By the pricking of my thumbs

by mentosmorii

Summary

es·cha·tol·o·gy
/ˌeskəˈtæləj/ noun
the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind

In a slightly different world, Artemis discovers magic before that fateful day in Ho Chi Minh City. A magic au.
In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora

Artemis Fowl got the suffix ‘the first’ tacked onto his name at around 3 a.m. on September 1st, 1988. He was in Moscow on business, playing cards in a smoke-wreathed room with various Bratva members. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t with his wife — during the last check-up they’d scheduled with a specialist in London, Artemis and Angeline had been informed that their child was likely due after September 10th or so. One also shouldn’t judge him too harshly for the smoking, as he honestly didn’t make a habit of it. He only did it during business. It was part of the necessary pretense, simply another seedy box to check to make sure he wasn’t suspected of being soft.

It was such that Artemis found himself in the dining room of Solomonov Vitaliy Romanovich, an obscenely powerful man who delighted in going by the diminutive ‘Vitya’.

Vitya gestured at one of the footmen to refill his drink, taking a hearty bite out of one of the wild salmon canapés on his china tea plate. Artemis watched him carefully, eyeing the man in the same way one might study a darkened room to confirm through scrutiny the absence of danger, and he set his cards on the table.

“Folding so soon?”

Artemis motioned for the footman from before to pour more sparkling mineral water into his drink flute. Betraying nothing, he met Vitya’s gaze, raising his glass to the mafiya man in a mock toast. Artemis smiled, ignoring the way the Major shifted in his seat further down the table.

The game slowly started back up again, and Artemis leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes. The tobacco in his cigarette had done nothing for him other than cause a brief spike upwards in his heartrate. In the dim, artificial light of the room, after so many hours of work, the chatter around him seemed like it was bleeding in and out of his awareness. Crossing his arms and sighing, he tried to find a comfortable posture on the chair, but it was of no use. He hoped his compatriots would fold soon, but he suspected Vitya would keep the party going on into the noon of the next day — disoriented business partners were docile business partners, after all.

On his right wrist, he felt his ornate watch ticking away. Each thrum of the device felt like the throbbing of a second pulse against his skin. It offered none of the warmth that a more complex machine might emit, only motion.

It was 5 a.m., Moscow Standard Time.

To the West, Angeline Fowl lay in her bed, feeble and pallid. A young Domovoi Butler stood in the door, diligent, as the midwife cooed at the baby. The older woman gently rocked the small child in her arms, and Angeline stared at them, her eyes drooping due to near delirium from exhaustion.

“Is the baby… alright?” Butler asked, his voice low and hesitant.

The nurse blinked. “Hm? Why, of course he is, Mr. Butler.”
Butler nodded his head, and she went back to fussing over the child. The baby blinked, his eyes almost comically large for his tiny frame. He seemed to be looking at Butler in curiosity, uninterested in the nurse’s ministrations. Butler gave the boy a small wave.

He’d read that engaging a child’s senses was beneficial for development.

In response, the child looked away, glancing back at the nurse’s face. The baby had remained mostly silent after the nurses had wrapped him up in a blanket. Butler hadn’t been hoping for a colicky baby, per se, but the quietness of the room unnerved him.

Angeline weakly tried to raise her hand, and Butler straightened, ready to move to her aid if need be.

“Let me see him,” she coughed, voice scratchy.

The nurse holding the baby stepped closer to the bed, bending at the knees so that the baby was close enough for Angeline to see properly. Angeline exhaled, smiling as tears pricked her eyes.

“My baby,” she murmured, and her son looked at her, his dark blue eyes glistening in the darkness. “My son.”

Shooting her a final glance, Butler stepped out into the hall, giving Angeline and her child some privacy. Artemis Fowl needed to be informed that his son had been born.

As he made his way to the Fowl patriarch’s study, his ears kept perking up, waiting for a child’s cry or wail to echo from Angeline’s room. It never came, though. The only sound in the manor was his own muffled steps upon the carpet and the quiet chatter of the nurses as they tended to Angeline. Butler ignored the pricking of the hairs on the back of his neck.

Outside, raindrops began to pitter-patter against the roof, creating a gentle rhythm. The sky seemed to sigh, and a young Artemis Fowl II listened, entranced.

Butler’s worries about the new Fowl heir were unfounded. The boy began to talk without any complications, gurgling out words before when all the books suggested was normal. He was a remarkably precocious child, and although Butler occasionally worried the boy was verging on frailty, he ultimately seemed healthy enough.

In hindsight, he should have realized it would only be so long before his charge grew bored with life within the manor. Artemis Fowl I had made sure the Fowl estate was well stocked with the finest things their fortune could afford: the kitchen had aromatic spices from every inch of the globe; the library was practically bursting with esoteric texts; the walls were adorned with beautiful tapestries and paintings. Artemis Fowl I had beaten the world down so that it fit within the stone walls of Fowl manor, and in theory, his wife and son had to want for nothing. When Angeline had been younger, Butler remembered her leaving on weekend trips to visit her family or friends, but after her son was born, it seemed like she was content to retreat into the beautiful dollhouse her husband had fashioned around her. Perhaps the reality of who her husband was and where she lived had finally sunk in, Butler mused, carrying the tea tray. At least inside she didn’t have to think about the sectarian violence broiling in Northern Ireland, or the heating-up Cold War, or the vile things her adoring husband had done to pay for their life in the manor.

Butler poked his head into the Fowl study, rapping a hand against the door frame. At the desk inside, Artemis Fowl II was curled up in his father’s ornamented leather armchair, nose buried in a book. The boy’s ears perked up at the sound, but he didn’t look up from his reading.
“You weren’t at lunch,” Butler remarked, stepping inside.

“I apologize,” Artemis said, his young voice cold and clipped in a way Butler had never stopped thinking of as strange. “I was busy.”

You’re seven years old, Butler thought, setting the tray down on the mahogany desk. Busy?

“Your mother missed you,” he said instead, and Artemis lowered his book, eyes almost guilty.

“I promise that I will be at dinner.”

“You should eat,” Butler ordered, pushing the tea and toast closer to the boy. Artemis hesitated for a moment, but he finally obliged, taking a small bite out of the portion of the toast with the least amount of jam on it. Artemis chewed thoughtfully, setting the food back down on the plate and pointedly nudging it away. Butler pressed his lips into a thin line. Thank Christ that at least Juliet wasn’t a picky eater.

“May I ask you a question, Butler?”

“Always, Artemis.”

“Where does Father go when he leaves on business?” Artemis inquired, and Butler sighed. He moved the tray on the table, making room for him to rest his weight against the desk.

“He’s on a business trip, Artemis. He’s told you this.”

“Where does he go, though? He won’t tell me what his ‘business’ is.”

Butler shrugged. “Your father told me the same thing.”

Artemis looked at him shrewdly. “I don’t think I believe that, Butler.”

“That’s too bad,” Butler admitted. “Because that’s all I’m going to tell you.”

“You work for me, though,” Artemis argued, brow furrowed. “If you do know more, then you must tell me.”

Frowning, Butler leaned back. “I protect you. I work for your father.”

Sensing that he’d offended, Artemis tried to backpedal. “I… no one will tell me, Butler. Why? I simply want to know more about my father.”

His bodyguard considered Artemis’ plea.

“I’m sorry if I seemed dismissive,” Artemis wheedled, prodding further. “I’m… I’m just curious.”

Despite being fully aware Artemis’ apology was motivated more so by ulterior motives than it was by genuine compunctions, Butler softened.

“I know you must miss him,” he relented.

Artemis perked up, sensing he’d succeed in wearing down Butler’s earlier decision.

Butler ignored the voice of Madam Ko in the back of his mind. He wondered if he could absolve himself for a brief moment of weakness surrounding his bodyguard principles.
Artemis was just a boy, Butler thought. And a smart one at that. He doubted that there was a child on earth that could be satisfied with simply artifacts from the outside world.

Reaching to ruffle his charge’s hair, Butler almost smiled at the way Artemis scrunched up his face.

“Why must you and Mother persist in doing that?” Artemis complained.

“Just another grown-up thing, I guess,” Butler ventured, humming good-naturedly when Artemis scoffed.

“What are you reading?” Butler asked after a moment, changing the subject. Artemis glanced back at his book, debating his next course of action. Finally, his excitement surrounding the book he’d been reading won out over his desire to continue pushing Butler regarding his father.

Artemis spun the novel around, allowing Butler to examine it properly. “It’s a collection of short stories by Kenzaburō Ōe. Right now I am on ‘Lavish Are the Dead’.”

Butler nodded, picking up the work and mentally filing the name away. He was nearly positive Artemis fell very short of the intended age demographic.

“What’s it about?”

Artemis’ eyes lit up. “The subject material varies, but the tone is similar between the stories. Ōe’s style is very derivative of French existentialists. I like him more than Sartre and Camus, however.”


Artemis nodded. “Yes, that was Camus. ‘Lavish Are the Dead’ is similarly macabre in the service of its philosophy.”

Butler thumbed to the first page of the short story to which Artemis referred. He narrowed his eyes, reading silently. Artemis continued on, unconscious of Butler’s increasingly deepening frown as the man scanned through gruesome paragraph after paragraph.

“I suppose it can be read in many ways. One view would be that it’s a meditation on the forgetting of the Pacific War, despite the violence’s profound impact on the cultural psyche. However, it could also be read as the submerged presence of the Korean War in Japanese society, memory, and culture. I’d argue both critiques come mainly from the perspective of the intellectual establishment, be it that it is both Ōe and the protagonist studied French literature at the University of Tokyo.”

“Artemis,” Butler said slowly, resisting the urge to rub his temples or to throw the offending text from the room. “This is about dead bodies being kept in the medical faculty of a university.”

His charge tilted his head, blinking owlishly. “On a literal, textual sense, I suppose so, yes.”

Butler made a face, putting the book owlishly. “It’s not appropriate for you. It’s… too much. You’re too young to be reading something like this”.

“I asked Father. He’s the one who brought it back from Tokyo,” Artemis offered lightly.

Butler floundered, unsure.

To push the matter, Butler would have to either insinuate the Fowl patriarch was so absentminded as
to not curate the reading material of his son or he would have to insinuate that the man had made an incorrect call in judgment. Either would be a challenge to Artemis Sr.’s authority. Either would be making a statement on which of the two had more of a say over Artemis’ behavior. An absentee father or a paid caretaker — Artemis was beginning to test the waters of which of the two men had more of a claim to be the male figure to whom he deferred, Butler realized.

Artemis watched Butler, waiting for a response.

“I see,” Butler noted, being careful to keep his tone even. Artemis’ eyes widened, a motion that would have been nearly imperceptible had Butler not been searching for a reaction on the boy’s face.

The surprise vanished from Artemis quickly, and his eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

Rising, Butler pushed the book back towards Artemis. “Yes. If he approved the book, then I am fine with it.”

“You have no further opinion on the matter?” Artemis pressed.

Butler shrugged. “I’m just your bodyguard. Is my private attitude towards the matter necessary?”

A completely bullshit statement.

Butler knew that.

Artemis knew that.

Hell, it was likely even Artemis Sr. knew that.

Butler blamed Artemis Sr., just a bit. Usually, the Fowls and Butlers were closer in age. As eerily as the young Fowl might present himself, it was hard to not feel parental twinges towards the boy when Butler’s primary duties as a bodyguard were mundane things — things like keeping Artemis from skinning his knees around the house or preparing meals for him and Juliet. The Major and Artemis Sr. were unambiguously boss and bodyguard, but Butler, who had to force himself to not subconsciously categorize both Artemis and Juliet as his kids, and Artemis, who knew his father as a visitor to the house instead of a permanent fixture? Their dynamic was undoubtedly more fraught, unspeakably more complicated to unpack.

But Butler couldn’t bring himself to give words to his failure. To do so would make it irreversible. It’d be the final nail in the coffin he’d fashioned for himself.

So he pushed the tea tray closer to Artemis, quietly getting up to leave.

Disappointed, Artemis moved to pick his book back up, returning to his previous activity.

Pausing in the doorway, Butler turned, faltering.

Artemis didn’t lower the book, but his eyes tracked Butler’s every movement like a hawk. “Yes?”

“Artemis,” Butler began, hand curling around the doorframe with uncharacteristic timidity. “Your father said he’d be home tonight. You can ask him about his trip at dinner.”

“...Will you be joining us?”

“No.”

“I see,” Artemis commented neutrally, fixing Butler with a pointed stare.
Ignoring the way his feelings stung, Butler let his hand fall from the door, turning away.

“Make sure that you eat your lunch, Artemis,” Butler said at last, weary.

“Mhm.”

Both the toast and the tea remained untouched.

Artemis sat in his chair ramrod straight, taking care not to swing his legs or slouch childishly. Carefully, he looked around the hall he was sitting in. Twinkling, prismatic light from the chandelier’s crystals dappled across the cool marble floor, the color muted by the artificial light.

When he’d finally managed to convince Father to bring him along on a business meeting as an eighth birthday present, Artemis had expected to be at least let in the room.

If he strained his ears, he could make out the sound of boisterous laughter and raised voices behind the closed door to his right. However, try as he might, the words themselves evaded him, slipping through his fingers like water. For all he could tell, Father and his business partners were talking about the World Cup. Artemis glanced down the hallway to his left, trying to see if there was anyone else in the palatial London estate. Not even the odd secretary or worker. Rupert Gorman was one of those types, then, Artemis noted, looking back towards the door. Although it was true that not even old money could keep one safe these days. Better a paranoiac than a fool.

The door creaked open, and Artemis jumped at the cacophony of sound that seemed to burst from behind it. A tall but otherwise unassuming man stepped out, closing the door behind him softly. Artemis studied him, taking in the man’s form of attire (reasonably elegant), appearance (haggard), and way of carrying himself (restrained). He looked just a few years shy of Artemis’ father's age, although the chestnut of his hair was already taking on a salt-and-pepper appearance.

He passed by Artemis, not even looking.

Artemis cocked his head, intrigued. Considering what his father had said about behaving tonight, Artemis weighed his options, finally deciding to feign a cough.

Again, the man did not so much as turn, continuing his slow procession down the hall.

“Would you like an Advil?” Artemis asked.

The man paused. Looking at Artemis, the corner of his mouth quirked upwards slightly.

“I would much appreciate one, thank you.”

Fishing around in the pocket sewn into the inside of his jacket, Artemis presented a tube of the painkiller, holding it out. The man made his way over, swiftly snatching it away. Crunching on a few of the pills and then swallowing them dry, the man gave a small nod of thanks to Artemis.

“It was no trouble,” Artemis reassured him. “I normally wouldn’t be so blunt, but I’m afraid that Mr. Gorman has scattered his staff to the wind.”

The man ruminated on the statement, still chewing. “They’re not just on a break?”
Jumping at an opportunity to show off his intellect, Artemis shook his head no. “The employee parking spots aren’t empty, yet the house is completely silent. I’ve not even heard footsteps coming from above or shuffling about in nearby rooms. Gorman is more than happy to show off his wealth and security by hosting, but he’s far too suspicious to allow any of his guests to interact with his workers.”

“Interesting theory,” the man remarked, slyly crossing his arms. “You’ve left something out of your consideration, though.”

Artemis crinkled his nose slightly. “Is that so?”

The man smiled, his teeth bared in the same way a chimpanzee might show off its canines in a challenge. “How do you know I don’t work for Gorman?”

Artemis felt a cold sweat prick at his forehead. “I’m—”

Laughing, the man waved him off. “I’m screwing with you. Rupert’s a worm. I’d never work for the guy.”

Sighing, Artemis leaned back, the effect of the stress lifting making him almost lightheaded.

The man stuck out a hand. “Dmitry Endor.”

Artemis looked at the hand warily, unsure of how to feel about the man’s joking. “Artemis Fowl. The second.”

Endor blinked. “You’re Fowl’s brat?”

Finally, Artemis shook Endor’s hand, nodding. “You’re one of his colleagues, I presume.”

Endor quickly withdrew his hand, reacting as if scalded. Artemis barely had time to note that the man’s hand was usually chill to the touch — clammy, too.

Endor proceeded as if nothing strange had occurred, shoving his hands in his pockets nonchalantly. “So, junior,” he continued. “Your dad brings you along on meetings now?”

“Er...” Artemis hesitated. “Yes?”

Technically, it wasn’t a lie. Just because it was his first time tagging along didn’t matter that much in the end.

“Interesting,” Endor grinned mirthlessly.

Silence fell over the two of them.

“Thank you for the painkillers,” Endor remarked, reaching into his own jacket pocket. Artemis tensed, shooting a glance at the door. Butler might’ve been ordered to stay at home and tend to his mother, but the Major was within shouting distance.

Artemis’ fears eased slightly when instead of producing a weapon, Endor simply presented him with a thin, well-worn book. Endor shook it slightly, gesturing for Artemis to take it.

“Take it as a token of my thanks.”

Politely, Artemis took the text from the man, setting it down next to him on the chair. “Thank you, sir.”
“The meeting won’t be over for at least another couple of hours. No pressure to enjoy it, just thought you might want something to do other than count the number of tiles in the hall,” Endor said, shrugging.

Unsure if he should thank him again or if it was better to move on, Artemis opted for staying silent, choosing to instead examine the book. It couldn’t have been more than a few hundred pages, and it was bound in black, India ink-stained paper. Opening it gently, he examined the pages, scanning the smudged text.

A creak sounded to his right, and Artemis flinched, looking back up just in time to see the door to his right close.

Dmitry was nowhere to be seen.

Frowning slightly, Artemis shifted in his seat.

Minutes ticked by, and the door remained closed.

Cautiously, Artemis reopened the book, beginning to read. All the while, he kept his ears trained, ready for when the door creaked open. Eventually, his anxiety ebbed, and he allowed himself to be absorbed in the story, the hours ticking by.

Late into the night when the party had finally slowed to a close, Major and Artemis Fowl Sr. found Artemis leaning against a side of the chair, sleeping peacefully. Neither man thought anything unusual of the book lying closed by his side.

The thrum of people parted around them as Major carefully picked up the Fowl heir. The young boy stirred briefly, but he fell back into a deep slumber after a moment. Artemis Fowl Sr. pocketed the book that had fallen off the chair, pocketing it so as to bring it with them to the hotel.

Moving slowly, the trio made their way out towards the car, the approaching dawn casting a soft light over the car park.

Unbeknownst to his father and the Major, Artemis’ dreams swam with vivid, technicolor images. In the strange hypnogogic state he occupied between sleep and lucidness, he was bombarded by flashes of emotion and form, each new thought passing smoothly through his mind before he could grasp at it to make sense of things. Although on some level he was dimly aware of the feeling of being set down on the leather upholstery of the backseat, he was caught up in a dream-state that felt like a dark, cold body of water where up and down were constantly being confused with one another.

Shifting briefly, Artemis’ brow furrowed. Sleepily, Artemis Sr. carded his fingers through his son’s hair.

The artificial red and white lights of the cars peeling out of the car park streamed through the tinted windows, giving the night an otherworldly feel.

In the back of the car, Artemis dreamed.

Chapter End Notes

OOF okay so! notes/references:
Each chapter is going to open with an epigraph — a short quotation that’s meant to speak to the chapter of book it introduces.

In chapter one, I chose, "In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora" which is Latin for "[my] mind moves [me] to tell [of] forms changed into new bodies". It is from Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', a Latin narrative poem that chronicles the events of history from the creation of the world to the deification of Julius Caesar in a semi-mythological/historical narrative. As you can probably guess from the title, many of the stories contained within the narrative have to do with how the violence of the gods and mankind can lead to both good and bad people being warped, both literally (magical transformation, such as how the goddess Diana changes a hunter into a stag as a punishment) and figuratively (how the hunter in that story has gone from being a hunter to the hunted). It's a terribly bleak story that happens to contain most of the examples of Roman mythology that pop culture draws from today. Also, I think some Latin AP courses have you do a capstone project where you translate it from Latin into English?? Essentially, the quote was chosen for the epigraph as a way of introducing that this story is going to be canon-divergent (taking the text and morphing it to a new and unfamiliar form), but it also speaks to some of the themes surrounding transformation and change (magical and figurative) that i'm gonna deal with here!

"Lavish Are the Dead" is a short story that is a really cool synthesis of french existentialist styles and the author's own creative touches, and it was chosen as a book to be referenced within the text because of the work's philosophy on the way the past can haunt the present, how letting the dead speak for themselves is necessary to fully respect the past, etc. Following in the tradition of French existentialism, it's easy to lose the thread of the themes in the wake of the morbid, descriptive horrors of the text (Butler’s comment about the sickly dog from Camus' book 'The Stranger' is the only thing my mum remembers about the book, lol). This work is 100% not gonna be a horror piece bc 1) I do not know how to write the genre and 2) frankly I don't think i’d do a horror piece for af even if i could because it's not appropriate for the series, IMO, but this reference is in service of establishing that Artemis can sometimes glance over real world concerns (e.x. that Butler is concerned the book's subject matter is too macabre for like, a literal 7 year old) due to how he gets caught up in his intellectualization of the content (e.x. the themes, the beauty of the writing style).

Finally the most overt reference is the title! It's from Macbeth — right when Macbeth goes to meet the witches at the beginning of the play to find out his future, the witches announce his arrival by saying, "by the pricking of my thumbs/something wicked this way comes" i.e. that Macbeth holds some fantastical and terrible things in his future.

OH actually nevermind there's one more: Dmitry Endor --> Dmitry= "devoted/dedicated to Demeter" and Endor = in the Old Testament, the Witch of Endor is a woman that a king consulted to summon the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel. It's meant to be a bit *too* fitting, implying that he perhaps chose it himself, trying a new name on as he acclimates to a new era.

That's p much all! Next chapter is going to be a time jump going into artemis' emerging abilities, his tutelage w/ Endor, and the tie between humans/mages/the People.
Chapter 2

“He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold”

Fowl manor was quieter than usual. Angeline took a sip of her earl grey, pulling her jumper around her body a bit tighter. Following a successful business meeting that Artemis had been allowed to tag along on, her husband had been taking their son on more and more trips. Sometimes Butler would go with them, sometimes he would stay back at the manor to watch over Juliet. Angeline wasn’t privy to the exacts of the arrangement the Major and Butler had worked out regarding Artemis’ presence on Fowl business. She didn’t want to know the specifics, truthfully. The more she knew, the worse her anxious spells were. If she were to ask her husband, Angeline was sure she would be allowed to accompany her son on their trips, but she balked at the idea. Her sleep was disturbed enough as it was at home — she was sure her insomnia would be intolerable in some stuffy hotel off in God knows where. Her doctor would probably vote against such a sudden change in her routine if Angeline asked her.

Briefly, Angeline considered calling up her mother. However, it didn’t take long for her to quash that urge. It’d been some time since they’d talked — their last meeting had ended on a sour note after they’d gotten into another spat about Angeline’s husband. They both needed more time to lick their respective wounds.

With her mother out of consideration, Angeline tried to think of someone else. Would it be imposing to ask Butler to break for tea with her? Probably, she decided, frowning. Her stomach clenching, she reached for the television remote. She hit a few buttons, the TV crackling with static despite its relative newness. Settling into her chair, she let the voice of the BBC newscaster wash over her, drowning out the silence of the estate.

“Again.”

Gritting his teeth, Artemis waved the noxious smoke away from his bowl. At the bottom, a few embers glowed stubbornly. He tipped the entire thing upside down, upending the ashen contents onto the antique table. Reaching for the glass jar of burning attar oil, he carefully transferred a few drops into the mortar bowl he’d been working with. Ideally, this would be the final time he’d have to repeat the recipe. Hesitating, he looked back at Dmitry, who gave no indication of if he had corrected his error from the previous attempt. Pursing his lips, Artemis turned back to his work.

If Artemis had to guess, he’d overdone it with the grapes last time. That, or the wormwood-star anise tincture. Eyes flicking between the various bottles and beakers on the table, Artemis pressed his palms down on the wood, fingers tapping out a frustrated rhythm.

Finally, he looked back at Dmitry, displeasure painting his features.

“Let me look at a recipe.”

Dmitry laughed — a full, hearty laugh, rather than just a chuckle. “Artemis,” he said, eyes crinkling in mirth. “That’s not the point of this lesson.”

“The point — when would I have to demonstrate my understanding of the material without being
able to look at my notes?” Artemis insisted, growing increasingly irked.

“The point, Artemis,” Dmitry enunciated, waving a hand so that a shadow descended upon certain ingredients on the table, rearranging them as he saw fit. “Is to make it feel natural. Like second nature.”

Artemis was about to argue the point further when a small wooden bowl shot across the table, rattling in place as it suddenly slowed to a halt in front of him.

“Tears of Chios,” Dmitry pointed, and Artemis’ mouth snapped shut. Nodding curtly in thanks, Artemis used one of the serving spoons to apportion out a few droplets of the plant resin. As he tapped the waxy tears off of the utensil, a ringing noise sang out with each instance of contact between the stone bowl and the bronze spoon.

After that direction, the process went smoothly, with Artemis delicately adding the ingredients — sundry herbs, pungent-smelling oils, and gritty powders — here and there. Occasionally, he’d venture a quick glance at Dmitry, trying to see if the man reacted at all to the addition of certain ingredients.

Pausing in his work, Artemis reached for a spice jar, uncorking it to take out a small sliver of bark. He popped it in his mouth, and Dmitry started, alarmed.

“What’re you doing?”

Somewhat pleased he’d managed to destabilize the usually equanimous Dmitry, Artemis raised an eyebrow. “It’s willow bark, is it not?”

“Yes,” Dmitry said, making a face. “Don’t do that again.”

“Its active agent is salicin. It’s a natural pain killer,” Artemis explained, pushing the bottle back to its spot before Dmitry could snatch it out of his grasp with a pointed thought. “The mixture’s smell is giving me a headache. It’s quite strong.”

The answer seemed to mollify Dmitry, who seemed to have forgotten his earlier alarm in favor of the new information he’d stumbled upon. “Salicin?”

“It’s in over the counter painkillers. You can pick it up at any chain-type chemist.”

“Clever,” Dmitry remarked, taking a closer look at the jar. “And it’s...”

“Medicinal,” Artemis affirmed, rolling up his sleeves to use the pestle to grind and mix the ingredients in the mortar. “Completely non-magical.”

Artemis drew his hand back slightly, thinking. “Although, I suppose I don’t know for sure. How do you know if something has...”

“Magic or not?”

Artemis nodded. Even a year into working with Dmitry, it still felt a bit... silly to call things magical. Even if he had seen the man work miracles, Artemis couldn’t shake the vague feeling of childishness that came with treating all the rituals and runes so solemnly.

“I’ve already explained this,” Dmitry said, but Artemis could see that the man was already starting to puff up with pride in the way Dmitry always did when he got the chance to revel in his wisdom.
“It’s part of everything. Either you can feel it or you can’t — and even if you do have a knack for sensing magic, you still have to teach yourself to make sense of it. It’s like... another sense that you need to hone in order to really take advantage of,” Dmitry continued, his tone taking on a far-away quality as he reminisced on the matter. “It’s how I knew you could serve as a decent assistant someday.”

It was a barbed compliment, but Artemis had gotten used to Dmitry’s insensitivity.

“It was barely there,” Dmitry added, and Artemis had to stifle the urge to roll his eyes. Juliet had started doing that more frequently, and Artemis was trying not to pick up the habit as well.

“But you had potential. I could see it. You’ve improved since then — if I were to try to get a reading off of you now, the feeling you’d give off would be more refined. Clearer. You just needed a teacher to help coax out the ability,” Dmitry finished, and Artemis nodded along, only half-listening at this point. Dmitry had the tendency to go on tangents when answering questions, always looping around to new ways to applaud himself for being patient, or a good teacher, or a powerful magic-user. Artemis had gotten quite good at picking out the rare valuable statement from a deluge of self-congratulatory bloviating.

By now, Artemis had a rough idea of how magic worked. It seemed like magic was a nebulous type of energy that existed throughout nature, and that the trick was getting it to mirror one’s will. Everything appeared to contain this strange force in different forms — for example, bergamot leaves seemed to be tied to exerting control, as Dmitry had burned it in large amounts when he’d met with Artemis’ father to convince him to drop Artemis off during business meetings. When Artemis had listened in on the Major questioning Father about his decision to leave Artemis under the watch of a colleague no-one particularly knew — to the extent that one would be hard-pressed to come up with an explanation for why Dmitry showed up to meetings in the first place — his father had been equally as flummoxed by this decision as the Major was. Still, Father was determined to stick to his arrangement with Dmitry, regardless of if he fully understood why he’d come to such a confounding solution to a problem that could be solved by simply leaving Artemis at home.

But to the bergamot leaves, it seemed notable that they were tied to control-based magic. Artemis had noticed that Dmitry only leaned on mixtures and incense for certain tasks — perhaps certain types of magic were intuitive to a person, whereas the innate magical properties of certain plants and animals had to be relied upon for magical acts that went beyond someone’s area of expertise. Frankly, the more Artemis learned about the limitations surrounding magic, the more his understanding of the thing became murkier. Maybe one day he’d be like Dmitry — so caught up in the magic that the contradictions seemed to no longer exist.

Holding the stone bowl in both hands, Artemis concentrated. Just like it had done before it had started coughing up black smog earlier, the paste started to smoke, smelling sickly sweet like the roses by the manor in August. The mixture at the bottom of the mortar bubbled, sublimating into a dark vapor that seemed to glimmer. Forcing his hands not to shake, Artemis blew on the smoke. It twirled lazily away in small spirals, wrapping itself around the covered basket near Dmitry. As the smoke sunk into the cloth covering, Artemis waited.

The seconds ticked by arduously.

Ever so slightly, the cloth began to twitch. Dmitry reached out carefully, pulling the covering back with a flourish.

Inside, the skeleton of a mouse perked up, with the area where its nose would have been bobbing up and down in curiosity as it regarded Artemis and Dmitry.
Artemis glanced at Dmitry, who gave a small bow of his head in permission. Outstretching a hand, Artemis gestured for the animal to come closer. He didn’t have to wait long, for the creature crawled out of the basket, scampering over. He forced himself not to recoil as it clambered onto his open palm.

It let out an odd squeak, and Artemis felt a peal of laughter bubble up within him, surprised.

“Good job.”

Dmitry smiled, and the mouse scurried back into the basket. The cloth’s shadow pulled at it, moving the fabric back over the basket.

Artemis grinned back, suddenly woozy. Shaking his head, he felt a wetness under his nose. Confused, he brought a hand to his face. He drew his fingers back, blood covering the digits.

Dmitry seemed unfazed, as he simply passed Artemis a neatly folded handkerchief. Pressing it to his nose, Artemis sat down shakily on one of the many stools that bordered the table.

“That’s to be expected,” Dmitry explained, his tone unusually kind. “You’ll become less strained with further practice.”

Not wanting to seem unnerved, Artemis remained silent, tilting his head forward slightly in order to keep his bloody nose from worsening.

“Do… you have any water?” Artemis tried, trying to sort out his thoughts.

Dmitry waved a hand, and a jug poured water into a small, wooden bowl, with the bowl itself sliding over to Artemis after a moment.

Using his free hand, Artemis picked it up, drinking deeply. The two of them sat there, quiet. Finally, Artemis drew the handkerchief back, reasonably confident that the bleeding had slowed to a stop. Expectantly, Dmitry waited for a further response.

“Do… you have any water?” Artemis tried, trying to sort out his thoughts.

Dmitry grinned, the motion showing off his canines. “Good.”

Domovoi Butler gently ran the brush through his sister’s hair, his movements easily accommodating the sudden jerks and turns of her head as she nervously watched the wrestling match on TV. She’d been talking about this match for the past week, and Butler had told her he’d help her do her hair into a French braid to match one of the women competing tonight. Juliet had decided that the matching hairstyle would be lucky, and Butler was more than happy to indulge her. Any moment he got to spend with Juliet was precious to him, and Butler hoped that there wouldn’t come a day when she decided their family nights were ‘uncool’, as she’d recently taken to calling things. He didn’t think Juliet would genuinely end up having a cynical teenager phase — she was too full of excitement and sincerity to act fashionably detached from her interests.

Still, he worried.

Artemis, who, in fairness, was a fairly reserved child, had been withdrawing.

Butler wasn’t sure what had caused the change, and he was left adrift, unsure of how to reverse the
weakening of their bond. It wasn’t just with him, either. Butler had noticed Artemis becoming increasingly distracted around his mother and father as well.

Butler ignored the whispering voice at the back of his mind that pointed out, perhaps a tad unkindly, that Artemis had always been a bit distant from his parents, whereas his aloofness with Butler was new.

Ignoring the twinge in his stomach, Butler gently started to braid Juliet’s hair, the TV serving as white noise as he allowed himself to get lost in his task.

Chapter End Notes

skdhfkf im gonna go back and fix some brief typos in chap 1 BUT here's the second chapter. The quote selected is a Mary Shelley quote! It's in reference to a nightmare she had that served as inspiration for her book 'Frankenstein'. Bringing in those sweet sweet themes surrounding life and death & the ethics surrounding control over them.
Chapter 3

"Where are the men?" the little prince at last took up the conversation again. "It is a little lonely in the desert..."

"It is also lonely among men," the snake said.

The little prince gazed at him for a long time.

"You are a funny animal," he said at last. "You are no thicker than a finger..."

"But I am more powerful than the finger of a king," said the snake.

The little prince smiled.

"You are not very powerful. You haven't even any feet. You cannot even travel..."

"I can carry you farther than any ship could take you," said the snake.

He twined himself around the little prince's ankle, like a golden bracelet.

"Whomever I touch, I send back to the earth from whence he came," the snake spoke again. "But you are innocent and true, and you come from a star..."

The little prince made no reply.

"You move me to pity— you are so weak on this Earth made of granite," the snake said. "I can help you, someday, if you grow too homesick for your own planet. I can—"

"Oh! I understand you very well," said the little prince. "But why do you always speak in riddles?"

"I solve them all," said the snake.

And they were both silent.

There are different kinds of silence.

Fowl Manor in the morning was like a sleeping giant, and Butler had come to enjoy the restfulness that seemed to linger in the air when he would prowl the halls during his morning patrol. Every morning, he would rise at around 5 a.m. and check the security of the manor — he'd gone through this routine thousands of times, and he was almost sad to feel the house start to wake up, signaling the end of the peaceful quiet.

This wasn't to say that the house became wild and unruly once the occupants rose, rather, it stayed quiet in a deliberate, stern way that Butler disliked immensely. He'd not minded the dreariness of the home in his youth, but with Juliet and Artemis around the manor...

Butler frowned.

A house with children in it should be teeming with life. The manor felt more like a historical site than
it did a home. With Angeline retreating into the safety of her bedroom, to the increasingly unavailable Artemis Sr. and the Major, Butler wondered if the wing of the manor he shared with Juliet was the only living part of the house. Physically, the entire house was beautiful and well-maintained, but there was something about the estate that felt decayed. Ruined. Butler wouldn’t go as far as to say he believed that something like a house could have a soul, but there was something about the manor that seemed contradictory: a piece of parallax architecture that was concurrently beguiling and rancid, depending on the angle at which one looked at it.

As he moved slowly and quietly through the hall, Butler tried not to think too deeply about the Fowls. It'd only serve to make him more cynical, and he refused to dwell on such matters until he was in his bed at night. To ruin a morning was to spoil the rest of the hours in the day, and Butler was not a man who could indulge in bitterness.

By now, he'd nearly completed his rounds. Through the veiled windows, he could see the soft bluish-grey of the spring morning. Butler smiled slightly. If it remained pleasant out, perhaps he would take Juliet down by the lake. In the warmer months, the water tended to be the temperature of bathwater by late-afternoon. He had many fond memories of teaching her to swim in the secluded, small pool of water that was tucked neatly away into the forest by the manor.

Tearing his eyes away from the window, Butler started to make his way back to his room. He'd walked these halls so many times that he knew where to step to prevent the floor from creaking in protest, and his mind wandered as he turned through the maze-like halls and corridors. However, he felt a prodding in the back of his mind, as though something was disturbing the backdrop of his morning. Pausing, he surveyed the room, his eyes lingering on the curves and edges of its structure.

Behind him, he heard a shifting sound, like fabric sliding past fabric. Dropping his hand to his holster, Butler turned.

Almost instantly, his hand flinched away from the weapon.

Butler inhaled in surprise, but then cut himself off half-way through the breath, not wanting to startle his sleeping charge.

The boy was curled up awkwardly on the chaise lounge, the antique rococo daybed's firm cushions refusing to give or conform to the weight upon it.

Carefully, Butler reached out to brush a stray strand of hair from Artemis' face. His charge stirred, scrunching up his face.

Artemis must've gotten home with the Major and his father late last night. They'd been gone on business for the past few weeks — he wasn't sure if he was seeing things in the dim morning light, but Butler could almost swear that his charge had shot up a full centimeter or two in the time since he'd been gone.

As Butler drew his hand away, he saw Artemis blearily begin to shutter his eyes open and shut, attempting to blink the sleep out of his eyes. Butler froze, waiting for his charge to sink back into a slumber, but the boy rubbed at his face, yawning.

"Artemis?" he said, voice barely above a whisper. Artemis nodded, tired, pulling his hand away from his eyes. "What're you doing all the way out here?"

"We returned late. Past midnight," Artemis mumbled, stretching.

"You should be in bed."
Artemis cocked his head, curious. "It is the 17th, yes?"

Furrowing his brow, Butler nodded slowly, when suddenly realization dawned on him. "You—"

Artemis smiled, satisfied, closing his eyes again. "Happy birthday, Butler."

"I… thank you."

They both fell silent, the only sound being the distant creaking of the house.

Butler watched his charge, a warm feeling curling around his gut. Gingerly, he scooped him up, and Artemis allowed himself to be lifted without protest.

"I brought you back a present from Belgium," Artemis said, his tone slurring from exhaustion. "'S a book. Card, too."

Trying not to jostle the boy as he moved, Butler hummed in response, the sound low and rumbling in his chest. Artemis sighed, going lax in his arms.

"You can show me in the morning. Or afternoon, if that's when you wake up," Butler promised, and Artemis nodded.

It was tricky getting a door open while carrying someone in one's arms, but somehow Butler managed. The light from the sunrise filtered into Artemis' room, dappling against the four-poster bed inside. Unlike Angeline's shrouded bed, the one here had the canopy tied neatly to each of the bedposts, thus making it easier for Butler to gently set Artemis down upon the duvet. Clumsily, Artemis crawled under the sheets.

"Do you need anything before I go?" Butler asked, smoothing out some of the wrinkles on the sheets.

Artemis snorted at that, cracking open a single eye to look at his bodyguard. "I'm not a child. I'm sure I will manage to drift off without you reading me a story or something similarly foolish."

Butler brushed the hair out of Artemis' eyes, and Artemis only half-heartedly scowled at the gesture. Butler smiled, the lines under his eyes crinkling. Artemis would have to be almost asleep to permit any sort of behavior he perceived as 'coddling' him.

"Juliet asked how your trips off with your father have been going," Butler remarked, changing the topic.

Artemis went still.

Butler frowned, unsure.

"They've been insightful," Artemis offered guardedly, leaving things at that. "Why?"

Ignoring his mounting feeling of unease, Butler kept his tone light. "She likes spending time with you. It's hard having one of her friends and her uncle off all the time."

His hackles lowering somewhat, Artemis sunk uncertainly back into his pillow. "Oh. I see."

"Would you tell Juliet that I consider her a friend as well?" Artemis said finally, turning on his side to look at Butler better. "I would be remiss to leave her uncertain regarding my view of her."

"I'm sure she'd love to hear you tell her yourself. Again, that's a matter for when you wake up."
Artemis' grip curled around the duvet. "Of course."

"Go to bed, Artemis," Butler said, voice gentle. He moved to rise.

"Stay?"

Butler forced his expression to remain neutral.

"Always. Always, Artemis—"

"Just until I go to sleep," Artemis amended, and even in the dark, Butler could see that his ears had flushed scarlet in embarrassment.

"Of course."

Settling in, Butler sat there in the dark, thoughts twisting and swirling around his head as he waited. Outside, the world began to wake.

Dmitry scowled at the letter in front of him, and every movement of his eyes moving down the page felt like the irritated flick of a cat's tail. Artemis spared him a brief, derisive glance before going back to his own work, tapping away at his computer.

Dmitry made a discontented noise at the back of his throat, and Artemis began hitting the keys a little bit louder, keeping his eyes locked on his screen.

Dmitry discarded the letter, tossing it aside.

Running his tongue over his teeth in an effort to keep from snapping, Artemis exhaled through his nose.

"Artemis," Dmitry announced. "We never get any pleasant letters. Have you noticed?"

"I have noticed. I wonder if that has something to do with your charming disposition, Dmitry," Artemis intoned, pointedly hitting another key.

In the nearly two years he'd been apprenticing under Dmitry, Artemis had come to a few conclusions.

Firstly, Dmitry was old. Older than any living human being on the planet by many, many centuries. However, he was fundamentally a child — he was angry like a child, sad like one, and happy like one. Taking Artemis on as an apprentice when they'd met in London had been a whim in the same way a child might coo over a new toy they'd spotted in a shop window, and Artemis had stuck with him by virtue of his ability to remain intriguing. Artemis had only just turned ten, and he was already in a position where he spent most of his jaunts over to Dmitry's estate practically serving as a watchful father to this man so many years his senior. Every time he would visit Dmitry, Artemis would bring a new piece of the outside world with him — currently, Artemis was trying to get his computer to work correctly in Dmitry's presence, as although the man was fascinated by the idea of the internet, electrical appliances seemed to go haywire around him. He'd had mixed success thus far.

Secondly, there were other people like Dmitry out there.

Similarly, they seemed to exist on the periphery of the world, interacting only with one another, and even then, through indirect means. They had their own history, had waged their own wars, and had
lived and died hidden lives, blissfully unaware of the fact that humanity had placed a man on the moon or that the power of the atom had been harnessed. They had their own hierarchies — Dmitry was clearly located somewhere on the top of it. They had their own politics — Artemis was unable to understand the intricacies of some of Dmitry's beliefs, but he could gather the man was a zealot in some fashion. They had their own laws — Dmitry had broken many inviolate ones, which explained why he seemed to cloak himself from his people's oversight in the messiness of human crime rings. They had their own community — and Dmitry seemed to be loathed within it.

Finally, something seemed to be brewing on the horizon of magical society.

When Artemis would check for mail on the estate's grounds, he'd find more and more letters, thicker and thicker packages. Irrespective of the escalating mail's implications, this was Artemis' least favorite job around the manor. The mansion didn't have a set location, a fact that, although helpful in the context of Artemis and Dmitry's arrangement, was a bit of a bother when Artemis would arrive during each new trip, unable to get his proper bearings until it was almost time to leave. But to return to the issue of the mail, the post was Artemis' only way of gauging the status of the strange world from which Dmitry came — no one ever came to call. It was just brown boxes, manila envelopes, and smart, yellow slips. They piled up in the gardens; came tumbling down the chimney; spilled out from the gutters (if the house was in the mood for a more modern roof). Artemis never opened a single one.

Artemis was jostled from his thoughts when Dmitry sighed again.

"It's like you don't even listen to me anymore, Artemis."

Artemis blinked. He'd been unaware that Dmitry had continued to talk.

"Tell me, are you this rude at home? Is this a 'teen' thing?" Dmitry continued, resting his chin on his hand in lazy curiosity.

"I'm not going to be a teenager for a little over another three years," he remarked, sidestepping the question about his home life. As much as Artemis was determined to continue with his plan to drain every last bit of knowledge about magic from Dmitry, he understood acutely the sort of danger Dmitry posed — as long as the arrangement stood, Artemis was determined to keep Dmitry far, far away from Fowl manor.

"Ahead of the curve again, then," Dmitry muttered, picking the discarded letter back up in annoyance. He snapped his fingers, attempting to startle Artemis out of his engrossed state of work.

"Arty. Business. Focus."

Artemis pursed his lips, shutting his computer. "If I'm ahead of the curve, then it must be because I have such an exemplary teacher."

"Hm?"

"Never mind," Artemis said, ignoring the nascent stress migraine beginning to prod at him. "What is so achingly important in the letter you've got, Dmitry? You've been just about bursting to complain about whoever — or whatever — is the matter since you opened it."

"Council business," Dmitry said resolutely, expression dark. He paused, leaning back after a beat. "Have we gone over—"

"Yes."
They hadn't, but Artemis was determined to hasten through the conversation in order to return to his tinkering with the computer.

"Wonderful," Dmitry replied, his smile widening by a few molars. "Council business is council business. They're displeased about something or other again, and they're determined to make that my problem."

"Dmitry, are they displeased about having a problem and wish to invoke your..." Artemis trailed off, giving the man a grimace. "Services, or are you the problem?"

Dmitry shot a glance back at the letter. "Services, most likely."

"Dmitry."

"I was joking! I've read the letter over at least a dozen times. I know damn well what nonsense they're trying to bully me into fixing for them. Again," the man stressed, tone snide.

"Don't treat me like a fool, Artemis," Dmitry added as an afterthought, voice cool.

Artemis nodded curtly, but didn't take any further action. He'd be mindful to try to keep from offending Dmitry when he didn't think he could get away with it, but Artemis refused to give him deference or fear.

The room still somewhat tense, Dmitry moved on, the slight no longer of interest to him.

"I don't have time to deal with their mess, but I'm obligated nonetheless," he continued, and Artemis allowed himself to exhale the breath he'd been holding.

"Should I send a letter out to one of your business partners?" Artemis tried.

Dmitry's brow furrowed. "Since when are you sending letters out to my allies?"

Making a face, Artemis pulled his lips into a thin line. "I'm not. I'm talking about the... human ones."

His teacher's mouth made an 'O' in comprehension. "They wouldn't be of any use in this case."

Calling people humans still felt strange in Artemis' mouth. He wasn't fully sure what he was at this point. Dmitry was fell neatly in the category of 'not-human' — Artemis had no trouble identifying him as something similar but distinct from humanity.

The rest of Artemis' world was human, though.

Was magic enough to change how one was classified on a species level? Was Dmitry different from humans because he'd only been raised around magic users? Was there a meaningful distinction to be made between who Artemis was before he'd met Dmitry and who he was now?

Dmitry regarded Artemis carefully, and Artemis was stricken by the strange worry he'd been having more frequently: that Dmitry could somehow see each of the thoughts tumbling around Artemis' skull.

"Artemis, could you do me a favor?"

Artemis tilted his head, fingers curling around his closed laptop. "It depends on what the favor is."

"It's more of an errand, really," Dmitry explained. "One of my government friends is... concerned about a group of humans."
Utterly vague. Artemis frowned.

"What sort of group?"

He got a dismissive hand wave in response. "A few rich pricks who're determined to act like Victorian occultists, apparently. The council wants to make sure they've not stumbled upon anything legitimate — which is where you come in. I have a poor grasp on what passes for a 'normal' human amount of knowledge regarding magic, but you've lived both walks of life."

Slightly more information, then. Still, Artemis was uneasy with the entire business.

"I'd have to disagree with your assertion that I have a better grasp on what constitutes the sum of the average per— human's knowledge about magic," he corrected himself.

Dmitry steepled his fingers. "Artemis."

Artemis resisted the urge to rub his temples.

"I was trying to manipulate you via flattery into voluntarily taking this job. I can see that that did not work, but I did try."

Idly, Artemis wondered if there was enough time before dinner and when he was going to return to his hotel to lock himself into the bedroom and scream into a pillow for a good hour. He'd never had the urge to do so before, but he suspected it would be immensely cathartic.

"The bottom line here is this: I don't have time to be chasing after every shadow menacing the Council. I'm busy. We're busy, but frankly I have more use for you in getting them to stop darkening my doorstep than I do in teaching you parlor tricks while I wait for certain things to be set into motion."

Still, Artemis conceded. Perhaps catharsis would have to wait. The last thing he needed was the Major or, God forbid, his father getting concerned about his well being. To put up with Dmitry for years, only to suddenly be forced to cut his plans short — thus achieving none of his goals while still having been subjected to the man's presence? Hellish. Unthinkable.

"Essentially: you're going."

Artemis scowled, but he nodded anyway. He had no other option.

He'd been presented with another indignity that simply had to be endured in the service of his more pressing goals.

Dmitry grinned, going back to opening letters in the candlelight.

Artemis opened his computer, going back to tapping away at the device.

It'd all be worth it.

Down in an office at the center of the Earth, Foaly let out a troubled flick of his tail, leafing through the file he'd thrown together.

What he had was… messy. An elegant suspicion that made sense of some of the weirdness his surveillance programs had been spitting out at him.

What he had was phone calls from a network of seemingly connected humans, all of which seemed
to trip off the word sensors he'd developed at least once or twice a month. Never at the same time of
the month, and never enough to push the calls into the territory of definitively pointing towards an
awareness of the People. Every isolated piece of evidence he had wasn't enough to cause alarm.

But here's the thing: he had an entire dossier of these weird blips. They clearly weren't isolated
incidents — but that was all Foaly knew. It was easy enough to point at the file he had and draw the
conclusion that something fishy was going on above ground, but he didn't know what. Again, each
of the calls and emails stopped short of saying something as clear-cut as "let's try to catch a fairy" or
"I think a secret society of magic users living on the planet".

It was like that human news article he'd read on governmental surveillance. Nowadays, a human in
America could send an email that said something completely innocuous, but the email would have
enough keywords to get caught up in an NSA net trawl. This inelegant system gave a lot of false
positives, a fact that left the agency with quite a bit of junk to wade through — at least based on what
Foaly had seen the last time he'd taken a peek. Foaly had the sneaking suspicion that the people he'd
been tracking were trying to game that type of system, as there was a veneer of plausible deniability
surrounding just what exactly these humans were talking about in the calls.

He knew what Julius would probably say: that he needed to come back when he had some real
proof. Alternatively, there was another scenario Foaly could see playing out — that the commander
would order a LEP team investigation and crackdown on the humans on the list, which was not what
Foaly wanted at this stage. It wasn't the time to go in, guns blazing, and risk disturbing a very
delicate situation. If there really were humans aware of the People's existence, then the problem
needed to be eradicated by pulling out the root, not just by attacking the vines. Right now Foaly had
a list of humans thought to be involved in the conspiracy; what he didn't have was a feel for the
breadth of the group's reach, if his suspicions ended up being correct.

Foaly would have to be very careful in how he told Julius about what he had in this file.

For as much as he would revel in finally being vindicated, in finally proving he wasn't just some
paranoid crackpot, his brief triumph would be far outweighed by the crushing prospect of a world in
which humans had turned their watchful eyes to the one place the People had left to hide.

Setting the folder aside for the moment, the centaur reached for his boxed lunch he'd shoved to a side
on his disorderly desk. He stabbed at his synth-salad, munching thoughtfully.

Sometimes he wondered if his coworkers appreciated just how stressful his job was, what with the
fate of the free world weighing on his shoulders. Frankly, he didn't get half as much respect as he
was owed. Hell, last week someone had stolen his cold sandwich from the employee fridge, the
animals. No respect. He'd never do that to another fairy's property — to be forced to have to resort to
vending machine food at the LEP was to put your soul in an irreparably dark place. Earlier that
month, Foaly had seen Trouble cursing at the machine, arm reaching up inside it to get the
precariously hanging bag of trail mix the machine had failed to spit out after it took his money. The
look in Kelp's eyes had been miserable resignation. Foaly had pretended to tip an invisible hat to his
coworker in solemn solidarity, but Trouble had thought that he'd been making a joke about the elf's
imported cowboy-style boots. The reaction had been... unfavorable. As a result, Foaly had been
forced to scratch Trouble off the list of potential candidates for his after-work board game group he
was trying to throw together.

C'est la vie, Foaly sighed, going back to the work that had actually been assigned to him.
This chap had a fair amount of time skips, but I hope it flowed in a way that made sense/sounded okay? This chapter's epigraph is from... Le Petit Prince/the little prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry! It's a modern fable about a little prince who is traveling the universe in search of wisdom — back on his tiny planet, he has a little rose in which he is in love with, but because they are both too immature to love each other properly (he does not understand her and she is selfish), he decides to leave. Out in the galaxy, he travels to many planets each featuring a grown-up who has been reduced to a function. He finds each of them foolish (for example, one is a king who rules over a planet in which he is the sole inhabitant, one is a geographer who refuses to actually travel his planet to see the places he records, and one is a businessman who claims to own the stars and spends all his days counting them), and he leaves the planet behind each time. However, he learns from the geographer that there are roses on Earth, so he decides to journey there. Meanwhile, there is a pilot on Earth who has crashed into the Sahara desert, all alone. He befriends the pilot, but the prince also meets the snake, who claims that he can help the little prince get back to his planet — the snake says that the prince's planet is too far away and that the prince is too weak to return, but if the snake bites him, then the prince can leave his body and fly back home, unencumbered. Ultimately, the prince asks the snake to bite him, and the pilot returns home, determined to believe his small friend is in the stars, flying home to his rose. The scene from above is when the prince first meets the snake — my thought process behind it was that in many ways, I want Dmitry to come across as a similar figure to the snake. He's dangerous, but can he serve a purpose? Is the prince truly out in the stars, finally reunited with his flower? Or is that merely the wishful thinking of the pilot, who misses his strange, magical companion?

In the next chap, we'll get into a bit of the group both Dmitry and Foaly have been tracking (though they are unaware of one another's existence), meet the Council, and we approach the September of 1998 — the maiden voyage of the Fowl Star.

Thanks to everyone who has stuck with the story, and any reviews, predictions, or bits of feedback are appreciated! Hope everyone's August is going well :)!
If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
if you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call;
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

Mulch was waiting for his luck to change.
The cell wall across from him seemed to stare back at him, unflinching.
It’d all started when he’d failed to hawk the Jules Rimet Cup to that undercover LEP operative. Following that bungle, he’d spent the past years in and out of prison, with his bouts of freedom being increasingly shorter and his bouts in jail stretching on longer and longer.
On the bright side, he mused. He didn’t have to worry about old Julius throwing him in the clink again. And the cell he was currently in was roomier than any he’d been in before — which made sense, considering it was human-made.
The wall he was staring at refused to comment on his rumination.
“You know,” he said aloud, shifting on the cold floor. “I can admit, in hindsight, that I probably
shouldn’t have broken into that businessman’s condo. Guy was clearly a nutter. Still, can I be blamed for not—”

“Hello,” a voice spoke softly in the dark.

Turning his head to follow the sound, Mulch saw a small, pale face pressed up to the bars on his cell’s window.

It took all his will (and some of the calmness lent to him by the tranquilizer in his system) to not shriek.

Mulch scrambled, pressing himself up against the far wall, providing as much distance as possible between himself and this figure. The pain in his head throbbed dully, but he ignored the sensation, his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

“I’m afraid I’m busy right now,” he forced out, chuckling a tad nervously. “In the middle of a conversation, as y’can see.”

Mulch’s vision was still foggy, but he could see the person at the window peer into the cell.

“I’m the only person with whom you’re holding a conversation,” the figure announced, looking back at Mulch. “I believe you might be hallucinating.”

Nerves shot, Mulch almost tittered. Great; so the human they’d sent to check up on him had no sense of humor. His day was getting better and better.

“I’ve come to free you,” the person said, and as Mulch’s eyes steadied, he could just about make out that he was speaking to a young child. “I do hope you’re not injured, as I do not trust myself to be able to carry you out of here.”

“Oh,” Mulch said warily, trying to see past the kid. “That’s nice.”

“Niceness has nothing really to do with it,” the boy murmured absentmindedly, his attention shifting towards inspecting the cell. “Business is business.”

“Way to make a guy feel special,” Mulch grumbled, some of his earlier stress bleeding away.

The tiny figure watched him, equal parts amused and slightly off-put by Mulch.

“Name’s… Doc,” Mulch offered. “And I’d shake your hand were I, y’know.”

Mulch held up his hands, the cuffs jingling at the movement.

“I don’t think Doc is your real name,” the figure remarked lightly, fingers curling around the bars over the window. “But as I’d prefer not to give you my real name either, I suppose I’m not one to talk.”

Mulch sighed, the noise echoing in the dingy cell. “Kid, you look about ten. Would it have been so hard to give me a ‘what’s up, Doc’?”

Ignoring the dwarf’s comment, the boy cocked his head. “What a joker you are. Well, Doc, I’ll offer you a name for me as well: Baud.”

“Bowed?”

Although Mulch’s vision was still blurry, he could see the kid make a face. “Baud. Baudrillard.
“Yeah, you’re gonna have to pick a new fake name,” Mulch interrupted, waving him off. “The name thing is a mutually-assured security thing, not an opportunity to get all hoity-toity. New name time: go.”

“Archimedes.”

“Bzzt. Wrong again. No.”

“… Pallas?”

Mulch let the name roll around his brain a bit, pretending to consider it. Frankly, he was just going to keep things simple and refer to the boy as ‘kid’, if and when he had to use a name at all. Finally, he gave a half-hearted shrug, and the boy outside grinned, triumphant. “It’ll do.”

No sooner had he given his assent did the door to his cell creak open. Mulch shook his head, trying to clear away some of the fuzziness. The kid waited at the window, watching. As far as Mulch could tell, there was no one else out in the hall.

The space in the doorway remained there, empty and foreboding.

“Is there anyone else like you here?” the boy asked, watching Mulch as the dwarf struggled to get to his feet.

“Like me?” Mulch questioned, wrinkling his nose. “What do you mean?”

It was the boy’s turn to shrug, looping his fingers together behind his back nonchalantly. He said nothing, enjoying Mulch’s unease in the silence.

Out of the mineshaft and right into the cave-in, Mulch surmised, his feeling of defeat from earlier settling back in. Stay with his human captors or take his chances with this kid, who, frankly, Mulch trusted only a marginal amount more. The preservation of thousands of years safely tucked away from humanity had roughly the same odds as a coin toss, if Mulch had to take his bets.

“Are you going to go about making more jokes? It seems as though your biting wit has disappeared.”

The comment cut through Mulch’s thoughts like a hot poker disturbing the dying embers in a hearth, startling him back to attention.

“No,” Mulch said finally, carefully crossing the boundary between his cell and the hall. “I’m fine.”

The boy smiled at that, but the expression held a bite to it. “Wonderful. I must ask again, though: are you the only one here?”

For a brief moment, Mulch considered blowing off the question again.

But he didn’t.

For better or worse, the boy in front of him was his only shot at getting out. The LEP didn’t know where he was, and therefore they certainly weren’t coming after him; his allies weren’t going to risk their hide breaking him free; he found it unlikely that these strange humans would let him leave. He knew when to bluff and when to fold. To give up some of the People’s secrets to this kid who already seemed privy to their business was worth it if it meant Mulch wasn’t going to be responsible for all of humankind being keyed into the Secret: the People’s existence.
“Yeah, I’m the only one,” Mulch admitted. “They’ve got tons of animals stored around the office, but I’m the only one like me.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” the boy promised, holding up a hand in an imitation of the scout gesture. As he did so, Mulch felt the pins in his handcuffs tumble strangely, the internal mechanisms of the lock moving awkwardly. The cuffs fell from his wrists, and for a moment all he could do was gawk at them. Uncertainly, he reached for them.

“You’re welcome,” the boy said, clearly pleased with himself.

Drawing his hand away from the cuffs on the ground, Mulch rubbed at his wrists instead, thinking. He could reflect upon... that with the therapist they had at Haven Penitentiary the next time he got caught by Julius. The main goal was to just get out of this goddamn building.

“I figured that you were the only one here,” the boy continued, speaking more to himself than to Mulch. “They only had a file on you, after all.”

Mulch looked up sharply. “File?”

The boy waved him off. “I’ve already scrubbed all their records, digital and physical. I suppose they might have some off-site, but I assume those notes aren’t enough to prove anything about magic—”

“Magic?” Mulch stressed, the strands of his beard at alert. Dwarven intuition — he’d been around the block enough times to know when to listen to it.

“— although those records will soon be dealt with as well, if everything goes smoothly,” the boy was prattling on at this point, but he started at Mulch’s interjection, blinking. “… Yes?”

Suddenly, the boy looked guilty, his stance a little more unsure. “They haven’t been… keeping you here since birth or anything, yes? You do know what magic is—”

Mulch blanched, holding up his hands to slow the boy down. “What? No. I got here about a week ago.”

He ignored the needling voice at the back of his head that pointed out that really, he didn’t know how long he’d been here.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Mulch took a deep breath, steadying himself. “What I mean to say,” he began. “Is how do you know about… it.”

“Magic?”

Mulch tried not to wince. God, he hated this conversation. Once he got out of here, he wasn’t coming aboveground for at least another decade.

“Yes,” Mulch grit out. “You’re not with the humans running the show here, so…? Enlighten me, kid.”

The more the drowsiness from the tranquilizer wore off, the more Mulch could see with clarity how utterly screwed the whole situation was. A better question for him to have asked would have just been: how and why are you here? Mulch was shite with guessing how old humans were, but he could tell this one was young. Why he was playing hostage search-and-rescue was beyond Mulch. If anything, the only reason he didn’t suspect that the kid was a plant sent by his captors, a tool designed to get more information out of Mulch, was because it didn’t even make sense from their perspective to send a child to play mind games.
“Magic,” the boy simply responded, and Mulch’s frown deepened. Before Mulch could press further, the boy snapped his fingers and the door to Mulch’s cell swung closed.

For a moment, all Mulch did was stare at his empty cell. Then, letting out a low, impressed whistle, he turned back to the boy.

“We’re gonna get out of here,” Mulch decided. “And after tonight, we’re never going to talk to each other ever again.”

The boy nodded, disinterested by now in Mulch. “If you’d like.”

The cool air on Mulch’s face felt like heaven. He inhaled deeply, tasting the night breeze on his tongue. Above him, the stars dotted the sky, and all around him, Mulch could hear the low chattering of birds and insects. Being able to sense the status of the world around him — to feel the dampness of forming dew, to hear the roaring of cars in the distance, to perceive the chill of the natural darkness — was a luxury he had missed. Sure, he’d spent countless days in LEP prisons or holding cells, but these past few days had felt different. Suffocating. He wasn’t one to linger on such thoughts, though, so Mulch instead took another breath, enjoying the way the wind tickled his beard.

He was in Ireland.

Well, he conceded, he was in an alleyway right now. Details, details.

Nearby, footsteps fell upon the concrete, and Mulch pulled back into the shadows. He had no shield to rely on, but the darkness would serve him just as well, considering the poor quality of human night vision.

“It’s me.”

Mulch rolled his eyes, the voice familiar. “Hello, me.”

The boy was carrying a plastic grocery bag from the Aldi whose alley Mulch was currently lurking in. Dropping the bag in front of Mulch, the boy reached into his pocket for a cell phone.

Picking up the bag in one fell swoop, Mulch began rifling through its contents. With a victorious grin, he pulled out a tinfoil-wrapped hot sandwich. Tearing into its wrapping, he wasted no time in taking hearty bites out of the sandwich.

Mouth full, he tried to speak around the food. “‘Ssit?’

The boy looked at him, not making an effort to conceal the disgust on his face. “Pardon?”

Mulch swallowed. “What is this? Best damn thing I’ve had in the last decade, probably. Also, point the phone away from me, s’il vous plait and por favor. Can’t be having any more pictures of my mug floating around.”

“It’s a gyro wrap,” the boy said, punching a few buttons on the phone. “I’d ask you to pay me back for it, but I doubt that would be possible, currency-wise. And I’m working, not taking photos — I have more important things on my mind than the mystery of how on Earth you’ve gotten this far through life with those table manners.”

Satisfied with the answer, Mulch finished the sandwich, moving to paw through the rest of the bag.

It hadn’t taken much to get out of the building he’d been held in, in the end. At first he’d been
hesitant, lingering behind the kid as they both made their way through the labyrinthine halls, but he’d become bolder once it became clear that no one was coming to stop them. He and the kid had crawled down a fire escape, made their way back to the main road, and trekked alongside the empty street until they’d hit this rest stop. Mulch was still dizzy, and beyond that, he didn’t even know where he was once he’d gotten outside. Following the kid until he got his bearings just made sense.

Popping open the top on some frou-frou fizzy water the boy had thrown in the bag, Mulch drank quietly for a moment.

“I’ve been thinking,” he started, and the boy looked up.

“Is that unusual for you?”

“...Developing a sense of humor, good for you. You’re welcome for the shining example that I’ve provided. But no, I was just thinking that, well,” Mulch paused. “Do you have something like, what, a boss? What’s up with you and the whole… rescuing me thing.”

The boy flipped his phone shut, pulling it up to his chin in thought. “I had business finding out what Damon Kronski and his group were up to. I was expecting them to have found something… other than you, but releasing you from their clutches was advantageous insofar as the ramifications of word of any kind getting out about magic would be disastrous.”

“Wordy, aren’t you,” Mulch snorted. “I thought as much, too, though.”

The boy smiled at that, his demeanor softer than it had been all night. “You’ll go back to your magic, and I will return to mine. I only ask that you keep Kronski a secret, as I already have word that my people are handling the situation.”

“Fair.”

Mulch shoved his hands into his pockets. “I owe you for tonight, kid.”

Ignoring the boy as the kid opened his mouth to wave off the declaration, Mulch reached for the chain around his neck. He’d tucked the necklace under his shirt to make sure that it didn’t get caught on something when he’d tunnel, and he took a moment to admire the metal as it glinted in the moonlight.

The chain itself had been kept in perfect condition, and the surface glinted more like a pearl than a precious metal. On it were a series of dog tags, many of different sizes and thickness, but all of the same bronze. Gently, Mulch took the chain off his neck, carefully moving one of the tags off the necklace. The smooth metal felt grounding against the rough calluses of his palm, and he allowed himself a moment to run his thumb over the tag’s surface, feeling the grooves of the lettering on it. Hooking the necklace back around his neck, he took care not to let the chain catch on itself.

Thrusting a hand out, Mulch presented the tag to the boy.

“Take it,” he said firmly. “It’s got my family’s rune on it. If you ever run into someone ‘like me’,” he made air-marks, “show them this. Rune stuff is serious business. People usually don’t take my word for much, but they’ll take something like this seriously if you ever get into trouble with one of us.”

Cautiously, the kid reached out for the tag, plucking it from Mulch’s palm as though he was worried Mulch would draw his hand back at the last second.
“Thank you,” he said finally, fingers curling around the object. “I can’t say that I understand the gesture fully, but I appreciate you giving me this.”

Mulch nodded, and the boy pocketed the tag. He could hear the cars puttering by on the road, but his fears that it was the sound of one of his captors coming to swoop him back up had faded. Briefly, he wanted to ask the boy in front of him how he’d gotten tangled up in all this business.

He didn’t, though. They were both going to walk away from this rest stop, and they were going to both remain quiet about the other. That was the only way their respective worlds could go on spinning as they had, undisturbed.

The street lights flickered, and Mulch went back to rummaging through the grocery bag, determined to make up for his missed meals.

The Endor manor was quiet as Artemis stepped inside.

The looming front door barely made a noise as the hinges glided past one another, swinging open gracially as Artemis had exited the cab he’d taken over. The cab driver outside had put his car into idle, and the headlights were now spilling into the hall. Taking a breath, Artemis closed the door behind him, not waiting for the noise of the car sputtering back out and away from the driveway. His priority was to let Dmitry know about the Extinctionists, but high up on his list of things to do was to find a nook or corner in the house in which he could tuck himself away in and sleep. His mind was too full of the past few yesterdays; hopefully in rest some of them would leak out of his brain, leaving only the necessary bits that would make sense of the puzzle. The business with the fellow from tonight would have to be put on the back-burner; to even attempt to unravel the mystery of who and what he was beyond being someone with magic (and thus someone who the Council wanted to get away from the Extinctionists) would take more time than Artemis had these days.

He made his way to the staircase, careful to keep his footfalls away from the parts of the floor that he knew would creak and moan in protest. Artemis felt tense; the entire house had a certain aura to it that had nearly bowled him over once he’d stepped onto the property.

He’d not even made it to the top of the staircase when the door to Dmitry’s study creaked open. Artemis frowned.

He’d not done that, and he hadn’t felt Dmitry’s magic do that, either.

He glanced down at the handrail, feeling the polished mahogany buzzing with energy.

The house was not happy. Something was wrong.

His dread increasing with every second, Artemis steeled himself to continue his ascent. Peeking through the door, his eyes scanned the room, searching for his teacher. His gaze finally fell upon Dmitry, who was sitting peacefully in his armchair, face devoid of the stress lines it usually held. The man’s eyes were closed, and there was no flutter typical of sleep. Everything about Dmitry was still.

A shudder racked the house, an inanimate wail of grief pulsing through the estate in waves.

Artemis stepped back, hand grasping for the doorframe shakily.

Dmitry was dead.
The epigraph from this is from a Midsummer Night’s Dream when Puck, the trickster faerie, appears on stage at the end of the play to give a soliloquy. It serves as both an apology for the mischief that Puck has caused in-universe and as a meta-commentary on the play itself; “if we shadows have offended/think but this, all is mended” is a line that could refer to the actors (the shadows, literally) or the fae (the shadows, metaphorically). That particular line serves as a segue to the dual function of the epilogue: first, in true Elizabethan fashion, it’s to basically say “hey, thanks for sitting through our little old play and not like, booing us”, and second, it introduces the idea of theatre as something “no more yielding but a dream”. Shakespeare’s world is a blend of fantasy and storytelling that is presented to the audience through acting, and watching the play and enjoying it requires a suspension of reality. In essence, you can’t be cinemasins-ing every element of production (well, if puck is REALLY supposed to be a fairy, then why could I see that there were strings used to give him the appearance of flying???) checkmate, Shakespeare. That was just a dude, not a supernatural creature) if you’re going to truly engage with the themes and text of a work. Focusing on the work metatextually is like coleslaw: it’s neat, but you can’t make a whole meal of it, can you? But to the sect of the audience determined to focus on certain elements of the play instead of engaging with it, such as the (at the time, raunchy humor and potentially unnerving supernatural themes, you can just pretend the past hour or so of your night was a dream instead of like, staying after to yell at the actors.

Basically, “Think but this, and all is mended” — “the show’s over folks; the characters are happy and the conflict is resolved. No need to throw a fit”.

And that’s not even touching the role of dreams vs. reality theme as it functions in text! But this isn’t an essay on Midsummer night’s so I’ll leave m’stuff at the door here and get to how this relates to this chap.

Why’d I choose this soliloquy? First off: Midsummer night’s goddamn RULESSSSSS it’s my favorite Shakespeare play of all time. Second, the theme of magic causing chaos and mischief, and the supernatural agents disturbing the peaceful lives of the humans around them? Relevant. But is Artemis firmly in the camp of a supernatural provocateur or in the camp of mortal collateral damage? A question that shall be explored. Tho’ nothing ever has a completely black and white answer, in all fairness.

Uhhh things that are relevant to the next chapter are pysanky, bureaucracy, and Italy. I will restrain my pretentious little gremlin hands from putting Dante or the Prince as my epigraph for next chap but Know that I am sorely tempted.

To answer the question about Butler’s military history, I present his early life section of
the wiki: “Though none are listed in great detail, Butler has been on many dangerous excursions across the globe, such as being sent out to blow up a Colombian drug lord’s estate (only for it to be hit by a massive earthquake seconds before detonating), undertaking a mission for the French Secret Service and later spending a month recuperating in Paris, being part of a five-year stint with an espionage unit in Russia in the late eighties where he, presumably, saw how the local Mafiya operated during dealings with them, going to Laos where he met a man who could put the "whammy" on a person, serving with the ex-Green Beret Sid Commons on bodyguard duty in Monte Carlo, saving the life of Sergeant Justin Barre after he’d been attacked with a hunting knife during a bar fight in the nineties and at some point, being involved with the FBI.”

Which is… a Long List. So long that I’d put it in a similar category of Artemis allegedly being able to type Paradise Lost in 20 minutes (which would give him a whopping 7525 words per minute uh????). Frankly I think the way I’d deal with Butler’s history prior to officially working for the Fowls in this fic would be that although his resume is prolific, there’s a lot of mythoi that’s been built up around him that he doesn’t exactly correct due to how it gives him an edge in intimidation. (Again, don’t know specifically what ‘old soldier’ refers to, but it could be metaphorical Orrrr be a way he classifies one of the above jobs/job he held that just wasn’t mentioned before Artemis was born)

Thank you again to everyone who has left comments/kudos’d — I appreciate the feedback and kind words!

(Okay side note if you want to watch Midsummer Night’s, my fave is the 1935 film directed by Max Reinhardt skdfhks Olivia de Havilland is stunning as Hermia and I had such a crush on her when I first saw this on TV years ago)
"The commentators tell us: the correct understanding of a matter and misunderstanding the matter are not mutually exclusive."

It didn’t take long for Artemis to go through all of Dmitry’s things. The house wasn’t empty, per se, but it was filled up with quite a bit of nothingness. The house would fill up empty spaces and desolate rooms with bits of itself it had bent into ersatz furniture-like shapes, and although these likenesses were real in that they could be touched, they had no more substance than water that dutifully fills up the container it is poured in, adding nothing other than a shallow interior that conforms to the void left by an anticipatory hole. Dmitry’s things, his real belongings, were as such just the odd trinket — things that the house couldn’t manufacture. The house let Artemis pore over the books and curios lying around, but it wasted no time in reclaiming its owner. Artemis had stumbled out of Dmitry’s study, disbelieving and repelled, following his discovery of his departed teacher. When he’d returned, he’d found the door to the study had disappeared, with the only hint that the room had ever been there being a dark curtain strewn over the smooth, flat portion of the wall where there had once been an entrance.

Artemis hadn’t attempted to circumvent the estate’s desire to put Dmitry to rest. The man was gone, after all, and in an odd way, the house was the closest thing Dmitry probably had to a family. In lieu of legal documents, it was only right that the representation of Dmitry’s thoughts and desires be the executor of his will.

He’d as such kept to examining whatever he was able to find. Artemis read the books, leafed through the lists of contacts Dmitry kept, and peeked at the scant records his teacher had recorded. From what he could tell, Dmitry had no premonition of what was to come, no secret anxieties he’d concealed from Artemis in the days leading to his death. Just useless, vapid nothingness. No clues, no leads, no explanations. Artemis was not used to being left with a problem that provided not even the most basic first step from which he could do a sort of intellectual waltzing over to the second (or even third) next step. Furthermore, he wasn’t used to being on such a time-crunch. For all Artemis knew, his father and the Major were already waking up from a two-year-long delusion that Dmitry had constructed. They would both be occupied by the business they were currently en-route to in Murmansk, and there was little either of them could do to get into contact with his mother or Butler while traveling by ship. But their business would not last forever, and Artemis needed to be certain he would be able to maintain Dmitry’s illusions once they returned.

Sighing, he closed the leather-bound book he’d been flipping through for the past hour. It was one of the many he’d pulled off of the bookshelves in the library. The past few days had been taxing. He would wake up when the house lit the windows bespeckling its interior with the warm, fiery color of dawn. Once he’d risen from whatever couch he’d fallen asleep on, he’d make his way to the dining room, where a continental breakfast spread would be strewn out across whatever pseudo-antique table the house had conjured up that day; Artemis would never take more than a slice of toast (with apple butter) and an egg (over-easy), but the house would still lay out a veritable buffet each morning. Once he’d finished his repast, he would make his way to one of the rooms of the house he knew to contain documents or texts he’d seen Dmitry use, and it was such that his day truly began. He’d read, take notes, discard the useless bits, keep the semi-interesting bits, and then begin again with a new stack of books. Again, and again, and again. The house would sometimes remind him to
break for meals, but for the most part, Artemis retreated into a sinking pit of word-sludge, up to his
neck in histories and subjects he was desperately trying to turn into a neat corner piece for his puzzle.
Often times, he didn’t even remember falling asleep — he was caught in a hurricane version of the
weeks leading up to the thesis defense of his work on Balkan Politics back at Trinity.

As Artemis reached for another text he’d added to the pile around his feet, a sharp rapping noise
sounded from the tall, stained glass window that served both as the centerpiece to the library and as a
constant source of light. Barely glancing up, he picked up the book he’d been eyeing earlier.

“Truly your forgiveness I implore;” he murmured. “But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you
came rapping, and so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door, that I scarce was sure I
heard you.”

The knocking against the glass sounded again, this time more impatient.

He sighed, setting the book back down. “I take it you don’t care for Poe, then?”

The entire frame of the window rattled, and for a moment, Artemis was morbidly curious about what
would happen if one of the panes fell loose; perhaps the house existed in a void when it wasn’t
necessary for it to take up a place on Earth, and perhaps he’d be pulled out into that void — a
cosmonaut being yanked from his ship into the vacuum of space after a rocket failure.

Rising, he made his way over, not wanting to test the house’s ire. The window was still by now, and
Artemis was left basking in the varicolored light painting his features. The glass stretched endlessly
upwards, it seemed, and even craning his neck, Artemis was unable to see the end of the window —
the ceiling was dark like a starless sky, and the windows and walls melted out of definition like oil
bleeding through a wine-dark sea.

He squinted.

Something was twirling through the air from above. It was still far too high above him to be anything
but a light speck, but there was clearly something falling down. As it neared, it came into view, and
Artemis was able to make out a small, white envelope tumbling towards him. It was so light that its
descent was slow, and Artemis was able to pluck it out of the air above him before it pirouetted
away.

The house rumbled in contentment.

Frowning, he made his way back to the chair he’d been sitting in. Distractedly, he reached for the
drawer of the coffee table next to him, using a single hand to rummage around for what he was
looking for. He flinched, drawing his hand back suddenly. Setting the letter down on top of the table,
he put his attention towards looking for the letter opener he’d almost nicked himself on. Finally, he
set to opening the envelope.

His eyes moved quickly down the letter. It didn’t take long to read — the entire message was no
longer than a few paragraphs. The Council that Dmitry had been so disdainful of sent their
condolences. They also requested Artemis’ presence for a brief meeting surrounding the passing of
Dmitry. It was all very clinical and bureaucratic.

Artemis tossed the letter onto the table next to him, closing his eyes to think.

“Shall I go?” he asked aloud, opening his eyes and looking around the room.

To his disappointment, the house offered nothing. Making a face, he leaned back in his seat. He was
back at square one.
The room darkened. Startled, he shot up out of the chair, fingers curling around the letter opener.

The window flashed, remaining lit for a few moments. Then it darkened for an instant before illuminating once more, the light enduring for the same period of time. Cautiously, Artemis relaxed, taking mental note of the flashes and darkening.

-- --- .-. -. .. -. --.

Morning.

Mulling over the house’s message, Artemis toyed with the letter opener, twirling it around his fingers as he moved to deposit it back into the drawer.

Morning. Interesting.

“Thank you,” he called out, settling back into his chair in the darkness. “Please wake me up at least an hour before we arrive, please. I want to leave a decent impression, after all.”

It would take some time before he fell asleep, but eventually, the house’s distant creaks and moans faded into white noise.

Morning would come soon enough.

The Paris Catacombs were a magnificent example of human ingenuity. The underground network of caverns and tunnels stretched for miles — many of which were available for touring. When the house had arrived in a neighborhood nearby the entrance to the underground tomb, Artemis had quickly gathered where his first place to look was. It certainly helped that the letter he’d been given seemed to tug this way and that in his pocket, allowing him to make his way slowly to the ossuary like he was playing a game of hot-or-cold. As he’d expected, there was a guard stationed at the opening, but the man seemed to understand intuitively to let Artemis through when he’d pulled out the letter. The man didn’t seem to understand why he was leading Artemis through the tunnels, of course, but he complied with the suggestion the letter had planted in his mind nonetheless. The tunnels they made their way through were often sectioned off with signs warning of structural weakness, but Artemis had been around Dmitry long enough to suspect that it was likely that if he tried to touch those signs, the writing on them would flicker away, revealing decaying paper with naught on it.

It was a painstakingly slow process, but Artemis was eventually standing in front of a gated-off corridor.

For a moment, it seemed as though the officer wanted to say something, but Artemis waved him off, stepping forward as the wrought-iron barrier swung open and inward into the darkness of the catacombs.

“You keep yourself safe, yeah?” the man offered, a bit uselessly, and Artemis nodded, pocketing the letter at last.

As he walked deeper into the inner sanctum, he saw the pale yellow and honey light cast by torches. The light led all the way into a circular room lit by floating balls of flame that hung like tea-lights around a long, rectangular table that seated various figures. They presumably were the Council, and Artemis forced himself not to sigh at the ostentatiousness of the décor. Firelight and catacombs. No wonder Dmitry acted the way he did — he came from a society of Byronic aesthetes.

“Stop,” one of the men at the table said, and Artemis dutifully halted.
“Are you the young one our departed brother has been apprenticing?” the man continued.

Obviously, Artemis thought derisively. What other ten year old would be down in the catacombs in the middle of the night?

Instead, he merely nodded. “I am.”

At that, he felt as though he was able to see the people seated at the table properly. He’d had a vague idea of their size and general appearance before, but it had been kept fuzzy by forces beyond his control. There were three of them, and their names seared onto Artemis’ brain with startling definition.

“I am here about his death,” Artemis began, pulling out the letter and setting it on the table. “I believe he was killed.”

The man seated at the head of the table laced his fingers together, cocking his head. “Why is that?”

Surprised, Artemis let a flicker of confusion contort his face before he was able to wrestle his expression back to neutrality. “Can your kind die without being killed?”

The man, Arus, laughed. “A question as an answer. I’ll allow it, though. No, we generally can’t. We live far longer than is perhaps wise when left to our own devices.”

“Before he passed, he was investigating the Extinctionists,” Artemis continued, trying to not reveal how unsettled he was. “I believe that their discovery of magic could have perhaps led to his death.”

Arus raised his brows, drawing his lips into a thin line. “Oh. Them. I’d be willing to bet good money that they’ve never seen real magic in their entire lives. It’s doubtful they had anything to do with your teacher.”

Filing away that information, Artemis made a note not to mention the creature he’d met when prowling through the halls of Kronski’s building complex.

“You seemed so… concerned about them when you requested assistance with the Extinctionists a few weeks ago,” he tried carefully, studying the faces before him for a reaction.

“That was a few weeks ago,” Arus said, shrugging. “This week, we are not concerned.”

Artemis looked back and forth between the elders seated at the table, carefully poring over which words to use.

“You meant for Dmitry to die.”

Light chuckling and titters floated around the table.

Arus raised his wine glass to his mouth, doubtlessly trying to hide the twitches of mirth dancing upon his lips. “He’s been going by Dmitry?”

Artemis clenched his fists.

The cloaked man, Icarot, sitting to Arus’ right took pity on Artemis, laying a hand on the High Cleric’s shoulder to quiet his companion. “You are very clever to infer that so quickly. How long has he had you around, little Artyom?”

“Two years or so,” Artemis replied, voice curt. “I take it you have little affection for him.”
“Perhaps we had a great deal of affection for him,” the woman, Maymag, remarked, eyes glinting with enigmatic light. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

Her comment only prompted more laughter around the cavernous room.

“He was a dogmatist,” she elaborated, sobering as she motioned for the others to quiet down with the wave of a hand. “The worst of his kind. The world had no room for... Dmitry, and he had no room for it. The only crowd he could entice to his pulpit was you, Artemis. An outsider and a child. Do you not see how pitiable that is? To release him was a mercy. It might seem like a vicissitude from your young eyes, but old creatures like him only ache more when forced to evolve.”

Aurus set his goblet down. “Cleric Maymag is correct.”

“If he was such an embarrassment,” Artemis interjected, lip curling. “Then why seek his aid in the first place? Seems a bit hypocritical. However, what do I know? I’m merely an outsider and a child, as you said.”

The laughter quieted at that.

Maymag quirked an eyebrow up, but she said nothing.

“There will always be more Kronskis,” Artemis said firmly. “There will always be more humans who peer beyond the veil. There will always be——”

“Kronski and his ilk were never a concern,” Arus cut him off. “Why else would Dmitry send you?”

Artemis blinked.

Aurus continued, tone dripping with false sympathy, and he rose from his chair “And we knew he’d send you. Kronski was a means to an end — a way to get you far enough away as to not be collateral damage.”

“There aren’t many young of our kind,” Icarot explained, words echoing and tinny as he spoke into his goblet. “Don’t go about getting any inflated ideas surrounding yourself.”

“Your existence presents us with the opportunity to mitigate a loss,” Maymag agreed, resting her chin upon an outstretched hand. “Dmitry goes. You take his place. A neat, zero-sum solution.”

“He forced our hand,” Arus sighed. “We’d just lost one of our members earlier this century — he knew we’d be hesitant to shrink our numbers even more...”

“But he found you.”

“... And just two years ago. That’s but a blink of the eye, even for human-raised stock.”

“— not nearly in corpore sano enough to have made much progress with you.”

“— Opportunities...”

For a moment, a vision of himself clapping his hands over his ears and keening over from the raucous chatter rang through Artemis’ mind with the utmost clarity.

“Dmitry was a bad man, that much is true,” he grit out, his voice barely carrying over the bedlam. “But to kill one of your own without trial... how could I ever work with you, knowing I am only ever a single trespass against you lot from being put down like a dog as well?”
“A ‘bad man’ — he was planning to turn this world to ash,” Icarot remarked mildly. “Do you plan to do the same, Artyom?”

“How?” Artemis challenged, ire rising. “Are his crimes so wicked that the mere mention of his sins —”

“Old gods. Very complicated to explain if you’re not up to date on your obscure occultist sects — I don’t suppose you’re familiar with Eldritch Hermeticism? That’d be approaching something akin to what he bought into,” Arus provided, his lazy grin mirroring that of Artemis’ late teacher.

“You mock me,” Artemis said softly.

Icarot softened. “Maybe so. Nonetheless, our offer is genuine.”

“He needn’t decide now,” Maymag cut in. She reached into her cloak to pull out a robin’s egg blue envelope, but Artemis was only half paying attention to her.

The letter was no bigger than a card box.

Flipping it up into the air, Maymag watched as it spun suspended in place, twirling like an ornament on a hanging mobile.

“Come back when you are grown,” she said, and the letter shot across the space between the Council and Artemis, hitting him lightly. It dropped to the ground, making a dull sound. “Make up your mind where you belong. If you still elect to hate us, I promise you that the pain we’ve caused will be no more than a distant dream. But until then, ruminate on Dmitry. Ruminate on us. Decide.”

They could have made the letter appear in his pocket, Artemis thought bitterly as he reached down to pick it up off the floor. Everything was a spectacle with these people.

Stowing the envelope away, he nodded at each of the three mages seated before him.

“You are dismissed,” Arus announced, going back to his cards. Even Icarot, the most diplomatic of the trio, seemed to have returned to his previous business.

And so Artemis left, allowing the policeman from before to lead him back through the ossuary, returning to the empty streets off no better than before.

Passing the officer a few francs, Artemis continued to the disguised mansion. Cleverly, it had tucked itself in between the tightly-packed houses that stood like a quilted wall; an architectural version of the particolored costume of a jester. The only thing that marked his house as strange were the anachronistic merlons that wrapped like stone teeth along the flat roof’s perimeter, with not a single bird nor bat attempting to alight upon the castle-like parapet.

Pausing slightly at the door, Artemis reached for the letter he’d tucked away into his jacket. He admired it in the warm light cast by the lamps, the thin paper looking almost like a membrane with how it became translucent and greenish under the brightness.

He tossed it away, the letter tumbling through the cracks of a storm drain. If he’d cared to look, he would have seen it become consumed by the dark water that ran below.

He didn’t need to wait for his 18th birthday. It was abundantly clear that he’d already outgrown this secret society of mages. When Dmitry had remarked on being an outcast among his kind, Artemis had expected it to have something to do with how the man used his power to remain vindictive and immature — and perhaps it did, in a sense. The Council and Dmitry must have driven each other
mad, as each was a mirror of the others, the monstrous sibling that suggests one’s own ugliness.

Artemis didn’t want another Dmitry. He certainly didn’t want anything to do with the Council.

Absentmindedly, he toyed with the necklace chain around his neck. His knuckle brushed the old, sterling silver ring he’d found amongst Dmitry’s things — he’d have liked to have worn it properly, what with the fetching intricate shaping of the metal into a pair of finely detailed clasped, skeletal hands that had shimmering labradorite stones that were inset as the nails, but the ring was slightly too loose on his fingers, save for the thumb. He’d put it on the necklace for the meantime. Artemis let the ring fall away from his fingers, moving down the chain.

He toyed with the dog-tag hanging next to the ring.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY notes on references. Epigraph: from Kafka’s “The Trial”. Basically, text is open to potentially infinite (and seemingly contradictory) interpretations, bureaucracies can build into themselves illogical structures and tasks that end up having to be carried out to preserve the institution (although what happens when humans serve a system instead of systems serving humans?), and the senselessness and brutal confusion that worms itself into life. Next: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”: this translation that appeared in the King James Bible and was used to justify witch hunts. King James VI and I’s (the name refers to just one man — he was James VI as King of Scotland and James I as King of Ireland and England) “visit to Denmark, a country familiar with witch-hunts, sparked an interest in the study of witchcraft, which he considered a branch of theology. He attended the North Berwick witch trials, the first major persecution of witches in Scotland under the Witchcraft Act 1563. Several people were convicted of using witchcraft to send storms against James’s ship, most notably Agnes Sampson. James became obsessed with the threat posed by witches and wrote Daemonologie in 1597, a tract inspired by his personal involvement that opposed the practice of witchcraft and that provided background material for Shakespeare's Tragedy of Macbeth.” (King James VI and I Wikipedia is the source bc I’m tired and am too lazy to hit up JSTOR soz). The KJV was sponsored by him starting in 1604 and was published in 1611 (after he’d written Daemonologie in 1597) — it was used as a way to expand punishments given to people (mainly women) who were accused of witchcraft. Public records suggest deaths between 40,000 to 100,000 — tho’ way more were accused and given lighter punishments than the death penalty. In an analysis by George N. Conklin, an associate professor of classics and comparative literature at Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT) wrote, “To say that the offense of witchcraft was wholly imaginary since witchcraft is scientifically impossible, is like saying that there were no alchemists because alchemy is impossible”. Essentially, this was a law that was on the books because of superstition and the ability for people who were undesirable (the mentally ill, the homeless, people who disrupted the status quo, hell, even like, just midwives who practiced healthcare) to be disposed of under it; it wasn’t ever really about witches so much as witchcraft gave a justification to the terror enacted across Europe — James himself ended up deciding that he wasn’t sure witches existed later in life. In essence, someone who oversaw the conviction of multiple people and wrote a book that served as inspiration from some of the most famous witches in literature (heyoh, Macbeth!) told his son something that can be boiled down to “yeah, most accusations of witchcraft are bunk and I’m not even really sure witchcraft is possible”. Yikes! Anyways, this was a long-winded way to say
that 1) the quote exists in this as a way for the council to hypocritically poke fun at humanity for allowing a desire to get rid of people they deemed undesirables to get in the way of truth and justice and 2) essentially say that Dmitry’s death was ultimately a boon to him. Other than that, the parallels end, as Dmitry is unabashedly a Whole Dick who was deserving of the heat that caught up to him, even if his end came from people who are really no better than he is. A final note is the line Artemis says: “Truly your forgiveness I implore; But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping, and so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door, that I scarce was sure I heard you.” That’s from The Raven by Edgar Allen Poe! The poems about a raven bothering the narrator with its squawking cry of “Nevermore!” that forces the narrator to reflect upon the loneliness he feels at the loss of a woman who was dear to him, Lenore. The poem opens by the raven rapping at the door, and Artemis is teasing the house by comparing it to the gothic bird from Poe’s poem. I was either gonna go with the Raven opening lines or have Artemis quote ”Some One” by Walter de la Mare. Although I liked that this poem captured the idea of a “nothing” knocker — a semi-supernatural feeling woven into nature — I ultimately decided it was a tiny bit too childish for Artemis. Hence, the supernatural raven visitor from Poe’s poem! Also, the idea of losing someone you care for deeply pushing you to madness? The Fowl Star is not going to make it Murmansk — and that loneliness and grief bowling one over definitely characterizes Angeline in book one. Dunno if I can call it foreshadowing when it’s literally just the canon events surrounding why Artemis contacts the People in the first AF book but! That’s how it is.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you know how it is when one wakes at night suddenly and asks, listening to the pounding heart: what more do you want, insatiable?”


“I felt and saw the night outside deep within me. Wind and wetness, autumn, bitter smell of foliage, scattered leaves of the elm tree.”


CNN broke the news a little bit before midnight.

Butler had just finished his rounds. He’d been sitting in the old armchair by his bed, quietly reading, when the phone on his nightstand began to ring. The breathing on the other end of the line had been shaky and syncopated — Justin’s breathing. Barre’s voice had taken on a raspy quality ever since the bar fight injury that he’d sustained years back.

Butler faintly remembered his hands tightening around the phone.

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting. He knew it wasn’t going to be pleasantries. No one Butler had made space for in his life had time for something as small as that, for better or for worse.

But he hadn’t been expecting…

Butler stopped his pacing around the kitchen, rubbing the bridge of his nose and grasping for the cool marble countertop.

Justin had broken the silence by telling him to turn on the television.

The Fowl Star had been sunk off of the Murmansk Fjord earlier in the day.

He hadn’t woken anyone in the house up yet. Butler simply didn’t know how to tell Juliet that her uncle was no longer with them. The idea of talking to Angeline about the accident was terrifying — she fell ill from stress when he left on his business trips, and the knowledge that her husband was somewhere at the bottom of the sea would most likely break her. And Artemis…

Dimly, Butler wondered what would become of him. Angeline was surely the successor to her husband’s estate, and for as much as he didn’t stay around enough to show it, Artemis Sr. had loved his wife. She’d want for nothing, need for nothing. The house would be hers, the stocks would be hers, and if Angeline and Butler wanted to pursue it, the contract Butler had held with her son could
surely be tweaked, thus ensuring that safety would be hers as well.

But she would want nothing to do with the house. She would want nothing to do with the stocks. She would want nothing to do with him.

The kitchen remained silent.

“Shit,” he finally let out, exhaling roughly. He sank to the floor, the hardwood creaking under his weight.

Artemis had been ten. Too young to…

By now, it was a reflex to quash any train of thought that betrayed how he’d failed to keep his charge at a distance. But what did it matter tonight? Whether or not Butler had privately considered Artemis to be family was no longer something that he could be lambasted over. The contract between the Fowls and Butlers was void in the absence of the former half of the equation.

There were not many times Domovoi could remember when he’d allowed himself to be selfish. For now, the loss would belong to him alone. He would be the only one he needed to comfort for a little while longer. He would only have to bear his own weight. He would mourn his uncle and his charge. Domovoi could be strong once the morning crept closer, but in the dim light of the kitchen, the cabinets and old floor would be solid and secure, and he would be the one that was allowed tenderness.

Domovoi settled in, the faint sound of the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall filling the emptiness of the room. In the stillness, he felt as though he were waiting, listening for something that would pop the bubble encircling the kitchen’s suffocating feeling of coziness.

One a.m. crept by. Then two.

He stayed in the kitchen, waiting.

The clock continued ticking.

Threefourfivesix.

The sun had been poking above the horizon later and later, coaxed into drowsiness by the coolness of September.

Seven a.m.

Angeline would be rising soon, Domovoi felt himself think.

Petulant, the light lines of dusky, warm pinks and shy purples stacked themselves like bars across the sky, refusing to blend themselves yet into a uniform blue.

Outside, the sound of tires crushing gravel traveled through the window he’d cracked open in an attempt to clear his thoughts.

The hinges of the front door creaked, with the floorboards in the hall protesting as weight was applied to them.

Domovoi raised his head.

The grandfather clock stopped ticking.
Frozen in the doorway, Artemis stared at him awkwardly, simultaneously surprised and guilty he’d been caught.

“Butler?”

Butler’s mouth went dry.

Artemis timidly placed a hand against the polished wood of the entrance, unsure at the sight of his bodyguard in such a distraught state.

“What’s wrong?”

Rubbing at the wetness on his cheeks, Butler shook his head.

“You weren’t with them,” he said finally, forcing his voice to remain steady. “You weren’t—I—you’re alright. You’re alright—I Artemis,” he broke, pleading. “You weren’t on the ship.”

Artemis took a step back. Even in the low light of dawn, Butler could see Artemis’ hawkish eyes studying him. He’d piece things together soon enough, Butler thought glumly.

“You’re alright,” he said, more to himself.

Artemis moved to sit next to him, gingerly lowering himself onto the kitchen floor.

“Of course I am,” Artemis remarked simply, as if the alternative were an impossibility.

That statement was almost harder to hear than the CNN broadcast.

In the low light of the dawn, it was the first and only time Butler would allow Artemis to see him cry.

In the low light of the dawn, Artemis said nothing, leaning his small frame against the sturdy side of his bodyguard.

In the low light of the dawn, the grandfather clock commenced its ticking as if it had never stopped.

Chapter End Notes

hey so its been a LONG time since my last update (please ignore the fact that I have another piece that I haven't updated in a year ksdjhfkks) sorry! But it has Arrived and hopefully, it's good-ish! The epigraphs of this were chosen for the reasons as follows: Czeslaw Milosz’s poem is chosen because the poem deals with the idea of a present constructed out of a crumbled past (which I like from a character analysis standpoint of Artemis losing his father and the butler’s losing their uncle AND from the standpoint of how fanfic works in basically sifting through rubble and finding the pillars of what you’re gonna base your stuff off of). I then chose Hermann Hesse bc I felt that that quote has a very dark fairytale vibe to it — also!! in literary symbolism, autumn usually represents change, maturity, sadness or preparing for an end or decline.

Uhhh I guess the only other thing that was done Intentionally that I think is of note is when Butler believes Artemis has died, he briefly switches from referring to himself as butler to referring to himself as domovoi — because, in a sense, he’s believed that that chapter of his life is over too.
That’s all folks! Also this isn’t an au in that art sr is still alive (and who knows what’s going on with the major eye emoji) and that Artemis will still attempt to make a deal with the extinctionists for the lemur (but I don’t think ill have a chap on that bc I've basically decided kronski wouldn't have known Artemis was involved w setting mulch free)

hopefully, the next chap will be out soon?? Fear.png because I have lots of work :( reviews are super appreciated, as always!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

I haven't updated in ages sorry!! The quote this chapter is from Anne Carson, and I chose it in essence because a common problem in this story is people talking around each other — their conversations are made up of words with literal meanings, such as Butler and Artemis talking about what happened with the Fowl Star sinking, but these conversations are actually about things different than what they are literally talking about, such as how Butler wants Artemis to trust him and how Artemis still is unsure of whether or not Butler cares about him beyond being his bodyguard. Also, the bit at the end about Angeline knowing how the butlers will die references the incident in the Eternity code where Butler is nearly killed. Food for thought: if Angeline knew about what would happen to the Major and Butler, why didn’t she predict what would happen with the Fowl Star?

I hope the next update will come out soon!

Reviews are appreciated, and I hope that you enjoyed this chapter!

"We operate all the time with language as if it says what we mean."

— Anne Carson

Juliet padded down the hall, the wood cool on the soles of her feet even through the thin barrier of the socks she’d slipped on after sliding out of bed. The alarm clock in her brother’s room had gone off around 5 a.m. as usual, and she’d heard the muffled sound of the beeping through the walls. She always woke up during the handful of seconds between when Dom’s alarm clock went off and when he carefully switched it off. Most mornings she would stay in bed, listening to the sound of drawers opening and shutting as her brother shuffled around, getting ready for the day. Usually, she drifted back to sleep for another hour or so, comforted by the idea of Domovoi wandering the halls.

The alarm didn’t shut off this morning.

Juliet had laid there, listening to the sound. The beeping was the only noise next door — she couldn’t hear the creaking of the springs on her brother’s mattress as he rolled out of bed, she didn’t hear the soft clicking of the light switch, and she was unable to hear the groaning of the door hinges as it swung open to the hall.

Eventually, the alarm clock went silent. It was designed to do that if it was left on for too long.

Juliet peered down the stairwell, her shadow spilling down across the steps and into the dim light of the downstairs main hall. Faintly, she could hear her brother’s hushed voice and the sound of a woman weeping.

Her brow furrowed.

Fingers ghosting against the beautifully carved stair rail, she descended down the steps.
“I don’t understand,” Angeline hiccupped, breathing stilted. “He — He — What?”

Through the crack of the doorway, Juliet watched her brother awkwardly rub the curve of Angeline’s spine.

“They don’t know what happened yet,” Butler said quietly. “I saw it on the news last night—”

“You knew?"

“Angeline —”

“You knew and you — why wouldn’t you have gotten—”

“I thought Artemis was with them!” Butler snapped, composure slipping.

The room fell silent.

Juliet drew away from the door. Angeline would want to go back to her room soon, and Juliet wasn’t keen to get caught up in watching over Mrs. Fowl.

Carefully, she turned to make her way back upstairs.

Juliet flinched.

Standing in the dim light of the kitchen door was a seated figure.

“Juliet?”

It was Artemis.

Tension seeping away from her shoulders slightly, Juliet nodded. “What happened?” she asked, inching closer. “When’d you get back?”

In the dark, she saw Artemis shrug listlessly. The light of the kitchen backlit him, creating an eerie effect. He cleared his throat, voice thick, but said nothing.

He looked small.

Moving slowly, Juliet sank to the floor. She pushed herself against the frame of the door, and Artemis twisted slightly to accommodate her in the space next to him. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she let her head lay against the strong doorframe. In some ways, the wood of the frame provided more warmth than the feeling of Artemis to her side — at least it had soaked up some of the heat emitted by the radiator. When Artemis leaned back against her, their shoulders bumping as if to hold one another up through pushing back against each other’s weight, he was the same temperature as the dawn’s air.

Distantly, she recalled when she tried to tussle with him when they were both young. When she’d hushed him, hugging him in a last-ditch attempt to quiet him as his face turned ruddy after she’d accidentally elbowed him in the sternum, she’d been astonished by how warm he’d been — it was almost as if he was perpetually running a fever when he’d been but four or five years old.

It was almost a distant memory at this point.

Tentatively, she felt a cool hand wrap around hers.

Curling her hand around his and delicately lacing their fingers together, Juliet let the distant rumble of
her brother’s voice fade into garbled noise.

“I’m sorry about your uncle.”

It was said so quietly that Juliet could have almost missed it.

Butler waited a month before he asked the question.

Of course, Artemis knew that Butler was going to ask it eventually. Artemis had to have known. Perhaps it was selfish, but Butler had pushed all the strangeness of the accident out of his mind for the first week after the sinking of the Fowl Star. He couldn’t deal with anything beyond waking up, patrolling the grounds, making sure everyone in the house ate, and then going to bed.

But there was now some distance from that hellish first night.

The night the Fowl Star sank, and Artemis came home.

The table in the kitchenette was small enough that it was hard for Artemis to ignore his bodyguard when they ate lunch together, but despite this, Artemis remained steadfastly interested in the finer details of the soup he had been raking his spoon through for the past half an hour.

Clearing his throat, Butler leaned his elbows against the table, crossing his arms. The furniture creaked under his weight, and the soup sloshed around slightly in Artemis’ bowl.

“Artemis.”

“Butler.”

Butler pursed his lips.

“Artemis, you know we have to talk about this,” he tried, and the frown on Artemis’ face deepened as the concentric circles his spoon was making widened.

“For all you know,” Artemis began, and Butler forced himself not to sigh. “I could be traumatized. I could have ‘survivor’s guilt’. Frankly, I don’t think either of us are psychologically ready to—”

“Artemis, I just want to know where you were on the trip,” Butler exhaled. “I know you don’t want to talk about it. And we don’t have to. I just want you to help me to understand what happened, and then we’ll be done.”

Artemis hummed slightly. “I went with them on business. My father decided at the last moment that it wasn’t wise for me to be on such an extended trip at such a young age. I was then flown home.”

Mulling over Artemis’ words, Butler sat there in silence. Finally, he sighed.

“Maybe it’s because I don’t… fully understand why your father brought you along in the first place. But — Artemis,” Butler said gently. “No one called ahead to say you were coming home early. I looked at the bank statements of that week, and your father didn’t even hire someone to fly home with you. I just want to understand, Artemis. If you can help me to understand, I can deal with all the arrangements that are being made.”

“You think there was foul play,” Artemis noted, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards slightly at the unintentional pun he’d made.

“Yes,” Butler agreed, nodding slightly. “But… I’ll be honest with you, Artemis.”
Artemis looked up from his soup.

“I want to ask you. I want to have this conversation with you because I know that that’s what you would prefer. I’m not going to go behind your back because I know that you can be mature and talk to me.”

“And?” Artemis prompted.

“Why did your father take you along on these trips?”

“He wanted me to learn the family business,” Artemis responded neatly, meeting Butler’s gaze.

“He told me that. I’m asking you, though.”

“And I’m telling you the same,” Artemis noted. “It seems as though my presence on those trips was productive, then, if I can respond as my father would have.”

“Artemis,” Butler sighed. “This isn’t about business. The Fowl Star wasn’t sunk by businessmen. This is mob matters. As your bodyguard, I need to know if your father got you tangled up in the same — I need to know how far you’re in,” he stressed, moving the bowl of soup away from Artemis.

“I’ve made things easy for you,” Artemis retorted. “As I’m not even remotely ‘in’.”

“I’m not saying he was a bad man,” Butler backtracked. “But I know far, far too much about the kind of business he got up to to pretend like he wasn’t part of that world. I’m not asking this to disparage your memory of your father. He could be a good man and still... still be involved in that life. The only thing I want is for you to be safe.”

Artemis quirked his head slightly at the final comment. “For how long?”

Butler started. “Excuse me?”

Artemis straightened in confidence. “The bank accounts and stocks won’t last forever, Butler. Are you planning to work for me, pro bono, until I reach the age when I can inherit the family’s assets and business?”

Mouth opening and closing, Butler floundered. In all honesty, that had been his plan — and he hadn’t thought that it had sounded all that far-fetched. “Er—yes?”

Artemis went silent, his gaze calculating. “You understand that I may never fully restore the business to what it was, correct?”

The worry lines on Butler’s face deepened. “Of course.”

“Alright.”

“Hm?”

“Alright. I can tell you with complete confidence that I’ve never been caught up in mob business.”

Butler waited for Artemis to continue, but his charge had evidently decided he’d finished.

Butler frowned. “Is that all you have to say to me?”

Artemis reached for his soup, finally taking a spoonful. “Yes.”
“Alright, Artemis.”

The Saint Bartley dorms were surprisingly cramped for the exorbitant price tag attached to them.

Silently, Artemis watched his roommate rummage through their joint closet, the sound of the coat hangers rustling grating on his nerves. A crash sounded, and Artemis sighed, sitting up slightly to look at the hanging rod that had come free from its anchoring.

Desmond stood in the midst of sweaters and blazers, looking like the world’s most sheepish scarecrow.

“Sorry, Art.”

Artemis gave him a thin-lipped smile, but it came out more like a grimace. “It’s ‘Artemis’, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Desmond rolled his eyes, going back to riffling around through the pile of his and Artemis’ clothes. “Sorry for trying to help you come across as less of a ponce, I guess.”

“Giving as ever,” Artemis remarked, raising an eyebrow. “But I’m afraid I’m committed to martyring myself by going by my name instead of the moniker you’ve so lovingly picked out for me.”

Desmond winced, scrunching his shoulders up as he picked up a windbreaker. “Don’t say that crap.”

“The same to you,” Artemis replied, increasingly losing interest in the conversation.

Clucking his tongue, Desmond threw the garment onto the ground. “Do you have a cross?”

How quickly Desmond moved on, Artemis noted, almost amused. “Answer my question first.”

“Choir?”

“What? No,” Desmond scoffed. “It’s just this club that a few of the upperclassmen threw together.”

Artemis looked at him expectantly.

“Fine. Whatever. It’s…” Desmond tried, the tips of his ears turning slightly ruddy. “It’s the Saint Bart’s Occult Society. They said you have to bring something that can be used as protection to each of the outings.”

Artemis made a face. “Excuse me?”

“It’s like a ghost-hunting club… thingy.”

“I wasn’t aware we had ghosts at school,” Artemis said lightly. “How old money of us.”

Although Artemis half expected Desmond to snap at him for poking fun, what with Desmond being as easy to embarrass as he was, Desmond simply clucked his tongue in annoyance.

“Do you want to come?”
Surprised, Artemis almost laughed. When Desmond remained silent, Artemis’ face fell, sobering. Against all odds, Desmond seemed to be serious.

“Don’t you have friends you could invite?” Artemis wondered. Although he hadn’t thought it possible, the remark seemed to make Desmond look even guiltier.

“Ryan and Even are coming too, if that’s cool,” Desmond explained, waving him off. “You can walk over with us.”

Forcing himself not to make a face, Artemis shook his head. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Desmond hesitated. “You don’t have to stay the entire time.”

Artemis reached for his phone, flicking through the email notifications that had popped up while he’d been busy with schoolwork. Condolence message, scam mail, and a few sparse notes regarding the specifics of the sinking of the Fowl Star. Artemis permitted himself a brief scowl, dismissing most of the messages and starring the few useful ones.

Suddenly, his ears pricked, and he looked up. “Pardon?”

Desmond looked like he’d rather die than repeat himself. “Come on.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t hear you,” Artemis apologized, putting away his phone in his pocket. “Are you heading out soon?”

“Look,” Desmond tried, huffing. “I’m… I’m sorry about your dad. If you want to have the room to yourself for an hour, or whatever —”

Artemis blinked. “You thought it would be appropriate to invite me to a ghost hunting group as a way to have fun after I got news of my father’s accident?”

Desmond practically turned green. “Shite — sorry, I’m — shite.”

Artemis knew it was mean-spirited, but it felt good to not be pitied, even if it was only momentarily. Artemis was not used to being treated like he was liable to break at the slightest amount of pressure, and to give a resolute whack to Desmond using the very olive branch the boy had offered made Artemis feel like he had a tiny bit of the power he’d had back before everything went wrong. But the moment passed.

Sighing, Artemis shook his head. “I’m just teasing. I think the club is…a bit asinine, but your invitation is hardly traumatizing.”

Desmond’s shoulders relaxed, and he tentatively gave Artemis a smile. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

Artemis opened his mouth, but he paused, the gears in his head-turning. “I suppose I have nothing better to do,” he said after a moment.

Dmitry’s ring hanging on a chain around his neck felt heavier.

Clearly, Desmond was not expecting this outcome, as his face flushed with equal parts regret and surprise.

Artemis mentally tsk’d. Oh, Desmond. Even when he was trying to be nice, he still couldn’t fully avoid being just the slightest bit insensitive. Not waiting for his roommate to attempt to wheedle his
way out of bringing him along, Artemis rose from his bed, looking at Desmond expectantly. Desmond hesitated for a moment, but seeing no way to get out of bringing to the meeting, he shoved his hands in his pockets and gestured with his head towards the door. Quirking at an eyebrow at Desmond’s poorly concealed sulking, Artemis made his way to their door.

“Lead the way, Desmond.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Desmond sighed, no doubt mentally going over how he would later explain to his friends why his roommate had come to the meeting.

They made their way over to his friends’ room in silence. Once they’d successfully found Ryan and Even, Artemis fell to the back of the procession. Leisurably, he let the group of friends walk ahead. Desmond had likely figured that inviting Artemis along was enough as a good deed, and in truth, Artemis wasn’t that offended. Artemis had been aware of this even before his father had gone missing, but there was seemingly a gulf between him and his peers. Not just intellectually, though — most of the problem seemed to in truth stem from the fact he and his classmates inhabited different social and emotional worlds. Desmond had no reference point for dealing with someone who had lost a loved one because he was still living in a world where death was purely theoretical. How could Artemis be offended, therefore, that Desmond struggled to offer support? At least Desmond was trying.

Tuning out the sound of chatter, Artemis let his gaze wander along the corridor as they walked. Saint Bartleby’s was definitely distinctly more British-looking than the other prestigious Irish private schools Artemis could name — in both aesthetics and education, Saint Bart’s seemed to eschew its Irish roots almost in entirety. The school had been built in the 18th century, right about when the upper-class Anglo-Irish began seeing Ireland as their home. They’d wanted an Irish elite school to which they could send their children, and so Saint Bartleby’s had been erected. However, no matter how much these New English saw themselves as Irish, their idea surrounding what sort of school was sufficiently impressive was undeniably British. When Artemis’ father had flown them out to Oxford for business last summer, Artemis had fully been able to appreciate the astonishing degree to which Saint Bartleby’s was a love letter to palatial English architecture.

Artemis frowned.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to dwell very long on old memories, as the group arrived outside the old auditorium. Briefly, the group stopped on the steps and admired the way the stone building stretched strong and proud upwards into the sky. It was unlikely that the club was big enough to warrant reserving this space for a meeting, Artemis thought, shooting a glance at Desmond. His roommate was unaware of his gaze, instead pushing through the door.

They all filtered into the lobby, the wooden floorboards creaking slightly under their footfalls.

It turned out Artemis had been correct. There weren’t enough members in the club to justify using the auditorium itself — when Desmond finally located the correct office that was tucked away in some side hall, Artemis was not surprised to see that there were only ten or so people crowded into the room. A few of the members seemed surprised that Artemis was present. The club members looked warily at Desmond to see if the new member had tagged along solely to make fun of the endeavor, but Desmond clapped a hand on Artemis’ shoulder, and that was that.

There weren’t enough chairs to seat everybody, and it was with great reluctance that Artemis found a place on the rug next to Desmond and his friends. However, complaining about the venue at his first (and only) meeting) would have been poorly received, so Artemis swallowed his pride and tried to not think too much about the cleanliness of the floor. As the meeting began, the upperclassmen leading the club motioned for side chatter to quiet down, and Desmond nudged Artemis, grinning.
Artemis gave him a small, thin smile back, and Desmond turned away, pleased that Artemis appeared to be enjoying himself.

Artemis dropped the smile immediately.

It took perhaps an hour for Artemis to discern the most popular ghost stories that the club used as their claims to fame. First, the club alleged that in an opera put on in the early 50s, a lecturer visiting from Oxford was decapitated by a falling pastoral backdrop. Second, they also alleged that during a musical in the early 1920s, a performance involving various live sheep had resulted in a gruesome pile-up in the orchestra pit when the animals became spooked by one of the actors. Both incidents, the club leaders claimed, were responsible for at least half of the hauntings in the theatre department.

It took Artemis about five minutes of tinkering around on the mobile version of one of the school’s archive sites to confirm that neither of these incidents had ever occurred.

Although the earnestness with which the other students approached the club was amusing, Artemis soon grew bored. There was only so much whispering in a dimly lit room that he could tolerate, and tonight was rapidly approaching his limit. If anything, he was slightly cross with himself. What exactly had been expecting — for the club to have genuine proof of magic? He snorted. Although some of the members here were certainly fond of the aesthetic of the arcane, Dmitry-like they were decidedly not. Idly, his fingers drifted towards the chain around his neck.

Toying with the necklace, he noted that the ring felt strangely warm. It stung his fingers in the same way touching metal with an electrical current running through it gave off small zaps.

The upperclassman at the front of the room clapped his hands, and Artemis released the chain.

“If anyone feels like they are not strong enough for the séance,” Charles began. “I would ask that you step out now.”

It was dark enough that Artemis wasn’t too worried about being told off for making a derisive face.

No one moved to leave, and so Charles continued. “Dan, if you’ll get the lights. Everybody, make sure you’re close enough to your neighbor to link hands later on.”

As the lights were dimmed, Artemis could hear the other boys snicker and begin to talk with low voices. Regardless of if you were a believer, there was something delightfully spooky about the performance Charles and the others were putting on.

Charles cleared his throat. “We, the Occult Society of Saint Bart’s, do extend our warmest welcome to any spirits extant in this place.”

Breathy whispers petered to a stop, and it felt as though the room was collectively holding its breath.

“We intend to communicate with you for the following hour, but this invocation shall be revoked if you show signs of wishing anyone in this room ill will. Our intentions are peaceful, and we request that you show us a sign and make yourself known to the degree to which you are able to.”

Charles looked around the room, and various members straightened to attention.

“Spirits, speak thee unto us?” the group announced, the voices in the room starting at different times and with varying degrees of confidence.

Quietly, a few people shuffled around, reaching for one another’s hands so as to create an unbroken circle of people in the room.
Very quaint, Artemis noted, not moving to join in. The ring around his neck was becoming uncomfortable, and he was eager to leave the meeting soon so as to have some time alone in the dormitory.

However, his roommate looked over, eyes wide. In the low lighting, the whites of everyone’s eyes almost glowed, and there was a sense of nervousness emanating from Desmond.

Of course he was afraid of ghosts, Artemis thought glumly. Desmond was exactly the sort of person to get roped into these types of situations.

Huffing slightly, Artemis linked his fingers together with Desmond’s. After a moment, Artemis extended his other hand to the boy sitting next to him. Desmond shot him a look of relief — if Artemis were to only hold his hand, it would be all the more obvious that Desmond had been seeking comfort, something the other boy would have been mortified over.

As Artemis’ fingers brushed against the fingers of his classmate sitting next to him, he felt the prick of static electricity at contact. Determined to soldier on, he laced their fingers together.

No sooner had he done so when the lights flickered completely out, cloaking the room in pitch-black darkness.

Sharp inhales and swears echoed around the room.

The sound of rustling grew louder as people scrambled to find their phones, and Charles tried to call out for people to remain calm. Whatever he’d been expecting as a clear sign from the otherworld, this certainly was not it.

Vaguely, Artemis was aware of all of this.

However, when he blinked and opened his eyes, everything around him was dark. His head was buzzing, and all the voices in the room sounded as if they were underwater.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw that his earlier assessment was right: all around him, he could see dark, still water. For a moment, his breath caught in surprise, but he was able to breathe just fine. Whatever he was seeing, he wasn’t physically experiencing the scene before him. Looking up, he saw the light of the sky filter down towards him, the water causing it to dapple across his face strangely. Slowly, a dark mass crept into view on the surface, and Artemis craned his neck to get a better look. Try as he might, he was unable to do anything but watch — he could neither move away from nor closer to the odd object up above.

The surface broke into an explosion of bubbles, and Artemis saw a figure diving down towards him.

A boat, Artemis realized. There was a rescue boat above him.

The man swimming down towards him was dressed in diving gear, and Artemis briefly wondered how the diver had known that someone would be underwater here. He didn’t have long to consider this, as the man moved quickly, reaching out and grabbing at Artemis’ arm. Or perhaps it wasn’t Artemis’ arm, but it was certainly someone’s arm, and Artemis saw himself being dragged to the surface even if he couldn’t feel the man’s grip.

The world was still as they made their way upwards, almost like watching a movie without the audio playing.

Then they broke through the surface, and the world erupted into loud, angry voices.
Blinking, Artemis marveled at the group of men all huddled close together on the boat. They must’ve been about a kilometer off from the shore, and they were all bundled up with as much winter gear as they could wear.

Sensing the man next to him in the water shift, Artemis turned to see his rescuer rip off his diving mask.

“On zhil,” the man spat out in a thick Russian accent, wiping the wetness from his mouth with the back of his hand brusquely. “He lived. Help me get out of the water and get Britva on the line.”

One of the men on the boat laughed, but he did not move. “Mikhael, you look madder than my mother-in-law’s poor cat when it gets left out in the rain.”

Mikhael let out a series of what Artemis assumed to be Russian expletives.

“Where’s the big one?”

“What?” Mikhael sneered. “Fowl was the one we needed. I’m not going diving for any more lost souls.”

The man from before shrugged. “The Major could be helpful as well.”

“He did his job: he died or was injured protecting his boss. He has no worth whatsoever in negotiations, and I’m not going looking for his body just so we can send condolences to his family. Get me and the irlandets in the boat and call Britva.”

Artemis’ eyes widened and he opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Desmond snapped his fingers in front of Artemis’ face, and he flinched.

“Oy.”

All at once, the office came back into view with dizzying speed.

Artemis scrambled backward, desperately looking around for any trace of the scene he’d just been watching unfold. However, the only thing around him was the club, and Artemis felt his heart sink.

“What did you do?” Artemis hissed, equally horrified and incensed that Desmond had broken the spell.

Desmond looked unsure, and Artemis could feel the eyes of everyone in the room lock onto them.

Clearing his throat, Artemis flushed.

Awkwardly, he rose to his feet, bowing his head slightly in apology to the room.

“I am sorry for making a scene,” he struggled to get out, forcing his voice to remain even-toned. “I — I don’t usually go to these types of…” his lip curled. “Meetings.”

A few members let out half-hearted acknowledgments of the apology, and Desmond shook his head emphatically to indicate that it was fine.

Turning on his heels, Artemis made his leave, not waiting for any further responses.

Desmond called out, but Artemis ignored it.
In the end, he wasn’t followed.

As Artemis made his way back to the dorms, he forced himself to breathe.

Whatever it had been that he’d seen, he knew it wasn’t simply a hallucination. It was too detailed. No, whatever it was that he’d seen, he thought, the cool breeze calming his heart rate somewhat, it had been real.

He had seen what had happened to his father.

The wind kicked up leaves as he walked, and Artemis reached for the necklace around his neck, unclasping it and pulling the ring off the chain. As he slipped the ring onto his thumb, he twisted it, thinking.

Britva.

Artemis had a name.

Now the planning could begin.

During the months leading up to Artemis’ birth, the Major remembered the constant sense of dread that had tainted his waking hours. He couldn’t help but feel like a man on death row. His end would not be heralded in by death, however — it would be brought about by life.

When Angeline gave birth to the child, her presence in the house would be permanent. Once there was a Fowl heir, the Major knew that she was here to stay.

She’d never done anything outright strange. When his boss had exploded at him, demanding he explain why he’d been so hesitant to welcome Angeline into the Fowl family, the Major had not had any explanation to give Artemis. The only real, concrete example the Major could provide for his distaste was the speed at which this relationship had blossomed. It felt like the Major barely had any time to right himself after Artemis had met the woman at some party and then declared that he was going to be with her. They’d said their vows later that year, and the Major’s feeling of unease had worsened.

Now she was going to have a child.

It was all just too much.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he nearly collided with one of the maids. She began stuttering out apologies, and he waved a hand, indicating it was of no great import. The poor woman skittered off, and the Major sighed.

He continued making his way down the hall, his ears pricking at the sound of a woman humming lightly.

He pursed his lips.

Angeline.

Reluctantly, he poked his head into the kitchen, and sure enough, the woman was seated at the table. She raised an eyebrow at his presence, taking a deep sip from the cup of tea she’d been drinking.

“Major,” she remarked. “What a pleasant surprise.”
Keeping his face blank, the Major nodded his head curtly. “Is there anything I can help with, Angeline?”

She tilted her head slightly, thinking as she drummed her long, tapered fingers against the china of the teacup. “I take it that my husband is home, then, if you’re back.”

The Major entered the kitchen fully, moving to stand by the table. “I’m afraid not. He’s still finishing up some business, but he’ll be home within the next few hours. Why?”

She laughed gently, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I miss him, that’s all. He must’ve sent you because he was worried about me being home alone.”

“How considerate of him,” the Major droned, turning his body slightly towards the door.

“I don’t see how you being here would make that much of a difference, though,” she said absentmindedly, more to herself than to him.

The Major started. “Excuse me?”

Angeline looked up, startled. “Hm?”

He looked at her curiously. “Do you think you’re in danger here?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. Ignore me.”

“I know it’s a stressful time with the pregnancy, but I promise that you are most likely the best defended woman in all of Ireland right now.”

“Defended by someone who doesn’t care for me all that much,” she pointed out, and the Major blinked, uncomprehending.

“Major,” she began again. “Why don’t you like me?”

His mouth opened, but he snapped it shut again. Perhaps if he were twenty years younger, he would have shrugged. There was really no way to respond to such a question, particularly when he didn’t know the answer to it himself.

“I promised your husband I would keep you safe,” he said finally. “Whether or not I like you is unimportant.”

She seemed pleased by his answer. “Good. You’re honest. I appreciate that.”

Angeline locked eyes with him, and the Major almost flinched. It was a challenge, and not an empty one, either.

After a pause, Angeline took a sip of her tea, still watching the Major.

“Everything about you fits well, Major. Beginning, middle, and end. All tied up so neatly.”

Warily, the Major turned away from the door. “I’m not a man who likes metaphors. If you’ve got a problem, say what you mean.”

“I did,” she responded. “Your family lives lives that fit them well. That was all I meant.”

If having her husband out of the house meant Angeline was going to act like a complete nutcase, the Major thought derisively, then this was the last time he was going to be caught playing bodyguard to
her while his boss finished up business.

“Alright,” he finally said. “If you say so.”

Her smile widened. “You don’t want to know more?”

“Not particularly,” he retorted, letting as much distaste slip into his tone as he could get away with.

“Not even if it concerned your niece and nephew?” she wondered, eyes lighting up when she saw him tense.

She’d got him.

“What about my niece and nephew?” he forced out, no longer amused by her strangeness.

“You seem put off,” Angeline backtracked. “I didn’t mean to bring up such a sensitive topic.”

Flustered, he blinked. “What — why would it be a sensitive topic for me? They’re fine.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I was just — I was just thinking too much, that’s all. Again, I apologize. This isn’t a fitting topic for afternoon tea.”

She looked at him, and the Major could feel himself at a crossroads. He somehow could sense that if he left the kitchen now, they could go on with their lives pretending this had never happened. It would be easy for them to do that. He hardly interacted with her much as it was.

But at the same time…

He couldn’t let this go, he decided, his earlier feeling of impending doom coiling around his stomach like a snake. He needed to know he wasn’t losing his mind.

He had to know what exactly was wrong with her.

Slowly, he pulled out a chair and sat down.

Angeline looked satisfied at having successfully enticed him, and the Major forcibly banished the scowl threatening to form upon his face.

“How nephew,” she began, swirling the leaves of tea at the bottom of her cup. “He’s not fit for the job.”

The Major snorted at that. “He’s the best damn trainee to come out of Madame Ko’s school in years.”

She nodded, conceding the point. “Maybe. But at the same time, he’s too… soft. Too sweet. He’ll never be able to fully harden his emotions against the world.”

She looked up, a faint trace of amusement dancing across her eyes. “He’ll die of a bullet to the heart. He breathes his last breath surrounded by confections, and he goes to his grave knowing he broke one of the core rules in his training.”

The Major twitched.

But he remained in his seat. He’d made up his mind to stay to the end.

“Too soft. Too sweet. Done in by his heart. Irony.”
“Now, you,” she continued, knitting her brows together. Straightening, she ran her tongue over her teeth. In the light, her canines glinted. “You… you chose to serve in the air force during your training because you hate the open ocean.”

He nodded.

“You die at sea.”

“Do I.”

The Major said it not as a question, but as a statement. As a challenge.

Angeline nodded. “And with Juliet—”

The Major stood up, the sound of the legs of the chair scraping against the wood making a shrill noise. “I think that’s enough.”

He didn’t care whether or not cutting her off meant that she won the weird mind-games they were playing with one another. He was done listening.

Angeline showed no signs of disappointment at having her fun ended early. Setting her cup gently upon the saucer, she pushed it towards him.

“I’ll leave this for you, if that’s alright” she said, getting up to excuse herself from the table. Her smile was pulled into a thin line. “You are the butler, after all.”