag, containing a tripod, a sniper rifle and cartridges of bullets. The wind whips long strands of hair against his hardened face as he sets up the tripod and places the rifle on it. He sticks his hand into the bag to get the ammunition, but his hands close over something he hadn't expected. He pulls it out.

It is a small soft toy of a pure black kitten. It has deep sea green eyes and a white tip on its tail. It has on a black robe with a tiny wand taped to one little paw. A purple scarf twirls around its neck. A tiny tag reads ‘Make your own house!’ with a purply heart at the end.
He sighs and props it against the tripod. He leans against the low brick parapet that runs around the rood top and stares at the bust street down below. Dozens of tiny humans darted here and there like an army of ants. He scratched the kitten behind its ear. The big doofus who gave it to him would be somewhere down there in two hours or so, and he'll be waiting for him.

Or more accurately, waiting for the person he's protecting.

Chapter End Notes

I know that Dr Piccani (is that how it's spelt?) isn't a medical doctor or a general practitioner but I kinda had to switch him into one as a psychotherapist didn't work with this set up.

I seem to have brought a zoo with me when I wrote this chapter. Hope you liked the animal jokes.

QotD: Do you think Thomas qualifies as a celebrity? What make a human celebrity, actually?

See you in two days!
ReReconciliation

Chapter Notes

This chapter turned out way more funnier than I hoped. Do let me know if the laughs per minute rate drops, I need to up the dopamine fuel then!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1200 h

Thomas eats his lunch. He orders two pizzas, one chicken and one cheese. He sits in front of the TV watching the reboot of his Disney old show, and cringes, laughs and cries at all the wrong places.

1210 h

Logan eats his lunch. It is three slices of cucumber, boiled green gram and an apple. Then since it was his cheat day, he has an unset yoghurt made from pasteurized goat's milk from Switzerland.

1220 h

Patton eats his lunch. It is a strawberry cheesecake he found in Thomas's fridge. It was probably not very fresh, but he poured a generous helping of whipped cream over it to cover the tangy taste.

1240 h

Roman eats his lunch. It is the cheese pizza, because Thomas could only manage to eat the chicken before he was too full to take another bite. He, of course, was very sad, but Roman was happy to step in.

1250 h

Remy eats his lunch, or rather drinks it. It is a Trenta, no foam, five-shot half-caf, no foam, pumpkin spice latte with no foam at 210 degrees from a coffee house with a server he particularly disliked.

1300 h

The assassin did not eat his lunch (a measly tuna sandwich he bought from a street cart) because a pigeon stole it when he set it down for one second. He does not mind, as he has bigger fish to fry.

1400 h

Logan holds a brief with his team in his office while Thomas is upstairs playing with a rubber duck and a toy ship in his bubble bath, though you should not let anyone know, definitely not the press.

"Order, please," says Logan, sitting down his chair. He places his fingertips on the table in a power move that made Roman green with envy at his easy command, Patton hot under his collar because attraction and Remy is not there at all, so we do not know how he would react.
"This is not a court, Sir!" says Roman.

"I am aware of that, Bronze."

"We can pretend, if you like. I love role-play! You can be the high judge and Roman can be the Plaintiff and I can be the vi-" says Patton.

"Thank you, Patton, that is not necessary," says Logan in a weary tone. "Instead, why don't you update us on the situation with PI Desperanza?"

"Oh her daughter finally charged her phone but then she needed more credit so I sent her some credit then she called back and said that her father managed to escape the fishermen and what's more, he rescued some tiger cubs they were smuggling so he's a hero but Desperanza is on the run from the police because she shot a fisherman so we still don't have a PI on our case but I asked 3D what happens next and they said they can send us Mr Desperanza if we like because he became a PI like an hour ago because they are so happy they managed to solve a case after so long!"

"All of that in one day?"

"Yup!"

"Mercy me! The Dignitary Defence Division is not what it used to be back when I was acing my certificate."

"That was last year, Sir!" says Roman, eager to please.

"I am aware of that, Bronze!" snaps Logan.

"So... are we getting Mr Desperanza?" asks Patton.

"Most definitely not." Logan rubs his temples. "I do not want a clueless man who had one unbelievably lucky coincidence. The investigation must wait. Our focus is protecting The Primary. What are his afternoon plans?"

Patton refers to his tablet. "I managed to get him out of most of his invites and cancel all the engagements he RSVPed because our poor little guy needs his rest. But Thomas insisted that he simply must go to a Cake Tasting Ceremony on Parade Street. He never turns down a charity event. It's in an hour."

"Hm..." Logan taps his pen against his palm.

"Hm..." says Roman, copying Logan. Since he never carries a pen with him, he taps his finger against his palm.

"What are you doing?" asks Logan, annoyed at being interrupted.

"Um... my hand was scratchy?"

"Go wash your hands."

"I don't think -"

"NOW."

Roman skedaddles away.

Logan turns to Patton. "Where is Goor, by the way?"
"He told me his lunch takes a long time to be prepared just right, so he'll get late." Patton grins apologetically. "He said he’d be on time, though."

"He seems to lack a proper concept of time, that one."

Roman returns.

"Did you wipe your hands, Bronze?" asks Logan sternly.

"No..."

"Use one of the princess gowns, the rest are bad as the first. Except the white one with the scalloped neckline. Leave that."

"If you insist..." says Roman, trying to stifle his giggle at Logan's obsession with ball gowns. Roman chose a dress that was checkered like a chessboard, except the squares were a lime green and sickly purple.

"I like the white one too!" says Patton eagerly.

"Then there is hope for you yet. We really need to do something about your clothes. We will go shopping later."

Patton squeed.

"All right, here are your equipment for the afternoon." Logan handed each a hands-free earpiece with attached microphone.

"Ooooh!" Patton picks up one, the way you would pick up a tiny kitten or a dragon egg.

"Yipee!" Roman snatches up his headpiece and jumps in excitement as he puts it on. "Gadget me up like Mr Bond. You actually do look like the tech guy who hands out super cool stuff in a spy movie!"

"Excuse me?" says Logan, making offended noises. "I am clearly an M, not a weedy tech guy. And please do take this seriously. The Dignitary Defence Division does not have the budget to give us anything the slightest bit high-tech. Nevertheless, they did manage to send this through."

Logan hands Roman a pair of sunglasses.

"This can zoom in on targets, it comes with night vision, infra-red and thermal scanning. It directly receives feed that I send from my laptop about where possible threats can come from, including photographs maps and what have you. I got the clearance to get access to the security feed of CCTV cameras that the Division has access to, both public and private. Follow the instructions in the manual carefully."

Roman ignores the leaflet completely and starts fiddling with the sunglasses. An alarm sears the room in a high pitch wail.

"BRONZE!"

"Sorry! It won't stop!"

Patton passes out as he has extremely sensitive ears.

Logan picks up the manual, glances through it, takes the sunglasses from Roman, and calmly and
precisely presses a button. The siren stops, and Patton pops up.

"I'm not going to give this to you unless you can't take care of it!" Logan thunders at Roman. "And we need to talk about your unfathomably unorthodox ways of crowd control. We simply cannot attack civilians unless they threaten us, and no, a punch to your face is not a good enough excuse and it will not fly with the authorities. And did I hear you fire your gun?"

"You asked me to..." mutters Roman.

"Did I?"

It is true. Logan didn't say the exact words.

Roman hopes he will not receive his marching orders. He takes a deep breath. "I was doing my best, Chief Craggers. I did what I had to do to keep The Primary safe. I did not think through, and I might have hurt someone innocent, or worse. We don't want to get bad press. I am sorry, and I promise to do better next time. If I have a next time. I hope you give me another chance, Sir."

Logan suddenly smiles, albeit grimly. "And what do your words tell me?"

"Is this a trick question?"

"Yes, it is, in fact, a trick question."

Roman scratches the back of his neck. "It says I'm sorry?"

"More than that. It tells me of a man who is innovative enough to come up with out of the box solutions to problems, and brave enough to go the whole length. And better, is honest and humble enough to admit where he went wrong and is determined to not give up. That's what I look for in a bodyguard. You deserve these."

He hands the sunglasses to Roman, who puts it on as if it is bejeweled crown with sparklers sticking out of it. He beams with pride.

"Alright, here are your orders. Tail Thomas throughout the event, but do not get too close, we do not want to interrupt the proceedings. Be ready to leap into action, and await my command. I will be in touch with you both. Patton, stick to Thomas' side, and keep an eye out on everyone who tries to talk with him."

"Yes, Sir!" says Patton. "Roman got his scolding, now do me!"

"Fine. Can we keep the over the top antics to a minimum? No crowd surfing on a wheeled device of any kind."

"Will do. Or won't do."

Logan looks from one face to the other. "Now are you a hundred percent clear with what you must do?"

"Yes!" the two of them chorus.

"And what if we fail?" asks Logan sternly.

"We won't mess up!" cries Roman, puffing his chest out.

"Are we going to fail?" asks Patton, downcast.
"Don't be a debbir downer!" huffs Roman.

"Okay! We are positively going to mess up!" says Patton cheerily.

Logan sighs. Why was he surrounded by such contrasting personalities? Oh, wonderful, her comes another.

Remy bursts in, "Hiya! Ladies!", and hands each a balloon. Patton got a white one that says MISS, Roman a red balloon with ME in big yellow letters and Logan received a blue one which declares...

"Goor, why do you insist on giving me inanimate objects with the word 'BITCHES' on them?" asks Logan. He releases the offensive balloon that floats away sadly to stick against the ceiling.

"I say it as it, gloomy grumps," says Remy taking a swig of his latte and making himself comfortable in a kids' swing set.

"Oh, really?" screams Logan, a blood vessel jutting out from his neck. "I'm not a bitch, you are! Do not disrespect your officer in command." He pops the balloon with a catapult he found in his drawer. Apparently, his sedate demeanor has popped too. Remy jumps up and takes out a well-thumbed dictionary of sarcastic retorts from his satchel. "You dare get into a sass battle with me? Bring it on, barbie doll!"

Roman grins, crosses his arms and leans against a life size transformer robot, gleefully watching the drama unfold. Patton puts himself between the two scowling men squaring off against each other. "Everyone! Be more chill!"

Logan pauses. "Apologies, I forgot myself. Now, since we still have some time to kill till Thomas is ready, kindly clear out the junk in this room. All of you." Logan picks up his things and heads to the door.

"But..." says Remy.

"Jump to it! I'm your boss!"

Patton immediately starts picking up all the Lego blocks littering the floor, which he definitely is not sad to see go, and his smarting feet agreed.

"What are we supposed to do with the stuff?" asks Roman, wondering if he could take the robot for himself.

"Bury them, Burn them, put them in storage. Mail to friends, family and fans. Sell on E-bay, I hear his stalkers pay well." And with that Logan hair flipped out the room.

**1500 h**

Allow me to set the scene once again, dear readers. The sun is shining, and there is little even the author can say to command a giant ball of gas, so let the fellow scorch us all. We are on Parade Street, not too far away from Dionysus Boulevard. It is a wide road with plenty of shops and restaurants and parks on either side, and is where the parades, rallies and marches of all kind happen. There is always a gentle breeze fluttering through the colorful flags, and the smell of tasty food is always in the air. Today, however, it sports a more low-key vibe. Several charities and NGOs and Welfare organizations got together to run a cake drive to collect to help funds for youth who had no homes to go back to. Several high-profile actors, sportspersons and politicians are scheduled to turn up later in the day, where all the big events will take place. Right now, it's a Cake Tasting Ceremony run by The Gorgeous Grandma Group, with cakes made by the participating...
kids themselves. Thomas was the judge, which meant everyone will be a winner.

Let us focus on the sleek black limousine hurtling down the street. Remy might not have the knack of turning up on time, but he did know how to get places in the blink of an eye.

You might notice that a pair of binoculars tracking the car from a rooftop right above the cake stand. That is our old friend the assassin.

Thomas and Patton hop out the limo, and everyone claps and cheers. Patton hands everyone friendship brands, and the competition begins.

In the car, Roman adjusts his earpiece. "You there, Sir? Can you hear me?"

Back at his office in Sanderville, Logan replies. "Loud and clear."

Roman: Do we get code names? Please?

Logan: I'm in favour of that idea.

Roman: Can I be Achilles? Love that dude!

Logan: I'll make a note of that. That would make Thomas... Helen of Troy?

A third channel chimed in.

Patton: Oooh! I like that!

Logan: I shall be Agamemnon.

Roman: But he is evil!

Logan: He may be not nice, he may not be good, but he is right. War is evil, and he was the leader and the tactician. Of course, he was incredibly short-sighted, but let's skip that.

Patton: I'm Briseis!

Logan: Unexpected.

Patton: Yup.

They hear a snigger.

Logan: Who was that?

Roman: Not me, Sir!

Patton: Nuh-huh!

The last channel beeps in, and Remy speaks: "Not guilty, chicas."

Logan: Must have been a crackle in the transmission. This connection is bad.

Remy: Diggy equipment, what did you expect? Hey, let's call this sweet set of wheels The Trojan Horse, coz it drags your sorry asses all over the place.

Logan: Ingenious.
Roman: Isn't Trojan a brand of condoms?

Patton: Archilles, never say that again.

Remy: And, I'll be Zeus.

Roman: Hey! Not fair!

Remy: Oh, Darling, I'm better than you lowly mortals.

Roman: I'm a demigod!

Logan: Stop bickering, children.

Patton: OMG! You called them children.

Logan: They don't know how to act their age. Now, Achilles, move out and survey the surrounding. Stay unnoticed. Zeus, go and park somewhere hidden, but keep your wits about you. Brises, do not leave Helen of Troy's side. I will access the security footage and update you on developments. GO!

1530 h

So far, so good. Logan has six screens glowing blue in front of him, each showing live footage from six different angles. Thomas is chatting with the children in one. Another shows Patton sneaking a candy cane off a platter. The third is trained on Roman, who true to his orders sweeps the crowd with his enhanced vision now and again. The fourth is of the Limo under a tree in a nearby park with Remy drinking a lime slushie leaning against it. The fifth gives a bird's eye view. The sixth is trained on two kids who were looking up adoringly at Thomas. Logan sighs and shifts the sixth screen to another camera, one on a rooftop. He starts when he sees something out of place.

Logan: Achilles, do you notice something out of place on top of the building behind you?

Roman: I didn't detect anything... wait my heat senses tell me there is a big red and orange blob up there. What could that be?

Logan: That indicates a human, Achilles. Read the damn manual. Even a gamer would tell you that.

Roman: I was never a gamer, Sir! I was into drama and I acted in a lot of –

Logan: Love to chat, but you have a job to do.

Roman: Sorry, Sir! It's just that I love to talk –

Remy: No one cares!

Patton: I do!

Logan: Ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. I'll try to get a closer look at the Target.

Logan keys in a command and the feed jumps up a few notched in resolution, and the figure of a man crouching over what looks like a rifle focuses into view.

The Assassin notices the CCTV Camera buzzing, and knocks it out.
Logan: Dammit! The camera is busted. Guys, look sharp. The Assassin is here. And he knows we know he is here.

Three tense intakes of breath.

Roman: I'm going up.

Logan: No, we wait for back-up. Remove Thomas from the scene.

Patton: But the kiddos would be upset!

Logan: They would be more upset if Thomas gets killed right before their eyes. Start the car, Zeus.

Remy: Give us a sec, this slushie froze my brain.

Patton: Agamemmnonny, I can't see Archilles.

Logan: Achilles! Where are you? Get to Thomas this instant!

1545 h

But Roman ignores the words in his ear as his feet thump up the steps four at a time. He bursts out on to the rooftop; his breath wheezes out in pants as he recovers quickly.

The Assassin was waiting for him, and he lazily swings the rifle around for the red dot to laser point on to Roman's chest.

"You!" Roman gasps, aiming his pistol back at him in retaliation.

"In the flesh."

"Virgil!"

"Duh. I'm the only Sande Side left, of course it's me."

"Wuh?"

"The writer's been putting hints everywhere. Don't act so surprised." Virgil smirks and rolls his eyes and hunches his shoulders and put his fists in his hoodie pockets and hisses. "See? I did all my signature moves."

Roman blinks, slowly.

"Oh, get over it!" Virgil throws his hands in the air in irritation.

"I don't get it..." Roman puts his hands down by his side, confused.

"Wait, aren't we having a gun stand-off?" Virgil cries and they quickly re-point their guns at each other.

"But why are you doing this, Virgil?"

"I'm here to assassinate Thomas Sanders, that's what."

"No! This can't be happening."

"It is." Virgil taps his ear. "I got you all bugged." He removes his earpiece and tosses it off the
roof. "No need of that now. Knew you'd come charging up here, and you fell right into the trap. I suggest you disable your headset."

Roman hesitates. True, he doesn't want Commander Root Lite screaming in his ear, but to do what Virgil asked is to give in. But he is at the best position to take control of the situation. He switches off the earpiece.

"Done."

"Aw... wish you were this obedient when we were dating."

"You were the one who walked out!"

"And because of whom? You screwed me over."

"So what, you became an assassin?"

"Needed the cash."

"You're killing my Primary to get even with me?"

"Two birds with one stone."

"Whoa! You take crazy ex-boyfriend to new cray cray levels."

"Well you were the one who taught me to be extra!"

Roman shudders. "You don't have to do this, Hunny bunny."

Virgil scowls. "You aren't allowed to call me that no more. I don't have to do this, but why not?"

"This isn't the real you talking, you're hurt and you're lashing out. Just stop and think. You don't want this to be the way you go down."

Virgil cackled. "Go down? The only one going down today is Sanders, and you're gonna lose your job."

Roman fought to keep his tears back. "I know you are NOT this cruel. This is the anxiety talking. You hate being alone again. I hate it too. We belong with each other."

"Seriously? Now is not the time to patch things up!" But Virgil's bravado ebbs away as he grows uncertain.

"It is exactly the time to clear the slate. I don't want the troubles in our relationship hurt others."

Roman eyes prick with tears.

Virgil sniffs. "We are terrible as a couple."

"Maybe but that doesn't mean others deserve –"

"SHUT UP! Just shut up. I can't deal with this!" Virgil starts to shiver, his eyes dart and sweat beaks out on his skin.

"Virgil, calm down. Can I come closer –"

"Stay where you are!"
The red dot reappears on Roman's chest.

Roman throws his pistol down.

"Why did you do that, Ro?" says Virgil, fiddling with the trigger.

"I'm not going to let you kill someone innocent. If you must go through this kill me first. Go on."

The red dot spins in an uneven circle.

"I'll do it!" says Virgil through gritted teeth.

"Look into my eyes, Virgil. You don't have to become this person."

Virgil pulls the trigger.

The red dot flashes past Roman and the bullet misses him completely. The gun and the tripod clatters to the ground. Virgil crouches down to pick up the kitten. He looks up to meet Roman's eyes. "I can't do it."

Roman squats down next to him and hugs him. "It's okay, I got you."

Virgil nods.

Roman kissed his nose. "Will you come back to me? I need you."

Virgil kissed his jaw. "I need you, too. Let's make up?"

"Again."

"And Again."

They lost themselves to passion as their lips connect, Roman's hands clawing fistfuls of soft hoodie material and Virgil's fingers raking through carefully combed and coiffured hair. Virgil's fingers accidentally brush against Roman's earpiece, and the sounds of their ferocious making out was immediately broadcasted right into the ears of the other three.

Remy: Woooo hoooo, get it, hot stuff!

Patton: Nooooooooo. My ears! They burn, They BURN. I can hear EVERYTHING!

Logan: BRONZE! STOP KISSING THE ASSASSIN AND TELL ME WHAT THE FLYING SPAGHETTING MONSTER IS GOING ON!

Roman and Virgil stop kissing and chuckle.

Roman: He's my boyfriend, Virgil. It's okay, I got everything under control.

Virgil speaks into the Microphone. "Hey! You're Roman's CoS right?"

Logan: You! You renegade! I will have you arrested and thrown in the clapper in irons! – On a side note, thank you for using the proper abbreviation when referring to my rank. – But I will see you rot in prison!

Virgil: Sheesh. You are a piece of work, aren't you?

Patton: Did you call Agamemmynonny a piece of cake? I like cake!

Logan: Agamemmynonny I will allow, but Agamemmynonny Dude? That I cannot abide. Zeus, stop laughing.

Remy: Hell no! This is better than a telenova, bitch!

Logan: asdilgdsa7cwawifub;kweabcdszgfc&!1!

Virgil: You guys are crazy. I'll fit right in. I'm not the bad guy, but I can help you catch the real bad guy.

Logan: And why should I trust you?

Roman: Please, Sir! You can believe him. I trust him with my life.

There was something in his tone that makes Logan pause. He has heard the same before, a long long time ago. He sighs.

Logan: What do you have to tell me?

Roman looks at Virgil, smiling in relief. Virgil takes the head set off Roman ("HEY! That's my toy! Go find your own.") and puts it on. He jumps onto the parapet and Roman quickly steadies him by holding onto his waist.

Virgil: CoS, you have surveillance of the place, right?

Logan: Affirmative.

Virgil. Tell me what you see.

Virgil scans the ground below him as Logan rattles off his intel.

Virgil: Dang. I can't think of anywhere he can be. Unless....

Logan: What?

Virgil: We've been looking in all the wrong places. He's right under our noses.

Logan: Out with it.

Virgil: The cake stand.

A white tablecloth covers a long table reaching the ground. The table is at the centre of the celebration. Cakes and sweets sit on the table, under a banner that shouts "COME JOIN THE GORGEOUS GRANDMA GROUP!"

Patton: I'm standing right next to it...

Logan: Curses.

Virgil pulls off the headset and hands it back to Roman. "We need to get down there. I bet my left foot that the bad guy is hiding under the cake stand."

Roman picks up Virgil and sets him down before him. "There's no second to be lost! Will you step in to the light and join the side of goodness, my beloved?"
"Why do you have to make everything so dramatic?" Virgil picks up his gun and hands Roman his pistol.

Roman puts his pistol in the shoulder holster. "Ha! Take my hand and I'll lead the way to victory!"

Virgil grasps his hand. "I'm taking the lead."

Roman grins at him, and they both run to the steps. Now, running down steps is not a good idea, and running down steps holding hands is never a good idea. They trip and tumble down sixteen flights of stairs, and roll out onto the street. They are not hurt, because this story is set in a cartoon universe.

1600 h

Roman pushes himself off the ground. Virgil, who was never a runner, falls back as Roman sprints ahead towards the cake stand. Thomas stands before it, just about to reach for a cake that Patton holds on a tray. Patton looks at Roman, scared. Thomas is oblivious as usual.

The table topples back as the real assassin leaps up. He is covered head to foot in a metallic silver spandex suit that glitters in the late afternoon sun. Nothing can be seen of him besides his eyes. Patton shrieks. The assassin pulls out a gun and aims it straight at Thomas who freezes in shock.

Roman realizes that by the time he pulls his pistol out, it would be too late. He does the next best thing. He kicks at the cake tray the same second the murder pulls the trigger. The cake flies at Thomas. It splatters onto his face as the bullet ricochets off the steel tray, leaving him unharmed.

The murderer leaps over the remains of the table and runs off, his suit turning grey and blending with the shadows as he disappears. Roman gives chase, but soon loses sight of him.

Virgil stares in shock as the bullet embeds itself into a poster of Thomas Sanders face. Had he actually considered doing this? He felt sick. Never again, thank goodness he was stopped before it was too late.

Patton gingerly lifts the tray off Thomas, revealing an icing covered very surprised face. He licks a bit of cake off, and promptly awards the kid who made it first place.

"Without your cake, I want be standing here!" he says to the beaming child. The rest of the people nearby either stare in disbelief, scream in fear or pass out, too overcome with the unexpected turn of events.

Logan's voice crackles in everyone's ears. "You did well. Now get out of there. Briseis, tell everyone... I don't know what, just put things in order. Achilles, get Helen of Troy – we must make that code name shorter – out of there ASAP. ZEUS, GET THE DAMN CAR ON THE ROAD."

"Um... People!" says Patton to the crowd. "Sorry for the bad man trying to kill Thomas, wait no, forget I said that, that was a joke! Thomas just got pranked! #caketothefacechallenge!"

"Oooooh!" Everyone starts to throw cake at each other.

Roman hoists Thomas over his shoulder and rushes at the limo as it screeches to a halt by them. Patton opens the door and drags Thomas in and starts mopping the cake off his face.

"You're coming with us." Roman extends a hand to Virgil, who hangs back.

"Are you sure?"
"Just get in."

Virgil clambers in as well and squeezes himself right in the back.

The car lurches down the road, and Patton clings to his seatbelt. He wonders if he should tell anyone that he recognised the killer's eyes. But he cannot bring himself to do it, his thoughts were being attacked by an egg beater.

1700 h

Safe at Sanderville, Thomas is tucked into bed with a hot bottle, a plate of cookies and a Thomas the Train jigsaw puzzle.

The others converge at Logan's Office.

Logan paces. "We were distressingly unprepared to deal with today's calamity. We did manage to save face – literally – however, thanks to Virgil here."

He shakes a blushing Virgil's hand. "My heartfelt appreciation, Mr Virgil...?"

"Virgil Nix," he says in a faint voice.

Roman grins proudly at his side. "Congrats, affection feline!"

Logan's eyebrows shoot up. "What is that, may I ask?"

"I wanted to call Virge love kitty, but he absolutely refused to let me, so I switched to affection feline and he was okay with that."

"You are not supposed to tell that to others!" Virgil punched Roman on the bicep.

"You guys are so cute! How on Earth did you guys break up?" prompts Patton.

Roman shares a look with a Virgil. "It was a silly argument."

"Pray, do tell us the hot... gossip... deets," says Logan as if he is speaking a foreign language.

Virgil stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Well...it was two weeks ago..."

"No that was the fight before that, this one was three days ago!" clarifies Roman, as if that was something to be proud of!

Virgil rolls his eyes. "Fine you can tell the story."

Roman claps his hands excitedly, and begins: "Hear ye, hear ye! Attend the woeful tale of the parting of ways of Roman and Virgil. Three sunrises ago, a ravishingly handsome man strikes a pose in front of a mirror. He is a gorgeous specimen of a man –"

"ROMAN!"

"Okay fine, my affection feline, I'll stick to facts. The handsome man –"

"NO!"

"Nice looking man?"

"Nope!"
"Average Joe?"

"That's more like it."

Roman whines. "The Average Joe stands in front of the mirror. He kisses his index finger and lays it on a photograph pinned to the frame of the mirror. A man looks over his shoulder; he is a dark shadow of Byronic emoromantic cuteness —"

Roman looks at Virgil out of the corner of his eye. Virgil gives him a thumbs-up. Roman huffs and continues, dramatically acting out their dialogue in different voices.

"Virgil asks Roman, 'Who is that guy in the photo?'

'That my dear,' says Roman, 'Is the greatest man in the whole wide world.'

'Don't know him.'

'Never heard of Richard Madden? For shame you uncultured popcorn muncher! He is one of the most promising stars of our generation!'

'Doesn't ring a bell.'

'He played Cinderella's Prince in the 2015 movie!'

'Never watched it.'

'I dragged you to see it!'

'Must've fallen asleep. Except when the actress who played Bellatrix popped up.'

'ohmgodyoudontevenknowhelenabonhamcarterbutthatdoesntmatternow. Richard Madden just won a Golden Globe for The Bodyguard! My dream role!'

Virgil frowns. 'Why do you like him so much?'

'He's the literal combination of a Prince and a Bodyguard! How could I possibly love another man?'

Virgil scowls. 'That's it. I'm done. I'm leaving.' He pauses at the door. 'You are too much in love with yourself. I'll come back when you learn to love another.' The door slams.

'What? No!' cries Roman, realising the error in his rash words. He catches his reflection in the mirror and sees how astonishing alike he is to Mark Wahlberg from The Happening. NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

The story is told, but Roman's NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO continues on and on and on. And on. And for some time more. Patton and Logan look at each other, then at Roman, then at Virgil. Will Roman never stop? Virgil finally punches Roman in the stomach and he doubles over groaning.

"That's enough, Royal Guard. First, pretty good impression of my voice. You should try that later when we're alone. Second, you shouldn't refer to yourself in third person, it's weird. Third," Virgil turns to Patton and Logan. "I'm totally in the right, aren't I? Roman is a big mouthed egomaniac."

"There's no right or wrong here," says Patton, wiping his eyes. "That was the most tragic love story I ever heard." He bursts into sobs. "But you two are back together again! These are happy tears!"
Logan pats Patton on the back and offers him a handkerchief. "I can't believe you two had an argument over the degree of hotness of an actor. However, I agree, Roman was more at fault during the argument."

"I'm sensing a but..." says Virgil, looking worried.

"BUT you got a gun and threatened to kill him. That is inexcusable."

Virgil looks at his feet, chastised. Roman straightens up and puts an arm around him comfortably.

"I don't mind. I'm still living, aren't I?" He winces as his sore midriff stretches.

Virgil, feeling guilty, rubs Roman's abs over his shirt and slips a finger in between two buttons. If Roman felt any pain, it disappears at once.

"How did ya' get ya' hands on a gun, gurl?"

Everyone's heads snap back to look at Remy lounging on Logan's chair, where he has been sleeping all along without anyone noticing.

"Well..." says Virgil self-consciously. "It's so easy to get anything online these days. There was this challenge on twitter about who could come up with the most creative slogan for a 'Kill The Gun, Not A Human' movement and I sent them this: 'To kill the gun, first kill every hand that holds the gun until only one human is alive and they....' That was NOT what they were looking for, but someone submitted it for a Reddit thread about the apocalypse in the Terminator series and I won first place... and this stupid rifle was the prize. I kinda spiralled from there. I was at a bar the other night and dude turned and offered me the assassin job, and I kinda went along with it."

Roman shudders and draws Virgil closer and kisses him on the forehead.

'Oh! my poor child!' Patton grabs Virgil's hand. "I will protect you from all the baddies and you will be the kindest gentlest purest person alive."

"You're describing yourself, Patton," says Logan. "And I will be taking this away from you." He picks up the rifle and stashes it away in a drawer.

Roman cups Virgil's face. "I'm so sorry for being a self-centred doofus, pookie."

"I'm sorry for being a crazy doofus, don't you dare call me pookie again."

They kiss.

"And," says Virgil. "You're funnier, stronger and cuter than Richard Madden could be!"

"I know you know we know that's not true!" Roman grins bashfully as arms hands circle Virgil.

"He looks like the constipated British cousin of James Franco. And I love you, and that does funny things to what I think of you." Virgil's hands lock behind Roman's neck

"I love you too. Our love is toxic, but it's so meant to be."

Virgil hops up to wrap his legs around Romans hips. Patton's ears turn red and Logan whispers to him, "I cannot in good conscience condone this relationship, but they're not gonna listen to us, are they?"

"You're such a Mark Wahlberg," purrs Virgil.
“Markie Mark is awesome. Except in The Happening. And you're such a Zooey Deschanel,” Roman growls.

"Well I do rock a good manic pixie dream emo look."

Roman sweeps off all of Logan's stuff from the desk and lowers Virgil onto it.

"Um... don't they know were right here? Like in the same room?" says Patton looking form between his fingers.

Logan tries to ignore the mess on the floor. That is impossible. "I'll redirect the conversation to safer waters." He coughs thrice. "Ahem. The Happening is a terrible movie. Are you sure you need to compare yourself to characters from that movie?"

Patton nods in agreement.

"I like The Happening, suckers. I'm always Team Plant, when it comes to plants vs. zombies, and humans are just zombies who sleep," drawls Remy.

Everyone looks at him. "SHUT UP, REMY!"

"Well, my planned worked," says Logan smugly, but then his jaw drops as Roman bounds onto the table too.

"Guys! Do you want to go play pattycakes?" Patton says in desperation. Roman's blazer comes flying and slaps him across the face.

"That's it! We're out of here!" cries Logan.

Remy doesn't move.

"That includes you especially," says Patton sternly, as Logan and he grab an elbow each of Remy and frog marches him out the room. Patton closes the door behind him.

Logan paces in a circle. "This is inconceivable! They are way out of line! That is my office! They should take their lissom activity elsewhere! I'm going to evict them from this building!"

He strides into the room.

He runs out a second later, eyes screwed shut and arms held out in front.

"NOPE NOPE NOPE. I'm never going to unsee that. Abort mission! Flee! Save your innocence, Patton! Remy, never make my mistake!"

"Logan, calm down do!" says Patton, dragging him off to the kitchen. "Here, have some chamomile tea."

Remy yawns. “Well, the funs over here.” Nobody would need the limo for some time, duh, so he decides to take it off for a spin.

Chapter End Notes

So I just referenced to Scream Queens and Heathers with Remy. Made me wonder if
Chanel Oberlin x JD needs to be a thing, and wouldn't that be the unholiest union ever?

QotD: Between Prinxiety and Logicality, who do you think is more... given to wholesome physical activity, if you know what I mean?

See you on Friday!
Not a very action packed chapter this time around, I thought the guys needed some time to chill. Yeah, I'm that weird person who likes the scenes in action movies when the characters sit down and eat and talk about themselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1900 h

We are at a bar, not that busy, maybe around five patrons, despite it being Friday night. Revel yourself at the ambiance of the dimmed spotlights that line the ceiling, elegant furnishings that circle the dance floor and the brick-finish walls punctuated with oil paintings and bottles in ships and action figurines. Please note that this is no seedy establishment tucked away at the dead-end of an alleyway in the red-light district, but The Publican at the tail end of Dionysus Boulevard, which is as fancy as a bar can possibly get. Inside, the oak counter is shaped liked a horseshoe around the sleepy young barkeeper, who is wiping away at the speckled wet rings on the polished surface from cold drinks left without coasters.

"Hooligans!" mutters Logan, who has a coaster under his drink, as well as a couple of tissues for good measure, one below the coaster and one above. He chose a simple mug of unchilled beer, but it stays untouched before him. He sighs at the newspapers before him.

"Hi, Mr Craggers!" says Patton. He switches out Logan's mug of beer with a cup of camomile tea (don't ask me how Patton got tea, The Publican's menu definitely did not include such tame beverages). Patton himself had got himself a mocktail of orange juice, soda and 95% of it was sugar syrup. He offered the barkeeper the mug of beer, but he responds that they do not take refunds. Then Patton offers it as gift, to which he replies that employees aren't supposed to drink while on duty. Patton says that he does not know anyone who follows rules, so why should he? The barkeeper agrees and chugs the beer.

Logan is in a slump, watching with idle eyes at the two of them chattering.

"Drink up!" urges Patton. "It'll cheer you up."

Logan takes a sip of his tea, and that does cheer him up, because Logan and tea make a very calming combination.

"Bad news?" asks Patton, nodding at the stack of newspaper.

Logan shows him the headline of the front page. A blown picture of a cake-faced Thomas fills half the page, and the title above it screams Silver Sparkle Strikes Sanders.

"Silver Sparkle?" Patton giggles.

"Yes, that's what the papers call the killer. As if he didn't look enough like a Cabaret Girl or Magician's Assistant already."

"Or a stripper."
"Thanks, Patton, that's the exact image I want in my head."

"Donit worry! Everything will be alright!"

"How? Even though there have been several sightings of... Silver Sparkle... the Police were unable to find a lead. He knew exactly where my blind spot was, as I failed to capture his escape on camera. He is crafty, and always a step ahead of us."

"We will catch him!"

"That is our objective."

"Then Thomas will be safe!"

"That goes without saying."

"Will Silver Sparkle be put in jail?"

"Yes, that is how the law works. I'm sorry, are we playing a game of stating the obvious?"

"Are you sure there is no way of not locking him away for ever?"

"He is accused of the murder of your brother. Even if he is not proven guilty of threatening The Primary, he will surely be charged against the murder. I aim to see this case closed. I despise a cold case left open for dog's years."

"But if we're done with the case... you'd leave right?"

Logan catches a note of sadness in Patton's voice. "That is right. My contract will be over, and I will be reassigned to a new Primary."

"Oh." Patton gulps down his drink. He looks through the newspapers so that he does not need to look at Logan. "Jumping jelly beans! There're so many of them! EVERY paper in town has printed this story. They all hate us!"

"Well, the newspaper doesn't necessarily hate us. They just print whatever's popular right now. Nevertheless, I do take offense at being called an 'incompetent circus master who hides behind computer screens.'"

"Isn't that what you did?" asks Patton, puzzled.

"Excuse me?" thunders Logan.

"Uh, you are a nice leader, but you did... um... hide behind screens."

Logan's face resembles that of an overripe tomato.

Patton watches, nervous.

Then Logan sizzles down and exhales heavily. "I deserved that. I was an incompetent leader, and some quick thinking salvaged the situation. Nix and Bronze are surprisingly effective. What did I do?"

Logan takes back the mug from the indignant barkeeper and finishes it. He then puts it down on the counter – but not on a coaster, can you believe it? – and buries his head in his arms.
Patton edges his barstool closer. But a barstool, being taller than your average chair, cannot be edged closer. The top of the stool tips over. And that is what happens to poor Patton, as his barstool careens into Logan's. They collide and fall, and the entire line of barstools keel over like dominos.

The crash echoes around the room, startling people across the counter or in the cubicles against the back wall. The barkeeper looks on in absolute pant-soiling horror as his usually quiet shift is rapidly turning into his worst nightmare. He runs out from behind the counter and wrings his hands desperately, wondering if he should call his manager. But that will mean a dreaded scolding.

Logan's thoughts of self-pity disappear with equal rapidity as he finds himself on the floor with Patton in his arms. He untangles his legs from the line of fallen barstools, and scrambles up, pulling Patton up with him.

"What happened?"

"I knocked over the stools..." says an apologetic Patton.

"No harm done."

But harm is done. A swarthy man grunts, stands up and saunters over, a permanent grimace of anger on his face. He was knocked over too. He picks up the barkeeper from the front of his shirt, leaving the little guy's feet dangling a whole foot off the carpet.

"What did I say about disturbing me?" he growls.

The barkeeper chokes.

Logan nudges Patton. "Go calm down the other patrons."

Patton nods and hurries away.

Logan takes a deep breath and taps the man on the shoulder. "Hello there, friend." He retracts his hand. "Let the barkeeper go. It was not his fault. It was my friend's and mine."

The man's gaze darts to Logan, and he unceremoniously throws away the barkeeper. He laughed sarcastically. "You talk big, nerd. Think you can take me down?"

"First, let us get to know each other. I'm Mr Logan Craggers."

"They call me..." – dramatic pause – "Bongo Bear."

"I suppose that is meant to be intimidating. However, I have no intention of fighting with you. I hope we can settle things amicably over a few words."

"Nice try, scaredy cat." The man takes a step closer, eyes yellow with alcohol.

Logan spoke as steady and casually as if the man had just asked for the time. "Quite the childish come back, mister. Hope we can do better than that. Allow me to take note of that blazer you are wearing. A specific shade of deep blue that is almost black... lapels forming isosceles triangles than the usual scalar. Interesting. Double vented, with a pick stitch instead of a blind stitch. Where have I seen that before?" His eyes narrow. "You, sir, are a bodyguard from the Dignitary Defence Division. But, I do not see a badge. You have been evicted from service. And drinking away your feelings of failure, no doubt."

"How did you know that?"
"Maybe you are familiar with the name Roman Bronze?"

The man semi-consciously rubs his jaw, where a purple bruise heals.

"Ah, I see you have been intimately acquainted with my colleague's physical prowess. Maybe you'd like to take this bar brawl up with him?"

The man stumbles in his haste to take a step back, but keeps his cocky smile. "I can take him... in more ways than one."

"Hm... then I might have to introduce you to his boyfriend who knows his way around a gun."

The man shrieks like a stepped on squeaky toy and runs away like an entire pack of sentient possessed dolls were chasing him.

The barkeeper stutters out his thanks.

Logan waved them away. "We got to get this place back in order."

The barkeeper helplessly tugs at a barstool in the middle of the row, but it doesn't budge, locked in place by both sides.

"Don't be silly. Go to the end and push that stool upright, and the rest would fall back into place. Gently, we don't want them to topple over to the other side." Logan snaps his fingers.

The barkeeper does as told, and soon everything is back to normal. Logan dusts his hands, sits down and peacefully takes a sip of his tea. Patton skips up and settles down next to him. He told the others that barstool dominos were the latest craze, and they liked the idea, but Patton told them to go try it out at some other bar. This bar had already had its share fun. He now returns to Logan and beams, his eyes gleaming with glee.

"What?" Logan puts down his teacup.

Patton nudges him.

"I do not understand what you mean."

Patton makes a sound like a chipmunk.

"I'm sorry, I do not speak rodent."

"You are a great leader! Look how you handled this crisis! You didn't have to lift a finger! You are so good at figuring out solutions! You know how to do word thingies!"

"Word thingies? Do you mean negotiation and influencing skills?"

"Yes! You don't have to like be on the scene and fight, you're are amazing at ordering people around to do stuff!"

"I am good at delegating."

"And you mentioned Roman and Virgil to scare the big baddie!"

"I use resources at my disposal."

"Which all adds up to ALL ROUND AWESOME LEADER!"
Logan thought for a moment or two. "You are right Patton. I am a competent leader; however, I do have quite a few areas of improvement. I will work on them." He looked at the bubbly man next to him gratefully. "I needed to hear that, thanks."

"You're welcome!" Patton does a little Maui dance on his stool.

"I am going to miss you when this case is over." Logan is surprised that he admits that out loud.

"I am going to miss you ever so much," wails Patton.

"Why is that?" Logan stares at the last dregs of tea in his cup, in which the tea leaves have settled in the inexplicable shape of a heart, or perhaps a very hairy nose.

Patton closes his eyes and leans towards Logan. Logan blinks. What on Earth is happening? Patton purses up his mouth into a little rosebud. Logan leans back. Patton keeps on drawing closer. Logan leans back further.

The barstools topple over.

The barkeeper bursts into tears. Not again!

Roman and Virgil walk into a bar. Why does that sound like the start of an insensitive joke?

At first, they do not notice the others, but Patton waves them over, from where he is sprawling on the floor.

"Okay, then," says Virgil. "Lying on the bar floor is something normal I guess."

Roman squeals and clasps his mouth. "OMG! Are they in a scandalous passionate embrace down on the carpet? Oh, praise be that I am on time to witness it!"

"Stop perving on your boss, Ro."

But there was clearly nothing scandalous or passionate about Logan when he got up, and his glower of annoyance turned to infuriation when he saw Roman and Virgil.

"Pff. You two finally decide to show up. And why, may I ask, is Virgil wearing Roman's jacket and trousers, and Roman wearing Virgil's sweatpants?"

Roman and Virgil look at each other and then down at themselves.

"Didn't notice," says Virgil.

"Do you want us to change right here and now?" asks Roman, unbuttoning his shirt, though that was not among the offending swapped garments.

"Of course not. Have some respect for public decency. I, meanwhile, will go to the garden for a breath of fresh air." And with that Logan went off, leaving behind three confused faces.

"What's bitten ol' cheese crackers?" Roman sets the crooked barstools right it all in one go. He sits down next to Patton, Virgil on his other side.

"I dunno," says Patton, in a sad tiny voice.

"Aw, cheer up! Our boss gets mad at everyone! You'll be over it soon. He's not that bad as most superiors go. One time, I had this dude once who would make us put hot melting wax on our hands
and –"

Virgil pokes him in the stomach. "Ro, thank you again for making this all about you. But, for once let others have a chance. I think our buddy here is feeling down."

Roman peers at Patton. "I sense... romantic troubles."

"Of course. That is the ONLY kind of trouble you sense."

"I'm proud of that fact. I'm a self-proclaimed love guru, after all. And we got a new patient to attend to!"

"Who said we, Dr Casanova? I'm only here to drink on Sanders' tab."

"I'm going in." Roman cracks his knuckles and stretches his neck. "Barkeep! Three martinis please! And add three tequila shots to that!" He winks at the barkeeper.

The barkeeper cheers up at that, and even uncorks a fresh bottle for them.

"Alright, Patton!" says Roman sweetly to Patton. "Is your heart feeling heavy?"

"Yes."

"Do you look so helpless, but your body's saying, hell, yes?"

"Um... no?"

"Hm... then it's a love sickness of the purer kind." Roman patted Patton's shoulder. "Do you feel there is a hole in your soul?"

"Kinda?"

"And is this void in the shape of a certain Mr Logan-crouching-tiger-hidden-fashionista-Craggers?"

A nod.

"Hm..." Roman takes a sip of his martini and lets the sweet liquid swirl on his tongue. "So... what did you do about this?" If he has a moustache, he will probably be twirling it right now.

"I tried to... kiss him? I think?"

"Yikes! That man could probably singlehandedly hold peace negotiations with an armored tank full of terrorists but if you as much as blow a kiss in his general direction he will dive headfirst into a canon than face his emotions." Roman hopped of the barstool and started pacing. "But we can still save this situation! He at least knows how you feel now! We can work off that! How good are you at flirting?"

"Not very good, I think?"

"Practice makes perfect! Try your luck on Virge!"

Virgil looked up from his glass. "Huh?"

Roman threw an arm over Virgil’s shoulders. "Wanna let Patton try out his flirt game on you?"

"I said I don't want to be a part of this!"
"Aw, come on, affection kitty! Help a friend out!"

"Are we even friends? We JUST met."

"I'd love to be friends!" cries Patton excitedly. "I even have some friendship bands left over from before! I saved a purple one for you! Isn't it pretty?"

Virgil looked at Roman. "It's worse than I thought. This guy is too friendly to even remotely sound flirty. He needs help, fast. I'm in."

"Yay!" says Roman, pumping his fist, though Patton is still unsure.

"First I must get in character." Virgil takes Roman's sunglasses from the outer pocket of the blazer and puts it on. He sits as if he got a broom strapped onto his back. He lets his face droop as if he is trying to remember something very important, or maybe it is smell the fart acting.

Virgil looks at Patton. "Good Morning, Patton, I hope you had a good day?"

"I missed you!" Patton pulled Virgil into a hug.

"Stop the camera!" cries Roman. Both Patton and Virgil look at him in surprise, but Roman carries on regardless. "Too forward, too much contact and way too much like a friendly hug."

"I'm never going to get it right!" mourns Patton.

"Never say never! Channel your frustration! Now again, more restraint this time, but more heat! Use sexy syntax, he'd like that. Hold back, but give more!"

"I don't think that make sense..."

"AGAIN! Roll the camera!" Roman throws out his hands dramatically.

"Ro, there's no one recording this." Virgil rolls his eyes.

"ACTION!"

Virgil looks at Patton. "Good Morning, Patton, I hope you had a good day?"

Patton flutters his eyes like curtains in a storm. "I" - flutter - "didn't" - flutter - "not" - flutter - "unmiss" - flutter - "you." He doesn't know what to do with his hands, so he ends making impressive air origami.

Virgil hollers with laughter. "I'm sorry, that was a triple negative. It was adorkable!"

"Ha!" Roman slaps his knee. "A breakthrough. Adorkable is good."

"Yeah, but it's Cheese Crackers we're talking of," says Virgil thoughtfully. "Best case scenario, he might dislikes adorkable. Worst case, he might actively hate it."

"I'm never gonna do sexy syntax right." Patton sighs.

"How did your flirtations play out with other guys?" asks Roman.

"I never had to. Guys always talk to me."

"We can try that! Virge, can you try flirty Logan?"
Virgin grins wickedly. "Watch and learn."

"ACTION!"

He turns to Patton. "Good Morning, Patton, I hope you had a good day?"

"Yes!"

"But I have noticed that a day can only be as good as the excellent company you spend it with." Virgil takes a slow sip of his drink.

"I guess so."

"And each day I spend with you borrows the same pleasant characteristics as you." A soft chuckle. "To list them would be too numerous, but rest assured, they are all favourable."

"Aw! You made today the best day I've had in a very long time!"

"Would you like to spend such a mutually beneficial day together without no distractions" A pointed pause. "Alone?"

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"I am."

"YES!"

"CUT." Roman lets out a breath. "Damn, Virgil, that was good. I better be careful, I'll lose you to the Chief if he hears you talking like that."

"Glad to know I have options," says Virgil slyly.

"So now it's clear..." Roman taps his chin. "We need to get Cheese Crackers to ask you out. How can we do that?"

"Why bother?" drawls Virgil. "Patton and Logan are going to end up together by the end of this book, we could just wait, you know."

"We can't do nothing!" scolds Roman. "Love always needs a helping hand, and you can't stop me from playing matchmaker!"

"Guys!" Patton sounds worried. "What if Logan isn't gay?"

"Oh." Roman stops in his tracks. "I didn't think about that at all. I kinda assume everyone is a little bit gay."

"I did see a photograph on his desk and there was a lady and kids in it... did you see it?"

"Urm... Patton pal, when we were on his desk, we were kinda too busy to notice any family pictures we knocked over," says Virgil casually.

"Ah. I think my mind censors out the R-rated memories in self-defence," mumbles Patton.

"The photograph doesn't prove anything," cries Roman. "He might still like men! But how do we make sure? That's the most important question right now!"
"the most important? We sure don't have out priorities straight, I can vouch for that," says Virgil. "We could ask him."

"Oh My God, Virge, you can't just ask someone if they're gay!" says Roman, aghast.

"What else can we do?" questions Patton.

"I shall use the most powerful tool at my disposal," says Roman, with a determined self-sacrificing air.

"Your gun?" Patton sounds horrified.

"It better not be what I think it is," says Virgil with a smirk.

"Neither! My charm! I am quite the persuasive enchanter. One minute with me and he will crack." He turns to Virgil, and asks with a serious voice: "Dear Virge, may I seduce Logan for the express reason of finding out if he could harbour potential pining romantic reasons for our good friend here?"

Virgil thinks for a moment. "Sure. Should be hilarious, and heaven knows we need more funny ideas for this book. But if I find out you have any other reasons, I will hunt you down and decapitate you, then test my sexy syntax with Logan."

"Deal."

They shake hands.

"I never loved you so much like I do right now."

"Right back atcha"

Logan strides in, bringing with him the night chill. The other three involuntarily stand at attention as he clumps past them. Patton smiles and tries to catch his eye, but besides a barely noticeable nod, Logan does not respond. His heels click smartly to a halt in front of Virgil, and he sits down by him. Patton tries to not get upset that he didn't take his previous seat next to him.

"Mr Nix?" asks Logan.

Virgil does not look up.

"Excuse me, Mr Nix?"

Virgil looks at him warily. "You mean me?"

"Who else could I possibly mean? I assume you know your own name?"

"No one calls me 'Mr Nix'" says Virgil awkwardly. Even his snarky front falls back when facing Logan.

"Get used to it, you are an adult. You must move past the rolled-out-of-bed-like-this look you seem to have chosen for yourself. It wouldn't hurt for you to wear a white long-sleeved shirt and black tie."

"Never. Then I would look like the man. I hate The Man. I fight THE MAN."

"That I cannot permit. Sociopathic manslaughter will not fly under my radar."
"Um... you know that's a figure of speech and not literal, right?"

"You were hell bent on murder a few hours ago." Logan does the two fingered 'I have my eyes on you' gesture and Virgil finger guns in return.

"Pffft. I would like to know the exact circumstances in which you got roped up into this nasty business." Logan whips out a flip notebook from his trench coat and a fountain pen hovers over a blank page.

Virgil whistles. "Did you practice that?"

"No. Of course not. Why would I? I'm all serious here. Now, tell me. Spare no detail."

Virgil reflects and begins: "Well... it was right here in this bar. Slow jazz music starts playing. Two days ago, nineteen hundred hours. Everything turns black and white. Picture this: a lone man slumps over the counter, brooding into the depths of his drink and alcoholic depression: Me. The glass of mimosa disappears and a pitcher of whisky materialises. I wait. For what? There is no meaning in life anymore. I am adrift in a sea of unfamiliar voices as the room fills with souls lost as me... all finding brief respite from the daily grind in a glass of drink."

Virgil takes a deep swig from his mimosa/whiskey.

"Um... sorry to interrupt this noir fantasy," says Roman. "But two days ago... that was the day after we broke up..."

"I get misty eyed and sigh, my voice gravelly. The shadows deepen as a projection of my vanished happiness and forsaken love."

"Where did you stay the night we broke up?"

"The saxophone grows louder. Ah! I look up with an eternal frown of intense sadness. The places I've been, the wandering street. The faces I've seen, the strangers I meet. You do not want to know the miserable hollows and filthy borrows I found myself in the night before... the things I did, the things done to me..."

"You crashed at your mum's basement again, didn't you?"

"Shhhhh. Listen to the strings in the piano strum, the cymbals crash and the drums reverberate. Watch the lights dim in the dusky air. Smell the dusty puffs from the cigarettes glowing red. A distinguished-looking man, dressed impeccably in a tremendous sombrero pulled down over his face and a dress coat with a high collar approaches me. He sits next to him and takes out a gold watch."

"How much do you reckon this is worth?" he asks in a clipped accent.

"Um... do I know you? Wait, sorry, this is 1920." Virgil clears his throat. "Who wants to know?"

"You needn't know my name, amigo. You look like a Joe in need of dime."

"What if I said yes?"

"I see you are a man behind the eight ball. I have no time to bump guns. Up to be my button man?"

"Will it pay?"

"If you get the man. Sanders. Heard of him?"
"I may have, on the grape vine."

The Sombrero guy slides over a folded piece of paper. "Here are your orders."

"Deal."

"Don't fail me."

Virgil sat back. "The End. A final blast of trumpets and bass drums."

Patton applauds and gave a one-man standing ovation.

"A very colourful – or colourless, I must say – description of what happened. That is all very well, but how do we find this man again?" asks Logan.

"He was supposed to meet me here same time today to make the payment," says Virgil. "But I guess he didn't coz I didn't kills Thomas after all. And he clearly didn't trust me to do it, as he came to the scene himself to finish the job."

Logan looks even more serious than usual. "Mr Virgil Nix. Were you the one who planted the bomb in Sanderville? If the times are correct, the killer met you hours before the explosion."

"That wasn't me. I was only told to turn up today on Parade Street."

"Very well. That means you haven't been involved in any direct criminal activity, and you are guilty on neither the death of Dolan Janus nor of withholding information when questioned. I will be able to clear your record of any wrongdoing."

"Yay!" Roman gives Virgil a hug. "I totally forgot you might get thrown in jail for attempted murder!"

"However, my supervisor might need further assurance of your innocence." Logan closed the notebook. "I have a proposition for you."

"You want me to go undercover, convince the killer I'm still on his side, then do him in when he least suspects it?" says Virgil in glee.

"No. Don not even joke about that. Silver Sparkle clearly knows that you have crossed over to the side of goodness, to quote Bronze. What I suggest is, would you like to join the team as our Private Investigator and track him down, the right way? You have the intelligence I need on my team, and you know Silver Sparkle the best out of us."

Virgil blinks. He has never been complimented like this before. "Uh... sure. I'm part of the team already, I guess."

"YAY, my boy's a genius!" shouts Roman, hugging him harder.

"Welcome to the beanie genies!" yells Patton, joining the hug.

Virgil wriggles out from under and leaves the other two hugging blissfully.

"Patton, none of us wear beanies, and the plural of genius if genii." Logan tut tuts. "Besides, we do not need a team name."

"How about The Stud Buds?" proposes Roman.
"NO!" admonishes Logan.

"The," offers Virgil.

"The what?" asks Logan, exasperated.

"No, just 'The'. It's simple, short, unique, and messes with your mind."

"Oh. Let's work on it, okay?" says Logan, wearily. "We have more important priorities to attend to. We must catch Silver Sparkle."

Patton chuckles. "I'm sorry," he gasps. "I can't take it seriously when you call him Silver Sparkles."

"Stay focused, scatter brain!" yells Logan, at the end of his tether. "Can't you see that there's a life at stake? If Thomas gets hurt in anyway, we are done in every sense of the word. Worse, the legal and PR complications would possibly sink his agent. Imagine what would happen to his career? And if he dies..."

He doesn't have to complete the sentence.

The others fall silent. Patton looks close to tears and Roman has his breath knocked out of him. Virgil twiddles his thumbs and then speaks up.

"The guy I met... he was wearing a sombrero. Pretty noticeable. The barkeeper might have seen something."

Logan jumps and does a victory dance, thought it looks more like ants in your pants meets geriatric break dancing.

"We have a clue! A lead at last! Bring forth the witness!"

The barkeeper is duly summoned by Roman flagging him over, and the young guy trips over himself to hurry up.

"My good man," begins Logan, "Have you seen a man that fits this drawing?" he holds up his notebook where there is a sketch of the Sombrero Guy aka Silver Sparkle aka you probably guessed who it is.

"No..." stammers the barkeeper.

Virgil scowls, catching the lie in his voice. "Are you sure?"

The barkeeper nods, just a bit too eagerly.

"Won't you tell even me?" wheedles Roman, and reads the barkeeper’s nametag. "You can trust me, Strumple!" Strumple wasn't a name easy to make sound sexy, but Roman managed it, as the Barkeeper cracked.

"Yeah. He was here two days ago. And he was here just before you'll came in. He was talking to the big man who attacked me."

Logan gasps. Things were falling into place.

"Thank youuuuuuu sooo muuuuuch!" Roman practically sings, and the barkeeper swoons.

"Do people usually faint when you charm them?" asks Patton.
"Yup. Except Virge. That's why he's the only boyfriend that lasted. It gets boring when your guy keeps passing out on you, but Virgil never does."

"I'll take that as a compliment," growls Virgil.

"Are you testing my... talent?" Roman slinks towards him, shimming his hips.

"NOT THE TIME, GUYS!" exclaims Logan. "Pull yourself together. Nix, good work. Bronze, listen closely. Silver Sparkle – Patton, not a giggle out of you – was talking to this guy called Bongo Bear – Patton, you may laugh – Do you know him? He is from the academy."

Roman's jaw dropped, while Virgil spits out an expletive.

"I do know him," says Roman angrily. "He is my ex-boyfriend, but he was a downright bastard. Loved me only for my body – not that I blame him – but lust doesn't last for long. Showed his true colours and I socked him in the jaw and dumped his lazy ass. Heard he got kicked out of the Academy?"

"That is true."

"And he is in cahoots with my boss?" Virgil growls (A decidedly unsexy growl, more venom than lewd). He looks at Logan guiltily. "My ex-boss, I meant to say."

"And that's what we need to find out." Logan snaps his fingers at Patton. "Pull up all the details, records and online profiles you can find of Bongo Bear, and see if any fashion blogs and gossip columns have reported a walking sombrero disaster."

"On it!" Patton taps away at his tablet.

Logan sighs and downs half of Patton's untouched mimosa. "Mmmm... I needed that. I'm going to call the Dignitary Defence Division and see what files they can get for me on Bongo Bear. Meanwhile..." He splashes the rest of the glass at the Barkeeper, who wakes up immediately. "Order whatever, you three want. We must celebrate or progress. I'll put it on the Division's tab. And think of a good name for our team while you are at it."

The yet nameless team whoops whilst Logan walks out again to make his call. Virgil orders a beer and drops in the shot to make a tequila bomb, then makes one for the others too. He is not going to hold back tonight.

Roman turns to Patton and smiles mischievously.

"What?" asks Patton, innocently.

"The Chief likes you!"

"No, he doesn't!"

"He drank out of your glass!"

"He threw half it away!"

"He's trying to not be obvious!"

"He was ruder to me than usual!"

"That craggy man has the emotional range of a grapefruit! He's doing the playground trick of
pulling your pigtail to show that he likes you!"

"I don't buy it," says Virgil.

"Don't rain on my parade!" Roman tosses his hair back.

"I have to agree with Virgil," says Patton, he takes a sip of his drink, and chokes. "Yikes! This is strong!"

"It's what you need right now!" says Virgil, not unkindly. "A tequila bomb got me through every hair brained thing Roman did."

"Well there's only one hair brained idea left: The Seduction of Logan," says Roman.

"Not the last. You need to sort this out. I found it in your jacket pocket." Virgil hands Roman a piece of paper. It is the letter Roman's Landlady gave him.

Roman quickly read through. "Evicted!" he wailed. "I'm so behind on rent I'm thrown out! I don't have any money!"

"Neither do I," says Virgil.

"Maybe Cheese Crackers will give me my wages early."

"What's the matter now, Bronze?" asks Logan coolly, stepping up from behind him.

"Uh... I have nowhere to live, and I was wondering if you could... um..."

"Yup," adds Virgil. "And we share ownership of his flat, so I'm effectively homeless too."

"What about your mother's baseme--" begins Patton.

"NO!" Virgil cuts him short.

"You both will be staying at Sanderville. That makes sense, Bronze will be near at hand for an emergency, and I fear Silver Sparkle might target Nix if he is left in an unprotected location."

"Perfect," says Virgil. "Exactly the answer I was hoping for."

Logan frowns. What has Virgil been planning? He is just about to sternly reprimand Virgil for manipulating the situation when a powerful engine revving outside drowns his thoughts out. All their heads snap in the direction of the entrance, as if there are strings attached to their noses. They rush out. It is a double-decker party bus, painted in all colours of the rainbow. Loud music thumps off the open-air upper deck, and it is full to the brim with people in costumes and throwing streamers. Remy pokes his head out of the driver's window and hollers.

"Get in the bus, loosers, we're going partying!"

"NO, WE'RE NOT, GOOR!" snarled Logan. "I told we can unwind with a drink at The Publican. NOT start a rave!"

"Well, if Cheese Crackers won' come to the party, the party must come to Cheese Crackers!"

"CALL ME THAT AGAIN AND I WILL –"

But the world will never know Logan would have done to Remy, as the deluge of people from the
bus trample him in their wild frenzy to get into the bar. Roman muscles his way through the crowd and plucks Logan from under a luminous voluminous skirt of a clown and carries him to safety. Patton fixes his glasses and tries to smoothen his rumpled suit. Strumple the Barkeeper looks on in horror as the crowd sets up a band under the awning leading to the garden, a strobe light in the middle of the ceiling above the dance floor and was that a kissing booth in the corner?

Remy strolls up to a furious Logan. "Come on, lighten up, hun. Even a great dictator needs some down time."

"You think I'm a great... leader?"

"Sure, gurl. You got me respecting you, and not many people can get in that elite club."

"But you still call me that deplorable nickname."

"As a sign of affection, boss, not derision. Now get in the party spirit, champ!"

Chapter End Notes

QotD: Out of the Sander Sides, who do you think Remy will get along with the best?
Lovelution

Chapter Notes

Well we all knew we'd be talking about love at some point in this book, so might as well be now!
I think this is where the plots starts to really get going. Which means our intrepid heroes will mess everything up, of course!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2100 h

Logan checks his phone as the party bus (now only containing the main characters, because I’m too lazy to write an explanation for what happened to the others) turns into the driveway of Sanderville. He has been keeping tabs on Thomas and his phone all evening, because if not him, who would? Luckily, there is no cause for alarm, as Thomas has been in bed all along. Logan frowns. Thomas has been surfing through a particular app that does not bode well with Logan.

"I feel sorry for poor Tom-Tom! He missed out on so much!” says Patton, the first to get out as Remy parked in front of the front door.

Roman and Virgil roll out with a couple of bottles bumping down the steps after them. They are drunk as sailors docked into port, and are in no shape to stand up without leaning heavily on each other like two sad soggy saggy French bread sticks left out in the rain.

"He... hick... din miss musch," mumbled Virgil. "We just drank, Logan stared down his nose at all of us and groaned over the bill, Patton did a fan dance with lettuce leaves or I might have just hallucinated that, Remy made everyone worship him like a weird cult leader and... Ro, what did we do?"

Roman belched. "The kissing booth musta be renamed The Fu –"

"Bronze! Nix! Go dunk yourself in a bucket of cold water!” barked Logan. "Remy, go dump this pink elephant monstrosity of a bus in a scrap yard. Patton, I don't have anything to scold you for... just go sleep. We have another long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"I don't think both our heads would fit in one bucket, Sir!” wonders Roman.

"Fill the bathtub! Jump in the pool! Stick your head in the freezer!” Logan flaps his hands in exasperation like a wind dancer puppet.

"I can't throw away this beauty, Nancy!” Remy pats the hood of the party bus. "I must take it back to the Diggy Deffy Divvy."

"The Division has a party bus? WHY?” Logan throws his hands at the sky. "The world as I know is at an end! Next they'll have jets with Jacuzzis and submarines with spas!"

"You look all heated up Mr Craggers!” Patton fans the frazzled man's hat in his face in a vain attempt to calm him down. "You better lie down! You know, it's so hard to go to sleep" – flutter – "when" – blink – "you" – flutter – "are" – winky blink – "all" – flutter – "alone" – aggressive
butterfly kisses.

"Patton... are your eye lids malfunctioning?" asks Logan, wondering if he was stuck in a bizarro limbo.

Roman and Virgil sober up when they see the shambling runaway train of a seduction wreck itself before their very eye.

"We got to can that clap trap!" whispers Roman. "Cheese Crackers would run to the hills!"

Virgil nods and hisses: "Charge."

Roman rugby tackles Patton to the ground. Logan's jaw drops, but Virgil spins him around before he could exclaim. "Look!" cries Virgil pointing in the general direction of the bus. "Remy is doing something weird."

Remy, bless him, was not doing anything out of ordinary for once in his life, but polishing the headlights, which was what your average chauffeur should do, though most chauffeurs didn't drive big gay party omnibuses. He looks up. "What? I done nothing wrong!"

"Impossible, Goor. Your mere existence is an affront to nature," says Logan with a sniff. "Thank you Nix, for pointing that out. However, in the name of all things holy, will someone please tell me why Roman attacked Patton?"

He shrugs off Virgil's arm and turns to the two men on the floor, one trying to think of an explanation on the spot and the other wondering if he would ever stand up ever again, as getting tackled by Roman is as good as getting run over by a bus. Thankfully, they are saved by a convenient distraction.

Roman leaps up. "Everyone shut up!"

"Ba-ba-beg your pardon?" gasps Logan, shocked at being told what to do by a subordinate. He gets ready to unleash the full foghorn of his commanding voice when Virgil holds up a palm before him, the universal sign to stop. "Listen," he says calmly.

"Do I hear musical theatre?" Roman puts a hand behind his ear.

True enough, a sweet tenor voice was seeping through the front door, lilting with barely contained joy and zest for life.

"I'm as trite and as gay as a daisy in May,  
A cliche coming true!  
I'm bromidic and bright as a moon happy night  
Pouring light on the dew!"

Logan threw the doors open and stalked in, the others flanking him. A peculiar sight greets them, one they were certainly not expecting tonight. A hundred-piece chamber orchestra fills the hall, radiating from the grand piano to the staircase, down which Thomas descends with great aplomb, resplendent in a billowy nightshirt and a luminous white satin robe that trails and flows and cascades down the steps behind and round him. He poses and struts in attitudes of glory and flights of fancy, and his voice rises in thrills of ecstasy.

"I'm as corny as Kansas in August,"

Thomas drapes himself over the banister like a willow weeping with happiness.
"High as a flag on the Fourth of July!"
He hops down the stairs like a sprightly firecracker bursting with colour and sound.
"If you'll excuse an expression I use,"
He reaches the end of the stairs with a leap to rival the most energetic of gymnasts.
"I'm in love, I'm in love,"
He elegantly pirouettes and crosses the floor en pointe like the ballerina of love.
"I'm in love, I'm in love,"
He is an emotional explorer at the discovery of a new territory of the wild heart.
"I'm in love with a wonderful guy!"
He slides to a halt, a bliss figure of romantic indulgence, and flings out his arms in an elegant curve as the music soars in a crescendo of cacophonic feelings.
A breath giving silence lingers in the air.
Everyone looks at Thomas. His eyes are faraway in a dreamy land called infatuation of first love.
The song over, the orchestra packs up and leaves, in search of some other character in a musical who randomly bursts into song.
"Brava! Fellissimo!" cries Roman. "Encore!"
Remy whistles and Patton claps and gives his second standing ovation of the night. Virgil merely shrugs and gives a thumbs up.
"Ahem," coughs Logan. "Mr Sanders?"
"Yes?" Thomas comes back to Earth, like a minor deity after discovering their powers of levitation.
"May we know why you are holding an impromptu recital of a Roger and Hammerstein revue?"
"OHMUGOSH! You like broadway?" gushes Roman, clutching Logan's arm in excitement.
"For heaven's sake, we have bigger issues at hand than your silly obsession!" Logan practically bites Roman's head off.
"Apologies, Sir! Didn't mean to, Sir! Sorry, Sir!" Roman lets go and practically backpedals.
Patton walks up to the still high-on-excitement Thomas, and puts a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay, little buddy?"
Thomas beams the indulgent smile of those who hold a secret.
"Mr Sanders, are you poisoned? Delusional? On psychedelic drugs? As your Chief of Security, I demand to know--" begins Logan.
"Uh... Sir? I think it's best we let Patton handles this," says Virgil cautiously.
Logan scowls but nods.
"Come on, tell us what's up, kiddo!" Patton grins and nudges Thomas. "I know you wanna!"

Thomas grasps both of Patton's hands and swings him around in ditzy circle. "I'm in love, love, love!"

"Woo Hoo!" shouts Roman.

"No woo hoos, please, Bronze. We already know he is in 'love', but when? How? Who?" asks Logan sharply.

"Well," says Thomas with a blush. "I met this guy... he is perfect! He's so sweet! He knows exactly what to say! He's such a gentleman!"

"Ooooh! You got to tell me all about him!" squeals Patton.

Logan's spider senses tell him that there was something fishy about this sudden change in circumstances. But he is wary of shouting at the others to calm down, get serious and do a fact check on this mysterious new paramour of The Primary. How had he not heard of him before? But he didn't want to erase the smiles of the other's faces. Let them enjoy the moment, even if he did not. There was always time afterwards.

"I wish you guys could talk to him too, but he had to go to sleep! You'd love him! His name's Eirian Lumos!" says Thomas, and it is clear that he will talk about this topic and no other for the foreseeable future.

"That's a wicked cool name!" says Roman.

"What is he, ya loverboy? A Tolkien elf transfer student at Hogwarts?" says Remy with a chuckle.

"Maybe, I'll ass him tomorrow!" says Thomas, hugging himself in glee.

"Excuse me, young man, did you say ass him? You're much too young, my little baby boy!" says Patton sternly.

"I said what?" asks Thomas, puzzled. "Oh, I meant ask. Whoops, Freudian slip. You see, he has read BOTH Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter, can you believe it?"

"I can," intones Logan. "Finding a person who had read both series can't be that hard. Whack a bush at a convention and at least half a dozen Tolkienites and Potterheads will fly out."

Thomas and Patton curl up on a white leather divan, Roman perching himself on one arm, and they proceed evaluate in great detail the many virtues of the illusive elusive Eirian Lumos, which is the standard procedure of getting a boyfriend. After all, platonic before romantic love, amiright? Remy fixes himself a king coconut and egg hangover cure, and starts counting all the silverware in the house. I mean, that's totally irrelevant to the plot, but that's what he did and thus I must transcribe it faithfully as the writer of this story. Logan dithers, wondering if he should leave or join the circle of kindred souls. Of course, they are. They are cut of the same cloth after all, but at the two opposite corners of the thread. Virgil stares right back, gives a nod of understanding and sits on the coffee table before Thomas. The others shriek and cling to each other in shock at the sudden intrusion to their round of boy talk.

"I'm sorry, was I unwanted at this exact moment?"

"Uh... who are you?" asks Thomas. "I saw you in the car earlier, but where did you pop up from?"
"I'm extraordinarily good at blending into the background. Yeah, I'm Virgil Nix, and I guess I'm a part of the team now. To help figure out who's trying to kill you. I mean technically it was me, coz I did try to kill you."

Thomas screams and hides behind Patton.

"Uh... I'm a good guy now."

"He's my boyfriend!" offers Roman helpfully.

"Oh! Then everything's fine!" Thomas claps his hands and beams at Virgil. "To have a boyfriend is the greatest gift in life!"


"I agree," says Logan. "Love is a curse on good judgement. Exhibit A: Sanders forgiving Nix, though him being Bronze's boyfriend should not reassure him in the least."

"Blasphemy!" yells Roman. "Sorry, Sir, for raising my voice, don't glare at me like that, I'm scared. Erm... anyways, the time has come for me to defeat the non-believers in the name of love! It's the most powerful human force that dictates every thought and action! To live is to love, it's right there in the word evolve!"

"That is your understanding of the concept of evolution?"

"No offense, Sir, but you misunderstand how to human!"

Virgil rolls his eyes at the bickering pair. "Dammit, zip it, nitwits."

"INSUBORDINATION!" Steam comes out of Logan's ears. "Speaking in contempt of court!"

"Stabbed in the back by my own lover!" Roman pulls out fistfuls of hair. "I mean... TRAITOR!"

"Uh-huh. If you two continue this ego measuring contest, we are not gonna get doo hickey squat done. Yeah, I'm a bad ass bitch, now shut up and let me talk to Thomas." Virgil casually pops a bubble of gum.

Logan and Roman stare at him their faces frozen in a collage of micro expressions of indignation, stupefaction and a general sense of being put in their place.

"This fork has eight prongs!" comes a voice from the kitchen.

"SHUT UP, REMY!" shouts everyone.

Virgil zones in on Thomas. "Alright, Thomas, is it okay if I call you that? Good. Where did you meet Eirian?"

"I didn't meet him yet. I found him online."

"Oh. Okay. When?"

"About two hours ago, I think."

"TWO HOURS? You can't fall in love in two hours!" Logan sits down, overcome.
"You only need love at first sight, then l'amour!" Roman swoons next to him.

"Can you couple of clowns go drown in your own verbal vomit? I'm investigating here!" Virgil blocks out the other two and turns back to Thomas. "Have you seen what he looks like?"

"Not yet," replies Thomas, starting to look uncertain for the first time.

"That doesn't sound suspicious at all to you?"

"Nope! He was very nice in his texts!"

"Give me a break!" Virgil massages his temples. "Let's review what we know, shall we? There have been two attacks on your life in the past two days, there is a gun toting stripper sparkling silver bullets at you everywhere we go in public, and the press is waiting to gobble you up whole. Don't you think it's a tad too convenient for Mr Right to waltz into your life now?"

"That is circumstantial evidence," intones Logan.

"Destiny! Fate! Good Karma!" cries Roman.

"While I value your input, thanks, but not thanks..." Virgil turns his back to the two of them. "I suspect that these seemingly separate events are all connected. How? No idea, but we need to be a bit more careful."

"You mean..." Thomas's lip quivers. "Eirian wants to kill me?" He bursts into sobs. "But I likey him and he likey me!"

"Now look what you've done!" Patton cuddles Thomas. "You made our pocketful of sunshine cry!"

Virgil sighs and puts a hand on Thomas's shoulder. "Look, Eirian might turn out to be the most wonderful guy in the whole of the South Pacific, but we simply can't let our guard down. I've come across Silver Sparkle, and the dude clearly knows what he's doing. I think he's teasing us before making the final curtain call. I hope you understand that you don't have the luxury to date any guy you meet... at least not without a thorough search."

Thomas nods against Patton's shoulder. "Yeah I get it." He wipes his eyes and sits up. "Mr Logan Craggers. What do we do now?"

"Simple. Ask Eirian to give us relevant personal information for us to vet him clear of any criminal record. He needs to understand that to date a dignitary means that his protection comes under my jurisdiction too. Patton, do a search through his social media handles and anything else you can find. I will check the Division's database. Bronze, once you get his address tomorrow, go do a sweep of the area. Nix, go with him, and talk to any family or friends. Goor, keep counting those salt shakers, but be ready to drive us around tomorrow." Logan looked Thomas in the eye. "Then, and only then, can I give an all clear. I hope that is alright with you, Sir."

Thomas nods.

"Excellent. I will now go to my office; some background checks are due. Nix, walk with me." He gets up and strides smartly down the hall.

Before Virgil could follow, Roman stops him. "What you said... is that what you believe about love?" he asks, nervous.

"Talk to you later." Virgil leaves.
Roman sighs and watches him go.

Virgil finds Logan waiting for him, leaning against the door frame of his office. Logan shook Virgil’s hand, much to the latter’s surprise.

"First," says Logan, "Good work with those questions. I failed to make the connections myself, as I was too blinded by my apathy of all things love related. I can see that you are a worthy addition to my team. Thank you, Nix. Second, I do not appreciate being called a nitwit or a clown. I am your boss after all, and I hope that will evoke some respect. Third, I hope any personal troubles you might have in your relationship with Roman will not spill over to your professional work."

Virgil and Logan are silent for a few moments, both looking at the other three having a thematically suitable slow-motion pillow fight on the divan.

Virgil speaks at length. "I guess I'll answer from the last to the first. I'm not the best at being a boyfriend. Can't say what may happen between Roman and me. I'll talk to him. And yeah, no sex on duty. Got the memo on that. As for disrespecting you... I don't. Sorry for all the crap I said back there. Way out of line. Yeah, leading this bunch of nutcases must drive you loco. But you're kinda easy to hate. Shit, shouldn't have said that out loud. You're bossy, you shout at all of us, and you sound like you're a century old. But that's what makes you our boss. I guess it isn't easy making friends with the rest of our team, they aren't really the brightest bulbs in the room."

Remy has joined the others by now, and they are all trying to balance spoons on their noses with varying degrees of success. Surprisingly, Patton was the best.

Virgil chortles. "I would never able to do it, I'll alienate them in seconds. We respect you, Craggers, in some form way or other, it's kinda a natural reflex. Don't worry. Glad I've got you to keep things steady. Just don't antagonise everyone too much. We make a good team when it comes to solving the case. You stand at the helm and bellow orders, and I'll do all the subtle shadowy sleuthing. You be cragging and I'll be nixing. Deal?"

"Yes. Thank you for this intelligent conversation, Nix."

"You are welcome. See ya tomorrow... Sir."

2200 h

Remy takes a room downstairs next to Logan's. Roman and Virgil bag the room next to Thomas's. Logan objected to them sharing a room, but Remy pointed out the horny is as horny does, Prudy Rudy, and one or the other would sneak into the other's room, so why not let them share a room? Logan reluctantly agrees, and Paton opens his mouth to make a similar suggestion, only to have Roman clamp his hand over it, and Virgil quickly puts him in the room on the other side of Thomas'.

Now, Virgil is getting ready to sleep. In the velvety darkness, he senses the bed creak as a familiar shape settles in, spooning him from behind. A leg slides over his tingling body and a soft mouth and raspy bristles caress his neck, breath heavy and hot with –

"Um... guys?" comes Patton's voice from the door.

Roman and Virgil spring apart.

"What the fuck, dude!" shouts Virgil and Roman groans in frustration.
"I couldn't go to sleep. I'm scared."

"I don't think we're the best people to deal with that..." says Roman. "My boyfriend is a living nightmare and my solution to a problem is either shooting at it or fu--"

"Are you sure Thomas or Logan can't help you out?" asks Virgil, cutting in.

"Thomas has gone to sleep..." Patton slumps down on to an armchair. "And the problem is Logan."

Roman sits up. "Ah. That old thorn on your side."

Virgil raises an eyebrow at him. "Are you ready to go through with the plan? He's probably still up."

"You don't have to if you don't want to..." says Patton anxiously.

Roman grinned. "And leave you stressed out? Not on my watch." He put on his headset. "Virge, back me up if I get stuck for words."

"Sure, but are you wearing only a wire and a pair of boxers? Won't that be too much for the old boy?" asks Virgil.

"Hmm... true." Roman puts on a slim-cut long-sleeved white cotton shirt, buttoning it right up to the neck. "Needs a touch of more nerd chic... Aha!" He shrugged on a pair of suspenders. "Let's see how he reacts to this!" He adjusts himself and jogs down stairs.

Roman checks Logan's bedroom, but finding the bed empty, he peeks into the office. There he is! He is garbed in a maroon dressing gown and jotting down notes on sheets of paper that littered the table.

Logan eyed the silhouette at the door. "Rather late isn't it, Bronze? What can I help you with? Did you leave your trousers in here by any chance?"

"No, Sir!" Roman glides into the room, accentuating the slightest swivel to his hips and shoulders. "We need to have an intelligent conversation."

"You have my attention."

"You see, Chief Craggers, Sir, PI Nix gave me a stern talking to about my inappropriate behaviour." Roman firmly plants his butt on the table and crosses one leg over the other.

"Careful, Bronze, I just had the desk washed with industrial bleach. We don't need a repeat of what happened the last time you were here."

"That's the very itch which ravishes me." Roman braces his arms on the wooden surface behind him and arches his back. "I can't help expressing myself... physically."

"Are you doing aerobics? Is that what you mean? Yoga does help express and release tension."

This was tougher than he thought. Let's Terry Crews this. Roman flexes his powerful pecs alternatively, a rhythmic bounce of hard muscle. But he didn't compensate for the tight shirt, alas. It bursts open, a button hitting Logan square on the nose.

"BRONZE! That was a waste of a perfectly good shirt. Next time, wear work out clothing. How much longer is this going to take?"
Really? No response yet? Logan is calm and collected, if a bit annoyed at Roman for wasting his time. Time to bring out the epitome of seduction. Roman kneels before Logan on the table and leans forward. His face moulds into one of the most formidable expressions known to man: The Smolder.

"Is your face... broken? Did the wind change direction? Are you having a heart attack?"

Hopeless! Roman taps his earpiece thrice, the signal for Virgil to supply their secret weapon. It's sexy syntax time. Roman repeats the words Virgil whispers in his ear.

"Apologies, Sir! I forget myself. I recommend that I be tutored streamlined to transform into the perfect agent, strategist, and weapon."

Logan taps his pencil against his teeth. "Really, Bronze? A subjunctive noun coupled with indirect first-person narrative and indecisive future tense, topped by the bane of all grammarians, the Oxford comma? Very intellectually sensual, but any amateur can tell you that it reeks of trying-too-hard. If I guess correctly, Virgil is telling you what to say?"

Roman scratches the back of his neck, and the last button left pops off. "Yeah..."

"And do drop the Hunk of the Week Sex and the City act. It is neither appealing nor effective. What is this all about?"

Roman hasn't planned this far... he had counted on his charm to disarm Logan, but he had neatly turned the tables back on him. Well, he wasn't one to shy away from direct confrontations. He took a deep breath. Do this for Patton, buddy, he told himself.

"Well..." he begins slowly. "I was thinking about our talk earlier – more of an argument really. What do you do if you really love a guy and they don't seem to love you back?"

Logan groans internally. "Do I look like a couple's counsellor?"

"Um... no, but I really trust your advice, Sir."

That was unexpected, thinks Logan, frowning. But if he is to be a more all-round leader as Virgil suggested, he better diversify his approach to the problems facing his team.

"You and I have polarised opinions on this matter. I think clear and constant communication is key. There you have my advice. Now go, I must do some work, because someone must."

Roman will not leave until he has an answer. "But what if he doesn't know how to put what he feels into words?"

Logan sighed. "I guess I must answer that as well. Most guys do not go around declaring their ardent love and admiration to everyone they meet. I have no idea what glitzy romantic planet you are from, but I'd rather not set foot on it. But it takes two to tango. If the couple is compatible, they will find a way to communicate. I suppose the guy who wants to talk but finds it difficult must find a comfortable environment to do so, which I hope the other guy can provide." Logan thought for a moment. "Your shirt is made of cotton, is it not?"

"Yes, Sir," says Roman, surprised at the change of topic.

"Excellent. This dressing gown is made of cashmere silk. If we are to rub the two materials together, static electricity will come into play, and the silk would acquire a positive charge, as the cotton will absorb the negative charges. See? If the two men in a relationship take the time to
"communicate, a balance can be restored."

"Oh..." says Roman, mind blown. "So, if we want to talk we need to rub ourselves together?"

Logan facepalms in despair. "NO, Bronze. You and Virgil do not have a communication issue, you two have a serious issue of substituting communication with copulation. Talk more, smush less, and you two will notice a marked improvement in your relationship."

"Whoa..."

"Any more questions?"

"No... except have you really thought about being a couple's counsellor, Sir?"

"That can be my side hustle." Logan cracks a smile. "And thank you Bronze. Whatever the real reason behind the sex kitten charade, I found it highly amusing."

"Um... your welcome?"

"Dismissed."

Roman scurries away upstairs and into his room. Two expectant faces meet him at the door.

"Well?" asks Patton, wringing his hands. "How did it go?"

Roman is one to savour a story to tell. "A roaring success, if I do say so myself. I launched sexual enticements one after another, but he proved a formidable foe, unbending to my most unfailing of sensual tactics. But do not lose hope yet, my humble audience!"

"GET ON WITH IT!" snapped Virgil.

"Ah... I see you growing impatient. So was my target, and an annoyed cheese cracker can kill with one look!"

"Cheese crackers don't have eyes," says Patton, puzzled.

"Before you go to bed tonight, Patton dear, pray for brains." Roman pauses for ze dramaticks. "Where was I? Ah, yes, Logan figured out the act and our most conniving stench was almost revealed! In fear of keeping our plan a secret, I had to think on my feet and lead the conversation towards our ultimate goal: does our beloved chief prefer the company of men? I valiantly battled his barbed queries —"

"And the stars wept, the angels sang, and mermaids walked the earth. Finish the damned story, Ro!" hisses Virgil.

"Hmph. No one appreciates my stories." Roman flops onto the bed. "I think he's gay."

Patton's face lit up.

"When we were talking about love, he used an example with fabrics, for crying out loud! He's a detail obsessed fashionista! A discount male Coco Chanel! He gay!"

"Way to stereotype, you dinosaur," drawls Virgil.

"Okay fine. He only used 'men' and 'guys' during the whole conversation. Telling, isn't it?"
"That maybe because he thought he was counselling you and Virgil," suggests Patton.

"I suppose..." says Virgil, doubtfully. "I still think we should ask him point blank. He'd prefer that over our hairbrained schemes."

"He did say something like that..." Roman quickly summarises the rest of the conversation, sans theatrics.

Patton still looked unsure. "Is he saying that I should make him feel okay to speak, or that he is purposefully not making it okay for me to speak, because he doesn't like me that way?"

"Oh, don't worry, be happy, you cinnamon roll!" says Roman. "At least we know him better, now! Just give him time and keep doing what you are doing now."

"Except never ever flirt again," adds Virgil.

Patton shudders. "Nope." He smiles awkwardly. "Thanks guys, for everything." He exits the room, shoulders bowed. "I'm stupid with love."

"Aw... I hope he he gets it, somehow," says Roman.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, we're done with that subplot for now. Where were we before we got distracted?" Virgil tore off Roman's clothes deftly and throws him in bed. He leaps on top of him, covering him with kisses.

To his surprise, it is Roman who stops him. "Virgil?"

"WHAT? I've been denied for too long. I need release!"

"Yeah, about that... There's something else Logan told... we apparently should have sex less and talk more."

"What the hell do we have to talk about?"

"Anything really. He said that would improve our relationship, make it better."

"Improve? Better? What do you mean?"

"I want this time to last for us." Roman envelops Virgil in his arms. "I don't want us to be stuck in a vicious cycle of a million arguments and rereconciliations."

Virgil clamps up. "Um... what Logan said was true. I kind of find it hard to tell you stuff. That's why I use so much snark."

"I love your snark!"

"How do you find it so easy to say, 'I love you'?"

"I just go for it. Why don't you try it?"

"Okay. Let's talk."

Silence stretches between them like an unbroken wire. One will start a topic, but the other's voice fades away. One will ask a question, but the other bites back the answer.

"This is hard," says Roman, burying his face in his pillow.
"Yeah. I'm sure the rest of this conversation would be rescheduled to a more thematically suitable moment in the book. Can we fuck now?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Oooh, kinky. Want me to do my sexy Logan voice?"

"Hell yeah, Sir!"

2300 h

Patton still cannot sleep. He tosses and turns in bed, and finally throws the covers off. He is thirsty. He goes downstairs to get himself a glass of water. He pauses at the strip of light coming from under Logan's office, like a deer caught in the glare of headlights of a car hurtling to its doom. It was not just that he really really like the man behind the door, it was the other terrible secret he hid from him.

He enters the kitchen, and tries to pour himself some water without making a sound, but that isn't exactly easy in the dark. He hears a sharp intake of breath behind him, and the glass slips from his hands. A still second of silence, and million pieces shatter on the floor. An arm clamps over his mouth before he can scream. A flashlight shines in his eyes. "Shoot, Patton, it's you." The arm releases him.

The kitchen light flickers into life.

Patton turns around, his heart in his throat.

Remy. Standing at the backdoor, just back from returning the party bus to the Dignitary Defence Division, looking like Zeus simultaneously facepalmed and released a thunderbolt.

"Remy! What on earth are you doing sneaking around in the dark?" whispers Patton.

"I can ask the same of you, gurl! You gave me quite the scare."

"I scared you! I almost DIED when you strangled me! Where on Earth did you learn how to do that?"

Remy tries to say something funny, but even he is feeling on edge. He sits down at the dinner table and puts his head in his hands. "Sorry."

"It's alright, I understand, we're all a little scared."

Patton stoops down to pick up the glass shards, but Remy stops him.

"I got it, Pattycakes. It was my fault anyway."

"No, I can do it!"

"Hush, love, you pour yourself another glass of water, like a good little boy. One for me too. scrap that, let's make ourselves a cuppa."

Patton giggles. He puts the kettle on boil while Remy clears the mess. Soon Patton brought two steaming cups of coffee to the table. Remy puts away the mop and sits down next to him. They sip silently, as they really didn't know each other very well to chat.
"So... Roman told me you're holding a torch for King Crackers?" says Remy, when both their mugs are empty and they didn't know what to do next.

"I told him not tell anyone!"

"He's an incurable gossiping biddy. He's probably told the postman by now."

"But Postie comes in the morning..."

"That won't stop a blabber mouth. But do spill the beans, Lothario, did you two get up to anything?"

"No."


"I don't know..."

Remy tips back on two chair legs. "Yeah. This shiz is hard. That man has a lot of damage under the surface."

"You mean Logan?"

"Yup. Bloke has a dark past, bet my Limo on it."

"The Limo isn't yours..."

"I drive it, don't I?"

"Yeah, but what's this about Logan?"

"Just what I think when I catch him staring into the distance."

"He does do that a lot." Patton picks up the two mugs and rinses them at the sink.

Remy comes over and sits on the counter next to him. "What you gonna do about it? He's not gonna hang around for ever."

Patton burst into tears.

Remy bites his lip uncomfortably and reluctantly hugs him. "There, there. It's okay, bud, let it out."

"I'm s-s-so sorry. I d-d-don't know what c-c-came over me," stutters Patton.

"Nah, it's cool." Remy chuckles. "Don't sweat it, hun, no offense taken. I've done way crazier things when my crush wouldn't even notice I existed. That stuff sucks."

"Thanks."

"Now go sleep. Trust me, things would look better in the morning."

Patton nods and scampers off.

Remy sighs and hops down from the counter. This is bad. He is getting to like the team more than he should. Not good at all. He'd start caring about them if he doesn't watch out. His mobile rings, and he pulls it out of his pocket. An encrypted number from the CPD gleams on the screen. He better answers this one.
Meanwhile, Patton, upstairs in his room, stares at his phone too. An all too familiar number blinks on the screen. He gulps and answers.

Chapter End Notes

So I just brushed up some old notes I made about the Greek's wheel of love, and was like huh... wouldn't this be a fun place to put it in? Hope you liked how it turned out.

The song Thomas sings, I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy, is a song from the Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II musical South Pacific. (If someone was confused when Virgil said 'the most wonderful guy in the South Pacific'.) Not the biggest fan of the musical, but I love the random lyrics, an it suited the story perfectly!

QotD: Was Thomas out of character in this chapter? I guess it's more like Roman to have an impromptu musical number, but Roman's kinda a more toned down character in this fic, so yeah. Anyway, I thought something like this was more suited for him.

See you on Wednesday!
2330 h

Patton is sleeping fitfully, when someone shakes his shoulder. He jumps five feet in the air with a scream to wake the dead. It is an urban legend that Thomas's dearly departed goldfishes started swimming again round and round the fishbowl that night.

"Patton, do calm down! It's me, Logan Craggers."

"Mr Craggers! In my room! Am I dreaming? Pinch me!"

"If you insist."

"ooooooooooowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww"

The zombie goldfish succumbs to a second death.

"Good, you're awake," says Logan. "Get dressed. We have somewhere important to be."

"Are the others coming?"

"Thomas is passed out on love potions. Bronze and Nix will not be joining us. They are otherwise engaged in testing the strength of the springs in their mattress."

"They're doing housework at this time of the night?"

"No, they're doing the good lord's work. Now, hurry downstairs before you hurt yourself thinking."

2355 h

Remy yawns. "You ghoul! Why did ya' break me out of my beauty sleep for this?"

"You're the driver. Don't talk, drive," directs Logan.

"Where are we going?" asks Patton.

"You will see."

The Limo roared into the parking lot of the most exclusive clothes boutique in town, where a crowd of people stormed at the big front doors. Loud banners and LED displays screamed MIDNIGHT SALE in big red letters.

"Oh. We're going shopping?" Patton presses his nose flat against the glass like a Dickensian
"No, Patton, we're here to start the red revolution."

"Whoa." Patton looks on in awe. "I don't see pitchforks!"

Logan messages his temples in exasperation at Patton's tendency to take everything he says too literally. "Of course not, Patton, appreciate a bit of sarcasm. We are here to shop, yes."

"Cool!" says Remy.

"No, you will wait for us at the car park. Toodles." Logan steps out the car and holds the door open for Patton, and closes it to cut out Remy's colourful swears.

**0000 h**

Logan flashes his badge. The crowd parts, stifling cries of horror, wondering if there was an escaped convict on the loose. Logan carelessly stalks through them with Patton and reaches the doors just as they open. They are the first to enter the store.

"That was so smooth!" squees Patton, who rarely ever got to be first in line coz he was so polite he let everyone go in front.

"Sometimes being in Security Services has its perks," says Logan blithely.

Paton looks around the world of bright lights and shiny floors and clothes of ever colour and pattern imaginable. He spins taking in the glamour of the most sophisticated shopping experience in town, at least, that was the tagline on the banners. The shop is separated into four sections: Mens, Womens, Kids and Miscellaneous. The Mens and Womens sections take up two wings on the first floor, which looks like a horseshoe looking over the ground floor. That's probably why the shop is called The Clotheshorse.

Logan steps over a child looking at a squashed spider on the floor with the same fascination as her mother looks at a neon green jumpsuit that had 'JUICY!' written in fruity letters across the butt, and heads upstairs to the Mens Section. "We are going to kit you out in the perfect professional ensemble for a personal assistant worth his salt." He starts shifting through the hangers on the displays.

"What's wrong with what I have on?" Patton looks down at his Hello Kitty shirt, blue dungarees and dusty worn sandals.

"You look like a runaway kid from a ghetto. Try this." Logan holds up a simple charm jacket of a soft material. "The sapphire blue matches the colour of your eyes."

"You noticed my eyes?"

"Blue is a very noticeable colour for eyes, that's all."

*insert sappy mid-2000s shopping montage music*

Logan sweeps through row upon row of exquisite clothes, occasionally holding a shirt against Patton, then a tie and now a pair of suspenders, which he then threw away with a grimace. Patton falls in love with a cute case for his tablet, with a loud aboriginal art pattern. Logan tuts at the
clash of colours but agrees it does look amazing. He continues to toss varying articles of clothing and accessories into Paton's arms. He hands him a pair of shoes. "Why don't you go try these on?"

Paton's eyes are wide as saucers. He nods eagerly and hurries off. He steps into the changing room cubicle and stares at his reflection. He never really did like how he looked. He thinks that his face is all the wrong shape, his features dull, and he never really knew what to do with his hair, which sit there in limp curls. His clothes hang off his slightly dumpy frame like a mannequin wrapped up in an ill-fitting car cover and passed off as high fashion. He doesn't like to think of his clothes often, and he still wears what his mum bought him ages ago. Truth be told, he never bought anything for himself. Because he gets uncomfortable whenever he thinks about clothes. He did like the ensemble in his hands, though he cannot say if it was because he genuinely likes the clothes or if it is because his crush picked it out for him. He puts it on, and twirls in front of the mirror. Grey socks with little ties on them end in brown sued shoes with blue laces. Dark blue denims cover his legs, not too tight and not too slack. A brown woven cloth belt around his waist. A beige long sleeved lined t-shirt with a wide a wide collar. A silver and leather strapped bracelet of quiet design. A watch with silver interlocked links on the other wrist. And finally, the sapphire jacket that made him feel like the prettiest person in the world.

There is a knock on the door. Oh, it must be Logan, impatient to see what he looks like. Patton steps out of the cubicle, and stops dead. It wasn't Logan.

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Logan meanwhile, scrutinises a waistcoat, wondering how it will look on Patton. Probably not... a shrill voice cut through his thoughts.

"Greetings, Mr Logan Craggers!" a tall woman tottered over in killer stiletto heels.

"Ah, Miss Arachne Svengali. A pleasure to meet you in the Mens Section. Got kicked out the ladies?"

"An experience you are unfamiliar with, I'm sure. However, the pleasure is mine, as we all know you stock your drawers from a garage sale."

"A keen eye is better than a lavish brand. Why are you up this late? Doesn't it make your pores look like lunar craters?"

"Tell that to your wearwolf whiskers. I suspected that a half-price sale was exactly where I'd find a miserly scrooge like you, and I was right."

"There is idle curiosity, then there is demented stalking. What do you want from me?"

"You know best about stalkers. What do you have to say for yourself about yesterday morning, Logan?"

"I have said everything that needs to be said, Miss Svengali. It was a surprise attack, but we neutralised the situation. It's all taken care of."

"Taken care of my gorgeously spray tanned left foot! Thomas might be safe, but his reputation isn't! Two producers withdrew his contract for future projects and the press is eating me alive."

"And that might be what poisons them for good. What do you want me to do about this? That is your arena, you're his manager."

"Two can play at that game, Chief Craggers. I demand you release him to appear for a press
conference. He is well enough, and we badly need to do some damage control. Your hair needs some damage control too, by the way."

"Then I'll get out of your over-dyed siren hair. Consider a wig. We shall organise a press conference for later today, say late afternoon. Agreed?"

"Pigs will belly dance the day we agree on anything. Why not the morning?"

"I need to brief The Primary on what to say and what to not. Fair?"

"Fair. I'll arrange it, you bring the man of the hour. If things get out of order, which I'm sure they will, you incompetent circus master –"

"They won't. Don't forget to invite credible newspapers, and not mere the tattle magazines, although that's your speciality."

"And you read the obituaries with envy, old man."

Logan's phone beeps, but he ignores it. "At least I can comprehend complex sentences. You and I will do our utmost to keep The Primary's name off the tattlers and obituaries respectively. Agreed?"

"Wonderful to see you doing proper work, instead of playing dress up with your little friend." Her eyes slant towards Patton, who has come up to them while they were talking.

Patton takes a step back at her bitter voice.

She looks at him contemptuously. "You are a poor replacement of your brother."

Patton shrinks to about a foot tall. Metaphorically, not literally, though that would be interesting.

"Um..." he says quietly. "Sometimes a replacement is necessary for the greater good."

"Hm..." Arachne smiles vengefully, masked in her usual contemptuous scowl. "Good to know your little friend has a voice of his own, Logan. We know how much you like to have people under your thumb. Hope Paton can keep up, he looks like he has no backbone and helium for brains."

Logan steps between them, nostrils flaring. Science insults? That was going low and dirty! "Take that back, you snake tongued bitch – ahem, Miss Svengali," – his voice drips with venom – "that was uncalled for and highly unprofessionally and insensitive. We might trade insults, but I will not tolerate you treating my team with the slightest indication of disrespect."

Arachne extends an ice-cold hand at Patton. "Apologies."

"Thank you," says Logan, still glaring at her.

"Nevertheless, have you wondered if your team can be trusted?" Arachne leans in confidently, as if she is the guardian of the most exciting secret.

"Choose your next words carefully," says Logan, not budging an inch.

"Well, how did Silver Sparkle know that Thomas would be at Parade Street yesterday? We released a public statement to say all his engagements are cancelled till he recovers. Even I didn't know that Thomas was going to the cake tasting, otherwise I'd have turned up with the press. Suspicious don't you think?"
"What are you implying?"

"I think there's a leak from the inside."

Logan's expression does not change. "And?"

"I have nothing more to say..."

"Very well. I will investigate this. How may I be sure that it isn't a person on your PR team?"

"They've worked with me for years... your team is all new isn't it? And what is this I hear of the most recent addition being a criminal?"

"I expect you to respect my judgement of character. Why don't we both track down the leak?"

"I am certain my darlings are clean, you however might no want to appear as a gullible and irresponsible Chief of Security, hm? You track record is fast turning into a disaster."

Logan looks like he was about to blow a gasket. But before he can use Arachne to vacuum the floor, Patton lays a hand on his shoulder. "I'll handle this."

He wags a finger at Arachne. "You are A BIG BAD MEANIE!"

Her eyebrows shot up at the unexpected attack. She couldn't be more surprised if a mannequin of a little boy in a tiny toots raincoat started cussing and spitting in her face.

"We're doing EVERYTHING we can to keep poor Tom-Tom safe and you DARE come up to us and tell that Logan is doing a bad job. He's doing gosh darn AMAZING job keeping the baddies away! Roman can break you in half and Virgil's got brains! And I care about Thomas! He's my oldest and bestest friend! You only care how many retweets and likes he gets. WHY? Someone wants to kill him. WHY! If you can't help us, leave us alone! If you can't shut up and wait, just drop DEAD!"

Arachne gasps daintily and steps back, a retort forming on her tongue. Unfortunately, she steps right off the balcony at the inner edge of the horseshoe.

She totters at the ledge.

She tips further and further away.

She topples backwards and disappears.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!

Logan and Patton stand still for a beat and then spring to edge and look down.

Arachne is wrapped in a giant banner, hanging half way between the floors, shrieking like a banshee. "Let me down! GET ME DOWN THIS INSTANT! SECURITY! LOGAAAAAAAN you will pay for this! And your silly little sidekick too!"

"Huh," says Logan. "Looks like she literally dropped dead. Lucky banner, getting in the way. Now, what do you think of your outfit?"

"Love them!"

"Then we shall we go to the cashier." He coolly walks away ignoring the guttural wails following
him down the steps.

Patton hops back into the changing room, gets back into his everyday clothes and rushes down to the check out, where Logan was gleefully watching Arachne get cut loose. Except the security guard didn't know what to do, so she keeps getting into worse tangles.

"Um... Logan?"

"What? I was just enjoying the view. I like clothes. Let's go. I'll pay. No, I'll put it on the tab. Whatever. This was fun!" Logan strides away (more like prances away but let's let him keep his dignity).

"LOGAN! I forbid you to leave me in this predicament!" howls Arachne.

"You started it, jezebel, hang for it. I'm a busy man. Toodles."

Patton smiles a little smile to himself as he waits behind Logan in the queue.

"Hey? Are you buying those clothes or what?" asks the cashier, popping her bubble-gum. "I haven't got all day."

"Whoops, sorry! I'm a scatter brain! I forget things!" Patton hands over the clothes.

Logan looks on, puzzled. There seems to be something off with Patton.

A couple of minutes later, Logan is in the car with a Patton who is trying hard to impress Remy with his new clothes, but an extremely disgruntled Remy is having none of it. Logan tunes them out and checks his phone. Odd... a text from Patton fifteen minutes ago, but it was deleted before he could read it. Must have been the beep while he was arguing with Arachne Svengali. He wonders whether to ask Patton, who was now jangling his bracelet in Remy's irate face, but decides against it. It probably was a question about how buttons worked. An alert suddenly glows red at the corner of the screen, and Logan, increasingly anxious, clicks on it.

Granny footage from a CCTV camera pops up.

What he sees does not make him feel any less anxious.

"GOOR! Step on it, we need to get to Sanderville this instant."

"Whaddup, Doc?"

"Never you mind, just get us there ASAP."

"Oh, so you need my help now, huh?" grumbles Remy.

"For goodness sake stop throwing a tantrum like a toddler not taken to the candy store, and drive, good fellow, DRIVE!"

"Strap in, dudettes, we're gonna go supersonic." Remy floors the accelerator, and the speedometer swings to the max, and red alarms flash as the Limo turns into a blur on the road. Logan and Patton are thrown back against their seats, as their faces are doing that flattened flappy things that happens when carton characters are on a runaway car.

"Wait, there was a candy store in there? And no one told me?" whines Patton.

Logan gives up, and makes a call.
Hello, reader! It is I, the writer. Let's take a hot second to talk about the security features installed in Sanderville, shall we?

Start from the outside. The walls that circle the house are twice the height of a man who grew up with a healthy calcium intake, and there are CCTV cameras at even intervals. No scrap of ground is left unrecorded. Further, there are highly secure houses to the sides and back of Sanderville, so if our rascally friend Silver Sparkle is to climb over the walls from those sides, he must get through their security barriers too. One house has a moat of piranhas, another a web of electrocuting trip wires and the last is the worst: a trigger-happy millionaire's preteen kid who refused to accept that it was unethical to shoot strangers on Daddy's lawn. That only leaves the front wall, facing the Dionysus Boulevard. This wall is shorter than the others. It is covered in graffiti from an art camp he hosted last year for differently abled kids, and it was mostly sweet slogans on peace, friendship and togetherness. The effect of these well intended quotes is somewhat dampened by the new barbed wire protective barricade put out front. Thomas doesn't like it, but Logan insisted that they better keep it until the bruhaha dies down, and it keeps the media persons at bay, so that was a bonus. Arachne immediately demanded the barbwire be removed, but Logan politely reminded her that when it came to The Primary's safety, his word was law, also dear miss, Svengali, I thought your tongue was barbed enough as it is, and to reinforce it with wires would be to just too self-indulgent, now wouldn't it? She flounced off in a tiff, and the barbed wire remained. The iron gates now have spikes on top of it, and its foot are two straight-faced security guards with grim frowns, because that was what Logan told them to do to look intimidating. One is a man mountain who probably eats dragon bones for his calcium nourishment, and the other looks like a lightning struck skeletal Cyprus who probably would shout "You meddling kids!" at anyone born in the past half a century. The latter's job was to question visitors and check their ID, and the former's to heft the gates open if the visitor proves to not be a nefarious schemer. Thomas' garden, thankfully, has no carnivorous animals, traps or young traumatised psychopaths. Logan got all the locks on the doors and windows changed for stronger ones. Inside the building he had cameras installed in every room of the house. Automatic message alerts came straight to his phone if Thomas or someone else as much as move from one room to another. Logan, of course, doesn't forget to delete the footage from the camera in his office from 1700 h to 1800 h, as the last thing he wanted was X-Rated footage in his storage.

0100 h

"Don't you know what time it is? This better not be a prank call."

"This is Logan Craggers. Bronze, is that you?"

"Uh, no. Virge here, Sir. Ro's knocked out. He's exhausted...He spent himself... multiple times."

"WAKE HIM UP! We got an emergency."

"He gets real grumpy if he doesn't get some sleep right after we drink and fu –"

"I DON'T CARE! Roll him out of bed, blast a trumpet in his ear, inject caffeine into his blood stream, just get him in working order!"

"Ugh, fine. Don't blame me if he projectile vomits from every orifice all over the house."

Virgil sets the phone down. There is only one sure-fire way of waking Roman up. Virgil flexes his
fingers. He brings his hand down on a particularly sensitive part of Roman.

Roman shrieks and launches himself at the ceiling. "OI!" he bellows. The dead goldfish resurrects again, more and more annoyed at their particularly eventful night in their afterlife.

"Why'd you do that for?" cries Roman, clinging onto the chandelier, looking not unlike a Spiderman with no spider suit.

"Your precious boss is on the phone.," says Virgil with a smirk.

Roman drops back down and picks up the phone. "Yeah, Sir? Sorry I was asleep."

"Please tell me you're not projectile vomiting and making a mess on the floor."

"What? No!"

"Good. I spotted a disturbance in the footage along the south wall. Looks like someone tried to tamper with the CCTV. Couldn't capture the face. Go check it. Be careful. Put Nix in Thomas's room."

"Copy that, Chief! Where are you?"

"We're on our way – FOR GOODNESS SAKE GOOR YOU ALMOST TOOK US DOWN THE SUBWAY ENTRANCE. DRIVE SAFE OR SO HEAVEN HELP ME –"

The line went dead. Oh well. Roman quickly briefs Virgil while shrugging on his bullet proof vest. He finishes dressing and runs out, his glock ready at hand.

0115 h

Virgil knocks on Thomas' door. There is no sound from inside. Feeling a sick sense of dread at the back of his throat, Virgil opens the door and steps inside. The wide-open windows let in a chilly breeze that flutters the gauzy rainbow speckled drapes. The bedclothes pour of the bed and lie in streaks of white on the floor. Thomas was nowhere to be seen.

A sob from a corner behind the mirror.

Virgil presses himself against the wall, fully aware that whoever else is in the room has seen him when the door opened. He creeps up to the corner and crouches down, eyes peering into the gloom. It is Thomas, clutching his eyes and crying his little eyes out. He hugs a fan made puppet of himself, which droops sadly from between his hands.

"Thomas?"

Thomas looks up, and seeing Virgil's shadowy etched face in the night is not a sight for those weak of heart, and Thomas' instincts kick in. that is, he kicks out in reflex and his foot punches Virgil directly in the sternum, Virgil staggers back, clutching his midriff.

Thomas jumps up in a fighting stance. "Don't come near me! I studied martial arts for the Karate kid reboot! I can attack you! But don't attack me, I only remember the crane kick in the finale!"

"Shhhhh! Keep it down, it's me Virgil."

Thomas crumples back to the floor in relief. Virgil hesitantly sits down next to him. Thomas
immediately hugs him, and Virgil has no option but to let him.

"Sorry to barge in like this, Thomas," he whispers. "But we got to be careful. Mr Craggers sent an alert saying that there is a possibility that an intruder is on the premises. Roman's out there, trying to track them down. Stick with me alright? I'll keep you safe."

Thomas chokes back a sob. "That's what I hate about all of this."

"Wuh?"

"People are putting themselves out there to protect me and I'm sitting here like a duck waiting to be plucked. I feel so useless. Roman can get hurt, and it will all be my fault. Craggers will get suspended indefinitely if anything ever happens to me. Patton's worried sick, Arachne's pulling all the strings she can and... and... they don't deserve any of this. Everyone is in danger as long as I'm alive, and if I'm not... I don't want to die. Why does someone want to kill me? I don't think I hurt anyone in my whole life! I just want to make everyone happy! If I can make someone smile, brighten their day, just make them realise that the world doesn't have to fell so overwhelming and there's always a reason to feel good... that's all I ask. And now I can't even go out and talk to anyone I want to make a change! Am I to be shut up in this house for who knows so long. I don't care if I don't get another contract, but I can't let down all the charities and welfare organisations that I promised to support. I can't do anything! Then there's this perfect guy who just entered my life... why do I deserve all this happiness when I ruin everyone else's?"

Virgil is in shock. The man clinging to him wasn't the optimistic friendly personality he knew laughing on every billboard in town. This is something new. And he hates that Thomas chose him to confide in... they hardly knew each other.

"I'm no better than this little guy..." Thomas holds up the puppet who stares back with vacant lopsided eyes.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Thomas stifles a cry of hurt.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, dude, but I'm no good with head pats and lollipops. No comforting hugs from me. Let me give it to ya straight. You're not useless. Whoever told you that? The Chief and Roman both knew what they are signing up for when they decided to choose this career. They knew one bullet could kill them. But you're as great as a Primary can get, so don't feel bad for them doing their duty."

"I guess you're right." Thomas stares at his reflection in the mirror.

"I don't know if you're a Mother Theresa for the whole world, but Ro thinks the world of you."

"Roman?"

"Yeah he's your biggest fanboy. Won't shut up about you. watched everything you're in, even taped the commercials off the TV. Remember one night, just a month or two after we started dating, he was doing really bad at the history part of his course... he was never good with the classroom stuff. His exam was just a week away, and I had no fricking clue to help him. He watched that documentary you narrated, and he perked up. I dunno, mate. There's something about you that makes people feel alive.

Thomas smiles shyly.
"Just keep what you're doing champ. We'll keep you from dying. How does that sound?"

"You're awesome!"

"Not really. Being a hero is Ro's department. I'm here to set the bullshit meter right."

Thomas bust into laughter, the same second the gun went off.

**0130 h**

Roman does a quick sweep of the house before heading out. The day he got here, he did a survey to check where the defence was the weakest. He pin pointed that the left side of the house, which was the South unsurprisingly, was the most likely the place that would come under attack. Even so, he is surprised that someone was stupid enough to break into one of the most secure neighbourhoods for miles! Most be a professional cat burglar or a bona fide idiot.

He sneaks out the back door and dives into the bushes. His foot lands on something sloshy and squishy and stenchy. He holds his breath, hoping it wasn't a landmine. Nothing happened. Then he remembers that Patton threw out the rest of his cheesecake that afternoon after his face turned a tad bit green.

He wriggles on through the foliage, his indoctrinated training kicking in. If you stood in the middle of the garden and looked around, you would not see a single leaf rustle or a stray twig snap. Of course, Roman prepared for an ambush beforehand, so he cleared a tunnel all around the house, but between you and me, reader let's not count that, shall we?

Our heroic hero heroically crawls around the corner and faces the South wall. He does not notice anything that stands out. He switches on the night vision on his glasses, but still nada. The intruder might be hiding somewhere though, thinks Roman, and adjusts the knob to turn on the infrared sensor. But, except for Thomas's pekingese sleeping peacefully in her kennel, no heat releasing creature pops up in his visor. Dammit.

He taps his earpiece. "Achilles speaking. Agamemnon, please answer."

"Agamemnon here. Did you zero in on unusual activity?"

"Not yet. Does the footage show anything?"

"Let me re-check." A startled scry. "Don't bump the car so much, you nincompoop. I swear you aim for every pothole."

Roman hears Remy's grumbles over the cackle of the radio. He does another sweep of the garden, but he sees nothing. Is the intruder in the house? A bead of sweat trickled down Roman's spine.

"Achilles?"

"Yes, Agamemnon?"

"The footage since 0100 hours is missing."

"Holy shit fuck balls."

"Achilles! Can we be a little less graphic?"

"I'm a Greek soldier, you better hope I don't really let loose."
"Don't get in character. The last thing I need is a pretty boy diva meltdown. I'm trying to get hold of the back up files from the main hub of the Dignitary Defence Division. You keep your eyes peeled, got it? Secure the perimeter. I'll get there as soon, but this trojan horse isn't turning into a Pegasus anytime soon. Unfortunately, it's jockey is very amateurish."

A third channel buzzes in. "I heard that! Zeus is all hearing, you annoying mortal! Oh look, a big ass pothole, you agony aunt."

"Don't you dare – OWWW"

Roman chuckles. But then he swipes his face into a stoic mission impossible face and steps out of the bushes. If he could draw out the intruder, all the better. He crouches down and makes a quick round of the garden. The grass and trees are eerily still and silent in the moonlight.

Roman pauses at the South Wall again. How did he not notice anything? Is this all a false alarm? Can he go back to sleep now? He Is REALLY tired. But Logan did see a blurred face on a camera...

He looks up at Thomas' room. He frowns. The window is wide open! He warned Thomas that all his windows must be closed at night, but it seems Thomas hasn't cared about that. He hopes that everything is okay up there. He looks down at the kennel. Thomas loves to look out at Princess Barkness every morning, so the kennel was right below his room.

An idea takes plant in his mind. Cautiously, he approaches the Kennel, turning on his heat vision. Sure enough, the dog lights up in red and yellow. But what else could be there?

A creak of wood.

Roman's head snaps towards the sound.

A powerful arm curves out from behind the kennel. Roman ducks and rolls to the side, jumping up with his gun drawn. A dark figure is already scrambling half-way up the side of the wall, somehow slithering over the smooth surface. It reaches the window, draws out a gun and fires.

Roman bounds onto the kennel and uses the momentum to launch himself at the shadow at the window sill. His hands lock around the man's waist, fingers sliding on the slippery material of the body suit. He pulls the intruder off the wall, and both crash back onto the kennel and bounce off onto the ground. Roman stands up, holding the other in a sleeper choker hold. That is when you stand behind someone you particularly dislike, put one arm around their neck, and brace it against the inside of the elbow of the arm. Try it on your least favourite friends (or someone not as strong as you) and they would not be able to get away.

Princess Barkness sleepily trots out the kennel, which now looks as if a cartoon anvil fell on it. He sees the two men, and sweet little domesticated loving dog she is, launches into attack mood. Straight at Roman's butt right in front of her face.

Roman screams, and the goldfish return to goldfish heaven for the last time, and the natural order of life is restored.

0145 h

Virgil and Thomas stare at the mirror before them, open-mouthed in horror. The bullet embedded itself in the centre of the mirror a thousand shimmering threads erupting in all directions, forming a
hypothesising spider web dripping mercury like silver blood.

Virgil takes a deep breath and takes the puppet, and sticks it out around the mirror. No shots. He pokes his head out slowly. No one, or a gun for that matter, is at the window. He stands up and quickly looks around the room. No unexpected visitors. Safe. But for how long?

He gestures Thomas to come out. Thomas shakes his head, terrified to make a sound, and curls up into a tight frightened little ball.

Virgil crouches down next to him again. "Hey, dude, you're not gonna let the killer make you a snivelling coward, are you? You're not gonna die in this chapter. He's just a nutter with a bad bone to pick with you."

Thomas buries his face in the puppet. "That's why I'm scared. Why me?"

Virgil sighs, his voice getting steely. "Silver Sparkle can pull a trigger, but you can do so much bigger. Look at what you've done, the first gay Disney Prince, the face of countless Green Earth products, a supporter of LGBT+ Youth Organisations. Some people are gonna hate you for that. You're not gonna go down without a fight, are you?. What do you say? Just close your eyes, hold my hand, and up you get."

Thomas nods and smiles through his tears. Virgil pulls him up and moves to the door, keeping him behind him.

"Is there a safe room you can hide in?" asks Virgil, urgently.

Thomas nods, and slips out the door.

Virgil hears a scream from outside. He bites his lower lip. It is unmistakeably Roman's voice. Hope he is okay, thinks Virgil as he hurries after Thomas.

Thomas leads him to a cupboard under the staircase. "I got it fitted with supplies and a ventilation system. It's got security features too. I should be safe in here."

Virgil nods and opens the door for Thomas and follows him in.

"Why are you coming in too?" questions Thomas.

"The Chief ordered me to be by your side. If the fellow gets up to this point, I'm your last line of defence. You'd probably wet yourself and pass out."

"True. But this place is completely shut in once closed. Plus, Roman needs you more than I do. I've never seen a person who can mess up things so much."

"Are you sure you're okay alone?"

"Yes, I'll be fine."

Virgil hesitates for a second, then steps out, before Thomas stops him.

"Changed your mind?" asks Virgil with a smirk. "Want a babysitter after all?"

"Nope. Just one question. Why did you join the team? Like, I know your boyfriend was with us, but you didn't have to put your life on the line and be a part of this..."

Virgil pauses, one foot out the door. "Well... didn't have a job, didn't have a place to stay, didn't
know what to do with my life. Always been a drifter, only stuck to one place after I met Ro. Didn't want to lose that." He shrugs. "Look, I was in a dark place when I aimed that gun at your head... gosh, it was less than eight hours ago. Thought it best I fight all of that, find that bastard tryna kill you." A self-conscious smile touches his lips. "Okay, since this is my emotions character development monologue, I'll pour my heart out. I want to do something good. And saving you seem to be the best I can do with my life. If I can't make something better, at least you can, and if I can help keep you around to that, then I'm good."

There are happy tears in Thomas' eyes when he hugs Virgil. "You're a good person, Virge. Go be a hero."

0200 h

Roman struggles to keep his balance, two creatures hanging off him at both ends, a thug in front and a mutt at the back.

Virgil runs around the corner, and skids to a halt seeing the three-headed monster before him. "Um... what's going on?"

"Get his gun!" gasps Roman.

Virgil twists the gun out of the intruder's arms, though he got a kick in the shin for his trouble.

"We need to get the dog off ya rump," says Virgil, eying the snarling dog.

"Oh, don't worry about that. My guardian angle must be working full time, because the doggo bit into my bullet proof vest. Its teeth are stuck in the Kevlar, I guess, so the poor fellow's stuck. No biggie, I just gotta do this hostage negotiation with a dog hanging off my ass."

"Keeping it classy, eh?"

"Welcome to Dionysus Boulevard, where wine flows out the tap."

"Now, let's find out who this bad boy is!"

Roman shoves the man against the wall, and twists his arms behind his back. Virgil tugs off his mask.

"Bongo!" they both cry in unison.

"Missed me?"

Roman's hands loosen their grip in surprise, and Bongo does not miss his chance. He elbows Roman in the gut and shoves him back, and heads to the wall. Both Roman and Virgil point their guns at his receding figure and shout 'FREEZE!', But he vaults over the wall.

Roman swore. "Dammit! He got away!"

"Not really," says Virgil with an evil chuckle. "That's the one with the piranhas."

Sure enough, they heard loud splashes and a man yelling. Bongo swims for his life, and jumps the wall to the house behind Sanderville. The thing is, it is never a good idea to jump on to electrical wires when you're wet, and Bongo discovers that first hand. After a series of tingly hops, he lands in the garden of the next house. He sighed with relief, as it is empty of death traps. But he thanked
his lucky stars too early, as a window shot up in the house and a thin reedy voice calls out, "Yay! Another fool to shoot at!" and a shotgun explodes in his face. He runs faster than a real vampire at the sight of a vampire, and disappears into the night, wet, singed and peppered with shrapnel. Not the best night for Bongo.

0215 h

Logan strides up to Roman and Virgil, fuming. "What happened, is everything alright? Nix, why aren't you with Thomas? Bronze, why is The Primary's dog attached to your behind?"

"Oh, poor little Princess Barkness! Let dadda save you, sugar pie!" Patton hurries up and gently pries the Pekingese's teeth off the vest, and cuddles her.

"Phew," says Roman. "I was worried I'll have a dog stuck to my butt for the rest of my life!"

"We need to get Thomas out of the safe room," says Virgil, and sets off running.

"What took you so long, Sir?" asks Roman, as everyone hurries indoors.

"Don't blame me, gurl" says Remy, joining them. "I drove super fast."

"Yes, Goor, you did drive extremely fast," says Logan in a deceptively calm voice. "IN THE WRONG DIRECTION!" he explodes.

"Whoa, calm down, Mr Craggers!" says Patton. "You'll burst a coronation."

"That's a coronary, you nitwit!"

They all end up before the cupboard under the stairs with all blood vessels intact, thankfully.

Virgil tries the door, and frowns when the key does not unlock it. "It won't open!"

"Oh no! My baby Tom Tom!" Patton hands Princess Barkness to Roman, who isn't that thrilled to have her, and vigorously twists the key. "Nooooo! He's trapped."

"Allow me." Logan steps up and turns the handle. The door opens. "It was unlocked all along."

Inside, Thomas looks a little blue in the face.

"And no one thought of switching on the ventilator," adds Logan. "If Silver Sparkle sits back and waits, we'll end up killing Thomas all by ourselves."

"Well, we're all still in one piece!" says Patton happily, hugging Thomas.

Logan groans. "An awfully low bar to clear, but that's the best we can do. And now, SLEEP. Mr Sanders, you will sleep in the guest bedroom, and put an oxygen mask on. Nix and Roman, I forbid you to bang yourself to outer space and waste energy. Patton, try to keep your dreams G-Rated on the weirdness scale. Goor, try to align your sleep cycle with the rise and setting of the sun. As for me, I plan to sleep like a log, and nobody dare wake me unless it's a life and death situation. Otherwise, I will personally make sure you're shipped to the damned Division as crash test dummies!"

Chapter End Notes
I wonder why I thought Logan and Patton were the best couple to go clothes shopping, but here we are.

The bit of character development hit me on the head when writing this chapter. I was not expecting that heart to heart conversation between Virgil and Thomas to become so touching!

QotW: Who do you think is the spy?

See you soon!
Closencounters

Chapter Notes

Now this chapter has something for you to get excited about... but the walls are closing in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0600 h

A shrill alarm clock rings, hops across a bedside table, and falls off.

Logan wakes up with a headache already pounding behind his eyes. Last night’s shenanigans do not sit well with him... in fact Logan is sure he is allergic to things not going as planned. He groans and sits up in bed. This was the only time he let his guard down and let himself feel the exhaustion and pressure of being a leader. He did need his down time, and it was never pretty. The best time to unwind is in the early morning, when no one else is awake to witness it. And what is Logan’s favourite method of unwinding? A simple method, guaranteed to work: put your head under the covers and scream as long and loud as you can. You would probably feel better after that to face the day.

Logan rubs his crusty eyes and slides out of bed. He pre-set the electric kettle last night to be boiling at seven o’clock sharp, so he only needs to pop a tea bag in a porcelain cup and pour in the hot water to have his morning pick up. He sniffs in the sweet aroma of green tea and heads upstairs onto the balcony. That is the best place to think. The birds chirp, dew lies on the railing and the sun peeps through big fluffy white clouds. But everything cannot always be perfect, as Logan slips on a splatter of bird doodle, and the tea goes flying over the railing.

0605 h

Remy is attacked from all sides. By feelings, I mean, not armed gunman or devoted grandmas or debt collectors. He walks agitatedly to and fro in the garden and presses his phone to his ear. A voice goes on and on shouting at the other end. He was in hot water. Literally.

A stream of scalding hot tea lands on his head.

Remy screams and drops his phone, fanning his head and jumping from foot to foot.

“OIIIIII!” He shouts. “What butterfingered silly sally spilt their tea on my precious head? Come out! I’ll show you what spilling tea really is!”

“Goor?”

Remy looks up at the voice.
A slightly bashful Logan peers over the balcony. “My apologies,” he says. “Of all the people it could have been, it’s an unbelievable coincidence it was you!” Logan cannot help but chuckle. “However, it was an honest mistake.”

Remy huffs. “I dunno, Cheese Crackers, you’ve made my life hell since I got here!”

“I most certainly did not!” says Logan indignantly. “I treated with you all the respect you deserve.”

“Exactly! You’re a mean one, Mr Cragrinch.”

“You can’t talk to your superior like that!” Logan feels his face going red as brick wall behind him. It was too early in the morning for this!

“Well you treat me like dirt, babushka!” says Remy with a pout. Then he pulls himself together… he cannot let his cover get blown by acting childish. “I’m sorry!” he calls up. “Shouldn’t have said that, boss, way out of line.”

Logan blinks. That was unexpected. Maybe Remy has some redeeming qualities. Should he apologise too, or not? But before he gets the chance to decide either way, the voice in Remy’s phone lying in the grass gets louder and louder.

“AGENT 101! ANSWER ME! YOU CAN’T THROW THE PHONE AWAY AND PRETEND I DON’T EXIST!”

Remy quickly picks up the phone and reduces the volume.

Logan tilts his head. “Who was that?”

“Um… my lover! Yeah, it’s my dear sweet… lover.”

“Your lover calls you Agent 101?”

“Look, I don’t judge you on your weird fetishes do I, fashionistah? Don’t judge mine.”

“Hm…” Logan isn’t convinced, but this is all he could ask for now.

0615 h

Patton is making himself a sandwich in the kitchen, when he hears Princess Barkness woofing mournfully in her kennel. No one can be mean enough to not go rescue her, so he unlatches the door, and the happy little doggie bounces up to him and begs to play. He shares his sandwich, and takes the pooch out for a run in the garden. He finds a frisbees stuck in a clump of ferns, and throws it. Princess Barkness chases after it, ears flapping and tongue hanging out.

Remy manages to calm down the angry voice at the other end of the line. All in vain, as a frisbee strikes him square on the nose, and he ends up flat on his back in the grass. He tries to get up, but a flurry of wet licks and fluffy fur and excited yips and yaps descend on him.

Remy wails. “Aiii! Get off me, you crazy mutt!”

“Down boy!” Patton pulled Princess Barkness off. “Up you get, kiddo!” He pulls Remy up.

“Get that animal on a leash! Nearly killed me! I’m too young and fetching to die!” Remy fans himself in distress.
“Well then you could have stayed away, dog-haters back off!” shouts Patton cuddling the frightened doggo. “Hush now, my baby wabby bow wow.”

“MR GOOR!” bellows the voice in the phone. “ANSWER OR YOU WILL BE KICKED OUT OF OUR—”

“Relationship,” says Remy hurriedly, looking up to see if Logan is still listening. He switches off the phone. If he expects that to put an end of someone yelling at him, he is mistaken, as a familiar voice strikes down from above.

“What’s going on, Goor? You better have a good answer.”

“Just a friendly disagreement!” says Patton, eager to patch things over.

“Goor, who was calling you?” asks Logan.

“I told you, my lover,” says Remy sulkily.

“Your lover calls you Mr Goor?

“We’re old fashioned.”

“Yet you role play,” says Logan. “Get a grip, Goor. Don’t bring your personal problems to work.”

“It was Patton’s fault! He set the dog on me!” Remy pointed at Patton.

“Nuh-huh! He was talking loud and Princess got distracted!” Patton points right back.

“He threw a frisbee at me!” Remy starts circling Patton, spoiling for a rumble. He wriggles his shoulders like a cat and wipes his nose with a sniff.

“I can’t help it if the frisbee likes hitting you in the face!” Patton does a complicated martial art move that was probably not from any credible movie.

Then both launch into an epic slap fight.

“Children! Stop that at once!” says Logan sternly and the squabbling pair breaks apart.

A chorus of ‘Sorry’s.

“Learn to behave properly, you represent both Sander’s name and The Dignitary Defence. Division. Be ashamed of your ungentlemanly behaviour. You acted like common ruffians, the kind we swore to keep at bay. Or rather I did, both of you are civilians. Anyway, it applies to you too, I demand that it does. Henceforth, act as preservers of the law. Capiche?”

“Will do, teach!” says Remy.

“I’ll behave like a good angel,” says Patton.

“Very well, get on with your day,” says Logan with a sigh. “We will have a briefing in an hour. Where are Bronze and Nix?”

“They went to pay Mr Eirian Lumos a surprise visit,” says Patton gleefully. “I hope they’ll find out he looks just as nice as he sounds!

Logan nods on the balcony, looking down at Remy and Patton running off in opposite directions.
He frowns, feeling that there was something amiss. Arachne’s voice was in his ear. Was someone in his team a spy, leaking out their plans? Who could it be? Who was Remy talking too? And Since when was Patton so friendly with the dog?

0630 h

Roman and Virgil’s stomachs growl in unison.

“Hungry?” asks Virgil with a smirk.

“Duh! Do you think we got the time to grab a bite before we go check out Thomas’ gentleman caller?”

“Well I’m sure as Hell not gonna take another step without something in me.”

“Something or someone?”

“Barely awake. Need some coffee before I answer that.” Virgil snatches a cup of coffee off a cart on the street they were walking on, and downs it in one go. He turns to the surprised coffee vendor. “Hey, man. Great coffee. I have a horny little shit for a boyfriend. Got anything that would calm him down?”

“By the look in his eye, he’d need enough sedatives to knock out an elephant!” replies the coffee guy with wry smile.

“Hey! I’m right here!” pouts Roman.

“In that case, he’ll have what I had,” says Virgil. “I wear my sultry looks in the inside, not in my eye.”

“Aw! That was so sweet! For you!” Roman dips Virgil with a kiss. A long smooch that is probably a bit too exhibitionist for that street filled with polite people.

“Um guys…?” says the coffee guy. “Can you like not? You’re scaring away my customers!”

“Sorry!” Roman pulls Virgil back up. He takes the Frappuccino the coffee guy gives him and takes a hearty swig. “Perfect! We’ll take a bagel on the go too.”

The coffee guy wraps one up and hands it over, rattling off the price.

Roman checks his pockets, and comes up with nothing. “Virge, can you spot me some cash?”

“No can do…” Virgil chuckles. “I’m so broke I’m basically living off hand me outs from the world’s most generous celebrity.”

“That’s all very well,” says the coffee guy with a shrug. “But I need my money!”

“We can get you autographed merchandise!” says Roman hopefully.

“That won’t pay the bills.” The coffee guy crosses his arms and taps his foot intimidatingly. “Hard cash, now.”

Roman, panicking, takes a bite out of the bagel. Virgil and the coffee guy look at him.
“That was kinda stupid,” says Virgil.

The coffee guy nods in agreement and holds out his hand, palm upwards. Roman hands him back the bagel with a bite-sized hole.

“That was stupider,” adds Virgil.

The coffee guy rolls his eyes and hands back the bagel. “There’s something you guys can do to payback… see that cart over there?”

“The sweet old granny selling homemade coffee?” asks Roman.

“Yup. But she’s no goody two shoes, she’s the meanest backstabbing old crone that dared to try drive the rest of us out of business! If you crash her cart, I’ll be much obliged.”

“Really? I didn’t sign up for petty crime today morning. I’m trying to go clean!” says Virgil.

“We got no other option, it’s criminal to steal food. Come on, It will be fun. Look at her beady eyes. She is evil!” says Roman, putting on a scary voice.

“She does look like a bitch. I’m in.”

“That’s my boy!”

Roman saunters up to the old lady.

“Would you like to taste some coffee, dearie?” she asks.

“Would I?” Roman dips her in to a kiss, while Virgil sneaks from behind and cuts out two of the spokes from a wheel of her cart with a pair of pliers he just happens to have in his pocket like any normal person, hint hint. The cart trundles down the road, and the old lady looks up in surprise.

“Oh, never mind!” she cries. “That kiss was worth it!”

She leaps up at Roman, but he steps aside. She cannonballs into the coffee guy’s arms with a flutter of scarves and moth balls. They kiss passionately.

“Ah!” Roman dusts off his hands. “The perfect love-hate relationship.”

“Okay let’s get out of here, cupid.” Virgil drags him off as everyone on the street clap and cheer at the newfound romance.

Roman and Virgil finally reach a row of sweet little houses, the last of which was Eirian Lumos’ house according to Patton.

Virgil looks down at his hands. “Oh. I still have the two spokes with me. Want one?”

“What do you think I’m gonna do with it?”

“Prick yourself in the eye?”

“Hmph. But then I can only see you half as pretty!” Roman bops Virgil on the nose. “I’m gonna keep it anyway, might come useful next time you snore.”

“My snores are cute snuffles, m’kay?” Virgil pouts.
“Whatever, I’m the one who has to suffer through them.”

“You snore like a steam engine getting violated,” shoots back Virgil.

“At least I’m a steam engine you’d want to violate.” Roman winks.

The two of them made their way up to the gate, which swings unlocked. Roman pushes it open and goes cautiously up to the door, one hand on his gun. Virgil looks at the boarded up windows – there seems to be no one lurking in the shadows peering through the slats. Roman knocks. No response. He thumps on the door, rattling it on seldom-used hinges. Is this really where Lumos lives, wonders Virgil. It looks uninhabited and worse for wear, unlike all the neat and pretty neighbouring houses.

“Mr Lumos?” shouts Roman. “Anyone at home?”

There is a slight movement in the narrow gap between the door and the frame. Virgil suddenly kicks Roman’s leg from behind, and ducks down with him as he falls. The door swings open suddenly, and an array of bullets sputters out. Roman rolls to the side, Virgil scrambling in his wake. They hide behind a low wall, as the gun at the door fall silent.

“Is it him?” whispers Roman.

“Couldn’t get a good look. Kinda hard to when you’re trying not to die.”

“Well he’s gonna pay for shooting at my boyfriend!” Roman charged in through the door, firing bullets in every direction.

“Why do I even like you?” mutters Virgil, even though he cannot help feel pleased. “Your brain is as empty as a gun barrel.” He sighs and scurries in after him.

Thankfully, Roman is still in one piece in the middle of a bare room, one that did not look like it has been lived in for years. Strands of light puncture the murky air through the holes in the roof (probably Roman’s handiwork). The silhouette of a figure moves at the end of a corridor.

“Over there!” hisses Virgil, and Roman heads in that direction in a low crouch.

The corridor ends at a closed silvery metal door. There was nowhere else Lumos – if it is him – could go. The door itself is on the small side, barely big enough for Roman.

“I’m going in…” says Roman in a low voice. He nudges the door and slips in. Virgil pauses at the threshold, heart in mouth, looking down the corridor, sure the worst is yet to come. His hyperactive brain takes note of every small detail his eyes and ears can sense. Crates are piled against the wall, and he reads the labels to calm himself down.

He hears a cry of surprise from within the room. “Virge! Get in here!” shouts Roman.

Virgil goes in and peeks around Roman. He could not believe his eyes. Inside was Thomas, waving happily at them, without a care in the world. Wait, what was Thomas doing here? There is a loud clang behind them, and the holograph of Thomas flickers and disappears.

Roman swears and shoots a useless bullet at thin air.

Virgil spins around… and the door is gone. Only a thin black outline remains on the smooth metallic walls.
“Shit!” Virgil instinctually presses his back against Roman. “It’s a trap!”

“Don’t worry… I’ll probably be able to break the door.”

“With what? Your thick skull? No, dunderhead, it’s solid metal.”

Roman pulled out his phone. The signal bars were down to zero. “Dammit! There must be lead in the walls!”

“It’s gonna be fine.” Virgil wrapped his arms around his head. He hated claustrophobic places.

“Yeah… the others know where we are.”

“Hope we don’t run out of fresh air…”

“Shhhh. Happy thoughts!”

Whatever thoughts they had, they go flying out the non-existent window, as the two walls perpendicular to the wall with the door slowly, ever so slowly, start to close in with a hideous groan.

Two pairs of horrified eyes lock on each other. A second tick by, then another. The groan continues.

Virgil is first to break. He throws himself at the advancing towering rectangle of solid metal, beating it with his fists, pushing back fruitlessly. “No! No! No…” his voice dies in his throat. Roman gathers him in his arms, wincing as a punch lands on his jaw.

“Virge, calm down.”

Virgil shakes his head, convulsing.

“I can’t bear see you like this.” Roman places his forehead against the damp shivering one of the other. He keeps his breath steady, matching his heartbeat. Virgil soon syncs up with him. He squeezes his eyes shut and the anxiety spasming through his body eases to a dull throb at the back of his skull. Roman peck a gently kiss on his flushed cheek.

“Better?”

Virgil nods.

“Thank goodness.” Roman slumps down, letting Virgil bear some of his weight. “I dunno how I can hold it together if you go berserk on me.”

“How are you so calm?” whispers Virgil.

“I’ve been trained to face death-defying situations.”

“Are – are we going to – ?”

Roman clings to him closer upon hearing the fear in his voice. “The odds are against us. This trap is a classic. The walls are moving steadily… we probably have ten minutes left before they meet. And then –”

Virgil cuts him off with his lips. “Don’t say it.” He cupped Roman’s face. “If I must die, I’d rather go with your arms wrapped around me, you big dork.”
Roman’s hands play with Vigil’s hair. “If I got five minutes to live, I won’t watch some silly YouTube video, I’d spend them lost in your eyes.

The walls crunch over the mud on their footprints.

Virgil looks up with steely resolution. “Make love to me.”

“Wuh?”

“When I die, I want you with me, on me, in me.”

“Poetic justice. I want to be one with you.”

“When the archaeologists find us, they’re gonna have one hell of a time figuring out whose bones are whose.”

“We’re going out in style.”

“Yeah, screw Bongo and the Silver Sparkle and this whole mess.”

“No, screw you.” Roman begins unbuckling his belt.

Virgil frowns, and then stops him. “No.”

“Why? I was just getting in the mood!”

The room shudders and shakes.

“What in the nine rings of hell are we doing?” asks Virgil.

“What we do all the time… smushing.”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re gonna call it? Logan’s right. We have way too much sex.”

“But it’s so fun! I thought I was good at it!”

“That’s not the issue.”

“Phew! You gave me quite a scare there, Virgey!”

“Roman Meredith Bronze, focus.”

“You’re middle naming me, okay I’m serious now.” Roman wipes the smile off his face.

Virgil sighed. “Why do we use sex as an answer to everything?”

“Dunno. I thought that’s the only thing you like about me,” confesses Roman.

Virgil frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Like why else would you date me, if not for a taste of this smoking hot bod? I’m no good at a relationship except for a real good lay.”

“You honestly think that? That I don’t like you for anything else? That I don’t love you for anything else?”

“Is there? I’m a human shield, a bodyguard, a job for people with no brains, all brawn.”
“Are you the strongest person I know? Sure. Literally jaw-droppingly cute? Hell yes. But, you’re more than that. You’re ready to put yourself in the line for someone else. Brave or stupid, I dunno, but that’s a level of selflessness I can’t even imagine. Hell, you look out for me, what more can I ask for? You’re caring, you’re kind, you’re duty conscious to a fault but always up to bend a few rules. You’re the dumbest superhero in the world, but you’re my dumb superhero.”

“That’s sweetest thing you’ve ever told me. Keep talking like that, and I’ll show you exactly how heroic I can be – nope, pump the breaks, Bronzy, we’re being serious here.” Roman scratches his chin thoughtfully. “What makes you such a sex crazed minx, then?”

The walls shoot sparks along the ceiling.

“Shut up, you’re the insatiable one with great sexpectations!” says Virgil.

“It takes two to tango! Come now, spill the sexy beans.”

“I guess I got addicted to sex… sex with you. It’s the only time I feel alive. Like… I can’t exactly put it into words, but hear me out. When I first met you, I was in a crappy place. Truth be told, I just wanted a distraction, and you’re hella distracting. But you never made me feel like this was a bang bang kiss kiss goodbye fling. You made me feel special. But I’m nothing special, am I? I’m more trouble than I’m worth. Look at today… when we got into a tight situation… I became a crying mess. I thought the only way you’d stick around would be for the sex.”

“Don’t say that, mon cher. You’re not special?” Roman scoffed. “Bullshit. I’ve been with many guys – stop snickering – and all of them were crap bags. You’re the only guy worth fighting for. If I’m selfless, it’s coz I grew to care for you, care for others, and not be a selfish brat. I know we fight and break up all the time. But we keep getting back together, don’t we? And that’s not because of the sex… I mean it’s a part of it, a big part, but what matters most, at least for me, is I have someone to inspire me.”

“I inspire you? Since when?”

“Well since I started to doubt myself… but at least you think I’m more than ken doll, so that’s all that counts!”

“And you really think I’m likeable?”

“Scrap that, you’re freaking lovable.” Roman tweaks Virgil’s nose.

“Good to know.” Virgil pokes Roman on the cheek.

“We good?”

“Better than before.”

“So, we will sex more responsibly from now on?”

“If we get out of here alive.”

The rumble of the collapsing room grinds around them, louder and faster now.

“Holy shit!” Roman jerks back. “I forgot where we were!”

“Trust the author for choosing a tense moment for this all important conversation,” grumbles Virgil.
“I for one, am not gonna die today,” says Roman, and setting his jaw firmly.

“What can we do?” Virgil stands up unsteadily. “There is no way out. The door is the only opening, and it’s sealed shut as far as I can tell.”

If Roman stretches his arms wide, his fingertips would brush against the two walls now. The left wall is almost at the outline of the door, as the door is off-set slightly to the left from the centre. Roman traces the slight groove with his fingernail.

“If we only had something to pry at it with, or else…” he wonders out loud, almost as if accepting their fate in the face of such dire odds.

A light bulb metaphorically pops up above Virgil’s head. “The spokes!”

“What now? Did you mean ‘He speaks’? Of course, I can talk! Is fear making your delirious?”

Roman rushes to Virgil’s side.

“No, your dolt, the ones we stole from the old lady’s cart.” Virgil holds up the bar of metal in question.

“Ah!” Roman produces his own.

The two of them jam the two spokes into the groove, and twist it. Nothing happens.

“It’s too strong!” says Roman in frustration.

“You know what’s stronger?” Virgil points at the left wall.

He pulls Roman back, and the left all reaches the two spokes sticking out of the door outline. The wall grinds to a halt, the incredibly strong spokes holding it back, as is there was one thing the old lady spared no expense for, it was her cart. But the door, fortunately, was no match for the combined strengths of the wall and the spokes, and it buckles under assault. It swings back on twisted hinges; a narrow gap opens.

“Quick, Virgil, get out, there’s enough room for you,” says Roman urgently.

“And leave you behind?” Virgil shakes his head. “Never!”

“Save yourself, get help!” Roman pushes him towards the opening.

“There’s no time! I can’t watch you die alone!” Virgil turns back to face Roman.

“Then don’t, for your sake and mine.” Roman all but tosses Virgil out of the freeing opening.

Virgil rolls on to the ground outside, and jumps up. Roman stands stoically within the rapidly diminishing room, holding a smile in place. The left wall was half way past the door now, and the right was rushing to meet it. The levers and pistons pushing it forward steadily were visible now. There must be some way to stop it. Virgil looks around desperately. He remembers…. His eyes land on a carton full of glass bottles of some kind of fluid. He scans the label. Liquid nitrogen! Perfect! He grabs a couple and throws them at the mechanism. The bottles break, the liquid evaporates, freezing everything it touches.

“What are you doing?” shouts Roman.

“Hold on tight!” Virgil throws half a dozen more, and the metal bars crank and creak and complain. Another bottle, and the left wall comes to a standstill. The narrow gap still permits a
hand, and Virgil clasps Roman’s outstretched arm.

“Virgil! You saved my life! Thank you.”

“Save your breath for later. Look behind.”

The right wall is still closing in hungrily.

Roman braced his back against it and pushed the left wall with all his strength. The weakened mechanism shifted, but did not give way. Virgil smashed the last of the bottles, and a couple of bolts flew out the rivets, and one bar completely broke down. But the left wall still stayed in place.

“It won’t budge!” grunts Roman through clenched teeth. His knees knock against the left wall. There is barely room for him now.

“You can do it!” cries Virgil. “I know you’re gonna make it.”

“No he won’t!” a third voice intrudes upon their worst nightmare. “It is I Bear, Bongo Bear.”

“You!” spits out Virgil, spinning around to face Bongo. “I knew you were behind this, Bongo Bear.”

Roman laughs wildly. “I know now isn’t the time, but that name is not intimidating.”

“SHUT UP! You’re gonna die, finally. You thought you could make a fool of me and get away? I threw my lot with the right side to be on, you’d all be dead by tomorrow. As for your new little boy toy here, he will get some shut eye right now!” Bongo aims his gun at Virgil.

Virgil backs away. He did not have his gun with him, and Roman’s one is on his other side, out of reach. He whimpers and covers back.

Bongo sniggers.

Anger sparks through Roman like a tsunami of power. With a roar he pushes back the left wall with strength he did not know he possesses, and the mechanism snaps. The door cracks open and Roman leaps out, landing in front of Virgil.

Bongo’s index finger lingers at the trigger. He knows Roman is wearing a bullet-proof vest, and aims for the head. Then he turns and flees.

Blood splatters over Virgil, and a curtain of red descends down the side of Roman’s face. He staggers to the ground, gasping in pain. Virgil crouches at his side, sobbing. “Roman! Ro, no! You cheated death once, you can pull through again.”

Roman mouth strained to form words Virgil could not hear. He leans closer.

“My Jacket…” whispers Roman. “Don’t let it get bloody.”

“You silly romantic!” Virgil pulls it off him.

“You will keep it warm for me, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t feel any pain. I am close… I feel my life ebb away…”
Virgil frowns. “Where exactly ARE you hurt? You don’t look like you’re dying.” He scrutinizes Roman’s hairline and what he sees make his jaw drop.

“Your ear… the tip is gone!”

“That’s it?” says Roman, sitting up. “So long as it’s the tip of my ear and not the tip of any other bodily appendage!”

“You never give up, do you?” says Virgil, sighing with relief. “I’m gonna take you to hospital.”

“One kiss of yours would heal me.”

“Yuck, no, it looks bloody awful!”

“Well, it’s blood. I thought you were a vampire?”

“Wrong fanfic, love. I’m as human as they come.”

“Still hot. Wanna check if I’m hurt anywhere else?”

“Oh, you unquenchable sex pot! Go hit on a slutty ECU nurse if you must, but for heaven’s sake move a leg! HURRY UP, YA HORN DOG!”

0730 h

Miss Arachne Svengali taps delicately on the door to Logan’s Office. “Come in!” Logan’s voice calls out. She slinks in with grace of a ballerina who works as a part-time cat-burglar, and takes a seat. Logan’s face sours, as if she walked in with a plate of salted lemons and force-fed him one.

“What foul wind blows you this way today, Miss Svengali?” he asks, his cup of tea poised half way to his lips.

Miss Svengali sits as if she was balancing not one, but three, books on her head. “Just a casual drop by to see how my favourite client is doing, Mr Craggers. Thomas is very special to all of us. But you should know that already, you oversee his safety. Unless you’re too busy throwing pretty puny princess parties?” She nods at the white ball gown that hangs in one corner of the room. It is the only article left in the room after Logan had the others clean it out for him.

“One might allow themselves one item of personal interest in their office, can they not?”

“It’s been ages since I wore a white gown.” She tilts her head menacingly.

“I despise weddings.” Logan set his tea cup down. “A prehistoric ritual that has overstayed its welcome.”

“The last wedding I was at was a total nightmare of a disaster.”

“The last wedding I was at was the worst day of my entire life.”

“The last wedding I was at, the groom was an hour late. Nervous, I heard people say.”

“The last wedding I was at, the bride bit off the groom’s head on the cake-topper.”

“The last wedding –” began Arachne, but Logan stops her with a raised hand.
“I am sure that you would love nothing more than a rehashing of the past, but –” Logan makes a steeple with his fingers, “Let us pivot instead to the real reason why you are here.”

“Which is?” she puts on a quizzical expression.

“You tell me. Come now, no lies, though you are crooked as the lightening you were born from.”

“You’re the one who looks like an overused lightning rod. Well, remember our chat earlier this morning?”

“At the clothes boutique?”

“Indeed. We discussed the possibility that – in our midst, in this very building – there might be,” she pauses dramatically, “a spy!”

“I have thought about that possibility. One of the few good ideas you ever had.”

“And what is your conclusion, who is it? Although going by your track record, you’ve got the wrong guy!”

Logan’s forehead criss-crosses with lines of worry. “Insult me as much as you want, but I still would like to retain a bit of trust in the loyalty of my team.”

“Oh, you sweet absent minded fluffy eared donkey. No one in this world is honest, not even you and I. Do your own deductions on who it could be. Goodbye.” She stands up, still carefully balancing the three phantom books on her head, and heads to the door. “Oh, and one last thing. Who always helps get Thomas to the place where he might get killed?” And with that, she was gone.

Logan shudders. Unpleasant woman. She brings the arctic cold with her like an expensive but disgusting polar bear fur coat. He sits back and wonders… who helps Thomas get to places? It was none other than him. He made his daily schedule, organised his transport… Logan gaps imperceptibly. Transport… driver… Remy Goor.

Logan rings up Patton and asks both he and Remy come to his office at once. They do, still looking sheepishly at each other.

“Good.” Logan nods in welcome. “Are Bronze and Nix back? It is better if everyone is present to here for this.”

Right on cue, the two absentees stagger in, clothes stained with dried blood. Roman sports a bandage around his head with a big pink heart on it drawn with a marker. Virgil casually sucks on an iced lolly from the hospital waiting room.

“What happened to you two?” asks Logan, resigning to the fact that as far things could go with these two idiots, he is lucky they did not return frozen in body bags.

Virgil quickly brings everyone up on speed about the events of the past hour, with unhelpful interjections from Roman about how awesome he was, and begrudging confessions that Virgil was bad-ass too. Not as much as him, but close.

“Hm…” says Logan. “So, Bongo Bear was there? The Division does not specify his whereabouts. He is classified as missing after he deserted from service, and he has not been reporting back, obviously. I will convey this information for an update on his permanent record. There was no sign of Eirian lumos, was there?”
“Nope,” says Virgil.

“I doubt he ever did live there, that place had trash décor,” adds Roman. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in there. Wait, I almost was, but you know what I mean!”

“How did you find the place?” asks Logan, puzzled.

“Patton told us,” says Virgil with a shrug.

“You told me to do a background check on Eirian Lumos,” explains Patton. “And I found a ton of cute pictures of the house on his social media. I put two and two together… I thought I was being a good detective!”

“Yes, you were, good boy!” says Logan, and if Patton has a tail, he would have wagged it.

Virgil sits on the back of his chair and puts his feet on the seat. “I suspect that Bongo might have planted those pics to mislead us.”

“And he turned it into a nest of traps?” continues Logan.

“Seems like it,” says Roman. “But I know for a fact that he’s too dumb to do it on his own. He can’t make a mouse find food in a maze, let alone construct the wall collapse thingy.”

“Yes, he needs the help of a mastermind,” Logan distractedly looks at the papers on his desk. “Did you get the feeling he was lying in wait for you?”

“Didn’t think of that, but possibly,” says Virgil. “He was ready to shoot through the front door.”

“Was he tipped off that you two were coming?” asks Logan leaning forward, his expression dead serious.

Roman and Virgil share a look. Both are unsure.

“Just what I thought. I think he gets information, or rather Silver Sparkle gets information, from the inside. I have reason to believe that one of you is a spy.” Logan lets his words sink in to a guilty room of shocked faces. All four started to defend themselves loudly and Logan held up a hand and stills everyone to silence with one his patented glares.

“I am not here to point fingers without evidence. If anyone here has something to disclose, please do so.”

The clock ticks by quietly.

“I see.” Logan sighs. He comes around his table and sits on it, facing the others. He rolls his shirtsleeves half-way up his forearms. “I was not planning on an expose, but that might be the best way forward. No interruptions till I finish, please. First, Roman. Your record is as clean as they come, and no offense, but I do not think you have the mental capacity to be a two timing spy.” Roman makes offended noises. “Second, Virgil. You are a wild card, but I’m going with my gut instinct with you. You are a big softie under all that emo makeup, and would not mess up this chance of redemption. I have complete trust in where your loyalties lie.” Virgil rolls his eyes to hide a pleased smile. “Third, Patton. You’ve known Thomas the longest out of all of us. You were his childhood friend, and I do not think you can intentionally hurt him.” Patton beams and claps, but then he would react the same way if Logan told him the sky was blue. “And Goor…” Logan turns to him. “What can I say about you?”

Remy shifted stiffly from one foot to the other. “What ya’ trynna imply, boss? I’m no snitch.”
“I did not say that. I simply asked what I can say to commend you as trustworthy.”

“Well I'm here aren't I? If I am a two tongued snake I won't be putting up with this shit.”

Roman, Patton and Virgil watch the two of them in awkward confusion. What is going on?

“Do calm down!” says Logan. “Profanity does not prove -”

“I don't have to prove anything! I'm great at what I do! You are the one who has to prove yourself. You might be the snitch!”

Logan loses control and slaps Remy.

Remy slaps him right back.

Logan gasps and splutters, clutching his cheek. “HOW DARE YOU?”

“Coz I'm leaving.” Remy storms off to the door.

Logan's jumps and chases after him. “Wait!” He grabs him by shoulder. “You all, please give us some privacy.” He nods at the other three, taking in Virgil's watchful expression, Patton's concerned one, and Roman’s look of glee at the unfolding drama. “Roman go rest your head. Patton, make us all some breakfast. A lot of it, we'll need it. Virgil, go see if Thomas is up. It is unnatural for anyone to sleep as much as he does.”

“But you just asked me to go sleep!” says Roman as he is pushed out the door by Virgil.

“Be glad you didn't get a concussion, but there's nothing between your ears for that to happen!” says Virgil.

“If I have nothing up there, it's coz I've got it all down there!”

“Say stuff like that again and I will put you in a coma. And overdose myself on sleeping pills.”

Patton put his arms around them. “Now, now, kiddos, be nice to each other. I'll make you some nice BLT sandwiches. With extra mayonnaise for Roman and extra gherkins for Virgil.”

“Yay! I love mayonnaise!” says Roman.

“Sure you do!” says Virgil with a smirk.

“And you love the sour - sweet taste of gherkins, don't you?” Roman clapbacks.

“No innuendo in my kitchen!” snaps Patton, rapping them on the heads with a ladle. “These veggies have self respect!”

“Even the eggplant?”

“ROMAN! I WILL WASH YOUR LIBIDO ASS MOUTH WITH SOAP!”

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Logan chuckles and closes the door. “Quite the colourful bunch, aren't they?” he asks from Remy glowering in a corner.

He does not reply.
Logan sighs. He sits in his swivel chair and gestures to the seat opposite him. He got two chairs brought in earlier, so that the room would have some semblance of an office.

Remy sits down reluctantly. “You're driving me crackers, Craggers! Am I fired or not?”

“No, you're not, if you don't want to be. As I said, I am not accusing you of anything. You're innocent until proven guilty.”

Remy visibly relaxes.

“Tell me, Goor. Do you like working with us?”

“Duh! You guys are crazier than cats with catnip.”

“That's settled, then. You will remain with us. I abhor diva show downs and our spectacle today was unacceptable.”

“Aw, come on! How often do you get a chance to slap ya boss?”

“One chance, and never again. Now let us join the others in the kitchen.”

“Stop trying to make us into one big happy family, sistah!”

“You called me sister. Who's to be blame now?”

Grumbling, Remy heads to the door. Logan studies the back of his head carefully, as if the word ‘SPY’ would appear in big glittery letters on his blow-dry hair. You see, Logan keeps his friends close and his enemies closer. Right now, he is unsure in which category Remy belonged.

Chapter End Notes

I decided that Roman and Virgil deserved some character development, and the idea of trapping them in a shrinking room sounded so wacky it was perfect! I hope I cleared up how they function, though I did not expect them to get that vulnerable. Oh well, the characters own me.

For those of you who suspect Remy to be the spy... this chapter made the evidence even more damming, eh? Careful, it might be a red herring.

QotD: Is Logan actually a good leader? I'm worried I've made him hold on to an idiot ball just to make the plot progress. But out of the Sander Sides, he is the leader, or who dod you think it is?

See you next week!
Dramadiorama

Chapter Notes

Good morning, peeps! It's one minute to noon here so I just had to say that!

The first scene in this chapter is probably my favorite slapstick I've ever written, but I guess it's funnier when I imagined it than wrote it. Hope it makes you chuckle!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0800 h

Logan pinches the bridge of his nose as he takes a seat with the rest of them at the kitchen table. They do not look as boisterous as usual, and he wonders if the business with the spy would create wedges between his teammates. Patton was the one most likely to still trust everyone unconditionally, Roman and Virgil would only trust each other, and Remy never really did trust anyone to begin with.

Roman lays his head in his arms on the table and immediately falls asleep. Virgil comes in after waking Thomas up, and sits next to Roman. He starts playing with the hair at the back of Roman's head to calm himself down as he never does well at sit-down meals. Remy fills the coffee machine, and tugs out cartons of orange juice and milk from the refrigerator, and set it on the table, unsure if he is supposed to ask who wanted what. He watches his own coffee slowly pour out. He figures leaving them to serve themselves was for the best.

Less interaction, less drama.

Virgil mutters a thank you and pours himself some orange juice. He puts a mug of milk in front of Roman, and sticks a bendy straw in his mouth. Roman starts drinking happily, still sleep.

Logan is not in the mood for a drink. He gets up and joins Patton at the kitchen island, where he is busy cutting a mountain of bread.

"Um... isn't it more sensible to start preparing the filling now? Otherwise we might have too much bread for the five of us."

"There can never be too much bread!" says Patton sagely.

"Okay... but I'm not looking forward to eating plain bread!"

"No worries! We got butter and sausages and ham and bacon strips and patties and tomato sauce and barbecue sauce and mustard and mayonnaise and tomatoes and lettuce and cucumber and olives and bell pepper and carrots and beetroot and gherkins and asparagus and cheese! Oh my, the cheeses we have! Cheddar and -"

"Patton, that will do."

"But I have enough cheeses to pave a road to Switzerland and back."

Logan facepalmed. "That joke was so... cheesy!"
"OHMYGODS! You made a pun."

"Just get on with the sandwiches!"

Chuckling to himself, Patton lights the stove and throws two frying pans onto it with a clatter. Next he grabs a lighter and a bottle of oil, and splashes a generous quantity in the pans. As expected, most if it ends up on the floor.

"My sainted Aunt Patty!" shrieks Logan leaping back to not get any oil on his shoes.

"What is up, everybody!" Thomas bursts into the kitchen with a spring in his step. Which would have been cute if he did not slip on the oil and go spinning across the floor. He face planted onto the table with a goofy yell.

Several things happened at the same time.

A wave of milk splashes on to Roman's face and he leaps up with a shout. "Aaargh! We're under attack! Floods! Water benders! Water balloons! Oh wait -" Roman licks his lips. "It's milk! It's raining milk! Mad cows be flying!"

Patton squeaks like a mouse who sees a piece of cheese in a mousetrap, and drops his lighter. A line of flames fan over the ground.

Logan snatches the fire extinguisher off the wall and sprays on the flames.

Remy spills the boiling water on himself, and screams so high pitched several coloratura sopranos got nightmares. Logan douses him with foam too.

Thomas looks up, a napkin covering half his face and a salt shaker in his ear. "I just wanted to know what's up, guys, not make a home video fail!"

"I guess the question is who's up, not what!" says Patton with a giggle, looking up. "Virgil, how did you get on top of the refrigerator?"

Virgil smirks and hops down. "I like looking down on chaos." He sits down next to Roman, and licks his milky cheek. "Mmmm... tasty."

"NOT THE TIME, GUYS!" bellows Logan, and blasted foam in their surprised faces. "COOL IT!"

"Ooooh! My turn next!" says Patton jumping up and down in excitement.

"PATTON, DUCK!" yells Thomas, as the frying pan behind him, neglected for too long, bursts into flame too.

"Quack?" says Patton unhelpfully.

Logan buries him and the stove in foam.

"Thanks, Mr Craggers!" says Patton, oblivious to everything as usual.

Thomas's janitor, in her early morning cleaning routine, peeps into the kitchen. She sees the mess, bursts into tears, and runs off. Her wails echo down the hall, and is joined by a loud commanding voice. "Now, now, what is all this carrying on about?" The hefty Cook, who could flatten Agatha Trunchbull in a wrestling match without breaking a sweat, appears at the kitchen door. She halts and gapes at the mayhem.
"OUT! ALL OF YOU OUT! NEVER DARKEN THIS ROOM AGAIN WITH YOUR SLOPPY FACES! Oh, la la my poor spick and span spoons, my clean and toasty table cloth! You could have eaten off the floor, and now a pig wouldn't be caught dead here! Ugh, the lovely pork chop i bought just this morning is soaking! OUT, I SAY OUT!"

Everyone tumbles out in a big wet heap.

The Cook pokes here head out. "Pardon my language, Mr Sanders, sir, but everyone here is a worthless sack of sh-sh-sh-" her breath heaved.

"Shit?" asks Virgil.

"Sugar?" wonders Patton.

"Shrooms?" offers Remy.

"SHRIMPS!" The Cook screams, her red face looking not unlike a boiled shrimp too.

The door slams.

"I, I a shrimp?" cries Roman. "I am NO shrimp! Hup!" He stands, picking up the other five with him.

Thomas and Patton cheer, while Remy asks Virgil: "I hope that's a shrimp in your pocket, stud, not what I think it is!"

Logan groans and wriggles out. He wipes his brow. "You heard the woman, you all are small free-swimming crustaceans with an elongated body inside large bags made of a strong material used for storing and carrying goods, having no real value or use. Now go get cleaned up and report to my office in five minutes."

"Phew, we almost died," says Patton skipping down the hall.

"Well, we got out of it without a scratch," says Roman with a chuckle.

"I actually got hurt!" says Remy, holding up his burnt fingers.

"Shut up, Remy!" says everyone.

Logan opened the kitchen door carefully. "Do you think we could still have some breakfast, ma'am?"

"Did you think a flying frying pan can kill a man?" says the Cook in a dangerous voice.

Logan squeaked like a mouse caught in two traps at once and runs off.

0830 h

Everyone settles down in Logan's office. Logan glares at them all. "If I hear one giggle, I swear the offender will be handed over to the Cook to do her bidding. She told me there are a lot of onions to be chopped."

Patton mimics zipping up his lips, Remy hides his mouth behind a large coffee cup and Romna quickly takes his hand back from behind Virgil.
Thomas puts his hand up. "Is smiling allowed, sir?"

Logan blinks. "If you want to, Mr Sanders, though I do not understand the point of smiling. Quite nonsensical. Also, the Primary does not have to refer to the Chief of Security as Sir. Craggers would do. And no, I do not give you orders. Apologies if I stepped out of line by ordering you around."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm very bad at making my own decisions."

"The four of us are here to tell you what to do," says Virgil lazily. "Except Remy, he's not even a proper side."

"Acca scuse me, Bella?" asks Remy.


"I'll enjoy kicking you on the side, mistah!"

"Ahem." Logan coughs. "Remy is a part of the team, no matter how useless he might be."

"In the name of all thing heavenly, hellish and in between!" cries Remy throwing his arms in the air. "I'm literally sitting right in front of you, and-"

"As I was saying," continues Logan. "We can not afford any more slip ups. According to today's schedule, we must first -"

"Oh no no, you loud mouthed hussy," says Remy pointing his cup at Logan like a sword. "Pay attention to me, I will not be ignored."

("Hey!" says Roman. "That sounds like something I would say!" "Usually," agrees Virgil with a nod. "But the author's still figuring out how to write Remy's character.")

"How childish of you to resort to name calling, Goor" says Logan.

"Ya a kid playing a big shot with a top hat on," Remy snaps back.

"If you are trying to make me angry, you are not succeeding."

"If anyone's making a fool of themselves, it's you and your big fat ego!"

"Still not working."

"You got a moustache like a cartoon dictator!"

"Insult my facial hair if you must, but I am not a cartoon!" Steam comes out of Logan's ears. "Take that back you grease monkey!"

"Who's calling names now, old geezer?"

"Coffee junkie!"

"Robocop!"

"You're straight out from a stranger danger PSA!"

"You look like a school kid's fantasy of a librarian!"
"Bimbo!" yells Logan, throwing his chair at Remy.

"Tramp!" yells Remy, throwing it right back and straight out the window.

"A TRAMP!" splutters Logan. "I, a tramp? You are the tramp! You had a dozen girls and guys and non-binary pals all over you at the bar yesterday."

"At least I don't lock away my emotions and not tell someone I like them..." Remy's voice dies away when he realised what he just said.

The two of them eye each other, wondering how to settle their argument. Both look at Patton, and he comes forward.

"There, there, let's all calm down, shall we?" says Patton, smiling sweetly, maybe a little too much. "We all like both of you and don't want you to fight! Everyone is important to the team!" He sniffed. "Don't mind me, I have a lot of emotions. I love you all." He hugs them both, knocking Logan and Remy's heads together with a loud crack.

"Aw... I have a lot of love to give too!" Roman gathers them in a bear hug and spins around the room.

"Don't expect me to join in." Virgil skips out of the way.

"I must say a few words," says Thomas solemnly. A podium appears as if by magic, and he steps behind it and a spotlight singles him out. Thomas taps the microphone and a muffled boom echoes around the room. "Good morning, honourable ladies. Hope you are ready for a longish speech, because I'm the guy who likes making the let's-all-get-along-together speech at the end of every argument. There's something I need to tell you, all of you: Thank you." He pauses. "I did not get the chance before to talk to you, in fact, besides Patton, I don't really know any of you. Have I even had the chance to have a long talk with any of you? Well except Virgil, who made me realise something very important." He gestures at Virgil, who immediately disappears under the table. "I told him, in one of the very rare occasions that he was ready to listen and talk, that I felt weird - dunno if it was guilt, insecurity, fear, or some combination of all three - when i think about how all of you are here to save me from an evil killer. He told me that you all knew what you were doing, knew the full extent of what you were putting on the line. You'll know the risk of making sure that I don't calm by harm's way. Roman's is literally ready to act as a human shield to protect me."

Roman puffs his chest out proudly. "And he's pretty handy with a gun. Don't get too reckless, okay? Use your head a bit. Virgil - I really don't know what role you play here - but I'm glad you're here, because you told me why you're here, and it was a selfless reason." Virgil pokes his hand out from under the table and gives a thumbs up. "You know you can come out from under the table right? We don't bite. And Remy, I love your jokes - not when you're being mean to people, though - and please don't let our teasing get on your nerves. Just get more comfortable hanging out with us okay? I love the vibe and energy you bring to the room!" Remy throws his sunglasses in the air, does a handstand and stands up for the shades to fall on his nose in a rakish angle. "All of you, whatever reason you have for joining our little team - be it for the money, the adrenaline rush, your duty and honor, or simply because you know me - I am grateful, and will forever be. I am asking a whole lot of you, and i know I'm the guy whose name's on everyone's lips, but you mean so much more to me, more than the mindless fans who just want a selfie with me to brag, or the paparazzi who are ready to tear me down as soon as boost me up." Thomas steps down from the podium and walks over to Logan. "Craggers... I was planning on making a little speech about how great you're doing, but you already know that, don't you? I am in awe of how you manage to push us all into getting stuff done, you know what a handful we are. But that said, I must add -"

Logan raises a palm to stop him. "None among you know my flaws better than I." He leans against
the podium, one elbow propped against the microphone and legs crossed. "I'll make this quick. This is my fast assignment." He notes the looks of surprise on everyone's faces. "I'm learning this on the go. I might be book smart but putting that theory into practice is no easy game. But I'm glad that I have all of you as my first team, I couldn't have asked for anyone better to have my back. Yes, this whole deal with the spy is making everyone worried about who to trust, but we will pull through. I have been rather unorthodox and chaotic as of late. Goor, my apologies. I have been singling you out for my derision, and you had to bear the brunt of my harsh words. Can we shake hands and let bygones be bygones?"

"Yes, hug and make out!" says Roman firmly.

"It's hug and make up," says Patton, patting him on the shoulder. "I want Craggers & Remy to act like two good kiddos, alright? What would your mummies think of you?"

Remy rolled his eyes. "So long as Mr Scrooge Mcduck don't break his promise."

"You have my word," says Logan shaking Remy's hand.

"So, you won't snap my head everytime I talk?"

"Depends on what you say. I might be apologising but I am your supervisor after all. Don't push it."

"Yay!" says Thomas. "Now everything is back to normal." He pauses. "But what's this about a spy?"

"Well..." says Logan. "Your Agent Miss Svengali brought up a suspicion that there might be a spy among us..."

"Impossible!" gasps Thomas.

"And given what had happened so far, I'm afraid I must agree. Silver Sparkle seems to be acutely aware of our every move."

"Would any of you betray me?" asks Thomas, looking around the room.

"Never!" says Roman at once. Logan surreptitiously observes the reactions of the others. Remy has his eyes and mouth covered by sunglasses and coffee cup respectively, and his face cannot be seen. Patton looks adoringly at Thomas, and his expression reveals nothing else, besides a slight tick in the tail of his left eye. Virgil is still under the table, and Logan cannot see his face.

"See?" says the gullible Thomas. "Everyone here loves each other!"

"That I hope to be true," says Logan dryly, worried at the lack of progress in that front. Who was the spy?

Virgil pops up from under the table.

"Eeek!" shrieks everyone except Logan.

"Oh gosh, calm your tits, it's me." Virgil sighs and perches on the back of a chair. "I have a question."

"Which is?" asks Logan, while the rest fan Roman who has fainted away.

"This is your first assignment, right?"
"That is correct."

"This is Sleeping Beauty over there's first mission too. Remy just joined the Dignitary Defence Division. Patton was called over to be Thomas's PA straight out of college. I was never meant to be a part of this... isn't that too much of a coincidence?"

"Well, everyone has to start somewhere!" says Thomas brightly. "I don't think any less of you just because this is your first real job!"

Logan scratches his chin, new worries flooding his brain. "I did not realise that. What could it possibly mean? I doubt one person has the authority to decide who gets what assignment. After all, the four of us are handled by four separate Departments in the Division, and Patton came here before I entered him to the Division's database."

"Who has the power to influence all four Departments?" asks Virgil, eyes narrowing.

"The old man in the sky?" asks Patton, eyes wide as space saucers.

"Don't be silly!" says Roman. "I'd bet the rest of my left ear that it's clearly a political job. Or someone with a lot of money. The high ups in the good ol' Division won't say not to a bribe. Someone could have demanded that they put us together."

Logan's face heats up to hear his beloved institution slandered. "HOW DARE YOU, BRONZE! YOU, WHOSE ENTIRE CAREER WAS BUILT BY THE DIGNITARY DEFENSE DIVISION!" He jabs Roman in the chest. "YOU'D BE WHORING YOURSELF ON THE STREET FOR A GUINEA A TURN IF YOU DIDN'T GET INTO THE BODYGUARD ACADEMY! TO DARE TURN YOU BACK ON THAT WHICH MADE YOU WHO YOU ARE TODAY -"

Patton smashes an ice pack on Logan's face. "Calm down! You're burning up!"

"Where did you even get an ice pack from?" mutters Logan from under the pack.

"Logan!" says Thomas. "Didn't we agree that everyone is important to the team? Hear Roman out."

"Hmph!" Logan takes a step back. "Fine."

"I really don't have anything more to say," says Roman, flushing. "Except that I'll fetch more than a guinea! Hmph!" he adds under his breath.

"I can vouch for that," says Virgil. "But does this mean that there's someone who wants all of us in one place? Why?"

"I don't think that's the reason, chuckies," says Remy. "If you throw a team of newbies together to protect a B-list celebrity, that only means one thing." He takes a long sip from his coffee. "They want us amateurs to fail. They want Thomas dead."

Thomas's voice is stuck in his throat.

Logan sits down in his armchair with a huff. "A person who wants Thomas dead with an extremely convoluted plan. And perhaps has grudges against each one of us personally. I was surprised when I discovered that Miss Svengali was your Agent. I know her from before, and CoS are usually not given assignments with people they know. Further, is it not curious that Roman's Ex-boyfriend also has sided with Silver Sparkle?"

"Damn," says Virgil. "Next my stepmother would come back as a zombie to join the Little Leagues"
Roman rubs the back of his neck. "When did this get so complicated? Can someone please point at a bad guy I need to shoot at?"

"That might be exactly what you have to do soon," says Logan. "We will get to the bottom of this. Without fail. However, right now, we need to focus on getting the activities of the day started. Patton, what is on Mr Sanders's agenda for the day?"

Patton switches on his tablet. "Let's see... Thomas's got an invite to a Treasure Hunt at the park."

"And how late is that invitation?" asks Logan. "I won't be surprised it was sent back when he was six!"

"Nope! It's from a cancer foundation and they would like him to host it... we're kinda late to confirm, but they would really like to have him! Ooooh! You can dress up as a Pirate, Tom Tom!"

"I think that's exactly what I want to cheer myself up today!" Thomas beams. "I really want to put a smile on those kids' faces. Didn't I have a Pirate's hat somewhere in this room?" Thomas looks around the library. "Actually where did all my stuff go?"

"In every corner of the Earth, hun bun," says Remy. "We sold the lot. I think the Pirate's Hat went to someone with a username that's X-Rated."

"It was that perverted?" asks Logan wrinkling his nose.

"It was literally SandersX-Rated."

"And that's all we want to hear about that. We will get Thomas a new costume. What else is on the agenda, Patton?"

"An email from Miss Arachne Svengali... she's organised a Press Conference for today afternoon." Patton looks up concerned.

"Oh dear..." Thomas mutters. "I have no idea what to say..."

"I may have to coach you through it, Mr Sanders. Just stick to the simple outline of the events of the night of the explosion, and be as generic as possible in your other answers, and we should be able to coast through comfortably." Logan looks confident, even if Thomas does not.

"Well I hope it doesn't drag on for too long," says Thomas. "I might have... plans afterwards."

"OH MY!" says Roman, going all googly eyed. "Do tell."

"Well Eirian, the guy I met online, he asked if we could meet up tonight..." Thomas's cheeks turn pink.

"Aren't you rushing into this?" asks Patton.

"Well if loverboy wants to git, he's gonna git," says Remy.

"I do not think that this is advisable, especially at this time. I voiced my concerns earlier," says Logan sternly.

"I agree with HAL 9000," says Virgil sitting on Logan's desk, much to the latter's annoyance.
"Aw... don't be a party poopy ducky!" says Roman. "Virgie, my dear affection feline, do you remember our first date?"

"I still get nightmares. No amount of therapy would help me heal my wounds from that fateful day."

"We weren't that rough the first time!"

"I'm talking about mental scars. But I guess you need a brain to get scarred."

"HEY!"

"Should I tell him I can't make it tonight?" asks Thomas sadly.

Logan scribbles a circle in his notepad. "If there are powers that be determined to see us fail, then running away will be letting them win. Thomas deserves a nice evening. I say we go for it. My team will reinforce your safety. Won't we?"

Everyone chimes in on a chorus of affirmation.

"Good," says Logan. "Now let us get ready to face the day. Patton tell us the details about today's events."

Patton rechecks his tablet. "It's at the City Park. Starting at 9.30. Thomas has to act as the guide along the trail, and the kids are supposed to follow along and find clues and stuff. Woo hoo! There's a bit in the lake! It's gonna be fun! Wish I could play too!"

"Patton, grow up!" says Logan. "This one is trickier as The Primary will be on the move. I need to have eyes on him constantly... I think the time has come for me to go out on the field. I am coming with you all this time." Everyone cheers (or at least smiled, like Virgil and Remy.) Logan tries not to let the other's see how pleased he is at their reaction. "Thank you. Now, quiet, please. I will be accompanying Goor in the limousine. Patton, at the Primary's side as usual. Do not lose sight of him. You are our eyes and ears near the main target. Bronze, stay close as well. I'm not risking having you too far away from the Primary like last time. Do not scare the kids."

"Kids love me!" protests Roman. "I make a very good climbing frame."

Logan is too preoccupied to give an answer to such ridiculousness. He takes out an extra headset and a glock from his drawer. He hands them to Virgil. "Welcome to the team. I need a plainclothes detective on the ground too. You will be investigating any unusual activity in the surrounding. Maybe another sniper on a roof, eh? I do not want Bronze getting distracted, understand? Keep an eye out for both Silver Sparkle and Bongo Bear."

"Can do, Chief!" Virgil puts the headset on.

"I've programmed each set to our code names. We got hacked last time by a certain amoral individual -"

"Okay, I get it!" says Virgil shoving his hands in his pocket. "Thomas, sorry for trying to put a bullet through ya head yesterday."

"No worries!" Thomas beams.

"Why must I deal with so much interpersonal melodrama?" Logan tells himself. He snaps his fingers. "Alright, let us move out."
"Wait, what's Virge's code name?" asks Roman putting an arm around him.

"How about Nix?" says Virgil. "It's my surname and an ancient Greek goddess."

"Who's Nix?" asks Patton.

"The primordial darkness from the dawn of creation." Virgil lowers dramatically.

"Too obvious," says Logan. "A fetus can figure that one out."

Remy hops onto the desk. "Guys, duh, it's prolly obvious who Virgiekins is! Patrocles! Roman's Achilles, it's a done deal by this point."

"I love it!" cries Roman hugging Virgil.

"Ya, I'm the strategist, and I die before you so it's you who'll get heartbroken," says Virgil, poking Roman on the nose.

"Are you implying that you'd be heartbroken if I end up dying first? You have a heart!" Roman squeezes Virgil harder. "You're losing your game, saying so many sweet things to me today!"

"Well, I plan on featuring in your sweet dreams when Silver Sparkle stabs you in the ankle." Virgil wriggles out from the tight embrace.

Logan programmed Virgil's channel. "There you go. No flirting over the radio, understood? We have have bigger fish to fry."

"So do I when we get back from the mission," says Virgil elbowing Roman in the gut.

"What's my code?" asks Thomas.

"Helen of Troy," says Patton.

"Seriously?"

"Yup! You're the prettiest princess in the world, love!" says Remy.

"Didn't we talk about making the name shorter?" asks Roman.

"Any suggestions?" Logan picks up his laptop.

"HOT," says Virgil. "It's the first letter of each word."

"I am NOT going to be on a mission where the code for the Primary is HOT!"

"Hel? As in short for Helen?" asks Patton.

"I don't like that! I don't wanna go to Hell" wails Thomas.

"Let us have a vote," says Logan. "How many in favour of Hot?" Everyone's hand except his goes up. "Very well then." Logan groans.

"We still don't have a name for our team!" says Roman.

"THAT IS ALL THE TIME WE HAVE FOR FUN!" shouts Logan. "The name does not matter, it is how well we perform. We have wasted enough time already. Everyone, MOVE!"
"But I'm still hungry!" says Thomas.

"And who's fault is that?" asks Logan, ushering everyone out.

"Patton," says Remy flatly. "I didn't get to eat even one sandwich!"

"Eat two, Remy? Then fall Patton!"

"Yup. He's to blame," says Logan. "Lunch is on Patton."

"Noooooooo!"

0900 h

Remy catches up with Roman as they walk to the Limousine. "Hey, bigfoot."

"Hi, Remy Littlefinger!"

"Uh huh. I'm curious about the shady stuff going down at the Diggy Diffy Divvy. I'm sure you know all the dirt deets about that!"

"Not really." Roman scratches his head. "I'm pretty low in the ranks, I don't get access to the important stuff."

"But you must have heard something, you got ears like cabbage leaves!"

"And you shouldn't put your pig snout into things that you don't know about."

"Aw, spill the tea! Tell me the goz!"

Roman dithers, those words are like candy to him. "Alright, but don't tell anyone else... I heard once that -" He rattles off all the rumours he has heard about bribing and embezzling at the Division. Roman loves telling a story. "Are you recording this?" Roman pauses when he sees the camcorder in Remy's hands.

"Geez, nope." Remy pockets the device. "Gotta run, needs to get the limo ship shape. Thanks for the chat, mate!" He jumps into the garage.

What was that all about, wonders Roman.

Behind him, Patton skips up to Thomas. "Are you excited to get some treasure!"

"You bet I am! This pirate is ready to dig in some booty!"

"Is it that kind of treasure hunt...?" asks Patton, blushing. "But think of the children!"

Thomas giggles. "Booty as in buried jewels and rubies and gold doubloons!"

"Ah! Silly me!" Patton swats his forehead. Princess Barkness, who has been forlornly sitting in her kennel since the last time she was let out, starts barking excitedly after seeing Patton. "Oh, I have to go say bye to the doggie! See you, Tommy!" he jogs off.

Thomas frowns. Patton was his oldest friend, and something seems to be off about him. Patton was always scared of Princess Barkness, and now they are the best of friends. And he called him Tom
Tom, not Tommy. The person who usually calls him Tommy was...

Further up the path, Virgil falls in step besides Logan. "Never been out on the field, huh?" he asks, noticing Logan's white knuckles gripping his leather briefcase.

"No. I always feel safer behind a computer screen, but it is time to change that."

"You will still technically behind a screen, except in a moving car. Stop whining, drama queen."

"How am I a drama queen?"

"We all are a special breed of drama queens. Trust me, I know, I'm dating the Grand Sultan of Dramadom."

"I fear today will be an epic disaster."

"That's what I say every morning, and I'm still alive and kicking ass, aren't I?"

Logan smiled. "That is surprisingly inspirational."

"When you hit rock bottom, the only way is up!" Virgil shifts his gaze to the other four before them "I think Silver Sparkle is going to make another appearance today. He's closer than we think."

"Are you psychic?"

"No, but a bit psychotic, so I know how a killer's mind works. Good luck getting through today." With that Virgil picks up speed.

Logan is left feeling more confused and worried than usual. How is Virgil so sure? Is he the goddamn spy? He’s weird enough.

Logan comes across the shattered remains of his chair and pauses.

When will this ticking bomb explode?

He sighs and steps over the wreckage and hurries after the others.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is marginally shorter than usual, but last week's one was longer, so I hope you do not mind.

I adore writing character interactions in this story! Everyone is so ready to be a straight up bitch! I live for Remy and Logan interactions!

The spy was supposed to be revealed this chapter... but I pushed the scene further down. Need to build up the tension, Hm? It's pretty obvious though, isn't it? IT'S THE COOK! BWAHAHA. Nope.

QotW: Who are the characters I should focus on more? I get the feeling I'm writing too much about Logan, Roman and Virgil...
See you on Wednesday! Today’s chapter was the calm before the storm, and blood will be spilt.
Heliomomentum

Chapter Notes

Let's get right back to the story, shall we? There's gonna be a revelation (or confirmation of your theory) that you've been waiting for so long!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0915 h

A fashion backward princess stalks across the City Park looking like an Eifel Tower cosplayer covered in pink and blue crepe, with sizzling glow sticks poking out from the top. Upon closer inspection though, it becomes clear that it is a decently dressed lady carrying the aforementioned monstrosity, not wearing it. Tottering on needlepoint heels definitely not designed to be worn on grass, she places the teetering cardboard and paper creation on the ground with a sigh. Great, the stupid treasure trail is complete now.

Miss Arachne Svengali stands up and wipes her hand on an offending streamer of crepe in a series of deft little movements, but alas, gets her fingers burnt on the sparklers for her trouble. She is forced to swallow a colourful swear that would have melted the poor abused replica when she sees two children hurrying towards her: A tiny rosebud of a girl in pink pigtails and a cherubic boy with already grubby knees.

"Mummy! Mummy! When's the treasure hunt going to start? We're bored!"

She pulls her red smeared lips into a thin smile. "Soon, dearies. We have to wait until Daddy comes."

"He's never here!"

"Go play elsewhere," she says shoving some notes of money carelessly in their direction. "Go by some fruit loops or fidget spinners or kamikazes or whatever kids like these days."

The kids run away in delight, whooping and clutching their spoils in sweaty fists. Arachne stands in a power pose with hands on her hips. If this was night, lightening may have struck behind her malicious grin, but since it's day, let us have a total eclipse of the sun. "Daddy better watch out, I have some fun in store for him."

"Um... miss?" asks her puzzled assistant tapping her on the shoulder.

The eclipse goes away and Arachne drops back into reality. "What, minion?"

"I don't think you are allowed to call me that, it's against union and labour laws." The assistant twirls a strand of dirty dishwater blonde hair with a bejeweled and pink-nailed finger.

"Ugh! Where's your love of drama, woman?"

The assistant pops a bubblegum bubble. "You can't reduce me to my gender, I have a name."

"FINE, paTriCiAh, you hideous human being, why are you still snivelling at my feet?"
"You've actually put 'snivelling at your feet' on my job description."

"I didn't mean literally, you humpbacked whale!"

Patricia blinks. "That's it. I'm resigning." She thrusts her clipboard in Arachne's face and struts off without a backward glance.

"You'll never find a position as good as this!" shrieks Arachne after her, and stamps her foot. The heel breaks and she promptly collapses onto the mini Eifel Tower. Screaming like a banshee, she gets up, finally stuck in a costume that suits her from head to toe. After several unsuccessful attempts to shake it off, she checks the clipboard. She sees an endless list of things yet to be done, written in big red letters. She snaps her fingers at the organisers of the treasure hunt, and with as much authority as she can while looking like a birthday cake of a demented five year old, tells them to sort it out pronto: "You unwashed whores straight off the street, I want these done stat, or no one gets a bathroom break, I don't care you are pregnant, Nancy!"

As for herself, she heads to the nearest clothes boutique to salvage the remains of her dignity.

0930 h

Remy pulls the Limousine to a halt inches in front of Arachne, resplendent in a brand new yellow flowery summer dress. Remy switches on the wipers cheekily, and she jumps back away from the jet of water with a squeal.

Roman is the first to get out of the car, and Arachne immediately seizes him by the collar. "Excellent! Exactly the thing we want!"

"Erm...?" Roman grins uncertainly at the lady doing her damnest to pull him away, but he doesn't even feel her efforts. "Can I help you?"

Logan steps out of the Limousine with the grace of a crime lord exiting a helicopter and looks down his nose at Arachne. "Greetings, Miss Svengali. Kindly stop accosting my bodyguard."

"He isn't your body guard!"

"Very well, kindly stop accosting my client's bodyguard."

"Thomas is my client too!"

"I can keep doing this all day," says Logan and takes a deep breath. "Kindly stop accosting our client's bodyguard."

"Um, I'm fine, really," says Roman, embarrassed.

"It's a matter of principle." Logan firmly grips Roman by the collar too and pulling away from Arachne. Of course, Roman does not budge, being the weight of your average armoured tank.

Arachne grasps Roman's wrist and leans back with all her weight, with no success. "We need a really obviously muscular and nice guy to play the prince captured by the pirates!"

"OOOO! Really?" I'm in!" Roman lets Arachne lead him away.

"Not so fast!" Logan clamps a steely hand over Roman's other wrist and stops him. "Miss Svengali, you cannot steal away our client's bodyguard away to play glorified kindergarten games when
there is part-time lunatic trying to kill him!"

"I thought he was a part time stripper?" asks Patton from Remy, who has reclined his seat with his feet up on the dashboard, sipping from a slushie he got from who knows where and watching the madness unfold. Remy impatiently shushes Patton.

"This is more important!" cries Arachne, pulling Roman. "I booked a celebrity cameo for the part, and he bailed out the last second because of the stupid killer on the loose!"

"Excuse me!" snaps Logan, pulling Roman back. "We are all trying to prevent exactly that. Priorities, you fame hungry bat!"

"I'm opportunistic, not a stodgy wizened decrepit owl like you!"

"Find yourself a male model, there are enough of them hanging outside casting agencies, you thirsty cougar."

"Well I never!" gasps Arachne, clawing at Roman with renewed vigour. "We got a pretty face right here!"

"Hey! I'm much more than a pretty face!" whines Roman indignantly.

"I only care if he can shoot straight at assailants, not sit still look pretty!" bellows Logan, nearly pulling Roman's arm off.

"Take that back! I'm really pretty, and shooting is the only straight thing I can do!" grumbles Roman with a huff.

Virgil facepalms. He pokes his head out of the sunroof and faces the others. "Hi!" He gives a curt wave. "I'm Virgil. And the only person who's gonna be tugging my boyfriend off is me."

"Oh My Gods, Virgil! Not in front of the kids!" cries Thomas.

"Wait isn't that my line?" asks Patton.

"Get back in the car, Virgey!" calls out Remy. "I wanna see who wins at tug-of-Ro."

"Listen up, dummies." Virgil snaps his fingers. "Roman's bad at making decisions, so I'm gonna."

"Hey! Give me some credit! I can think intelligent! Two plus two is one, coz I am the only one that matters! Hah!" Roman pouts and crosses his arms, and the two people fighting over him are violently pulled towards each other.

Logan and Arachne gasp in horror when they realise their faces are smashed up against each others, and leap back as if the other was made of fire or smelt like raw sewage.

Virgil raises an eyebrow at the interaction, but decides to continue. "Alright, Ro came here to do his job, not follow his dreams. He's gonna be skulking around the corners glaring at evil dudes and not be acting it up in the limelight drinking in a standing ovation."

"Break my heart, why don't you?" wails Roman. "Your realism is a bitter pill I’m forced to swallow."

"Get in line, sweetcakes, my bitter pill isn’t all you gotta swallow."

"I’m not complaining." Roman shrugs off Logan and Arachne. "But my cakes will always be
sweet!" he adds with a smirk at Virgil.

Logan groans and runs a hand over his face. "Why do I suddenly have an urge to take a bath?" He rounds up on Arachne. "I'm extremely sorry, but I cannot afford to release one of my team for your unprofessional make belief agenda."

"Where else am I going to find someone?" Arachne wrings her hands. "You've got to pull one for the whole team and volunteer someone."

"I'm sure we can spare someone," says Virgil with a shrug.

"Who? You?" Arachne scrunches up her nose. "The kids would rather bury you six feet under."

"Hell no." Virgil scowls. "Prince Charming was out a millennia ago, now the kids dig uwu smol beans like yours truly."

Roman clutches his heart. "All this prince hate is just too much! You better make up for all this roasting!"

"I will tonight if you make sure I don't get killed by a sparkly pole dancer."

"He's a pole dancer too?" asks Patton, confused as always. Or is he? (Shoot ignore that rhetorical question, I'm not supposed to reveal spoilers.)

Roman salutes. "Will do, Cap'n!"

"I am literally your boss. I write your paycheck..." drawls Logan.

"I thought I was the pirate captain!" interjects Thomas.

"Good!" Virgil claps sarcastically. "Now that we know who's who, can we please decide who plays the prince, or I swear I'm gonna spontaneously combust."

"You can do that?" wonders Patton out loud. "Wait sorry, we're being serious here. What about Remy?"

"Really? I thought you liked playing the victim?" Logan frowns in Patton's direction.

"Did I say that? Oh, I have a really bad memory," says Patton a bit too chirpily. "I think Remy will be great!"

Remy readjusts his sunglasses. "Well, I was planning on snoring at the back of the Limo, but if the world is desperate to give me moment in the sun, I'll oblige."

"Phew, that's settled," says Virgil. "Honestly I think we talk so much crap just because this story has a threadbare plot and we need filler scenes."

Everyone jumps when they hear a sharp whistle.

"Yikes! It's da police!" Virgil ducks behind Roman, who immediately puts a protective arm before him. "I'm so sorry I broke the fourth wall!"

"As fascinating as all of this is to watch," says the policeman, grinning, "I'm afraid I must ask you to move, this is not a parking spot."

Logan gestures at Remy.
"What?" asks Remy flicking his hair back. "I'm a prince now, I don't drive."

"SHUT UP, REMY!" shouts everyone.

"And stop stealing my moves!" says Roman, flipping his own hair aggressively.

"Why are these people so extra?" moans Logan. "Just get in the car and drive, Goor, before I self-combust."

Remy shakes his fist at the sky. "One day I will get my moment in sun!"

"Are you, like, going to break out into song?" asks Thomas, clapping in glee. "Because if you are, I'm all here for it!"

"Jimminy Cricket upon a star! Are you Thomas Sanders?" The policeman has stars in his eyes. "Big fan!" He shakes Thomas's hands in great excitement. "Can I take selfie?"

"Oh, sure! A fan is always welcome!" Thomas beams into the camera.

"You all can totally park here!" says the Policeman giddily and skips away.

"Yes! My prayers have been answered!" Remy extends his arms towards the sun. "I will never drive again."

"Oh, really?" thunders Logan. "This treasure hunt is done in an hour. If you are not back in your chauffeur's uniform by that time, heaven help me, I will run you over!"

"So... you'll be the one driving?"

Logan's face turns red from chin to hairline and he vibrates like a steam engine in distress or a pressure cooker left on the stove too long.

"Everyone, take cover!" shouts Roman and lunges behind a trashcan taking both Virgil and Thomas with him. "He's gonna explode."

Thomas wriggles away and pats Logan on the shoulder. "Calm down, Mr Craggers, do. You'll get a cardiac arrest one of these days."

"The only arresting I will do is putting the stripper behind bars," says Logan sternly, but his face doesn't return back to its normal shade, and is tinged in red.

"YAY! I knew he was a stripper!" says Patton.

"Do you live in your own world?" asks Virgil incredulously.

"Well, we at least we got a good parking spot out of it," says Arachne, busy running her hands over Remy's body. To take measurements for the prince costume, of course.

"Thanks to the lack of integrity of the police officers of the City Police Department," mutters Logan with a disapproving sniff. "The CPD always was a bit too sure of itself, and their policeman are so silly," he adds with the self-righteous sense of rivalry the DDD always had with the CPD.


"Wait, what the hell, mademoiselle?" Remy blinks in surprise.
"What did you expect? You are a prisoner of the pirates."

"Is that what I signed up for? Tied up for an hour in an uncomfortable position, hoping that at least one bright kid will find me and release me from my cruel bonds?"

"Uh-huh."

"Curse you, sun!"

"BOO – YAH!" Roman pops up from behind the trashcan. "I'm not only pretty and intelligent, I am lucky too."

Virgil slams the trashcan lid on Roman's head and walks off whistling.

Roman rubs a tear of the corner of his eye. "I love him so much it hurts more than the bump on my head. Also, I probably have a concussion. In my brain and heart."

"We better keep an ambulance on stand by," says Logan. "At this rate, one of us is going to need it today."

0930 h

Hordes of families pour into the city Park. Whooping dads and complaining mums pull their giggling offspring behind them to the big pirate ship where the games are about to begin. Casual observers turn up to watch, as the park is where everyone ends up on a hot day like this. There are food stalls and shaded walks and pony rides, and Logan feels uneasy, as the crowd grows thicker. It will be difficult to spot anyone in this giddy chaos.

A crackle of static buzzes through the radio.

Agamemnon: Greetings. I am stationed in the Trojan Horse. I have installed more advanced software against hackers, so I do believe that no one will be able to tap into our wavelength.

Brises: Hellooo! I'm waving at you Agamemnon can you see me?

Agamemnon: No, you simple munchkin, I can only hear you over the radio.

Patrocles: Actually, we're like only hundred meters from each other; we can totally see each other. Can't we just wave at each other something instead of doing a fourth rate radio adaptation of The Iliad that only geriatric cat ladies will listen to?

Achilles: Aw, we're way cooler than the Iliad. Waving at each other like scarecrows having strokes does not have the cool spy mojo like this!

Zeus: Pity, then you would see me flipping you off.

Achilles: No I won't, you've got your hands tied behind your back.

Zeus: Grrrr.

Brises: Now play nice, kiddos.

Agamemnon: Now that Patrocles integrated himself into the group with his sardonic humour and acerbic wit –
Achilles: English please, you talking thesaurus.

Agamemnon: Okay you guys, our boi Patrocles is a part of the home team, his snark is on fleek!

Zeus: Damn gurl, you a basic bitch like the rest of us!

Patrocles: Nooooo! I though we were better than the speak of lower mortals! A part of me died hearing that!

Achilles: Imma gonna force you to talk like that irl now.

Brises: I think he's in love.

Agamemnon: Who is this he? Me?

Brises: No, I meant I'M in love.

Agamemnon: I think the hot sun is making you delirious.

Achilles: It's more like a hot boss situation.

Patrocles: Archie, shut up.

Achilles: Make me, Rocky.

Patrocles: Rocky? Wouldn't Pat be the obvious nickname to make from Patrocles?

Achilles: We already have a Pat. Plus, if I can find a way to be extra, I will never settle for obvious.

Brises: Aw, you guys are so cute I can listen forever.

Zeus: Heck no, sis. These two sound like an old married couple, no game at all.

Agamemnon: Thankfully, we are not here for the Archie & Rocky show. Brises, what is... Helen of Troy... up to?

Brises: HOT is dividing the kids into groups... there's the red team and blue and green team and purple team and every tot gets a hat with their colour on it. Some of them have dressed as pirates and slaves and there's one weird kid dressed as a corpse...

Zeus: Probably the little brat has watched too much Pirates of the Carribean...

Agamemnon: Do you see a girl in pink pigtails with her little brother?

Brises: Yes! They're so cute! You know them?

Agamemnon: Not any more.

Brises: Oh. And now HoT is handing out maps... gosh these kiddos are such rough and tumble bunch... so noisy and pushing each other into the pond and stabbing with wooden swords...

Agamemnon: I think you might want to stop the violence.

Brises: I tried... they don't seem to like me very much. I threw sweets at them too!

Agamemnon: You threw sweets at the miniature humans? I do not think they will react to that
positively. I have discovered that they prefer a gentler approach than dogs for whatever reason. I had the feeling that children would like you. You do give the vibe of a human shaped marshmallow dipped in chocolate syrup.

Achilles: Wanky.

Brises: These kiddos seem evil!

Patrocles: From what I can see from the gazebo the kids are acting like angels out of a family planning advertisement? Are you sure that you are not the evil one?

Zeus: Shoot, Rocky, you're not hades, you don't have to be so salty all the time.

Agamemnon: Well, whether the children are devil spawn or heaven sent; get them in order, Birses. We need to keep things moving fast and smoothly, as Thomas is more at danger out in an open park. Besides, he needs to be in a good mood for the Press Conference later today.

Brises: On it.

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Logan exits the shared channel, and gets onto the direct radio channel to Virgil.

Agamemnon: Copy, Patrocles. Agamemnon here.

Patrocles: Whaddup, Sarge Memnon? Your troops doing fine?

Agamemnon: Not as well as I hoped. Do you sense something odd with Brises?

Patrocles: Not necessarily. His brain seems to be in a constant sugar rush. The usual exaggerated characteristics you find in a flanderised fan-favourite character. But I do not know him very well...

I've only met him for like a day, you know.

Agamemnon: Yes, but he is different from the person I met on the first day. Not in appearance but a few mannerisms and slip-ups have made me suspicious.

Patrocles: Eh. Appearances can be deceiving. Maybe there's something going on in his personal life that he isn't telling us.

Agamemnon: I aim to find that out.

Logan flicked through different footage from the CCTV cameras all around the City Park.

Patrocles: See anything out of place?

Agamemnon: Not yet. Only of children running and crawling like ants on a piece of dropped bread. HoT looks ridiculously frumpy in that pirate costume.

Patrocles: I think most people will call it cute. That man just needs to wear a different costume and he's a different person entirely.

Agamemnon: Agreed. But a set of clothes is like a visual statement declaring what kind of person you are. Do you want The Primary's statement to be an unlawful vagrant?

Patrolcles: No one is stupid enough to believe that.
Agamemnon: Here are some folk who would. The press. Look at their beady eyes and flashing cameras and spidery walk.

Patrocles: Um... they're not evil killer bugs...

Agamemnon: I plan on publishing a scientific journal calling the Razzie Flies.

Patrocles: Who's loosing focus now?

Agamemnon: grumblegrumblegumblemumble

Patrocles: No worries, Chief. I’m the only person you can switch off the Devil Wears Prada attitude with.

Agamemnon: Thank you.

------

Suddenly the main channel crackles and an emergency beep comes through. Logan and Virgil immediately switch over to it.

Achilles: Guys! Guys! Guys!

Zeus: WHAT? You broke a nail? Shot yourself in the leg? Saw Edris Elba? Just tell me whatever, I'm bored out of my wits tied to this coconut tree with a pigeon pooping on my head.

Agamemnon: As delightful as that image is, I think what Achilles has to say is more important.

Achilles: I think I see someone suspicious.

Patrocles: It's not the tax collector, is it?

Achilles: Tax collectors ARE scary.

Brises: Yup, I never pay my taxes.

Agamemnon: How can you NOT pay your taxes – Dammit, focus people!

Achilles: Whoops sorry, I think there actually IS a tax collector here, let me just inconspicuously back roll away...

Patrocles: I can literally see you cartwheeling like a double-jointed runaway clown.

Achilles: Ha! I am safe for now.

Patrocles: What's with you and hiding behind trashcans today?

Agamemnon: FOCUS PEOPLE!

Achilles: Ah yes, I think I saw Bongo.

Agamemnon: NOW YOU TELL US THERE IS A ROGUE MADMAN WITH BODYGUARD TRAINING RUNNING AROUND THE CITY PARK?

Achilles: He wasn't running, he was eating an ice cream.

Agamemnon: dshgfosuydfsrbkkKDGAFFGAHF
Zeus: Finally something’s happening. This trussed up turkey needs some entertainment.

Patrocles: Priorities, Zeus. Shit, I should have called you Lightening McQueen; the joke makes itself. Anyways, I got to the ice cream stand, and he's not here.

Agamemnon: Achilles, get your ass out of the trash can and get closer to HoT. Anyone can see you are his bodyguard, so if Bongo is here, he would most likely keep away from you. Patrocles, try tracing his steps from the ice cream stand to where Thomas is now, keeping to the opposite side of Achilles. I will try to locate him on the footage, but there is quite a crowd now.

Achilles: Roger that.

Patrocles: being a plain-clothes detective is kinda fun, isn't it? It’s stalking people and eavesdropping, which I do that all the time anyway, except now I get paid for it.

Zeus: You girls get all the fun. I wanna have fun too!

Agamemnon: Well, Thomas will be getting to where you are as the last stop on the treasure trail, so keep your eyes open.

Zeus: Keeping eyes open is just about the only thing I can do now, so will do, bossman.

Brises: I'm with Thomas... No one suspicious is near him yet... OH MY GOD!

Patrocles: Bongo Bear Attack?

Zeus: He seriously calls it that?

Achilles: Yup. You should hear what he used to call his moves in bed. Urk.

Agamemnon: I do not give a flying trapeze monkey about Bongo Bear's sex life! Brises, is it him or is it not?

Brises: Gosh, no, a kid just found a clue.

Agamemnon: And one would think we're in the middle of a crisis situation, but of course a snotty nose gremlin solving a puzzle is more important.

Brises: YAY! She's so happy!

Agamemnon: Wonderful. I shall send my congratulations via hot air balloon.

Zeus: The good ol Diggy Diffy Divvy has a hot air balloon. I always wanted to fly one.

Patrocles: He was being sarcastic. I am actually annoyed how good he is at it.

Achilles: But I wanna go in a hot air balloon. Why was he being sarcastic? Waaah, I hate sarcasm!

Patrocles: How are we even dating? I'm a sarcasm wizard.

Brises: OH MY GOD!

Agamemnon: Did the little girl find the second clue?

Brises: NO! IT'S BONGO!

Achilles: Dang Dang diggity danga dang! It is him! Shall I shoot his blocks off?
Agamemnon: No, you ape with a gun, you will not mutilate his genitalia. Corner and disarm him. We need to hand him over to the Division alive. Besides, he has not threatened The Primary yet, so we cannot use self-defence. Take him down.

Achilles: Damn it. He's disappeared into the crowd again, the coward. I'm going after him.

Zeus: Can I provide the exciting chase music as I am otherwise useless?

A poppy beat box beat fills the channel.

Achilles: Awesome! You can beat box?

Zeus: Hell yeah, baby!

Agamemnon: Whatever gets the job done, I will not say no to your unorthodox methods.

-----

Virgil weaves between the crowds stealthily. He tries his best to keep an eye on both at Thomas, who is standing under a signboard with Patton and the kids holding up a humongous map, and at Roman who is somewhere in the crowd chasing Bongo. He still has not caught sight of Bongo, and it seems impossible to locate him. He is shorter than most people in the crowd, and he has pulled his hoodie over his face and swept his hair over his face to not let anyone recognise him. A trickle of sweat slid down his spine as the noises of laughter from the game stands and the spinning coloured lights above filled his ears and eyes. He tasted bile in his mouth, and he ducked through a cacophonic group of tourists clicking half a dozen cameras. He escaped the throng and leapt over a DO NOT ENTER sign on a rickety gate.

It was as if he had entered a different world.

The sounds of the happy crowd faded away behind him as his eyes sweep the scenery before him: An abandoned amusement park. A rusted Ferris Wheel creaked in dismay on broken hinges. A derailed roller coast hung off its tracks like a mummified caterpillar. Discarded pieces of paper blew over the dusty ground in lazy circles, their slight rustle the only sound in the damp and dank air.

Virgil leant against a pole to catch his breath. This place was creepy, but it was quiet at least. Any other day, he would have curled up in a corner until all the noisy people went away, but today he had signed up to protect Thomas Sanders, and hiding in fear will not achieve that. He tapped his mouthpiece.

Patrocles: Hi?

No answer. He cannot hear the crackle of static or the other's voices. He looks up, and sees a buzzing transmitter on top of the pole he is leaning against, with countless cables and wires spreading from it. The frequency is probably cutting out his signal. He pulls out his phone, only to find the same result.

He is on his own.

He pulls out his glock from the gun holster under his hoodie and carefully steps away from the pole. Debating whether to stick to the sides in the shadows or strike it out in the middle on the open ground, Virgil follows a long disused path towards a large bulky tent with a dirty sign loudly proclaiming "Hall of Mirrors!". He steps up to the entrance, and pauses. Should he go inside?
He hears paper crinkle behind him.

He spins around.

The muzzle of Bongo Bear's gun winks at him.

"Hello, Virgil, we meet again."

Virgil gulps and raises his own gun shakily. He puts on a careless grin. "Aren't you going to go 'Muahahaha', Bongo?"

"That was the old me. Now I am silent deadly killer."

"I have a gun too, you know."

"But are you brave enough to pull the trigger? You're a scaredy cat."

Virgil hesitates. Would he dare?

"Step away from him." Roman's menacing voice creeps up on them from behind Bongo. Roman steps out of the shadows, his gun ready at the end of his steady arm.

"Welcome, Roman! I knew you could not keep away from your new boy toy."

Virgil's eyes flick between the two of them. Bongo does not give Roman the courtesy of looking over his shoulder at him, but focuses his gaze on Virgil, who is growing more nervous with each passing minute.

"He is not my boy toy, he is my boyfriend, and a thousand times awesome person than you," says Roman through gritted teeth. "Now get the hell away from him, or I swear I will blast your brain out your ears."

"But I have my gun on Virgil, if you didn't notice. You shoot, I shoot."

They are at a standstill.

"Why are you after us?" asks Virgil. "Thomas Sanders isn't here."

"You still haven't guessed the game, have you? This is a distraction, idiots." Bongo's incisors slide over his lower lip as he smiles.

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Agamemnon: Damn the netherworlds!

Zeus: Aren't they damned enough already?

Agamemnon: We have lost contact with both Achilles and Patrocles. Last time I could track them, they went into the abandoned amusement park next to the City Park. I assume Bongo Bear is in there with him.

Zeus: Probably, Chieftain Argh Me Non. But don't we have to send back up?

Agamemnon: I am calling for them now. The situation is going fast out of control.

Zeus: There's something fishy afoot, chicas. It just doesn't add up. Archie and Rocky are missing.
you are stuck in the Trojan Horse, and I am tied up to a plastic tree.

Agamemnon: Belly dancing belly buttons! I just lost all the CCTV footage. My laptop crashed! And the Limousine just switched off. What is going on?

Brises: Everything is going according to plan.

Agamemnon: It is most certainly NOT.

Brises: Oh yes, everything is going according to MY plan.

With a final buzz, the radio dies.

------

Roman's steely expression falters. His duty and training called him to immediately to rush to The Primary's side, but he could not leave Virgil at the mercy of Bongo. "It's gonna be alright, Virge," he calls out. "I'm here."

"Of course you are!" simpers Bongo. "But for how long? You work your way through guys faster than a dog and its bitches."

Roman took a deep breath to calm the red hot flame rising in him. "Virge, don't listen to him. When I lost sight of Bongo in the crowd, I saw you come here. I followed you here as I was worried what might happen to you. I did not chase Bongo in here. And I will never let him hurt you, not without a fight. And I'll never leave you."

Virgil smirks, his nerve coming back. "And it's two against one, punk. Archie and Rocky will make you rue the day you crossed us."

"But who will pull the trigger first?"

Virgil bites his lip. He is no killer. He learnt that about himself on the rooftop that day, when for one dark moment he though he was capable of harming another breathing human in cold blood. But there were other ways of defeating a person than an outright bullet to the chest. He squints, takes aim, and shoots. Without waiting to see what destruction he has unleashed, Virgil turns and runs into the Hall of Mirrors.

A black speck whizzes across, straight at Bongo. Before he can react, the bullet flies into the barrel of his gun, and it explodes. Bongo lets go of it just in time. He ducks and rolls to the side, and is gone.

Roman grunts in frustration at the missed opportunity to capture Bongo, and runs into the tent after Virgil.

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As calmly as a stripper in an elite high-end gentleman's club, Patton rips off his clothes to reveal the trademark spandex of Silver Sparkle. He whips out a gun and points it at a startled Thomas, whose mouth is a perfect O of horror. The kids scatter screaming, except for an intrepid young soul who boldly marches up to Silver Sparkle.

"Excuse me, Mister, but are you a killer clown?"

"Fuck off, kid."
The little boy's pants turned a darker shade, and he ran off sobbing.

Silver Sparkle approaches Thomas slowly, a manic smile on his lips. "Hello, Tommy."

"Dolon!" whispers Thomas. “I thought you were dead!”

"In the flesh, alive and kicking a whole lot of ass."

"Why are you doing this?"

"You know exactly why. But wonder no more, it's time for a reprise of Bye Bye Birdie."

Not too far away, Remy hears the screams of frightened children. He struggles against the chains trapping him. They will not give way. He looks at the tree he is tied to, and an idea flickers in his brain.

Further away, Logan balls up his fist and knocks down the partition between the back of the limousine and the driver's compartment. He crawls behind the steering wheel, and turns the key in the ignition. Nothing happens. It has been some time since he hotwired a car, and he hopes he has not forgotten that very important life hack. It feels good to be a badass again.

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Roman runs down a corridor filled with mirrors of all shapes and sizes, his breath rattling in his throat. He sees no one besides his own distraught reflection. "Virgil!" he shouts. "It's only me, don't run away." His voice echoes from glass to glass, and he feels he is shouting at himself. Suddenly Virgil's reflection appears before him, before splitting into twelve. Six turns towards him, six turn away, and all disappear.

Roman struggles through the greenish blue lights filtering through the watery surfaces of the bottomless glass lakes drowning him from all sides.

A footstep behind him, and Roman leaps to the side. A powerful arm swipes down where he was mere seconds before, and his gun is snatched out of his hand. From the floor, Roman makes out the silhouette of a man he has grown to know as chaotic evil, and he tackles Bongo's legs. He falls, kicking Roman on the jaw. Both men stagger to their feet, facing each other, and their reflections turn to each other in nightmarish mirror to parallel mirror. With a dozen mocking smiles, Bongo lifts a dozen hands and points a dozen guns at Roman.

"No!" multiple Virgils appear.

Bongo shoots.

Roman lunges aside, and a mirror cracks right above Virgil's heart, silver mercury blood trickling down.

Roman sees red, and launches forward, a fist fuelled by unquelled emotions pummelling Bongo in the jaw. The man is thrown back against a wall of glass, which shatters as he smashes through. Mirrors crash against the next, and like brittle dominoes falling, rows of glass toppling all over the hall until the three humans are left standing in a sea of a million shards of sickly light.

Roman locks his eyes with Virgil from across the bluish gloom.

Bongo rises and raises his gun at Roman again, his face ripped in bloody red lines of hate and fury.
A gun fires, a flash in the quivering thick air.

Bongo screams. He drops the gun in his hand, clutching his shoulder, and runs away into the darkness.

Virgil stands still, smoking gun still in hand, his blinking eyes black and blank. Roman runs over, glass crunching underfoot. He catches Virgil in his arms, and holds him close.

"I wanted to kill him," whispers Virgil.

"Shhhhh." Roman places Virgil's head on his shoulder. "That is natural to feel. A person like Bongo looks at innocent people covering in fear before him, and pulls the trigger. A person like you looks at people like Bongo, and pulls a trigger to stop him hurting others. That makes all the difference." He kisses Virgil's hair. "But who is in the right or wrong is not for us to judge. We must put him behind bars, and let the powers that be deal with him."

Virgil nods. "Let's get out of here. The others need us."

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Thomas looks at the gun hovering before him, as if lost in a waking nightmare. His end was finally here, and there was so much he hasn't done to make the world a better place.

Out of nowhere, a tall plastic coconut tree breaks through the bushes. It is attached at its base to a roaring Remy, who charges at them in a series of determined hops. He bends in half, and the tree slices down between Thomas and Silver Sparkle (henceforth known as Dolon) and by a miracle of luck, actually manages to knock the gun out of the latter's hand.

"What the hell happened?" gasps Dolon.

"This, my dear." Remy grinned, with as much dignity he can with a coconut tree strapped to his back. "Was my moment in the sun!"

"He’s my hero!" cries Thomas, overcome.

The Limousine bursts through the bushes, its engine revving like a bellowing bull. It drives straight at Dolon, but halts right before it hits him. The bumper makes slight contact with him just enough to transfer the momentum, and Dolon, being of lesser mass, goes flying over the treeline with a greater velocity.

Logan leaps out. "Eureka! My calculations were correct!"

"Dammit, Cheese Crackers! You stole my moment!" wails the coconut tree.

Thomas promptly faints.

Chapter End Notes

I hope Dolon Janus's convoluted plan of deception makes sense? I was trying hard to do a bit of show don't tell, so I couched all the preplanning in the first half of the chapter, where you can see him carefully put the characters exactly where he wanted on his chessboard.
I was determined to give Remy some character agency, so I introduced the whole moment in the sun storyline which was hilarious to write, but I hope I can cook up a fun payoff to it too. Also... this doesn't mean he's totally innocent of having a hidden agenda.

I do not know why the Roman and Virgil scenes went so intense towards the end... maybe its because I watched Jordan Peele's movie Us a couple of days ago which has a delicious hall of mirrors scene that I so badly wanted to include. Besides, I thought it was high time Roman got be the stronger person in the scene, and Virgil gets to be vulnerable and badass at the same time.

QotW: I guess this chapter pushes Miss Arachne Svengali into full-on villain territory? What exactly is going on with her and Logan and the kids?

Friday, here I come!
Enjoy the descent into the madness, with extra glitter and make up and wigs this time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1030 h

"Are you alright, Mr Sanders?" asks Logan.

Thomas opens his eyes blearily and doubles over groaning. He comes to, and relaises he is laid out in the back of the limousine and wrapped up in a warm fuzzy blanket. "I'm fine."

Logan hands him a glass of water. Thomas takes a sip. The vehicle moves slowly, with Remy at the wheel.

"So it was Dolon Janus all along," says Thomas, his voice laced with sadness.

Logan scratches his chin. "What was he like?"

"I knew him from the days I was in my nappies, and this is how it ends. If Patton was all sunshine, then there was something sinister and sneaky about Dolon. I think he was insanely jealous, and he always liked to lie his way through situations and charm people into doing what he wants."

"Well, he is a grown man, so he is in charge of what direction he chooses to take in life," says Logan. He is busy updating his report on his laptop, which he managed to reboot along with the car and their radio system. "If he decided to make a name for himself by attempting to murder people, that is on him. So... it seems like he planted the bomb at your house himself, and faked his own death. Afterwards, he has constantly been stalking us as his alter ego Silver Sparkle, which I do not think he will use again after today's reveal. It is a pity he managed to escape. I wonder at which point he decided to disguise as Patton. How did he get into the house? We have put eye scanners at every entrance so he cannot just slipped in."

"Maybe he used Patton's real eye," suggests Remy.

"Nooo!" wails Thomas, "I DON'T WANT TO EVEN THINK OF THAT!"

"Hm... I do not think that is possible," wonders Logan out loud. "However, I looked over our movements the last two days, and narrowed it down to one possible explanation. I noticed that Patton – or I should say Dolon – was acting strange since today morning, and he was usual self the day before, even at the bar. So the switcheroo must have happened last night. I believe it was at the shopping boutique when he left to fit on his clothes. They must have switched places in the changing rooms when they were trying on new clothes. And of course, when we got home, it was during the distraction made by Bongo Bear so neither of us did the eye scan. He must have tampered with the software since then, the slimy eel. It befuddles me how he tricked me so easily."

"He tricked all of us." Thomas sighs, wondering how a person he had trusted and kept close for so many years could betray him so easily. You never knew what people were really like until they revealed their true colours.
"Yes, but..." Remy looks back over his shoulder. "You're not gonna like this, Chief Lovey Dovey, but I think you let get Patton/Dolon get away with a lot of things because you were too busy mooning over him to notice what he was doing. I mean, you gave me so much grief, and he got of scot-free. If you were as itty nitty gritty picky with him, you might have seen something unusual."

"I was not making moonstruck eyes at him!" fires back Logan.

"Yeah, and Romeo and Juliet had a healthy loving mutually respectful relationship and nobody died. Even if you didn't realise it, little miss hoity toity, you were awfully lenient with Patton. Maybe Dolon picked up on that and exploited it."

Logan leans back against the black leather seat with a hand to his forehead. "I am ashamed to admit that what you say is true, but it is. I owe you an apology, Remy Goor, for distrusting you for so long."

"Aw, we cool, gurl. I hold no grudges. I know I'm a tough nut to crack." Remy gives a thumb up. "I am no spy," he adds, gripping the steering wheel again. His phone started chiming, and he immediately silenced it.

"Thank you, Goor." Logan rubs his nose. "All of this is my fault."

"Don't say that!" says Thomas with spirit, taking Logan's hand in his. "True, there might have been some careless mistakes on your part, but Patton is the sweetest person on Earth, and anyone would trust him regardless of whether they like him as an acquaintance, friend or whatever. I totally understand if you like as him something more."

"Why do people keep saying that?"

"Duh, it's obvious. Anyway, I knew both Patton and Dolon forever, but I didn't notice they had swapped themselves. And when you realised the mistake you made, you didn't sit back and cry. How many Chief of Securities will hotwire a limo and drive over to knock down a gunman?"

"I did not knock him down, I gave a gentle tap, and it isn't my fault he weighs so little that he took flight."

"Exactly! Now just keep doing as good as you always do, and then we are good!" Thomas leans forward to thump and Remy on the back. "And that goes to you too, Remy. You were awesome today! The coconut tree battering ram was a nice touch!"

"I always go the extra mile, babydoll," came back the careless answer.

"I wonder where he is now... Patton. He disappeared without a trace," says Logan. "I've already sent out a search warrant to see about Dolon's capture, but we have no concrete trails for Patton."

"I can't imagine he will do this willingly," says Thomas firmly. "He won't hurt as soul. He must have been threatened, or told this was the only way to save Dolon's life."

"Or our resident cinnamon roll was hypnotised or mind-wiped of something," says Remy.

"Oh dear, I hope not," says Logan in concern. "We must find him. But how?"

"Did Dolon leave behind anything before him am-scared like the little coward he is?" asks Remy.

"He did leave behind Patton's tablet..." Logan picks up the little black device, and his fingers trace a sticker of puppy on its cover. "I've tried opening it, but I do not know the password."
"The D Bastard must have changed it!"

"No, the password has not been changed for the past twenty four hours. It is whatever Patton put when I first gave it to him."

"Poor Patty, I hope girlfriend is doing peachy. If I can get my hands on Dolon again I'll turn his colon inside out!" Remy drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in annoyance. "How can he turn on both his best friend and brother?"

"Dolon did have a bad habit of completely forgetting about people he did not find interesting at all," says Thomas. "Once he is done with whatever he wants from them, they basically just disappear from his radar."

"Classic sociopathic narcissist," says Logan. "And look, we are running into a whole bunch of people who live off a narcissistic celebrity pop culture."

The Limousine grinds to a sudden stop as a crowd of paparazzi surrounds them.

"What do I do Chief?" asks Remy. "Running them over isn't an option, ya?"

"Of course not. Only I get to do that." Logan smartly taps a button on the control panel to slide back the sunroof of the limousine, and he rises from it like a demigod from the ocean waves. "Salutations, my dear soulless humans of the media, will you please let us pass?"

A gaggle of questions greeted him.

"Was that the Silver Sparkle?"

"Why was he disguised as Mr Sander's PA?"

"Did he shoot off Thomas's cute grin?"

Logan groans internally. What was up with the last reporter, who seems bizarrely obsessed with Thomas's body parts?

Remy pops up next to Logan. "Let me handle this," he hisses from the corner of his mouth. He turns to the crowd and starts shouting in an unnecessary loud voice: "To all the so-called mainstream media, including weird Websites that nobody has heard of who have used Thomas Sander's name as clickbait, and to all the relentless unwashed hordes on Twitter, who have taken every opportunity to mock and attack him mercilessly from the safety of their stained futons, I offer the following heartfelt sentiment. YOU CAN ALL SUCK IT!"

The reporters burst into a chorus of indignant retorts and questions, and Logan stuffs Remy back into his seat with a well-aimed kick.

"Apologies, we only mean some of that heartfelt sentiment."

"Hold up!" A reporter crowd surfs over to the Limousine. "Hi, Bluff Chicanery at your service."

"Hello again," says Logan. "Why do you keep turning up like a cockroach infestation?"

"It's my job, compadre. And I seem to be doing a better job than you."

"And why do you say that?"
"It would make excruciatingly bad press for you and Mr Sanders if the people get to know that his Security Chief slipped up so bad that the killer managed to impersonate his Personal Assistant right under everyone's nose? How can you let that happen?"

"The circumstances are more complicated than that. And I will appreciate it if you could step back now."

"Not until I find the full story."

"Then please come to the press conference we are holding later today, that is where all questions will be answered."

"Are you running away from the tough questions?"

"I'm not running away anywhere. Your people are blocking the road, remember?"

"You are a very funny man, Mr Craggers. I wonder if you will still be smiling this afternoon."

Logan gulps and twiddles his fingers behind his back.

"Of course he will be!" shouts Roman, his arm coming out through the crowd and pulling Bluff off the Limousine. "Begone, you little bug, you won't be intimidating anyone on my watch."

Virgil makes a peace sign at Logan. "Whaddup Lo - Man, Sir. We got out in one piece."

"And aren't I glad to see you back," says Logan morosely. "Now can you two help moving away the crowd?"

"Will do!" Roman tosses Bluff off into the crowd and squeezes his way to the front of the Limousine. "Alright guys, move along now. We haven't got all day to pose for today's headline right now. You can put a picture of me on the front page if you like!"

No one moves.

"Virge, can you scare them off?" asks Roman.

"Sure thing." Virgil vaults on to the roof of the Limousine. He makes a claw with one hand and hisses.

The mass mob lets out an 'Awww!' and snaps photographs of him.

"Dammit!" snarls Virgil. "There used to be a time I could get everyone quaking in their shoes!"

"Nah, you are too adorable now!" says Roman.

"Your positive influence has corrupted me."

"Well, we need to go for bigger guns." Roman scrambles up the Limo to stick his head in through the sunroof.

"Your plan is to flash your bodacious booty at the crowd like the descendant of a long line of Berrybottoms you are?" asks Virgil.

"Nope. We need BIGGER guns. Come on!" Roman pulls out Thomas through the sunroof. "Do your shy city guy act thingy!"
"Um... okay." Thomas tucks his hands in his pockets and giggles.

The crowd gasps and swoons and hits the ground and passes out.

"Excellent!" says Logan, "Sometimes quirky is the best offense."

Roman and Virgil toss aside bodies and cameras and a surprisingly large amount of cigars and free a path for the Limousine.

Logan crosses his arms and watches the two of them climb into the car and sit at the back. "Where were you two when Thomas was directly under attack?"

"Er..." says Roman. "We were trapped in a hall of mirrors with a trigger happy thug?"

"It was a scene straight out of an action horror scene," confirms Virgil.

"Yeah, we didn't hook up in there or anything," says Roman with a giggle. "That shows how freaked out we were."

"But Bongo Bear got away..." says Virgil, downcast. "We are kinda incompetent, aren't we? The killers keep escaping us."

"There's always next time!" says Roman cheerily.

"THERE SHOULDN'T BE A NEXT TIME!" Logan slaps his hand down on his armrest, startling Roman and Virgil from their conversation with a jerk. Thomas edges away down the seat, and Remy focuses on driving with his eyes on the road for once.

"Did we mess something up?" asks Virgil from Logan. "More than usual, I mean? Geesh, you look ready to split every atom in your body. Do we have any ice water with us?"

"We got some in the mini fridge," says Roman helpfully, offering Logan a bottle.

Logan snatches it, and for a moment looks like he will crush it into a ball and throw it at Roman's confused face. Then he unscrews it and aggressively chugs it down in one breath. He drops the bottle and massages his temples.

Virgil and Roman share an uneasy look.

"Everything Gucci?" asks Roman.

"No, Bronze, everything is not an exorbitantly high priced designer clothing and accessory brand." Logan breathes deeply.

"Uh... is this because I called you a talking thesaurus? You're kinda overdoing it, you know!"

"Ro, shut up," says Virgil. "Craggers, if you are mad at us, you better tell us why."

"I am more mad at myself," says Logan wearily. "When I called the Dignitary Defence Division for backup when you two disappeared, they asked me why the bodyguard was elsewhere and not with The Primary. Such a move is against protocol, and I gave the order to Bronze to take down a potential killer instead of asking him to remove Thomas from there immediately."

"Oh." Roman scratches the back of his neck. "But we needed to catch Bongo to save Thomas!"

"True. But the safety of The Primary is the priority." Logan looks at the other two. "What actually
happened in the abandoned Amusement Park?"

They fill him in. In turn, Logan updates them on what went down with Dolon Janus.

Logan sighs. "And this is a case of the blind leading the blind. Bronze, you knew that when Bongo
said that it was a distraction, you had to go check on the Primary immediately, or have you
forgotten your training entirely?"

"I couldn't leave Virgil behind," says Roman. "And I am not ashamed of making that my priority.

"You should put your professionalism above personal matters."

"And leave him to die?"

"He had his own gun. He knows how to act under pressure. Thomas had no gun, and he faints if a
frog croaks too loudly. That is where you should be. And I should have been sensible enough to
tell you that."

Roman hangs his head. "You are right." Virgil takes his hand and plays with his fingers
distractedly, to comfort himself as much as comfort Roman.

"Why were you in the abandoned amusement park in the first place?" asks Logan from Virgil.
"You must have realised that getting away from the crowd would make you an easier target."

"The crowd was too noisy." Virgil's voice is small. "I had to get away."

"That reason is not good enough," says Logan coldly.

"I'll take the blame for that," says Roman. "I feel guilty for asking Virge to put himself out in the
field. I know what it's like, and I knew he hates it, but I still didn't stop him from joining coz I
selfishly thought of only how cool it would be to have him by my side." He turns to Virgil. "I
thought we'd make a great duo!"

"That's the problem," says Virgil, his brow furrowed. "We care about each other so much we
forget about the others and go do our own thing. We are a part of team, and we are letting the
others down by taking odd on our own."

Logan takes a bottle of something stronger than water from the mini-fridge. "I had my reservations
about having a couple on my team, I feared that this might happen, and I was right. You two would
always look out for each other than do your job."

"That's not fair!" cries Roman.

"Yes!" says Virgil, his face darkening. "We were played by Dolon and Bongo. And we were
following your orders, you know."

"True, but the fact that you fell into their trap proves my second point that you might not be clever
enough to be a part of the team," snaps back Logan.

"You are not fit enough to lead the team!" shouts Virgil, losing his temper.

Remy turns back in surprise at the raised voices. "Um... gurls? I don't think this is the time we
should be fighting...."

"Well what do you know about fighting, huh?" growls Roman. "You just drive us around! Your
little act of trying to get a moment shine is so pathetic!"
"Right back atcha, Roman the cowardly bitch! You are so pathetic you need your boyfriend to save you out of every scrape. You're a phony!" Remy slams on the breaks.

"Why you little!" Roman reaches to through the broken partition to the front, and Logan and Virgil pull him back. Remy scrambles onto the dashboard to avoid Roman's swinging fits.

"Nix, get your rabid man under control!" yells Logan.

"Oh, yeah? I though you were the big bad boss!" Virgil sticks out his tongue.

Logan pulls Virgil's tongue and Virgil pokes Logan's glasses off his face. Roman grabs Remy's hair and Remy grabs Roman's hair and they both shriek like their weaves are getting snatched off.

The inside of the Limousine resembled a classroom with a bee in it, also known as absolute chaos.

"EVERYONE SHIT UP!"

Logan, Roman, Virgil and Remy freeze in various compromising and in retrospect.

"Uh, I mean, shut up," says Thomas, apologetically.

"Nah, it's totally cool," says Virgil, picking up Logan's glasses and putting it on Logan's head. "I and U are next to each other on the keyboard, mistakes happen." (Thanks for calling out my butterfingers, Virgil, thank you very very much.)

"Can you even shit up?" asks Roman.

"You know, Roman, honey," says Remy patting Roman's hair down. "Sometimes its better to be silent and be thought a fool, than open your mouth and remove all trace of doubt."

Roman beams for a second, then realises the jab at him. "HEY!"

"Look, we shouldn't be fighting among ourselves!" says Thomas in earnest. "That's exactly what Dolon's trying to do! Make us hate each other and destroy us from within!"

"Maybe he has a point." Logan slumps back in his seat. "We cannot function as a team. We are better off giving up on the assignment and handing in our badges."

Thomas pats him on the back. "Come on, don't be such a Debbie downer, Logan! We are not going to let one hiccup in our plans turn is into a bunch of looser pants!"

"Yeah!" says Roman, punching the roof.

"Seriously, it takes so little to excite you, sister," says Remy scratching his head.

"That's why I keep him around," says Virgil. "I don't have to bother being optimistic if he is charmingly positive all the time!"

Remy shrugs. "It's infectious."

"Yay!" says Roman. "I helped!"

"See!" says Thomas. "We can make it work!"

Virgil pulls his hoodie strings so that only his nose pokes out of the hood. "I can't deal with all these good vibes. Can't we go back to slapping each other?" But he is secretly smiling behind the
"There's something I did not notify you of," says Logan slowly. "The Dignitary Defence Division is sending an inspector to assess us to see if we are any good."

"Then let's show that we are rockstars!" cries Thomas. "We all want the real Patton back, so let's go rescue him! That'll show them that we are a G-Force to reckon with!"

"What does this have to do with the Gravitational Force?" asks Logan puzzled.

"Get on with the program Logan!" shouts Roman and puts his fist in the middle of the group. "Let's do this thing."

"I'm pretty sure this is not necessary," says Virgil, but he adds his hand to the stack too. "But these clichés go with the genre."

(Virgil, why do you hate me today? – D&E

Because I know what you're gonna make us do in the next scene – V)

"Alright, what do we know about the Pat Man's whereabouts?" asks Thomas.

"No clue so far, all we have is this tablet," says Logan. "I've already tried tracing his phone and it shows up at the bottom of a river."

"Oh no! Is he drowned?" asks Roman clutching his cheeks.

"Better make sure before we hold a one minute vigil for him," says Remy who taps Virgil on the head.

Virgil rolls his eyes and takes the tablet to his hands. He stares thoughtfully at the blinking scroller on the password bar. "We got to crack this."

"Knowing Patton, it cannot be that complicated," says Roman. "Why don't you try 'Patton@123'?"

Virgil keys it in. "No luck."

"'PattonIsAStar'?"

"Isn't your password 'RomanIsAStar'?"

Roman goes red and shakes his head vigorously.

"We can try all the combinations in the world until Patton's long gone," says Logan, "But that does not help our case, does it?" He adjusts his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, ignoring the others giggles. "We need to think carefully."

"Wouldn't he put the name of his little pet doggie boggie?" asks Remy.

"It's Dolon who liked Princess Barkness, not Patton," points out Thomas.

Remy slaps his forehead. "Get it together, senorita! They are two different people."

Virgil taps a tooth with a fingernail. "He probably would put someone he loved dearly as his password."
"Wouldn't that be himself?" asks Roman.

"Ro, everyone doesn't love themselves as much as you do!"

"Well, Patton doesn't have a special someone, so I don't think he'd have someone to put as their password."

"Wait, are you telling me that I am your password?"

Roman grins. "Yup."

Virgil turns a fiery red. "That's unfair. I have my one true love as my password."

"You mean Depression, the icy cavern of darkness that we all try to crawl away from?"

"Yup."

"You're trying to make me jealous, aren't you?"

"You can't be jealous of abstract concepts," says Logan. "Now, as touching as all this cutesy wutesy couple talk is, can we try figuring out the password, please? Did Patton have anyone he cared about in his life?"

Virgil sneaks a glance at Logan, and hurriedly taps in a few letters, and grins in triumph as the screen unlocks.

Roman and Thomas high five each other. "We did it!"

Remy tilts his head, looking at Logan from the corner of his eye. "Virge, what was the password after all?"

Virgil shrugs. "The important thing is that we managed to get through."

Logan takes the tablet and starts swiping through tabs and apps. "Everything seems to be in order... oh look, the latest set of notes was made by Dolon. And yes, he knew of the trap set for Bronze and Nix at that house we thought was Bongo's. Hm... today's plan is here too." Logan sighs, scrolling down further. "Even the distraction and hacking my laptop." He frowns. "How curious, listen to this: Get Roman bronze tied up as the captured prince. Get the biggest threat out of the way first."

"Ooooh! I'm the biggest threat!" crows Roman. "Always knew size matters!"

"Not what we should focus on, Ro," says Virgil with a secret smile. "It was Arachne Svengali who was desperate to get Roman for that part. Is she a part of all of this?"

"I have my suspicions," says Logan. "She has not answered my calls, and I assumed that she would be the first on the scene if Thomas got attacked, but she did not make an appearance."

"Odd," says Virgil. "But right now, we are no better off finding a lead on Patton."

Logan searches through Patton's messages. "Nothing here..." He pauses. "I can only find one text conversation with Dolon. It is just says 'We should hang out sometime, one bite of these and you'll simply loose your mind!' and three pictures... of food." He holds up the tablet. Fist up is a picture of three rows of sandwiches of all shapes and sizes and flavours. Next is a bowl of strawberries, shiny and red and juicy. Last is a big round delicious pie, with a golden brown crust.
"Mmm..." says Roman, drooling. "Who's getting hungry?"

"They look so real!" says Thomas reaching out towards the screen. "And strawberries are healthy and tasty, and I usually eat only tasty stuff because I'm terrible at looking after myself."

"I wouldn't mind making a detour to that sandwich shop," says Remy smacking his lips.

"You uncultured swine," says Logan with a sniff. "It is a sandwich bar not a shop."

"Hold up!" says Virgil, eyes alert. "Wasn't Dolon as Patton going on and on about strippers? Was he hinting at a Stripper Bar?"

Logan looks scandalised. "You think Patton's being held hostage in a stripper bar?"

"Sounds like it." Virgil scrolls through the pictures. "And I'll bet good money it's called The Strawberry Pie."

"Oh my gods, that place is the bomb!" says Remy.

Everyone looks at him.

"Do you patronise that establishment?" asks Logan.

"Don't you patronise me, Penny," Remy chuckles. "Don't tell me you've never been to a strip club?"

"These glasses also stand for prude," says Logan, patting his lenses.

"Hey, isn't that the place where I met you?" asks Roman from Virgil, and Logan throws up his hands in despair.

"Really?" asks Virgil. "Wasn't that at a drag show?"

"Which was at the Strawberry Pie!" says Roman, happy that he connected the dots.

"I'm sorry, poor ol' Patton is stuck in a drag stripper bar?" asks Thomas in wonder. "That sounds like fun."

"Nonsense!" says Logan. "I am not going to let you into a house of ill repute filled with stripper assassins in outrageous make-up and accessories!"

"Yes, Thomas, listen to mummy even if daddy is in a strip club," says Virgil. "Though in its defence, they do have excellent music."

"So what are we going to do now? Crash the place?" Roman rubs his hands in glee.

Logan groans.

"I don't think that is a good idea," says Virgil.

"Thank you, Nix, you are the only sane one here," says Logan mopping his brow.

"Oh no, I'm totally down to crashing a drag queen stripper joint, but it's obvious that Dolon wants us to go there, as he left a trail of breadcrumbs for us."

"You mean it could be another, trap?" asks Logan nervously.
"Yup. We're gonna be cross eyed in body bags if we turn up at the front door," says Virgil, shutting down the tablet.

"Then there's only one thing we can do!" says Remy. "Gurls, our moment in the sun has arrived. We are gonna get disguises!"

"Can I be Gladiator?" asks Roman hopefully.

"No, Romaximus, we are going as..."

"Pleadedon'tsaywhatIthinkyou'regonnasay," mutters Virgil.

"DRAG QUEENS!"

"Over my dead body," says Logan.

"No, you mean over your drop dead gorgeously clothed body!" says Remy.

"Is it my birthday?" asks Roman, "All my dreams are coming true!"

"We are doing this then, I guess," says Logan in defeat. "I am a man of many talents, but making it work in high-heels is not one of them. I will not be joining you, and neither will Thomas. He tends to get distracted easily. So, that leaves us with you three."

Virgil clamps his hands over Roman and Remy's mouths to stop them from squeeing. "I'm too emotionally unstable for drag queen duty, may I be excused?"

"No," says Logan firmly. "I trust you to stop the other two from having a disastrous diva dance off or running away to be the next top runaway model."

"All my dreams aren't coming true then," says Roman sadly.

"One is," says Logan. "I declare myself the only one here with a decent fashion sense, and therefore I am the most suitable candidate to dress you up, so prepare to experience the transformation of your life! Goor, on the double to The clotheshorse!"

"And I'll judge who looks the best!" says Thomas picking up a clipboard.

"This is not a competition," says Logan. "We are trying to work together –"

"Too late!" says Roman, who does a dozen push-ups in preparation. "The game is on. Remy, get ready to have your wig snatched!"

"Don't you at me, Romanique, I will cut you," says Remy with all the attitude of a participant in a bad girls reality show.

"Gosh, these two need only a coat of paint, they are already ratchet on the inside!" says Virgil with a smirk.

1130h

Thomas sits on a wide white fluffy sofa eagerly anticipating the reveals of Roman, Virgil and Remy.
"Aren't we wasting time better spent on finding Patton?" asks Logan. "I chose your outfits, now just put them on and let's go!"

"No way!" comes Roman's voice from the changing room. "If we are gonna be heroes, we need to look good!"

"But what if we are too late and Patton is already... dead?"

"Oh we will be on time and save Patty and look smashing doing it!" says Remy poking his head out, only half his make-up done and looking like a horrifying burn victim.

"Can we save the confidence for the stage and get there as fast as possible?" asks Logan wearily. "I am literally begging on my knees, this is the slowest team I have ever had the misfortune of babysitting."

"We are the only team you've ever had the misfortune of babysitting." Virgil clears his throat. "Alright I am ready."

The others chimed in too.

"At last!" Logan claps his hand. (Yes, he has perfected the art of the one-hand clap.) "I checked the website of The Strawberry Pie, which unfortunately required me to turn off my safe surfing feature." He glares at the sniggers coming from behind the curtain. "And discovered that the theme for today is Superhero Glam, along with a song and dance portion, which was an opportunity too good to let pass. I am a comic book aficionado, if I do say so myself, and I ran with the idea to compile an ensemble of –"

"Enough with the speech, I want to come out and dazzle you!" shouts Roman.

"All your life, Bronze, you are up first."

"Shazaam!" Roman flings the curtains aside and struts forward, spins and poses with a flourish of jazz hands. He is in green tights with black fishnet stockings over it, leaving nothing to the imagination. Below are pointy heeled and toed brown boots. Above is a blousy dark green hunting jacket with flowing sleeves and a plunging sweatheart neckline. And of course, he looks like a watering can full of sparkles and glitter and sequins was tipped over him.

"Playing The Huntress... Roman, what is your drag name?" asks Logan, proud of his creation.

"Bronze Blaze!"

"Trust you to choose a name that's... fiery."

"Hm..." says Thomas. "I'll hold off the final tally until I've seen everyone."

"Oh don't bother, I've already out blazed all of them." Roman flounces off the side.

"Next," says Logan, "Playing Black Canary is..."

Remy burst out and slides across the floor with a whoop. He is in a long sleeved velvet dress of midnight blue with trimmings of red sweeping down to the ground over pert little sued shoes. A voluminous black mass of curls and waves and swirl of hair sits stop his head. He has his habitual sunglasses on, studded with outrageous rhinestones, because impersonator he maybe, nothing would make him part with those.
"Ta Da! I was wondering what amazing name is should go by, then I realise I always keep it real, and tell it as it is." Remy bowed. "Introducing: Basic Bitch."

"Um, that is most unorthodox," says Logan.

"Hah! I have the better name!" crows Roman.

"Not really," says Thomas. "It's funnier coz it is parodying extravagant names like yours!"

Remy and Roman swipe at each other with clipped-on nails as they sit down on another sofa and try hard to out pose each other.

"What fresh hell did I sign up for?" mutters Logan.

"Well we are going to drag ourselves to hell," says Thomas.

"No, I'm sorry, but only Patton can make puns work. Now, the last but not the least member of the Birds of Prey: Catwoman."

Virgil stalks out with a scowl. "I agree to no part of this." He is wearing a black leather cat suit complete with perky ears. His make-up is more catlike than usual, with cute little drawn whiskers.

"Aw Em Jee! My boyfriends finally an affection feline!" says Roman jumping up. "Can I pet you?"

"Get in line!" says Remy, tripping up Roman.

"Virgil wins!" says Thomas grinning wildly. "Hands down, or should I say paws down? Eyy?"

Roman and Remy pout, but both agree they have been out-classed.

"Of course I win, people who hate doing something always end up best at it," says Virgil, finally letting himself do a twirl.

"What's your drag name?" asks Logan. "I need to enter you all into the competition before the deadline, which is in five minutes."

"Let's see... how about Erotica Sawyer? In memory of our one true queen Veronica Sawyer?"

"The Broadway stripper name of our Cult Leader of the Theatre Thursday Fam!" says Roman. "It's perfect!"

"What do you want to call your act?" asks Logan. "The Birds of Prey?"

"Gurl, don't be so boring!" Remy tosses back his hair. "More like The Birds of Gay!"

Logan fills in the application. "Alright, boys, go do me proud."

Virgil arches an eyebrow.

"Fine." Logan takes a deep breath. "Alright, Gurls, go do mamma proud."

"YASS!" shout Roman, Virgil and Remy. "Launch Operation Save Patton!"

"And also don't forget to find Patton!" reminds Thomas. "I think all of us forgot why we're doing this in the first place!"
It makes me have writing whiplash that this chapter starts with everyone fighting and ends with a drag show. How crazy is my imagination?

I adore how Logan has totes given up being a stern commander and joined in the madness. First he wants to hurry things along, then he acts the master of ceremonies of an impromptu runway show.

QotW: What do you think would have happened to Patton? If he is disguised as a drag queen, what should his name be?

See ya soon, I hope to unleash my inner trash cween next chapter!
Dragrevue

Chapter Notes

Hi humans of all shapes and sizes! I'm back. a bit of a busy week, but here's the next chapter for you.

This chapter turned out better than I could have hoped. Probably on the crazier end of things, and that's saying a lot considering the other stuff that happens in this book!

I hope there are fans here of the Batman Animated Series... you'll be in for a fun surprise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1145 h

Let me set the scene.

We are at the... actually, I think there is someone who will do a better job than me. Over to you, my dear. Hope I'm not intruding your beauty siesta.

"What does it feel like to be my driver?" purrs Remy.

"Perfectly pleasant, Goor. At least I treat a car as she should be. I was the only one left not in an insanely lengthy heel, so I'm clearly the designated driver," says Logan with a tight-lipped grimace as he turns the limousine into the red light district. It is the understatement of the day (as today is a day of overstatement, surely).

"Why am I wearing the most uncomfortable get up?" groans Virgil.

"Because you are the cutest!" says Roman, running his eyes appreciatively over a Virgil's cat suit.

"I'm looking so fish today!" Remy checks himself out in the rear view mirror, touching up his eye liner.

"More like a rotten flounder stinking up the beech!" Roman tugs at Remy's wig.
"Yo Chief! This two bucks bargain bin barbie is pulling my weave!"

"I did nooooot!"

"Oh, then what's that hair doin' in your hands?"

"I didn't poul her wheaf! Why would I poul her wheaf? If I'm gonna pull a wheaf, wouldn't I poul my hown wheaf? I'm no wheaaf pouller! It's insaaaane!"

"STOP THIS TRASH TALK OR I WILL JUMP OUT THE WINDOW!" yells Virgil.

Logan takes out a squeeze-bottle and sprays water over his shoulder at them. "Quiet! We will not do this! You are three friends with nothing in common except an ear-splitting shreik, so zip those lipstick-slathered mouths and get along."

"But he –" begins Roman and Remy at the same time like a bizarre circus twin act in in drag, which probably does not sound out of the ordinary in hindsight. They are both holding onto each other's wigs and ready to get down for diva fight in a bad girls reality series.

"CHILDREN! Play nice together!" Logan felt like driving into a dumpster then and there and ending his misery. But Patton's rescue mission and protecting Thomas is way too high on his list of priorities to let himself go. It is not as if he had family to live for anyway. Anymore.

Roman and Remy push each other off to the two end of the seat. Virgil has shut himself in the mini-fridge because sometimes sharing space with others of the same species is a bit too much, you know?

"You're beginning to sound like Patton!" mutters Remy.

"Why aren't you saving him, he's hopelessly in love with you," mumbles Roman in an even softer voice.

Logan frowns. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing!" both says in unison. 

"Where's Nix?"

"Are you done acting like the hosts on The View?" comes Virgil's voice from the refrigerator. "Can I come out now?"

Roman pulled him out. "I can't have my boyfriend freezing his ass off!"

"That's all you care about me, eh?"

"Want me to show you how much I care?"

"GUYS!" bawls Logan. "Those costumes cost a ridiculous amount, you will not ruin them with your kinks!"

"See? I'm the good drag queen." Remy shot Roman a mocking glance, and the latter just glared back.

"Neither one of you are not worthy to wear the clothes I put on you," says Logan. "Of all the unhinged Neanderthals I had to babysit, you guys take the strawberry pie!"
He swings to a halt in front of a big pink and yellow building that one would assume was built to mimic the dessert the place was named after, but after years of neglect, the place looked more like a lopsided beetroot dipped in a gravy that was better left unnamed. A big board above the entrance screamed in unsubtle blinking neon letters "Strawberry Pie: Wilkommen."

"What's Wilkommen?" asks Remy.

"It sounds like –" says Roman, with a mischievous grin.

"No, don't you dare." Virgil pulls Roman's fringe over his face.

"It means welcome." Logan parks the car. "Which I hope it will be. Alright, men... ladies, you will infiltrate the place and do a sweep of the whole club. Go into every room, I do not care how. Find Patton. Even if he is not here, there must be a reason Dolan sent al the pictures to Patton."

"Roger that!" Roman holds his hat up in a salute. "We will poke ourselves into every nook and canny and drag out all its secrets!"

"We will bring back Patton dead or alive," vows Remy, then he immediately backtracks when he realises what he implied.

"I sincerely hope it is alive," says Logan dryly. "We have to question him."

"Is that the only reason you want him back alive?" asks Virgil nonchalantly picking at his fingernail extensions. Which admittedly look cool.

Logan looks over his shoulder, and sees that all three are looking at him expectantly. Expecting what, he had no idea. A declaration of love? He was done with all of that a long time ago.

"Be gone." Logan's voice is more tart than usual, if it ever is sweet, that is. "You have to find a certain Madame La Douche who will instruct you. Please do not make a mess of this mission, I beg of you. We cannot afford anymore missteps."

It was clear he is done with the conversation.

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Madame Trixie La Douche's heels clack over the marble floor of the foyer as she opens the door and looks down to the driveway. Hm... a Limousine. The new princesses know how to travel in style. The pristine metallic white car door slides open and out they step. First is a tall redhead, a bit bulkier than the average drag queen, but damn if he got the body and the face and the style. Complete with the walk, the pose, and the riveting hair flip that seems to slow down time. Second comes one with rhinestone sunglasses... with him, it is all attitude, attitude and a third serving of disarming attitude for good measure. The wink over the glasses, the shimmying shoulders, the rolling tongue. Both are performers, the first could stand still and the room will bow, and the second can fire up the crowd into a frenzy with a flip of the hand. But the third, how will he fare? He does not push himself to the front, and with the two in front vying for the spot of the shiniest and loudest and brassiest, he blends into background. But there still might be potential. It was usually the shy and quiet ones that went all out bombastic on stage, as that's the biggest draw for drag performers, isn't it, to leave your mundane everyday self behind? Look at the funny adorable guy her favourite client sent to him today morning, all meek and confused. But after she kitted him up, he blossomed into a rose and will surely be the draw of the afternoon show, and will be all ready for his debut at the evening matinee. Hope the new three would fit in... what were they called now? The Birds of Gay? Madame La Douche stands to the side, concealed by the
doorframe. Better see their dynamic, which was key in a group act.

Roman shuts the car door and Logan zooms away.

"Alright, let's make this work!" Roman takes the lead.

"Uh, honey boo hoo, who made you leader?" Remy pulls Roman back by his pearls.

"You dare challenge me, you supermarket Christmas decoration?" asks Roman, hands on hips.

"Clearly I am better suited for the job, I know my way around the late night club scene. This midday bash would be an insta pedi for me."

"True, but being a drag queen is all about the power walk, amateur! How are we going to strut down the hall without me up front? I was made to have you two flank me! We will lose the perfect balanced formation if you lead!"

"I've never stood behind a man and I'm not about to start today, you flamingo with a flamin' ego. Let's all walk in together, and then the eye would pick out the most interesting person, i.e., me."

"And look like fashionable scarecrows on death row? I'd rather do the hump dance!"

"Why do you push me down every time I have an idea?"

"Coz I wear the pants in this team," - Roman scratches his head – "as in leader of the group, not pants as in clothes."

"Weak save."

"Not as weak as your eyeliner."

"Don't you at me, bitch, I will cut you."

"HEY, Anastasia and Drusila, whenever you're ready." Virgil shouts from the front door. "I'm going in, and you can flank me, losers."

Roman and Remy stare at each other in surprise. Then they pick up their skirts and run as fast as they can on killer stilettos. "Wait up!"

All three march in through the door. The door clangs close behind them, disappearing into an outlined rectangle on the wall and cutting out all natural light. They are met with a room that looks like the inside of a cushion, all red velvet drapes and plush crimson carpets and scarlet light fixtures. Sofas and footstools and curtains stand out in cotton wool white. Warm yellow light buzzes in translucent bulbs, giving the room an otherworldly and timeless quality. Or maybe it looks like a rejected set from Moulin Rouge.

"Gurls..." a voice as sensual as melting piece of dark chocolate, but with authority as teeth shattering as the roasted almond within.

All three whipped around to the owner of the hypnotic voice.

"Where are you sashaying off to?" A lady steps forward. A glimmering yellow curled wig sits on her head, held secure by a purple bonnet complete with grapes and violets. Ornate puffed sleeves of purple chiffon and glass crystals, a deep maroon faux whale bone corset (more for show than to tuck in) and an impressive skirt by any standard, rich glossy fabric over a can can that would throw a renaissance fair queen off on a loop. But the most arresting are her eyes, which can stare through
"My Lady." Roman decides to bow before royalty. "I'm here to audition for the role of drag queen number 1?"

"Not speaking like that." She tut tuts, looking at Roman with pity.

"Let me," says Remy. "Hey, gurl, what's shakin?"

"Your spine when you get on stage."

"Okay, I'm this close to be guilty of multiple homicide," says Virgil holding up a thumb and forefinger disturbingly close. "Can we come through? If not, get out of my way."

The Madame throws her hands in the air. "Par excellent! You are the perfect rag doll for the show! The sass, the eye roll, the whole I'm done with everything attitude, yes yes YES!" She pulls Virgil down the corridor. "You two can come or whatever," she shouts over her shoulder. "You are his perfect backup!"

"My pride is wounded," says Roman.

"And so will we if we don't go save V-man from the harpy's clutches." Remy jogs after them. But that is not something you can do in heels (unless you are a professional, I guess), and he would have fallen flat on his face if Roman did not grab his wig, which at last did come off.

"HA!" crows Roman.

"Just you wait!" huffs Remy. "I'll snatch your wig proper once we are on stage."

1200 h

"Alright, painted ladies. I'm Madame Trixie La Douche, and I'm your housemother. Follow the rules and don't cross me, and I'll be a good mother. Got a little motto, always sees me through: When you're good to Mama, Mama's good to you."

"Oh my," whispers Remy. "It's the chief in drag... it's Chief Draggers."

Madame La Douche glares at him.

"Got the glare down pat, too," says Roman.

"Erotica Sawyers, darling, you get a dressing room." She opens a door. "You two," she gestures dismissively at the two. "Wait in the corridor." She stalks off.

"And she irrationally likes me better than you two. She is a gender bending Logan!" Virgil shakes his head in amusement and drags the other two into the room.

Roman perches himself on the vanity counter. "Alright, we got in without looking suspicious. Fine, looking really suspicious, but not out of ordinary. Thank goodness we are drag queens, I don't think I can go as undercover as anyone else!"

"So..." Remy was at the mirror, gluing his wig back, glaring at the back of Roman's head. "Are we going to start snooping around like the girls from Totally Spies?"
"Yeah, but we better lie low." Virgil sits down on his swivel chair and spins around lazily. "All the performers are in their rooms now, so it will look odd running around now. Let's keep our eyes open during the competition. I saw where Madame La Douchebag put our applications. If Patton is here, there must be a record of it in her office. After the show, I'll break into the office, Remy try to find Patton and Roman be the watch dog?"

"Babe, didn't we agree to not to call each other by our pet names out in public?" asks Roman.

"Safety word!" cries Remy. "I don't need to hear this!"

The door swung open without a knock, and the newly formed Birds of Gay jumps in surprise. Two drag queens entered. They were no ordinary ones, their electric punk rock and Victorian gothic fusion outfits more sophisticated and downright cooler than either one of our three heroes. The first is smaller than the other, and wears a mask like a silver falcon, the other, a much bigger person, wears a black mask that is solid as the face of rock cliff.

"Hello, newbies. I'm Argentumina," says the first extending a hand. He is definitely not holding it up for a shake, so Roman bends over and kisses it, not knowing what else to do.

"Lovey," Argentumina continues. "I just came along to congratulate you on the competition. The Strawberry Pie is a very select club and only the crème de la crème may join its coterie of gender destroyers. And you thrown out mannequins in hand me down clothes have no chance winning against us! We're drag magicians! Me and my assistant will outsmart you with every move!"

"Whoa this is just a show, no need for a super villain speech!" says Remy.

"We will always be one step ahead of you lot!" says Argentumina with a cackle.

"Hmm..." says Virgil, looking at them carefully.

"I mean the foot work obviously!" says Argentumina, flustered. "A drag queen needs to know her dances!" He gives a big fake smile. "See you on stage, your video is going up on an epic fails channel."

"No!" weeps Roman, clutching his cheeks in absolute horro. "Anything but that!"

"That's your worst fear?" asks Remy. "Been there done that. Have you seen me at parties?"

"Focus on me!" snarls Argentumina. "Prepare to have your throats cut! You all look like road side Halloween attractions left in the rain." He laughs at his own joke. "Except you, love the new outfit, Roman."

"Thank you!" says Roman cheerily, beaming and flushing.

With that Argentumina and his assistant swept out of the room.

"Who the hell were those blokes?" asks Remy indignantly. "Twirling in here and spiting in my face! Ugh!"

"He knew my name!" says Roman dreamily.

Virgil slaps him. "Wake up, princess. Think of another guy when I'm around and the illustrious drag magician will be doing a fetal disappearing act." He pauses thoughtfully. "I think I know who they are..."
"Who?" asks Roman.

"How?" asks Remy.

"We'll find out soon enough. It's much more funny and climactic and suspenseful to challenge your enemy in a drag show, than, I dunno, call the police or whatever." Virgil shrugs.

Madame La Douche's voice crackled through the intercom. "Get your well padded asses backstage! The curtain's going up!"

"Mission or not, I'm gonna rock this!" said Roman putting his hand in the middle. Remy immediately put his fist over his, and Virgil more reluctantly. "One, two, thray, the Birds of Gay!"

"Thray?" Virgil raises an eyebrow.

"I couldn't think of a rhyme, okay?" wails Roman.

They head backstage, where everyone else is gathered. Argentumina and his assistant are holding court, as expected. Their magical act includes the infamous Chinese Water Torture Cell, where the magician is locked in a tank to make their daring escape from. The tank is already installed on the stage, to act as a pretty backdrop for the other acts. It is a solid iron box with thick impenetrable glass. Our three heroes give the pair a wide birth, instead choosing to mingle, eyes peeled for a sign of Patton, asking here and there if anyone has seen him. No wiser than when they started out, the three of them meet up at the foot of the steps leading up to the stage. Virgil looks around questioningly, and the other two shake their heads sadly. Virgil looks down in disappointment. Where could Patton be? The sweet guy who turned out to not be so innocent?

"HA!" Argentumina saunters over. "What a sad bunch of drag queefs."

"Are you like the designated mean girls at every climactic competition?" asks Virgil.

"And you are the under dogs."

"You will not insult me!" says Remy, annoyed.

"Too late, you do that to yourself just by thinking you have the hips to pull off that dress, no amount of padding can help an ass that isn't there."

"That's it!" yells Roman. "Imma gonna deflate your pneumatic bra!"

"That's sexual harassment."

"You would know all about that, wouldn't you?" asks Virgil. "How guilty is your conscience these days?"

"Fit and active, unlike your mental health."

Roman growls and leaps forward, swinging his necklace like a mace, angry beyond measure at the low jab at his boyfriend. He did not get that far however, as the black masked assistant sent him reeling back with one punch.

"Stop the violence!" Madame La Douche ran in, skirts flying. "I will not have my chickies fighting in my pen!" She pushes the two groups apart. "You are scaring our star performer!"

Roman, Virgil and Remy turn to look at the drag queen she points at, and their eyes meet the blank ones of Patton.
Logan and Thomas sit down for lunch, alone, at Sanderville. They eat leftovers from breakfast, reheated, too listless to prepare anything afresh.

"I hope Patton is okay," says Thomas for perhaps the hundredth time.

"Repeating it will not make him reappear." Logan jabs down with a fork.

"You seem to be... more disturbed than usual."

"Of course I am! One of my team members have been kidnapped, replaced with his evil twin, who also wants to kill my Primary and then both disappear without a trace!" Logan dashes his head against the table. "There is a limit even I can keep a stiff upper lip!" He looks up, eyes bleary. "I cannot believe Patton betrayed us."

"He did," says Thomas sadly. "But you have to understand that Patton thinks from his heart, not his mind."

"That is anatomically incorrect."

"Maybe, but not humanely. I think Dolon must have contacted him after he faked his death, and manipulated him into helping him with his twisted plans. Patton was always gullible, and Dolon always trained him to obey him. Patton cares for me as a friend, but he loves his family more, and the poor fellow must have been torn between us. I hope Dolon didn't scare him too much, Patton is very fragile."

"I cannot imagine why someone would love someone who is evil."

"Dolon is Patton's only surviving family."

"And that excuses his behavior?"

"It doesn't, does it?" says Thomas, learning something new. "I thought Dolon was a good friend, too. Trusted him with my life, and now he is out to take it away. Both Patton and I were duped, and it is hard for both of us to accept the truth. Harder for him, because he is desperate to keep his family together."

"Understandable. It is that quality of him I admire most, putting others before oneself and mediating unity. I respect and value him.

"Patton is great at that. But he does not meet many people who respect and value him... maybe you should tell him that."

"I will."

"Logan... Mr Craggers. What do you feel about Patton?" Thomas asked cautiously, picking at a nail on the table.

"As a team member, and lately as a friend."

"Just as a friend?"

Logan held up a finger. "Let me stop you right there. I am in the middle of a powerful realisation."
He closes his eyes, a minute ticks by, and he opens them. "I love him."

Insert explosion of rainbow fireworks, because Thomas is always prepared to celebrate declarations of love. "YAY! But... you knew it just like that?"

"Of course! I never dilly dally with my emotions, I understand them instantaneously and most often than not I am completely correct about them, as I rarely if ever make sentimental decisions. Now I shall go rescue Patton, because I love him, and by doing so he will love me back, and we will live several long meaningful ears together. Goodbye, I shall return with my significant other soon." Logan rises smartly from his chair and strides to the door. He pauses. "Thomas, one more thing."

"You called me Thomas!" says he of that name, eyes shining bright.

"Are we not family?"

"Yes we are! What's the thing?"

"Do not open the door for strangers. Knowing you, you will trust The Terminator."

"Isn't he a good guy?"

"My point is proven."

1225 h

"Patton!" cries Roman running up to him. "It's me Roman bronze, we've come to rescue you!"

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Patton over enunciates the words, robotic as the expression on his face.

Roman's mouth drops open.

"Um... how could you forget us, honey bunny?" asks Remy, worried.

Patton blinks. "I am really sorry, guys, I've never seen you before."

"What's the last thing you remember?" asks Virgil sharply.

"Dressing up for the show? Are you here to take part too? Good luck! Hope we all make it through, I'd love to make new friends!" Patton waves at them and heads to the stage. Madame La Douche smiles like a mako shark as she puts an arm over his shoulders. Argentumina and his assistant snigger like hyenas in the background.

1230 h

"Wilkommen!" Madame La Douche spins onto stage in a shower of glitter. "Put your hands together for Ragazzino!"

Patton took the stage. His costume is western inspired apparently, denim dungarees over a frilled yellow top. Childlike, abashed and doll-like, Patton is dwarfed in the belittling light of the disco ball, the tank behind him a frozen wave ready to crash and drown him any minute.

"I've got no strings
To hold me down.
To make me fret, or make me frown.
I had strings,
But now I'm free,
There are no strings on me."

"Oh! Is he lip-synching to a song from Disney's Pinocchio?" asks Roman, as he and the rest stood on the stage wings.

"My eyes be lying, but is he dancing like a puppet?" says Remy, pushing his sunglasses up into his hair.

"Do you two have spaghetti for brains?" snaps Virgil. "He is hypnotized!"

"Aaaaaaah," chorus Roman and Remy.

"By whom?" asks Roman.

"Silver Sparkle, Dolon, Patton's bro, who else?"

"How?" asks Remy. "Voodoo?"

"No."

"Pendulum?"

"No."

"That weird tea spoon thing from Get Out?"

"No, this story is not written well enough for something like that." Virgil points up. "I'll bet good money it's the fricking disco ball."

"Oooooh," chorus Roman and Remy.

"I know what Logan feels like now." Virgil rubs his nose. "Now what?" he asks a little louder.

"Break it, break the curse, and break out of here while break dancing!" says Roman.

"One step at a time, okay?" reprimands Virgil.

"You three are up next!" Madame La Douche barks at them. The three are surprised that Patton is done already, but the crowd is cheering and clapping.

"Ma'am!" Remy waves a hand to get her attention. "Can we perform up on the catwalk?" a grid of catwalks criss-crossed above the stage, and was perfect for more adventurous performers.

"An unusual request."

"One of our birds is literally catwoman."

"Sure, go wild, your frisky little thang!" She cannon balled onto the stage to announce them.

"Why'd you ask that?" hisses Virgil. He could do without lip-synching live, but dancing at the same time? Urgh, and perish the thought of being up on a catwalk.
"We'd be close to the disco ball. We can take it down!"

"That's a legit good idea! I'm impressed!" Virgil gives Remy a thumbs up.

"I could have thought of that." Roman pouts.

"But you didn't!" Remy grins and swings up the scaffolding to the rafters.

Roman follows, grumbling. He stops to help Virgil up too. They join Remy, adrenaline coursing through their veins as the crowd below them cheer. The stage lights swing up to them, and the three pose dramatically. Patton sits down on the edge of the stage, looking up star-struck. Argentumina and his assistant stand on either side of the water tank, in preparation for the next act. Madame La Douche whips the crowd up with a series of whoops. "The Birds of Gay, everyone! Bring it on, Bronze Blaze, Erotica Sawyers and Basic Bitch!"

Catwoman: Good evening all you gentlemen, mobsters, creeps and crooks,

Huntress: Men in tights come after you, and still, you're off the hook,

Black Canary: For those who scare and terrorize, it's the dawn of a brand new day;

All: You scum can simply call us, the one and only Birds of Prey!

Virgil finds himself shaking with nervous energy, and Roman grabs his hand spins him around, and Virgil cannot help but giggle. Remy grins encouragingly at the other two. They could get through this! The pirouette and do splits and slut drop with renewed vigour.

Catwoman: Green Lantern has his special ring!

Huntress: Pretty strong that little thing!

Black Canary: Blue Beetle's deeds are really swell!

Huntress: But who will bring him out of his shell?

Catwoman: Flash's foes, they finish last!

Huntress: Too bad sometimes he's just too fast!

All: While all the boys can always save the day,

No one does it better than the Birds of Prey!

While all the boys can always save the day,

No one does it better, no one does it better than the Birds of Prey!

Roman heads towards the disco ball, but sees Madame La Douche's eyes on him, and skips past it. He takes note of the wire taped to the ceiling. He whispers in Virgil's ear, "Look!" Virgil takes note of it.

Catwoman: Green Arrow has heroic traits, that is when he's shooting straight!

Black Canary: (spoken) Hey!

Catwoman: I'm just saying...
Black Canary: Aquaman's always courageous!

Huntress: His little fish, less outrageous.

Black Canary: Plastic Man can't expand.

All: Becomes putty in our hands!

While all the boys can keep you punks at bay,

No one does it better than the Birds of Prey

While all the boys can always save the day,

No one does it better, no one does it better than the Birds of Prey!

Virgil tries next. The other two are the flashier dancers, and his dark suit matches with the iron of the catwalk. He creeps closer and closer. He tugs at the casing of the wire, and the disco ball flickers. Argentumina and his assistant look up, startled and Virgil slinks away.

Catwoman: Batman throws his Batarang, what a weapon, what a bang...

Black Canary: Check out that utility belt, sure can make a girl's heart melt...

Huntress: He's always right there for the save, I'd like to see his secret cave...

All: While Batman does things in his special way,

He'd do it better with the Birds of Prey!

All: While Batman always seems to save the day,

No one does it better, no one does it better than the Birds of Prey!

Birds of Prey...

Remy tries his luck. He takes advantage of Roman and Virgil full on making out (which is always the best distraction, as no one in the room can take their eyes of them go at it) to take out a pocketknife from his cleavage and slash at the wire. The disco ball whines as it stops whirling, and dies. The web of colours ensnaring Patton dissolves.

Catwoman: (spoken) Meow...

Half a dozen things happen at once.

Patton looks around, a dull headache disorienting him. He curls up into a ball, clutching his ears.

The crowd loses it, jumping up and down yelling their jubilant praise.

Virgil sees Madame La Douche talking with the guests, sees her office unguarded. He drops from the catwalk and rolls under the tables towards the open office door.

Argentumina gasps in horror to see the disco ball destroyed, and his face twists in anger. Wordlessly, his assistant leaps up onto the catwalk and runs towards Remy.

Remy looks at the disco ball, sees that it is split through the middle, and he opens it. He gasps. Inside lies what is unmistakably a bomb.
Let's tackle each scene one by one, shall we?

Virgil slides in through the door, and runs to the computer. The password is LaDouche@123, which he guesses right away. How? Since Madame Trixie La Douche is exactly like Logan and as Virgil found out Logan's password is Craggers@123 when he hacked into his Wi-Fi. Un-tech savvy people sometimes share the same process of making a password. Virgil scrolls through the records, pen drive ready in hand. He could find no trace of Patton or Ragazzino. On a whim he checks the list of clients, and is surprised to find a Dolon Janus there. He quickly downloads the file.

"Excuse moi? What are you doing here?"

Crap. The La Douche has found him. Better get out before she flushes him out.

Vigil whips out a bottle of hair spray and douses her wig before using her can can as a trampoline to somersault off in to the crowd.

"No! My beautiful weave is frizzy! You monster!" Madame La Douche shrieks and gives chase. Virgil ducks and weaves and leap-frogs over obstacles, which often include humans. The Good Madame choses the alternative of ploughing through like an army tank.

High above the chase sequence, Argentumina’s assistant runs after Remy. He did not reach him.

Roman's heels step on the metal grill before the assistant. "Going somewhere, compadre? You'll have to get through me first." He does a back flip with kick (please note he is doing this all in a dress and heels) and knocks the black mask off.

"Bongo Bear!" gasps Roman.

"We meet again. And I have you where I want you, dressed as a little girl." Bongo flicks his wrists, and two daggers pop out from his sleeves. He grins, his canines sharper than his blades.

Roman kicks his heels off and holds them up. "What girl didn't take off their killer pumps in the middle of a party?"

They launch into an impromptu sword fight. After parrying off a few sloppy thrusts, Roman pins him by the collar against the wall with the points of his stilettos. Bongo wriggles helplessly, his feet dangling over twenty feet of air.

"Hang in there, buddy!" says Roman and rappels down.

He remembers the last time he had to control a crowd, the paparazzi at the hospital. He had to depend on Logan then, but he is not here now. The same tactic can still work, right?

"People! There is a bomb here. Run for your life!"

The hitherto happy crowd gasp, get up as one, and sprint screaming to the door.

Little does he know that he is helping Virgil, as Madame La douche is swept off with the mob.

And he knows even less that Remy has a bomb in his hands. An actual one.

Remy's brain revs at lightening speed. He did not know how to defuse the bomb, and he doubted throwing it far would save anyone, and he did not trust his aim. He sees Argentumina look up with a knowing smile. He turns to run away, leaving all in the room to their doom. Not if he can help it,
thinks Remy, an idea taking root in his head. He throws himself off the catwalk, arching through the air. Suspended mid-parabola, he tosses the bomb into the water cell and slams the lid down securely. He lands on an infinitely astonished Argentumina, flattening him like a pancake, his mask skidding away.

"You're going down, Argie!" pants Remy. "Or should I say Dolon Janus?"

Roman, who has escorted the last patron out the club, runs up to help, except he did not bargain for Bongo to crash to the ground before him.

"Your stilettos gave way, bitch," he says. "Next time, get better weapons." He delivers a harsh uppercut, and Roman collapses.

Bongo throws Remy off Dolon, picks up the latter, and hightails it out of there.

Virgil, still not aware of everything going on, turns towards the stage. The room is empty, tables over turned and chairs broken and drinks pooling like blood on the ground. He steps forward, and his arms are immediately twisted behind his back. It is Madame La Douche, free of the crowd at last.

"Think you can get away from me so easily?" She squirts the hair spray straight into his eyes, and Virgil staggers away, clawing at his eyes. She grabs the pen drive and runs away as fast as her little legs can carry her.

Remy crawls over to Roman's crumpled body and drags him away from the bomb. He hopes he can get away on time.

Virgil, still blind, struggles to get his bearing.

Patton is still on stage.

Virgil makes out Patton's figure mistily, and shouts: "Patton! You okay?"

Remy looks at him in horror. "Patton get away from the stage. NOW!"

Patton looks up, the noise in his ears dying away. Where was he? Who were those people screaming his name? Who was Patton?

1300 h

Logan nearly drove the Limousine up the steps to the entrance of the Strawberry Pie.

"Sir, you can't park here!" cries the security guard.

"Eat dust, I am here in the name of love." Logan kicked the front doors open and marched in, gun in hand, coat whipping in the wind.

Madame La Douche, running out into the foyer, had to stop and admire that the tall glowering stranger walking in. he had it all. If he ever decided to be a drag performer, he would have the city eating from his hands.

"Sir! Stop! Who are you?"

"I am wearing a trench coat and fedora. I am clearly a flasher. I belong here."
"Uh..."

"Madame, I have come to rescue Patton Janus. Do you know where he is?"

"No..."

"Step aside, I must pass."

"You can't go in there."

"Nothing can stop a beating heart." Logan whacks Madame La Douche between the eyes with the butt of his gun, and she bowls over.

Logan stepped over the fallen woman and strode into the lounge, and his sharp eyes flicked over the chaos within. Roman, Virgil and Remy seem to be in safety. And his eyes saw Patton. Nothing else matters. He sees Virgil turn around in surprise, eyes squinting. He hears Remy shout unclear words. He is shaken into action when Patton groans and cradles his head. He runs up the aisle, as Patton sits up uncertainly.

"PATTON! You are safe now!"

"Who is Patton? Why does my head hurt?"

"Maybe this will help."

Logan kisses Patton.

The tank explodes.

Chapter End Notes

And then they all died. Just Kidding! Or maybe not, the next chapter will be them saving Primary Sanders as a bunch of ghosts protectors/ polterguys.

Writing Logan in this chapter gave me life.

If you haven't heard the song Birds of Prey, give it a listen, it's on Youtube. If you like my kind of humor, you'd love it!

QotD: How much is Patton to be blamed for his actions? Would an apology cover it, or a redemption arc?

See you soon!
Liarevelations

Chapter Notes

This is kind of a more heartfelt and serious chapter than usual (well, as serious as this silly story can get!), where we talk about the theme of this book! YAY! Hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1315 h

A hazy memory shifts through the winding paths of Patton's mind.

A loud boom roars in his ear, like distant crashing of thunder or the singing of angels or the chiming of a chocolate advertisement. Then rain, stars and sugar drops and sparkles shower down from above all around him. He feels himself thrown away by forceful heat. But he is safe. The bony arms around him poked him in unfortunate places, but he does not mind because they belong to Logan. The eyes that meet his are frowning, maybe out of concentration in this high stress situation, not because he does not like him. The opposite actually. The eyes tell him that Logan likes him back too. Very much. And Patton can live with that. And the lips that brush against his are Logan's and that makes all the difference. Except it is a very bad kiss. Logan does not know how to kiss, like at all, and Patton's mind is way too groggy for him to kiss back properly. They are locked in this passionate and tender but incompetent and sloppy abomination unto the make out gods as they are thrown off the stage from the blast.

Patton opens his eyes, all his memories come rushing back, all the happy ones and sad ones and guilty ones.

"He is awake! Our little trouper lives!" cries Remy.

Logan slowly helped Patton sit up. "Has the hypnosis worn off?"

"I think so," says Patton.

"Thank goodness!" Logan hugs him.

"You gave us quite a scare!" says Virgil. "Your mind was under a spell and you passed out after the explosion. And you didn't recognise anyone."

"You two fell on me and broke your fall!" says Roman cheerily, rubbing his jaw where an angry bruise was rapidly forming where Bongo struck him. "That brought me back to consciousness from that punch, so thanks!"

Patton looks around. His friends gather around him, looking a bit worse for wear with ash on their faces and tears on their clothes and debris in their hair. And some of them were in drag for some reason? The room itself is trashed as if raided by the fashion mafia, with costumes hanging off twisted iron bars and the remains of a disco ball hanging off the edge of a whole in the roof and the curtain fluttering like ripped sails of wrecked ships. He is happy that he isn't one of the broken pieces on the floor, and is grateful his friends saved him.
He burst into tears. "I'm so sorry for helping Dolon. I though he could turn good if I just helped him, but look at this place. He just wants to destroy in cold blood."

"It is hard to accept that someone you love turned against you." Logan wipes away Patton's tears. Roman looks ready to burst into tears too. Remy mostly looks uncomfortable, not knowing how to react to Logan being empathetic. Virgil looks awkward dealing with all these emotions but he is here to help.

"He said he would kill Thomas for real if I did not help him," says Patton, a sob stuck in his throat. "He is my twin, my family," he added, more to convince himself than a fact.

"Yes, but he manipulated you and threatened you and hypnotised you. Not accepted behaviour of a family member, is it?" Logan holds up the tablet, which he had brought with him. "Look what I found: A disco ball app. Dolon has been hypnotising you for a very long time."

"The sneaky toad!" says Roman, grinding a fist against his other palm. "If I cross paths with him again..."

"You will probably fail spectacularly to catch him," says Remy with a smirk.

Roman wails at the skies. Which he can do now, as there was a sizable whole in the roof.

Patton takes a deep breath. "I must be truthful. I did help him intentionally at first. I knew it was wrong, but I told myself he could not be all bad. And I was wrong."

"True," says Virgil. "But your heart was in the right place. Look at me, I was in the wrong too at the start, but I turned out alright, didn't I? We have a very forgiving policy on past mistakes."

"You forgive me?" Patton's eyes are hopeful.

Roman, Virgil and Remy nod at once.

Patton turns to Logan.

Logan is careful with his words. "Yes. If you promise not to do this again, and help us bring Dolon to the justice he deserves."

Patton grasps his hands. "I will never fail you again."

"Look, champ," says Remy. "If I learnt anything from this bunch of balloon-headed baboons is that family isn't what you're born into, it's the group of friends you end up with and feel yourself the most with."

"Yeah!" says Roman, putting his arm around Virgil. "My family never understood how I could be hyper masculine and feminine at the same time, and I was in a lot of self doubt until I ran into Virgil."

"Less said about my family the better," says Virgil, snuggling into Roman's embrace. "Roman and I are friends first and foremost, if you can believe it. Sure we mess around a lot but at the end of the day, we're family."

"Virgil Nix, love of my life, was that a proposal?"

"Dream on, my sweet prince, I will never say yes."

"Dammit, I thought surviving a near death experience together would be romantic!" says Roman,
so downcast that Virgil couldn’t help but give him a peck on the cheek, which brightened him up considerably.

Patton laughs. "I do feel better now."

"We are family," says Logan. "No matter how you all drive me to the breaking point and beyond, I've never felt more home than among you."

Remy sighs, turning serious. "I was searching for my personal moment in the sun all this time, but I was wrong. Sure, I was super cool getting rid of the bomb, but Virgil was our undisputed leader and kept Draggers at bay, Roman showed Bongo what's what and saved everyone, and Logan walked in like a badass bitch and saved the day. I couldn't have done it alone."

"I'm proud of you, Remy." says Logan. "And of you too Roman. You've learnt a lot over the past two days."

Roman and Remy grin at each other and high five, their feud forgotten.

"Virgil," continues Logan. "I'm slightly less proud of you, as you did recover the Dolon files but if I had not stopped Madame La Douche from escaping, it would have been in vain. I've handed over both the pen drive and her to the Division, and I think that information is enough to find her guilty of abetting a criminal. So, good, not excellent work."

"Fair is fair," says Virgil with a shrug.

"Oh my gods!" shout Remy and Roman in unison. "We're better than Virgil."

"That's the down side of families," says Virgil to Patton. "They are competitive as a British Bake-Off and the teasing, oh dear lords the teasing."

Patton sniffs. "At least this family does not deceive each other. Not any more."

"Um... Mr Craggers and the Gurls?" Remy lifts a hand, uncharacteristically nervous. "I have to confess something."

"Go ahead!" says Patton warmly. "This is a safe and caring space. Share."

"I am a spy," says Patton with a shrug. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"I'm an undercover agent investigating Dolon Janus for sometime. He is involved in several high profile cases in Dionysus Boulevard attached to VIP celebrities I am not allowed to disclose. I am not supposed to come out to you, but I cannot keep it a secret anymore. We believe that the Dignitary Defence Division has a lot more corrupted officials inside, and we're trying to crack it open. I infiltrated this assignment as it has the best chance of exposing both Dolon and The
"Who are the 'we' you keep referring to?" asks Virgil.

"The CPD, City Police Department."

"I see," says Logan.

"My higher ups believe that there must be someone in connection with Thomas who is the mastermind."

"Thomas would never do anything bad!" cries Patton. "Can't I trust anyone?"

"Thomas is innocent, we are sure. Someone got into his private funds and bribed the Division to appoint their new Director, so we suspect it's Dolon or someone else in Thomas's inner circle."

"I will not hear of this any more!" snaps Logan. "The Division is not a pit of cheaters like you so callously allege!"

"Mr Craggers, Sir," says Roman, determined to say his piece. "The Dignitary Defence Division is what made me who I am today, but you must know it's not the most honest of places! There is a lot of shady business going on. I think Remy is doing right, trying to catch them in the act."

Logan opens and closes his mouth like a scavenger fish trying to find some last shreds of dignity at the bottom of the aquarium, but gives up. He sits back on his heels, his shoulders slumping. "There is no point defending The Division anymore. That place is incompetent, inconsiderate, and so few people actually care about the safety of the people they swear to protect. Remy, thank you for coming clean with everything."

Remy nods. "I understand if you do not want me on the team any more. The hoity toity higher-ups at the CPD will fire me anyway when they find out I told you."

"I'll leave that decision to the team," says Logan.

"I don't want to kick Remy out," says Roman firmly. "He is super cool at fighting in any complicated situation and I need someone else in the team who can match my level of awesomeness."

"I've already said that we forgive more villains than a children's cartoon," says Virgil with a shrug.

"Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me," says Patton. "I got my fingers burnt once trusting family, but I still have faith in you."

"Those are quite strong sentiments," says Logan, wondering how such different people manage to work together. "So I will comply. The same rules as the other reformed wrong doers on our team: no more lying, no more betrayals, and promise to help us bring justice to the evil and protect the innocent, in this case Mr Sanders."

"A tall order, but I'm in if you'll let me, Cheese Crackers," says Remy, looking hopeful.

"You are in, but call me that again and you will be on a missing, presumed dead list."

"Group hug?" asks Patton. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so all of them do end up in each other's arms in varying degrees of discomfort.

"Patton's squeezing me!" wheezes Remy.
"Shhh... it calms you down, it's science!" Patton hugs him tighter.

"Excuse me, is someone feeling me up?" asks Logan.

"Whoops sorry, I thought that was Virge’s butt!" says Roman.

"And that's the end of the group hug, thanks!" Virgil ducks out of it.

They all look around their little group with, glowing with the light of friendship.

"Guys, I think we need to officially name ourselves," says Remy. "How about we go with the Birds of Gay?"

Everyone except Logan votes yes, but as per the usual protocol he gives in.

"There we are," says Logan. "We are the Birds of Gay, and we're here to save the day."

"Alright, there's only one thing left to do!" Roman claps his hands.

"Which is?" asks Logan, fearing the next madcap scheme.

"The power walk!" Roman does a few push-ups in anticipation.

"And white might that be?" asks Logan.

"We are going to walk in flawless formation looking fine AF" says Remy.

"It will be empowering and in slow motion!" squees Patton.

"We are going to mime slow motion?" asks Logan, more confused than ever.

"Oh no, this is a fantasy universe, the slow motion kinda just happens," says Virgil wisely.

"Then let us proceed by all means." Logan takes the first step.

And off they go.

A guitar riff thrills the air, curtains blow like victory banners, and poise and grace cloak the five men walking out of the burning building. First come Logan, face impassive but the trench coat makes it work it with a life of its own as usual. Roman flanks him from the left, smoking gun in hand and his tattered clothes adding to the machismo. He is rubbing his aching jaw, but don't count that. Virgil is on the left, hands in pockets (of course his cat suit had pockets) and glaring through his bangs but he is winging it as usual. His eyes are still smarting, but ignore that. Behind Roman is Remy, lips quirking up into a smirk as he winks over his sunglasses. His fingers tremble when he remembers that he held a bomb in them, but it's cool tremors, okay? Patton follows Virgil, still disoriented and with two left legs trying hard to trip him up, but he manages to not trip and ruin the whole effect. Phew, we good. The slow motion stops when they reach the car.

"That was great!" Patton beams like a kid in a fun bouncer. "Let's do it again."

"No, you are under probation, you do not get to make executive decisions. What happens now?" asks Logan.

"We go home, my familiars," says Remy.

They get in the Limousine, Remy at the wheel as usual.
"We can go back into slow motion when we get home," says Roman. "For some reason getting out of a car is way cooler than getting in."

"Ro, be a darling and shut up." Virgil tightens Roman's seat belt so that he cannot breathe, let alone speak.

"Kinky," whispers Roman, and is thankfully silent for the rest of the trip.

1345 h

Thomas is overjoyed when they get back to Sandervile safe and sound, and cannot stop hugging everyone. Princess Barkness looks at them moodily, missing her favourite person. Patton is so happy to be back he hugs her too, and the dog strains to get away from him.

When they go back inside, Logan sees that Thomas is not alone in the house. A strange man sits on a settee, in immaculate black coat and tie with Windsor knot, embellished with silver cufflinks, tie pin and watch. His goatee bobs as he smiles toothily at them. He raises a hand in greeting, and expensive diamond sitting on his forefinger in the shape of a poison dart frog. Logan stifles a gasp of surprise as he sees the crest embossed on his coat lapel. It is the seal of the Dignitary Defence Division. The distinguished gentleman rises with ponderous pompousness and when he speaks, his voice harkens mahogany wood tables and cigar smoke and pureed caviar. "Hello, Hello, Mr Logan Craggers, nice to see Mr Thomas Sanders' Chief of Security and his team, albeit not in the expected attire." He guffaws and shakes his hand firmly, two sharp tugs and a vice-like grip. "I've been waiting to see you for a very long time."

"The pleasure is mine. You already know me, so may I have the honour of knowing who you are, Sir?" Logan keeps his voice calm and collected, though he senses the rest of them shift behind him uneasily. Remy looks as if he has both kidneys stolen.

"I am Mr Scorpio S. As you might be aware, the previous Director of the Dignitary Defence Division has an unfortunate... untimely death. I am delighted to take his place."

"May I see some identification?"

"Ah, you see, it happened so quickly, today morning only, the procedures might take some time to be finalised. I m afraid I do not even have a business card to offer you."

Logan only has to do the slightest motion with his hand for both Roman and Virgil to put their hands on their guns, which they had retrieved from the Limousine. Scorpio did not seem to notice anything amiss.

"Thomas," says Logan cautiously. "What did I tell you about opening the door for strangers?"

"Um..." says Thomas. "Don't do it?"

"He is no stranger!" A familiar yet unwelcome voice trills like a wind chime in a typhoon as Miss Arachne Svengali floated in with a bowl of candied fruits swimming in condensed milk. "He is my brother and he came with me. Thomas was such a dear and wouldn't let us in but a locked door never stopped me!"

"You were always uncannily good at picking locks," says Logan, his voice not unlike a drill boring a hole through the pavement. "I wonder how you learnt that skill... stealing cheque books from all your ex-husbands?"
"Oh, you always had a penchant for drama," she says flippantly. "You seem to lose your grasp on facts..." She sets down the bowl. "... as you grow older."

"My age has not dulled my wits as it has done your personality, Miss Svengali. And why, may I ask, is Mr Scorpio Svengali here? To see if his name could be upgraded to something even more sinister?"

"Not at all!" says Scorpio pleasantly. "I believe a ruling was passed that your team needs to be assessed for competency?"

Logan shudders. That was probably the worst mistake he has made so far. His team would definitely not pass a standardised test, they excelled and innovation and resourcefulness which never made its way onto an appraisal sheet. "Yes, I have not forgotten it. But why have you, the Director, come to personally look into this matter, instead of an invigilator? I would assume you would have more pressing responsibilities back at the headquarters, especially with the hand over from your predecessor."

"Mr Sanders is our most valuable client right now. I must make sure he is safe with the best service we can offer. The perfect face and vibe to win over the public, and his face is splashed across the news, did you see? His story is trending and buzzing and skyrocketing sales. The unwashed masses eat up this death threat drama."

"Death threat drama?" asks Logan, his nose wrinkling up with displeasure. "Is that all this means to you?"

"We are here to stop our dignitaries from dying but a bit of publicity hurt no one!" Scorpio sweeps his arms out to include all. "Are you ready for your assessment?"

"Hell yeah!" cries Roman. "Bring it on, baby."

"Is this written or verbal, because if it is verbal I might need a panic bag," says Virgil. Ever the conscientious boyfriend, Roman hands him a brown paper bag, a stock of which he always carried with him. "Okay, I'm ready, let's do this," mumbles Virgil.

"I'm ready too!" says Patton, and slips his pinkie finger around Logan's.

Logan smiles, thankful that his team has his back. He is surprised that Remy did not loudly assert his enthusiasm, but he actually looked more disturbed than usual.

"Very well," says Scorpio. "Let us begin by checking your progress." He pulls out his phone and scrolls through some notes he has made.

Logan does not let his annoyance show. How can Scorpio treat this so casually? To not even open a physical file for them was such an insult. Where are the forms and psychometric tests and graphs? He might be old fashioned, but rules were rules. He is still not convinced why such a high up official should be on their case.

"Mr Patton Janus. We are putting you under containment," says Scorpio.

Patton whimpers.

"I beg your pardon?" says Logan.

"Don't get angry at me, just doing my job!" Scorpio beams at them. "We cannot be sure if he would convey information to Dolon Janus again. Besides, now the public thinks that Mr Sanders’
stalker and personal assistant are the same person, and explaining the entire twin situation is bad for PR. They will think Patton is the killer if he goes out in public, and we don't want that happening, can we? It's better to keep him under lock and key. Not arrested, mind you, we are still investigating if he was abetting a criminal."

"I won't betray us again," says Patton in a very small voice.

Logan knows he is treading on dangerous waters. He grips Patton's hand tighter behind his back. "I understand your point. However, is it not better to keep Patton under house arrest in Sanderville instead of at a holding room at the Dignitary Defence Division? This building has been declared a safe house and I have made sure it meets the criteria. I will ensure he does not leave at all."

Scorpio puts his chin in his hand. "Mr Craggers, I see nothing wrong in your plan. We will review his status after the case is wrapped. In the meantime, you will contact the Division and get one of our registered personal assistants and add him or her to your team. Hm... get a girl, they are more photogenic."

"That will be my choice," says Logan, bristling. Patton looks at him teary eyed and Logan shoots back a reassuring nod at him, but Patton is only half consoled.

"Now onto the next rascal," says Scorpio waving a finger in mock sternness, but no one laughs. "Mr Roman Bronze. You are fired."

"WHAT?" Roman quickly fights down his disappointment. "I beg your pardon, Mr Svengali, Sir."

"May I know why my trusted bodyguard is to be removed from team?" asks Logan. He crosses over and sits directly in front of Scorpio, and pops a candy in his mouth slowly.

Scorpio, jostled out of his momentum only for a moment before sitting down too. The rest remains standing, like the chess pieces of a battle between them.

Scorpio coughs and makes the first move. "Roman has been with your team from day one, but he has failed to capture the killer on numerous occasions despite having the opportunity to do so. We have many recorded blunders, not limited to walking straight into a trap at the fugitive Bongo Bear's alleged house. Don't you think having a more skilled bodyguard would be of more use? I will chose and send over his replacement. Roman will be sent back to the Division, and hopefully he will pick up another assignment by the end of the week, or it's no pay indefinite leave for him."

He smiles a pityingly, but it does not reach his eyes.

Roman deflates visibly, and hangs his head. He takes off his bodyguard badge, ready to throw the towel in when Virgil snatches it and pins it back on. Before Logan can say anything, Virgil speaks up in a tight fierce voice: "Listen up, mister. My boyfriend might have messed up a few times, but that's not enough to kick him off the case! He knows the criminals better than a fresher and it will be stupid to bring in a someone clueless at this stage!"

"Keep talking, and you endanger your um… friend's chances even more." Scorpio steeps his fingers. "The main charge against him is abandoning the Primary to protect you, and that is gross negligence."

Virgil looks ready to scream, and his customary anxiety disappearing at the face of seeing his loved one threatened. "Then punish me, not him."

"Virge, it's okay," says Roman putting a hand on his shoulder. "I know I have to follow the rules when I signed up for this."
"Aw... how sweet." Scorpio chuckles humourlessly. "But that is not going to make me change my mind."

"May be this will." Logan holds up a hand to stop Virgil and Roman from talking further. "Send me a new bodyguard by all means. But, don't you think it is better to have two on this assignment? The threats of The Primary's life are getting more frequent. You yourself said that he is one of our best clients. I propose to keep Roman on, make him the second in command bodyguard if you must, but I will not have you swooping in and questioning the integrity of my team."

"You drive a hard bargain." Scorpio scratches his forehead. "Once again I am compelled to agree."

"Good."

"But that is his last chance."

"Understood."

Roman sighs in relief. Virgil looks at Logan curiously. The first time he met him, he had serious doubts whether he was a leader, but now he was pulling through. But Virgil's respite is cut short as Scorpio turns to him.

"And you, Mr Virgil Nix, have the most colourful record I've ever seen. Is there nothing you didn't get yourself involved in?"

"I like to get exposure every kind of crime, Sir." Virgil spat the last word out like a piece of gristle from an undercooked piece of meat. "Gotta know them all. I did my time though, you can't hold that against me."

"But you see, I can hold it against you! You will go to The Division and have one of our investigators vet you. If you pass, join formally as a detective, and you can stay on the team. I do not know why Mr Craggers took you on in the first place, but here we are."

"He has more skills than that appears on paper, Mr Svengali," says Logan testily. "I have already personally vetted him, and found nothing irredeemable. However, I will send him to the headquarters immediately."

Virgil shrugs. Scorpio seems to be making sense at last; he anyway would have had to sign up with the Division at some point if he wants to continue this.

Scorpio stands up and moves over to Remy. The light changes dramatically and paints the two of them shadows of stark contrast. He smiles, a glinting sickle in the dark.

"My dear Mr Remy Goor. We meet again. The last time I had the pleasure of your company, you were working with the CPD, weren't you?"

"Um... yes, milord."

"It seems a bit odd that you would leave a cushy job as a detective with the central branch of the CPD and become a... driver?"

"I'm rebranding my image. Had to cut my losses but I am in a better place now."

Scorpio does not seem amused by the stock reply. "Very well. Get yourself vetted. If something goes wrong, you know whom to call. You do know that the Division and the CPD don't see eye to eye, and I'd hate to get caught in between."
Remy blanches white, all sass gone.

Logan stands to place himself between the two. "Mr Svengali, Remy will follow the exact same vetting process as Virgil, and I am positive no phone calls are necessary. An excuse me, but are you threatening one of my team members? I will not allow that."

Scorpio glares at Logan. "You're getting too big for ya' breeches, did you know that?"

"I am just doing my job."

"And not succeeding."

"My defeat is yours too. We work for the same Division."

"Yes," says Scorpio, clearly meeting his match in Logan. "Let us see next week the progress you've made."

"Trust me, this will all be over before the week is up."

"I will hold you responsible for that comment. And to make sure I get steady reports on your doings, I will appoint my sister Arachne to act as your parole officer."

"Delighted to do so." Arachne smiles benevolently.

"I refuse to accept that," says Logan firmly. "She is a civilian. You cannot put her in charge of a delicate duty as that."

"There is no other person to do the job... you can hardly expect me to ask the new bodyguard I'm sending. They're just mountains of disposable muscle."

In the background, Roman pouts.

"He's got a point you know," whispers Virgil. "Except you are in no fucking way disposable."

"I'll do it," says Thomas. The room brightens again, and all eyes turned to him. "I am in the best position to judge if I am safe or not. I know I'm a civilian and have no idea how to be a parole officer, but I think it's my place to assess my friends... I mean the security team.

Scorpio smiles again, as if Thomas has said what he wanted him to say all along.

"And who am I to argue with you? That duty shall be yours. And now, I will take my leave. Think about what I have said." Scorpio bows to all, and with Arachne on his arm, exits. He pauses at the door. "Another thing, Mr Craggers. You called the Primary by the first name. Highly unprofessional. You are here to protect him, not be his friend."

Logan watches them go. "Patton, be a dear and go open Princess Barkness's kennel and give her a hug from me."

"What? Now?" Patton is confused.

"If you do not mind."

Patton skips into the garden and does as he is told, like the obedient little elf he is. Princess Barkness makes a sound like a dying sewing machine, and runs away as fast as she can. She sees the juicy calves of the Svengali Siblings walking down the drive and leaps at them yapping. The two of them scream and run helter skelter down the garden. Unlucky for them, the gardener had
just watered the grass, and off they went sliding and slipping in the mud with stalks sticking out of their hair. They crawled into their car and drove off so fast a racecar would have suffered a stroke at the sight.

"And we're done with that," says Logan. He collapses into an armchair. "That was nerve wracking. Once again, I apologise for bringing this upon us."

"Are you crazy? Don't apologise! You were super awesome badass defending us, Sir!" says Roman. "You deserve all the medals!"

Patton gave Logan a big hug. "You will always be my hero!"

"Thank you, and thank you all for having my back." Logan smiles with genuine affection at all of them.

"This makes me sad!" says Thomas. "All of you got into hot water because of me!"

"Nonsense," says Virgil, "Don't beat yourself up, dude. We're all in this together and all that crap."

Thomas beams. "I'd hate to think I'm paying you to protect me, and not because you care about me!"

"Well the money is a great incentive," says Virgil with a smirk.

"But we are family," adds Patton with no room to argue.

"You know that only gets sillier the more we say it?" comments Virgil.

"Nope!" says Patton blithely.

"Remy, you have been silent for sometime," says Logan. "Is anything the matter?"

"Nah, Nanny Fine, I'mma fine." Remy hides behind his sunglasses.

"You are clearly not."

"Okay fine... this might come as a shock, because you know I have great taste, but I kinda dated Scorpio."

Everyone gasps.

"It was a long time ago, gurls, and an on and off fling. This tall glass of water does not do relationships. I was a rookie at Police Academy and like an idiot I told him all about it. I think he wants to make trouble for me, that bull with horns and no head."

"Hm..." Logan taps his chin. "This seems too much of a coincidence. There seems to be a lot of exes involved in this conspiracy. Roman has Bongo, Remy and Scorpio... and well, you might have guessed by now that Arachne and I used to be married."

Patton gasps. "Really? Why did you two divorce, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Mutual differences. This is a topic I'd rather not dwell on, so I will only permit one more question."
Everyone let Patton ask it, as he was practically bursting with excitement. "Logan? Are those two sweet cutie pies in your photograph your kids?"

"Yes."

"I love them already! They look so sweet!"

"I would like you to meet them too, but I haven't been a good father to them. I do not know the first thing when it comes to being a parent, and I always prioritised work over the kids."

"I can help you with that!"

"Looking forward to it. Now let us move on. Anyone here has an ex to disclose?"

Thomas looks at Patton uncertainly, who nods encouragingly. "I don't know if this counts," says Thomas slowly. "But I went on one date with Dolon. I told him afterwards that I did not feel anything more than friendship towards me, and he kind of blew up at me about that. I didn't know he was into me that much. It was the evening before the explosion."

"The night he was drinking at the bar and met me," says Virgil, piecing it together.

"If we naming embarrassing dates, I'm guilty too," says Patton. "I might have dated Madame Trixie for a week. She was obsessed with me and wanted me on the show so bad, I just had to say yes when she asked me out. But it went to bits and pieces so fast... I'm so happy I'm with Logan now." He turns to Logan. "We are together now, aren't we?"

"That's a conversation for later, hopefully without an audience," says Logan.

"Well, this is fun," says Virgil. "The Salty League of Killer Exes are out to get us, and I'm the only one left free from all this relationship baggage."

There is a crackle on the intercom, and the security guard at the gate speaks: "Sir, there's a guy here who says he is the new bodyguard?"

"Send him in," shouts Logan.

They wait still for a few tense minutes till there is a loud thump on the front door, and it swings open, lock snapping at the power of the fist. The fist is connected to a body, that is, yes, probably best described as a mountain of disposable muscle. He looks startlingly similar to Roman, right down to the height, build and winsome smile, except for the thatch of sunshiny yellow curls flowing down to his shoulders.

Virgil yelps and covers behind Roman. "I take back what I said. This is not fun. That's my ex."

"He looks just like me..." whispers Roman.

"I have a type, okay?"

The giant of a man waved a meaty hand. "Hi! I am Archie Lez."

"And he is a literal Achilles! Me but better! I am undone, undone!" wails Roman.

"What an interesting development," says Logan to himself. He speaks up: "Welcome, Lez, I am Mr Logan Craggers, your supervisor and The Primary Thomas Sanders' Chief of Security. Please go with Roman, he will brief you on what needs to be done around here."
Both Roman and Virgil look horrified at the prospect.

"Everyone get cleaned up, and lose those ratty wigs please, you are shedding pins all over the floor. Virgil and Remy, be prepared to head to the The Division Headquarters pronto. And grab a bite to eat, everyone, today will be a long day and night. And I must now take Patton to his room and lock him up as per the orders. I will return with our new Personal Assistant. Now hurry up!"

Logan took Patton by the hand and hurried off.

"I think those two are up to something." Roman cocks and eyebrow. "Maybe they are into prisoner and guard role play."

"Shut your libido ass mouth, Ro," says Virgil.

"I wonder who our new PA is going to be..." says Remy. "Another salty ex?"

Chapter End Notes

The idea of the Salty League of Killer Exes just came to me last night, and I was like sure, three of the characters have exes running around, why not give them one each and watch the madness happen? I'm looking forward to see how much fun I can have with this. I was dying with laughter imagining Patton dating Madame La Douche because whaaaat?

I feel good wrapping up some character arcs and starting some new ones. The next few chapters are going to focus more on Patton, Remy and Thomas because it is high time they get some screen time.

QotW: So did I do a good job introducing Scorpio, our big bad?

See you in a couple of days, hopefully!
Chapter Notes

This was a doozy of a chapter to write. Somehow it started out serious and then went off the rails big time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1415 h

"Are you really going to lock me up?" asks Patton in concern. "I don't want to be! I want to be out and help! I need to be there when we bring Dolon down!"

"And you will be," says Logan, his mouth set in a determined scowl. He walks right past the staircase, so Patton is sure that he will not be locked in his room, but then as they walk out the back door, he becomes increasing concerned whether the tool shed is to be his cell.

To his surprise, Logan pops open the passenger door to his old car parked in the garage, and gestures at Patton to get in. He does so, and Logan hops in behind the wheel and zooms away. Except that Logan is the kind of driver who is so careful the police stop him for driving under the minimum speed limit. Patton vaguely remembers the road they take, as if from a trip late at night.

"Um... where are we going?" Visions of being locked in a dank cellar, and underground bunker, an unopened grave flash before Patton's eyes.

"You will find out soon enough. It is a surprise!" Logan smiles, his facial muscles so unused to that expression he looks closer to a creepy clown than a funny face on its balloon.

Patton wails. "You are giving me to an orphanage, aren't you? I don't want to go back there and sing kumbaya again!"

Logan pales. "Apologies, I did not mean to cause you distress. I thought a surprise would be... charming?"

"Ooooo." Realisation dawns in Patton's eyes. "This is your attempt at being... romantic?"

"I think the intentions were lost in the execution."

"Please don't say execution! It makes you sound more like a serial killer than before!"

"I do have a few sociopathic tendencies, but do I come off so antisocial?"

"If you pull of stunts like this, yes!" Patton puts a hand on Logan's shoulder. "Why don't you be as you normally are, instead of acting romantic?"

"Very well."

"Now tell me where we're going or I'm going to pull the hand break."

"Stop the car in the middle of the road with no red light in sight? Blasphemy! Who is psychopathic
now? Alright, here is the agenda. We will go to the Clotheshorse and I will choose you a new outfit, as I have learnt that an attire makeover is the solution for all life's ills. We will find you a disguise, as what Mr Svengali pointed is true: it is all over the press about how someone who looks exactly like you pointed a gun at Thomas. You will not be able to show your face in public, but we can ensure that is not the face you show, can we not? You will still be able to be in our new team masquerading as the new PA, and we can still maintain that you are locked up safely, so everyone wins. Now shush and let me dress you." Logan brings the car to a screeching halt in the Clotheshorse car park, neatly between the white lines.

"I like it when you order me around."

"And you are very good pupil. Now put these on, we cannot have anyone recognising you. Besides, you are still in drag." Logan chucks his trench coat at Patton. Patton puts it on and revels in the warmth and smell of Logan enveloping him. Logan's lips twitch as he lowers his fedora onto Patton's blushing face.

"Pity, your face is lit up like a siren, and that will give us away."

"Um... I don't think I can stop it, I have very weirdly pale skin."

"Then hickeys are off the table, I assume."

Patton goes white with charged surprise, so now he looks pink like a boiled lobster.

"Perfect." Logan swings open the doors and pulls Patton out before he could react any further and they hurry into the Clotheshorse.

"We should make a habit of this," says Patton as they head down the familiar aisles.

Logan hums in agreement, his mind working double speed as he juggles several looks that would make Patton look his exact opposite. He fails, as something that is uniquely Patton looks awkward in the guise of another, no matter if he puts a cap backwards or leather jacket or gingham pants on him.

"I can only imagine you looking different if we dress you up as a businessman man, as professionalism seems to be your antithesis. But then how can we hide your face?"

Patton nervously twiddles with the grey tie Logan handed him.

Logan picks on his nervousness at once. "Do you have another idea?" he asks encouragingly.

"May be we're looking for clothes in the wrong section?" Patton's eyes glide over to the women's section of the clothes boutique.

Logan follows his gaze. "Oh. I dare say we will find a good disguise."

"Not a disguise." Patton looks at Logan hopefully.

Logan tilts his head, eyebrows raised questioningly.

Patton took a deep breath. "You know I always dressed as if nothing fit me, right?"

"I can testify to that." Logan smiles and puts Patton at ease.

Patton shifts through the hangers on rack for the need of doing something with his hands while he talks. "That is because I never felt comfortable in them. But I didn't really know any better. But
when I got into this dress at the Strawberry Pie, I felt as if it all finally made sense. You know, it fit me right. And I don't think I want to go back to wearing men's clothing. I'm tired of being what I am not because I was scared of what Dolon would think of me. I know I'm not very good at making decisions for myself, but I kinda feel safe with you? You were the only one I met who treated me as a part of the team and not a silly airhead, and when you did that was within reason, because I do silly things all the time. I really want to dress in clothes that make me feel right, and if it keeps people from recognising me, then that's a bonus, but not the main reason." He bites his lower lip. "It does not weird you out, does it? Oh gosh, I hope you're not mad at m –"

Logan cuts him off with a peck on the lips. He leans back, a dusting of crimson in the hollows of his face. "I am not angry. Why should I be? In fact, I find you all the more endearing. I am happy with this step you've taken. I did not fall in... like... with you for your clothes, more for the person you are. What right do I have to say what kind of clothes you wear, so long as I get to make sure you look your best in them?"

Patton grins happily and throws his arms around Logan's neck. "You are the best Logan! No, I look my best with you in me! No, that's not what I meant –"

Logan chuckles, happy he can relax with only Patton around. "This conversation took a hard turn to the left. For now, we should focus on finding you the right set of clothes and accessories. Ready?"

"Readier than I've been since the day I was born."

Cue sappy dress montage music round two, romantic edition.

Logan was not making a false promise when he said that he has an acute fashion sense when it comes to finding what clothes complimented Patton the most. With the initial dissonance done away with, he let his instincts guide him. He finally gathers up all he needs and turns to Patton, who looks up and down the aisle to check for on-lookers before pulling Logan into the fitting room. Logan wonders at which point he left his sanity behind him, but he rolls with it like the resourceful fashion guru he is. Patton's skin tingles as Logan deftly assembles the ensemble, slips on some accessories and dusts down just the ample amount of make up. Finally, he fixes the wig on his head, like a tiara on a princess.

Patton stares at his reflection in mesmerised silence. The clothes looks perfect, he feels perfect, and together they are perfect. Grey socks with little cats on them end in brown sued shoes with blue laces. A dark blue pantyhose that cover his legs, not too tight and not too slack. A short, stylish, slick ultramarine skirt held in place by a brown woven cloth belt that winds around his hips. A soft white singlet that flows delicately over the new curves of his chest, courtesy of a padded body suit. He keeps his silver and leather strapped bracelet of quiet design. Logan found the same sapphire jacket in the ladies section that made him feel like the prettiest person in the world. He adds a simple silver necklace with a small charming orb as a pendant. Patton feels his face with unbelieving hands. It looks different, his reflection. More radiant, more confident, more content. His wig makes him want to toss his head back and laugh at the carefree world, and shake his long golden locks.

"You look aesthetically pleasing," says Logan in his ear as he stands behind him. "Quite the visual orgasm." He gently lays his hands on Patton's waist, caressing.

Patton leans back. "Thank you, for everything."

They fall silent, aware of their close proximity and rising heat.

"As tempted as I am," says Logan, "A cubicle is not classy or roomy enough for any kind of sexual
activity."

Patton squeaks.

Logan grins and drags Patton out of the cubicle, well aware there probably was a line outside due to all the time they took.

Except there was no line, only one lady, carrying an armload of clothes she did not need and definitely could not afford.

"Arachne!" shrieked Logan. "Apologies, Miss Svengali, we will be on our way."

"Logan! What a delight to see you in the ladies section, I knew the day would come!"

"And the day I never see you again would be delightful, so I cannot say the same."

"And who is this pretty young thing you are with."

"This is... Thomas's new Personal Assistant."

"How lovely. What's her name?"

Logan and Patton share a look of horror. They start scrambling at the same time.

"It's Pat" "Patty" "Pet" "Wrong" "Oki" "Sure?" "Jan" "No!" "Ooo" "Oh?" "Remy!"

Arachne blinked. "Pappet Petruchio Jenny O'Remy? What kind of name is that?"

"Patricia January," says Logan calmly. Patton nods eagerly, then stops, worried the wig might go flying.

"Hm... Logan, why were you with her in the fit on rooms? Turning into a cradle snatching sugar daddy, are we?"

"No. I was inspecting her uniform that is all."

"Sure, let’s call it that. Well I hope this bed hopping bimbo gets to keep her job, the last one had such a tragic end." She smiles like a piranha at the sight of a meat cube. "Logan, by the way, we do need to catch up." She gives a pointed look over her shoulder disappears through the door into the fitting room.

Logan and Patton hurry downstairs.

"We did it" says Patton. "She fell for it!"

"Our plan is perfect. Of course it is, I made it." Logan doffs his hat.

They wait in line, and just as they reach the cashier, Arachne cuts through.

"Terribly sorry to barge in, but I was his first you know," she snipes at Patricia January.

"Go ahead by all means," says Logan, too tired of her drahmatiques to make a scene.

Arachne smiles like some evil creature or other (give me a break, guys, there are only so many metaphors I can pull out of my ass!) and hands over her card to the cashier.

Patton is not going to Logan be bullied by a domineering ex, however, so tips over a jar of sequins
on the counter straight into her shopping bag.

"Aaaaaaoooooowwwaaaaahh!" screams Arachne. "You clumsy clownfish! That's going to take ages to clean!"

"Well, I guess I leave a lasting mark," says Patton, his voice pitched higher to ruffle even more of Arachne's feathers. (She is a scavenger bird now, sue me, I'm sleepy.)

Logan makes use of the commotion to discreetly lean over and inspect her card. It strikes as something makeshift, so he quickly memorises the number and swipes the bill when no one is looking.

Arachne storms out of the shop screaming she will have the whole establishment, every branch and even the head office of The Clotheshorse shut down. "I'm never coming back!" The shop attendants clap and thank Logan and Patton for getting rid of one of their worst customers.

The cashier looks at Patton. "Is she... wearing the clothes you're buying?"

"Yes," says Logan, willing his face to not go red. "The labels are undamaged"

"That's against store policy, but I'll let it slide." The cashier winks.

Patton has to hop onto the counter and get into various contorted position for the labels to reach the scanner, and Logan does not find those poses provocative at all, no, not he.

They get back to the car without any further incident, both pumped up with adrenalin at the success of their ploy.

"So... Logan. Is a car not classy and roomy enough?" asks Patton, slinking into his seat,

"It most definitely is. But I can be flexible for once... ethically and anatomically."

1445 h

Roman, Virgil and Remy, scrubbed clean of make up, dressed in their regular clothes, well fed and watered, sit on a sofa listening to Thomas go on and on about his upcoming date with Eirian Lumos, about how wonderful he was and how fantastic he was (those are two very different things, right? Now you know) and how he rescued puppies and chocolate (Maybe not recued the second one) and how he donated to UNESCO and the local prostitute ring (for their welfare, of course) until even Roman, the most romantic one of the audience, was feeling personally attacked under the face of such goodness and virtue.

"Look, Thomas," says Virgil. "We haven't heard from this guy since Chapter 4, are you sure you he is all you think he is?"

"I don't think," says Thomas dreamily. "I know."

"That's it, our boss's boss is high as drugs bunny." Remy leans back into the sofa pillows and groans. "Whatever he's smoking, I want some."

"One day you will, love is the most potent of drugs," says Thomas with the infinite wise wisdom of someone who has a boyfriend and so automatically decides they know everything and advise us poor unfortunate souls (Sorry not sorry for that hot take.)
"Really?" says Roman, brightening up. "Virge, make me high."

Virgil kicks him off the sofa.

"Ow! Why'd you do that for."

"Sorry, my love only makes you go down."

"If it makes me go down on you, I don't mind," Roman falls back on to the sofa. "But my love only makes you go head over heels." The power of his weight makes Virgil bounce right off the sofa, and he flies for a second before landing flat on his face on the carpet.

"I think you broke all my bones. That's exactly like being in love with you." Virgil looks up to see the front door open and Logan walk in with a stranger. He leaps up to his feet, his bones intact despite his claims.

"Meet the new PA, Patricia January." Logan makes a formal introduction. The lady curtsies.

"Hi!" says Roman, giving her his best 100-kilo Watt smile. "Have I seen you before? Were you once a man coz I think I may have slept with you."

Virgil bonks him on the back of the head. "You do look familiar. Did I steal something from you a long long time ago? Oh, shush, I swear I don't do that any more."

"You have a pretty average face, gurl!" says Remy. "Maybe you have one of those basic faces that looks like everybody else's?"

Logan, of course, bristled at the insinuation that Patton's face was anything less that angelic.

"It's Patton!" says Thomas hugging him and doing the starfish waddle. "I'll know it's you anywhere!"

"It's me! How do I look?" Patton jumps in excitement.

"Hot damn mama! Look at them legs!" cries Remy.

Roman wolf whistles and Virgil bonks him on the back of his head again.

"No one will guess it's you, that's for sure," says Virgil.

"As usual, Virgil is the only one with anything half-way sensible to say," says Logan grimly. "Now, stop ogling at my boyfriend or I will end your careers slowly and painfully."

Roman and Remy sober up faster than a drunkard at the sight of the police at 3 am.

"Virgil, Remy and Pat, go to The Division, do those test, and register yourself. Fail and I will make you regret that your father met your mother. Snoop around and see if you can find anything suspicious. I have qualms about the former Director of the Division just dying... he was hale and hearty just a couple of days ago. He was my mentor..." Logan's voice cracks. Patton rubs his arm to console him.

"We'll try to find what we can," says Virgil.

"Scratch that," says Remy. "We will find evidence, boss, and if there's any backstabbers running around, well, they better watch out!"
"Thank you. Thomas, we must go to the Press Conference, and I hope you have read all the prep notes I gave you. Roman and... where is Lez?"

Roman and Remy both look guilty.

Logan's eyes narrow. "Boys... what did you do with Archie Lez?"

"I will change the Wi-Fi password unless you tell," says Patton holding up the tablet of doom.

"They said the bodyguard has to wash the car too," says Virgil, nonchalantly picking his fingers.

"Betrayed by love!" cries Roman.

"...and change the oil and fill the tyres with air," continues Virgil.

"Et tu, Virgil?" wails Remy.

"...and I asked him to stock the mini-fridge with booze, so I'm guilty too," drones Virgil.

"Please bury me somewhere far far away when I die of an heart attack," says Logan to Patton.

"This is just too much."

Patton giggles. "Only if I'm buried next to you."

Roman's eyes widen, eyelids flutters, nose twitch, lips quiver, and a finger taps his chin. "Did you two fuck... OHMYGODZ you totally did." He high fives Virgil. "Mission accomplished."

"I will destroy you right now," says Logan with grace of a glacier calving.

"Okay guys!" says Thomas clapping his hands to get everyone's attention. "Let us forgive and forget and make a move, the clock is ticking."

Everyone mumbles their "sorry"s and head in their specific directions.

"I love my dysfunctional family," says Thomas and hurries after them.

1500h

"Nobody will look at us and think we are a functional trio," says Virgil. "Have we ever worked together?"

Patton and Remy look at each other. "Nope."

"Something's gonna blow before we shake down," says Remy. "And I hope it isn't me at the short end of the stick."

"We are friends! We can do this together! We are infallible when united!"

"Who's going to throw him in the canal if he says another fortune cookie bullshit mantra?" asks Virgil from Remy. "You or me?"

"Oh, I know you love me," says Patton, linking an arm through each of theirs.

They enter the Head Quarters of the Dignitary Defence Division looking like a trio that is definitely not platonic in the eyes of a stranger whose mind is always in the gutter (Me.)
The building towers above them. Think old. Then older. Then think how this is not a pre-historic monument of a bygone civilization, but a registered government institution with the mission of safeguarding the dignitaries and the celebrities and the aristocrats of the city? If anything, the building was assigned to the Division because no one else wanted the building. It is like a maze of endless threadbare-carpeted corridors and rooms with mirrored walls and doors that lead to thin air. Fatigue grows in here as fast as the creepers and seedlings that clutch the sides, and if you listen closely, you can here the poor building groan for the easy death of wrecking ball and demolition crew.

The receptionist at the front desk is eating pineapple pizza with oyster sauce when the three of them come up. She looks up through fingerprint-smudged spectacles. Patton nervous, hangs back and Virgil is never one to talk to strangers.

Remy takes the lead. "Afternoon, sister. What's cracking?"

"Your ass."

Remy grins. A rude one, eh? He gestures at the food. "What's up with the trash food?"

"Making a statement."

"I dig cool chicks like you. Were you hoping to work this afternoon?"

"Asking me out, huh? I don't like guys with attitude."

"Guess you make out in a mirror, then. Why don't you go get yourself a coffee then? I'll pay."

"This sounds dodge."

"We're three new receptionists."

"And I'm your mother."

"Mummy! You're alive! It's me, your baby boy!"

"Get lost, I wished someone turned the hose on your parents."

"Thank goodness they didn't coz I won't be here charming you now!"

"Hard pass. I have better things to do with my time."

"Like what? Eat more pre-diarrhoea food?"

"You can't tell me what to put and not put in my mouth. Who are you guys?"

"We are... janitors!"

"Ha, the only thing you’d ever clean is your bank accounts."

"Prostitutes?" offers Virgil.

"You wish."

All eyes on Patton. "Um... we are here to do our tests and get registered." he says truthfully.

"Ah!" the receptionist beams. "Shoulda told me first! Do you wanna cheat?"
"Wouldn't say no to that!" says Remy, while Patton looks scandalised and Virgil is more or less wondering if he is emo or edgy anymore compared to all the corruption in the world.

"Cool. Pay up, and I'll disappear for a few minutes. Just get on my computer and fill out the sheet saying you passed."

Virgil is suddenly very interested in the deal. "Gee, thanks, miss. Remy, cough up the dough."

"Why should I pay?" pouts Remy.

"You offered."

"Pffft.‖ Remy hands over some notes.

The receptionist smiles patiently.

Another note is added to the pile.

The receptionist smiles benevolently.

Remy sighs and dumps all the money he has in her palm. She nods, pockets the cash and dashes off, and I hope she does buy a coffee and not anything more… substancey. The computer lies unattended on her desk. It was an honest to gods desktop computer from probably two decades ago, and actually does not feel out of place in this museum of a building.

"We can't do this!" cries Patton as Virgil goes around the desk to sit before the computer. "We can't cheat!"

"Sure we can," says Remy. "How do you think I got my driver's license in the first place?"

Virgil hisses. "We're not cheating. It sucks to have a conscience, but as ex-villains in the middle of a redemption arc we need to do the right thing!"

"Dammit. I'll ask Ro-Ro to bang some sense into you," says Remy. "Why'd you waste my money on her if we're not cheating?"

"Coz we're gonna hack into the system and see what we can find. I little bit off evil for the greater good, eh?"

"Now you're talking my speed, baby doll!‖ Remy kicks Virgil off the chair and sits down. "I'm an experienced ethical hacker, CPD Certified. This should be a piece of cake." He starts tapping on the keys.

"It still feels unethical‖ says Patton resting his elbows on the counter. "I feel unclean."

"No wonder," says Virgil getting up painfully and glaring at the back of Remy's head. "Pat, you are wearing clothes straight off the rack; you are buzzing with bacteria. I'm getting germ induced anxiety just looking at you."

"Eureka!‖ shouts Remy triumphantly. "Jackpot! Bingo! I got in!"

Virgil kicks him off the chair with a satisfied smirk and sits down. "Hm..." he scrolls through a string of encoded files. "Nothing fishy so far... hello, what have we got here?‖ He clicks open a document, and skims through it, his heart in his throat. "Madame Trixie La Douche... charged with crimes of... abetting kidnapping and attempted murder... no substantial evidence... freed of all charges... set to be released. This is BULLSHIT! She gets to walk free after all she's done? She
knew what Dolon was up to."

"Must be an order from an higher up, if you know what I mean..." says Remy.

"Scorpio..." whispers Patton dramatically.

"How are we going to put a stop to this?" asks Virgil. "We can't exactly drag Madam Doubledouche back into a cell."

"What we can do is help me do my job," Remy puffs out his cheeks. "I just need to get this across to the CPD."

"How do we know the CPD isn't rigged too?"

"What are we going to do if we can't trust anyone?" asks Patton, hugging himself.

"Sure the CPD may not be the most honest of places, trust me chica, I know," says Remy. "But if we start from not trusting the law enforcers, where are going to stop?"

Virgil shrugs. "I just don't want to put all my eggs in one basket." He shifts through more documents.

"Wait, was that Arachne's name?" asked Patton, pointing.

Virgil enlarged the document. "It is a certificate for a seriously hefty sum of money donated to the Division by Miss Arachne Svengali."

Remy's eyes look as if his eyes were about to roll right off his face. "That... that is the sum of money, the exact figure, I've been tracing all this time. Coincidence? I think not."

"So... Arachne has been bribing the Division... with Tom Tom's money?" asks Patton, fire in his veins. "She's going down, that ************* with a **** up her ***."

"Whoa, calm down, fire cracker!" says Remy, and Virgil makes a note to never get on Patton's bad side.

"Search for more dirt, boys!" commands Patton. "We are going to spill some serious tea in 3D."

"That email conversation looks suspicious," says Remy, clicking on it.

Virgil smirks. "Sheesh, I wonder if it contains vitally and conveniently plot relevant clues."

A chain of emails whitened the screen, and all three pair of eyes looked ready to pop out of their respective skulls. This was some serious evidence indeed, and treachery was afoot no doubt.

"We need to get this now," hisses Remy urgently. "Quick, Virgil, your pen drive."

"I wish the Division gave us some cooler gadgets at least, pen drives feel so retro pastiche," says Virgil sticking the pen into the computer. "Isn't it glorious irony that we're bringing them down with their own tech?"

"We don't have time for irony!" wails Patton. "Someone might see us!"

The pen drive connects, and the computer screen goes blank.

"Shit," hisses Virgil.
“Language!” cries Patton in horror.

“You are one to talk!” cries Virgil. “Irony my ass!”

Remy kicks Virgil’s ass off the chair. "No... no... no... this stupid thing has a firewall... let's see if we can..."

Slinky sax music starts playing from the computer speakers (Do you remember what old timey speakers were? Those box thingies with one perforated side that sound comes out of, before the speakers were built into the trendy laptops and macs?).

"Um..." says Virgil. "Why does the music sound like it's from..."

A video popped up on screen.

".... A porno."

Patton shrieks. "You perverted... penguins!" He was very bad at insults. "Why, just why? I am a good decent soul, why must I –"

"Calm your tits, Patty," says Remy. "This is just the virus. I should be able too..." he gets absorbed into the keyboard as he keys in lines and lines of wriggly codes. The sounds were not getting any softer, and if this was any other situation Virgil would be on the floor laughing.

But his smirk was wiped when he saw a familiar figure come in through the front doors. He ducks under the table. "Guys! Watch out!"

Remy looks up, ad freezes, his mouth trembling. Patton shoves him off the chair and Remy joins Virgil under the table, or rather falls on him in a tangle of limbs and knees him somewhere guys definitely do not want to be kneed in. Virgil stuffs his sweater paw into his mouth and thinks of creative ways he can get back at Remy.

Patton elegantly arranges himself on the chair and bats his eyes at the approaching man. Time to hope his new appearance passes the test.

Remy shoots a hand out and snagged the keyboard under the table. He resumes typing, sweat pooling down his spine. Virgil grabs the offending speakers and puts them under his hoodie and thankfully the layers of wool dampen the sound.

"Good afternoon!" chirps Patton brightly in high giddy valley girl voice.

"Good afternoon," the man glares down at the insignificant receptionist. He does not have time for pleasantries. "Where is Rehat?"

"Um... the other receptionist?" asks Patton, hoping he is not making a mistake.

"Yes, where is she?"

"She stepped out... a hair curler branding incident."

"Ouch!" The man takes off his bowler hat and laughs. "You're funny. Keep your job, you brighten up the place."

Patton beams, and then realises he is the enemy, and tones it down a few notches, because a smile expert like Patton knows how to calibrate his smiles.
"I've set up a meeting. Check the schedule." His voice changes, playtime is clearly over and it is down for business now. He frowns. "Where is your keyboard?"

Patton panics. "I type with my feet."

"How talented. Where did they find such a good receptionist? Type in Scorpio Svengali and check my schedule."

Remy fingers are mauling the keyboard trying to crack through the firewall. They could not check the schedule or anything else for that matter, and it will only be seconds before Scorpio smells a rat. Or rats. Clearly under the desk was not swept often enough.

"Um..." says Patton stalling for time. "That is a very beautiful name."

"Thanks, sweet cheeks, my parents had a thing for the class Arachnida."

"Clearly."

"Hm?"

"I mean, it is a very beautiful name..."

"You already said that. Hurry up."

"How do you spell it?"

"Give me the damn keyboard, I'll type it in."

"My feet are very stinky! You wouldn't want to touch it!"

Virgil rolls his eyes. Patton was hopeless at stalling, and Remy was cradling the keyboard like a mother would an unresponsive baby. Time for a distraction. He turns up the knob of the speaker.

Scorpio jolts. A loud moan is followed by a series of noises that makes Patton turn into a beetroot in a blonde wig.

"What the heck is that?"

"Sorry, Sir, I am an adult woman with adult needs."

"I can relate to that. You are an interesting young lady, aren't you? I subscribe to your style."

Remy gasps. A breakthrough! "Hurrah! This damn computer is my bitch again!". Virgil clamps a hand over his mouth, thankful the blasted video is gone. But the damage is done.

Scorpio's jaw drops open. "Who is that?"

Patton thinks fats. "Me. I'm a ventriloquist."

"That was an odd thing to say. And that was a man’s voice..."

"Sorry, my alternate personality is a he, and he is in a dominant relationship with his computer."

"That voice sound very similar to someone I knew... intimately... a long time ago."

"I am psychic too."
"How curious. A psychic ventriloquist with dexterous feet and multiple personalities? You are a national treasure."

"Yes, I tour the country doing shows. You can subscribe to me on YouTube."

Remy taps Patton's foot and gestures to the screen. Scorpio's schedule pops up on it, and sure enough, there is a meeting booked in Conference Room 4.

"Ah! Here it is!" says Patton. "Head on to Conference Room 4."

"Perfect!" Scorpio gives the trademark Svengali evil smile of evil evilness. (Guys. Sometimes word rep gets the point across better than flipping a thesaurus).

"See you soon, Sir!" says Patton, eager to get him out of his annoyingly scratchy hair/ wig.

"Hm... while I'm here, can you look up Remy Goor on the database?"

Remy types his own name with reluctant fingers. His record from the time he registered to be a driver appears on the screen.

Scorpio turns the monitor around before Patton could stop him. He takes a photo from his phone. "Good. I may give the fellow a call tonight. We got a lot of catching up to do."

Remy grips the keyboard so hard his knuckles turn white as bleached bones on a dried up lakebed. Virgil clumsily pats him on the shoulder, but did not expect him to cling to his hand.

Patton watches Scorpio walk away, and sighs with relief. He picks up the keyboard and arranges the table back to normal. But his relief is cut short when he sees the next person to approach his desk.

"Hiya, fanny girl! Name's Madame Trixie La Douche, and I'm free baby! Check me out from this craptastic building!"

All three feel as if they are in the middle of a game of roulette run by a vicious god of pranks.

"Um... sure," says Patton, not making eye contact. He went to Madame La Douche's account and checked a green tick on the 'Released' box on the status column. "Done."

"That's the spirit! Madame out!" she turns away, then looks back. "Patton? Is that you? I know anyone if they get in drag!"

Patton tries hard to look like someone else, but that's not exactly possible, is it?

"We wouldn't want The Big Evil Boss to know it, would we? It can be our little secret."

"What do you want?"

"What are you up to tonight?"

"N-n-n-nothing."

"Let's reconnect. Madame outie for realisie." And then she was gone.

Virgil and Remy crawl out from under the table.

"I feel unclean," say Patton and Remy.
"Damn, your exes are some nasty pieces of work," says Virgil. "I'm glad I prefer my men big and dumb and nothing much else."

"Let's get out of here," says Remy.

"Aren't we doing the tests?" asks Patton.

"This place is going down. I don't want to be a part of it."

"But," says Virgil. "When we expose them, the last thing we need is for our records to be fake. We need to cover our tracks."

Remy grumbles, but Rehat is coming back from her unofficial break, so the three of them quickly head off to the administrative wing. Their path takes them past a board that states 'Conference Rooms 1 – 5' with an arrow pointing down a corridor.

Virgil pauses. "Should we..." he gestures down the red and black carpeted corridor.

"No," says Patton at the same time Remy says,"Yes."

Virgil shrugs. "Then we will."

They drag a back-pedaling Patton down the corridor. They see a door marked with an ominous red and black 4, as the set designer could not decide which colour was scarier. The door was ajar, and they could see Scorpio's shadow sprayed against a wall within. Alone. It was no meeting. He was standing in front of an ancient radio transmitter station.

Remy puts his finger to his lip. "Shhhh, gang. We must be stealthy and spy on the big bad Scorpio. Maybe we should split up?"

"When did we gate crash a Scooby Doo episode?" says Virgil.

"Woof," says Patton helpfully.

Inside, Scorpio is monologuing as a good cartoon villain is wont to do. "Ha! Mr Craggers and your pathetic little team! Think you can outsmart me? The great Scorpio! Run, fools, run! We might have lost our first pair of ears on our little birdie, but I put another one right in!" dramatic music starts playing in a clash of minor chords. "Let's see, Archie Lez, if you've been a good boy and bugged the system." He takes a deep breath. "Bwahahaha, now I got you –" The music stops.
"Damn you, old timey Division radios!" He thumps on the offending piece of equipment, and violins start screeching again. "BWAHAHAHAHA!" Then he sits down and starts the boring process of listening to the transmitter.

The Scooby Gang backs away slowly.

"We have to warn them," hisses Remy. He finger guns, because he has not been sassy in a while and he cannot function under pressure without it.

"But we can't use our headsets if they are bugged! Maybe even our phones are," says Patton.

"Aren't you two telepathically connected to your significant others or something?" asks Remy.

"No!" says Patton wishing he was. It will make life much easier if he had a person all knowing genie on mental speed dial. (He means logan, if you didn’t catch that.)

"I have an idea..." says Virgil. "Um... Roman and I are on this app that lets us exchange... videos of
sensitive nature... and that cannot be traced or bugged. I can call him on that."

"What's that app called?" asks Patton innocently.

"GayO3."

"Seriously, dude?" asks Remy.

"Yup." He rings up Roman. He does not pick up. "Pick up, you lumbering lout! The one time you don't answer a booty call and you choose today!"

But the phone only keeps ringing.

Chapter End Notes

I've been wanting to write the section about Patton's transvestism for a long time (Since Chapter 5). I based it off my experiences, so I am not too sure about how accurate it all is. If anyone likes to share their ideas, do let me know!

That's probably why there is so self deprecating humor in this, where I roast myself in brackets.

I really enjoyed how things turned out putting Virgil, Patton and Remy in one group! Their dynamic is to die for and the jokes just kept coming. I really don't think I had them interact that much before, so yay for this chapter! Plus they are the ex villains, sort of.

QotD: I wonder if this story is not serious enough?

See you once Roman picks up the call, or if he never does. D&E outie for realsies.
Chapter Notes

Deep breaths. This chapter got pretty intense.

Don't forget to look out for clues!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1510 h

Roman glares at his vibrating pocket. It was a very special buzz and he recognises it immediately. Or rather a certain appendage of his body right next to the phone did. He groaned. Now was not the time Virgil! He was in a compromising position that did not benefit in any way from a call of that nature.

You see (or rather, you read), Thomas was having a panic attack. Of the dramatic kind. He was splayed out on the long seat of the Limousine, a wet cloth over his face, in attitudes of violent distress. Why, you may ask? (or you comment, rather.) He fears his face-to-face confrontation at the press conference.

"I only want to be a nice guy who makes everyone smile! Why must a homicidal maniac target me? Okay, in this case it's a childhood friend who was insanely jealous of me and crazily in love with me at the same time, so I can get why, but still why, why, why? I want to cuddle a conveyor belt full of soft toys with faces of all the boys I love and lock in a box letters to all the boys who loved me. I feel so wrong to be the root cause of all this shooting and bombing and spying. Okay, I knew I was signing up for this when I became famous, but still why, why, why!"

"Cease your incessant whining, Mr Thomas Foley Sanders, or I will eject you out of this car," threatens Logan.

A/N: Sorry for cutting in, but can we all take a moment to appreciate that Thomas' middle name is Foley? Being a devoted Fander, I knew this since one minute ago when I looked it up for that joke (I'm glad I did, learnt something new, and also sue me, I am a bad Fander for not knowing that before) but I can't wait till the end of this chapter to fangasm over it. Okay, so the dictionary (naturally, one turns to the dictionary when they fangasm, dincha know?) tells me that 'foley' means relating to or concerned with the addition of recorded sound effects after the shooting of a film. The word came into usage in honour of Mr. J.D. Foley (1891 – 1967) a sound editor from the Golden Age of Hollywood. All right, take deep breaths. Thomas was literally literally LITERALLY meant to be a singer/ YouTuber/ video maker from the day he was named (or years or months before when his parents thought up of that name, probably because they liked the sound of it or a distant uncle had the same name... but let us not worry about what we shall never know.) And, it's a bit of a stretch but Foley sounds like the musical Follies, which is the biggest gay thing on Broadway, and Thomas is the biggest gay and musical thing not on Broadway! (Grrrrr) Also, my conspiracy theorist senses tingled when I saw the Foley dude's initials. J.D.? As in Jason Dean fro Heathers? AS IN ONE OF THE CHARACTERS HE HAS PLAYED? AAAAAAAARRRRCGH! And we are
done with that. Back to the story, where Thomas is crying like a baby because contextual contrast is a key element in comedy. What's that? You don't know what contextual contrast is? Well, it's all about... NO. Only want rant per day. Press unpause.

"You are mean to me, Logan," says Thomas. "I am drowning here and you're not helping me."

"That is because you did not read any of my cue cards. Cue cards are a speechmaker's gospel. And you disregarded them."

"But I can't repeat those up on stage like a parrot robot!"

"I do not understand," says Logan, with a puzzled frown. "Isn't talking the same as repeating memorised words like a parrot robot?"

"No it isn't! Is that why you talk like a robot? As for me, everyone stares and judges everything I say or don't say and how fat I am!"

"Well, do not care what other people think of you. You should be able to handle a few questions, you are an actor!"

"Exactly. I am an actor, and my entire career is built on what people think of my face and body and voice!"

"Try using your brain for once, Thomas," says Logan, not unkindly. "You will find that would help you overcome most challenges."

"Your advice isn't helping!" sobs Thomas. "At least Roman and Archie are!"

Roman and Archie are massaging Thomas's feet, one each. It started out as a harmless way of getting Thomas to calm down, but it soon developed into a competition between the two, and it was probably Roman's fault. Granted, most things that go bump in the night are Roman's fault, but in today's case, it was because he was feeling unbearably jealous. Archie was a professional masseuse, one of the many qualifications he had in his impressively long resume. But as Virgil could attest, Roman knew how to massage a foot: To reduce you to the spots that he touched and the rest be fiery air. But, he then realises that Archie massaged Virgil at some point before him, and he sees red. Soon one foot of Thomas looks like it was dragged out of a bear trap and the other looks like angels kissed it.

"You see..." drones on Logan, entering lecture mode. "A speech is like opening a door to your soul. It is the purest form of communication..."

Thomas eyes go cross eyed with boredom.

Roman and Archie massage Thomas's feet as if their hands are clamped around each other's necks.

"Bronze, if you focus more on the nadi points on the sole, it will be a better experience," says Archie, in a sing-song voice that still manages to sound gruff and manly.

Roman tries to pitch his voice lower and fuller, and ends up more with the croak of a dying bullfrog. "You better focus on the naddy points of your soul when I punch you."

"Do you even know what a nadi is?" Archie tugs the foot closer to him.

"Um..." says Roman, pulling the foot closer to him, thinking it was an advanced massaging technique. It wasn't, and Archie smiles mockingly.
"Posture!" says Logan, enthralled with his own voice. "Shoulders straight! Chest out, butt back, no slouching!"

Thomas wonders if listening to Logan lecture about a speech was worse than delivering one himself.

Roman's phone buzzes again, and he ignores it.

"Roman, whatever you're doing, it's good," says Thomas, who was only half awake now.

Roman looks down, and sees Thomas's foot is pressed against his phone. He smirks at Archie. "I'm better than you. Hah!"

"You're master move is holding the foot against your crotch?"

"My solution to everything."

Archie scowls. "I'm better than you in everything else."

"Like what?"

"Oral skills!" cries Logan, oblivious to all. "Intonation, articulation, pronunciation: All crucial elements of a speech!"

Drowsy Thomas wonders why his legs are both tugged at suddenly, in opposite directions.

"You're going down!" hisses Roman, squeezing the foot tighter. "No one replaces me!"

"Don't you see? I already have!" Archie grins bending the foot back.

"Guys?" says Thomas, waking up fast.

"You will never have Virgil," says Roman shaking the foot angrily.

"A matter of time!" Archie pops Thomas' toes.

"Guys!" squeaks Thomas.

"And if you ever feel like you are pulled to two sides by opposing arguments, do not spread yourself too thin," continues Logan drearily.

"I'm feeling pretty spread right now!" shouts Thomas, who was basically doing a split by now. "GUYS! Can I have my legs back now?"

Roman and Archie drop his feet at once, and poor Thomas rolls onto the floor. Roman and Archie leap forward at once to help him up and crack their heads against each other's. They sit back, sullenly rubbing their skulls.

Logan is shaken from his mental excursion. "What the tap dancing tatertot is happening? Don't make me come back there!"

"It's his fault!" Roman and Archie point at each other.

"Yes, Dad," they grumble.

"I don't drink usually," says Thomas. "But I think I need one today." He crawls over to the fridge and grabs a bottle. He silently thanks Virgil for that bright idea. He pops it open, and tilts it up to his mouth, but is still too disoriented to aim straight. Half the beverage paints the front of his shirt red. Thomas looks down. "Oh look, I've been shot. Yay."

Logan stops the car. "That's it, Thomas you need some serious prep. But before that, what are we going to do about his shirt?"

"He can have mine!" shouts Tweedleroman and Tweedlearchie.

"You shirt is crushed," says Archie. "Too poor to own an iron?"

"Nope, too busy getting laid with the cutest guy I know and you ever knew!" Roman shot back.

"Thomas, wear Lez's shirt," says Logan hurriedly, who is now genuinely concerned for Thomas.

"I'm afraid you won't be having your David Budd moment saving your Primary from a drink-spilt-on-shirt fiasco," says Archie, shedding his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt.

"Was that a Bodyguard reference?" Roman could not believe his ears. "You like that show?"

"Yes." Archie smiles smugly, taking off his shirt and flexing his impressive musculature.

"Ugh! You are too perfect I can't even hate you!" But Roman's fanboying stops short when he sees an unusually large amount of wires running under Archie's bullet-proof vest. All of that could not be for his head set, could they? He frowns. Should he tell Logan? Archie shrugs on his jacket and all is hidden from view. Thomas puts on the new shirt, and is almost drowned in it. He does look a bit like the Michellin Man. He steps into his shoes.

Logan opens the door and helps Thomas out. He pats down the creases and adjusts the edges. He takes off his tie and puts it on Thomas. "There, you look presentable now. Let us just go into the city hall and wait backstage, alright? The press conference starts in a few minutes, and you have enough time to catch your breath." He gives him a bottle of water.

"Lez, go do a sweep of the hall," commands Logan, and Archie lumbers off.

As soon as he is out of earshot, Logan turns to Roman. "I do not trust him."

"Oh thank goodness," cries Roman. "He is the personification of a home-wrecking man-stealing ho--"

"Focus, Roman."

"Sorry, sir. I saw a bunch of suspicious wires on him. Should we be worried?"

"We should..." Logan chews his tie in frustration, and then realises it is now attached to Thomas and not him and drops it immediately. Thomas does not notice at all, preoccupied with all the media vans parked next to them. "Roman, do a sweep of the hall too. And keep an eye on Lez. Dammit, I can't contact you over the radio as he is hooked to it too. I will be on stage with Thomas, and he will be in front of the stage nearby. I'm afraid I have to put you by the door as you are the Second now."

"That's fine, I love door duty," says Roman trying not to let his disappointment show. "As for
communicating, I have an idea..."

1520 h

"Why isn't he picking up?" groans Virgil. "I even put it onto emergency quickie mode!"

"What does that mean?" asks Patton.

"You wouldn't want to now," says Remy.

"Hello?" Logan voices comes through, sounding extremely displeased. "Virgil, please change your profile picture on this obscene vulgar app that Roman just downloaded onto my phone."

"Hi, Sir!" snaps Virgil, surprised. "Guys we're at the Dirty Dotted Dascals' lair and Scorpio is spying on you guys. I think Archie is bugged, don't trust him."

"Knew it!" says Roman. "Oh by the way, Logan can be in the loop too as I added him on as a part time lover."

"Truly, the highlight of my career," says Logan with a groan from the depths of his personal hell.

"Maybe we should get this app too, Logan!" says Patton over Virgil's shoulder. "It must be fun to chat!"

"Um... that's not what it's for..." says Thomas. "I found Eirian on GayO3."

"I will put that request under consideration, Patton," says Logan. "Now, be sharp everyone, the next few minutes are going to be tense."

1525 h

Roman pockets his phone. "I'll dash off now." He puts both hands on Thomas's shoulders. "You're gonna be fine, you're gonna kill it up there. I mean, I hope not literally. They say that when you give a speech think of the audience naked to calm down, but that does not work. It makes you either awkward or turned on, and that in not what you want to feel in public, unless you're into that. What you should do is imagine them as toddlers, coz you can't be scared of a kid asking silly questions, can you?"

"Um... thanks for the advice, I guess?" says Thomas. "I'd love to give a speech to a roomful of kids, so I'll try it!"

Roman runs off, ready tackle a flying bugbear with his bare hands if necessary.

Logan guides Thomas through the lobby, and two-dozen cameras explode in his face. Logan pushes his way through and reaches backstage without any incident. Thomas gulps down a few sips of water, feeling as if he left his stomach behind him in the Limo. Logan peeks through the curtains onto the stage, where stands a simple desk and two chairs behind it. Rows upon rows of media person sit in front, a hundred eyes hungry for information. A janitor mops the stage, and Logan gestures him to get off at once. He grumbles and does so. A buzz of conversation rises from the hall.

Logan turns backs to Thomas, who has the expression of a person with vertigo at the top of the
highest hill of a roller coaster.

Logan sits him down on a bench and crouches before him to tie his shoelaces. "I see that your mind is disturbed by something more than stage fright. What is really the matter?"

"I feel guilty." Thomas admits defeat and stares into the swirling vortex of his water bottle. "About the danger I put you in."

"We discussed this before... each one of us know what we signed up for. And now with newer revelations, it is clear that we have our personal stakes in this to fulfill as well. There are no longer any reasons to feel guilty about us putting our selves on the line for you. As Patton would say, we are family, and family looks out for its members."

"I know." Thomas beams. "I guess I need to hear that out loud." He picks at his thumbnail. "I feel guilty about all the people I put in danger... if I go out in public, how can we guarantee that no one gets hurt?"

"That is a harder question." Logan shifts to the other shoe. "Yes, some people might say it is better for you to be sent to safe house faraway or something of that kind. But think of the bigger picture. This has become a much bigger operation than protecting you, we are in the middle of a conspiracy that spreads throughout the Division and the entire entertainment industry and celebrity pop culture and media reporting and who knows what else." Logan stands up. "And what did you say people care about you the most?"

"My face and body and voice?"

"Yes. And what does that mean?"

Thomas thought for an indecisive second. "I have a platform to make a change?"

"Affirmative." Logan picks up the cue cards and tears them in half. "Go speak your heart out."

Thomas leaps up and stands on the bench. "I Will! I will show then that I won't bow down to their wicked conspiracies and mind games! We stand for truth and honour and justice! I will make all the cheesy quotes to unite everyone against evil!" Thomas blinks. "Oh dear. You shouldn't have torn the cue cards. I need them. Badly."

"Don't worry," says Logan. "I was certain you would lose them, Patton would eat them, Roman would violate them, Virgil would get make-up on them or Remy would spill coffee on them, so I made copies to be on the safe side. Here you go."

"You are a life saver!"

"That is my job, literally. You made me use a word I detest, but it was worth it. Now go on up."

1530 h

"Is everything in place there?" asks Virgil over the GayO3 link from Roman.

"Yes! We just started," says Roman, excited to make commentary, because it was boring otherwise at the back of the hall. "Thomas and Logan walked on stage looking like the King of a small country between France and Spain and his Minister of Defence."
"You should never become a reporter, you will make a pickpocket sound like the heist of the century. Anything suspicious?"

"No, except for that janitor dude hanging by the stage. Oh, Archie is asking him to go away."

"Shouldn't you go take look too?"

"Why bother? He is so perfect I'm sure he cured the janitor's eczema with a look."

"Where did that come from?"

"I bet he orgasms instantly too."

"Roman, jealousy is not a good colour on you."

"But..."

"You idiot, do you think I give a flying fuck about my exes now that I am with you?"

"You don't?"

"Of course not. He might look and sound exactly like you but he does not have your heart. Alright I reached my quota of mushy feelings for one day. Hope that convinced ya, coz I can't say anything more."

"You don't have to. I love you."

"Me too."

"You love yourself?"

"Ohmygodsyouwantmetosayitoutloudokayfine, I love you too."

A tingly chime coming through with a sensual voice announcing disrupts tender moment: "Your new lover Lollypop wishes to enter the conversation."

"You named Logan Lollypop?" asks Virgil stifling a laugh.

"Yes, that's only thing remotely sexy I could think of his name." Roman accepts Logan's request.

"YOU LOLLYGAGGING LOVEBIRDS! PUT YOUR INTERPERSONAL DRAMA ASIDE FOR ONCE! Try not to send anyone to their graves today. Understood?" Logan did not sound pleased. The last thing he wants is two irrepressibly horny voices whispering in his ear.

"Yes, sir!" the other two chorused.

"You better. Now do not disturb me unless you have anything important to say."

Logan tuned out.

"I'm renaming him Lollygagging," says Roman.

"That'll probably be Patton's username," deadpans Virgil.

The two almost die of laughter.

"I think our bond is based in our mutual taste in sex jokes," says Virgil.
"Hell yes! Archie can finish second best!"

"Can we not make this a competition?"

"Only one question, who gives better massages?"

"Objectively him, but subjectively you, and I will always be your loyal subject, you royal pain in the... neck."

"Ha! I seriously have to make it up for you to being so nice!"

"It better be the best sex ever. You totally don't orgasm at the right time, but –"

"I CAN STILL HEAR YOU. SHUT UP OR I WILL CHEMICALLY CASTRATE YOU.”

1535 h

Logan sits ramrod straight and calm in his seat, and Thomas shifts awkwardly in his seat. A wide screen behind them has a live projection of a close up of their faces. An unsettled minute ticks by. Thomas taps the mike, and a loud boom echoes from speakers around the room.

"Um... Hi!" Thomas fiddles with his microphone. "Sorry for the slight delay, but better de lay than never, eh?"

The audience blinks blankly.

"This is not stand up comedy," whispers Logan.

"I interpret life as a stand up comedy. Meaning, I always stand still staring at a camera and act funny."

Logan drums his fingers on the table. When will the Meta jokes end? "We will open the floor for the first question."

All the hands in the room went up. Roman put his hand up too because he likes to join in on everything.

"Who should I pick?" asks Thomas, panicked.

He need not have bothered, as before Logan can answer, a reporter stands up. It is Bluff Chicanery, of course. He grins cheekily under his pencil moustache, and gives a small wave.

"Hello, again! I beg your pardon for taking the liberty of talking first. My first question is, on a scale of 1 to 10, how safe are you?"

"A Large Pizza!" Thomas answers with confidence.

"I beg your pardon, A Large Pizza?" Bluff’s eyebrows are lost in his hairline.

"Yes, that is the answer I have chosen. A pizza has 8 slices! I'm relatively safe, but there I still a threat. I have a crack team to keep me well protected."

"A crack team? As in drugs?"
The whole hall laughs. Roman is just about to start when he realises they were being mean. He scowls. He wonders if he could do his domino trick again.

Seeing Thomas at a loss, Logan steps in. "Can we please focus on relevant questions? We assure you that drugs or other narcotics do not have any involvement in today's discussion."

Bluff gets ready to ask another scathing question, but Thomas has enough. That tongue snaking between thin lips triggers a memory. He recognises who Bluff was, of course, it was him all along. The same gloating smile, the shifty eyes. You cannot disguise your nature, no matter how different your disguised face looks. He gets up. It is time for some top tier great showmanship. He snatches up the microphone and strides to the front of the stage, promptly trips on the wire and falls off. Archie picks him up and puts him back on stage. The crowd titters. Thomas jumps up and beams. The show must go on, even if he has a tendency to fall out of it.

"Wassup everybody! Hope you are having a blast coz I'm the bomb!"

"No no no! Don't joke about bombs!" hisses Logan.

"You might wondering what all this is about, so let me break it down for you. I am an actor, the least legit job there is coz I pretend for a living! But I had my big break last year, and some people didn't like that. Jealousy is an ugly colour. Green. What else is green? Broccoli. I'm sure it tastes as horrible, too."

Logan feels as if someone is playing the concertina with his spine. What is Thomas saying? Has he finally lost it?

"Let me tell you a story! Remember when I was in that Disney show with the talking coconuts and the magic washing machine? You know the usual run of the mill sit-com. I had a very good friend back then. But friendships are like dates, the fruit I mean. Tasty when it's fresh, and when it's rotten it starts looking like shit."

Logan's jaw drops open. What happened to Thomas's wholesome PG 13 Rating? But Roman's bursts into laughter, and the crowd follows suit.

"So this fine upstanding ex-friend sold his soul to evil to turn into Disney Villain while I was voicing the first gay Disney Prince!"

Roman leads the crowd's cheers. Logan wishes he could shut him up, but anything that keeps the crowd happy is fine by his book. Maybe there was something to Thomas’ tactic.

"I wonder why... emotional constipation?" Thomas's eyes lock with Bluff's. "Caring only of your needs and not of other's who get in your way? Now isn't that a bit selfish?" His gaze sweeps around the room. "It makes me sad to say this, but for a roomful of news reporters, you are being selfish too. Not all of you, only some, but we all are trapped on this hamster wheel."

The laughter dies, and he hold the attention of the room in his hand.

"I get it. People love to read about whom I'm dating or what part of my body blew up." he waves at the reporter who is always asking the last question. "But that's not the problem here, is it? Strange enough, people are so eager to sensationalise a story they are blind to the facts. Please don't forget all the people who get hurt because of these attacks on me. Did any of you reporters go talk to the kids at today morning's treasure hunt? They were really scared. No? I guess they aren't popular enough. What about the charity? Not scandalous enough? At least I hope they got some press coverage because of this, as they badly need it." Thomas goes up to a camera and looks into it. "To
all the people frightened to go out on the streets because I might walk past... I'm sorry. This is not a fun game of roulette wondering when and where the next attack would be or which gossip tabloid gets to blow up the story. But I am doing my best to see that this ends soon, my security team is doing their hardest to find who is behind this, and I will not let this knock me down. I will be here fighting against misguided forces that want to hurt. I want everyone to get along and smile, so I will try to set them right, but if they don't want to, we will deal with them to keep the entire safe."

He back away, blinking tears.

Logan pats him on the back. "You're doing great, I'm proud of who you are and what you believe in."

The hall murmurs, this was taking a different turn from what they expected. A peroxide hair dyed reporter from a tattle magazine has fallen asleep.

Bluff clears his throat. "Do you know who is behind these attacks?"

Logan takes the microphone. "I am afraid we cannot make a statement on that yet. But we are getting closer to the truth. And as Mr Sanders says, we are unafraid and will not bow down to pressure when it comes to exposing the wrong doers."

"And how do you know your suspicions are correct and not full of mistakes like your track record so far?" Bluff's overbite chews on his lower lip.

"May we have a question form someone else?" asks Logan, sensing that Thomas is getting more and more uncomfortable with Bluff.

Bluff sits down with a grimace, jostling the sleeping tattler next to him. She wakes up, and smiles brightly with pearly teeth. "Oooh! Are we asking questions? Thomas, Thomas, what are you wearing for the Berry Awards tomorrow?"

Thomas' face goes red. Not from holding his breath, embarrassment or from eating a paprika, it is because he is angrier than he has ever been in his life. He calms himself, as his personality is that of loving-kindness. "Why is that a question you prepared for this conference? Aren't there more important things to discuss? Can the press do their job for once?"

The entire hall breaks into angry mutterings.

"I am serious. I have been disappointed in what you have achieved since all this began. You seem to be more interested in hunting me down with the silliest questions I have ever heard, or harassing us over past mistakes, instead of making strides in finding out where the threat is coming from or focusing on news stories that actually should take up your time?"

The voices rise higher, and some stand up in anger. Logan frowns, and shoots a worried glance at Archie. Roman, too, takes a few paces forward from the door. Were things about to get out of hand?

1557 h

Scorpio listens to the radio, hands in motion as if he is conducting an orchestra. "Soon my pretty puppets, soon! Bwahahaha!"
Amidst the confusion, Roman sees Bluff Chicanery standing still, watchful. Roman is surprised. Bluff is the biggest troublemaker, how unlike of him to not join in the chaos. Was something bad about to happen and he knew of it somehow?

Scorpio picks up his phone. His fingers tap out the seconds. "Unleash the bomb." His voice scrapes through parted lips, hungry for destruction.

"Ro!" cries Virgil into his phone. "There's a fricking bomb in there, Scorpio just said so. Get everyone the hell out of there."

"On it," shouts Roman, beginning to run towards the stage. "Tell Logan."

Roman scans the room for Archie. He was in a better position to protect Thomas, and he the crowd. He saw Archie staring down at his phone in alarm. Roman waved wildly, but he did not notice. Roman catches a glimpse of Archie's phone screen as he raises it to his ear. Something familiar. But then Archie moves towards the stage, shouting into the phone. Who is he calling? Not him or Logan, as far as he can see. Who cares, he got going at last.

Roman raises his voice into a shout that shook with urgency. "EVERYBODY! LISTEN!" No one heard him over the commotion. He tries again, but is drowned out. How is he going to get the message out and fast? He spots the audio-visual control booth and pushes his way through. The tech guy looks up in surprise from the camera pointing at the stage, a miniature Thomas and Logan on a screen before him.

"Hey! You! Quick, hook me up to the PA system or whatever, I need to be heard." Roman flashes his bodyguard badge.

"No can do, caballero, it's synced with the video feed."

Roman strong-arms him away. He does know his way around a light and soundboard. He pulls out an aux cable and plugs his phone in and switches the input channel. All he had to do was to speak into his phone microphone. He fiddles with the ports and switches, hoping to make a connection.

Scorpio rips his headset off. He throws it in the air and whoops in joy. He picks up his phone. "Everything is going according to plan!"

Beyond the door, Virgil stifles a gasp. He desperately buzzes Roman, but the call does not go through.
Roman pumps his fist as the phone connects. But he did not bargain for his phone home screen to pop up on the screen up on stage. He also did not realise that it he had his GayO³ app open, and the entire hall had the pleasure of seeing a blown up image of Roman strutting what his mother and father gave him in its natural form. The crowd falls silent. It is a sight to behold.

"PEOPLE! DON'T LOOK AT ME. THERE IS A BOMB HERE, NOT ME, BUT A REAL ONE. RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!" shouts Roman through the intercom.

The room jolts awake, and a host of screams and yells take over the room again. A stampede erupts towards the door.

A piercing whistle drills through the room, stunning rushing feet into frozen stumps.

Archie stands on stage. He is holding the janitor by the scruff of his neck in one hand, and the other he holds a black object.

The bomb.

Scorpio breathes hard. Then he lets out a sigh of relief. He smiles, turns, and heads to the door.

Remy grabs Virgil and Patton and drags them away.

Scorpio kicks open the door and his the metal sole of his footsteps clack against the marble tiles like thunder. He passes a display of three life size statues of the best bodyguards the Academy had produced, and passes not noticing anything different. He stops, and turns. Did one of them move? No, he must be imagining things. He disappears round the corner, muttering darkly.

Remy, Virgil and Patton, pull off the clothes they took off the three dummies, and make their escape. Of course, it is impossible they had the time to get in their costumes in time and replace the mannequins, let alone get behind the glass display case, but this is a cartoon universe, isn't it? They run out the front door, grinning in victory.

"People!" announces Archie loudly. "There is no need to fear. I have found the bomb and diffused it. It was in this janitor's cart. You are safe!"

Roman quickly unplugs his phone, that picture of him did definitely not go with the present situation. The crowd cheers and claps and throws hats in the air, cameras flash and voices cry in relief and a few people faint, overcome with emotion.

"Now we only need to put this sneaky rat into jail!"

A hundred voices rallied against the janitor, demanding he be... well most of the suggestions were not nice, and let us leave it at that.
Roman's eyes met the janitor's. He saw no fear, defeat or submission. The poor man was confused, whimpering, too scared to speak. There was something fishy about the situation. He in no way thought the man was guilty. And that meant... Archie was framing him. Why? His head ached. He was not good with the thinking. Get to Logan, now. He looks to the stage, where Logan and Patton were still standing, shocked at the events unfolding before them. The bomb may be discovered, but that did not mean the threat was over.

"Another brilliant save from the Dignitary Defence Division!" shouts Bluff, in a bit too bright voice. Roman's head whips back. Now he decides to make a sound?

"Ooooh!" cries the gullible media persons, and immediately latches onto that angle to tell the story.

Thomas looks at the scratching pens and tapping phones. Is there no way he can turn this frenzy of information peddling to their advantage? His brow clears. A brilliant idea struck him. Oh, is that the game you are playing, Bluff? Cast the Division in a good light? Well, two can play at that game! He taps his microphone.

Roman immediately switches the channel back to the main, gives the tech guy an apologetic smile for putting him in trouble with his supervisor. Then he runs off to the stage. What he did not realise was that nobody hardly ever noticed the techie, let alone smiled at him, and Roman had made his day.

"Attention!" intones Thomas, putting the most authoritative cadence into his voice, outstripping Logan as when the quiet childish one puts on the big boots, its scarier than the one who stomps about always. "Yes, the Dignitary Defence Division is always on their feet protecting hundreds of important personalities across the city, and their work is underappreciated. I personally invite all you astute investigative journalists to dig deep into their work, really rifle through our past cases, go interview the current director, and write a thorough piece on them!"

"Ooooh!" cries the media persona desperate for the next big story to take the hive mind by storm.

"Are you sure that's the best idea?" asks Bluff Chicanery, shooting Thomas a glare. But his colleagues were already running with the story. He exits again.

"Bravo, Thomas," says Logan. "I ignore the media usually, but you play them like a fiddle."

"I am the face of this operation, remember?" says Thomas with a grin.

Roman reaches Logan and Thomas. He snatches Logan's phone, and immediately gets on GayO3. He wipes the conversation and deletes the account and uninstalls the app. He shoots Virgil a message asking him to do the same, and erases all traces from his phone as well. He is sad to see all their colourful communications go, but it cannot be helped.

He gestures at Archie. "We need to get somewhere he can't hear us," he says in a low voice in Logan's ear. "I am sure they hacked GayO3 too. I saw it open on Archie's screen."

Logan nods. He calls the bomb squad to drop by immediately. They arrive, and dispose the explosives. He turns to Archie. "Stay here until I release you, make sure everything is in order."

"Sorry to disagree, Sir, but I must take this criminal to the Division," says Archie not liking the plan at all.
"Roman will handle that. And we are not taking him to there, but to the CPD." Logan's eyes flick to the phone in Archie's hand. "You can tell your precious boss that." He drops his microphone in his face and stalks off.

Roman makes the 'I've got my eyes on you' sign at Archie and Thomas mimes his head getting chopped off.

"Boys," says Logan. "My line was badass enough. Now follow me and leave the melodrama behind. We have a standard to our exits."

Chapter End Notes

I think I still have a lot of anti-celebrity culture salt remaining from the days I worked as journalist intern. Honestly, the way we had to cram in a some popular personality into a story just to get people to read it!

Anyfan of the BBC series Bodyguard here? It's partial inspiration for this story.

I think we are in the home run of this story, I have the ending planned out, and I'm actually happy I get to finish a story!

QotW: How did I do with my portrayal of Thomas in this chapter? I feel as if I managed to span through every possible emotion he could have.

See you soon!
First Date Night

Chapter Notes

Well this chapter took a sudden turn. Expect the unexpected. As usual, feedback is welcome.

Content warning on past abuse, and a certain level of gun violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1800 h

"So... how is everyone feeling?" asks Patton as he and Thomas hands around cups of warm cream of corn soup. It came in bowls that were delivered today, as Thomas did not have any, as you remember. All six of them are in the library office, seated in chairs Roman has dragged in despite Logan's protests. But he allows it, as the Birds of Gay are very tired birds this evening, because it has been an event packed day, to say the least. Soft piano music plays, as everyone agrees that Logan's taste in music will probably offend the others the least. It might bore them, but that is the price you pay to get along.

"I can hibernate for a month," says Remy, and everyone nods in agreement.

"Did you do all your tests? And got registered?" asks Logan from the three in question, tapping his foot on the floor.

"Yup," says Virgil. "We were halfway back here..."

"When we realised our silly nunm nums forgot all bout those useless doohickeys," continues Remy.

"So I had to drag them back crying and force them to take the tests. I bribed them with ice cream," finishes Patton. "Honestly, I feel like I went from clueless twenty year old drifter to middle aged suburban mom in one day." He puffs out his frilly snow white apron.

"Well that's done," says Logan, inexplicably attracted to Patton even more. "Now to the meat of the matter. What do we know of The Salty League of Killer Exes?"

They share all that they know and pool the facts.

"Mr Scorpio Svengali is behind all of this?" Logan taps his chin. "And now he is at the head of The Division... that is horrifying."

"He must have bribed his way in using the money Arachne stole from Thomas," says Remy. "Boom! That swindler is going down."

"I can't believe she stole from me... She was my Agent since Dolon became my PA. Oh. That makes sense," says Thomas. The facts were indisputable: Arachne had made the donation to the Division using the card Logan had noted down at the Clothesthorse.

"It's all falling into place!" says Roman. "But what does Scorpio gain from this? Because becoming
the Director of the Dignitary Defence Division is nice and all, but I wouldn't be ready to kill for it."

"Did they want Thomas killed?" asks Virgil suddenly. "Or any of us for that matter?"

"What do you mean?" asks Logan. "Their intentions seem clear to me."

"I thought so too, but given how incompetent we are, it is a miracle we are still in one piece..."

"I lost the tip of my ear," points out Roman.

"... besides bruises to Roman's ego," says Virgil rolling his eyes. "But the fact stands that all those times we though we were lucky to make it out alive, we were actually overcoming very easy obstacles. I think they wanted the buzz created by juicy story about a stalker killer after the It Celebrity of the month, not to kill him off."

"Why did they chose me then? There are way popular actors and singers than me..." says Thomas, because humility is one his strident virtues.

"But you are the best!" cries Roman adamantly. "I can't bear to think you hurt!"

"You are probably the only person everyone would feel personally attacked if you get hurt. Case in point: Roman," says Virgil, gesturing at Roman. "Everyone loves a ray of sunshine like you, I mean it's impossible not to. Plus you were all over the news as the next rising mega star even before all of this. You reputation was ideal for exploitation."

"You mean Dolon does not have a personal vendetta against me?" asks Thomas, wondering why he weirdly missed having a killer stalker. Brrrrrr.

"Oh, they have personal grudges against us," continues Virgil. "The big picture is that who wins when we keep fending off the attacks? The Division. The press would paint it as a story of heroic defence. I am sure the Division got a bunch of new clients because of this, as celebrities are scared now. They are creating threats to get more business, how sick is that? I don't think the plan was to set today's bomb off at all. See how happy Scorpio was when he was cackling all alone in a room? Mood, by the way. And they can kills two birds with one stone. Do you remember how we wondered why we ended up in one team? It's because the SLOKE orchestrated it. They probably plan on accusing us of all of the killing attempts or whatever, and dispose of us. Just because we dumped them."

"Erm... I don't think so..." says Remy with a shudder. "Scorpio called me... he seems to be interested in getting back together... not that I will." "As did Madame La Douche," says Patton.

"Archie hinted that..." says Roman. "And Bongo is always texting me." He turns to Thomas. "And we know that they hacked into GayO3... and Eirian is on GayO3 too..."

"You think he is connected to all of this?" asks Thomas, pained. "Eirian Lumos... that means silver sparkle... dammit I've been blind! It's Dolon! And Bluff Chicanery... I think he is Dolon too, that name literally means deceit. He is a master of disguise."

"That is disconcerting." Logan leans back in his chair. "They want to hold possible lifetime imprisonment against us to make us get back together? That is incredibly petty and diabolical at the same time."

"Talk about crazy ex special someones." Virgil laughs bitterly. "What do we now? Do we have
enough evidence to go to the police?"

"And give the chance for SLOKE to weasel their way out of this?" says Remy. "Gurls, I hate to say
this, but we don't have an upper hand. We may be able frame Arachne, but Scorpio will bail her
out. We can build a case against Madame La Douche, but we gave our evidence to the Division,
which declared her free. Same with Bongo, his case is all Diggy Deffy Divvy territory. Archie has
technically not done anything wrong. And sucks to be me, but Scorpio is untouchable."

"We need to catch them in the act..." muses Logan.

Thomas stars at his hands clasped around the half full bowl of soup. It was now or never, he had to
step up and take responsibility of his role in this web of lies and destruction. "Then that's settled.
I'm still going on this date with Eirian... and let's see what we can find."

"Are you sure you are ready to do that, Tom Tom?" asks Patton, concern darkening his brow.

"Yes." Thomas takes a deep breath. "I was chosen by the SLOKE as I am the easy target. Time to
switch that around. You all put your lives on line for me. Now it's my turn."

"While I admire your bravery, it is too dangerous..." begins Logan. Plus, this was not protocol.
Corrupted Division or not, he will not go against rules, perish the thought of letting the Primary
protect his Security Team.

Virgil puts a hand on Logan’s shoulder. "Shhh... let him have the cathartic climax of his character
are."

Logan sighs. "But you are not going. I'll send someone with you as your guard. Do not argue with
me."

Thomas nods. "I think I will go get ready. Prepare to be dazzled by the best date ensemble this side
of the Century."

Roman looks at Patton. Both of them stand. "We are gonna help you and don't argue with us."

Logan gets up too. "Harem pants will make a comeback the day I not be involved in something
fashion related."

1915 h

"So... we spent the last five minutes staring at each other without saying anything," says Virgil
looking at Remy across the room. The two of them were left alone when the others trooped off
upstairs. "I'm not a talker but I though we bonded or swhatever after we pretended to be
mannequins together."

"Hmm?" Remy looks up from scraping his spoon to scoop the last dredges of soup in his bowl.

"Let me try again. Oi, we mates or what?"

Remy laughs. "You're one of those blokes who are too sarcastic to do an accent. Thanks, now I
need to go put castor oil in my ears." He looks sad despite the quirk in his voice. He sighs. "Yeah
you're my mate. Honestly, you're the only one I can stand, and Ro-Ro's not bad."

"Yeah, he's the best," says Virgil with genuine fondness sweetening his voice.
"It must be nice to have a steady someone in your life."

Virgil raises an eyebrow at the bitterness in Remy's voice. "Yeah... but it's a hell of a lot of work and as silly as it sounds, there's still fireworks every time I wake up next to him... then we'd argue like an old married couple then I'd make him a sandwich and he'd give me a... hell, why am I blathering on? You don't want to hear about that. Okay let me blunt. Why are you down in the dumps and does it have anything to do with Ro and me?"

Remy gets up and flops unceremoniously across Virgil's lap.

Virgil makes a sound like a dying cat. He nervously thumps his hand on Remy's hair. "There, there."

"Here comes the verbal vomit, gurl, grab a bucket coz imma gonna hurl. I'll calm down when I come down from my sad bubble. I knew it was trouble when I met Scorpio, but I'm done with feeling happy or sad over the whole crappy connection and after therapy..."

"Therapy!" gasps Virgil. "What the hell happened with Scorpio?"

"He's a nasty piece of work. Why do you think I'm so cocky all the time? Otherwise I'll just go to pieces if I think back."

"Oh. I think I can kinda relate... I went though some dark stuff when I was a teen, until I met Roman. And heck, I still use snark to cover up for the darkness inside, but that's me being me without being put down for that."

"So... I must wait for the perfect Roman to come along for me?"

"Nope. You need to find out what makes you feel comfortable enough to be you. For me it was Roman, for you, it can be anything really. And also, hands off, Ro's mine. Plus he'd be terrible for you, both of you are so extra."

"When did you turn to the yoda of emotions?"

"Coz that's how I roll. I smoke emotions to get high."

"Well then you'll probably get why some part of me still misses Scorpio..."

"It is not uncommon for victims to want their abusers... we need to figure out a way to uproot him out of you. In like a way that doesn't leave scars behind."

"We?"

"Ya, all of us. Even Cheese Crackers. Ugh, I hate saying this but it’s true. We're family."

"Cheesy."

"Hey, we are having a heart to heart here."

"I think I need to stand up to Scorpio. Like really let go of all the fear and wallop him on the head."

"Could work."

"I have a crazy idea."

"I am all about psychotic ideas."
"So... Thomas is gonna try to make Dolon fess up, right? Can't we all try to get the truth out of all our exes? Show them bitches what's what?"

Virgil braids Remy's hair unconsciously. "Actually that might work. The real baddies here are the Svengali Siblings. Logan has a better chance of breaking Arachne than Thomas has of Dolon, and Scorpio is the one we really need to bend to our will. But... can you do it?"

"Now that I know all you wankers care, I'll always have you to back me up."

Virgil grins, a glint in his eye.

1930 h

They hear a faltering footstep and a gasp from the door.

"What is going on here?"

Virgil and Remy look up at Roman standing frozen in horror. Logan, Patton and Thomas bump into him like carriages of a train that braked too hard.

Virgil smirks and twirls a finger in Remy's braid. "There's something I need to tell you, babe. I've been cheating on you with Remy." He groans dramatically. "We're over, you and I have to break up."

Remy's jaw drops open.

"Really?" says Roman with an equally charming smirk. "Thomas, ditch Dolon and be my rebound. I promise my dates are spectacular it will be straight out of Moulin Rouge. Dolon isn't fit to wash my paintbrushes."

Thomas's jaw drops open.

"I'm sorry, what telenova did we walk into?" asks Logan.

Remy leaps up. "Nothing happened!"

"Oh I know," says Roman. "Virgil has way better taste in men."

"I don't know whether to feel relieved or insulted," says Remy.

"And Thomas, I'm sorry, your cute, but Roman like his rebounds with more baggage and trauma," says Virgil looking at Thomas with pity.

"Uh... thank you?" says Thomas.

"Yay!" says Patton. "No one is dumping each other! We should be legally prohibited from becoming adultery." He giggles.

"It is already illegal," says Logan, puzzled.

"We can't be adults?" asks Patton.

"I don't think you know what words mean. Thank goodness you're sweet, or there will be a me shaped hole on the wall."
"Don't leave me!" Patton hugs Logan.

"Calm down, Patton," says Logan, patting Patton on the head. "We are on the clock here."

Logan glares at Roman. "I ought to fire you for making romantic propositions to The Primary."

"Why aren't you shouting at Virgil and Remy too?" Roman pouts. "Sorry, sir."

"If I punish my team every time there is inappropriate sexual activity, you and Virgil will be publicly executed, so I can't blame him and Remy for this innocent cuddle."

"What about us?" asks Patton. "That time in the car -"

"Patton, darling, shut your pretty mouth. Or that hole will be punched."

Everyone stares at Logan, mouths agape.

"On the wall, godsdammit, on the wall." Logan desperately flaps his hands. "I will never stoop low enough to make a double entendre."

"Ah," sighs everyone in relief, as there are some status quos you cannot break.

Logan claps sharply. "Anyway, back to order, you gaggle of geese. We are here to admire Thomas's outfit. What do you two think?"

Thomas awkwardly stands while Virgil and Remy check him out. Pointy shoes polished to dazzling white. Maroon pants, only a shade darker than the deep burgundy of the long sleeved shirt and two shades darker than the lilac highlights in his hair swept back off the forehead and coiffed into a pompadour. The inside of the collar and cuffs have a white flower pattern in stark contrast, folded back for maximum effect. An elegant white sash around his waist adds a touch of exotic class. He had his go to brown leather jacket over one, in case the night turns chilly.

Remy whistles. "Damn senorita fantastica! Looking fine, your date better go, "shine and be mine!". Remember a date is all about confidence with a bit of sense, pizazz with a bit of jazz, and the evening better end with a bit of action. Shoot, it's Dolon, he's trash. Only over-the-clothes action then, nothing under the waist."

"I won't be able to pull off any of that, but thanks anyway." Thomas grins.

"A first date..." says Virgil. "Can never go great. Unless there is a second date, which better not be the case, it's Dolon. The clothes are fine I guess, love the sash, but nothing can hide the fact that your palms will be sweating, there will be greens in your teeth and you will want to take a dump right in the middle of it."

"Virge! Don't tell them about that!" whines Roman.

"Um... I feel uncool and anxious now," says Thomas going green in the face. "Also, washroom!" he cries and runs off.

"Why do you take such pleasure in tormenting each other?" asks Logan. "The poor boy will be a bundle of nerves now."

"Hey," says Virgil. "While Thomas is gone..." He quickly conveys Remy's plan, and Remy touches on his past with Scorpio briefly.

Roman grinds a fist against his palm. "Take Bongo down? With pleasure."
"I think I can handle Madame La Douche," says Patton. "We could play dress up!"

"This is an orthodox plan." Logan shakes his head. "I cannot allow it. Too many risks for so little results. And it feels so... degrading."

"I think that depends," says Roman. "What's degrading for you might not be for me."

"And we can't let Thomas do all the hard work!" says Patton, wringing his hands. "And if he messes up, we have no back up plan. I love Thomas, but he is not the best spy. He apologises if he so much as pronounced someone's name wrong, how can he find out big bad secrets?"

Virgil chews on his lip. "It might be all for nothing. But it might be cathartic to finish off this ugly business like this."

Logan puts a hand on Remy's shoulder. Remy jolts, not expecting the contact. "Are you sure this is something you are ready to do? You have the most at stake. The cruellest parting and the worst of the SLOKErs."

"Yes." Remy's throat is dry.

Roman claps him on the back, Virgil gives him a thumbs up and Patton full on tackles him in a bear hug.

"I am not sending you alone," says Logan. "I will ask both Scorpio and Arachne to come here, and they have already been here so it will make sense. Virgil, take Thomas to The Publican, and pick up Archie from the CPD on your way. Archie will probably have the least to say, so just make him talk while keeping an eye on Thomas. Roman, go find Bongo wherever he is. Stay close. Patton –"

Patton looks up from his phone. "She says she wants to come here."

"Probably for the best," says Logan. "Everyone set with the plan?" He holds out his hand.

Everyone stacks their fists above his, and cry "Birds of Gay!"

"Wait for me!" Thomas hurries in and puts his hand on top of the stack. "Birds of Gay," they cry again. It lies unsaid in the air if Thomas is a part of it or not...

"Is everything alright?" asks Thomas smiling crookedly.

Should they tell him their plan? Eyes dart from one to another.

"Everything is fine!" says Patton brightly. "Go have your date, have fun! Tell me all about it."

"Curfew is at Ten pm, sharp," says Logan. "And did you wash your hands after coming from the washroom?"

"Um..." Thomas hides his hands behind his back.

"That's it! Everyone sanitize your hands in lime and salt and boiling water!"

A/N: There is shift in tone for the rest of the chapter, so I'd suggest you take a break and get into a dark mysterious forbidding mood for the rest of the chapter. Or just continue reading, I only control the characters, not the readers. XDXDXDXD
Thomas sits at the corner booth of The Publican. He studies the menu before him. Is he too early? On time? Too late? A hand lowers the menu card, and a warm mouth melts into a smile. An ornate pair of owlish glasses peeks through sweeping black hair that half hides a too smooth face. A coat of indescribable hue. Black gloved hands. Posture poor, movements measured.

"Thomas Sanders?"

"Hi, Eirian!" Thomas gives a small wave.

"It's great to see what you look like in living colour."

"You don't know what I look like?"

"I'm not into stalking celebrities."

"Really? You must be one of the few who don't. It's a refreshing change."

"I want to get to know the real you... see what you are like on the inside."

"But I want to know the truth about you too!"

"Be my guest!"

"What will you order?" Thomas cracks a smile despite himself. "Try the grey stuff, they're delicious."

"I am fond of grey myself..." Eirian mirrors the smile. "Who has time for white or black? I prefer the flexible middle."

"Are we still talking about food?"

"Everything."

"Okay."

"What will you order?"

"Something simple and healthy and green."

"Something green? Careful, you will suddenly see more than you bargained for when you feed me."

Thomas giggles. "You know a lot of references I like."

"I know you well."

"I bet you do."

They lean closer, judging each other, predator and prey.

"What will you order?" asks a waiter suddenly.

Both look at him as if he was an alien.
"I will give you some more time then."

2005 h

"Hey, Virgil..."

Archie shifts in the shadows like a memory forgotten when better memories were found.

"Yes, Archie?"

Virgil watches Thomas through the windshield of the Limousine, through the glasses of the windows of The Publican, through the shifting glasses of the Aquarium at his table.

"I've been wondering..."

"I know I am with Roman. But..." Virgil closes the distance between them.

2006 h

"Hey, Bongo?"

Bongo shifts in the shadows like a memory forgotten in the search for better memories.

"Yes, Roman?"

Roman looks past the glass of the cheap motel door, past the mosaic of glass rain that falls through the city, past the glass of the blinking sign board 'The Publican' and at the Limousine.

"I've been wondering..."

"Aren't you with Virgil?"

"Yes, but..." Roman closes the door behind him.

2015 h

"Good evening, Ms Arachne Svengali." Logan takes her hat and fur coat at the door and puts it away in the closet.

"I wish I could the same, Mr Logan Craggers." Arachne raises a hand to his cold cheek and lets it fall.

"You brought the children."

"They never get to see their father."

Logan crouches down. Four small orbs look at him, strangers of his own blood. "Hello, children," he says. He pats their cheeks and they flinch, unsure how to react. "Wait in the kitchen, mummy and daddy have to talk." They nod, accustomed to this routine, and shuffle off.

"Why do you shut them away, Logan?"
"Because I am honest enough to say I am unfit to be a parent."

"Neither am I, but I still did not run away." She takes a drag off her cigarette. The smoke curls against the dusky air.

"I did not ask you here today to discuss the children." Logan coughs slightly as the winding wisps sting his nostrils.

"Then?"

"What do you think?"

"I hope it’s not Sex?"

"Likewise."

"Thank goodness. Ew."

"Likewise."

"I thought you dried up years ago."

"Likewise."

"Well, let’s talk."

"This way, please."

2030 h

"Hi, Trixie Dixie!" Patton playfully tugs at one end of a feather boa.

"Hi, pumpkin pie!" Madame La Douche pats Patton on his curls. "This new look suits you." She fusses about his dress.

"Thanks! How are you doing?" Patton wishes they met under different circumstances. He really did value her as a friend once upon a time.

"Not that great." Her lips tremble. Reality and conscience had not been kind to her for the past hour, and Patton's open friendly smile unravelled her.

"Well, you tried to kill me."

"I swear I did not know about the bomb."

"You knew that there was something wrong."

"I did, I am so..."

"Shhh..." Patton took her hand and led her away. "There is something you must help me with first." They entered the kitchen. Two cherubic kids sat at the table, surrounded by art and craft supplies and yards of fabric. They beam with excitement.

"They want to dress up," says Patton. "Would you like to help us?"
Something akin to hope filtered through Madame La Douche's face. She sat before the kids. "Ready to play?"

2045 h
"Remy."
"Scorpio."
"This way, please."
"Ready to play?"
Remy's throat tightened, no hands required.

2100 h
"That was a lovely dinner," says Thomas.
"And what a waste of a lovely night to sit inside," Eirian tilts his head. "Care to go for a walk?"
"I would like to stay here and chat."
"Sure. About what?"
"Can I ask you some questions?"
"Shoot."
"Have you shot anyone?"
Eirian laughs. "Not what I expected. The answer would be that I've never shot anyone dead."
Thomas weighs his answer carefully before asking the next: "What do you regret the most?"
"Not following my dreams."
"Oh. Why?"
"I put someone else before me."
"Why?"
"Friendship."
"That is a good thing, isn't it? Why do you regret it?"
"It should have been me."
"But that does not mean you can't be it too."
"Not everyone gets a chance."
"Not even if the person who got in your way offers you a chance?"
"It is too late."

"It is never too late."

"There comes a point when it hurts too much to think it can be better."

"Wounds can heal."

"Scars don't."

"Scars don't define you."

"Unless you chose to let them." Eirian's arm shoots out and grabs Thomas's wrist in an iron grip.

2105 h

Logan and Arachne sit across a table for two, champagne glasses glinting between them.

"Reminds me of our first date." Arachne takes a slow sip.

"A long time ago." Logan sighs. "Well, I have told everything that needs to be said."

"And?"

"I am sorry for being a neglectful father."

"And I am sorry for being an inadequate mother."

"And we will put aside that chapter in our lives."

"Very well. There is only so much animosity that we can share."

Logan smiles. He needs to close this part of his relationship with Arachne, put to rest these mutual failings before moving on to crimes that were only hers.

"Arachne, do you have anything more to say, of what you have been doing the past week?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"Are you sure? I cannot pardon or keep them secret, but telling them will ease your mind in the days to come."

"My lips are sealed. I cannot speak without exposing someone else too. And that cannot be."

"And that is your answer?"

"Yes."

Logan nods. He had enough evidence to frame her. A confession would have helped his conscience, but if that is to not be, then his rational side will see it through.

"Where are the children?" she asks slowly.

"You will find them with someone who may grow to love them dearly if you are alright with letting them free."
She stands. "Then we must go see this wonderful person."

They descend to the kitchen. The kids scramble all over Patton, giggling and squealing in delight, putting paper crowns on him and drawing smiley faces on his face arms with crayons. They look happier than they ever do with either of them.

Logan eyes flick to Madame La Douche sitting to one side. Patton nods. She told me everything.

"Children, say Goodbye," says Arachne. "I'm afraid we have to go now."

The children protest and whimper, but Patton hugs them both tight, gives them an apple and chocolate each. They trip off holding their mother's skirt, looking back over their shoulders and waving.

"So this is Goodbye?" asks Arachne at the door.

"Yes," says Logan, his voice harder as he tells a different goodbye, not as a former husband but as the one who brings her to justice.

"And I set the children free."

"Thank you."

Patton and Madame La Douche come up behind them.

"We will keep in touch?" she asks.

"Of course!"

"I do not know what's going to happen next."

"Your just desserts," says Patton and gives her an apple and chocolate.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry you didn't realise this before you had a reason to be sorry."

"Do you want lift?" asks Arachne kindly from Madame La Douche.

"Thank you, Ma'am."

Logan shuts the door. He and Patton share a look. It is a start. Tomorrow will tell how it all plays out.

2110 h

"We've been talking for far too long," says Scorpio. "It reminds me of us our first date. You were always skittish under your false bravado."

Remy's eyes dart around his room. He had tried to get Scorpio to open up, but he was tighter than a calm with a rotting pearl inside.

"I'm bored. You were funny. Always. Entertain me."

"Those days are done."
"How sad."

"And I don't want you to bring them back."

"Why?"

"I can't let you hurt people again."

"And what do you plan on doing?" Scorpio's fingers brush against Remy's sternum, and walks up his chest towards his throat.

Remy's hand slides to his pocket, thanking Logan in his head for his foresight.

"Looking for this?" Scorpio asks, holding up a Taser. "The first thing I checked for. I don't like it when you aren't funny. Say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry." A broken whisper.

"Good."

2111h
"I'm sorry," says Eirian.

"For what?" Thomas's pulses quicken under Eirian’s grip.

Dolon smiles. "Not taking what I always wanted sooner." He wrestles Thomas out of The Publican.

2112 h
Roman sits back. He feels sick and bile rises up his throat.

"You don't seem to enjoy it as much as you did," Bongo leans back lazily against the headboard.

Roman pulls on his clothes.

"You should have left earlier. You're too late to save your precious Primary."

Roman punches him through the cheap wooden walls of the motel. "I'm not sorry," he says and sprints out. He snatches up the key to Bongo's motorcycle, and zooms out into the dark tunnels of the roads.

2113 h
Virgil looks up. He feels sick and acid fills his stomach.

"You don't seem to enjoy it as much as you did," Archie leans his head on the steering wheel.

Virgil pulls on his clothes.

"I'm sorry," says Archie, and kicks him out the Limousine.
Dolon comes running, throws Thomas into the car, and it zooms along the night tunnel roads. Virgil stares in despair.

2114 h

Logan and Patton turn to see Scorpio descend the staircase, Remy firm in his grip, a gun to his head.

"Step aside," Scorpio snarls.

"Look," says Logan, holding up his hands. "Stay calm, and –"

Scorpio shoots. Logan’s breath is stuck in his throat. A bullet quivers before his eyes, stuck in his glasses. Patton pulls him aside.

Scorpio strides out, half carrying a deflated Remy. The sound of a car tearing down the driveway.

Logan and Patton sprint to Logan's car in the garage, tumble in, and gives chase.

2115 h

Roman's motorcycle tears to a halt before Virgil. The stench of sex coagulates the air between their eyes that refuse to align.

"Where did they go?" asks Roman.

Virgil points.

"Get on."

Vigil slips in behind him, and puts his hands around Roman. Their contact burns as hard as the tires tear down on the hard asphalt.

2130 h

Phew. Now I got all my chess pieces heading to the same destination. Let me set the scene.

In the middle of the city, a bascule bridge leaps over a sluggish polluted river that rumbles through its urban heart. If you do not know what a bascule bridge is (I had to look it up, so no shame in admitting, love ya) you find out that it is like tower bridge in London, where the bridge opens upwards on a hydraulic system to let taller ships pass through underneath. Two square steel towers stand proud and tall, strong taut iron cables spanning from the bridge to the wire ropes above. In the middle hangs an ornate silver orb, reflecting the light of the moon. It is to this bridge two cars race this cloudy empty night, followed closely by our heroes.

2145 h

A limousine from the right bank and a mustang from the left charge at each other across the shiny
rain slicked tarmac of the narrow bridge cutting through the lack of light once they left the shores of the city. The wheels skid and screech at the middle of the bridge, just over the gap where the two halves met, and their front bumpers crash into each other, the iron cases of the cars jolting to a sudden halt.

Scorpio is the first to get out of the car, Remy following like a limp doll after him.

Dolon gets out with a swagger. "Come on, Tommy! You wouldn't want to miss the party."

Thomas eyes widen when he sees Remy's glazed over eyes. Remy struggles to focus on his scared ones.

"You idiot!" snarls Scorpio. "You won't supposed to kidnap Thomas!"

"Well, you did the same with Remy." Dolon has the audacity to whistle a merry tune.

"I couldn't help myself!"

"Ditto."

"Guys..." says Thomas, surprising himself with how calm he sounds. "This is crazy. Can't we go somewhere safe and talk like mature people?"

"Talk?" Dolon laughs. "No time to talk now, playtime is over."

"Let us go," whispers Remy.

"Not enjoying yourself, baby girl?" asks Scorpio.

"Our friends will get here soon," says Thomas firmly.

"I don't see anyone else here," says Scorpio taking his gun out, as does Dolon.

"I know they will come," says Remy.

2150 h

Logan parks his car in the shadow of the tower on the left bank. He takes out his gun from under his trench coat, and turns out to Patton. "It might not be safe out there, there will be shooting."

"I'm not staying back."

Logan nods.

He and Patton creep up the left half of the bridge behind Scorpio.

2151 h

Roman leans the motorcycle against the base of the right tower. "Are we going to talk about what happened before?"

"Not now," says Virgil, and pulls his hoodie up.
"Charge together?"

"Is there any other way?"

And they sprint down the right half of the bridge screaming blue murder.

2152 h

Logan groans. Apparently Roman and Virgil have forgotten how stealth attack works. He leaps up from behind the Mustang, Patton next to him.

"Scorpio, Dolon. Drop your weapons and step back from Thomas and Remy. We have you surrounded."

"Do you?" asks Scorpio, gripping Remy by the front of his shirt and turning to point his gun at Logan.

"We have more tricks up our sleeves, don't we Tommy?" says Dolon throwing an arm around Thomas's shoulders, twirling his gun carelessly around one finger.

"I won't repeat myself," says Logan.

"Don't bother," says Scorpio.

"Hey, lil' bro," says Dolon. "Why do you think I chose this bridge? Look up."

Patton looks up automatically. The orb shimmered above, looking like a disco ball. Hypnotism stirs behind his eyes.

2153 h

Archie jumps out of the limousine and points his gun at Virgil and Roman. His gun whips between the two of them as they approach.

"You hate me, don't you?" says Roman. "Shoot me if you dare."

Virgil gets the message and starts creeping to the side, hoping to get around Archie.

"I don't have to shoot if you back down," says Archie, his voice shaking.

Virgil's ears prick up. "Archie, you don't have to be a part of whatever nonsense Scorpio and Dolon told you. I left you because I was in a bad place, not because of any fault of yours."

"So Roman is better than me?" says Archie, gun pointing directly at the person he named.

"No and Yes," says Roman. "Not because Virgil feels like a better person around me, but because I don't shoot at innocent guys. I might make bad decisions, but for good reasons."

"I hope I was one of those," says Bongo, emerging from behind and trapping Roman in his arms. "Miss me?" He knocks Roman’s gun away and holds his own against his head. "As if I would miss this for anything."
Virgil looks at this intrusion in horror, and Archie uses the distraction to disarm him. His gun joins Roman's on the wet ground.

2154 h
Patton blinks the rain away and looks steadily ahead with milky eyes.

Dolon smirks. "We don't want Logan hurting himself with that gun do we? Why don't you take it away from him like a good boy?"

Logan panics. Patton seems to have lost all control of himself, as he turns and tries to grab at his gun. When it comes to it, Logan could overpower Patton in a tussle, but he cannot bring himself to use violence against him.

"Patton," pleads Logan. "You can break free of his hold, try!"

Patton does not respond, his hands closing over Logan's hands around the gun.

2155 h
"Isn't this fun, Archie?" says Bongo sleazily moving against Roman. "We fucked these two, and now they get to see face to face each other in our arms. How does that feel?"

Roman and Virgil's eyes meet at last. A connection unbroken.

Archie shudders. "Bongo, shut up."

"What? We're on the same team."

"I'm having second thoughts." Archie's voice and pose softens. "I can't do something like this to someone I once loved and tell myself I still do though I have no right to."

2156 h
Logan cries wordlessly as Patton's finger accidentally pushes his own down on the trigger.

215615 h
A bullet spits out and burns through the air.

215630 h
Virgil freezes as the bullet heads straight at him.
Archie ducks, pushing Virgil down, and the bullet whistles overhead harmlessly.

2157 h

Logan does not see his Patton in his eyes, and kisses a memory. Patton hears the river roaring under him, rain on his face, and his memories return to him in an explosion of water.

Patton shakes off the hypnotism like a wet dog. He turns to Dolon. "Never try that again, Bro."

2158 h

"You idiot!" screams Bongo.

Archie leaps up and punches Bongo in the face.

Roman wriggles free and darts towards Virgil.

Bongo shoots, and one side of Archie's face is covered in red.

Archie punches him again, and Bongo staggers back.

Bongo raises his gun again, but Archie wrestles it out his hand.

Bongo turns and flees.

Roman and Virgil stand up, holding their own guns they picked up.

Archie looks at them, drops the two guns in his hands and backs away.

Roman and Virgil nod, and Archie turns and flees.

2159 h

Logan and Patton, eyes as hard as molten iron, close in on Scorpio with Remy in his grip. Dolon turns to face Roman and Virgil approaching him with grim smiles, and pushes Thomas behind him. Guns point in all directions.

Three loud horn blasts.

A ship approaches down the river.

Mechanism creaks and cranks and crunch as the two halves of the bridge begin to rise and open. The ground slants and all eight shift uneasily.

The gap in the middle widens, and Thomas and Remy share a look of unadulterated fear across it as they feel the hands of their captors push them towards it.

2200 h

Scorpio and Dolon hold Remy and Thomas over thin air by the front of their shirts. Back against
back, their legs dangling over the river far far below the soles of their shoes.

"If you dare come closer," shouts Scorpio.

"And it's bye bye birdie for the two of them," says Dolon with a cackle.

The bridge tilts more.

The four heroes and two villains and two victims are still, frozen, at an impasse.

Thomas looks at Remy. "We can't be victims forever, can we?" He grips Remy's hand behind him. "We are family, and we go down and rise up together."

"Hell yeah!" Life courses through Remy again.

"Dolon," Thomas looks at him, down the length of arm extending to his throat. "You always felt left out, didn't you? You saw what you wanted, but never worked towards it, so you grabbed what you wanted. But it never felt good, did it? So, you made this family of sorts with all our exes to see if you can recreate the same family. But you can't make the magic happen if you build it by hurting others... but it doesn't have to be this way. You can always find ways to become a better person. Find people who will. Not us. But your family is out there, and we will help you find it."

The gap widens. Thomas and Remy's hands stretch as they clasp strong.

"Yo, Scorpie," says Remy. "You find me funny, eh? That sucks, coz I'm laughing at you, you lobotomised ape-man. I don't need you, heck I don't need to find a person to be funny. I'm fricking hilarious, and my sense of humour is something I take pride in and you can't take that away from me. You know who doesn't? My girls, I got my fam bam damp in the underpants with my jokes and my bitches got my back and I don't need you anymore coz I found my crew. They once told me to shut up, and now they -"

"Say it, Remy," shouts everyone.

"You are officially unfriended. Go find help elsewhere, I'm not qualified to deal with your shit." Remy throws his head back and laughs.

The gap grunts wider, and Thomas and Remy are holding each other by their fingertips. The others crouch against the sloping tarmac, trying to not slide. The cars roll down the road, and tip over and crash in the distance.

Scorpio and Dolon stare at each other, as one dares the other to make a move. A pity they decided to place their point of influence in the other, as madness takes over. They drop Thomas and Remy.

"Tom Tom! Remy!" cries Patton, and leaps, his familial instinct overriding all sense.

Roman takes a running start and dives after them. He will protect them, or die trying.

Logan follows without hesitation. A captain goes down with the ship, the last to leave.

Virgil gives Scorpio and Dolon a two-fingered peace sign salute, and steps of the bridge.

And down they fall into the inky black waters below as two broken figures watch from above.

Chapter End Notes
Am I the only one who like the 'explanation scene' in a mystery story where the characters sit down and figure out what's been going on? Yeah, maybe spoon feeding the audience but I personally love seeing the characters figure out how everything falls into place.

My first draft for the second half of this chapter was originally funny, then I realize that was not the way to go with that section, so I went into some noir action thriller moods. Hope the shift was not too much of a jarring change.

QotW: How have I been doing with the Crazy Ex aspect of this story? Not too exploitative, I hope. This chapter was all about humanizing them, and identifying the reason why people make mistakes or become evil.

I know I left things on a cliffhanger (They literally were dropped or jumped off a bridge) but next chapter will makes it all come around, I promise.
Chapter Notes

Well. I'm back. I'm more than a week late. Sorry, life decided to hijack me with other plans.

Anyway, find out if any of the six survive in this week's episode! roll up, roll up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2201 h

They all fell in to the water.

No, not in the river. In a swimming pool.

It is not strange at all, actually, if I let you know that the ship passing under the bridge right at the moment was a yacht of the city's most notorious billionaire. But it was no ordinary yacht, it was a party yacht (unless all yachts are used for parties, I don't know, I'm not a thousandaire let alone a billionaire). Complete with a swimming pool shaped like a dolphin and a disco dance floor shaped like a flamingo and a fun bouncer shaped like a panda. Luckily for us, our intrepid heroes did not get pancakified on the disco floor or trampolinised on the fun bouncer, they ended up in the swimming pool for maximum comedic effect and plot convenience.

Logan is the first to surface, of course. If the captain goes down with the ship, then he is the first to leave the water. All the scantily clad guests, shocked into sudden silence, look at him as if they had an alien in their midst, which is not too far from the truth actually. He did descend from the skies.

A distinguished gentleman in a blue and white cap with white muttonchops and a tremendous beer belly plants himself right in front of Logan with a scowl that outstrips even Logan's most commanding glare.

"Ahoy there! Welcome aboard. Now tell me who the hell you are or I'll blast you to smithereens!" The captain (for he looked like one) points a shotgun, which had a convenient sign hanging off it declaring 'PROSECUTORS WILL BE TRESPASSED' written in sloppy drunken handwriting.

"Um..." says Logan. He cannot possibly say 'Oh we were all thrown off – or jumped in solidarity off – the bridge by two crazy psychopaths who are also our exes and also one of them is a brother of one of us and the other is my ex's brother but it's a long story so...' Instead, he went with the first thing that pops into his mind: "We are the Birds of Gay."

Logan wonders whether to sink down again because saying the first thing that pops in to mind is always the cringiest reply.

"Wuh?"

Logan went in for the kill. "We are a skydiving dance group."

The rest of them burst out of the from behind him doing jazz hands and singing acapella in tandem. The party guests cheered and our heroes bowed. Except Logan and Virgil because some things
"What are you doing in MY POOL!" bellows the captain, waving the gun like it was a lasso.

"We ran into some technical difficulties and crash landed into your pool," says Logan hurriedly.

"Where are your parachutes?"

"That was the technical difficulty. We forgot them."

The Birds of Gay look very apologetic indeed.

"Hmph," says the Captain. "Who am I turn down the wackiest party crashes I've ever seen? Out you get!" He pulled Logan out by one arm, making him squeak like an abused door hinge. "This is why I should have listened to that chap from the Dignitary Defence Division."

Logan pricks up his ears. They definitely cannot let him know they were connected to the Division. He swipes off his badge from his coat lapel and pockets it. He quickly looks at Roman who is the only one with the logo on his coat (Since the others never got formally registered, thinks Logan with a mental eye roll). He mimes pulling off the badge, so naturally Roman obediently pulls off his coat. The crowd gasps, because Roman in a wet white shirt is a treat to the gods. Virgil hid a smile and pulled Roman out of the pool with his tie. Virgil has the presence of mind to realise Thomas might be recognised, so he puts Roman's coat over a very surprised Thomas who was not very happy with the most recent development because the coat smelled of things he dare not think of.

Logan makes use of the diversion to link arms with the Captain and steer him away. That is not his usual style, but he assumes that the leader of an airborne dance troupe would be a very over the top socialiser.

"Tell me, Captain," says Logan, camouflaging his voice to match his new friend.

"Oh I'm not the Captain! I own this bloody ship!" He throws his arms out as if he owns the whole world. "I'm Mr Stynkyn Filthritch!"

"Stinking filthy rich?" asks Logan.

"That I am!" cries Mr Filthritch with child like wonder.

"So, did the... chaps... at The Dignitary Defence Division warn you about us or something?"

"Not you specifically, but they have some 'super duper rocking packages on how to make sure I am safe anywhere, from a red carpet to a bath tub!"

Logan nods, remembering how many pointed letters he had written to the marketing department begging them to change their slogan.

"They are doing good work saving that little Sanders boy," continues Mr Filthritch. "I have a god mind to get my own team. I'm hosting the Berry Awards you know!"

Logan beams, letting himself go now that he pretending to be a skydiving dancer. He has learnt all he needed, and now they had to scram, and fast.

"Do you have a boat we could borrow?"

"Aw! Leaving already, champ?" Mr Filthritch laughs and thumps Logan on the back. "No one
leaves the Party Animal! That's the name of the yacht. We don't have any boats, we party till the break of dawn! That's our slogan."

Logan groans. Bad slogans are his kryptonite because he felt personally attacked as they sounded like his name. His eyes focused on something big and pasticy and full of air.

"Can I borrow that?"

"What? No, you can't!"

"We will reimburse. Thank you for your hospitality." Logan ran off.

Roman, Virgil, etc. (sorry guys, but I'm a busy writer and people billed after the title card get featured less) were standing in the middle of the party wondering whether to join in or not. They noticed Logan running at them gesturing wildly, and everyone's jaw drops with horror at seeing him out of character.

"There he goes with the gesturing again!" says Roman rubbing his head. "I do not understand that man when he turns into a circus monkey."

"I do," says Remy. "The bosses at CPD love to scold me with their hands than words. I think Cheese Crackers want us to..."

"Uh..." says Virgil. "Is he miming giving a blowjob?"

"No, that's eating a bamboo shoot," says Remy calmly. "We should steel the panda fun bouncer."

"YAY!" shouts Patton and Thomas (I seriously have too many characters to give everyone lines).

"Well come on then!" shouts Virgil.

They sprint helter-skelter to the fun bouncer and throw everyone off it with a chorus of "Hey!"s and "Watch it!"s and "I stood in line for this!"s. They push it off the side of the ship and it falls on to the water with a big splash. They pile in, and the panda ship does not sink thankfully (please do not try this at home. I cannot be responsible for panda fun bouncer sinking accidents).

The coat falls off Thomas as he jumps in, and someone in the crowd (Ha! Get the reference?) sees him. "That's Thomas Sanders! Please make me your protégé, I'm an actor!"

"Me too!" cry a hundred voices.

"That's not Thomas Sanders!" shouts Patton. "He is cosplaying as him. We are skydiver dancers who also cosplay! We have excellent make up and costumes!" He points at the drunk dudes you always find at parties. "You were all checking out my non existent boobies!" He pulls one pad out and waves it jauntily. "I hope you are all thoroughly confused and learnt something new about yourselves."

Logan cannon balls into the fun bouncer. "Move it, people, MOVE IT!"

And they do.

2230 h

"If I knew today will end with us stranded in the river on a floating device in the shape of an
"endangered animal, I would not have agreed to this plan at all," says Logan primly.

"Yeah, there was absolutely nothing else we could've done!" says Remy, grumpily sarcastic, as he would have rather stayed on the party yacht. "We could have stayed undercover longer on a crowded boat than on this one third We Bare Bears floatie in the middle of an open river!"

"Well, Mr Stynkyn Filthritch was getting suspicious of us, and he has connections with The Division," says Logan in defence.

"Oh no! We would have been in hot water if we get caught!" says Patton.

"Patton, this is no time for puns. Besides, the yacht was going away from Sanderville, and we need to go back upriver to head home." Logan looked out over at the moon dapples waters and sighs.

"Home?" Remy's question hangs uncertainly in the humid air.

"Well, Sanderville is our home now!" says Patton happily.

"I guess it is," says Remy, a slight smile on his lips, so different from his usually cocky grin. Home is a feeling he was beginning to open the front door and lay out the welcome mat for.

"As touching as this sentimental moment is," says Logan, loathing having to cut in, but he hates not being in charge more. "The current is taking us downriver, we need to row. I am an expert at many things, but not physical exertion."

"Oh dear," says Patton. "I'm a dummy at many things, but... no, sorry, I can't row either."

"Um..." says Remy. "Did anyone notice that the Birds of Gay is missing a few squawks?" He looks around the panda float. "Whaddup, gurls?"

Roman, Virgil and Thomas sit in three corners, sulking, brooding and sniffing respectively.

"Welcome again, interpersonal drama, I have not missed you," says Logan. "What is the matter now? Speak up, and keep it precise and accurate."

All three shake their heads.

"Why don't you try pointing fingers and screaming accusations?" suggests Remy. "Works every time."

More shaking.

"Let me try, you pair of extremists," says Patton. He sits in the middle and starts moving his hands in circles.

"What is he doing?" whispers Logan.

"Cleaning their chakras, or maybe mime therapy?" Remy hisses back.

"Oki doki," Patton reaches out and grabs the hands of the three Debbie Downers. But he has only two hands, so Roman gets a foot, of course. "Tell papa panda what's making those smiles upside down?"

"Roman's a slut! Duh!"

"No, Virgil's the slut!"
"And everybody hates me, and I didn't even sleep with anyone!"

"Woof," says Patton. That is the way is way he says when he does not what else to say, a sort of mixture between whoa and phew. "Let's start with Thomas, okay? Friendship troubles are more my thingy." He pats Thomas clammy palm. "Why do you think we hate you? We don't! We love you!" He shoots a meaningful hinting look over his shoulder.

"Ah yes!" says Logan. "I laa-oo-lee-lay-lei-va-ve-vo you!" His tongue dries up and flaps around the unfamiliar word.

"Trust me, love, if I hate you, you'd be face down in a cup of coffee, so we good," says Remy.

Roman growls.

Virgil hisses.

"They all love you, Tom Tom," says Patton convincingly, eager to do some heavy lifting in the feelings department.

"Then why did none of you tell me that you were meeting up with your exes too?" asks Thomas. "I'm not dumb. I figured out what was going on soon enough. Why don't you make me a part of the plan?"

All is silent except for the lap of water against plastic.

"We're sorry?" Patton offers an apology.

"That doesn't explain why..."

Logan bites the bullet. "At that time, it seemed for the best. We did not want you to put yourself in harms way alone."

Thomas rubs his nose with a thumbnail. "But I wanted to... and things went off the rails – or bridge, rather – anyway. I'm not saying it was a bad idea. I think dividing and conquering the SLOKE is a good tactic. But why didn't you tell me?"

Logan chooses his words carefully. "Because we do not want you to worry too much. It is our job, and we do not usually tell The Primary –"

"I'm sick and tired of being the Primary and coddled instead of doing anything useful!" Thomas squeezes the head of the panda in frustration and one eye pops out.

"Tom Tom, you have a lot on your mind," says Patton soothingly.

"I KNOW! THE GUY I THOUGHT WAS MY BEST FRIEND WANTS TO KILL ME. But that's not why I'm upset."

"You aren't upset?" asks Patton, horrified. "Please tell me you don't like my idiot brother!"

"Oh gosh no, I mean I am scared, but not right now I'm upset over how messed up this entire thing is of you protecting me. If I am the target, shouldn't I be taking responsibility? Shouldn't I be out there?"

"We are better trained for that," says Logan quietly.

"Not Virgil and Patton." Thomas hugs Patton. "And yet they do it!"
Logan's forehead leaks beads of perspiration. "It would be a worse calamity if you die."

Thomas's jaw drops open in horror. "Disposable? Is that what you are saying? You are disposable?"

"Yes," says Roman with a shrug. "One of the first things I learnt at the Academy."

Remy nods. "All detectives know if you are at the wrong place at the wrong time, you're gone girl."

"Better go out with a bang saving someone who'd do more good in the world than I ever could," adds Virgil with a shrug. "Personal philosophy, no training."

Thomas cannot believe his ears. "That sucks. I can't have that, I can't. From now on, I'm done with this whole Primary and Security Team nonsense. We are all targets as much as I am, and I'm not gonna be a damsel in distress anymore. We are in this together. And I promise no one on this... panda boat is going to die any time soon, you are going to live long lives and achieve all your dreams!"

"I do not know about the last part, but fair is fair." Logan stands up and promptly falls over, as standing on a fun bouncer is never easy. He sits as composed as he can be after that ill-timed tumble. "Thomas, I will not let you be in the line of fire. Despite your best intentions, that is just plain idiocy. But we will include you in all our plans, and your voice is an important contribution. Everybody, got that?"

Everyone nodded.

"Good." Logan gave Thomas a firm look.

"It's good to not be told what to do!" says Thomas, beaming.

"Oh, we will direct you with every move, you seem incapable of functioning without our input," intones Logan, holding out his hand to shake.

"That is exactly how he functions," mutters Virgil under his breath.

Thomas energetically shakes Logan's hand, and nearly topples the boat with his enthusiasm. Roman and Virgil, in an attempt to be further away from each other as possible, have been sitting far out on the edge, and promptly fall off.

Logan facepalms. "I forgot about these two. Do I even want to get caught up in the middle of their sexcapades?"

Remy claps. "Bravo, Madam Craggers, brilliantly put. But we have to put out the fires in the best little whore house in pandaville." He pulls Roman and Virgil out of the water. "Patton, I think I better take the mediator chair for this one, as it might make a family man like you start throwing around holy-some water. Okay, Romanique and Virgilicia, I like a healthy diva slut shaming fest as much as the next guy who has a taste for drama, but you two had the most stable relationship I've seen – which makes me reconsider all the relationships I've seen, coz how bad must they have been for yours to be the best? Huh, wait this isn't about me – so it's kinda stupid to see you giving each other the good ol' silent treatment like a geriatric married couple. Now, come on fess up like well-functioning grown-ups, instead of bottling it up and getting depressed like a pair of normies."

"Whoa," says Virgil. "This dude is more messed up than I thought. Mad respect."
"You are one to talk of messed up, Mr Max Groucho," says Roman cricking his neck like a disgruntled valley girl dressing a bitch down.

"GURLS! Less with the japing and more with the yapping!" Remy gets hold of both by their ears. "What the hell happened?"

"Ow!" wails Roman. "Virgil had sex with Archie behind my back! I have a very fragile man ego and it HURTS!"

"I hurt it more when you were banging the tango on the Bongo drum!" snaps Virgil. "At least I sexed up Archie so good he left the bad side and joined ours! Ha!"

"Oh my sainted Aunt Patty!" gasped Thomas. "When we set out to break our exes, we meant their lies, not their beds!"

"Virge did it in a car like a common street ********"

"As if a seedy motel is any better, Ro, you ********"

"Thank goodness I can censure out words to preserve my innocence," says Patton moping his brow.

"Thank goodness our wholesome physical affection is more in the vanilla category," says Logan, going red in the face.

"Vanilla is my favourite flavour of cream!" says Patton, then blushes crimson when he realises what he just said.

"Now don't you two puritans start too!" says Remy with a huff. "There's only so much sexy mediating one guy can do. Alright, Romie and Virgie, why did you two cuckold each other? Like seriously, bad show, mates, very poor sport."

"Ughhh... I'm stupid and I misheard the instructions and though we had to have sex with our exes?" says Roman with a big easy white fake smile.

"Yeah... we took the initiative to go the extra mile on our mission. We deserve praise!" says Virgil, trying to put on a fake smile, but it physically hurt him to do it.

"Don't give me that crap!" says Remy sternly. "I know how twisted reasoning can be behind this whole shebang. Now spill the beans or I'll gut it our of you like the two stinking fish you are!"

Virgil and Roman both suddenly find the panda's tail very interesting.

"Yeesh, this is bad." Remy pats his chin in frustration. "This is what we're gonna do, Jiggs & Maggie. Blurt out the real reason – the truth, mind you – at the same time on the count of three. One, two, three..."

"I wanted to feel how better I have it with you now," says Roman, chewing on both his lips somehow.

"I wanted closure for how bad I had it back then," says Virgil, and disappears into his sweater.

Remy throws his head back and laughs. "You couple of dorks. That's the reason? Kinda valid, I must add, but the way you set about it is really dumb. You two have a garbage tipper full of trust issues. Just talk it out, and kiss and make up, godsdammit!"
Ever the one to first rise up to the challenge, Roman crawls over to Virgil. "Hey." He pokes the sweater where he hopes Virgil's nose is.

"EEEKK. That was my eye, you clumsy butterfingered mdkrj."

"Whoops, my bad. So, then this must be your nose." A kiss on the soft woollen fabric. "And this your other eye." Another peck that left a little imprint of lips. "And this your mouth." A finger traced its outline. "I think we both did something reckless. Am I forgiven?"

Virgil's head pops out of the sweater. "We were reckless yeah, but I think we both needed it to put a full stop to all the baggage we have and like really get why I am better off with you." Virgil gives Roman a quick kiss on his lips and murmurs, "I forgive you."

"I forgive you two, babe." Roman smirks against the other's lips. "Thank goodness, I felt as if I threw away everything good I have just to prove how good it was." Roman sat back on his heels.

"You and me both, buddy, but you're not getting rid of me that easy." Virgil clambers onto Roman's lap, arms firmly locked around his neck.

"Ha! I knew you couldn't live without a taste of this smokin' hot bod!" Roman's hands inch around Virgil's waist.

Virgil's eyes dance with mischief. "Doesn't Bongo always top?"

"Been some time since I got railed." Roman bit Virgil's ear. "And it must've been a while since you were the pitcher, if I remember how Archie likes it up the bum."

"Maybe we should be more flexible." Virgil popped open Roman's collar.

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" Roman ran his hands up under Virgil's shirt.

"You, a sub bitch? I dig it."

"I can be very loud and bendy."

Logan kicks them into the water.

Roman and Virgil break to the surface, gasping, but still holding onto each other.

"I am glad you two made up, but, NOW IS NOT THE TIME! And on a fun bouncer for heaven's sake! You would bounce us right off it!" Logan fixes his best glowering glare yet on the two heads bobbing in the water, and that was enough to drive all lewd thoughts out of their heads. "Now get back in, and row! Our little middle of the river pow wow wasted enough time getting us far away from home."

Roman clambered onto the fun bouncer (Logan had to push Remy on top of Thomas and Patton to make sure the weight is evenly distributed and they would not tip over) and pulled up Virgil after him with one arm. He clung to his side.

"What are we going to row with?" asks Patton sliding over to Logan. Remy and Thomas are left behind trying to figure out how to entangle themselves from each other.

"Hm..." Logan points at the flags that are attached to the side of the fun bouncer. "They have tapered ends that made excellent improvised oars, if one can ignore the extremely unsavoury graphics on the flags."
"I declare myself the unofficial oarsmen of the group," says Roman proudly. "I was trained to be excellent in watersports at the Academy, and I know how to handle an oar like a pro!" He grabs two of the flagpoles and pulls them off their fastenings. He throws a wolfish grin at Virgil and tosses the other to him. "Virgil, will you join me for a moonlit row down the river?"

Virgil ignores the piece of wood. "I wish I could, but I don't want to." He lays down and folds his hands over his chest like a corpse. "I need my rest, Ro. I'll be your oarsmen later tonight."

Logan groans. "And that's the end of that argument. Who else here can row? Or at least strong enough to? For a security team, we are really out of shape."

"Remy's probably the strongest after Roman," says Thomas.

"Wuh?" says Remy, who did not expect that at all.

"You kinda fell on me?" says Thomas flushing. "And I... um... felt stuff? Ohmugodsthsoundedsowrong I meant muscles! Your jacket doesn't exactly hide it either!"

"Well, flattery always works with me!" Remy winks.

"It is not as if we have any other option. Get on with it, Remy," commands Logan.

Roman hands Remy the other oar and briefs him with the most basic of movements. Roman would be leading, and Remy basically has to make sure they do not veer off course. The both sit at the either side and start. The float spins around on one spot, then does a perfect loop the loop, but soon enough the two of them get the hang of it, and the float heads upriver. Thomas curls up next to Virgil and falls asleep. Virgil opens one eye, decides he is harmless, and closes it again. Logan takes out his phone and does a bit of recon. Patton, bored, plops himself down next to Remy.

"Hi!"

"Hey Pats!"

"You've passed the test!"

"I did?"

"Yup. You aren't part of a family until you've gotten into the middle of an argument. You did good work. You're alright."

"Thanks, I guess." A sense of belonging takes over Remy. His secretive line of work has left him jaded and lonely, and those feelings dissipate as Patton pats him on his shoulder.

Soon the towers of Sanderville appeared over the lines of willow trees on the river bank, its warm yellow lights blinking welcome.

2300h

When they reach the front gate, they see the dark shadow of a car parked outside. Arachne steps out carefully, and closes the door behind her. She at stands ramrod straight as they approach, and Logan walks up to her.

"Greetings, Miss Arachne Svengali."
"Logan, please, none of that formality now."

"Very well, Arachne. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"I quit."

"Quit?"

"Scorpio. I'm done with him. I know I've done a lot of terrible things, putting his plan in motion. But he did find out that I came here earlier tonight, and he figured out that I was turning coat on him. I dare not think what he will do if he finds me now." He grabs Logan's unflinching hands. "Can we stay here, please? This is the only safe place I know."

"Who are 'we'?"

"The kids. And Trixie."

Logan considers the odds. He doubted whether he could trust Arachne and Trixie, this might be yet another ploy of Scorpio to infiltrate their defences. But when he looks at the scared faces of his children through the tinted glass panes, he knows he cannot turn them away.

"You can stay here," he says quietly.

"Are you sure that's the best idea, Chief?" asks Virgil.

"No. But we need our friends close and enemies closer." Logan sighs and holds out his hand. "Arachne, we will check all of you thoroughly before letting you in, and I'm afraid we must lock you and Trixie up inside for the time being."

Arachne nods, and the other three pile out of the car. The kids immediately run to Patton's side. Logan gestures at the security guards and the gates swing open.

They hear the sound of gravel crunching underfoot as a figure runs down the Dionysus Boulevard towards them. Logan flicks his eyes at Roman and Virgil. Roman leaps out before the figure could emerge from the shadow and pins him down on the pavement with its hands behind its back, the other clamps over its mouth. Virgil frisks it quickly and pulls out a gun.

Thomas squeaks at the sight of the gun. He then sets his jaw stoically and walks up to the figure. He squats down and pulls his head to the light. Dried blood coats one cheek.

It is Archie Lez.

"Are you here to kill me, Archie?" asks Thomas in a voice that betrayed no fear.

Archie eyes grow wide with fear and he shakes his head urgently.

"Roman, let him speak."

Roman takes his hand away.

Archie gasps. "I'm so sorry. I ran all the way here as fast as I could. I don't take orders from Scorpio anymore. I want to be with you guys. I'll never do anything against you again."

Thomas studies his face. It is covered with sweat and a primordial fear that he has himself felt many times the past week.
"Sure." Thomas looks up at Logan, who nods.

Roman pulls Archie up. "You are a good man, Archie. Welcome to the team!" He pauses and points to Archie's ear. "What happened there?"

Archie gingerly touches his hastily handkerchief bandaged ear. "Bongo kind of shot off the tip back on the bridge."

"He did the same to me! the slimy toad," says Roman. "He's so good at shooting off the tip!"

"Well you two are practically twins, now!" Virgil smirks and shakes his hand. "Knew there was good stuff in you, Archie. I don't have that terrible taste in men." Archie and Roman grin, then glare at each other as Virgil walks off whistling.

As they all head indoors, and Arachne turns to Thomas.

"I've been a terrible agent. I've helped harm my client and stolen from you. Please fire me."

"Well," says Thomas whose biggest fault was a generous soul. "Why don't we sort all of that out tomorrow? When all of this is over?"

Arachne smiles gratefully.

Watching them go, Remy sighs. It was his assignment to get her behind bars, but this had grown into something way more dangerous now. It could wait.

0800 h

The Birds of Gay gather at Logan's office the next morning, well rested after one of the longest days of their life. Roman and Virgil are practically glowing. Thomas looks a mixture of nervous excitement and thrilled hesitance, as today evening was the Berry Awards. Patton has on a new look, with honey brown highlights in his wig and eyelashes, and pale green dress that spoke of summer winds. Remy has two cups of boiled water and two slices of lime, which was a sign that today was a day he will tackle from the front instead of the back. Logan looks as he always does, as his expression never changes, no matter the circumstances. But there is a little braid tied with a blue ribbon above his ear, probably Patton's handiwork, and either he does not know of it or he does not mind it.

"Today will be a busy day." Logan rests his ten fingertips on the table. "But so long as we follow the schedule and get Thomas to and from the Dionysus Amphitheatre in one piece I will call it a success. The venue will be heavily guarded, so that makes our job easier. I've briefed all of you on how it plays out. Only Thomas can go to the actors seating area before the stage. Roman will be in the room, but at the back with the other bodyguards. Patton, you can accompany Thomas anytime he is outside the Amphitheater. Roman and Patton, stick close to Thomas on the red carpet. I will be in the control room. Virgil, do your thing, blend in with the crowd. Remy I am extremely sorry, but you have to stay out in the car park. Thomas, I have a job for you. Ask all your peers at the ceremony what they know of the Division. We must know who and who of the powerful figures are in their pocket." Logan takes a deep breath and sits back, looking down at his blurred reflection on the shiny wooden surface of his table. "I did not send in a report to the Division last night. We cannot let Scorpio know of anything. From now on, all our communication will be verbal. This means we have to make do with all the weaponry and gadgets we have with us now. Luckily I cleared access to the CCTV camera at the event before, because I plan early, thank you very much.
But the fact stands, we are doing this operation rogue."

"Woo hoo!" cheers Roman and fist pumps.

"I'm scared," says Patton, chewing on his hat.

"I'm in it to win it." Remy flicks on his sunglasses.

"Come what may." Virgil shrugs and steals a sip from Remy's water.

"We got this!" shouts Thomas. He pulls everyone into a hug. "We need this, no one better pull away, I'm looking at you Virgil."

"Nyahnyahnyah," grumbles Virgil.

"I wish I could take you all with me and just sit down together and have fun!" Thomas slumps. "But we can't and I only have a plus one invitation, not that I'm taking anyone."

Surprisingly, Roman is the first to break away from the hug. "I beg your pardon? You don't have a date for the Berry Awards?" He swoons onto Logan's chair.

"Bubble gum in my hair!" shrieks Patton, swooning on top of Roman. "I totally forgot about this!"

"Mamma Mia! Ay caramba!" Remy wonders whether to collapse on top of Patton, and goes for it. "Even I know that's worst thing ever!"

"What am I missing?" asks Virgil, mildly shocked by recent events.

"I believe they are overreacting," says Logan dryly.

"OVERREACTING!" bellows Roman, jumping up and tossing Patton and Remy off him. "It's you who are UNDERREACTING!"

Thomas was wringing his hands. "Why is this so terrible?"

"YASSS. Not having a date at the Berry Awards is social suicide!" wails Roman. "I watch it every year religiously and the tabloids rips apart lone wolves to shreds. We need you a fine upstanding guy at once!"

"In one day?" Thomas has started to hyperventilate.

"We got no time to lose!"

"Excuse me," says Logan. "We do not have the time to hold impromptu bachelor auditions now!"

"We must!" says Thomas. "I can't let the press or Scorpio know they've broken me down. That was why I was so eager for Eirian, I wanted a date for the Awards so bad, but now that plan's kaput. We can't let our enemies have the last laugh. We need to find a new guy!"

"But who? I'd volunteer but both Virgil and the Chief will murder me," says Roman.

"None of us will," says Logan calmly. "We will figure out a plan of acquiring some arm candy for Thomas."

"What's the matter, Tom Tom?" Patton peeps over Thomas's shoulder. "Oh! Your Aunt Patty is coming over for your big day? That's so sweet of her."

"Yes," says Thomas, colouring. "I promised her I'll pick her up at the airport, but I forgot all about it."

Logan snatches Remy's other cup of water and gulps it down, slice of lemon and all. "Fwah! Thomas, you know I plan the day down to the least significant second, and you can't spring in two new side quests all at once!"

"We've been running out of subplots, though," says Virgil. "Something knew would be fun."

"Really, Virgil?" snaps Logan. "Well then you and Roman can go pick Thomas's Aunt. Take Archie with you. Find out if he is as loyal as he promises. Now out of my sight before I have a coronary."

Virgil grabs Roman by his jacket cuff and pulls him out of the room.

"Patton, get me some camomile tea." Logan sits down on his armchair. "Remy's drink only made me thirstier."

"Hey!" Remy crosses his arms. "I never offered you any, you got no right to insult it!"

"My apologies, I sometimes forget that I do not hate you anymore."

"And the grand poobah of condescension has his humble moments too."

"Anyway, you are the only single person among us who I marginally trust. Help Thomas find himself a date. Now go, call all his friends, hold a parade in the street, open auditions at the city hall, whatever it takes. We will hold today's mission in style, or the very foundations of humanity will shake."

"Uh... got it boss. I'm not the best at picking out decent guys, but happy to help." Remy threw and arm around Thomas's neck and gives him a noogie. "Come on, let's go find you a bloke who's not a nutter."

"Yay!" says Thomas with a hop. "We are on a dude quest."

They run out. Patton enters the room a few minutes later with the tea and finds the room empty.

"Logan? Are you here?"

Patton hears a muffled snuffle.

He looks under the table. He finds Logan curled up around his footrest. Patton crawls next to him and nuzzles up next to him.

"I hope you are down here coz you're playing hide and seek, but you are not doing a very good job of it coz I found you."

"Well, I'm playing hide and seek, but with myself, and I don't think I want to find myself."

"I need a translation to normal speak."

"I worry whether today will not be my last hurrah, but my final curtain call. Things have changed so much since the day we started this assignment. All the order and rules and processes I stuck to
are gone, and I'm making decisions on the fly and letting my heart lead me instead of my brain and that scares me."

"Well you have all of us to help you now! You no longer are the big scary boss who has to manage everything."

"That scares me too. I like being the leader." Logan squeezes his eyes shut. "And now I'm not."

"You most certainly are."

"Thomas..."

"... hasn't stolen you thunder." Patton buried his nose in Logan's hair. "He hates being left out. All his life he has been in front of the camera, but I know he feels left out because of it. he values his friends so much... just gives him a chance. And trust me, he needs you, now more than ever."

"I guess it is harder to save a friend than the primary."

"Yup. We're not saving Primary Sanders anymore, Mr Logan-Chief-of-Security-Craggers, we're saving our friend Thomas. And I think we'll do a better job of it now than before."

Chapter End Notes

Why a panda? Because there's nothing I wouldn't do to run a pun into the ground.

I really like the place where the story ended in this chapter... Seems to have come a full circle, hasn't it?

I wonder if the subplot with Roman and Virgil is too "real".

QotW: Will there be an outcry if I... actually kill off one of the characters? I do have a big cast of characters to chose from.

See you soon! I have the entire next chapter planned out, so it would hopefully be sooner than today's update.
Dude Quest

Chapter Notes

Imma make up for my absence by posting another chapter soon.

You know what? This was probably my favorite chapter to write. probably not the funniest though... I think Chapter three still holds that crown. I'm flexing my muscles writing Thomas and Remy, so pardon me if they seem out of character. This chapter was written in the spirit that more extraneous characters the better! Anyway, have fun reading. Keep your eyes peeled out, there's a clue hidden in plain sight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0900 h

Remy throws open Thomas's closet. Literally, I mean, the metaphorical one has been open for some time. Remy cards through his clothes, muttering to himself. "Oh baby girl, these outfits do not scream hot date material... more like friendly nice guy on the street... or man baby who likes too much pizza... or a very pale shellfish in a brown toupee." He pokes his head in. "Gods! This wardrobe goes all the way back to Narnia!" He roots in at the back. "How many clothes do you have in here you never wear?"

"Um... I usually wear whatever's on the floor. Can't I go find a guy wearing what I have on?" asks Thomas.

Remy's head pops out. "Oh honey, those are Pajamas."

"They are not!" Thomas pulls at the maroon hoodie and light grey sweatpants he was wearing.

"Anything held up by strings and patches are only acceptable in the bed, and then only if you are not sharing it with everyone. Your ensemble is the dying cry of a couch potato. We need some thing vibrant! No, that's not what you need. Logan would squeeze you into a suit but what does that grandpa no about dating! We need something cool and suave! We need you to rock some Captain Jack Harkness realness."

"I think I'm over my head in this."

"Good. We need to find a guy who's head over heels for you before sunset today."

"Can't I just ask a friend? They'd be sure to say yes for an evening of free food!"

"I love you, but I went through their social media, and sorry boo but nope. None of them are camera ready."

"They practically live in front of a camera!"

"That's what we like to think, but they are more au naturale than parfum magnifique. What are our other options?"

"I could try calling my acting friends..." Thomas scratched the nape of his neck. "But I really don't
know them very well. I'm a really quiet guy for all my public personas."

"That is something we can exploit!"

"Are you trying to find me a date or sell me off to the highest bidder?"

Remy winked. "Is there a difference?"

Thomas belly flopped onto his bed and smothered his face on his pillow. "I'm never gonna find a guy."

"Have you ever had a steady boyfriend?"

"Yup. But I've been focusing on work lately. It's hard to have a special someone and keep it private when cameras chase me every step I take."

"Well then it's about time you get out again, with someone who does not mind the flash." Remy flashed a wicked grin. "Actually, I'm enjoying this, chica. It's therapeutic to set a friend up on a date after all our crazy ex boyfriend drama."

"I will add this new guy to that list tomorrow too, after how disappointed he's going to be of me today. Yay! My life is so glamorous!"

"Every teen magazine says so, but we know life sucks, don't we?" Remy put his hands out as if he was measuring a photograph.

Thomas turns his head to the side on his pillow. "What are you doing?"

"Seriously, with an ass like that, how is the Boulevard not littered with men shooting themselves over you?"

"OH MY GODS! I'M SO MUCH MORE THAN A HOT PIECE OF ASS!"

"Uh-huh. That's your biggest ASSet when it comes to the art of seduction! You're America's ass for a decent chunk of the world population!"

"Really?"

"Yup. Bubbly butt, floppy hair and quirky smile, you can't go wrong with that combo."

"But I'm bad at doing the sexy."

"Tut tut, what's with this defeatist attitude, pidge? You are sexy in your own way!"

"I'm going to die all alone surrounded by dogs in a ranch on the range."

"As self care-ish as that sounds, it's time for you to put out!"

"Yikes! Put out already?"

"Whoops, put yourself out!" Remy emerges from the closet with an armful of clothes. "These will do, Annie, then we hath a way of making a swan out of this ugly duckling thing you got going on. I went with a brown colour pallet coz that's cool yet laidback, classy yet fun too. Not as sinister as black or drab as grey or popping as the colours of the rainbow because, hun bun, you do not have the pizazz to pull it off."
He dumps the clothes on Thomas. "Jump into these now, chop chop."

"Noooo" moans Thomas. "Putting on some new clothes is not going to fix anything!"

"It's not just clothes, buddy." Remy kneels down and rests his chin on the bed next to Thomas's head. "It's about the self-confidence and self-esteem. If you don't care how you look, who else will? If you don't love yourself, you letting the world miss out the chance on loving you too!"

Thomas beams. "Okay. Let's go catch 'em all."

"That's the spirit!" Remy moonwalks out of the room. "Now doll up like a good little boy or I'll steal yo clothes and empty the city of every human with a pulse."

0915 h

Logan and Patton sit on the desk in the library drinking tea with their pinkies up.

"What are we going to do now?" asks Patton. "We have a whole day till the show! Can we bake a cake?"

"And open a stand on the street corner?"

"Okay, I'm sensing a serious lack of enthusiasm from you. I can deal with that. Why don't we do something you like?"

"The only thing I would like is to put Dolon and Scorpio behind bars. Oh and Bongo can conveniently disappear in the crossfire."

"Harsh. But there's nothing stopping of us getting our arts and crafts together..."

"No."

"...and scraps and glitter..."

"No."

"And make a dress for me to wear on the red carpet tonight!"

Logan lit up. "Perfect! That's the project I need to get my mind off things. I already have an idea!"

He jumps and drags Patton off the table, leaving the teacups rattling in their sauces.

They bump into Thomas just stepping off the staircase.

"Well! Look at you Tom Tom!" cries Patton jogging on one spot for joy.

Thomas spins for their inspection. Brown leather ankle boots that laced halfway up his shin, form fitting beige pants tightened around low on his hips with a woven belt of whites and creams and umber. A simple white t-shirt with a touch of colour added by an earthly marble pendant. He awkwardly pulls the cuffs of his iconic brown-orange jacket, the final piece of his ensemble.

"Quite well put together, I must say," Logan, and he would have adjusted his monocle if he had one, though I am sure there is one tucked in some drawer or other.

"Let's get you out of here before Ro-boy gets a look at you!" says Remy, propelling Thomas out of
0930h

"Are we getting the car?" asked Thomas, putting on a pair of brown tinted tortoiseshell sunglasses.

"Nah, it's going to the airport," says Remy strutting down the driveway. "Let's walk."

"Where are we going?"

"To The Publican!"

"Is picking up drunks at a bar the only option I have? Figured."

"Nope. They're having The Berry Awards Pre Party Brunch there! The perfect place to find you your new love, young Romeo!"

"Fingers crossed!"

They walk out the gate and down the Dionysus Boulevard. Fancy cars fill the parking bays, armed guards dot the walkways and dignitaries – the ones that are early risers, at least – are busy posing for photographs. The street was alive today as even though a prestigious awards show came about every month, that was not a reason not to make a big fuss of it. Remy made a bee line for a slushie stand and got himself a mixture of every flavour. The standkeeper looks impressed. He popped in a straw from his pocket.

"Why don't you get yourself something too?" asks Remy from Thomas. “Props are amazing in the art of looking cool!"

"Uh sure." Thomas dithers at the stand eyes flicking over the options on the menu tacked up on a big board.

Remy looks over his sunglasses at the man behind the counter. "What would you suggest for our little prince here?"

The man blushes under his freckles. "I don't think everyone is brave enough to try every flavour at once," he says tugging at his collar nervously.

Thomas chooses a fruit and nut ice cream cone at last. He notices that the standkeeper doesn't take his eyes off Remy the entire time, though Remy is too busy texting to even notice.

"How do you do that?" asks Thomas, a bit upstaged.

"Do what?"

"Get that man all hot and bothered?"

"Oh, did I?" He chuckles. "That's my special brand I guess. I am the unreliable flighty cool guy who you know is not for you and will abandon you in a heartbeat, but you really want me in your bed nonetheless or you will never sleep easy again. All I got to do is do me and wait for them to be my fans. I literally have to only make a few short appearances and everyone will start making theories about who I am and what I like and making up backstories. ZING! I'm a basic dreamboat in a teen romance novel." Remy hopped onto a bench and posed like the lookout of a ship.
"Well that pushes the likes of me out of the picture." Thomas sadly licked at his ice cream.

"Na na na nope, gurl. Everyone has their own style that's gonna make anyone with a libido go weak in the knees. Roman brings on the aggressive flirting that makes you wanna do the only appropriate response and throw your legs in the air, Virgil has the broken bad guy vibes that just makes you wanna rescue him from his inner demons. Logan and Patty have their own thing, though I think they're more Pattonsexual and Logansexual respectively to have a universal style. And you, babe, you are a special case unto yourself." Remy picked a nut off Thomas's ice cream and popped it into his mouth. "Why'd you pick this ice cream?"

"I like them?"

"Uh-huh. Now if you take this cutie." Remy held up his slushie. "This beaut has a special vibe. There so many things you can say with the way you held the cup. And the straw... there are so many ways to use it." He squeezed it between his teeth.

"I don't think I can pull off anything like that."

"Psh! Again with the self-doubt. Think of your self-doubt as the ice cream and swallow it all down! You see, the ice cream is you."

"Wuh? You want me to eat myself?"

"That's probably what you'll end up doing if we fail our mission. I'm bad at metaphors, but I've struck gold with this one. You are the every guy, the guy in the street, kid friendly and down to earth. You are like an ice cream, and everyone would like a taste. But you're kinda really good at being the perfect human being and too good for our sinful souls, so it's better to put the ice cream in a glass cabinet at a museum for the aliens to find you as the exemplary human specimen. People kinda look up to you instead of look to you as a potential mate, got it?"

"So... I'm too good to date?"

"Bingo. Who'd want to spoil you?"

"I hate this ice cream now."

"Just find someone who appreciates the ice cream for it's true flavour," says Remy with a shrug and takes a long sip from his slushie.

"Oh! I know him!" says Thomas, abruptly nodding towards a billowy redhead in flowing green robes. "That's Manon Man'acshionè. He played the villain in... well every Disney Channel movie I ever guest starred in!"

"Hm... let's use him for our appetiser. Go ask him how he's doing?"

"Just like that?"

"No, hide behind this tree and wish real hard and he'll come-a-running."

Thomas makes a face. Remy whistles twice, sharply and Manon looks over, his face shifting into a cursory smile when he recognises Thomas. He heads over. Thomas wolfs down his ice cream in horror and chokes. Remy thumps him on the back. Thomas swats at him, annoyed and panicked.

"Why'd you whistle?" hisses Thomas.
"You'd never have gone up to him other wise, don't wuss out now."

"I never wussed in!"

Too late, Manon has reached them.

"Ah, hello Thomas." Manon claps him on the shoulder. "And who is this?"

No one could read Remy's expression behind his sunglasses.

"That's my friend!" says Thomas chirpily.

"Ah!" Manon looks relieved. "So you two aren't dating?" He gives a weak laugh.

"I'm single!" says Thomas brightly.

"And you?" Manon asks Remy.

Remy ignores him and swirls his slushie as if he is hypnotised. Manon looks like he is hypnotised too, but not of the slushie but the one who holds it.

Thomas nudges himself between them. "I got nominated for a Berry!"

"Congratulations." Manon pats him on the head. "Good kid. Did you get nominated too?" he asks Remy. "You look like you'll get nominated for hottest kiss or something ha ha ha."

Remy arches an eyebrow.

"He didn't, He doesn't act, I do!" says Thomas, all but pointing at himself with both hands. "I have a project coming up..."

"What does he do then?"

Thomas could have screamed in rejected gay distress.

"I'm going to leave you to it." Remy gets up. "I have to go change a wheel in Thomas's car."

"But we just met!" says Manon.

"That's the best way to know me. Cheerio." Remy raises his slushie in farewell at Thomas and wanders off.

"Don't go!" Thomas and Manon reach out towards him, one in the desperation of isolation and the other in a desperation of a different kind.

"He's going to change a wheel, all greasy and sweaty. So manly. I wonder if he goes into a shed and pets his firearm collection and chugs barbecue sauce."

"I don't even have a reply to that." Thomas sighs. He might as well open a lemonade stand and sell Girl Scout cookies made of real girl scouts to get attention; he was so suburban wholesomeness. He wonders away, not that Manon would notice anyway. Remy pops up from behind a multi-coloured croton bush. Thomas squeaked.

"Sh! How did it go?"

"I might as well have been a pebble under his shoe."
"Shit."

"That works as well."

"Better luck next time." Remy throws an arm around Thomas' shoulders. "Being distant is my thing, but that means nobody gets close to me at all."

"You like that?"

"After Scorpio I swore off dating for ages and the easiest thing to do was to go for a bad boy image. When I started dating again, I was so discerning, I was nervous, mate, you see, it was all like who's gonna mess me up next. Gotta keep a strong face. It became easy to figure out what games people play, bud, cos they're all the same. I can make my escape with a wink and swirl, or keep them guessing for more. Kinda lonely but it's survival."

"Wow. I had no idea. Want to talk about it?"

"That's you problem, dude. Too nice. Most guys aren't nice enough for you, and thankfully Dolon didn't get far enough to get his dirty paws on you. And we won't let him, or I'll personally knock the block off the bugger."

"But my lips are sealed. Today's about you and your new flame."

"It can be about you too," mutters Thomas under his breath.

"What was that?" asks Remy heading to the long bar.

"Nothing."

1000 h

"We've been waiting here for ages," whines Roman, flipping through the same newspaper for the twelfth time. "When is the stupid plane?"

They are in the waiting room of the airport. PA systems buzz and cackle overhead, the announces the taking trouble to sound as impossible to understand as possible, pilots and flight attendants walk by like models on runways and many many many lost or confused passengers run all over the wide hallways and polished counters waving half a dozen papers and screaming in languages twice that. Some had given up the run of life and settled down to sleep. Their snores echoed up to the big glass panes overhead, only punctuated by the rumble of planes taking off or landing in the distance.

Roman is seated with Virgil's head on his lap as he languidly stretches over a row of seats, not caring that a family of six were standing nearby. Archie, too, stands, unsure if he was supposed to sit next to Roman or Virgil. Roman gives Archie a satisfied smirk. He runs his hands through Virgil's hair, and short of peeing on him to mark his territory, couldn't be more clear that he was claiming him as 'mine'.

Two can play at that game. Archie sits by Virgil's feet and puts them on his knee. He flexes his fingers and start massaging.

Virgil moans involuntarily, then clamps his mouth shut. "Guys, what's happening?"

Roman panics. If Archie is unchallenged then his masseuse hands will punch him out of the race. He ducks his head low and whispers in Virgil's ear. "Ever had sex in an airport bathroom? It's a
"You're sick!" says Virgil. "But okay."

"You're just going to leave me here?" says Archie, pouting.

"Someone has to wait for the old broad," says Roman triumphantly and hands Archie a card that says "WELCOME, AUNT PATTY SANDERS!" in Thomas's big uneven letters.

"Wait, no, we can't," says Virgil. "We have to babysit Archie."

"No way! My needs are more important!" wails Roman.

"Shut up, we know you are the royal baby." Virgil stands up. "We better do our job, and can you two stop fight over me?" He flips his hair, loving the attention, despite the words he was saying. It wasn't often he was the centre of a love triangle.

"I've won already, and I claim my prize." Roman picks Virgil up and swings him over his shoulder and heads to the mensroom.

"You know, Ro, the language you use is really problematic. I'm no prize to be won."

"You know you love it when I talk cave man to you."

"Wait!" cries Archie running after them. "Logan told me to never let you out of my sight."

"So you're going to watch us bang or something?" said Roman. "You're welcome to, if Virgil doesn't mind."

"Oh please, there won't be room for you in the cubicle if I'm there, I'm very big." Archie flexed his boulder shoulders.

"Big!" squeaked Roman in a high-pitched voice. "I'm a manly man! I'm bigger!" He tosses Virgil aside and squares in on Archie.

"Wanna bet?" Archie grounds a fist into his palm.

Archie and Roman circle each other like sharks.

"Guys, am I even a part of this fantasy threesome you two are so into?" says Virgil getting up of the floor, rubbing his butt. "There's not going to be any sexual activity in this airport, so wrap it up, you two, don't make me smack you."

Roman and Archie both gulp.

"Love it when he's commanding," says Roman, licking his lips.

"Something about that hip swivel," says Archie nervously.

Virgil rolls his eyes. Great, he got himself a Roman 2.0, as if he didn't already have enough on his plate.
Unexpectedly, the whole airport falls silent.

Red high heels clack, dried bead chains rattle, and gold loop earrings chime.

"Hello, world!" trills a voice that filled every corner and nook and cranny.

All eyes swoop up to the top of the escalators that dominate the hall.

A regal hand waves as a grandiose figure descends from above.

"I have arrived," the same rich voice chinks and rings.

Mascara lined eyes peer and flutter from underneath a tie and dye kaftan.

"Excuse me! Yes, you three jumped up glib globbing goldfish straight out of water!" A bejewelled finger points straight at our two heroes and Archie. (He has not earned that status yet.)

"Us?" Roman gestures at himself and the other two, acting the self appointed spokesperson, as Virgil has shut down to the flight or freeze mode and Archie was opening and shutting his mouth in a confused loop that unfortunately did look like a goldfish.

"Yes, you three dearies!" She trots over to them like a fussy hen. "You're holding up my name! I'm Aunt Patty! I'm here for my darling boy Thomas! Where is he" – she throws a handbag at Roman – "how is he" – she hefts a cabin bag at Archie – "when is he coming to see his beloved tante?" – she tosses a baggie of trash at Virgil – "I was worried sick of the poor little bee boo! He must be waiting for me! Why didn't he come himself?" She pats Roman on the cheek. "You don't have to tell me I know he must be ever so busy, Tiny Tom Thumb always kept himself occupied with entertaining the world he sometimes forgets his own family! But I am so excited to see him! It's been a year since I saw him last! He must have grown so much! Silly me, he's all grown up now, he won't grow anymore. How time flies." She dries her eyes with the end of Archie's tie. "And now he's getting an award! I floated out of my fluffy bunny slippers right in the middle of my messy cosy kitchen when I heard the news! I'm so glad you boys are there to protect him." She tried to chuck Virgil under the chin but he back-flipped away. "What do you do? Break secret codes? Ooooh all these spy stuff is so fetch and fun and fantastic!"

"Ma'am?" asks Virgil, still dodging out of her reach. "We are here to escort you back to Sanderville."

"Yes yes yes, just look at me nattering on and on like a over heated kettle whistling for her dear life! Take my hands, you are so strong and my poor old bones are tired... Stuck in that lousy plane for an hour, a nine whole hours with germ spewing tourists, can you believe it! There was a baby screeching on every row like the antichrist reborn, and I'm just knocked out with all that. Hoist me up, boys." She practically has Roman and Archie carry her through the airport lobby like a faux descendant of an Egyptian Queen on a reality show. "Anything better than getting knocked up!" She cackles excessively at her own joke, ample bosom heaving.

Roman grins, liking her immediately. "I'm so sorry to disappoint you, but all three of us are very very gay, like totally. But if I wasn't, Mi amor, I'd love to be your boy toy."

"What do you even see in him?" whispers Archie in Virgil's ear. "He's dropping you like an old sock!"

"I dropped you like an old used sock, remember?" says Virgil, shrugging. He cannot deny that he found it immensely satisfying that Roman could have anyone in the world, but he always came back to him. A little bit of sexing did no one any harm.
Aunt Patty throws her head and laughs uproariously, her teeth twinkling thanks to the miracle of science. "You are so sweet, my little charmer, but I'm not surprise all of Thomas' friends are gay, he's gayer than snow cones dipped in rainbow colouring. Where is the dear boy, I must see him! I demand it, command it and grant it you shall!"

"He's on a dude quest," says Roman, eager to please as always.

"Oh la la la! I knew it was time he settled down! I can him see him have a white Christmas wedding on a cliff, and then a little baby with little feet – No Patricia, stop yourself. He needs to find a guy first. And I have the perfect candidate!"


"I met him on the plane! Walked right up to me and made friends. Such a gentleman!"

"Thomas is looking for his one true love all over the city, but Mr Right just flew in on the arms of a heavenly bird!"

"It's called a plane, Ro," says Virgil. "Who is this wunderkid?"

Aunt Patty, sweeps her arm across the lobby, and the camera glides along the motion (just go with it, okay?), skimming through the throng of people, splashing along the spray of a fountain to pause before the gentle stubbly smile of a mysterious stranger. His coppery skin glows in the dapple light off the duty free shops, his eyes laugh like the men in the air travel insurance ads behind him, his swoopy hair has crystals of condescension on it like an angel put each one on place (Make-up artists are the real miracle workers. That is a fact.) His black leather jacket is badass, but doubles as perfect planeware because anything works on his well-proportioned photo-shoot perfect body. He pulls a travelling bag behind him, one of those brands with a name you cannot pronounce and with a price tag you better not convert to your own currency. He floats over with the grace of dancer of romance and stands before them with the stance of a lancer.

"Hi." His voice could make the stones weep, Orpheus hold my lyre if I'm a liar.

All the attracted-to-males people in the hall swooned.

"My name is Paulo Rivera."

Virgil shakes his hand. "Of course it is. You are straight form cheap paperback book with a title like 'My Secret Spanish Lover'."

"Who is this Mr Thomas Sanders, and how may I make him my lover?"

"I shall take you to him. But first: Hey, I'm Virgil Nix and I'm an enigma only few dare solve."

"A challenge only a brave man may accept. And I am courageous." Double gun pose.

Virgil winks over his shoulder at Roman. "Babe, love ya, but you've got competition. And Archie, buck up, there are more butts on the race."

Paulo turns to open the door for them, and all eyes land on his butt, because dear gay gods, that derriere was a delicatessen of delectability.

1010 h
The last passenger on the plane steps onto the tarmac. He is wearing full leather gear in black, complete with knuckle-dusters and bandana. He could very well do without the get up, but what's villainy without a bit of theatrical dressing? He isn't called the world's greatest assassin for nothing. He speaks into her mouthpiece.

"I have arrived, boss."

"Welcome, my dear."

"I am not your deer for you to hunt. It has been a long time since I saw the last of you, and the only memento was a broken condom."

"Water under the bride."

"Where is my target?"

"Making a fool of himself at a pub. But first, you know what to do: go dazzle the goonie squad."

He readjusts his black backpack over one shoulder, which contains a dissembled double-barreled bazooka. On the other hand, he has a sequined tote bag, with clothes for a quick disguise. Mission commences.

1030 h
The Berry Brunch is famous for its very berry dairy menu. Strawberries on ice cream, blue berries on waffles, black berries in scones, rasp berries on muffins, wild thorn berries on the television. The Publican is packed with people with their own Wikipedia pages fro all over the country, jostling with old acquaintances and networking with new.

"What do you see before you, Thomas?"

"A pub full of people? What were you expecting, Remy?"

"Not people, my young pupil, it's a roomful of potential valentines!"

"Is that the way you look at every roomful of people?"

"Only when I'm in the mood for it. Now, are you ready to be a playa?"

"No."

"Say yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"Maybe."

"Not the best start, but let's make it work."

"May I please go use the bathroom, Remy?"

"No, that usually happens after you found a guy. Now chin up, chest out, butt back. Player ready?"
"As I'll ever be."

"Ready Playa Go!"

"Like just run at them?"

"You're killing me here Thomas! Just go be yourself!"

"So a plate of milk and cookies that taste like home baked bread but with the energy of Red Bull?"

"That sounds like death to me, but sure, if that's your thing."

"I'm off!"

"Don't come back without a catch."

"Why are we making this into a hunt?"

"It's a dude quest, bro. You gotta play by the rules. Also we don't have any time to lose, so git!"

Remy settles at the bar, a lime crush in hand, as he is not a heathen who drinks heavy early in the morning. He observes his ward hop around the room, talking animatedly and smiling like a Game Show Host. That's all very well if your mission is to make sure everyone is having a good time, but that's unfortunately the exact opposite of finding a date. Dates are usually found in brunches that are a flop, because they would prefer to bail out with you and see where things go. At least that's what my friends tell me, because I am the type of gay guy who goes to brunches to make love to the food and not the guys present.

Remy sinks down on to the bar top in desperation. Thomas needed more help than he realized. Some personalities just did not scream DTF.

"Hey, you look down," says the hunky barkeep to Remy. "Want a pick me up?"

"Nah, hot stuff, too early."

"What about later?" The barkeep leans forward with a smirk. "Maybe after my shift?"

"Oh for heaven's sake! I'm not that bad a boy! I'm actually kinda clingy and needy! Don't hit on me, hit on my mate!"

"But he is so..."

"What?"

"...not you."

Remy throws his drink in the barkeep's face and hustles over to rescue Thomas from a sneak attack middle aged church lady from trying to sell him three dozen tickets which he would have bought, of course. He drags him over to the other side of the bar.

"Okay, Thomlicious, change of tactic. We need you to look sexy!"

"I don't think me and sexy belong in the same sentence."

"Oh you sweet summer child, I think you are very sexy. I mean, we need to make everyone think you are very sexy!"
"But how?"

"Well my tactic is to pose alluringly." Remy lounges casually against the bar, runs a hand through his hair, and makes eye contact with a veritable Aphrodite across the room. They make eye contact, and Remy gives her a generous once over. She reciprocates with sulriest come hither look Thomas has ever seen.

"See? That's how you do it. Give me what you got."

Thomas leans back on his stool one elbow on the counter, the other up in the air with his fingers in his hair. He did not whether to arch his back or not so he ends up doing the bridge pose and collapsing alternatively. His legs are another matter entirely, as he seems to be jogging on the same spot. Everyone pauses their conversations to look at him, but definitely not with sexy thoughts.

"Oh my goodness gracious me!"

"Is he having seizure?"

"Is he possessed?"

"Call 911!"

"Call an ambulance!"

"Call a shaman!"

Remy jumps up. "We all good here, guys! He just sucked too hard on a... uh, a lime! Under control now, move along." The crowd dissipates.

Remy pokes Thomas in the ribs. "What in tarnation was that? It looked as if the bar stool was molesting you!"

"Uh... so no good then?" Thomas grins pathetically.

"Never do that in public again. Or in private. Or even in hell, they have suffered enough already."

"What's the next plan?"

"I got nothing. My tactics clearly don't help you."

"I have an idea!" Thomas pulls out his phone. "Whenever I don't know how to human properly, I look to the wonder of the animal kingdom. They always have some interesting tips!"

"This ought to be fun. I'm all ears." Remy gestures to the barkeeper to bring him a drink, but he ignores him because patrons who throw drinks in your face do not deserve to be served. That's barkeeping 101, trust me, I know.

"Aha! Ears! Let's see what bunnies do." Thomas scrolls through the search results. "Aha! The Eastern Cotton Tail. The buck chases the doe until she stops, faces the buck and boxes him with her front paws. Perfect!"

"Chasing and hitting them does not sound very romantic," says Remy. "In fact, the exact opposite."

But Thomas is already off. He leaps over the bar top and runs at the barkeeper, who turns around in surprise.
"You aren't allowed back here!" The barkeep swats at him with his cleaning towellette.

"I ran at you, now punch me, and then we shall go on a date!"

"I'll gladly punch you, but screw a date!"

"Whoa!" Remy jumps in between them and gets a punch to the eye for his trouble. "OW!"

He drags Thomas back over the bar top and retreats to a faraway booth.

"That didn't go well, did it?" asks Thomas.

"Nope." Remy grumpily rubs his black eye.

Thomas grins and puts on a high lilting voice. "Oh your poor eye! You look so troubled. Do you fight crime at night? So brave!"

"Get lost, or I'll bravely commit a crime right now!" snaps Remy.

"Hm," says Thomas, trying to ignore Remy's freshly increased attractiveness. "The dinosaurs scratched rocks to attract mates!"

"That will only turn on a caveman. Why wasn't this featured in any dinosaur movie? For educational purposes, of course. Next."

"Mice sing ultrasound love songs!" Thomas starts squeaking so high a wine glass broke, and the barkeep broke down crying, because there is only so much cray he can take in one day.

"But humans can't hear those grand proclamations of love, Carlotta. They only get bloody ears. Next."

"The red-cheeked cordon-bleu songbird does an invisible tap dance!"

"A what now?"

"They dance so fast nobody can see them move!"

"Fascinating." Remy taps his nose. "But same problem, birdbrain, humans can't see you to appreciate you! Next."

"I promised myself never to ask spiders for advice..."

"A wise lesson for everyone not stuck in a fairy tale."

"... but this can work. A male Black Widow spider twerks to tell the female not to eat him! I used to do that on a regular basis!"

"I got a sticky feeling about this..."

Thomas leapt up on the table and Remy slid under it.

"All eyes on me!" shouts Thomas. "Here I go!" He got into position, and slayed some serious twerk game.

"Ooooh!" says everyone, their eyes bouncing along to Thomas's butt. "A flash mob!" The crowd fell into place as the whole room turns into an impromptu twerk parade.
"Wow," says Remy to himself. "Thomas is so inspirational, everyone would rather do what he does than do him. Well, if you can't beat it, join it!"

Remy slides out from under the table to the middle of the floor, somersaults in the air and lands on his feet. "Let's do this!"

Thomas stares with his mouth open when Remy dances. He has seen nothing like it. A judge might criticize that his technique is wrong, he didn't use the space right, or he spent a bit too much time with the grinding and slut dropping and the air splits. But it did what Thomas hoped to achieve, as Remy returns back to the booth waving off two score requests for an encore.

"That was fun!" cries Remy crashing down next to Thomas.

"For some people," mumbles Thomas.

"Aw, is our little Saturday Night Fever feeling jelly?"

"You are a better dancer, and you did steal the moment from me!"

"Sorry," says Remy shoving his hands in his pockets. "Didn't mean to. But it wasn't working for you, was it?"

"Well yours was working for me."

"I say! My dancing got your blood pumping, eh?"

"Shut up!"

"Okay next tactic. You're an actor. Bolster up the charm! Why don't you pretend to be the rest of the Birds of Gay and see how it plays out."

"That seems doable!"

"And this is one area I cannot beat you at, so go kill it, you champion chameleon."

"I told you this isn't a competition, and definitely not between us! We're on the same team!"

"Yeah, we're team #GiveThomasABoyfriend. Good luck, not that you need it!"

Remy busied himself putting some ice on his eye, and Thomas turns up at last. He collapsed onto the linoleum chair across from Remy.

"How'd it go, star of the bar?"

"I dunno, Remy, it was crazy. When I acted like Roman, people were all over me, and everyone, EVERYONE, gave me their number except the barkeeper. When I was Virgil some people called me 'waifu' and that was creepy. Patton had a lot of fans with a daddy kink and Logan... I better not talk about that."

"Try me?"

"You want me to hit on you pretending to be the other guys?"

"Oh gosh no, that's too weird even for me. I meant try acting like me?"

"I can, but I don't want to."
"Sheesh, way to punch my ego. I'm not that bad."

"No, not that, you're alright. I meant, I want a guy by being me. That didn't work, and I tried all these other crazy stuff and those didn't work either. Some did, but that's not them liking me for me. Have I really lost hold of myself with all this acting? Some people just like me for being a celebrity or I'm famous or for the glamour or because I'm rich. That sucks. I can only date people who are rich and famous because then they want only like me for those factors, which is what happens if I meet a fan. And even then the celebrities look down on me coz there never is a way to be the 'right' kind of actor is there? My personal life is on parade, and if I keep it secret its worse. Can't I find a simple guy to hang out with and go places and hold hands and kiss and be my boyfriend and companion and well everything? Is that too much to ask?"

"I hear you. I guess you don't want a random hook up or start dating to find out how their gears spin. You want a friend who you know inside out... to turn into something more."

"But I don't think of my friends that way. Or if I do, they're taken." Thomas let his head fall onto the table.

"I'm sure you can find a friend of yours who is single."

"I give up. If there is a perfect guy out there, he is not in this room."

"He may be."

The doors to The Publican flung open, and Paulo Rivera steps in. An ever-present wind rustles his hair, a magical spotlight gives him the right angle of lighting, and the air freshens like the inside of a spa. "Thomas Sanders, my stars and the moon, I have come for you!"

"Oh look," says Remy. "He's here after all."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you got the Avengers Endgame reference! Honestly my favorite line in the whole Marvel Universe!

On to the new characters. I thought poor Aunt Patty got lost in the middle of all the crazy. Her entrance was the best I've probably written, nah? Her part was so much bigger in my notes but eh, what can I do? She's gonna play a minor but crucial role. And dear dear Paulo. I had the misfortune of seeing the Friends first season last week and I knew I had to write in a Paulo. Manon Man'acshionè is pronounced as man-on-man-action and it warmed my gutter mind when I came up with it. I though it would be interesting to point out that there's usually a gay actor playing a villain on Disney, hm?

I watched some of Thomas's early videos to get a better idea of how to write him (seriously, he is more 'him' in those ones, if that makes any sense) and I had forgotten how rib ticklingly funny his getting sexy video is. A true classic. I've added some more to it here. hope it was at least one fourths as funny!

QotW: I'm curious... Out of my original characters, who do you like the most and why?
See you soon! We got quite the action seeing coming up.
Dude Found

Chapter Notes

I guess it's pretty obvious who the dude is?

Just a heads up, while the stuff that happens in this chapter are based in science, it probably wouldn't happen in the way it is depicted. Also it helps if you have a vivid imagination, my descriptions are rarely clear because I imagine everything but have no clue how to put it down in a way that makes sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1100 h

"I get the feeling the others are having more fun than us..." muses Patton as Logan measures him up.

"Oh shush. There will come a day that you will realise that running around adventures pale in comparison to making a good dress. Now hold your breath, I'm measuring your midriff."

Patton sucked in all his breath until his face was red.

"That's a little too much, my dear. We do not want you asphyxiating whenever they take a picture."

Patton lets himself droop like a melting candle.

"And that's too little. Take a half breath."

"Better now?"

"03.42% more."

"Logan, I'm not a bicycle pump."

"No, you're a bit more intelligent than one. Try again."

"Waaaahy are you such a perfectionist?"

"Because being one is a hilarious character trait apparently. Now, you can go have a break. Ten minutes, return the exact second."

"I'm not a clockwork mouse either!" Patton flounces off, annoyed at Logan.

Logan sighs. He cannot tolerate insubordination, especially during the delicate art of dressmaking.

A peroxide blond beehive wig struts into the room.

Logan looks up, and greets the woman that follows the scene-stealing wig. "Good Morning, Madame Trixie La Douche. I hope you are not here to kill me."

"Oh those days are past! Plus, mon chere, I merely sneak in the gun, not pull the trigger myself."
She winks. "Was that trouble I heard in paradise?"

"I believe so. Patton is being difficult."

"Don't be too hard on that little gumpy puppy, darling."

"Well, I will not take advice from a former criminal without a pinch of salt."

"Well, you better take advice from an Ex, hm? We're more than just crazy."

"You have a point. It will be remiss of me to not get the consultation of someone who knew him well."

"Can you like not speak like a Marriage Counsellor, m'kay? Those guys are the worst at relationships." She picks up a swathe of material off the ground. "You're gonna make a ball gown from this rag? Hm... nice sketch but our Pat isn't some Victoria Secret model, thank the good lord. Why don't you make him something that he'd like, not something you would?"

Logan looks ready to explode. "He likes what I like!"

Madame La Douche smirks.

"Oh. I just ."

"Mm-Hmm."

"A change of plans. He was rather fond of one of the stupid ball gowns Thomas had in here before I invaded. Maybe I can rework one of those."

"Atta-boy!"

Meanwhile Patton was sulking in the kitchen in a depressed funk, sprinkling water on his glasses to pretend he is walking sadly in a thematically appropriate rain.

"Excuse me, I didn't see you there!" says Arachne backing away from the kitchen in the face of such abject misery.

"No, don't leave me! I need company!"

"I make a very poor companion."

"True, but not in this case. Do you want to whine about how mean Logan can be?"

Arachne pulls up a chair. "You don't need to ask twice, sister. That mister has a support group for all the people who feel belittled by him. What did he do this time?" Arachne put her chin in her hands, eagerly waiting for dirt on her Ex.

"He wants to turn me into a perfect mannequin for his dresses."

"Why do you think I never let him make me any dresses, instead maxed out his credit cards buying them? Don't take that kind of nitpicking from him. He's got his head in the right place, but his heart is heaven's knows where."

"I guess I'll have to find it then."

"Oh. I never even thought of doing that."
"That's why he dumped you and not me. Good talk by the way, gotta run, be right back."

Arachne catches hold of Patton's hand before he could run out.

"I'm so sorry, Arachne, but I've got no time to talk!"

"Just a second, Patton. Oh yes, I know it's you, no matter what you dress up as. You're good for Logan, I haven't seen him this happy in ages. You're are nothing like your brother. And... I got a feeling you'd make a better parent to my kids than we ever could. So, yeah. Go save Logan before he gets to where I ended up at."

Patton nods, his face a kind smile, and trots off.

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1115 h

"Aunt Patty!" squeals Thomas, catapulting out of his chair straight into the warm embrace of the middle aged aunt of baked sugar buns sneaked behind your mother's back.

"How are your doing Tom Thumb? I flew right over when I heard you're getting another gold trinket to add to your shelf! I was so proud of you! You were always the star in the family, even if you forgot all about us when you moved away from home to this fancy hoity toity street where everyone has shiny gold teeth. You don't have any gold teeth, do you?" She pulled his cheeks out like a chipmunk's. "Phew! I was worried there for a second. Have you gotten fatter? Oh, you can't fool your aunt Patty, an ounce or two never hurt me and won't hurt you either, we got good genes, always remember that. Your dear mother and father would have been so happy if they could see you now." She mussed his hair and patted it down again neatly. "So pretty. But for how long? I heard you were looking for a nice young man to date. I'm happier to hear of that more than the silly little award! I want to be a grand aunt! Get settled now or you'll turn into one of those old men who finds a young thing one-third his age. Or worse, you'll end up with one of those relics. But don't worry! Aunt Patty's got it all sorted out for her poppet, I found just the man for you! Introducing Paulo Rivera! Now I'm off to go see what that cutie of a bartender can come up with for me, mamma needs her cougar juice in her. Now, you two behave nice or you will get the business end of my walking stick!"

Thomas, who always feels like he just got off a merry go round spinning at light speed every time he meets Aunt Patty, is still trying to get his brain to stop sloshing around his skull when Paulo approached him with a deep bow and proffers the bouquet of roses. "It is so good to see you, Thomas Sanders. I have travelled far to see a face so... adorkable and quirky."

Thomas makes a sound like a balloon squeezed too tight and blushes redder than a balloon in the hand of a killer clown.

"Is this dude for real?" asks Remy, crossly. "Hey, you, who do you think you are –"

Virgil clamps his hand over Remy's mouth and Roman picks him up off the stool and they hustle him over to the door where Archie stands guard.

"Mmmpfff!" Remy struggles.

"Shhh! Give them some privacy!" says Roman in a placating voice as he sets Remy down.

"Ya," says Virgil. "We finally found a guy for the 'poppet' at last, so we can take a breather. Don't you go upset the boat now."
"Et tu Virgil? You've fallen under his tricks too? Just look at him charming up Thomas! I'd thought you were more street smart than to get fooled by a guy with a crocodile smile and eight and a half abs!"

"Uh... Remy? Do you see who I'm with?" Virgil jerks his head at Roman. "I'm a sucker for the prince charming type."

Roman tosses his hair back. "And also he's like really really hot."

"Oh my gods, when did you two turn into sixteen year old school girls?" Remy crosses his arms with a pout. "Archie, help a guy out here."

"Sorry, I got nothing," Archie shuffles his feet. "Except he has a smile of a mako shark and the cold dead eyes of a great white, but that only makes him look like Tom Cruise."

Remy groans. "Battle over."

"Oh, look," says Roman pointing across the pub. "Remy, your kissing booth is still here."

"And why should I care? I'm not in the mood for a kiss, definitely not from you, who knows where those lips have been?"

"Hey!" Roman rubs his jacket sleeve across his mouth.

"That made it worse. I've seen you wear that jacket to the toilet. Long sleeves + washing your business, not a good combo. Never end up dry."

"Oh shut up, Remy. Can you babysit Archie for a while?"

"I guess?"

"You're me pal." Roman threw Virgil over his shoulder. "Come on Virge, we have unfinished business. Wanna go rechristen the kissing booth to the fucking booth?"

"We did finish our assignment so the big boss can't shout at us again for inappropriate behaviour while on the clock," says Virgil, making himself comfortable on Roman’s shoulder. "Remy, my man, you are in charge."

Remy threw his hands in the air. "Normally I'd say go get it girl, but I have to agree with Logan here. You two have way too much sex. Like do you have trust or communication issues?"

Roman and Vigil share a loaded look. "No" they say together.

Remy narrows his eyes.

"That only means we need to spice up our sex lives!" said Roman.

"Archie, wanna come along?" asks Virgil, winking over Roman's head.

"Seriously?" Remy pushed his sunglasses so hard up his nose he left red bruises. "Am I the only guy who's not gonna get some today?"

"You welcome to join us too," says Roman.

Remy splutters.
"Um..." says Archie. "I think I'll keep Remy company. And we might need someone with a gun out here if one of the SLOKE turns up."

Virgil shrugged. "Okay. Another time then?"

"As I would ever pass up on getting it on with my ex and his new boyfriend," says Archie, not sure if he was being sarcastic or hopeful.

"Counting on it!" Roman claps Archie on the back and jogs off to the booth.

Virgil perches on his shoulder looking disinterested with life. But then his usual expression is so whatever you couldn't say if he was being ferried to the underworld or taken to his honeymoon suit or if he was an immortal being who's seen everything that there is to be seen and nothing surprises him anymore.

With them gone, Remy slumps onto a bar stool closest to the door, which is always reserved for those who pass out at two in the morning, but with the sun up, no one bothers to come to this end of the bar. Remy watches listlessly as Pualo orders two drinks. Archie leans back against the bar top, propped up by his elbows.

"Hiya," mumbled Archie.

"I don't think we've ever talked to each other, muscleman. Let's keep it that way."

"Sorry."

The two of them were occupied in their own thoughts for a moment as their eyes wandered over in two directions, one towards the kissing booth, which was shaking in not so subtle oscillations, and the other towards the back of Thomas' head shoulders, shaking with giggles as Paulo cracked another joke. Archie bit his tongue glumly and sighed. Remy sighed too, and both caught each other's eyes in mutual disassociation.

"Let me guess, Romeo, you're still pining over Virgil?"

Archie let lose a low chuckle. "Am I that obvious? I think I've missed one of the best things that happened to me. I really do like Virgil, and he knows it because not many people realise how great he is. But what I feel is nothing compared to Roman's... I've never seen a guy so dopily in love. He melts every time he sees Virgil. And Virgil loves him back. It's nice of them to keep me on the loop, but it will always be them and me. I guess that's the best I can have. I mean, I don't deserve even that, because I thought I had to get back at Virgil for dumping me. But now I realise that it makes me happier to see him happy."

"I hear ya, you star crossed lover. Wish my bastard ex felt the same."

"Scorpio is twisted. I can't believe he convinced me to try and kill Thomas. Or hurst another human being."

"That's what he does, amigo, he convinces people they're bad and will get worse unless he shows you the way out. That makes him the good bloke and you the bad, see? But you know what? His way out is straight down to hell, and he is sure gonna drag you with him. Wish I could cut him out of my life forever, but you can't rub a bruise away. I gotta uproot him for good, and this chance to beat him is as good as I'm ever gonna get. Plus, I can't have him hurt my boy Thomas anymore."

"Remy... uh... do you like Thomas?"
"Sure I do, gurl. Who could possibly dislike the human equivalent of the thumbs up emoji?"

"I know you like him, but do you like like him?"

"Oh, bullocks." Remy bangs his head on the counter top. "Is this what this is about?"

"Seems like it from where I'm looking. I know all about seeing someone you like like like another." Archie pats his shoulder sympathetically.

Remy lifts his head. "You know what? If I met Thomas in a crowded room, no context attached, I don't think I'd even think of asking him out, he's not my type. But given all the shit that's been going down, I think there's a circumstantial connection going on. You know, there's this kinda self-defence bond you forge with another because they had a monster of an ex too." Remy stares at Thomas brush locks of hair behind both ears. "And I went through it, but Thomas got out of it before Dolon had the chance to mess him up. It took me five years to look at another guy or girl or whoever in a sexual way again after the whole Scorpio debacle but even then I didn't feel strong and ready enough to face him until I found my Birds of Gay family. Oh shoot, sorry for dropping all of this on you, man. Just humour me and nod along. I want to protect Thomas from an evil guy, and that's kinda possessive I guess. I don't want him for me though. But I guess I kinda do? But maybe not because I really like him, but I want be the guy who makes him happy because then I prove I deserve to be happy too. Because if he finds love after hate maybe I will too." Remy takes off his sunglasses. "There. Façade off. See my bleached bones. Now go run and tell everyone."

"Shit." Archie stares down at his hands. "That's a lot to process." He edges closer to Remy. "I think you deserve a hug. Is it okay..."

"Bring it in, big Joe."

Archie shifts around to give Remy a side hug. Remy didn't return it, but Archie saw that the nervous tick in his eyelids that he hid behind his glass is gone.

"You know," says Archie. "It takes a really brave guy to channels his past grief to helping out another who is in kinda a similar situation now."

"Well, you're a real swell bloke, then. You're helping me out than setting the fucking kissing booth on fire, aren't you?"

Archie nods, realising in that moment he was over his ex-boyfriend.

"Guys?"

Archie and Remy look up to see Thomas and Paulo before them, holding hands.

"Paulo is the best! Thanks for bringing him over, Archie!" Thomas is so hyped up he could not stand in one spot. "We're going up to the rooftop, he said that he has something to show me!"

"Want us to come with?" asks Archie, feeling Remy tense under his arm.

"Nope," says Thomas giddily. "What could possibly go wrong? Let me know if something does go wrong. Oh, look at me, worrying like Logan instead of having fun." Thomas simpered as Paulo swept him away with a grin over his shoulder at the dejected Remy.

"That was a fricking picnic in in the park," says Remy hugging the bar top.

"Shut up!" cries Archie.
"Yeah, yeah, who cares about angsty Remy, the readers only want sassy Remy,"

"No – I think I saw Bongo Bear in the crowd."

Remy leaps up. "Holy Mackeral! Where?"

"By the back door."

"He's always by the back door, that creep. Is he going after Thomas?"

"Don't think so... he wasn't near the staircase to the roof."

"Okay, Archie boy, you go grab the two copulating simian monkeys and go after Bongo. I'll shimmy up to the roof."

Remy is about to dash off when Archie catches his shoulder.

Remy raises an eyebrow. "What, sport? You gonna kiss me good luck or somethin'?"

"No." Archie bites the inside of his cheek. "It's just that don't expect from Thomas what you feel towards him. You might be setting yourself up for disappointment."

"Don't sweat it, I give up. If there is a perfect human for me out there, he is not in this room."

"He may be if you look hard enough." Archie sprints off to the booth without looking back.

Remy frowns for a second, and then takes off towards the stairs. He trips over an extended foot and would have landed on his face if a hand smelling of saffron did not pick him up.

"Remy, isn't it?" asks Aunt Patty. "Is my baby boy in trouble? I heard a hullabaloo."

"I hope not, I'm going up to check."

"I'm coming with you." Aunt Patty hops off her barstool and pulls out a pistol from her hand bag.

"Whoa! Do you have a licence for that, ma'am?"

"Why, you a cop?"

"I actually am a cop..."

"Oh, sugar in the kettle! Now I have to chloroform you!" She yanks out a bottle and holds up her handkerchief.

"Yikes, you're a hardcore dame. No need for a drug assault, I'm on the same team as you! Let's go!"

"Yee haw!" shouts Aunt Patty and gallops up the stairs twirling the pistol.

Remy looks at the all the brunch guests looking at them in surprise. "She thought this was a fancy dress brunch." He offers in explanation, and chases after the runaway cowgirl with a blood lust.

1145 h

"Guys!" shouts Archie, thumping on the side of the booth.
"Seems like someone wants to make an Eifel Tower after all!" comes Roman's voice with a chuckle.

"Archie, go away!" shouts Virgil. "I got the rhythm right for once, don't break my tempo or I'll lose my temper!"

Archie pulls his sideburns in frustration, then grabs a bucket of ice from the bar and upends it into the booth. Howls and shrieks erupt from within.

"Get out, you two!" bellows Archie. "I saw Bongo Bear!"

"Virge, ask your Ex to stop chilling my boner!"

"Just the mere mention of your Ex should have done the job, but here we are. We'll be out in a jiffy, Archie. Give me a sec to find my belt, oh there it is. Ro, this might hurt a bit, I'm about to tug my belt of your..."

"Mmmm... me likey."

"For heavens sake, Ro, does nothing make you unhorny?"

"I haven't found my kryptonite yet, I run on dicktonite."

"Well you want be getting my dick tonight unless you hurry up."

"And my boner's gone. Not having you is my kryptonite."

"The pleasure's all mine."

"You tease."

"HURRY THE FUCK UP GUYS OR I WILL SET FIRE TO THE BOOTH!" screamed Archie, and the other two scampered.

1146 h

Remy and Aunt Patty emerge on the rooftop. The publican has a flat concrete roof with a few starlight tables dotted about under clusters of pink begonias and purple orchids. A few couples clink glasses of champagne, and a white clad waiter turns to Remy and Aunt Patty in surprise.

"Do you have a reservation for the couples brunch?" she asks, checking her chart.

"Yes, whatever, let us through," says Remy, scanning the perimeter for a sign of Thomas.

"We're together!" says Aunt Patty playing along. "I like them young and juicy." She grabs Remy's butt.

"Hoo-o-o-oooo" Remy jumps a foot in the air.

"And your name is?" asks the waiter.

"I guess our ship name is Ratty?" suggests Aunt Patty.

"Your name does not seem to be on the list."
"I don't have time for this." Remy flashes his CPD Detective badge. "Did you see a couple like this?" He gives a short description of Thomas and Paulo.

"Oh you mean the teen heartthrob and the adult heartthrob? They came by fifteen minutes or so ago."

"And I guess you let them in coz they were drop dead gorgeous?"

"Yeah, they're way hotter than you two."

Remy rolls his eyes. So much for pretty privilege. "Thanks for that, just what I wanted to hear. Now point us where they went, or someone might actually drop dead."

The waiter points towards the edge of the rooftop, which adjoins the next building, which is under construction. A big crane is fixed on the floor adjoining the rooftop. It has two arms, one with a hook at the end and the other with a wrecking ball. Remy could make out two figures by it. He starts running, with Aunt Patty huffing and puffing behind him, complaining loudly about her rheumatism.

1147 h

"Has anyone told you that you have the most enchanting giggle?" asks Paulo as Thomas and he paused for a moment to look at the Dionysus Boulevard spread out below them.

Thomas could not help but giggle. "Thanks for noticing. Most people just focus on my ass and nothing else." He also could not help but thick of the last person who focused on his ass.

"And they are very unlucky to miss out on the rest of the amazing parts of you." Paulo smiles lazily as his eyes flick over Thomas from his stumbling toes to red ear tips.

"The rest? You practically know nothing about me."

"There's no need. You know when you meet for the first time, whether this man is for you or not." Paulo plucks a rose bud out of thin air and places it on Thomas's ear.

"I guess." Thomas wonders how Dolon, someone he knew for so long, the first person besides his parents he has known in fact, and yet he did not know him at all. But he felt he knew the five friends he made this week more than he knew himself. Did time really matter when it comes to knowing someone truly? No. It is whether they open their true self up to you. Dolon, for all his minutes, had no one moment of sincerity. And his new family, what they've been through, the obstacles they over leaped, the bonds they forged, all seem truer to him. Logan never has no secrets, and Thomas has watched Roman and Virgil work their way through their lies to become stronger for it as a couple. Patton he loved with all his heart as a dear friend and brother in arms and he forgave him for his deception. And Remy, who two has led a double life, has the most to lose by coming clean with them, but he did chose to be honest with him. Thomas still has no idea whether he is is his genuine self, but with all he relates to Remy the most. It takes guts to drop your picture perfect image to show the mess of emotions underneath... and he has done it, so can he. He can open up to Paulo, and give him all the time he needs to do the same.

But can he trust another?

If people give him the chance, he better give them too. So, Thomas reaches up to plant a kiss on Paulo's cheek.
Paulo smiles back, but in that smile is a grimmer shadow. All is going according to plan.

1148 h

Roman, Virgil and Archie burst out into the backyard of The Publican.

"Where's Daddy Bear?" Roman pants as his eyes dart past the grass lawn, bushes, and sidewalk beyond.

Virgil glares at him.

Roman rubs the nape of his neck. "Um... where's Baddie Bear?"

"There's Bongo!" cries Archie, picking out the familiar hulking figure loping towards the construction site next door.

"Well, this better be the last time we let him walk away free again," Virgil zips up his hoodie. "Let's make him wish he never cast his die with SLOKE. He will be behind bars or he will choke."

114815 h

"Thomas!" cries Remy, halfway across the rooftop.

Thomas and Paulo turn around sharply at the sound of his voice.

"Bongo's here!" shouts Remy gasping for breath as he catches up to them by the crane.

Thomas's face turns white. "I'll date the man who saves me!"

"I'll save you, my precious little bird!" says Paulo, picking Thomas up in his erms bridal style.

"Thomas... what the hell happened to you?" asks Remy. "When did you turn to Princess Peach?"

"I decided to be vulnerable and open up my heart," says Thomas clinging to Paulo's shirt.

"That's not always a good idea," says Remy, chewing his lip.

114830 h

The threesome down on the ground crept up to the barbed wire fence around the construction site. Loose rubble is strewn across an uneven ground, and from the dust a concrete skeleton of an unfinished building rises, decked with scaffolding, two stories high. The second story is parallel to the rooftop of The Publican. Bongo climbs stealthily up the scaffolding, heading up to where Remy and the others are. He turns, grins at the three down below, and kicks the scaffolding from under him as he swings on to the first floor. The pile of iron comes tumbling down. Archie and Roman leap back to safety, realising too late that Virgil did not have the strength for such a manoeuvre. The scaffolding settles with a final crash and clash and ringing that pierces the ear. When the dust settles, Virgil is nowhere to be seen.
"What was that noise?" says Aunt Patty, as the people on the restaurant section of the rooftop jump up in fear and run screaming to the exit. She has finally caught up with Remy and Thomas.

Remy looks over the edge of the roof, and sees Roman and Archie below. "It's our guys, don't worry. Get Thomas out of here."

Paulo took off running, Thomas bobbing like a sack of potatoes in his grip. He gets a fair distance from Remy, and unceremoniously drops Thomas on the ground. Thomas grunts in pain, and looks up in surprise. The look turns to horror as he Paulo whips out a gun and points it at Thomas.

"Sorry, my dove. It never pays to drop your guard. My boss wants you off the picture, so say your prayers. Make it quick, I'm an impatient man."

"VIRGIL!" screams Roman, choking on the dust as he scrabbles through the iron poles.

"I'm alright," comes Virgil's weak voice. "I just can't get out."

"Roman, go to him," says Archie. "I'll get Bongo."

"But he's my Ex," says Roman. "I have to defeat him. That's have character arcs work!"

"Your Boyfriend needs you now. Exes don't matter when the one you love is in danger."

Roman stares in shock as Archie sprints off after bongo.

An adrenaline rush takes over Remy. He leaps in to the control cabin of the crane, cranks it up, and swings the arm towards Thomas. The hook at the end neatly catches his collar, and snags him away just as the bullet from the gun in Paulo's hand passes by him harmlessly into the concrete rooftop.

Bongo reaches the second floor of the building under construction, and points his gun at Thomas dangling twenty feet over the ground at the end of the crane. Archie speeds up, scaling up a rope with sweat in his eyes.

Aunt Patty whips out her gun, and aims it at Thomas too. Both Remy and Thomas almost have a heart attack.
114920 h

Paulo languidly aims his gun at Thomas and turns to Remy. "And who do you think you are, trying to save him, one against three?"

Remy flips off his sunglasses. "I'm his driver, bitch. I can drive anything under the sun, from a rickshaw in downtown Shanghai to the Pope Mobile to the Apollo 13 to this fucking crane. And that includes driving you insane, buckoes, so buckle in for the ride of your death."

114925 h

"They need your help up there," gasps Virgil. "Go."

"I'm not leaving you." Roman's face contorts as he tries to lift up the fallen debris.

"When Thomas was in the city park, he almost died because you were too busy saving me. Don't make the same mistake."

"I can't let you die."

"I'm literally stuck. You have a higher chance of dying. Now get the hell out of here and do some heroing."

"I love you," whispers Roman, and lets the scaffolding rest on the ground again. He races to the building.

"I love you too," says Virgil, and doesn't tell him that he only sees darkness from one eye.

114930 h

Archie tackles Bongo from behind. They tussle on the ground, Archie trying to knock the gun from Bongo's hand, but he keeps on trying to shoot at Thomas.

114935 h

Aunt Patty, her rheumatism forgotten, runs towards the edge of the roof to Thomas, shooting wildly.

114940 h

Paulo runs up to Remy, and shoots open the lock to the crane control cabin. He steps in, and looks mockingly at Remy.

"Game over, driver boy."

"Suck my juice, lover boy." Remy squirts an oilcan in his face. "I learnt a few tricks when I went undercover as a mechanic one time."
Paulo drops his gun, swatting the oil off his face.

Remy swings the crane arm, a screaming Thomas flying through the air, dodging bullets left and right. The cabin tilts, and Paulo topples backwards on to his incredibly sculptured ass. Remy keeps one eye on the controls, the other on Thomas, and but still keeps track of Bongo and Aunt Patty too. His biggest concern however, is Paulo standing up. Remy goes crazy but in control, keeping the cabin slanting in every direction, sending the gun skittering across the floor and an off balance Paulo scrambling after it. Thomas, airborne, manages to not get perforated with half a dozen bullet holes.

115959 h

In the same second, Thomas and Virgil decide to not be damsels in distress.

1200 h

"Paulo," spits Remy through gritted teeth. "You don't have to be a crazy ex, believe me. There are tons of better options, just let it go, man."

"Shut your mouth."

"Who's Ex are you even?" Remy thinks fast. Only Logan and Patton have not seen Paulo yet, and he cannot imagine either dating Paulo.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would. I really don't know."

"I'm not doing this because I'm salty about my past lover. I dated my boss sure, but I kill Thomas Sanders because I'm paid cold hard cash."

"Who is your boss?"

"Who is your boss?"

"I'm my own boss. Are you?"

120005 h

Virgil whistles a tune, three short notes over and over.

Roman, halfway up the rope, pauses. That was a tune he knew well. It was Virgil's safe word when they were in the middle of – how shall we put this politely – erotic electrosimulation. Roman had no idea why Virgil would be using that tune now of all times, but then he saw a generator before him, tucked away in a dumping spot for electrical and construction equipment, and he immediately understood what Virgil meant. He jumps off the rope, runs to the generator and powers it up. He tugs the iron chain attached to the second arm of the crane, from which hangs the wrecking ball. He wraps the copper wires from the generator round the chain. Here goes nothing, he thinks as he switches on the generator.
"Ha!" Paulo staggers up, gun finally in hand, holding onto the doorframe. "Looks like I'm winning." He aims the gun straight at Remy. "Stop moving the crane."

Remy picks up a flask of tea and takes a sip.

"What the fuck?" Paulo shrieks. "I'm gonna kill you, take this seriously!"

"I'm British, you wanker." Remy smile serenely. "My family has come up with a hair brained scheme to save the day." He tosses the tea, the brown liquid arching in the air from the control panel to Paulo's face.

Roman watches with bated breath as the chain buzzes as electricity courses through the copper wires, and the chain, the crane and wrecking ball turns into a giant electromagnet.

Thomas tugs himself free of the hook just before he gets electrocuted, and jumps back to the roof, landing right in front of Aunt Patty.

Archie pushes Bongo off him and stands back. "You know, you have an awful lot of piercings on you."

"So what?" snaps Bongo. "I'll put a spike a pole through your brain when I'm done with you."

"You forgot one thing." Archie kicks Bongo in the chest. "Metal sticks to magnets."

Bongo goes flying back and gets stuck on the chain connected to the wrecking ball, his gun sticking a few feet down the chain, out of his reach.

Electricity zaps from the control panel, along the stream of tea and into Paulo. Paulo blasts backwards, unconscious. Remy safe in his plastic seat, is unharmed except for all his hair standing on end.

The fallen scaffolding above Virgil tremble, as the magnetism pulls at them, and they rise one by
one to go get attached to the wrecking ball hanging above.

Roman slides down the rope and lands running. He skids into the crater, at the bottom of which Virgil lies.

"Your eye!" cries Roman, cradling Virgil's head.

"We can still save the other. You're my hero, you saved my life."

"No, you're the hero. You came up with the master plan."

"I did. But you carried it out."

"We're a team."

"Yup." Virgil pokes his head up to give Roman a bloody kiss.

120040 h

"Aunt Patty," says Thomas slowly. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"Kill is such a harsh word, my little boy!" Aunt Patty's eyes were red. "Can you understand how lonely I was when you were gone? You abandoned your family, Thomas! Fame came a-knocking and you just upped and left, no care for all those who brought you up and slaved to make who you are today. You had a plus one to the Awards, and you went searching for a guy instead of remembering the people who really matter. That was the last straw. I said nothing when countless postcards and calls and emails went unanswered, I said nothing when you thanked your poor parents but never me in your big grand speeches, I said nothing when your visits home stopped altogether. How can you forget your roots! This ends now! You aren't meant for this fancy life! See it just makes you prey to crazy lunatics who want you dead. Come home. Stay with me. The world is dark and wild, stay a child while you can be a child, with me."

"That's the thing, Aunt Patty. I grew up. I wish to see the world. If I stayed at home, I could have helped you and maybe five others. But now we can help the whole world, changes lives and change institutions and change the way things work for something better. And if I did fall out of touch with you, it wasn't because I forgot. I did not want to. I have a new family now, the one I chose because this is who I am now. I am an entertainer and influencer and I need people who support me and protect me, not hide me away. If you feel that I owe you for depending on you as a child, know that raising me was something my biological family signed up for when I was born. And if crazy lunatics want to kill me for what I believe in, then that's an obstacle I have to overcome. Look around you, Aunt Patty. You are one of the crazy lunatics too. Except that they don't like who I am now, and you still hold on to something that never was. I know you are not a bad person, Aunt Patty. Please hand over the gun. I know you know I'm not a bad person, give me the gun. I know you can do it, just let go."

Aunt Patty's hand trembles as she drops the gun in his hands.

"I'm really sorry it has to end this way, Aunt Patty, but this is for all that caster oil you made me drink." Thomas clonks her on the head with the pistol, and she passes out.

1230 h
Logan and Patton drive in to the scene at full speed. They march into The Publican, which has been cleared of everyone since the attack began.

"We came as soon as we heard everyone lost their heads and chaos reigned," says Logan. "No surprise, I wasn't here."

"I heard that everyone was scared and unsure who was good or evil," says Patton, "No surprise, I wasn't here."

"You two are the worst parents ever," says Virgil, holding an ice packet against his eye. "I came up with a plan only the craziest mind could come up with."

"And," drawls Remy. "There was some convoluted plot twists going on, but we stuck to our guns and saved our home boy's ass." He pats Thomas on the butt.

"I did own bit of heroics too!" says Thomas. "I got Aunt Patty under control with words and not wavering from what I believed in."

"I used my brains for once," chime in both Archie and Roman.

"Ohmygodaboveandbelow," says Patton. "Our children are growing up."

"That they are," says Logan, and pretends his glasses are not misting up.

1235 h

Virgil is rushed off to hospital at once, and Roman goes with him in the ambulance. He can't help but feel a bit thrilled to charge through traffic with a flashy siren. He holds onto Virgil's hand. "I'm gonna miss your sarcastic eye rolls."

"I still got one eye, dammit. You're not getting off that easy."

1240 h

Bongo, Paulo and Aunt Patty are rounded up and carted off to jail. Remy gives the orders to the Policemen, and for once Logan does not mind him taking charge. He knows that the Division was no longer what it once stood for, and CPD has to take over.

Once that is done, Remy slouches off to the bar and pours himself a whiskey. He sits and hunches over the drink.

"You alright there?" asks Archie, hovering around nervously.

"Yeah, why shouldn't I be? I helped save Primary Sanders. What else more is there to it?" Remy knocks back a hearty gulp.

"You were really… uh, complicated. I took one man down. You had three assassins to take care of, not to say Thomas to protect too."

"All in a days work. What do you want? My autograph?"

That is not what Archie wants. He hesitates, wondering if he could ask Remy if he would like to
grab a coffee or something sometime, but then decides he will wait. There is time later, and Remy did go through a lot today. So he laughs and backs away.

1245 h

"How are you feeling?" Patton sits Thomas down at a booth, Logan across the table from them.

"I AM feeling upset!" Thomas rubs his nose. "I've been let down by both my born family and my date!"

"Aw, poor Tom Tom," says Patton and gives him a bear hug. "You'll be alright! If you want a family, you have us! And the right guy will come along someday."

Thomas looks thoughtful as Patton steps away. "Unless I date one of my family."

"Mr Thomas Sanders," cries Logan, scandalised. "That is illegal and morally reprehensible!"

"Not what I meant." Thomas walks past the others to the bar and sits down next to a person hunched over a drink. "Remy, will you be my date to the Berry Awards?"

Remy's jaw drops. Then he downs the drink in one gulp. "You're not kidding around, are you, mate?"

"Nope."

"I'm in. You're top rate guy. Let's show those suckers how to set a red carpet on fire. And finish up every last champagne flute. And make the best meme faces."

"I'm regretting asking you now."

"Don't. Keep the regret for later when you realise your date is hotter than you."

Patton almost strangles Thomas, then Remy, with hugs.

Logan claps them both on the back. "Now that this meaningless detour of finding a date is over, can we go back to the main storyline?"

Archie gets up from his corner and follows the others, not sure if it is his home or not, and wondering why he kept missing his chances. Maybe some people are destined to be Exes and nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Archie is one of those characters that sneak in and become a staple of the cast. If anyone is keeping track, I'm going to be packing off characters one by one, until its manageable.

QotD: I hope the action scene made sense? No? Did the confusion make it seem more immersive? Took many characters and confrontations? Did the setting sound three dimensional? Help me out here, I'm worried of the action set piece of the climax,
which is next chapter hopefully.

See you soon!
Preparation

Chapter Notes

This was such a cathartic chapter to write! All my sweet little character arcs and subplots tied up.

A head's up, not exactly a content warning: Roman and Virgil have some serious talks about their relationship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1400 h

"We're back!" trills Roman as he stomps into the kitchen at Sanderville.

Done with a quick late lunch, the rest of The Birds of Gay are gathered around the kitchen table, chatting. They look up and cheer as Roman guides Virgil in to the room with a steady hand at the small of his back. Virgil gives a bashful grin, adjusting his eye patch in a rakish angle.

Roman pulls out a chair for him.

"Ro, you don't have to do everything for me!" whines Virgil. "I can still see! It's the pain killers making me see double – wait I can never see double again. At least I can get drunk without any trouble now!"

The table laughs uneasily; glad that Virgil's sense of black humour was guiding them through an otherwise awkward situation.

"Who said the chair was for you?" says Roman with a chuckle. He sits down and pulls Virgil onto his lap. "My boyfriend's hurt, and it's my lawful right to spoil you for a bit." Virgil squawks in protest as Roman squeezes him around the waist. "You were so worried when I lost the tip of my ear, now it's payback time." Roman nuzzles his face in Virgil's hair. Virgil looks mortified, but he can't help blushing like an Irish pirate with sunburn.

Archie gently brushes the tip of his own ear, which Bongo shot off at the bridge last night. Except there was no one to take care of him.

Thomas and Patton coo over how cute a couple Roman and Virgil make.

"You okay there, boyo? You look peaky." Remy nudged Archie on the shoulder with his fork.

Archie nods and suddenly finds the pattern of the tablecloth fascinating.

Logan raps his knuckles on the tablecloth sharply. "Settle down everyone. It's good to have you back, Virgil, but please find your own seat. At least pretend that there's a modicum of professionalism left in this outfit."

Virgil pats Roman's thigh consolingly and hops onto the next chair. Roman lets him go as if he is off to a war from which none will return.
Logan coughs. "Now that we are done with that drama..."

"We're not done with all the drama!" Patton bursts with excitement and showers the room with party streamers and confetti. "Thomas and Remy are dating!"

"No we're not!" says Thomas and Remy at the same time.

"What? No." cries Roman. "Shipping you is the only reason I survive!"

"Really?" deadpans Virgil. "Forgot all about me, eh?"

"I'm so sorry!" wails Roman and immediately drags Virgil under the table to shower him with affection and get into his... good books. Take your mind out of the gutter.

"But didn't you ask Remy out?" asks Patton, hastily rolling away all the 'Thomas + Remy purrever' posters he made.

"I asked him to be my plus one for the Berry Awards," explains Thomas. "That's all it is, right?" he turns to Remy.

"Yup," says Remy, carelessly rocking back on the back legs of his chair. "Thomas, you're a decent bloke but you're tasty as a plain white piece of bread, no offence. I rate you, but definitely not in the heart fluttery way. I'll be at the Berries with you coz someone's got to make sure you won't lose your berries to the next hot guy who gives you a rose."

Thomas grins amiably. "You're probably the only one I know who won't let me die of boredom during the ceremony, so I'm glad I have the displeasure of your company tonight. But if you think I'm gonna take you out for dinner after that, think twice. The most you'll get is a trip down the bread aisle in a supermarket."

"B. O. R. I. N. G. I need a guy who takes me on a date to an abandoned supermarket that turns into a rave at 0216 am."

"Fantasia?" asks Archie, perking up.

"Yeah! That place. Been there?" Remy's sunglasses hide his expression.

Archie nods. By now he could have redrawn the pattern on the tablecloth by memory.

"Yes! We've been there!" comes Roman's from under the table.

"Wasn't that where we went our first orgy?" asks Virgil.

"We do not talk of orgies at the kitchen table," says Logan, dragging the two of them out and plunking them in their chairs.

"Okay okay," says Virgil, kicking away Roman's wandering hands. "I'll get back into detective mode, I've been slacking for sometime. It's hard to be proactive after a life of curling up on surfaces I should not be sitting on and not doing anything. My bad. Okay, you turds of gay, let's compare notes. Full report on what happened."

They spend the next fifteen minutes discussing all that happened.

"Virgil and Roman, I do not approve of your crazy plan today afternoon, so many ways it could have gone wrong. Thomas could have gotten fried, you know." Logan waggles his finger at them.
"But it all turned out fine," says Roman, doing jazz hands.

"Yup. And it could have turned out way worse, so count your blessings," Virgil taps his eye patch and that sobers Logan up.

"At least we have Bongo behind bars," says Logan. "He is charged with attempted murder on several accounts and for deserting his rank as a Bodyguard. I would not be surprised if more cases of criminal activity surface in the coming days of the investigation. He confessed everything related to us, and it turns out he ditched Scorpio too because, and I quote him, "the preppie didn’t give me the good goo goo" whatever that means. Apparently his plan was to kill off Thomas and Roman just for spite. Bongo has lost all his sense, I'm afraid, though hopefully not from being magnetised. Yes, all his piercings have turned to electromagnets so he is in a plastic cell like Magneto. Also, remember Scorpio never wanted Thomas killed; he just wanted the press story out of it. As for Dolon, well, Bongo thinks that he wants Thomas all for himself. Anyway, we shall deal with that when the time comes. For now, good work Archie, you are a part of The Birds of Gay now."

Archie beams and then flattens his face on the tablecloth when Remy claps him on the back. Great, now he's making out with the pattern, that's as much action he's ever gonna get, he thinks to himself.

Logan's voice turns serious. "As much as it saddens me to say this Thomas, it seems Patricia Sanders was not affiliated to Scorpio and his gang at all, we found no trace of evidence connecting them. She was acting under her own accord to bring you down. It was just an unfortunate coincidence she happened to be there today. She is charged with attempted murder. Good work, Thomas, for calming her down without incident."

"I feel guilty..." says Thomas. "None of that would have happened if I hadn't been so distant from her."

"It's not your fault," says Patton. "If a parent figure ran after their kid with a gun just because they grew up and moved on, they don't deserve to be called parents. It was totally her decision to handle it like a sane person or a psychopath."

"She did plead not guilty because of insanity," continues Logan. "Let's see how that turns out. Now for Paulo Rivera. I'm sure you would not be surprised that it's not his name. He is a Russian spy and assassin by the name of Valentino. The International Police are quite pleased with getting him behind bars. Remy, you continue to astound me with not completely sucking. Good work."

"No hard feelings, teach." Remy flips Logan off affectionately. "But I'd like to see you pull off what I did to Valentino."

"You flew with Eagles once, but if you prefer keep on testing me, Remy, you will end up like him." Logan shuffles his notes. "But this is the curious case of Valentino. He has absolutely NO connection to either Aunt Patty or Scorpio, and this is from all the information I got from trusted sources who have been cracking his case for the past five years."

"He did refer to a boss," says Remy, "But he didn't say who, or which one us handsome bastards he dated."

A quick look around the table shows that none of them has dated him in the past.

"Hm..." says Logan. "There is another supervillian out there who wants Thomas dead, besides Scorpio and Dolon."
Everyone gasps.

"How many are there?" moans Thomas.

"I think we have established that they do not have a personal grudge against you," says Logan. "They have a vendetta against what you stand for and the opportunity to exploit it. Let's look at what we got on Valentino. We traced a call he made just as he got off the plane, but thanks to someone's electric brilliant idea, his phone got burnt."

Virgil scowls, and Roman glares at Logan for making fun of his boyfriend. Logan glares right back.

Patton takes out a squeeze bottle and squirts water at them. "Down, boys, down. Logan, come on, don't chew Virgil out. What is done is done. And Roman, the overprotective act is cute and all, but we're all friends here, tone it down. Virgil, any chance of sorting this out?"

"Hand those reports over," says Virgil, eager to make up for his slip up. Logan hands over the documents smugly. Virgil scans through them. He suddenly laughs, throws down the papers and gets up with aplomb. "I have found our villain."

"What? Who?" gasps Logan.

Virgil tells their name.

Everyone gasps on cue.

"We must go catch the monster!" cries Roman, jumping up with his glock in the air. He rubs his nose. "No, I'm gonna sit down and put this back in my pants. I've learnt my lesson and I will not rush into action again."

Virgil nods. "If we go charging now, we lose the chance of trapping Scorpio and Dolon too. I'm positive Scorpio is in cahoots with the mastermind, maybe even taking direct orders. The Berry Awards is the perfect place to catch them all. I'm sorry, guys, but we need to hold our heroing for just a little longer, and trick the three of them right into our trap. And this is what we're gonna do..." he then pauses and looks at Logan. "Uh... sorry. Back to you. What are we going to do?"

Logan leans forward and steeples his fingers. "You know what? I only have one plan. And that is to take a back seat."

Everyone gasps, because the pattern of three is so fun!

"Let me explain. When I began this assignment, I was a beetroot-faced commander who did nothing but shout orders and throw insults at everyone. I have since learnt the best way to get the best out of you is to make your own mistakes and be leaders in your own way. Virgil, your plans work bloody well, pardon my language. I will be honoured to hear your next. Roman, couple that newfound caution and self-restraint with your physical prowess, and you will be a great bodyguard that owns it on the field. Patton, do you realise what an effective mediator and peacemaker you are? Exactly what we want. Thomas, knock me over with a feather, I did not think you had it in you, but when it comes to diplomacy you shine. Remy, just do your thing, whatever it is."

"Sheesh, Cheese Crackers, what do I need to do to win your approval? Kidding, I know you love me." Remy flicks a cheese cracker off a fork at him.

"Never in a million moons. In conclusion, my point is that you all have what it takes. What you need is not a dictator, but a coordinator. Without me, you will go in your separate directions.
Saving Thomas would have gone smoother if I was there to execute Virgil's plan, in fact I may have been able to prevent the situation going so out of hand. But that is all in the past, I am sure we are ready to work as a well-oiled machine now. Virgil, tell us your plan, and I'll figure out how to put it into action, and we will all play our parts."

Everyone claps.

Logan blushes.

"Oh my gods, we cracked through to the human under the robot mask!" says Patton hugging him. "All it took was for him to realise we were all equal."

Logan wipes his glasses on his tie. "Well I'm clear superior to all of you in many ways, but I will let you have this one."

"I feel so special," murmurs Virgil. "All right, listen up schmucks, this is what we will do. Listen carefully, one step wrong and we'll all be in the blood black pudding. Okay, so..."

1430 h

"Everybody clear?" asks Logan. "Good. Now go get ready. We roll out in two hours. In the meantime, I will inform Arachne and Trixie of the parts they will play." He stands up and heads to the door.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" asks Patton, squirting water from the bottle straight into his mouth.

"There's only one way to find out." Logan makes his exit.

"Whoa, he's changed. What happened to all the by-the-rule-book stuff?" Thomas gets up too. "I think I'll go get ready." He leaves too.

"Yeah, you better look for pretty me for me, hot stuff!" hollers Remy. "I'm just gonna throw on a cheap rented tux so all the good looking gotta come from you. So disappear to the bedroom and do something to that face!"

Thomas pretends to gag and stumbles out of the room.

Patton pats Remy on the forearm. "I hope you treat a real date of yours much nicer. Sometimes stuff you say are just plain rude."

"Huh?" Remy pushes up his sunglasses defensively.

"Look, buddy, I adore your sense of humour," says Virgil, and Roman nods too. "Like I'm all up for some mean snark, so lay it on thick to me, but..."

"Some people might not like it as much," says Patton. "Treat Thomas with kid gloves, okay?"

"Yeah sure." Remy sinks down in his chair.

"Yay!" Patton gives him a hug and bounces off. "Now I will transform to the belle of the ball, and I for one need a full hour to get all that make up on!" He pirouettes off with a giggle.

"I think I'll go to my room," says Remy. He walks off thoughtfully.
"What kind of suit will go with your eye patch, Virge?" asks Roman.

"A salmon pink one with a claret red ascot," says Virgil sarcastically.

"Finally! He agrees to look extra!" says Roman, pumping both fists.

"Uh-huh, I'm just gonna wear what all the actors wear, easiest to blend in. Shall we head up?"

"Yup," says Roman, picking him up.

"Put me down! My legs work fine!"

"I hope that's not all that works fine!"

"Seriously? Now?"

"We have two hours to kill. We need to celebrate your recovery!"

"Sure." Virgil leans down and whispers in Roman's ear. "Why don't we ask Archie to come along?" Because deep down he has a fear, one he hates to admit to himself, much less to Roman. And Archie would be a perfect distraction.

"Okay," says Roman. He misreads Virgil's intentions completely. He doesn't ask him to clarify, but just goes with it, despite his feelings in the contrary. "Hey, Archie, get your ass in gear. You're coming with us, and you better chug that mountain dew."

Archie looks up. Well, he needs to get his mind off something that would never happen, and rebound fuck would do the trick.

1500 h

Patton stares at himself in the mirror, thinking off how amazing it was that he finally found himself a group of people, his family, that did not give too hoots about the way he dresses. And a boyfriend who makes dresses! The eyes in his reflection twinkle as Logan peeps in, holding up the dress he has worked on like a Trojan seamstress to get it ready on time. He slides into the room slowly and places the dress against Patton gently.

"Perfect," he says.

"Only because you made it."

"Only because you will wear it."

"I don't make sweatpants look gorgeous do I?"

"Well a dress can only compliment beauty and confidence already present."

"Wait is it made from the white ball gown that was in Tom Tom's library?"

"Yes, it was the only one that was not a complete disaster, and I am glad I saved it for you."

"Thanks. I loved it then, and I love it now!"

"I know, I thought of what you might like best. Thank you too, for letting me pursue something I
adore but never got to do alongside my work. And I had a chat with Arachne. It seems like you are on board with the idea of looking after our children? I know we have not talked about all the semantics of the arrangement, but –"

"Sh... we will work out something that we both want."

"Is that a yes, then?"

"Of course. I love the kids. And I like their father very much."

"Good." Logan hugs Patton from behind, his smile matching his. "I shall set the plan in motion."

"Do you always treat loving your family like a mission operation launch?" Patton grins cheekily.

"Unfortunately."

"Fortunate that I'm here to balance the scale. Now get out, I need to change."

"Why? There is nothing I have not seen already."

"One thing I like about you is your modesty. Now out!"

Patton giggles and shoves Logan out the room. He wants to surprise Logan with the final result.

1515 h

Thomas unsuccessfully tries to will a zit away, but that is the kind of magic is not possessed by even the most pure hearted of humans. He clutches his chin and forehead, tilting his head in all direction trying to judge in the mirror whether it cannot be noticed from some angles.

"Better turn that into a black head," says dry voice behind him.

Thomas almost falls headfirst into the washbasin. "Virgil! You startled me!"

"Shouldn't have left the door open." Virgil comes in and hops onto the vanity.

"Good that you are here. Do I really look that awful?"

"Shut up. Remy's just an ass sometimes. You look the most wholesome snack in the buffet. At least you don't look like the creation of a mad scientist like me." Virgil scratches around his eye patch.

"Still itchy."

"Aw… it’ll get better."

"Nah, I look badass, and I was never good with my sight. Now if I lose my tongue then that would be a tragedy."

"So you're certain I look okay?"

"Uh-huh. Just pull on something and you'd be good to go. The more you think about it, the worse you get. I'm sure your closet has something that would become the latest trend when you start wearing it."

"Help me choose something!"
"I'm not good at the clothes stuff. I literally wear this hoody for everything. I'm dreading wearing a tux, but you have some pretty nice stuff in here!" Virgil pokes at the closet door with his foot.

"HELP ME!"

"Ugh fine, how about a salmon pink suit with a claret red ascot?"

"I love it! And it goes with something I was wondering whether to wear, but was too scared." Thomas holds up a black shirt with pink flowers, one of his trademark tops. "But is it too casual?"

"To hell with what they think. I'm all about the couch potato life. Let's get you kitted up."

Thomas pulls on the t-shirt and a salmon coat.

"The good thing of having a big gay boyfriend is that I know how to do an ascot," says Virgil choosing one closest to the right shade of red. "Now don't say anything too clever, stand still and let me make this work."

"I'm not saying anything!" says Thomas, giggling.

"Hold still! You're not having coffee jitters and shitters, are you?"

"Nope. Can I ask you a question though?"

"Fire."

"Why are you here?"

"Well if you don't won't me here, you just have to say it," says Virgil with a huff. "Good luck finishing that ascot."

"No no no, don't go! I thought you'd be with Roman, you know. Don't you guys have sex all the time?"

"Well he's in my room having sex with Archie id you wanna know. Seemed like I wasn't needed so I just walked off."

"Whoa." Thomas grips Virgil by the shoulders and drags him over to a fuchsia sofa and sits him down. "That is not okay." He gives him a glass of water. "Are you okay?"

Virgil shrugs and takes a sip.

"You don't mind your boyfriend having sex with another man?" Thomas blushes, just talking about the subject makes him hot under the collar.

"It's cool. We decided to be in an open relationship when we started."

"But... there's something you're not telling me."

"Please don't laugh at me or anything for what I'm going to say, okay?" Virgil draws up his knees buries his face in them.

"I promise," Thomas hugs him with one arm.

"Um... I kinda wanted to have a threesome with Archie, sure. Kinda hot really. Both of them fawning over me. But after this..." Virgil gestures at his eyepatch. "I thought that Roman wouldn't
"You seriously think Roman is going to stop wanting to have sex with you just because of that?"

"Kinda." Virgil rubs his head furiously. "I can't think why Roman would want to have sex with a limp rag like me at all, I got my shit self-esteem to thank for that. I just though he deserved to have a good fuck once again, that's all."

Thomas leans back. "That is crazy. Why didn't you just tell Roman?"

"When he's treating me like a glass doll? Earlier I was going to give him head but he freaked out like I asked him to skullfuck me or something and fricking put a pillow under my head and told me to lay their without getting hurt! I don't think he's gonna let me to do anything now."

"To be fair, you're just after a major operation. You can't blame him for being cautious."

"But that's always going to be the case, isn't it? I'm the one with the hole in the head. As if that wasn't the case already with my stupid anxiety and now it just became physical. When Roman fucks, he wants to fuck hard and we got up to some crazy stuff, and now I can't give him any of that."

"So, what? Archie's the consolation prize? That's kind of unfair. On them both."

"I may not have been thinking clearly."

"Duh. Give Roman some credit. He's not an idiot, okay fine he's an idiot, but he's an idiot madly in love with you, and I'm sure he'd understand."

"I screwed up, didn't I?"

"Yes, but if there's anything I learnt from being in The Birds of Gay is that if you mess up, you must put things right too."

"Thanks, Thomas. You're kinda good at this advice thingy."

"That's why I do it all the time on YouTube! Now go straighten things out with Roman, and make it all a whole lot gayer!"

Virgil chortles and runs out.

"Wait! You didn't finish the ascot. COME BACK!"

1530h

Patton drops a pin in surprise when he hears a knock on his door. Logan is not one to come back when told not to. "Don't come in!"

"Uh... sorry. You must be busy. I'll pop by later."

That is not Logan's voice.

Patton pops open the door. "Roman!"

"Can I come in, Pat?"
"Sure! Make yourself home. And while you are at it, help me with this dress!"

"Dayum! That thing is a beautie to the cutie booty!" Roman picks up the dress and twirls with it.

"Logan made it!" Patton smacks Roman's hands off it. "Why don't you get me in it for starters?"

Roman pools the dress on the floor, and Patton steps into the middle. Roman pulls the dress up and helps the sleeves over Patton's arms.

"You gotta give Logan credit where it's due, this dress is proper head turner!" Roman begins fastening the laces up the back.

"Yup. Thanks, I couldn't possibly have put this on by myself. I'm glad you are here... wait why are you here? Aren't you getting ready? Oh." Patton taps his nose. "Virgil chased you out of the room to surprise you with a sexy suit?"

"He was kinda the person who left."

"Oh no!"

"Can you help me with something?" asks Roman pitifully.

"Of course, Roman dear. What's the matter?"

Roman slumps into a chair. "I don't think Virgil wants to have sex with me anymore."

"What? That's crazy talk. You two have more sex than the two bunnies I had as a kid! Or even the hamsters! Or the mice! Or the –"

"I think I get the picture, Patton. It's just that... ever since he had sex with Archie... and Archie turned out not to be a completely awful person, I was kinda worried that there maybe a chance he might still like him. He always kept talking of having a threesome. I didn't want to. But I went along cos he wanted it. And... after today's accident I didn't want him to feel anything was different, but just after I said let's have celebration sex, he said he wanted Archie." Roman threw the pincushion against the wall, and pins fly everywhere. "And I was relieved. Because yay! I was giving him what he wanted! Even if he doesn't want me! I'm such a good boyfriend, so selfless and giving!"

"So... Archie was a present you gave him or something?"

"I guess? And that's not the worst part."

Patton rubs his shoulder. "What is it?"

"I feel like I'm cheating on him. With Archie. Because my stupid self is so horny all the time I can't help but feel a tug at Archie. He's so unfairly hot and some part of me is hugely turned on by the fact that he's so like me. Wouldn't it be the wildest masturbatory fantasy to have sex with someone exactly like you?"

"That... is a lot to process."

"I'm a terrible person!" wails Roman dashing his head on the vanity and getting make-up all over his face.

Patton sits down next to him and calmly wipes the mess away with a moist towellette. "You know what? I think you are being stupid."
"ME being stupid?"

"Yes. I refuse to believe that Virgil would think for one second that Archie was better than you."

"Uh..."

"And I'll be disappointed in you if you think so little of Virgil's trust and affection."

"Yeah... I guess I was letting my insecurities get the better of me."

"And talking about insecurities... I think you like Archie because you are so obsessed at looking perfect that you're projecting it onto him. Think about focusing on this," Patton taps Roman's head, "Instead of this," Patton taps on Roman's reflection in the mirror. "You can't cheat on Virgil with yourself, you know."

"That makes so much sense..." says a dumbfounded Roman.

"Now go and tell all of this to Virgil like a good boy."

"I will!" Roman gives Patton a sloppy kiss on the cheek and skips off.

Patton looks at the mess he left behind and sighs. When will Roman ever learn?

1545 h

Remy is walking blindly down a meandering corridor when he bumps into a decidedly uncomfortable Archie trying to sneak past him, praying he wouldn't be noticed.

"Archie! What's up?"

"Uh... Hi Remy! I'm trying to get away from the saddest threesome I've ever been in with the last shreds of my dignity."

"Say what now?"

"Yeah... Virgil and Roman invited me..."

"And you weren't into it?"

"No... at least I don't think so?"

"Really? My eyes don't lie, chum. You were hot on their tails all this time. And now you're all cold scented. How come?"

"Uh... just."

Remy takes off his sunglasses and twirls it aimlessly in his hands. "I'm not a guy who doesn't poke his nose where it can get chopped off."

Archie wishes that for once Remy would poke him. Wait, no –

"Actually there's something you can help me with. Do you think I'm a mean guy? The other's gave me a good ribbing today. I think that's why Logan doesn't like me still. What do you think, Archie?"
Archie picks at a fingernail. If he says the truth, that might ruin his chances with Remy, but if he lies, the chance he gains would be ill gained. "Don't stress it," he says. "We like you sassy as you are! But, be a bit more sensitive, hm? Like if you insult my hair, I will cry."

"I hear you loud and clear, mophead."

Archie grumbles and puts his hand in defeat. "Okay, yeah, that was funny. But that's coz I know I look A + good, and nothing you say will shake me. But for a person who is nervous of their looks? You just ruined their life."

"Ah. I thought it was my charm."

"I like it." Archie stutters and tries to stop his face from flushing. "I mean, some people like it —" Remy looks at him, one eyebrow raised, chewing on one temple of his sunglasses.

Archie gulps. The cat was out of the bag and scratching his leg and there was nothing he could do to stuff it back in.

Remy takes a step closer, backing the other man against the wall. "Archie Lez, is there a reason why you did not enjoy a threesome with the hottest couple in the building?"

"Uh... er... I might... um... llikesomeone else."

"Really? Who, may I ask?" Remy slid in the tip of the sunglasses into his mouth.

Archie feels his throat clogging up. "No."

"Let me guess then. Is he devilishly handsome?" Remy tilts his head to let a lock of hair fall across his face.

"Y-y-yess."

"Muscular?" Remy casually flexes his arm as he flicks the lock of hair back.


"Hm... we're getting close. Does his name start with a R?"

Archie nods, and almost dies when his nose brushes against Remy's.

Remy grins, teasing, punches Archie on one bulging pec and propels himself back. "Liar. So you do like Roman."

"No!" gasps Arching desperately, tortured.

"Then I need more clues. What does he smell like?" Remy lets himself rest again against Archie's body, his cheek an inch from his.

Archie takes a shuddering breath. "Lemon cologne?"

"You know what, Archie?" Remy's breath tickles Archie's ear. "I might be a arrogant guy, but one thing I can't mock is that python in your pants twitching against my thigh."

Remy leans back before Archie has an accident in his boxers.
"Arch, when I first saw you, I was like that boy is well peng. I would have totally hit on you before, but with my shit with Scorpio to deal with and you obviously hung up on Virgil, I didn't make a move. Now that we are in a better place..."

"Yes," squeaks Archie, his head rushing.

"Oh, so eager." Remy walks his fingers up Archie's arm, from wrist to shoulder. "I really do like you. You're honest and solid, and I'm hella flakey. But – I'm trying to tone down the bad boy act and be a nice guy. I promised Thomas I'd be with him this evening, and I'm not gonna do anything to hurt the sweet fellow. But afterwards," – Remy pats his cheek – "come find me."

Archie finally lets himself faint into Remy's arms.

1600 h

Virgil pauses before the door to his room. Is he going to walk right in, pull Roman and Archie apart and demand they have a talk? He needn't have bothered, as Roman rugby tackles him from behind, propelling them through the door to crash onto the bed.

"What the hell, Ro!" shouts Virgil.

"I thought you like me when I'm rough!" says Roman apologetically

"Wait, you are okay with being rough with me?"

"Of course! Now I must confess everything, even if you hate me and don't want to have sex with me..."

"What? I don't hate you, and if you think I've had enough of your dick, you're dumber than I thought."

And after that out came pouring all that they hid from each other, until thoroughly smitten with each other once finding out what has been hurting them all along, they start making out as if it's their last minute on Earth.

Virgil puts their hand between their mouths. Roman whines.

"Ro... do we have too much sex?"

"Uh... it's healthy?"

"Is it?"

"Some couples like sex more?"

"Yes, but I think we do have a problem."

"I hate it when you say that."

"That's because we have to say it too often. I think we have a communication and intimacy problem."

"You mean we have sex to cover up for not talking to each other?"
"Something like that. I think we need to have mature adult conversations."

"We can try. I want to move on from this permanent can't-have-enough-of-each-other stage we're stuck in." Roman sounds deadly serious.

"I'm ready for the next step." Virgil's voice shakes, but his face is determined.

"Virgil, I don't want to have sex with anyone else. Can we be exclusive?"

"Of course! I thought you were the one who wanted more. I can't satisfy you."

"Alright, you proved yourself sillier than me. Of course you are all I want. Who gives a shit about the world when I have the world in my arms already?"

"Never stop the cheesy lines. And yeah, you're the only guy I want in my life."

Roman holds Virgil closer. "Do you want to be the only guy in my life till I die, Virge?"

Virgil's breath falters. "What are you saying, Ro?"

"I know I'm not ready yet, and neither are you, but if I popped you a very important question one of these days..."

"If my mind is still where it is at right now, I'll say yes."

Roman brushes his forehead against Virgil's. Their breathing synchronises along with their hearts.

"Shouldn't we apologise to Archie?"

"Oh gosh, we should. We were like really shitty to hi the way we used him."

1615 h

Remy totters along the corridor dragging an unconscious Archie behind him, muttering to himself, "Why did you have to go faint on me, dude? Not cool, seriously, not cool. That said the guy I'd be potentially dating is super jacked so that's a plus for me, but oh boy, he's HEAVY!"

Roman and Virgil skid to a halt before Remy, and he drops Archie flat on his face in surprise.

"REMY! What the hell did you do to Archie?" shouts Virgil.

"Please tell me you didn't kill him!" Roman drops to his knees in attitudes of violent distress. "I'll never forgive myself if he dies before I tell him I'm sorry!"

"Calm down, drama queens, he just couldn't handle an injection of my charm." Remy squats down and loosens Archie's collar.

"Wait, are you two..." Roman's voice trails off as his eyes dart from Remy to Archie.

"Yup. Just acknowledged our mutual attraction, fellas, nothing big." Remy blinks, his mind still trying to register what has happened.

"Well, he doesn't waste time." Virgil sits back on his heels.

"Who doesn't waste time?" says Archie with a groan, sitting up and rubbing his head.
"Archie!" cries Roman and picks him and sets him on his feet. "I'm so so sorry!"

"For what?"

"We... um –" begins Virgil.

"You know, guys, it's all good." Archie smiles at them, but with steely eyes. "Apologies accepted. Leave all the bad stuff behind. I'm done with letting you dangle me around. You two know you are jerks, right?"

"JERKS? US?" Roman and Virgil cross their arms indignantly.

"Yeah. I mean I'm the rookie here and it's not my place to say anything, but you two are so selfish and wrapped up in each other's drama you really don't care about what happens to others. You threw me under the bus, and you were off screwing around and leaving Thomas totally in harm's way if Remy and I weren't there. We're a team. You got to pull your weight too."

"He has a point," mumbles Virgil. He elbows Roman in the gut to stop him from saying anything more.

"There you are!" Logan darts around the corner and thunders up to them. "So much for my big speech about letting you all be leaders. Thomas, Patton, Arachne and Trixie are all ready, and you are all jaywalking up and down the corridors!"

"We were solving matters of the heart," says Remy. "A foreign subject to you, perhaps."

“Oh for one second if you could. Not. Come. At. Me,” clapbacks Logan with a snarl. Then he sobers up. “You know what, Remy? Fine, you might be blunt about it, but I needed to hear that. You lot have a lot of… um… ‘matters of heart’ to resolve, and all the power to you with that. I hope we’ve arrived at some satisfying conclusion to these trysts now?"

Everyone nods.

"Good. This story is a action comedy/ action thriller, not a romantic chick flick!" Logan laughs, and returns to his stern expression. "Now go change, we are leaving in fifteen minutes and if you all don't look like you could hit the runway at the plaza then I'm leaving you behind!"

The four of them scurry away, because eat the end of the day, Logan is still the big daddy around here.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason I was in a Heathers mood (when am I not?) so some of those lyrics snuck in. Hope you noticed!

I will have some fun next week! An author Q & A. Just ask me anything you want from me (the one or two people who read this book) and I will answer next chapter. You'll be in for a surprise!

See you next Wednesday.
Fourth Wall Broken

Chapter Notes

Guys, gals and non binary pals, look at this shark. And now watch it jump!

Yes, the moment has finally arrived.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1630 h

Logan sits in the passenger seat of the limousine, drumming his fingers on the dashboard impatiently.

"You alright there, Sir?" asks Roman, while Virgil squeezes his eye and ears with his hands to try and block out the annoying sound.

"Our driver is late." Logan leans over and presses the horn so hard the poor car must have felt violated.

Virgil groans and tucks his head in Roman's Jacket to get away from the noise, and his boyfriend is happy to hug him close.

"Tickling the tooter isn't going to help," says Madame La Douche, attacking her weave with hair spray.

"Language," says Arachne stiffly, adjusting her pantsuit. "Why does everyone here insist on making everything so sexual?"

"Oh, lighten up those corset strings, darling," says Madame La Douche. "But that did sound really dirty. My bad. I just meant don't honk."

Logan hammered the horn again. "Where is that tardy excuse for a millennial? REMY!"

"He'll come when he comes," says Thomas diplomatically. "He won't stand me up."

Patton adjusts Thomas' ascot. "He won't, trust me. And, calm down, Logan." Patton puts his arms around Logan's headrest to hug him. "I'm worried you'd burst a blood vessel if you get madder."

"I'm about to give everyone a coronary if he doesn't show up NOW!" The harassed horn wails out a mournful beep before spluttering out.

"Can I please have my ears amputated instead?" whines Virgil.

"But then how can I serenade you with entreaties of love?" asks Roman.

"Okay, definitely chop them off." Virgil chortles and gives Roman a big hickey under his collar.

"I can go look," says Archie, still not too confortable with seeing Roman and Virgil get touchy feely with each other.
"Make it quick," snaps Logan, and Archie tumbles out of the car.

He did not have far to go search for him. The Limousine was parked on the curb of the Dionysus Boulevard, just outside the gates of Sanderville. He steps in through the gates and gets a whiff of smoke drifting in from around the pillar. He peers around the corner and sees a despondent Remy smoking a cigarette. He has his phone pressed to his ear, and an angry voice screams at the other end. Archie gasps, and panic jerks up Remy's head. He spits out the cigarette and grounds it underfoot. He mumbles something into the phone and pockets it.

"Uh, hey Archie. Sorry bad habit, one of my cool guy bad boy traits, I'm afraid."

"What are you doing here? We're all waiting for you." Archie pauses before he adds a "Remy" to the end of the sentence, then he immediately wishes he did not, as it made the interaction even more awkward, and it was already awkward as a forced romantic subplot. (I kid, of course, Army... Rechie... Rarchie...[I'm-working-on-it] is endgame.)

Remy quickly dusts off the ash off his jacket front. "Yeah, of course you would be, I'm coming." He brushes past Archie, but he grabs his hand.

"What? I said I'm coming," says Remy irritably.

"Who were you talking to?" Archie stutters his 't's. "On the phone?"

"Did you think I'm snitching on you? Haven't I proven I'm a solid bloke?"

"I'd never think that. But something's bothering you. Are you... stressed out or something?"

"No, I smoke for the thrill."

"Okay."

"That's it, chump? You're not going to grill me for the truth?"

"Not my style. I know you will confide in me if you feel ready."

"Ugh. Now I want to tell you. Okay. So, um... you know how I painted this picture that I'm a hotshot detective of the CPD, but not exactly. I'm a small timer. Getting the Sanders Case was my big break. That was my Captain, and he was giving me hard time for not handing over the case to the CPD to handle. He's not cool with our plan to go rogue. All I got to do is get Arachne behind bars, and I'm set. I wanted to, but this is a bigger deal than any of us thought before, so I'm holding out for the greater good. I'd get off on a cushy pay, but I can't leave you'll hanging. Me! The most selfish go-getter asshole there ever was. And then Logan left all of today's arrests to me, and I kinda realised when I came down stairs... this is a pretty big deal you know."

"It's okay to be nervous..." Archie is stumbling over his words. What should he say? He wishes a comforting Patton or level-headed Logan were here, or maybe even Virgil or Roman will be better candidate to deal with an emotional Remy.

"I'm being dramatic aren't I?" Remy turns his wrist so that Archie is no longer grabbing his hand, but holding it.

"No." Archie takes a deep breath and gathers his thought. "The others and I have lower stakes as the Division is going down after this. But this is your chance to prove yourself to the CPD. I can't even imagine that kind of pressure. I'm just a gun jockey. And I don't know you that well, but I'm getting a strong vibe that those guys in the car will make you feel okay if you just told them you're
under a lot of pressure." Archie's hand was getting clammy. "Uh... they sure can get you better advice to deal with all this." He gestures with his free hand at nothing in general.

Remy grins. "That sure did cheer me up."

"Glad I could help." Archie clumsily trips up on the loose gravel of the driveway, and pitches forward.

Involuntarily Remy leans forward, and theirs nose smash into bump other. Remy looks guilty. He lets go of Archie's hand and strides off to the car.

Archie stares at his empty hand, clenches and unclenches, then hurries after.

1645 h

"There you are!" says Logan sardonically as Remy hops onto the driving seat. "You took your merry time."

"Sorry, Chief." Remy buckles his seatbelt. "This face doesn't get this pretty with genetics alone."

"And I am adapt gene splicing, I can make you look like a hybrid with a blowerfish."

"Stop chewing me out, Cheese Crackers, I know I'm a tasty dish." Remy gets the car out onto the middle of the road. "Okay gurls, confession time. My superiors at the CPD are depending on us to bring this case home. Or else I'll probably be singing Lovely Ladies this time next month. If you don't hate me already, can you please do me a turn and not mess things up? Please?" Remy stares resolutely at the road ahead.

"Remy Goor, how dare you think we don't have your back!" says Patton. "Of course we won't let you down!"

Everyone chimes in with their acquiesce.

Remy bites his lower lip hard to stop himself from grinning like a cat that got the cream. But he notices Logan is silent, shoots him a quick look from the corner of his eye.

"And even if we fail – which we will not – I will make sure you will not end up destitute." Logan awkwardly pats Remy's knee and retracts his hand just as quick. "We are family."

"Ha! Sucker!" cheers Remy. "I got you to say you like me!"

"And off he goes again, when I thought there was a shred of human decency in him." Logan closes his eyes and drifts off, done with everything.

"But, seriously guys, thanks for the boost." Remy smiles over his shoulder. He shifts aside and puts an arm over the back of the seat to grasp Thomas's hand. "Hey, babe. Sorry for that comment about your face. Wasn't nice of me. Not then, not now, not ever."

"You insulted my face?" asks Thomas. "I didn't even realise! It's all good, man. No offense. You're the best date I could ever ask for!"

"Cool beans."

Patton gives him a proud dad look and a thumbs up.

Virgil is in no position to stop the avalanche that is Roman, and gets knocked over like an iron fist through wet tissue. Unfortunately for Arachne and Madame La Douche sitting behind them, that means they topple backwards too, pantyhose clad legs in the air.

"Hey, didn't Remy and Archie have something going on?" asks Virgil, whispering in Roman's ear.

"Yeah..." Roman looks over at Archie who definitely looks a bit glum.

Archie sits forward and catches Remy's attention with a wave in the rear view mirror. "Hey, it's a big day for both you and Thomas. Why don't you take a rest of chauffer duty, I don't mind driving."

"Nah, I'm good," says Remy quietly. He catches Archie's eyes in the mirror, jerks his head slightly towards Thomas and rubs his nose. Archie understands. The moment they shared could not be anything more as Thomas is still in the picture.

Thomas, catches the glances, and feels a background character in his own story. Thankfully Patton could be counted on to add cheer when you're feeling down.

He hugs Thomas ecstatically. "You're gonna get a Berry Award! It's been your dream since you were in your diapers!"

Thomas hugs him back, needing it. "With everything going on, I almost forgot that I might win a Berry tonight! I probably won't, there are way more experienced voice actors nominated alongside me. But still, it's fun to be a part of it all!"

"Well," says Logan sagely, still with his eyes shut. "I'm all for having fun, but my priority is keeping all of you safe and alive through the ordeal. But nothing should go wrong, if we communicate effectively –" His eyes shoot open as he sits upright as if he just sat on a porcupine. "Communication! How are we going to communicate? All our phones and headsets are bugged!"

A heavy silence hangs in the Limousine.

"It would have been easier at the construction site today if we could talk to each other," says Remy.

"Maybe my phone isn't hacked?" asks Arachne.

"Sugar cube, Scorpio had us under his nose," says Madame La Douche shaking her head sadly at her. "He has us bugged, and infected with worse too."

"Why don't we try shouting really loud at each other?" suggests Roman.

"Not all of us have foghorn voices, Ro." Virgil snaps his fingers to get everyone's attention. "I might have a trick up my sleeve."

"What would that be? Telepathy?" asks Logan, sighing in defeat.

"Exactly. I'm gonna channel all my fourth wall breaking powers." Virgil smiles darkly.

"What the ever loving belly dancing baboons is that?" snaps Logan.

"Haven't you all been feeling a bit disoriented lately? Like you are super aware that we are all characters in a story born in a crazy mind of a madcap writer?"

Realisation dawns on everyone.
Virgil wraps his hands around Roman's arm tightly. "Everybody hold on tight."

The limousine disappears with a bling, everyone's voices cut off mid shriek. And old bag lady nestled comfortably in a bus stop looks almost falls off he seat in shock, but then shakes her head and laments the hardships of living in a cartoon universe.

The present, right here.

It was a morning of rain-chilled winds. I sit moping in a cosy little coffee house by a lake in the middle of concrete and steal city somewhere on Earth, nursing a cold press apple juice in one hand (yes, I'm the kind who orders fresh fruit juice at a coffee house, I go for the ambience, not the writer stereotype of coffee addiction) and the other hand restless typing out the words you now see before you. I am in a homely cocoon of my own making, writing away like there's no tomorrow. Or a self-imposed arbitrary deadline. I hear a clash of metal on the street, as if a giant piano fell out of the sky, but I ignore it wrapped up in my work.

A shadow falls across my laptop.

I ignore and practically puts my nose in the cup, hoping whoever it is will go away. Or if it is the server, I will pay my thumping bill when I leave at midnight, okay?

The shadow clears his throat.

I look up, face scrunched in annoyance, wondering what it would be like to chuck my juice in their face and get away with it like on a sit com. And then I grin softly to myself, because my raunchy sense of humour is a gift that keeps on giving. Then I blush, mortified that someone had seen my face morph alongside my mental gymnastics.

"Excuse me? Yes, you, the one with the broken expression meter. I'm Virgil. You are D&E, right?"

Virgil calmly slides into the chair opposite me.

"Don't ask me, I didn't write this damn story. It's kinda cool though. I like your t-shirt, very me."

I look down at my shirt, momentarily dazed. It's jet black with Sarcastic AF sprayed across the front, and yeah I did buy it in honour of our favourite boy of darkness. That jolted me to the situation at hand, and I start freaking out. "This cannot happen! We're blurring lines between fact and fiction! You can't enter reality! Get back in my mind and in my screen! Wait, am I even real, if I'm a character in my story? Is this what Thomas feels when he is in a Sander Sides video because for all intents and purposes he is playing a characterised version of himself and not his real self. AAAAAARGH!!"

"Who are the Sander Sides? A band?"

"You wish, dear sweet innocent confusingly sexy-scary in real life Virgil, don't worry your head about that. I know everything about you but you don't know everything I know, because you are my creation. Damn, is this what Victor Frankenstein felt like when his monster opened his eyes?"

"Whoa. Does that make you my new daddy?" asks Roman, from behind me.

"OH MY GAGA. Is everyone here? I mean I know everyone is here, but for the sake of this narrative not getting too meta, I'm a character just like you, thinking just like you two dimensional
beings just like oh my gods I get to be just like you - YAY - without knowing more than the here and now and around and around...

"Is he always like this?" asks Roman from Virgil.

"No I'm mostly withdrawn and listless like a closeted gay Victorian guy with tuberculosis and syphilis. Ahem." I cough. "Hi Roman! Big fan."

"Thanks!" Roman beams, and a part of me turns into galaxy ice cream. "Want an autograph? Where do you want me to sign?"

"I'm going to say the back of my hand, because I try to maintain a mature rating around here, not explicit."

"Yes," intones Logan as Roman scrawls on my hand. "For all the lewd content in your stories, there is actually no smut."

"That's because I only write what I know," I say, looking up to Logan.

"So you are a vir --" says Virgil.

"Shut up, Virgil." I wave my hand and his mouth closes, "or I'll make you lose more than your eye. Logan, HUGE fan. (Roman grumbles in the background.) It's not like I like you, I am you! I don't know if I want to kiss you or be you! But then I never know whether I want to be myself or kiss myself half the time, so..."

"Hm... autosexuality. I can relate to that," says Logan. "No offense, Patton."

"None taken," says Patton, popping up next to him. "Hi, author!"

"Hi Patton! Please don't hug me, I really don't dig physical contact. Also, how are you feeling?"

"Like a blueberry cheesecake with chocolate syrup!"

"I love how I basically use food to describe everything about and by you. It's a neat little tactic coz you're the character I least identify with. I actually based you on one of my friends, and basically wrote what I observed in him as you. But because I am so like Logan, that's why I kinda shy away from writing too much logicality... buuuut, this story is about you, not me, ha ha ha..."

"I like you. You are funny."

"Thanks."

Thomas wanders in, arms clasped under his chin looking like a child at their first night of the living dead Christmas trees (Look, some jokes I write are to make you laugh, some are for me).

"Where am I?" he cries excitedly. "Is this the mind palace?"

"It is my mind palace. In a really expensive coffee house I don't think I'm legally allowed to mention by name but I like how I am not disturbed here and it's really close to my office. Except you'll, and this doesn't count coz I'm pretty sure you are still all in my head and the cashier is probably wondering why I'm talking to thin air. I do my best writing here, or in my bed late at night, but I can't dare dream of having any of you in my bed late at night so this is the best place for our space and time bending hangout."

"You talk a lot..." says Thomas, befuddled.
"I do, don't I? And you are forced to listen to me coz I gave you life, bwa ha ha! Also, thank you so much Thomas Sanders for inspiring me to write! Even though I basically stole your characters because I'm too lazy to be original, but I hope I put a fun twist to them! Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome! You mean I created all these characters?" Thomas asks, gesturing at Logan, Roman, Virgil and Patton.

"No, this is an alternate universe... don't think about this too much, you might discover the meaning of life."

"The coffee here is some poor slop," says Remy, dumping a cup in the trash.

"Oh hi to you too, Remy, just destroy what little joy I have in my life, why don't you? And how did you buy that, you don't have money from this part of the world with you... never mind. Just don't do anything else, okay? I'm still figuring out how to write you in a semi-decent way coz there really isn't much canon content of you to work off of. But I'm seriously beginning to love writing you, and I have no idea why I didn't realise what a goldmine I've been sitting on with your character."

"Uh, thanks, I guess, spazzo. I have no intention of letting you sit on my face, thank you very much."

"Ha! Archie is essentially my self-insert character in this book, so I'm gonna have my way after all! -- oh hi, Archie, didn't see you there."

Archie mumbles something because I decided that making him a lovable hapless doof is the best characterisation I could whip up for him.

"Don't worry, Arch, you're probably the most decent character I've come up on my own!"

"What about me?" Remus pokes his head in through the door.

Everyone screams.

"REMUS GET OUT!" I shout. "You are not a part of this book and my mind is already too effed up already without your contributions. Shoo!" I blast him out with a pulse of heat energy.

"And welcome, ladies," I say to Arachne and Madame La Douche. "I have your character arcs noted down literally as a bunch of bullet points, you are such C-tier characters."

Arachne sniffs disdainfully, but Madame La Douche shrugs and accepts her fate.

"So why do I have the pleasure of seeing you today?" I look around the eclectic bunch of characters assembled around me. "Besides giving me a waking drug trip or a chance to show how whack my mind works?"

"This is the deal," Virgil leans forward across the table and takes a swig of my apple juice. "We need a deus ex machina to save the day."

"But that's bad writing," I protest.

"Yeah don't flatter yourself, but we need help communicating with each other. I dunno what crazy multiplayer hellscape you've planned for us for the climax of this story, but we need to keep in touch while we're in our own subplots. And for some reason the villains always keep hacking our communication devices, with is such a cheap trick to make the plot work. So what do you say?"
"You want magic mirrors or something?"

"That'd be great!" says Roman. "Like from Beauty and the Beast!"

"Can we have a teleportation book too?" asks Patton hopefully. "That will solve all our problems. We can go back in time and never date our exes."

"No, that book is a terrible plot hole and should never have been in the remake," I say, relishing the moment of throwing shade at the Disney Live Action Fairy-tale Movies.

"Gosh, even the author cannot focus on what's important," groans Logan.

"Can you please think of something better?" Virgil pushes the laptop towards me. "Or are you just a hack writer?"

"Ah, self doubt and criticism are the tools of any writer." I think for a moment. "What about a mental chat group? Just like the walkie talkie network, except you can access it telepathically."

"Then everyone can read my thoughts?" gasps Thomas, shaken.

"No, of course not, where's the drama in that? And I'm sure no one can survive hearing Virgil and Roman's thoughts, brrr. Just concentrate and you can send a though to the other person like logging into the chat, but there's a firewall to stop hacking."

"Sounds neat, if a bit too much one with the cosmic universe," says Remy, popping some cloves in his mouth from a jar on the counter. "Bravo, you new age hippie."

"Phew, that's solved," I say. "Also as I just mentioned fairy tales, I'm going to arbitrarily decide that all your powers will disappear at midnight. Because you cannot be superheroes for the rest of your life."

"Why not?" cries Roman, disheartened.

"Because I say so, and my word is law. Now can you go before I have a creative aneurism?" I usher everyone towards the door.

"Wait... I just realised, you made me lose an eye!" cries Virgil. "How dare you! Give it back!"

"No it was for character development! And to show my heroes aren't invincible and there's a price for victory!" I push them harder.

"Oh my goodness," gasps Thomas. "Do you know what's going to happen to us?"

"Um... I have it all planned out in my head, but I haven’t written your futures yet" I say, trying to wedge Roman out through the doorway. "But I change the story as I write, so who can tell? Do you know that excellent quote from George R. R. Martin about how some writers are architects, who plan every detail and structure before writing, and some are gardeners who plant a seed and waters it with a vague idea of what plant will grow, but not how many branches or fruits? I'm definitely a gardener writer."

"Fair enough," says Logan, calmly stepping out of the window to avoid the tussle by the door. "But may I know if someone gets hurt? Then I know who not to send to the front line of defence."

I look at the floor and tell myself "No, don't look at him! My eyes will give away spoilers."

"Oh no! He was looking at me!" wails Roman.
Behind him, Archie and Remy gulp.

"Well, it's a him," says Arachne pertly. "And as the only bona fide female here, I can happily say that I am safe."

"Um..." I say. "I didn't say anything about you not... no!" I clamped my mouth shut. "Just go!" I gurgle, "Visiting hours are over!"

They all tumble into the Limousine, and I sigh in relief as it dissolves into the fictional portal, which is also in my mind... just run with it, okay?

I apologise to the rest of the café patrons and return to my seat, hoping I hadn't made too much of a scene. If the scenarios in my head played out in real life, the world will look as if it was a Baz Luhrmann film. I pack up my laptop and finish my drink, ready to go. "Alright, bye guys, I'm off now. Toodles! Back to the story. The real one, I mean."

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter was a break from the usual story. Hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it.

I apologize for Remus breaking into the story. It just happened, and I found it rib ticklingly funny.

QotW: Who do you think will die...?

Next chapter is the climax! We're almost done guys!
The End of the Fucking Story

Chapter Notes

If you're wondering where I got inspiration for this chapter title, please do check out the TV Series The End of the Fucking World, highly recommend.

Well, let's get on with this shall we? I dunno if there are other Awards show nuts here, but I based the Berry Awards on the golden Globes than the Oscars, coz the former gets more cray, hm?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1800 h

Let's set the scene, shall we? For some reason there is buoyant jazz music and bubbling champagne corks popping in my head, so that can be our background music. The city hall was transformed into an extravagant venue the likes of which will put a billion dollar casino to shame. The theme was Caribbean inspired, and plastic palm trees glowing in every colour known to man line the well lit drive way crowded with expensive cars spewing out indulgently dressed dignitaries ready to make fashion history. Cameras flash at the exact right time to catch a poor unsuspecting celebrity in a compromising pose and reporters ask remarkably insensitive questions and get epic clap backs. The child stars steal the show, as always, and there is always that guy who dresses down. Inside the hall is made up into a vista of stunning backdrops of blue oceans and skies. Glittering bejewelled ipomea flowers sit on pristine white tables that are spread in concentric circles around the stage, which is designed to mimic a frozen wave. Light piano music plays as the guests drift indoors, with their unseen security staff scurrying around like black ants making sure everything is going on without a hitch. If you like, I can let you know about what happens behind the scenes, but we are here to go ooh and aah at the pretty faces and clap at the person who wins, or scream at how unfair the win was. But don't take my word for it, I've got a more credible source to capture the excitement!

A video pops up in your recommendations. Click play.

"Hello and Good Evening, dear Ladies and Gentlemen and everything in between and far away, welcome to my YouTube channel. If this is the first time you are seeing me for the first time, hi, I'm and I run an Internet cult for award show fanatics because of all the fashion! The dates! The drama! The snuuuubs. All my social media links are in the description if you want to hang out with me! I've got a very special live stream for you today, a reaction of the Berry Awards 2019! As you can see the first guests are rolling up in their Limousines and carriages right now! Oh look, there is that crazy DJ on a horse! Stunning! Comment down below if you think a horse is better than a Porsche or vice versa. I do not have the time to read or answer all of your lovely comments but I do appreciate it! Look, someone just got out of a helicopter! Who is this David S. Pumpkins knock off? I do not recognise him or that eye candy on his arm! Is he even a celebrity? Oh one of my fans watching me live tells me that it is a Mr Scorpio Svengali, who is the Director of the Dignitary Defence Division... who dat? Does he direct films? No wonder, he's not important! Is this Division a dance studio? Oooooh, never mind, look who's up next! It's Thomas Sanders! As a hardcore Sanderling – guys please pass on the hashtag #sanderling, I'm trying to bring it back – I know from all my stalking that he is single now! Sorry ladies, he only has eyes for the men! What is he
wearing? A pink suit and a shockingly ratty t-shirt. Sorry, I did not mean to throw shade, but your homegirl is a bit tipsy today! Thomas looks like an expensive red wine that your mum wrapped in some pink flower wrapping paper to give to your 'conservative' aunt who folds and keeps the wrapper. I like it when a man wears something more interesting than a black or blue tux, boring, puke emoji. And call me a bond girl who wants to be shot in the two 0s and 7, but who is this James Bond impersonator? OMG you guys, he's holding Thomas' hand! Thomas has a date? Who is this? He looks like a sexy spy undercover as a sexy limousine driver, a sexy double agent. Oh wait, he is actually Thomas' chauffeur, Remy Goor. I'll ask my minions to stalk – I mean, background check on him. Well the secret is out, the new James Bond is gay and he's dating Disney's first gay prince. Blessed to be living in 2019! And the moment we've all been waiting for... Thomas's Bodyguard! It's Roman Bronze, and he's wearing that jacket like it shrank at the dry cleaning but he wore it anyway! And yes, he has a thirst Instagram, everyone go follow him! What I will do for a bite of that A...Star! Ahem. Well that's all for now, let's see who comes up next! I hope it's the couple everyone's talking about, the cowgirl and the mathemagician! I'm taking a little break to update you about that vlog with the space raccoon everyone went crazy over! Don't forget to let me know if Thomas' new boyfriend is a hottie or a nottie, and if his suit is an 8.5 or a 9? Comment below! Bye!"

1900 h

The Birds of Gay were still getting used to their mental connection.

Patton rubs his temples with his thumbs, as he and Logan head across the foyer. Logan flashes his passes at the security guards, smiling apologetically at their looks suspicion of Patton tripping by his side with his head in his hands. Logan and Patton take a back corridor to the ante-chamber where all the assistant staff go. It is mostly crowded with attendants in tight black suits responsible for arranging the trains of the dresses, who are glad to have some down time after their celebrity has gone into take a seat.

"My head hurt," says Patton.

"So does mine after hearing your grammar," says Logan. "It is simple." Suddenly his voice popped up in Patton's head. "I've mastered it already."

"Eeeek!" shrieked Patton.

The attendants looked at him.

"There was a mouse under my dress!" says Patton apologetically.

"EEEEEEKKKK!" shrieks the whole room and starts jumping on chairs and whacking the floor with their pointy shoes. The attendants, I mean, not the room.

Logan makes use of the confusion to drag Patton over to a quiet corner. He put both hands on his shoulders and faces him. "Patton, I want you to concentrate," he said out loud.

Patton nodded and scrunched up his nose, thinking very hard indeed.

"What are you doing, Pat?"

"Concentrating."

"On what?"

"Oh, I forgot about that. I was concentrating on concentrating."
"You silly billy. Alright, now listen closely."

Patton put his hands behind his ears.

"No, with your mind." Logan wondered whether it would be easier to shout across the room after all.

"Sorry."

"It's like trying to dig up a phone number you accidently on purpose forgot."

"Uhh..."

"Alright, now I will talk telepathically." Logan's voice echoed into Patton's head. "Hello Patton. I am in you now. That's wrong - my head is in you. No, my voice is in your head. Sorry, it's hard to think clearly, let me get it under control. By it I mean my mental voice. Dammit, I do not have the protection of a mental filter.

Patton giggles, squeezes his eyes shut and tries it too. "Helloo Logaaan! This is your conscience telling you to be nicer to Patton."

"I am always nice to you."

"Well I don't mind if you are rude and rough with me sometimes."

***

Thomas: Hi guys! Thomas here. You two realise we can all hear you, right?

Remy: Our two Dads are getting their freak on. Shut up and listen, this is gonna be good.

Logan: Apologies, it will not happen again.

Remy: Crud, you spoilsport.

Patton: Where are you two? It must be so fancy inside.

Remy: You can say that again, luv! Everyone here is sexier than even moi! How much do they spend up on make-up and hair extensions and fake beards? I already shook hands with so many stars I'm a super nova. I'm at our table! I even got a place card. I'm stealing it, don't judge me.

Patton: Having fun, Tom Tom?

Thomas: Not as much as Remy, I'm afraid. Crowds make me nervous. And everyone here is treating me a bit different after all what happens. But the snacks on the table are tasty!

Remy: But it's kinda boring until the fun starts. I'm playing footsie with Thomas.

Thomas: No, we're not! I'm smiling at everyone like a bobble head and NOTHING is happening under the table.

Remy: They can never know what they never see, babe.

Archie: Hi! This is weird.

Remy: Footsie?
Archie: Erm... I meant the mental link.

Remy: Dammit.

Thomas: What?

Remy: You can't hear the thoughts I don't project at the metal group chat right?

Logan: No, that was an essential part of the plan.

Remy: Thank goodness.

Archie: Thank goodness.

Logan: Exactly. We do not need impure thoughts disturbing us more than they ought to.

Roman: Greetings, all you beautiful thought people!

Logan: Speaking of impure thoughts, look who has joined us.

Patton: Logan! Play nice.

Logan: Sorry, pops.

Roman: I'm having so much fun! I got so many autographs! They've got such tough security here; us bodyguards are chilling at the back of the hall and killing time and glowering at everyone to show we mean business! And trading horror stories about our primaries.

Thomas: Hey!

Roman: You're good. You're an angel. Thomas, that Miss 80s Mall Hair across the table from you makes fur coats out of orphans, didn't you know?

Virgil: Whoa. I thought the actual voices in my head were dark, but dang you guys are crazier.

Roman: My bad, she owns illegal fur coats and adopts legal babies.

Virgil: Figures. I'm on the overhead catwalk with the light and sound crew. I've been spying on the bald spots hidden under toupees all evening! I was walking around the lounge earlier. You won't believe how easy it's to blend in the crowd here. I just need to hint at who my sugar daddy is and everyone welcomes me with open arms.

Roman: Wait, who's your zaddy?

Virgil: The contract has a non-disclosure clause.

Roman: Hmph. I'll let you know that the second I got here, four lovely ladies gave me their numbers, and when I shouted that I am gay, four dashing gentleman did. So there.

Virgil: Probably out of pity. Why don't we make a bet to see who can collect the most numbers by the end of the show?

Roman: Get ready to get your ass handed back to you.

Virgil. Deal. I've already got nine.

Roman: HOW?
Virgil: People like the doe eyed out of town boy just moved into the neighbourhood story I've been telling them. Works like magic.

Roman: Ha! I don't need tragic backstories! What's in it for the winner?

Virgil: Hm... Remember last night when we tried –

Logan: I'm going to stop this conversation right here. You boys focus on what's going around you, not perpetuate a hook-up culture.

Remy: Logan, do you get off on taking the fun out of things?

Patton: He does.

Logan: AWFGEWOUYGAOHCBHJBJLbhj. Anyway, Archie, where are you?

Archie: Uh yeah. I'm backstage. They won't let me check the awards. Wouldn't it be ironic if the Thomas' award has a bomb in it and it blows up in the middle of his acceptance speech?

Roman: Dude! Not cool.

Virgil: Like how you think.

Patton: Eeeeeeeeeek! No!!! Why would you even say that?

Logan: That went needlessly dark. Are you okay, Archie?

Remy:

Thomas: Thanks, now I can't stop thinking about it! I just want to be happy for my first nomination, and now it's like the Homicide Awards 2019!

Virgil: Seriously, my usual thoughts of death are half as snarky as you lot! Keep them coming!

Logan: Calm down, it is unlikely that Scorpio or Dolan would bug the trophy. I mean, the chances of Thomas winning are slim, and the risk of hurting someone else is too high.

Thomas: Thanks, Logan, for believing in my inability to win.

Patton: Aw, Tom Tom. I believe in you. Don't listen to the haters.

Thomas: You're the best Patton.

Patton: It's a big moment for you! All your life has been leading up to this moment! You are finally being recognised for all the great things you've done!

Logan: Apologies. You are the people's choice for the winner, and that is a definite influencing factor for the voters of the Berry Awards.

Roman: Yup! I voted for you from all my 14278 accounts.

Archie: Sorry I said anything. You deserve the award Thomas! I promise I'll check it won't blow up in your face.

Remy: Heh. Thomas is really ticklish behind the ears. There, that ought to cheer you up.

Thomas: Remy, stop!
Virgil: You kinda might have to... people are looking at you two.

Remy: Crap. Thomas, we need to be on that kind of date where we leave room for the Holy Ghost between us.

Roman: By the way, the other bodyguards are convinced that Thomas is an alien! Because, last year, when he....

Arachne: It is I, Arachne.

Logan: I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm glad to hear from you Arachne. There is only so much of this madness I can take.

Arachne: Hurr hurr hurr.

Logan: No, Madame Medusa, you do not get to do a mocking laugh, you are still under probation.

Arachne: Well this petrifying snake lady got her job done while you were all having a kiki.

Roman: That's offensive.

Remy: Since when were you woke?

Roman: No, my kikis are way more lit than this. This place doesn't even have amazingly choreographed group dances to the latest Beyoncé song!

Virgil: That was one time, Ro, and thanks for making my birthday all about you. Arachne, all set then? You did not mess up my beautiful plan, did you?

Arachne: Heavens, no. It pays to be in the Book Club for Bored Socialites. I just had to tell her my name and she was my fan. I charmed her by offering her a voucher for a full body polish at the best spa in the city. Given the choice between accompanying your husband to a stuffy awards show or going to get all the kinks stretched out of your body, she trotted off on her little piggy legs to the spa for all seasons. I'm at my seat in the VIP section drinking rosè in a flute, not even Thomas can get here, harr harr.

Trixie: Hiya, duckies!

Logan: Ah. I was wondering if everyone was here.

Virgil: And how did your masquerade go, Madame La Douche?

Trixie: I slipped into my role like a smooth satin glove. I'm at the special invitees table, and my 'hubby' is doing his voice warm up exercises. It's such a wicked little treat to pretend to be the wife of Mr F –

Virgil: Shush! We can't reveal the name of the mastermind until the most climactic moment! We need to come up with a code name for him.

Patton: How about Megamind? That's my favourite anti-villain!

Remy: Pah. We need something more dickish for the rum bastard.

Virgil: Megadick?

Roman: You called?
Virgil: Nah, go back to trying to peek under that Scottish actor's kilt. Yeah, I see everything you're upto.

Roman: Ughhh. You're such a nagging boyfriend, spying on everything I do! Let a guy live a little!

Virgil: Someone's got to keep you from getting sucker punched. Besides, you don't measure up, Archie's actually got the bigger –

Archie: Nopenopenopenope dick size doesn't matter.

Remy: It totally does, you slanger.

Thomas: Guys! I'm trying to keep a straight face for the cameras, and I can't with all these scandalous thoughts in my head!

Patton: Your face was never straight, poochiekins!

Logan: I haven't done this in a while, and never in my head, but here goes. SHUT UP YOUR VERBAL DIARRHOEA MOUTHS, YOU IMEBCILES! FOCUS! FOCUS! FOCUS! EYES ON THE PRIZE! I DON'T GIVE A HOOT ABOUT YOUR BODILY APENDAGES, ONLY THAT THE BAD GUY GETS CLAPPED IN THE CAN AT THE END OF THE DAY!

Remy: Whoa. The drill sergeant's still got it!

Roman: My head... it's echoing....

Virgil: That's because it's empty. My ears are ringing and the chief didn't even open his mouth.

Patton: I don't think I'm ever going to get your voice out of my head. Or my heart.

Thomas: Aw... my brain is haemorrhaging so I'm trying to focus on the cute side of things to keep it together.

Archie: I think I blacked out for a second there. I'm still seeing red sparks.

Arachne: One thing I don't miss divorcing. Wait – there's nothing I miss divorcing.

Trixie: Sister, please, cut the act. I work in a club and that voice won't make it past the first DRINK.

Logan: Well, it seems like I got you settled down at last. Now, pay attention. Is Megadick – huh, that code name is surprisingly well fitting – where he should be?

Trixie: Yessiree. All according to plan.

Virgil: I got my eye on him. Literally. There's a telescope up here. Don't ask me why.

Roman: it's part of the décor, you heathen. I can see the back of Megadick's head from where I am. He's got to dye his hair, his roots are showing.

Logan: Trixie, be sure to pass on that oh so vital bit of information to Megadick. Good, we have eyes on him. What about Scorpio?

Arachne: My darling brother is here in the VIP section. He's glaring daggers at me, I can't bear it, this mon deu dress wasn't made for scornful looks!
Logan: I'm sure it's not the dress he wants to stab. Let us know whether he does anything suspicious.

Arachne: Oh no! He's opening a pamphlet! Is it a secret document?

Logan: That is called an agenda, dear Miss Arachne Svengali. It is quite common at an awards show. But then lateral thinking was never on your résumé.

Arachne: Careful, Mr Logan Craggers, or your life will not resume ever again.

Patton: Hee hee hee. I feel bad for finding that pun funny.

Logan: As you should be. Any sign of your twin?

Remy: And there we go again, Captain buzzkill only wants to see us sad.

Virgil: Why do I get the feeling you're stealing my lines?

Thomas: Well, in all fairness, we need to know if Dolon will turn up waving a sword and screaming like a pillaging Viking!

Roman: Ooooh! Swords! Vikings! No – that's bad, I don't want Thomas to die. I'll never let the Viking charge through, Sir!

Logan: Very noble, Roman, it's the least you can do. It's your job, remember? And, can we please return to my question? Any sign of Dolon?

Patton: I can't see him in the attendants' lounge...

Arachne: Or the VIP lounge....

Remy: And he's not in the front of the hall...

Roman: Or the back...

Archie: And he's not backstage...

Trixie: Or with the special invitees....

Virgil: So basically, the answer to our game of Where's Waldolon is a big fat nada. Whelp, there goes my anxiety buzzer. Everybody panic.

Thomas: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGHHHHHHHH!

Logan: Do not panic, Thomas Sanders.

Patton: Give him a lozenge, quick, that calms him down.

Remy: I have one. Lucky that I have all kinds of stuff in my pockets to make me look awake.

Logan: Now that is taken care of, we can all hope that Dolon is in an abandoned underground lair somewhere licking his wounds and swearing revenge. So long as he keeps out of our way, we are fine. Alright people, keep your head above water, keep your eyes peeled, and keep your hands sanitised because how many germs are passed around here, with so much hand shaking and kissing and hugging? Notify us if you see the slightest suspicion. I'm mental logging out now, act natural everyone.
Virgil: Act natural, he says. If it were that easy.

Patton: You can act super natural!

Virgil: Ha.

Roman: I always act super!

Remy: And yet you can't be supersized.

Roman: D-d-d-don't you fucking dare, you little –

Remy: No, you little! There are bigger boys in the playground now.

Archie: Can we please let that slide?

Remy: Slide in where?

Logan: THAT'S IT! I AM BANNING YOU ALL FROM ACTING LIKE SEXY GOSSIP GIRLS. EVERYBODY OFF THE MENTAL CHANNEL!

***

With a slight buzz of white noise, the Birds of Gay return to reality. Some are stunned, but some are not, like Virgil, who spends most of his time procrastinating, and Patton, who is a permanent resident in toonville.

Logan opens his eyes and shakes his head. The mental chat group was as close he will get to a drug trip.

"That was fun," says Patton, the whites of his eyes showing.

"Excuse me?" asks a concerned voice of another Personal Assistant.

Logan and Patton look around the room, and see a horde of puzzled people looking back at them curiously.

"Are you two alright?" continues the worried lady. "You've been standing in the same spot for half an hour an hour without moving at all..."

"We are perfectly fine. We are two very conservative people, and standing still next to each other counts as the consummation of our relationship."

Everyone backs away.

Logan groans. "I made a sex joke. The sooner I get those vulgar voices out of my head the better."

2000 h

Click play, and the livestream continues.

"Hi! Your girl is back, and ready to snack on all ze amazing dramatiques about to go down. The Berry Awards will start in three... two... one... HUZZAH! Am I the only one who gets this excited about awards shows? Oh, who cares, join in the fun! It's the opening number. Showtime, folks! It
looks like we have a bit of tap dancing, a bit of the Charleston, a bit of the jazz, sorry, this is the only time I can use my degree in a contemporary and classical dances. Four years of dance school and here I am as a YouTube reviewer! Isn't life wonderful? Oh my, this is turning into a full scale Busby Berkley kaleidoscopic madness! Oh look, one of the bodyguards in the back is dancing along! Aw... we're done with the dance. I don't think that dancer was supposed to fall off the piano, but let's pretend we didn't see that. Here's our host for the evening, Stynkinritch! Gosh he's funny! I mean he's funny in the way middle age men think is funny, and the whole room laughs only because he's the one with all the money. He clearly has a lot of money, look at the gold frosted pearls his wife is wearing. She looks like she was at an Arabian Nights themed birthday party and then was like oh I have to go to the Berry Awards no time to change. Did you know their son is also running for an award today? He was the voice of that adorable . I didn't see the movie, but I heard it wasn't good. Don't believe the critics, they don't know anything. Hm... Stynkinritch's speech is pretty political, but nowadays it will be odd if it wasn't political. All right it's time for the first award, Best Funniest Actress in a Superhero TV Series Cancelled Last Year. Erm... I don't know the actress who won, must be from the diversity quota. Wow, look! They have a pirate canon above the stage that shoots a coconut with the award in it. That's cute. They're really running wild with the Caribbean theme. Is it cultural misappropriation though? Who cares, it looks so pretty. Bye for now, imma be back with more juicy tales!

2030 h

Remy poked Thomas in the ribs.

"Ow!" Thomas rubs his side and gives Remy the side eye.

"I'm bored, girl. This party is no fun. I have to fake smile too much."

"That's kinda the deal. But I'm here for the genuine smiles of validation for the winners."

"I'm not that selfless. Up for something crazy?" Remy leans forward with a conspiratory air.

"Um... okay. Is it going to get me in trouble?" Thomas tugs at his tie nervously.

"Only if we get caught. I say we pull off a practical joke. Who's going to be our victim?"

"I'm going to draw a line at killing," says Thomas firmly.

Remy scoffs. "I'm not the bad guy here. Do you know anyone else at the table?"

Thomas looks around. "Well... that's Jo and the girl next to him is Li. I know them from the days I had a YouTube channel. They're good people, they love laughing at themselves." Thomas waves at them, and Li sticks her tongue out at him while rolling his eyes, while Jo grins and lobs over a paper rocket made of the agenda. Thomas opens it, and scrawled across the middle is the message: "You should have asked me to be your date, that guy is way too James Dean for you."

"Oh, he's going down," says Remy, reading over Thomas' shoulder. His eyes dance with mischief as he does the 'I got my eyes on you' gesture at Jo.

He turns to Thomas. "I have no regrets for what I am about to do. Think fast." He kicks Thomas' chair from under him and sends him sliding under the table.

Jo and Li jump up in surprise when they feel someone grabs their ankles. They duck under the table, and come face to face with a very apologetic Thomas.
"Yo Thomas, what are you up to?" asks Li.

"Um..." Thomas tries to think on his feet – or flat on his stomach rather. "I like you shoes and thought I'd take a closer look?"

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a foot fetish!" laughs Jo. "Had a good look?"

Thomas nods, face a burning, and scrambles back onto his chair. He glares at a very smug looking Remy.

"What was that for?" hisses Thomas.

"You'll find out soon enough!"

"Ladies and Gentleman!" announces Stynkinritch. "Put your hands together for the winner of best YouTube comedian With No Controversy in 2018.... Oho, we have two winners! Jo and LI!"

"Blimey, didn't see that coming," says Remy, slouching low in his seat as the camera crane swung to their table.

"What did you do?" Thomas grits his teeth in a tight smile.

"I swapped their speeches!"

Thomas slides down in his seat too, trying to stifle his giggles.

Jo and LI stand happy and proud and radiant behind the podium, holding up their Berries.

"Thank you for the honour!" says Jo. "Standing here as a strong independent unicorn...." He blinks down at his cue card.

Li fills in. "I'd like to thank my beautiful wife, and we are expecting twins... wait I'm not married! I'm too straight and ratchet to be married to a mummy to be!"

"Ah... I can't believe that video where I got my vagina steamed wasn't controversial... what even?" Jo melts into a puddle of sniggles.

Li catches on to what's happening. "Well it seems like we are stealing each other's speeches just like we stole each other's solo spot centre stage! How's this for a viral video?" she cries out at the laughing and cheering crowd.

***

Logan: THOMAS! REMY! GET OUT FROM UNDER THE TABLE AND SIT UP STRAIGHT! I hope you had nothing to do with that.

Remy: Us? Oh no, we're two little angels.

Patton: You two are such naughty children. No dinner for you tonight.

Thomas: Sorry. I'll turn down all the invitations I got for the after parties.

Remy: Over my dead body.

Logan: I can arrange that. No more goofing around.
This thing is taking forever, thinks Roman restlessly to himself. He has busied himself working around the room collecting as many numbers as he could, even of the janitor who was 102 years old but still got game. He is annoyed that he is still tied with Virgil, who seems to be racking up phone numbers with alarming speed. Only one more! Roman spies a strange man in black – from tapering toe to spikey hair – his eyes yellow slits in a gloomy corner. Hm.... Maybe he could be up for some fun. Roman sidles up to him, and leans on the wall next to him. Popping open the buttons of his jacket, he angles his torso towards the stranger. The dark man's eyes gives him the once over from under long bangs that obscure his face.

"Hey, I'm Roman. Haven't seen you before. Want me to show you around?"

"What's in it for you?" The stranger's voice is a slurry growl.

"I was wondering if I could ask for your number... for a tour of the backstage."

"Give me yours, I'll text you mine." The mysterious man holds out his palm.

"Sure!" One more in the bag, thinks Roman gleefully as he scribbles his number down.

"Do I get to take a personal tour of you?" The stranger leans forward and grabs Roman's crotch. Roman gulps, and firmly moves the hand away. "Look, man, I just wanted to get your number."

"Why? Too scared?" The man ran his hands up under Roman's shirt.

Roman backs away. "Whoa, you're forward. I got a boyfriend, sorry for sending the wrong message."

"Hm... a taken man. Ever thought of having a side ho?"

"Nope. My boyfriend is awesome. He's the sweetest, funniest, cutest guy I could wish for."

"He sounds... perfect. But there's more fish out in the sea."

"But I have my perfect fishie all for myself. The only thing I don't like is that he hides his pretty face behind his hair." Roman flicks away the bangs to reveal Virgil's surprised face, and captures his open mouth with a possessive kiss.

"You knew it was me all along?" gasps Virgil, as he resurfaces out of breath.

"Yup," says Roman, his hands inching around the smaller man's waist. "Only one man grabs my bulge like that."

"I guess my fingers are used to it's... uh, dimensions." Virgil bites his lip. "It's the perfect size for me, well, because it's yours. Sorry for teasing you."

"No harm done. But you better make up for it, I'm gonna make you howl." Roman is thoughtful for a second. "Do you think I'll ever cheat on you?"

"Um..."
"I meant it when I said I wanted to be exclusive with you."

"I have trust issues, okay? I made this whole asking for numbers thing up because I was certain you will get way more than me."

"But you got as much as me. You are lovable too, you know. And I fricking love every freckle on you. I'm never ever gonna leave you. I can't survive if I amputate my heart from my chest, now can I?"

"You unimaginably lovely psycho," murmurs Virgil resting his forehead against Roman's. "How do you know the exact gruesome romantic thing to say to me?"

"It's in my name!" Roman twirls Virgil around. "We good?"

"Yup. Better pucker up coz you're stuck with me till I die. Or if you die before me, then I'm gonna fricking bury myself alive with you."

"So gothic. Swoon."

"By the way, I won."

"Huh?"

"One of us had to get only one more number to win, and I got yours!"

"You sneaky...."

Virgil presses his palm over Roman's mouth. "Talk to the hand, you sore LOSER."

Roman chomps his teeth and Virgil snatches his hands away. "I might have lost, but you are going to be a SORE winner."

***

Patton: Hellooo, boys, it is me, making the rounds. Did you know that emotions take on colours in the brain? And you two are sending out the brightest red I've ever seen. Can we tone down the smexy stuff please?

Logan: It is rude, there are other people in your head.

Roman: OMG! I'm cheating on Virgil with all of you! NOOOOOOOOOOO!

Virgil: Well so am I, so we good. But after twelve tonight, it's another story.

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2130 h

"My ankles and toes hurt," wails Patton, putting half his weight on Logan as they stood before a huge screen that telecasted the show. "Wake me up when Thomas wins his award."

"Once again, Patton, there's only a one in five chance of Thomas winning, no matter if he's the favourite."
"Thomas deserves to win everything in life."

"But life may have other plans. Why don't you just take off your heels? Cursed be the person who invested them."

"I can't undress in front of the others!"

"Gods of every religion, give me patience. It's just your shoes."

"I forgot to pluck my toe hairs."

"Hmph. Why don't we take a walk outside?" asks Logan sympathetically.

Patton nods and they slip out into a roped off corridor leading backstage. Patton takes off his high heel shoes with a sigh of relief and the two of them stroll off hand in hand in companionable silence.

"It's such a relief that tonight is going smoothly," says Logan, at peace. "The team is stepping up to the task, even though they tend to leave their brains behind now and then."

"That's only because they need some downtime from you keeping them in line!" says Patton, winking.

"They need that too. Thank you for supporting me!"

Suddenly, a man in an official-looking red suit runs up to them. "Are you two heading backstage? Here you go." He thrusts an envelope in Logan's hand and walks off, his well-polished shoes clanking like horseshoes on the tiles.

"Wait!" cries Logan, but the man is already gone.

"What is it?" asks Patton, prodding the envelope as if there might be a frog in or something.

Logan reads the words printed on it: Best Male Lead Vocal Performance in an Animated Film.

"Oh dear," mutters Logan, holding the envelope away from him.

"That's Thomas' award, isn't it?" Patton wrings his fingers.

"Yes. We can open it..."

"And know if he won."

"No," says Logan. "It is wrong."

"And it feels wrong." Patton nods firmly. "We'll just pass it on."

"Yes." Logan pauses.

"Logan! You can't possibly be considering opening it!"

"No. Look at the flap... this has already been opened. It is tampered with. Someone already knows the winner."

"But that doesn't mean we ought to take a peek."

"We need to find out who broke the seal."
"We didn't even see the face of that man properly!"

"Whoever that was, we need to get backstage as soon as possible and deliver this to the right authority."

They hurry down the corridor.

"You know," says Patton, "What will Thomas think if he knew we had the chance to know if he was the winner or not?"

"He probably would tell us that we were right to not look," replies Logan sternly.

They work a few more steps.

"But," continues Logan. "He will find out in a few minutes." His fingers pick at the opened end of the envelope.

Patton snatches it from him. "No! You can't look!"

"Are YOU trying to peak inside?" Logan swipes it back.

"For once I can't trust you!" Patton jumps up trying to get it back.

"You'd do anything for Thomas, even cheat!"

"You'd cheat just to know everything beforehand!"

"It's driving me crazy not knowing who's in the envelope!"

"It's the surprise that makes it special!"

They tussle. A square of plain white paper falls out the envelope, and floats in lazy circles to the ground. Logan and Patton stare with eyes they cannot tear away. The paper finally rests on the ground, a name printed neatly in its center.

Logan, detached, picks up the paper with shaking fingers and puts it back in the envelope. "Well," he says. "Now we know. And the question is, do we tell?"

2200 h

"Who's there?"

Logan and Patton look up from the floor to see Archie slink around the corner, one hand on his glock. He lets go when he sees the two of them.

"Sir! Did you two fall down?" Archie asks respectfully, holding out a hand to help them up.

Logan and Patton stand up and Archie awkwardly puts his hand behind his back

"Isn't that an envelope that has the name of a winner?" Archie wonders why both look as if they had received shock treatment.

"Yes," says Logan at last.

"The one for Thomas' category," adds Patton.

Archie gasps. "You two looked, didn't you?"
Two guilty heads nod.

"How could you? I don't even know who you two are anymore!"

"In our defence," says Logan stiffly pulling down the cuffs of his frock coat over his sweaty palms, "The contents of the envelope fell out by mistake."

"And we don't know what to do now!" Patton fell to his knees and wailed at the ceiling, dabbing his eyes with a lace handkerchief. "Do we tell him or not?"

"That's an easy fix!" says Archie, beaming.

***

Archie: Hey, Thomas. Logan and Patton know if you won or not. Do you wanna know?

Thomas: WHAT?

Remy: Dayum. Logan and Patton being sneaky? Cute.

Roman: Do we get to scold him? Can we? Can I start? Can I?

Arachne: Hold my martini. If someone's blasting Logan, I call dibs.

Trixie: I'm sure I can dig up some dirt on Patton.

Patton: Everyone knows! Everyone knows! I am publically shamed! Archie! You can't just tell people....

Archie: I'm sorry! I didn't know it will blow up like this! I'm so sorry! But aren't you all about being honest and morally right?

Patton: Yes, but I need a break sometimes! Phew. You are right. Thomas?

Thomas: Ya-yes?

Patton: We found out accidentally on purpose. But we did consider looking, so we are bad in thought if not deed. Sorry. But do you want to –

Thomas: I don't know if I want to know or don't want to know! You just handed me your confusion. Imma about to panic. AAAAAARGH.

Patton: REMY! A LOZENGE!

Remy: He ate all I have!

Patton: Thumb sucking calms him down!

Remy: Uh – okay, mate, whatever floats his boat. Here comes my thumb, Tommy boy!

Patton: HIS OWN THUMB.

Remy: Couldn't have said that first, huh? Everyone's giving us weird looks now. Not for the first time.

Logan: You deserve those looks. But Patton is right; I am at fault here too, I should have had the sense of mind to not be tempted. But, Archie, you should not have blurted it out to the whole
Remy: He did nothing wrong, bossman! You and Patton would be dithering like golden oldies at the beach, and this way at least we got to know the truth.


Archie: Thanks for standing up for me, Remy!

Remy: Anytime, luv.

Archie: hamanahamanahamana

Virgil: Hold up, I was zoned out watching this really funny commentary livestream of the show, and I come back and everyone has turned to toddlers. What the hell's going on?

Logan: A strange man in a red suit handed us the envelope of the winner of Thomas' category. The envelope has been unsealed and tampered with.

Archie: A man with a red suit? I saw one creeping around back stage.

Roman: I heard him asking around about Thomas.

Virgil: He's one brave rat coz I saw him up on the catwalks! I asked him what he was doing up here but he ran away.

Roman: Ran away, huh? I got his number. Ha!

Virgil: Not now, Ro.

Trixie: Darlings. Bros. He was talking to Megadick. I was seated next to them, but I could not hear much of what they were whispering about. They something about the 'Two Envelope Paradox', whatever that means and "Rob the right winner"....

Patton: Well, we have one envelope here, and it is a paradox alright!

Thomas: And they want to rob the person who should win?

Virgil: O-O-O-O-Oooolllllaaaaah!

Logan: Roman, stop stimulating Virgil.

Roman: Not me! He ran off somewhere. Virge, you better not be getting frisked by some guy...

Virgil: Sheesh, chill. I just had a brilliant idea. I think I'm close to cracking this case.

Logan: Bravo. Care to enlighten us?

Virgil: No. I need a few more clues.

Logan: I command you to tell me.

Virgil: I don't know if I'm right... and if I tell, what if I was wrong?

Logan: I think saving the day is more important than saving your skin. We are saving the world here for all we know, not just saving Thomas!
Thomas: Once again, I’m so happy I matter so little although it’s my name in the title of this book.

Virgil: Great, now we got to change the title of this book to Saving the Fucking World, not Saving Primary Sanders.

Remy: Well I’m about to be serious for once. Okay, my hearties, I think Megadick or Scorpio or Dolon tampered with the envelope, don't ask me why they did it. It's classic cop stuff to come across torn envelopes. But they were sloppy, coz we figured out their ruse.

Logan: Maybe they wanted us to find out?

Remy: That's why I don't think we'll catch that person if we take this envelope as evidence, because they can say we are the ones who broke the seal. Then we can say goodbye to coming off this case as the good guys.

Virgil: All right, I promise I'll tell all I think is happening, but we're not gonna prove anything if we don't get that envelope to the presenter.

Thomas: Yes. I don't want to know if I won or not before they announce it like they should do. Come what may, I'm happy with what I did back when I recorded my voice for that role, and I'm glad for all the smiles I brought to people around the world when they heard me. And that's why I did it. I wanted to be a part of it when history was made when Disney created their first gay prince. I didn't do it for an award.

Archie: I think I see the stage manager up ahead. We can give him the envelope.

Logan: Very well.

Patton: Sit tight everyone; the next category is Thomas'!

Arachne: Birds, I checked the agenda. You won't believe this: Scorpio is presenting the next award!

Trixie: Him? What the hey did he do to get that spot?

Roman: I don't know, but maybe we can take him down too with the same shot.

Virgil: And I think we can catch Dolon too if we play our cards right.

Patton: Dolon's here?

A sharp jab at the back of the skull.

Dolon: Whaddup, bitches.

Patton: Aaaaaah!

Thomas: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

Logan: EEEEEEEESEESEEEEEEEEE- Coli virus.

Roman: AEAEEAEAEAEAEAEAEAEAEAEAEAEAERGHBBBBHHH!

Trixie: Aiiaiiiiiaiiiaiiiiiaiiiiiiiiiiii

Arachne: Ew.
Archie: Channel Archie temporarily disconnected.

Remy: Mammacita! El Diablo is here!

Virgil: Hi Dolon, how did you get here?

Dolon: I'm Patton's twin. I hijacked his mind waves. Again.

Logan: EVERYONE OFF THE MENTAL CHAT! NOW!

***

Chapter End Notes

What do you think of the YouTuber narrator person? When I was writing the descriptions, I realized that I myself sounded like one, so I just spliced in that voice over. Please keep track of what she says, there are a lot of clues in her ramblings!

I came up with so many fun little scenarios for the guys to trash the awards show, and decided to scrap most of them because dear lord this story is long enough already. I kept in Remy and Thomas playing the fool as I found it funny and I squeezed in two subtle cameos. And the Virgil and Roman part was just to be a silly bet, but I suddenly realized that I could tap into something deeper and I actually happy I got the chance to show a some development with Roman. Plus, how often do I get the chance to make a dick size doesn't matter joke into something heartwarming? LOL.

QotW: I am curious... will Thomas be jealous, supportive or upset when he finds out about Remy and Archie? Is he the kind who is oblivious to the signs or knows everything but waits for the right time to go, 'yeah, I knew all along'?

See you next week!
The Fucking End is Coming, Patience

Chapter Notes

Let's do a quick recap of where everyone is, shall we? I'm afraid I might have confused you. Thomas and Remy are seated right before the stage, in the front of the hall all the actors are seated. Arachne is in the VIP section, which is in the galley above the hall, and Scorpio is with her. Madame Trixie La Douche (for some reason I can't decide which name of hers to use) is in the special invitees section near the stage, on one of the wings. She is seated next to Megadick. Roman is at the back of the hall, with the rest of the security staff. Virgil is with him, but remember he can sneak around any part of the hall because that is what he does. Logan and Patton and Archie are all somewhere backstage. And Dolon... well you'll find out soon enough.

Content Warning: Violent and graphic violence, including death.

All right, on with the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2230 h

Stynkinritch taps the microphone. "That's it folks, we're down to the last award of the night. It's the category that's been getting the most press this awards season: Best Male Lead Vocal Performance in a Feature Film! My son's here tonight, hey there kiddo!" The crowd laughs while a handsome man seated not too far away from Thomas grins and waves back. "And we've got a nominee here who cheated death to get here tonight!" Chuckles splatter through the hall as Thomas tries not to slide under the table again. "And it's all thanks to one man: Mr Scorpio Svengali, The Director of the Dignitary Defence Division. Please welcome him on stage to present the award." Stynkinritch steps off the stage and heads off backstage.

2232 h

Logan, who is a burning a hole in the carpet pacing, his head on fire with conflict, snaps his head up. So that was why Scorpio wanted to be the one to hand out the award. To get all the credit. Not on my watch, thinks Logan, you are going down tonight.

2234 h

Scorpio walks down the aisle, and catches Arachne's eyes sending out a silent plea. He does not acknowledge it and continues towards the stage.

2236 h

Virgil runs up to Roman. "Ro, you need to get me to Thomas."
"Um... civilians aren't allowed in that section," says Roman, gripping Virgil's arm. "Where did you go? Where's Dolon?"

"He's here, but I got worse news for Thomas!"

Roman trusts Virgil, and walks up to the front of the hall, and flashes his bodyguard badge. He quickly waves Virgil Through.

2238 h

Scorpio stands behind the podium. A bead of sweat carves a thin line of glistening light down his temple. "Ladies and Gentleman. Just a few words before I begin. The Dignitary Defence Division is sworn to protect all the dignitaries..." he coughs and swallows. "From whatever danger that might affect them, whether from far away or closer than you can imagine."

Logan frowns. What could he mean by that comment?

"Anyway, on with the show," continues Scorpio.

A pretty lady comes over to hand him a card with all the nominees.

"The nominees are..." says Scorpio. "Thomas Sanders, for his voice work on The Nutcracker Prince, Robert Stynkinritch, for his voice work on The Crack Prince..." he continues listing the other three nominees, but they are not important to the story so let us forget them for eternity.

2240 h

Thomas holds onto Remy's hand. "I wish I asked who won," he says in a moment of weakness."

Before Remy could say anything supportive, Virgil pops from under the table.

"What the hell, you jack rabbit?" cries Remy, while clamping his hand over Thomas to stop him from screaming blue murder.

2242 h

After a slight delay the lady hurries back on stage with the envelope in hand. Scorpio takes it and opens it, visibly panting. "The winner is..."

2244 H

In the wings, a man in red lies waiting.

224430h

"Thomas," hisses Virgil. "I know you don't want to know, but the name in that envelope isn't the
real winner."

Thomas's jaw drops open.

2245 h

"THOMAS SANDERS!"

The canon roars, and a coconut with the award comes soaring through the air.

A hundred hands start clapping.

Thomas sits frozen.

"Go!" Virgil pokes Thomas's leg, and disappears.

Remy puts his hand on Thomas' back. "For what it's worth, congrats, buddy. Shit's about to hit the fan. Just go pick up that trinket, and then we're ready to face hell."

Thomas nods, and scrapes back his chair. He walks onto stage as if in a trance. He floats more than climbs up the steps and approaches the podium in a daze. But there was nothing vague about the cold hard look he gives Scorpio as he accepts the award.

Thomas stands behind the microphone. What can he say? His moment of glory has been stolen from him, and he just wanted to scream as long as he can, then a bit more.

2247 h

Leaving Patton behind with Archie, Logan looks on in consternation on to the stage from behind a curtain at the back. This was going too smoothly. He was not surprised when Thomas won, but was the bad guy just going to let him walk away with the trophy. Virgil appears at his elbow.

"Hiya, Chief."

"Virgil! When are you going to tell me what the H-E-Double L is going on?"

"You? Swearing? Thing's must be serious. Thomas isn't the winner. I'm positive they put a fake name in the envelope. I'll tell you why soon, and it's not the reason you think. There's like three separate villain plans happening at once."

"TELL ME GODSDAMMIT!"

"Well, one's about to be revealed."

“Oh you little secretive shit…” snarled Logan.

2248 h

Thomas takes a deep breath and tells his nerves to calm down. It's just like diving into a pool. "It's a great honour to receive this award," he says, parroting the most generic lines he could think of. "I
had a dream, and it came true! I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me! I must thank my father and my mother and my brother and my other brother and my other other brother and my best friend and my chauffer/ date and my agent and my chief of security and my bodyguard and my detective and some other people who also like me... and I must thank... mother nature! Yes! Thank her for everything!"

2249 h

Scorpio, standing behind Thomas, makes a big show of looking at the envelope on his hand, scrutinizes the broken seal, and then does an exaggerated face of realising that something is afoot. He is truly acting for the cheap seats at the back. He steps forward to put a hand on Thomas' shoulder to stop him. He opens his mouth to speak, when –

2250 h

The Man in Red steps onto stage. "That award is mine."

Thomas looks at him in horror. "DOLON!"

Scorpio takes a step back in surprise too. "Stick to the plan," he mouths.

But Dolon was having none of it. He calmly walks centre stage, loving all the eyes on him, as he holds the whole room and a thousand viewers behind television sets and computer screens and phones in his hand.

"Hello, world. Thomas Sanders is an imposter. It is my voice you hear in The Nutcracker Prince, not his. And he was about to steal my award."

The crowd gasps. Tables turn over and radios buzz and heels clack and cameras flash.

Thomas goes paler than an Irish ghost. His biggest fear is laid out bare, being told that his intellectual accomplishments were not his own. No one took his job seriously, no matter how hard he tried to explain that it was legit. It was worse back when he did YouTube, and he hoped he will have more credibility as an actor, but those stories still followed him. And... what if everyone believed Dolon? What he said had some truth in it... Guys... You can't believe what Dolon says, can you? He thought fervently.

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Patton: Hey Thomas, we can hear you. And we love you. I trust you, and you are an amazing person!

Dolon: Your golden boy who can do no wrong has been tricking you all this time. He is the mastermind behind this all, and he's the one screwing me over, not the other way around.

Logan: Thomas is this true.

Thomas: It's a lie!

Logan: What do you think, Birds of Gay? Do we believe Thomas?

Birds of Gay: We believe you Thomas!
Dolon: YOU FOOLS! WHY DOES NO ONE TRUST ME?

Virgil: Coz you a bitch. And we're in a bitchslapping mood. Roman, you got my back?

Roman: I'm always right behind you. Except when you are behind me.

Virgil: That's a great battle cry.

Logan: Birds of Gay, ATTACK!

2255 h

Virgil throws open the curtains at the back of the stage, and charges forward, gun pointed at Dolon.

Roman jumps onto the camera crane at the back of the hall, grins apologetically at the operator, and jams the gears. The crane whirs and comes to life. Roman swings over everyone's heads and slingshots himself on to the stage, twirling his gun around his forefinger.

Dolon looks at two attackers coming from both sides, and rolls forward. Roman and Virgil crash into each and other tumble into an ungainly heap.

"That's the best you can do?" Dolon giggles, his eyes red with madness. He marches towards Thomas. "Come on Tommy, give me that blasted award. IT'S MINE, MINE MINE!"

Patton squeezes past Logan and runs onto stage. "Dolon! Don't!"

Logan grabs Patton, and pushes him behind him. He takes his gun out, but keeps it at his side, ready to aim at anyone who steps out of line.

Thomas stands his ground. "You aren't stealing anything more from me, and this award isn't mine to give."

"Dolon, you hotheaded foo!" snaps Scorpio. "You ruined the plan. But let's wing it." He grabs Thomas from the back of his collar.

"Take you hands off him, you scum guzzler!" Remy bounds onto stage and twists Scorpio's wrist away. He backs away with Thomas at his side. Scorpio stands still, weighing his opposition.

Dolon stalks towards Thomas, like a panther on the kill.

Suddenly, something smacks Dolon on the face, and he staggers back.

"Stay where you are," snarls Archie.

"Did you just throw you're gun at me? How dumb are you?" laughs Dolon, picking up the aforementioned firearm.

"I had nothing else to throw," mutters Archie.

"Thank you, compadre, the security didn't let me bring my own gun, but now I have one!" Dolon spins around and aims the gun at Roman and Virgil who had sorted themselves out and closing in on him.
The stage is frozen in a stale mate.

Logan calls out in a clear voice. "Clear the hall."

"Aw, the audience makes it so much more fun!" Dolon cackles.

The security personal usher everyone out, calling out for back up. The cameras are ordered off. Soon the room is empty except for our villains and heroes on stage. The humungous clock atop the dome crowning the City Hall ticks on, marking the seconds in the dark night.

"Too bad no one can get out," says Dolon, and takes a remote control out of his pocket. He presses a button and the doors leading out of the City Hall clang shut.

2300 h

***

Patton: Arachne!

Arachne: What? I thought we must not use the mental link anymore.

Patton: I need your help!

Arachne: How can I help? I'm no use with the gun.

Patton: We have something stronger than a gun. I have a mental connection with Dolon... can you try if you can reach out to Scorpio? Our brothers might listen to us...

Arachne: We can try...

Patton: I'm sweating from spots I didn't know I could, but we must hurry up, we have only one more hour left of the mental link!

***

2302 h

Arachne braces herself against the wall as the frightened crowd fights past her. The hallways and foyer is crowded with too many people trapped behind the locked doors. The poor pretty lady who brought the envelops on stage is curled up in a corner, wishing she could go home and wear sweatpants and eat a bowl of pasta, she never signed up for this madness.

Madame La Douche looks back from where she holds onto her 'husband's' arm, and gives Arachne a flying kiss. Arachne nods, squares her shoulders and heads back into the hall. She focuses her mental energy to one tiny dart as she walks down the bare aisle, reaching out with all her thoughts of her brother. Her consciousness brushes up against another's that is surprisingly familiar, joined by decades of shared memories and experiences and a bond made by blood.

***

Arachne: Scorpio.
Scorpio: Arachne.

Arachne: I know I've been your partner in crime for many long years. But it has not taken us anywhere but to more heart break.

Scorpio: It brought me here, and I can't turn back.

Arachne: I did.

Scorpio: But you did not sink as low as I did.

Arachne: I sank lower; I pretended to be on Thomas' side. But he forgave me. Not redeemed me, as it is something I have to do on my own. I was always the more sensible one of the two of us. I am begging of you now to just give in. it will get better.

Scorpio: I will never become better.

Arachne: But you can stop yourself from getting worse. Do your time for all the wrong you did. You will come out of it, if not better, at least different form what you have become.

Scorpio: Is there a chance?

Arachne: Everyone gets a chance. But it's up to you to take, earn it, and not exploit it.

Scorpio: I daren't take it.

Arachne: If not for others or yours, do it for my sake…

***

Arachne comes to the lip of the stage and climbs up. She looks at Scorpio, tears filing her eyes.

Scorpio falls to his knees and lifts up his hands. "I surrender."

Remy releases a breath he did not realise he was holding. Archie sees his shoulders relax with relief, and allows himself a small smile. At Logan's command, Archie steps up to Scorpio's prone form and handcuffs it. Remy looks at Archie with an indescribable expression as the final click falls into place. Thomas' eyes dart between the two.

2308 h

"Weak!" scoffs Dolon. "What? You expect me to do the same now? Ha! I got more tricks up my sleeve!" He presses another button on the remote, and the coconut canon above the stage cranks and turns to aim straight at Thomas. "Bye bye, Birdie!"

"If you want the award so bad, have it!" cries Thomas. He tosses the statuette, and it rolls to Dolon's feet.

Dolon does not dare to stoop to pick it up, not with Roman and Virgil inching closer like bulldogs.

"Back away, boys," he says with a mocking smile. "Or else Thomas is yesterday's news."

Roman and Virgil stop where they are helplessly.
Patton interlaces his hands through Logan's, and closes his eyes.

2310 h

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Patton: Um... Dolon?

Dolon: Why are you doing this, you little fairy in a dress?

Patton: Because I still love you like a brother, even though you may not me.

Dolon: Seriously? You are trying to play that card on me? 'I still love you! Don't turn evil!'

Patton: Sigh. Even your mental voice sounds devious.

Dolon: That's cause I already am!

Patton: Mental?

Dolon: Whoa, I maybe a villain, but let's keep things PC around here. I meant I've already turned evil and nothing you say can turn me to your side!

Patton: Who's talking about sides?

Dolon: Isn't this a forgive-the-villain operation?

Patton: It is. But it isn't about me forgiving you, it is about you forgiving yourself.

Dolon: Me? Why should I? The world should say sorry to me! it is they who screwed me over!

Patton: As long as you put the blame anywhere it's really not gonna make anything about you better is it?

Dolon: Cut the fortune cookie crap.

Patton: Alright. I will get even with you. Maybe the world was unfair to you. Maybe you did not set out to wage war on the world. But what about me? You made my life miserable growing up. I only came clean with myself that I like wearing dresses recently, and that was all because of you holding me down. I finally found people who like me for me. That is because I finally liked myself. You need to like yourself first for the world to like you. That's the first step. And I can help you get there.

Dolon: Nice story. But I'm not convinced.

Patton: Don't you want to be a good brother again?

Dolon: You forgot something. I don't give a shit about you.

Patton: I – uh. That hurt. But... why?

Dolon: You can't give me what I want.

Patton: What's that?
Dolon: Everything Thomas has.

Patton: He got all he has because he worked hard for it. And because he is a nice person, and people like him for that. And because he is humble enough to be happy with what he has.

Dolon: I'm not gonna get that playing nice. I need it fast, and I need it now.

Patton: Then I can't help you.

Dolon: I though so. My fingers are getting awfully close to this button.

Patton: Why don't you try making your way to where he is now in some other way without killing him? And killing him is not going to make the award yours...

Dolon: You forgot another thing.

Patton: I'm scared to ask what...

Dolon: I've stopped caring. About what's right and wrong a long time ago. About other people who stand in my way. About myself. I care about one thing only...

Patton: What?


***

Dolon presses the button.

2315 h
The mechanism in the canon warms up.

231504 h
Thomas' breath crystallises in his throat as the barrel of the canon aims straight at his chest.

231508 h
Everybody on stage freezes as all eyes lock on the canon with morbid fascination.

231512 h
Remy takes a deep breath.

231516 h
Archie sees what Remy is about to do, and jumps onto a ladder leading up to the platform with the canon.
231520 h
Remy pushes Thomas out of the way.

231524 h
Dolon turns and runs, no one notices him go.

231528 h
Thomas falls to the ground.

231532 h
Dolon realises he has left the trophy behind, and looks back over his shoulder.

231536 h
Remy tries to move away, but fear freezes him.

231540 h
Archie reaches the platform above.

231544 h
Dolon meets Patton's eyes, and there is no pity in them.

231548 h
The spell broken, everyone starts moving at last.

231548 h
The spell break too late for Remy.

231552 h
Dolon runs away from the chaos he created.
Not knowing what else to do, Archie sticks his fist in the canon.

The canon explodes.

Ears ring.

Smoke fills the stage.

Eyes smart.

The curtain catches fire.

Muffled cries.

Roman and Virgil share a look, and chase after Dolon.

Thomas grips Remy's shoulder. Remy does not even notice, his eyes focused on the canon, still screened in smoke.

"Go to him," says Thomas. "You saved my life, and he yours. Now, save his life."

Remy nods, and sprints to the ladder.

Remy crawls through the smoke, feeling the heat of the flames close by. His wandering hands brush against soft hair matted with sweat. Archie. Crying out with relief, Remy cradles his head on his lap. "Hey, champ, wake up. It's me, Remy."

Archie opens his eyes blearily. "Remy!"

The smoke drifts away, and Remy sees the mangled burnt stub of Archie's arm. He fights back the bile rising in his throat. He shrugs off his jacket and wraps up the arm, which has begun to bleed copiously. It isn't going to be enough, he was already losing a lot of blood. Remy turns Archie's head away onto the crook of his elbow.

"I saw what's left," says Archie, his voice a whisper.

"I'm so sorry," says Remy, his voice broken.

"Don't be. I'd have done the same to save Thomas. And I'll do the same ten times over to save you."

"I don't deserve you and your big fricking heart," mumbles Remy, a solitary tear falling from his eyelash onto Archie's nose.
"I used to think I didn't deserve someone as cool as you." Archie smiles up at his double reflections in Remy's sunglasses. "I'm loving this moment, but I think I might lose more than just my arm if I don't get to a hospital quick.

"Shoot, yeah, lemme pick you up."

"I don't think you can pick me up."

"Well you lost a bit of weight."

"Are you already making jokes about me losing an arm?"

"Shit... I'm – I"

"Shut up. I love your mean humour, remember?"

"Keep saying stuff like that and I'm afraid I'll make you love more than just my humour."

Remy picks up Archie, his body buckling under the weight.

"How are we getting down the ladder?" asks Archie, wincing as his posture shifts.

"I've got a better idea." Remy steps off the platform on to thin air.

2320 h

Thomas runs across the stage, picking up the trophy from where it had fallen, and heads back stage. He does not know what Roman and Virgil plan to do when they caught up with Dolon, and he dare not try and find out through the mental link in case Dolon was spying on them. But he knows Dolon would not stop unless he had his trophy. He has to stop Dolon somehow, because of everyone he knew on the planet, it was him Dolon feared and admired the most. Plus it was high time Thomas does something brave. He has been damsel in distressing for far too long.

2322 h

"Where did that rat sneak off to?" pants Roman as he and Vigil sweep through the maze of rooms behind the main hall. Finding nothing, they emerge on the left wing of the hall, up on the gallery.

"There he is!" cries Virgil, pointing up at the ceiling.

The main hall is at the centre of the City Hall building, right under the dome, which arched above the main seating area. A concentric circles of coloured glasses let in the pinprick lights of the stars, and a red figure can be made out climbing onto the mezzanine that ran around inside the dome. Flames licked the walls just underneath. A spiral staircase leads to the mezzanine from the gallery, and Roman and Virgil hurries up it. Dolon looks back as our two heroes dash onto the mezzanine through the wall of fire.
"I was wondering how long it will take for you to catch up," he says, leaning against the glass lazily.

Virgil nods at Roman, and each moves forward along the circle in opposite directions. Soon Dolon will be caught in the middle, like in between two crab claws. That did not seem to bother Dolon though.

"You are good as caught, friend!" says Roman grimly, his gun steady.

"I more worried that you have a last ace up your sleeve," says Virgil.

"That I do! Bright boy!" says Dolon with a smile like a teething baby's. He holds up his remote. "When I press this button..."

2324 h
Remy and Archie land on the camera crane Roman had swung on to the stage on, and the momentum carries them across to the back of the hall. Remy carefully gets off, Archie clinging to him, and strides out of the hall.

Outside, in the foyer, he is met with a throng of picnicked people smashed against the doors, which still remain stubbornly closed.

"Make way, people!" screams Remy. "I've got a wounded person here!" He makes it to the front. "Can't we get these blasted doors open?"

"Nope," says a policeman. "We got a team on the other side trying to burn their way through."

"Here," says Trixie handing Remy a bucket of ice.

"Thanks, madame, but I'm not in the mood for a bloody drink!" says Remy, laying Archie down on the floor by the doors.

"It's for his arm, chuckie," she says quietly, "It'll stop the bleeding for a bit." She then returned to her 'husband' and pretended she did not know the two of them at all.

Remy stares broken at the solid doors, wishing he could blast through them. He cannot let Archie lose the fight after what he did for him.

2326 h
Logan surveys the scene. He did not like how things had gone down, but deal with it he must. He looks worriedly up at the fire above their heads. "Arachne, Patton," he commands, "Help me get Scorpio out of here. Then we must try to get hold of Dolon's phone, open the gates, catch Dolon..."
He rubs his temples. "So much to do and so little time.

"One thing at a time says," Patton, patting him on the back. "Our boys are doing good work."

Arachne pulls Scorpio onto his feet. "I hope you feel sorry for yourself, you barbarian."

Scorpio walks up to Logan. "There's something you should know. Dolon has the trigger for a..."
"Boom!" shouts Dolon gleefully. "There's a bomb under the stage. And we're all gonna burn!"

"He's crazy!" says Roman, stopping halfway around his semi-circle, too wary to move forward.

"And I know crazy, but this is clinical insanity." Virgil stops directly opposite him.

"What are we gonna do?"

"I dunno... I'm not good with calming down a nutcase, I'm usually the nutcase..."

"And I don't think having sex with Dolon is going to calm him down. That only works with you."

"Guys!" coughs Thomas, stumbling on to the mezzanine, throwing off his jacket, which is aflame.

"Hold still, I'll talk him out of it." He holds up the trophy. The four of them now stand at the four compass points around the circle.

"Talk?" scoffs Dolon. "I have no use for words. I want your blood." He aims at Thomas and shoots.

"You are telling this only now?" Logan pulls out a fistful of hair.

"It's through that trapdoor." Scorpio points at square panel on the stage. "I don't know, but we may be able to diffuse it."

"I have studies bombs inside out," says Logan calmly. He approaches the trapdoor. "Dammit, it is too small for me to fit through!"

"I shouldn't have eaten that cake this morning," says Patton mournfully.

"I'll do it," says Arachne. "I'll fit in perfectly, I starve myself to have this perfect figure society has thrust upon me."

"Are you sure?" asks Logan, surprised.

"Yes, it's not like we have another option." She smiles with determination, touching up her blush with a powdered brush.

"Listen to every word I say."

Arachne nods and slides in. Logan holds the trapdoor open, looking in.

"Do you see it, Miss Arachne Svengali?"

"Patience, Mr Logan Craggers. It is dark in here, wait till I switch on my handy dandy penlight. Ah perfect. I think this is it. It's a black box with all kinds of wires running out of it. Très chic, I must say."

"Is there a black wire?"

"Yes..."
2332 h

Remy presses the ice wrapped in his coat against Archie's shoulder, watching the red blood seep through.

"We called ambulances," says the policeman. "A lot of the people here has smoke inhalation."

Archie mumbles weakly in Remy's arms.

"I've got you, stay with me, rhighto luv?" Remy brushes the hair back form Archie's colourless face.

"Don't let me die," whispers Archie, as his eyes roll back in his head.

"I'm not gonna let a dumb old man in a silly grey robe come cut your life in short with a stupid scythe." Remy ducks down and pokes at Archie's cheek with his nose.

Archie chuckles. "I'm glad I have you with me. I'll die of laughter."

"I make you laugh?"

"Yeah. I'm kind of a dull guy, and you are the only one who makes me laugh."

"Maybe I can give you another reason to live." Remy locks his eyes on Archie's, and closes the gap between their lips.

A red tinge of a blush appears on Archie's deathly pale cheeks.

2334 h

Thomas steps aside too late. A thin red line appears on his cheek.

"You hurt my primary, I'll make you gargle blood!" growls Roman.

Virgil motions him to stay quiet.

"Dolon!" says Thomas. "I'll give you the trophy. But you must press the button that opens the doors. And then you will slide the gun and the remote to Virgil and Roman. Got that?"

Dolon looks sad. "Thomas, I always listen to what you say." He presses a button.

Thomas looks at him, heart in his throat. "Can everyone get out now?"

"Psych! No, in five minutes the bomb goes off! Woo hoo! And if you want the doors to open, too bad! I have one bullet left, and I'm putting it to good use." Dolon throws the remote across the open space in the middle above the roaring inferno, and shoots at it.

2336 h

"Logan! A count down just started." Arachne looks at the big red digits in horror.
"Crap crap crap. Do you see a big red button?"

"Yes."

"Press it, keep pressure on it."

"Done, next?"

"Cut the black wire next to it."

"Thank goodness I have my nail clippers with me! What's next?"

"Twist the end of the black wire to the green one!"

"There's no green!"

"Dammit, whatever happens, don't let go of the button!"

"All right. TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

"I'm thinking!"

"USE THAT BIG BRAIN OF YOURS!"

"What's under the building?" asks Patton.

"The sewers," says Logan.

"Will the effect be less if I drop the bomb in there?" asks Arachne.

"Yes," says Logan. "But you can't let go of the button when you drop it. Do you have any tape on you?"

"No! I'm not a handyman! What else can I do?"

In the dark, Arachne makes up her mind.

2338 h

Dolon's remote and bullet hang in mid air, the latter speeding towards the former.

Virgil throws himself off the mezzanine and across the flames, plucking the remote out of the air, and lands on the opposite railing. Roman pulls him to safety.

The bullet flies straight at Thomas, and there is no getting away this time.

Roman fires his gun, and neatly strikes Dolon's bullet. Both explode harmlessly against the glass of the dome.

"The jump was fucking amazing," says Roman thickly into Virgil's ear.

"You gunwork is fucking amazing," says Virgil against Roman's neck. "And I feel your other gun appreciates it too."

"I always wanted to have sex in a burning building." Roman's eyes are on fire.
"If we have the time," says Virgil, and pushes Roman back. "But first." He presses a button in the remote.

2340 h

"Logan! Can you think of something else?" Arachne feels deathly calm even though blood pounds in her ear.

"I'm coming down." Logan sticks his head through the trapdoor. "It's my duty."

"You'll get stuck and that's no use to any of us."

"I cannot let you die!"

"You aren't. I am." Arachne takes a deep breath. "Scorpio. Brother. How sad is it that that word is rusty on my lips. I know I haven't been the best role model to you, but take control of your life and make it one worth living, like I took control of my death and made it one worth dying. Logan, I once loved you and disregarded you, now I do not love you but I do respect you in ways I did not think I could bridge again. goodbye, and thank you for the last few hours of kindness you showed me. Patton, make Logan happy and look after my children."

With a final smile she dropped down into the sewers below, holding fast onto the button. She was still smiling as she sank to the bottom of the sludge, with seconds to spare.

2342 h

Remy is the first to break the kiss, and awkwardly rubs his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Archie? I hope that was okay..." he says uncertainly.

"Don't worry," Archie's smile is fuller, and he is not ready to die anytime soon. "We'll complete that kiss another day.

A dull thud echoes from the foundations of the building, and the doors slide open.

"You must be a hell of good kisser if it makes miracles happen!" says Archie.

"I'll sock you in the kisser if you say stuff like that," says Remy, furious at the dopey grin he knows must be stretching across his face.

"Um... arm..." reminds Archie.

"Oh, yes!" Remy picks him up, feeling as if he is walking on air, and rushes to the nearest ambulance.

2346 h

Dolon feels horror climb up his spine with her icy claws. His grand plan has gone in flames literally.

Thomas holds up the trophy, its paint peeling off in the heat. "All of this for a little bit of plastic
with a bad gold spray paint. You can have it." He sighs. For some people, redemption is only a theory, and they'll feel happier huddling a worthless piece of junk they had grafted their life mission on to. He tosses the trophy across to Dolon.

The problem is that Thomas is not a good thrower as Virgil, and Dolon is nowhere near as good as Roman at catching. The spinning award falls short, and Dolon, eyes ablaze with greed leans too far out to catch it. He looses his balance and falls through the ring of fire. He falls like a burning star that never got the chance to shine, not because it never was in the sky, but because it never took the chance to fly. He catches the trophy seconds from the ground, and his face is a serene smile before he shatters against the cold floor of the hall, happier than he had ever been his whole life in its last few moments. But it is ill gained joy, is it not?

2348 h

It is Patton who is surprisingly the calmest as he closes the trapdoor, and helps a paralysed Logan to his feet. Scorpio weeps openly and does not resist when Patton takes his hand and leads him off the burning stage. They walk through the hall, wreaths of fire the only decorations now of the celebrations held here today, the rain of debris the confetti. They pass Dolon's prone form in the wreckage, and Patton breaks down in tears. Logan and he lean on each other for comfort, and they exit in silence, leaving behind a thoughtful Scorpio. He sighs, resolved to make good with the chance he is given, and follows the sombre pair.

2350 h

"Guys!" shouts Thomas over the groans of the building swallowed by fire. "The spiral staircase has fallen down! How are we getting out?"

Virgil looks down into the hall. "Ro, ready for one last shot at playing Tarzan?"

"Don't remind me of my failed auditions," says Roman. "I'm doing good with what I'm doing now."

He beams at Thomas and picks him up with one arm. "Saving this fellow's sorry ass," He picks Virgil with the other. "And as for my loving trusting boyfriend's ass... my imagination is the limit."

With that he jumps down into the flames...

.... And lands on the camera crane. It creaks down onto the floor, and Roman scampers through the destruction to the exit. They make it just in time, as the dome collapses inwards behind them.

2352 h

Logan, Roman, Virgil, Patton, Thomas and Remy meet up out in the driveway, framed by the burning building. They all looks worse for wear, and they nod in tired acknowledgement. Celebrities and attendants and catering staff and who have you continue to stagger out into cars in ruined finery, their former screams of panic turned to laughter as they swap tales of a night to remember.

The real tragedy lies with the remaining members of the Birds of Gay.

"Where's Arachne?" asks Thomas hesitantly. Even though he did not like her much, she had been his agent for a long time, and he would not even have had his role in the movie if not for her.
"She chose to diffuse the bomb, and she did not make it as we were ill prepared," says Logan simply. Logic, as usual, is his comfort in times of distress. "It was her choice."

"I'm sorry we could not stop it before..." Roman's voice trails off. He hates a job half done. "But what is done is done," he says, and accepts he cannot be perfect all the time.

Remy sticks his hands in his pockets. "And she died an honourable death. I did not get the chance to thank her for making Scorpio see sense. But I hope she knew. Thank goodness Scorpio is in jail now."

"At least Dolon is out of the picture now." Patton's eyes have no more tears to shed. "And I honestly believe he left in the way he always wanted to. Clutching an achievement he didn't deserve, burning like a phoenix."

Virgil sighs. "I'm ready to hibernate for an ear, but it's not over yet. We have one more villain to catch."

Trixie: Ho ho ho, my little elves. Mama Santa is ready to land her sleigh. I'm all set.

2354 h

Megadick gets in his Rolls Royce, and lets out a heartfelt sigh. "What a night!" he tells his wife as she gets in.

"Yes, I cannot believe half the things that happened!" She leans over with a snivelling air. "But did your plan work out?" She purrs, her pearl pendant trailing seductively over his chest.

"How did you know about my plan?"

"Oh, I know everything about you, tubby bearkins!"

"Well, we are yet to see if operation rob the right winner turned out well. I did switch out the name in the envelope, and put in that kid Thomas Sanders' name. He has already a lot on his plate, but he I needed to get him out of the winning race! Ha! I only had to drop a few hints here and there and soon he'll be in the clink! Pity that fool Scorpio didn't get to say his line because that madman Dolon crashed the whole party! I can still salvage the whole scheme still."

"How lovely." She sat back with a gentle smile. "After such a successful day, I have a surprise for you."

"I like where this is going!"

She taps the glass partition to the driver's compartment. "Make a left here and pull over."

"Where are we going?" Megadick asks excitedly.

"Well, I am going to the nearest bar and cracking open a beer. And you, my dear, have a date with law. In jail, biyotch!" Madame La Douche whips of her wig and pulls out a gun. "Shut up and step out the car."

Megadick fumbles as he trips out the car. "How? What? When?"

"Greetings, Mr Filthy Stynkinritch," says Logan as he pushes Stynkinritch against the car and handcuffs him. "You are under arrest for many many many crimes."
"Did you get the recording?" asks Patton.

"All here, boo," says Trixie, holding up her pendant.

2356 h

A Macleran hurtles down an empty road when Roman steps onto the tarmac. Tires squeal as the car skids to a halt. A young man jumps out.

"What the hell, man, I could have run you over!" he shouts at Roman.

Roman grins his most charming, and presses his gun between his eyes.

Virgil strolls up to him. "Hiya, Robert Stynkinritch, or must I say Rob the right winner? The games up, and you'll be joining your old man in prison."

"No! I'm a rich straight cis white dude! I can get away with anything! I'll call Daddy!" He whips out his phone. "Daddy? There are two men trying to arrest me! No, Daddy. Yes, Daddy. Daddy!mDaddy. Wants to get you two fired. What are your first and last names?"

"There's no one at the other end of the line," says Virgil with a smirk. "Your precious daddy will be in jail pretty soon." Virgil handcuffs him.

"Make them tight, Virge," says Roman. "Hey, Rob, I might consider letting you go scott-free if you say Daddy again."

"Ro, heel!"

2358 h

Remy opens the passenger door of the limousine for Thomas, and gets in himself. He drives off slowly towards Sanderville.

"Today was a flop of a date, wasn't it?" says Thomas with a chuckle, looking at Remy through the corner of his eye.

"Uh yeah, about that," says Remy, scratching the back of his neck.

"Both hands on the wheel, please."

"Whoops, my bad. The thing is, gurl, I'm kinda in a sticky situation..."

"You like Archie, huh?"

Remy almost swerves the limo into a ditch.

"Whoa!" cries Thomas, trying to hold the rolled up handkerchief against his face in place.

"My bad, hombre! Let's get you sorted out." Remy parks the limo and turns to Thomas. He pulls out the first aid kit from the glove compartment and starts to expertly fix a bandage for Thomas' face.
"You are good with wounds," says Thomas, mouth twisted to the side.

"You learn a lot of things as a cop, it's nothing," mutters Remy. "I hope I don't make a wound over here," he taps Thomas on the chest, "When I say I do like Archie a lot."

"Everything's fine, Remy. I knew for quite some time. Plus we were never going to work out, and this pairing was a ruse for the press. I'm done with all that now. We're good."

"Thank goodness, you are a swell bloke, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise." Remy smiles contentedly and starts the limo again. The car zooms down the road. I think I like like Archie, he tells himself.

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Archie: Um... I like like you too.

Remy: Shit, I didn't mean to think that out loud!

Archie: Heh. It is probably the painkillers talking.

Logan: Good news, Birds of Gay! We won. We got everyone in the clink.

Roman: As if we were ever gonna lose!

Patton: I'm just happy we're safe from now on.

Virgil: Unless, Dolon comes back as a zombie...

Thomas: VIRGIL!

Virgil: Too soon?

Trixie: Definitely.

Remy: But I'm looking forward to the day we can laugh about all this.

Archie: Sorry if I'm being sappy, but I'm drugged out now. You guys are the best. Saving Primary Sanders is the best decision I made in my life.

Thomas: Not just me, we uncovered a bigger conspiracy. We saved the fucking world! And we can do it again!

Birds of Gay: Hell yes!

And with that rousing sentiment, the mental link fell silent for the last time. Or does it?

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to Chapter 1, when Patton tells of Dolon's death: "Wanted to die in a fiery
ball of flame, so I hope he is happy somewhere out there.” I gave Dolon the death he always wanted.

This was quite the chapter wasn't it? I probably did not dive into some aspects as much as I should have... but oh well. I wrote what felt was right. What are your thoughts?

Don't worry, we're not done with this bunch yet. There's one more chapter coming up, and we're done, unless I feel the need for an epilogue.

QotW: I have another question about Thomas, coz only his character has another bullet point on my list... Do you remember the video where he talks about how people don't take him seriously as a YouTuber? What are your thoughts about that? Do you think it will extend to him feeling 'less serious' as an actor? (Technically we can call him an actor too, yeah?

See you on Wednesday, hopefully! The next chapter will have all the explanations for the mystery, but I've given all the clues if you care to figure it out all by yourself.

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