Summary

When Haru was in the lair of the Shishigumi, she thought that her life was at an end. She was helpless yet again, and this time, nobody was here to save her. By the end of the night, she'd made a decision - she wasn't going to need anyone's rescue ever again.

Diverges from canon towards the end of season 1 - beware manga spoilers beyond! A story of romance, blood, and overcoming adversity through the power of friendship.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Legosi snarled as he grappled with the old lion, their battle a swirling chaos of brutal claws, knocking limbs, and hungry fangs. He couldn’t imagine how it must look from Haru’s perspective - literally speaking. He was present in the ultimate sense of the word; this was a fight to the death where the penalty for losing was far more consequential than the loss of his life. It was a fight to the death where he could not entertain the thought of losing, and so he didn’t - for the first time in his life, Legosi was fighting with everything he had. Everything he was, everything he could bring to bear, every ounce of energy he could muster and every fiber of his being were poured into the mortal struggle against the chief of the Shishigumi, and he knew that he would win because there was no alternative.

When he felt the hunting knife enter his side, snagging in his muscle and pinning it in a tight, immobilizing cramp, he knew that he’d been wrong.

Legosi sank to his knees, shock and exhaustion suddenly overpowering his adrenaline as the chief rose above him, the old lion grinning triumphantly as he coarsely wiped a smear of blood from his nose with the back of his paw. “Allow me to teach you a lesson, pup,” he said, his voice cold and cruel. “It does not matter how young you are. It does not matter how strong you are. There is not enough fervor in the world to compensate for one simple weapon: experience.” Legosi looked up at the lion, whose knife sat comfortably in a reverse grip in his massive paw, the perfect hold for an execution. The Chief smiled back down at him, savoring his victory, and lifted his arm high into the air, mockingly allowing Legosi to savor the moments before his death.

Then three deafening cracks of thunder split the moment, and three blossoming blood roses sprouted from the Shishigumi Chief’s chest.

It had been harder than she expected - not shooting the old lion, of course. There was no hesitation in Haru’s fingers when she tugged on the trigger, no tremble in her arms, and no panic at the back of her brain that screamed that she was about to take the life of an animal. No - the thing that surprised her in this moment was how the weapon had kicked in her hands when she pulled the trigger. How it jumped as wildly to escape her grasp as she’d wanted to when she and Legosi had first met.

It had been a simple opportunity, really - one moment, the Chief of the Shishigumi was on top of her, about to do who-knows-what before he killed and ate her, not necessarily in that order. The next, Legosi had burst through the door, and the lion’s attention had been otherwise occupied. Haru had a good memory - organization and attention to detail were things one learned as a gardener, and perception, naturally, was enhanced by terror - and so, in those brief moments of freedom, she clearly recalled where the Chief had stowed the weapon he’d been cleaning when she was first brought to him.

Top right drawer, second compartment on the left.

It had been an easy thing to hop to the desk while Legosi and the Chief fought - easier than watching her friend spill his blood over the carpet to rescue her, anyways. She hated that word - rescue. It was a word that had defined so many of her interactions with other animals in the past.
Pity the dwarf rabbit. Help the dwarf rabbit. Rescue the dwarf rabbit. She felt the weight of the gun in her hands - she’d never used one before, but she’d seen movies; how hard could it be? The safety was already off - no surprise there, safety was a scarce commodity in general and she would be genuinely surprised to find any of any kind here of all places - so all she had to do was point and pull the trigger. She had, for a moment, worried over the decision - what if she hit Legosi by accident? What if she missed, and then the chief ate her and she couldn’t help anyways?

Those worries vanished when she heard Legosi’s yelp of pain and saw the lion standing above him, wicked and triumphant. Haru was a rabbit - speed was something that she was accustomed to. She was quite certain that she’d never acted so quickly before in her life.

Legosi watched incredulously as the proud, almost regal form of the lion above him twisted and spasmed as blood erupted from his chest, ears twitching in confusion as he heard the ragged sigh of breath leaving a dead man’s lungs as the chief of the Shishigumi’s knees buckled under the strain of keeping him upright. He was confused - Legosi was no playwright, but he was pretty sure that this was the part of the tragedy where the hero meets his end, not the part where the villain spontaneously and unceremoniously keels over dead with a heavy thud. When the lion’s body stopped blocking his view, Legosi couldn’t believe his eyes - Haru was standing in front of him, naked and firm save for his coat draped over her shoulders, her two tiny hands clasped tightly enough around the grip of a massive handgun for him to smell the strain in her fingers. Moonlight flooded the room through the open window behind her, shining through her fur and wreathing her in a halo of silver light. Maybe it was the blood loss, but Legosi was certain in that moment that if there were angels, she was what they looked like.

The moment was shattered when he saw tears well at the corners of Haru’s eyes and leak down her face as her composure melted with the adrenaline leaving her system. Her arms trembled under the weight of the weapon, and it dropped to the floor with a heavy thud as her fingers gave way before its weight. She took a step toward him - she was in shock, it was obvious. If it weren’t for her, he was pretty sure he would be too.

“L-legosi, I…”

It was all she could get out before he had her in his arms letting her shelter under the warmth of his body.

“Haru? Will you… will you come away with me?”

The chief groaned his rage against the floor after he heard them leave, his instincts allowing him to come to once the lapine bitch who had just shot him with his own gun had exited the room. Carefully, he rose onto his knees, blood dripping from the bullet wounds in each of his shoulders and just above his kidney as he rubbed his throat where the wolf had bit him - he was lucky. If he’d been a little slower with the knife, or the rabbit’s aim had been a little better, he would not currently be peeling himself off the carpet and going for the gun the couple had been foolish enough to not take with them. He couldn’t suppress a chuckle when he stumbled to the window and saw them walking away down his front walk so confident they’d won - the irony was enough to make an old man smile as he chambered a killing round in his weapon. “One last lesson, young pups,” he murmured to himself as he steadied himself to get a sight - his only hesitation was deciding which one to pop first. The wolf, he decided - his men would retrieve the rabbit for him later, and he’d have a proper feast. “No act of kindness ever goes unrewarded-” his voice was cut off by a cry of pain and surprise as a bullet ripped through his hand and knocked his gun to the
balcony floor. Before he could say anything else, something truly absurd happened - a teenage deer shoved a gun in his mouth and demanded he beg for his life.

The last thoughts of the boss of the Shishigumi pondered the sheer absurdity of his evening meal that night, before a bullet sprayed his brains like sakura petals across the moonlit sky.

Louis let the body fall to the ground with a cold disdain, wiping his father’s pistol off on the dead lion’s jacket before the corpse hit the floor and he tucked the elegant weapon into his breast pocket. “Sorry old man,” he said more to himself than to the corpse - Louis wasn’t stupid, he just liked to gloat. “Just wanted to teach you a lesson.” As his eyes grazed over the corpse, he noticed something - there were little white hairs on the handle of the former mob boss’ gun. He frowned, and knelt to pick it up, cursing himself slightly as he did - even now, after he, a teenager, had just killed a man, his composure refused to slide. No matter. Louis scooped the gun up into one palm and stood, carefully inspecting it. Some part of his brain registered the sound of footsteps rushing up the stairs to the executive suite he currently occupied, but that was pushed away when he sniffed the hairs, and the scent made his eyes go wide with disbelief.

“... Haru..?”

Legosi groaned in agony as he lay on the park bench, gnawing gently on the ruined portion of his arm where the Shishigumi chief’s fangs had tasted his blood. “Ooouhhhhhhwww,” he complained around the makeshift chew toy he was sure to regret come morning, but for now all he could focus on was the strange combination of pain and intoxication that came from the ever enthralling little white rabbit who knelt at his side.

“Quit complaining,” Haru scolded him gently, almost reflexively, as she fixed what she hoped would be an effective bandage against the hole in his side and began to tightly wrap the gauze from the corner store first aid kit she’d picked up on the way here around his abdomen. Miraculously, the Shishigumi’s knife hadn’t gone deep - carnivores were just made of tougher stuff, she guessed - but the wound still needed to be sealed or it would make a bloody mess all over the place, and the two of them already looked ragged enough as it was without leaving their own drippy red carpet behind wherever they went. Secretly, though, she was glad to hear his whining - it suited him a lot better than silence. “... you were quiet, and you weren’t moving, so… well, even if you did die, it wouldn’t do any good for you to bleed all over the bench, now would it?” She winced when he grumbled. The joke wasn’t funny.

“No, I… I’m still alive,” he reassured her. Her fingers tightened against his bandage.

“I’m sorry, I… this…” she started to apologize, her voice catching from the stress, the adrenaline, the guilt of seeing her… her friend this way because of her. Because she couldn’t defend herself. He cut her off.

“I’m still alive,” he explained, “because of you.” Haru’s body stiffened in surprise, and the memory came flooding back to her. Her standing there with the gun, the weight of it in her hands, the way it felt as it kicked when she fired. Her taking aim, and then the feeling of it tumbling from her fingers and falling to the ground. The way Legosi’s face looked when the lion fell aside, and there was nothing standing between them anymore. She shook her head.

“But you could have died!” she protested, tightening the bandage perhaps a little more than was necessary.
“But I didn’t.” His response was simple, and given Legosi, surprisingly straightforward. Haru decided that it was probably the blood loss. “And right now, I… I…” “Y-yes?” Haru asked, waiting on bated breath. His stomach answered before he did.

“I could really use something to eat.”

Dinner? Dinner had been nice. Legosi felt much better now that he had a full stomach - both because not long ago he’d almost been beaten to death by a horrible old lion, but also because he didn’t need to worry as much about his stupid wolf body deciding that Haru made a better lunch than a girlfriend as much.

Though, somehow, that ever present anxiety seemed… lessened right now.

Maybe it was because tonight, he saw the girl whom he was madly in love with kill a predator he couldn’t.

Or maybe it was because the two of them, having missed the last train, were now standing at the entrance to a love motel. “Haru,” he said nervously, “this… this is a bad idea.” His ear twitched when he heard her laugh. This whole night was strange - one moment they’re fighting for their lives in the middle of a crime syndicate’s lair, and the next he’s trying to suppress the sort of thoughts that would surely make themselves known via his inconvenient anatomy, and she was laughing at him for being a teenage boy who was just told, by the girl he loved more than anything, that the two of them would be sharing a bed in a love motel.

This was just weird because of the shock, Legosi said to himself, not believing a word of it. They were just acting like this because of the shock.

“It’s cheap, they allow interspecies couples, and they won’t check ID,” she explained as calmly as she could manage given the circumstances. She wasn’t sure her heart would ever stop pounding. She wasn’t sure if she liked it or not. “I don’t… think we have many other options right now, Legosi.” He shook his head.

“No, that’s. That’s not what I mean,” he said, swallowing. Their dinner together after… well, after Haru killed a man because Legosi couldn’t bring himself to was the closest thing to a date he’d ever been on. There was an energy between them - something he couldn’t really describe, and something very different from when she stripped in front of him in the gardening clubhouse. An energy shot through with guilt.

He still hadn’t told her.

He came to when he noticed Haru looking up at him in confusion - shit he was doing it again, he needed to be present. Her ears were pricked up, and that meant he should be talking again. “I… I mean, you were just kidnapped by carnivores,” he reasoned, still clinging to logic in the face of the chaos of the situation. “Wouldn’t you feel unsafe, you know… sleeping next to one?” Haru couldn’t help but smirk.

“I dunno, Legosi. I just shot a carnivore. Wouldn’t you feel unsafe sleeping next to someone who could do that?” She suppressed a giggle when the big wolf’s expression suddenly jumped like he’d been caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Haru gently took his hand, which, of course, only made him stiffen up more. “It’s fine. You saved me. I think it would be a little ridiculous for me to be afraid of you after that.”
Legosi swallowed. Okay, that bit didn’t work. She was right - technically speaking, he wasn’t the one who brought down the Chief. That was Haru. He was still sort of processing that particular piece of information. “R-right. There’s… well, there’s another thing,” he confessed. “Tonight’s been… a night. I took on the Shishigumi, rescued the girl I love, g-got rescued by the girl I love,” experienced severe blood loss that’s really messing with his decision making capabilities right now. “Dinner has me all energized, and. Well. Let’s just say I’m sort of in, uh, male mode right now, and if we, well… you know…” He paused to swallow, increasingly concerned by Haru’s increasingly amused expression while he tried to stammer out the simple admission that he was incredibly horny. “Something might happen, that we regret, is all.”

She laughed. “Oh, Legosi. Please. Maybe I helped out, but you’re the hero today. If we do anything…” Haru savored his expression as she drew closer to him, surprising even herself with how much she relished this sort of power. “It won’t be a mistake.”

Legosi sat on the edge of the bed, panting heavily and clutching himself - this was a terrible mistake. He could still taste her sweat on his tongue, and he was pretty sure some of her fur was caught in his throat. But that wasn’t the problem. No, not at all. The problem wasn’t even that he’d tried to eat her… again.

The problem was that Haru had just tried to feed herself to him.

Haru sat awkwardly next to Legosi, wringing her hands and waiting for the silence to break. She went over the play-by-play in her mind - everything started out fine, though she’d been surprisingly nervous. They’d talked, he’d taken her up on her invitation to touch her, he’d confessed that the predator who almost ate her that night outside the school had been him - normal couple stuff, right? Nothing to be concerned about. Then, she asked if they were going to have sex, or if he was going to eat her - still fine, no uncharted territory there. It was a normal choice to ask your maybe boyfriend to make.

Okay well that was a lie, but compared to what happened immediately afterwards, it felt comparatively normal.

The problem arose when she, on some bizarre reflex, had tried to climb into his mouth. Haru’s internal monologue couldn’t help but find the humor in it - so much for it being his decision, right? Ultimately, she decided to break the silence. “So… that was weird.” Legosi nodded his agreement.

“Yes. It was.”

“I think… I-I must just not be ready for this. That’s all it was.” Why was she behaving like this? It’s not like she was the inexperienced one here - maybe with a carnivore, but still. Stupid instincts. Legosi nodded.

“That makes sense, yeah,” he said, and sounded… shockingly defeated. Haru felt awkward - she needed an out.

Oh right! The clothes.

“I’m going to go wash your clothes,” she declared. “So the stains don’t set in. Blood’s hard to get out.” He didn’t respond, which only made the whole situation tenser. Oh dear.

When she returned, he was still sitting on the bed the same as he’d been when she’d left. He was clearly troubled by something - he had that look he gets when he’s stuck in his own mind and
doesn’t see what’s around him anymore, like when they’d med in the garden clubhouse. Haru frowned - that wolf complicated things so much. Why couldn’t he just be simple?

Then again, if he was simple, she probably wouldn’t be alive. Simple people don’t chase down mobs to save one bunny. Especially not simple teenagers.

She decided that the best way to knock him out of it was to tackle him from behind with a smile. “Hey! Don’t look so glum. It’s fine.” He lay there quietly for a long moment. Maybe it wasn’t fine.

“Haru?”

“Yeah?”

“... I’m sorry you had to do that. Shoot him, I mean. I shouldn’t have made you do that.” Haru blinked.

“What?”

Legosi shifted, turning to lie on his side so that she fell off him. “I saw how you looked, after he went down. That couldn’t have been easy. I’m sorry you had to do that to someone.”

Haru sighed. “That’s... not what it was about, Legosi. Shooting him was easy - he was awful. I was just... scared.”

“Of what?”

“What would’ve happened if I didn’t do it.”

“Oh.” Legosi was quiet for a long time. Haru looked at him anxiously, waiting for his response.

“Legosi...?” she asked, and reached out to touch his side. When she did, she was surprised. “He’s asleep..?”

Chapter End Notes

This is going to be the first chapter in a longer work; I don't know exactly where it's going to go yet, but I'll add tags as they become relevant. Sorry if this was a little awkward; rehashing scenes already in the canon is a little difficult, but the next chapter should break off pretty completely and land us in new territory. I'm excited to write it, and excited for all of you who are going to take this journey with me!
Chapter Summary

Haru and Legosi review their relationship, and talk about murder. Louis plans his reunion. The staff of the Hotel Rose wonder what the hell these kids are doing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haru lay as still as she could manage, her ear pressed against Legosi’s chest on the bunk she kept in the gardening clubhouse as she listened intently. Under other circumstances, she might have thought that this pulse was normal - maybe even a bit slow. Haru knew better, though - she knew how much bigger he was than her, how much slower his resting heart rate was.

Haru sighed. Legosi was trying not to panic again. That was okay. It was just something that they’d have to work on.

“Legosi,” she said, breaking the comfort of the September silence. “Why are you so afraid all the time?” The big wolf swallowed, and she could hear the movement as it passed down his throat and into his chest. Haru thought back to that night after the Meteor Festival, when they’d stood together against the railing and gazed out over the city lights - lights they both knew covered up a sinister dark side. The breeze through the open window reminded her of that night, where they’d made each other a promise.

“I will get stronger for you”, he’d said, and the confidence in his voice throughout the desperate conversation leading up to that affirmation had been so unlike him. She remembered how strange he’d seemed in that moment - ordinarily, Legosi was more like he was now; anxious and worrying about a thousand different potentialities which would never come to pass. In that moment after the festival, though, there was none of that uncertainty; when he’d spoken, it was a simple statement of fact. Haru remembered what she’d said to him as clear as she remembered how clumsily he’d eaten his yakisoba the night before - it was, after all, important.

“I’ll do it with you.”

Since she’d spoken those words, things had been different between them. It was an unspoken change - he was still Legosi, the awkward, genuine, lovably honest wolf who fretted about everything and took care not to step on ants whenever he walked outside the school building, and she was still Haru, the calm, rational one with enough sense of humor for the both of them.

Okay, maybe that was giving herself too much credit, but she still felt like that was the case most of the time.

The shift, though, had been in how they interacted - the tension between them that always seemed to encourage them to split away from each other like incompatible magnets was disappearing, replaced by… something else. Haru wasn’t exactly sure what it was - a stoic determination to fulfill the promise they’d each made the other? Maybe. It could also just be acceptance that no matter how this ended, they would enjoy it while it lasted. She’d be okay with that too, if she was being honest - emotional vulnerability was an awkward thing to perform. Legosi shifted under her,
and she felt one of his massive paws settle impossibly gently on her back. She knew he wasn’t actually letting its weight rest on her, so she reached out and took his wrist in her hands, and massaged it until he did.

“I’m scared,” he began calmly, and Haru could hear his heart rate drop when he did, “because I… don’t know how to do what it is we’re doing.” The confession was simple, almost bafflingly so.

“How do you mean?”

Legosi made her wait for an answer - he did that a lot. She still couldn’t read him all that well.

“Well, I guess that I’m just used to trying to do everything alone,” he said, experimentally rubbing her back in a small circle. Haru squeezed his wrist in encouragement. “I’ve always tried to make everyone else feel safe around me, or at least not notice me as much. I guess I’ve never really been in a spot where I’m a group project.” Haru couldn’t help a laugh at that, but it was a worried one. She shuffled up onto her elbows, and looked up at him - he was staring at the ceiling, but when he felt her move lowered his head to meet her gaze. When he did, their noses almost touched.

“We’re a group project now,” she reminded him, and gave him the tiniest kiss on the nose. Legosi immediately shoved his head back on the pillow, returning his gaze to the roof. She knew it was so that she couldn’t see him blush. “You’re still worried you’ll hurt me, aren’t you?”

“And you aren’t?” His response stung less because he thought it was true and more because, to an extent, he was right. Even now, on a lazy September afternoon as the heat of summer melted away and the leaves began to turn, there was an electricity that hummed in her legs. It wasn’t as bad as it used to be, but her body was still always ready to flee whenever they got too close. Haru nodded.

“I am. But that’s what this is for,” she affirmed. Legosi relaxed visibly under her - honesty, she supposed, really was the best policy. Better he know that she’s afraid than have to worry about how much. “After all, we can’t expect to get better at being close if we don’t practice, right?”

Legosi nodded, but he didn’t say anything. Haru sighed, and rested her head on his chest, curling her fingers in his shirt. He’d been drawing away more and more of late. She didn’t know why - part of her was angry with him for it. It was as though even after seeing her gun down a mob boss to save his life, he still couldn’t look at her for too long without seeing her between his teeth. Mostly, though, she was worried. Legosi wasn’t invincible - something he was up to was taking a toll on him. He was more and more tired every day, and she’d noticed the new scars he was picking up. Something was going on, and she wished he would just let her help him. Haru’s brow furrowed, and she made a resolution. Legosi wasn’t going to just let her help him - that was fine, that’s just who he was right now.

She was going to make him accept her help, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Louis reclined casually in his office chair, drumming his fingers on the heavy wooden desk that had, for the past few months, officially belonged to him. The irony that an herbivore - and a cervid, no less - would be the leader of an otherwise all-lion gang was not lost on him; Louis was nothing if not intelligent, and he appreciated the uniqueness of his position.

That, however, was not what he was doing today. Today was one of the many days where Louis decided to torture himself.

The thing was on the desk in front of him, neatly contained in a small plastic bag. Such a strange thing, a pistol. So small, and yet so easily capable of taking an animal’s life. His eyes rolled over
the metallic object in the bag, settling on the white fur which he ensured had remained stuck to its
grip.

Such a strange rabbit, Haru, to be so similar to a handgun. Louis sighed and spun in his chair,
kicking his legs to display his frustration. He couldn’t stop thinking about that night - when he
made the conscious decision not to pursue the rescue of the girl he loved, while that damned wolf
had thrown himself headlong into danger without a second thought. He thought back to when he
decided to follow Legosi into the Shishigumi hideout, mayor’s requests be damned; he’d known
what he was doing. It was a suicide attempt.

Part of the reason why Louis appreciated the irony in his leadership of the Shishigumi was the fact
that he hadn’t intended to survive. It was like a bad joke - a deer walks into a lion’s den. What does
he get? A promotion.

It would be funny if it weren’t so frustratingly confusing. Louis, a deer who prided himself on his
realistic and cynical understanding of the way the world really works, suddenly found himself
living in a world where wolves loved rabbits, rabbits shot lions, and a deer couldn’t get either of
them out of his head. Louis sighed, and picked up the bag, letting the weight of the gun dangle in
front of his face by the plastic trapped between his fingers.

Maybe it was time he paid the two of them a visit.

Legosi groaned miserably, wincing as he felt the needle pierce the skin on his back. Things had
been hard enough since he’d begun his training with Gouhin - vigilante psychology was a lot more
strenuous than he’d expected. He wasn’t sure if things had gotten easier or harder since Haru had
found him out. Definitely harder at first, he thought to himself as the small hands continued to
stitch up a fresh wound on his back. She had not been happy when she found out that the reason
he’d been avoiding her was that he was spending his evenings beating up meat-crazed carnivores in
the alleys of the black market and that he’d been spending his days single handedly pursuing a
murder investigation. Not that he was doing it at all - that was fine. The problem she had was that
he’d left her out.

He remembered when she found him out - he was on his way back to Gouhin’s after school, and
had stopped at the same Yakisoba shop he and Haru had eaten at after the incident with the
Shishigumi. He hadn’t expected to run into her there.

“Legosi???” Uh oh. She saw him. Think fast.

“I don’t know who that is.” Great job thinking fast, Legosi. Real bang up excuse.

Haru had stormed to him from across the square. Legosi resigned himself to his fate, waiting for
the end to claim him.

Instead, she’d bought him dinner, and reminded him that on that night at the meteor festival, he
wasn’t the only one who made a promise to become strong. She reminded him that that promise
went both ways.

That was a few weeks ago. Now, Haru was practicing what she’d been learning from Gouhin by
stitching up the fresh cuts on his back in the dingy room they rented at the Hotel Rose to do this
sort of thing whenever he got hurt during his night shift. Legosi had to admit - Haru was not as
good at this as Gouhin.
“Am I doing ok?” Haru asked, a delicate hand alighting on his shoulder to check if he was alright. Legosi nodded.

“Y-yup! Just fine,” Legosi said through suppressed tears and gave her a thumbs up. Haru sighed at his response, and he heard her hands hitting her skirt.

“I must not be using enough anaesthetic again. Sorry.” She sighed, and started to gently sponge off his back, carefully cleaning his fur. “So… any new notes?”

Legosi swallowed. This was how things had worked for a while now - he gathered information on who could have killed Tem while he was at school, Haru picked it over and analyzed it while he was out hunting, and they talked it over while she patched him up afterwards. It wasn’t an ideal situation - for Legosi because he thought Haru was putting herself in too much danger by investigating the murder, and for Haru because she still felt like she wasn’t helping enough - but he had to admit that they made a pretty good team. He nodded. “Yeah. I got to look at Juno’s fangs, so I know it can’t be any of the girls. The tooth marks were too big for that.” The implicit on Tem’s bones was left unsaid. “I ruled out Aoba, because of uh, well. Teeth. And I don’t think it could be Bill, because if it was he’d have been caught already.” Haru nodded in agreement. It was true. Bill wouldn’t know subtlety if it bit him in the ass. “Dolph’s teeth are too square, too, so. There’s only a few students that it could be, really.” Legosi’s unease was palpable. Haru rubbed his back.

“Good.” She knew this couldn’t be easy for Legosi. After all, these were his friends. “I did some digging on the photos,” she began slowly. “Something struck me - you’ve been focused on teeth a lot, right Legosi?”

“Mhm?”

“What about claws?” Haru scooted back a hair as Legosi’s back straightened. It was an unconscious motion, and she only noticed after she did it - being around him was getting easier the more she learned how he moved.

“Claws?”

“Well… yeah. I noticed some of the scrapes on the bones looked unusual; not like teeth. I did a little studying after classes let out, and found out that those sorts of scrapes usually happen when… well, when a predator uses their hands to strip the meat off the bones.” Her voice quieted a little as Legosi went still at her words. She understood why - his investigation was always fixated on motives, on interacting with the potential killers, or on interviewing his friends. Hearing about what Tem - his friend - probably endured before he died must be awful. A part of her brain reminded her that he was also probably thinking about how all of this might have happened to her if he’d been too late that night with the Shishigumi. “I measured the width of the marks,” she continued after a pause. “They’re big. Like, extremely big, and a little round.” Suddenly, Legosi shot up from the edge of the bed, almost knocking her over as the mattress sprang up with the sudden absence of his weight. Haru scrambled to stabilize herself, and by the time she had, Legosi had turned around and knelt in front of the bed. He took her hands in his, his eyes staring intently into hers. She couldn’t help but blush. “Legosi..?”

“I think we can find out who it was now.”

Louis waited impatiently in the black limousine, checking his watch for what must have been the fiftieth time as he stared up at the single lit window on the sixth floor of the motel. His shoe tapped a steady rhythm against the headrest of the automobile’s front passenger seat, and the package on
his lap seemed impossibly heavy. Louis checked his watch again.

“You’re sure about this, boss?” asked Ibuki from the driver’s seat. His voice carried his concern clearly - it would piss Louis off if he wasn’t in such desperate need of understanding right this moment. “If you’ve changed your mind, just say so. We can be back home before there’s time for regrets.” Louis’ relationship with Ibuki was… strange. Ibuki was a lion, and a crook - a creature of the Black Market through and through. But more than that, he and Louis were the same. Louis vividly remembered when Ibuki had shown him the tattoo on his elbow - “Relief from Exhaustion”. It was disgusting - just like his own. It meant that they both understood how the world worked.

“Yes, Ibuki. I’m sure. Let’s wait just a little longer - you made sure our guest knows that I’ll be making our introductions a little later than anticipated, yes?” The casual tone on Louis’ voice couldn’t help but make Ibuki smile as the lion adjusted the rear view mirror so he could see his boss, as well as the Bowie knife that Louis had idly begun to fiddle with as a distraction. Ibuki suspected that the Shishigumi’s current “guest” would become well acquainted with it whenever they got back.

“Yes, boss. Everything’s been arranged and prepared for. I even put down a new tablecloth.” It was Louis’ turn to smile now.

“Good man.”

Dave stared intently at the pair as they left the hotel lobby, his knuckles whitening around the handle of his mop. The 47 year old possum had seen a lot in his twenty years as the Hotel Rose janitor. He’d seen elephants leaving with literally anything other than another elephant. He’d seen a jaguar walk in with a pekinese. But before the summer, he had never seen a wolf and a rabbit get there covered in blood, and then both leave completely clean. And at this point, in the scarce few months since the peculiar couple had walked through the hotel’s doors, seeing these two very strange teenagers was becoming almost a daily occurrence.

“Oh, give it a rest Dave,” called Gertrude from the front desk. She was a cow only a few years his senior, and technically his boss. “Our customers come here why? Because of our discretion. How often do we get regulars? Not bloody often. So just leave them be, be glad they clean up after themselves better than you clean the rooms half the time, and hope that they keep coming back to spend their money!” She huffed, as though the argument was settled before it began. Dave just frowned, continuing to stare.

“... but what could they possibly be doin’ in there? I mean. Aside from the obvious.”

“Who knows, Dave! That’s the point!” Gertrude said, exasperated. Her frustration with Dave was broken when a third voice called from behind the maintenance stairwell door. It was Aisley, a ferret who marked the youngest of the crew at 28 and worked as Dave’s partner in cleaning.

“Hey guys?” they said, brow furrowed with confusion. “Have those guests ever left a scalpel behind before?”

“... so anyways, that’s why I think that if you’re going to keep doing this, you should really invest in some good kneepads,” Haru explained, holding Legosi’s arm snugly against her side as they walked back in the direction of Cherryton’s campus as the first rays of dawn began to crest over the
horizon. “Your knee’s a lot better than your head if you need to smash something, but I can only pick broken glass out of it so many times.” The investigations and the vigilante stuff was exciting, but this was really her favorite part of their nights out - the walking back home, completely alone on the streets, both of them hazy from the excitement and exhaustion of their crazy lives and staying up through the night. Legosi sighed.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll go to the bike shop… tomorrow? Today?” He whined and waved his free hand about his head like he was shooing an inconvenient fly. “After classes. What color do you think I should pick?”

“Well,” Haru said, considering the options, “blue looks best on you, but given what you’d be using it for, maybe red. It would probably be easier to clean that way.”

“Maybe I’ll get two pairs? Blue and red,” he offered. “That way, if I break the red ones or we ever want to go biking, I’ll have a set to wear.” Haru looked up to him wearing a puzzled but genuine smile.

“Yeah! I’d like that a lot,” she said in agreement. Her smile began to fade before the words were fully out of her mouth, though - Legosi had that look on his face, the one where he was worried or guilty about something that he felt he shouldn’t bring up but was going to anyways as soon as she asked about it. He was predictable like that. Legosi was like a pressure cooker - leave it alone, and it’ll keep all the huge pressure inside, but flip one little switch and suddenly the steam all comes pouring out. “Legosi,” she said quietly, “you’re making that face again. What’s on your mind? You know what’ll happen if you don’t tell me - you don’t want that, do you?”

Legosi swallowed. “N-no ma’am.” Haru had her ways of convincing him to let her help, and her favorite was the simple reminder that if he didn’t, he would inevitably make a mess of things by trying to deal with everything completely by himself and ultimately wind up needing to ask her for help anyways. He’d rather skip that and just get the help. “I… was just thinking about that night again. How - “ his voice cut off abruptly and he stopped in his tracks, his whole body going stiff.

Haru made a tiny “oof” as she stumbled to a stop against his arm, and looked up at him in concern. “Legosi..?” she asked, glancing around the block in the dim light, looking for trouble. Legosi sniffed the air, turning his head side to side.

“Lion. Behind us. A block down,” he murmured under his breath. Haru nodded, and reached into the front pocket of her hoody, fingering the knife she kept hidden there. It… well, it wasn’t a gun, but at the very least it helped her to not feel totally powerless. “Male. I smelled him before, but I know he’s following us now. Do we run, or play it cool?” Haru took a moment to think.

“Play it cool,” she settled on after what felt like far too long a period of consideration. “I don’t know if we can outrun him, and if he’s got friends this could easily be a trap.” She sighed in disappointment. “I guess our early morning walks being alone has one downside, huh? Oh well. No helping it.” Legosi nodded in agreement. She could see his posture shift, and feel the subtle changes in his stance like he was trying to wrap his body around her and keep walking at the same time. He could be so stupid sometimes. “Legosi,” she reminded him, “it’ll be really hard to use my knife if you trap me so close.” He stumbled, and loosened his gait around her.

“Sorry. Habit,” he said in a tone caught between sheepish and ready to fight.

“No, instinct,” she corrected. At least they could still banter while getting ready to maybe die, she thought to herself. They hurried along the sidewalk - Haru couldn’t smell it, but as the sun peeked higher and higher above the horizon, her vision continued to improve, so she glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, they were being followed - three silhouettes followed them a short ways back, and the one in the middle was gaining ground on them. She quickly turned her vision back to
the sidewalk in front of her, and squeezed Legosi’s hand. “Three of them,” she whispered, “in suits. I think it’s who we both think it is.” Legosi nodded.

“How do you want to do this?” he murmured, and she could hear the growl on his voice.

“The middle one’s walking fast - I’ll handle him with my knife, you get the other two.” She’d been practicing a little knife fighting with Gouhin when he was too grumpy to teach her surgery; hopefully, that would be enough to catch a Shishigumi by surprise.

“Right,” Legosi responded, and Haru let go of his arm. If this was going to work, they would both need to have as much freedom of movement as they could get. Haru could smell it now - the middle silhouette was getting close. Something wasn’t quite right, though - the scent wasn’t just lion, there was something else there too. Her stomach turned when she realized it was deer - the Shishigumi must have just had a meal.

As the knife flashed out of her pocket and Haru turned on her heel with a leaping bound, she was determined to make sure that he would never get another.

Louis expected a lot of things when he’d decided to stalk his former classmates - anger, perhaps, maybe some indignation, and probably raised voices accusing him of betrayal. As with all things in his life, he had prepared for those eventualities with rehearsal - Ibuki had been a great help in going over his lines; he particularly liked his rendition of Haru. Louis was ready for a wide range of reactions when he met Legosi and Haru again for the first time in months.

He did not, however, expect to be tackled with a flying kick and then held with a knife at his throat.

“Well,” he said dryly, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips even as his heart turned a particular flavor of flips in his chest that he was completely unfamiliar with while a version of Haru he’d never met before stood on his chest and held a blade at his neck, “this is an unusual way to say you’re happy to see me, isn’t it Haru?” The strangest part of the situation was that Louis really wasn’t sure who he should be more concerned about right now - Legosi, who finally fit the picture of the wolf he should be, or Haru.

He really wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he settled on Haru as the bigger threat between the two of them.

“LOUIS????” Haru shouted, and Louis breathed a sigh of relief as she dropped the knife. He was less relieved when she punched him straight in the eye. “LOUIS WHAT THE FUCK.” He could feel her heart pounding through her legs where she straddled him as his head hit the pavement. He knew he refused to publicly acknowledge their relationship in favor of his reputation, left her to die at the hands of his new friends, and disappeared off the face of the earth for months with no warning or explanation, but did he really deserve that?

No, he thought to himself. I don’t even deserve to be in her presence.

And yet, here he was.

“Relax, gentlemen,” he said, knowing without looking that Ibuki and Free had their guns trained on Legosi right this second. “And you too, dog. I’m not here for violence. Haru, it’s good to see you. Please don’t punch me in the eye again, unless you truly feel it’s necessary.”

She punched him in the nose instead, and then stood so that he could get up.
“So,” he began, keeping his eye on Legosi, who was still in the process of coming down from fight-mode, “I suppose that there are some explanations in order.” Louis felt his instincts burning in his belly, begging him to flee, or to gore the wolf with his antlers or to kick his chest in and run. He swallowed them as easily as they imagined Legosi might swallow his leg. He leaned his weight on one foot, and let his cloak billow in the morning breeze as he lit a cigarette. “Now… which of you would like to apologize first? Don’t keep me waiting.”

Legosi blinked at Louis. Haru seemed like she was trying to decide whether she wanted to hug him or stab him, and Louis was his normal incomprehensible self, but Legosi was most surprised to discover that Louis smelled like a lion. “I’m joking, of course,” Louis said, breaking the tension with a single comment. It was only fitting, given that he’d created it in the first place.

“Louis?” Legosi said, glancing at the two well dressed lions standing about 10 meters back. “Why, uh… why are you hanging out with the, um, you know… the them?”

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Louis said mockingly, bringing a hand to his mouth in false surprise. “The Shishigumi had a vacancy in the management department - Haru made sure of that.” Legosi audibly swallowed - yeah, he didn’t think he’d ever forget that, though the details after were a little fuzzy. It was a weird night. “I figured who better to fill it than me?”

“Is that where you’ve been all this time?” Haru asked. She sounded angry. “You decided to run off and join the mob? How did you know about all that, Louis? How did you know I killed the boss?” Legosi watched Louis intently - one of the lions behind him looked like he wanted to say something, but Louis silenced him with a simple raise of his hand.

“You followed me, didn’t you Louis?” he said, and the momentary flash of expression that crossed Louis’ face told Legosi that he was spot on the mark. Louis huffed, and turned his face to the ground.

“Well, I couldn’t exactly let you go and just get yourself killed, now could I?” he said, clearly embarrassed at having been found out so easily. “Though it looks like you didn’t exactly need my help.”

“But how did you wind up in charge?” Haru asked, scowling. “And why are you here now? Don’t tell me it’s just to say hi to a little dwarf rabbit. After all, you’ve always had better things to do before.” Legosi winced on Louis’ behalf at that - he’d learned a little about what Haru and Louis’ relationship had been like, but usually she didn’t want to talk about it. Maybe this was sort of why. Louis sighed, and Legosi couldn’t help but look him over, checking for injuries or signs of stress. He looked thin.

“It’s… a long story,” Louis said with a sigh, “but I came here to apologize.” He reached into his pocket, and tossed Haru something wrapped in a small plastic bag. “You should have this, Haru. If you’re going to keep hanging around a feral dog, you should have something you can use to protect yourself.” Haru caught the object, and Legosi peered over to see what it was. He recognized it instantly - the glint of the early morning light on its chrome surface, the dark rubber grip, the smoothly polished slide.

It was the gun Haru used to kill the Shishigumi’s last chief.

“Louis, I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to have this,” she said.

“And I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to be staying overnight at the Hotel Rose with a male
wolf,” Louis retorted. Legosi looked away from the both of them - somehow he felt like he did something wrong and he didn’t even know what it was. Best to just stay quiet for now.

This was really awkward.

Haru sighed, and undid the packaging, turning the weapon over in her hands. It looked so big, compared to her, like the weight of what it did was ill suited for an animal her size. Legosi had to remind himself that he shouldn’t think like that - but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that a world where a small animal needed to carry a weapon to be safe was sick. “Will you come back, then? To school?” she asked, tone a mixture of cautious and hopeful. Louis shook his head.

“No. I’ve got responsibilities now and business to attend to. You’ll have to manage without me for a while longer, I’m afraid.” He shifted his weight and turned his body. “I know about what you do in the Black Market, Legosi, and I know how you follow him, Haru. If you get in over your heads, you know where to find me.” The lions bristled at Louis’ invitation, but Louis didn’t look like he cared. As Louis turned, something struck him in the back - it was the gun.

“Then you can keep your apology, and that heavy thing too!” Haru’s voice was hard when she spoke, but it was a hardness Legosi recognized; the anger that stemmed from worry instead of hate. It was one of her best qualities. “You can try again when you’re ready to quit being so full of yourself.” Louis chuckled.

“Fair enough,” he said, and his voice sounded sad. Sad was not an emotion that suited him well, Legosi thought. When he turned to leave, Legosi’s arm shot out and caught Louis by the wrist - instantly, the two Shishigumi’s guns were on him again, and Haru scooped her knife up off the ground.

“W-wait,” he said, not sure what he was doing until he did it. Legosi reached into his pocket, and pressed a small package into Louis’ hand - it was a breakfast bun. “You look thin. You should take this.”

Louis snarled, took the bun, and walked briskly away.

Chapter End Notes

Louis re-enters the stage! Funny how material gifts don’t just make people be ok with your mistakes, huh - wonder where he got THAT from?
Chapter Summary

Legosi and Haru continue their investigation. Haru has a deadly encounter. Louis deals with responsibility and guilt. Free has a great time. Ibuki worries about his boss. Gouhin desperately tries to cope with the stress of having kids. The boys of 701 speculate about the truth. Pina wonders what the hell is going on. A shadow finds salvation. Enter the White Court.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ibuki stood calmly by the door while his boss raged. Louis had these episodes sometimes; he was 18, it was normal enough. Still, Ibuki was concerned as antlers struck cheap pottery and sent stoneware fragments flying across the room; just because he understood the boss' youth and position didn’t mean the rest of the Shishigumi would, let alone the rest of the Black Market. It was good that only he got to see Louis this way - vulnerable, angry, alive. It was a duty he fulfilled with pride.

Louis screamed his rage into the soundproofed room as he swung his head to clear a shelf of cheap glassware, sending the fragile dishes smashing to the hardwood floor. The gun - haru's gun - rested on his desk like an accusation, reminding him of what he did. Of what he made her do, because he was too caught up in his own stupid bullshit to help the female he loved.

Did he even have the right to call her that? Louis didn’t know - his father had warned him of the dangers of sullying one’s reputation, especially in a prestigious place like Cherryton Academy. For all her virtues, Haru did not have the good fortune of a sterling reputation. He told himself that he loved her, yes, but he never did anything about it - they never went on dates, he never held her hand, they hardly even spoke outside of when he visited her in secret so she could make the loneliness go away. He heard his voice echo off the walls as a thick vase fell to the floor and burst into a thousand pieces. He felt something wet and hot running down his cheek, and smelled something coppery in the air. It didn’t matter, it was irrelevant. Louis was busy dealing with something new - he had asked Haru for her forgiveness, and she had completely refused to give it to him. He had asked Legosi for his loathing, and he too had refused to give it to him.

Louis was not accustomed to not being given what he asked for. Maybe this was what real responsibility felt like. He felt himself laughing and hyperventilating as his legs moved numbly to the chair set before his enormous desk. Louis slumped into the chair that rose almost to the tips of his antlers and spun idly, gazing out at the room - everything here was huge, far too big. It was vulgar in its excess - or maybe it was just designed for someone of larger stature than he. He stopped, and slid the gun in the plastic bag across the desk towards him. His head was a mess of confusion as he stared at the weapon that had come to mean so much; the weapon that he knew Haru had used to save Legosi and that his predecessor had tried to use to kill that same wolf.

Legosi.
Legosi was an enigma to Louis - a damnable spot that he couldn’t fit onto his graph of how the world worked. He was a carnivore, but he was weak. He was a wolf, and yet he refused to bark, howl, or bite. Legosi infuriated Louis, but it was mostly because he defied being put in a neatly labelled box. Legosi defied fitting into Louis’ expectations, and the most important expectation that Legosi refused to fit was the expectation that Louis should not care about him in the slightest. Louis sighed, and smiled at the gun, pulling the plastic taut over its bulky frame.

Those two animals would be the death of him, he knew it.

“Ibuki,” he said, voice once again the calm, even tone that matched the face he showed the world. Louis the Red Deer: businessman, killer, actor.

“Yes, boss?”

“I’m done here,” he said as he rose from the chair, dusting off his jacket and pressing a kerchief to stem the flow of blood from the jagged gash the vase he’d broken had ripped through his cheek while his other hand picked pottery fragments out of his antlers. “Send someone up to clean up this mess - someone with discretion. You know who. I think it’s about time I paid our guest a visit.

“Right away, boss.”

Legosi stared aimlessly across the cafeteria, eyes struggling to stay open and ears twitching while they tried desperately to capture whatever it was Haru was saying. Something about... audacity? Wasn’t that that sound editing software you could get for free? Was Haru trying to say she was going to start a career in electronic music?

He didn’t think so, but if she was, he didn’t think it was a bad idea. She had a lovely voice.

He wasn’t trying to ignore her - he really wasn’t. He was just so exhausted from everything that had been happening lately. Getting closer and closer to solving Tem’s murder, capturing dangerous carnivores in the black market, keeping up with his classes as best he could with Haru and Jack’s help, and now the incident this morning with Louis. What was Louis doing with the Shishigumi anyways? He’d always wielded a staggering amount of authority and grace, but Legosi would never have expected that even Louis would be able to pull that off. He couldn’t stop thinking about Louis’ face; normally, Louis wore an impenetrable mask. Getting a read on his emotional state was nigh impossible; Legosi had only seen it slip a couple of times, first when Louis’d had that private meeting with him for Drama Club, and second when Haru had been kidnapped and Louis had resolved not to do anything about it. Each time it slipped, the mask Louis wore slipped a little farther, and today was no exception; Legosi didn’t know what was going on with the stag, but whatever it was it wasn’t good. He couldn’t wrap his head around why Louis would have followed him, but not chosen to try and let him or Haru know that he followed. He’d been so convinced there was no chance to save her, so why even come at all? A guilty conscience? To stop Legosi from getting himself killed? Whatever it was it was clear that Louis needed help, so all he needed to do was -

“Legosi?” Haru’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts, and he sat up straight in his chair, suddenly returning to attention. She sighed, and a little tired laugh escaped from her mouth. “You’ve been staring over my shoulder for a while now. Did you doze off again?” she asked, clearly more concerned than worried. Legosi awkwardly rubbed his arm.

“Y-yeah. Sorry,” he admitted sheepishly. “W-what were you saying? Something about... sound programs, or Audacity?” Haru laughed again.
“No, silly! No, I was just ranting about. About!” She clutched her ears in exasperation, fingers bunching the fur on her head up into little white tufts. “About Louis!” Oh good, she’d been thinking about the same thing he was. “Who does he think he is anyways, bringing those no-good lions on some dumb gesture to try to apologize? And what’s he trying to do by saying sorry with, with, with, with a gu- a gift?” Haru looked around the cafeteria, but thankfully it didn’t seem like anyone was listening in on their conversation anyways. “I just don’t… understand him, is all. It’s like he never wants anyone to know when he needs help, so he just shuts everybody out and tries to deal with it by himself, like that time he broke his leg. Only this time he’s living with lions and missing school!” She sighed again, and rested her chin on the table, pushing her empty food out of the way. “I don’t know, I’m just… worried and insulted at the same time. It’s very weird.”

Legosi nodded - this time, he’d listened very carefully. “I dunno,” he said, taking Haru’s hand in one of his own giant paws, “the way you talk about him, he kinda sounds a lot like me.” Haru’s hand stiffened in his - he could tell he’d struck a nerve. “Do… do you still love him?”

“What?” she responded, quickly moving to face him. “No, of course not. I just…” she trailed off, and Legosi sighed. He was going to have to get her to talk this time, wasn’t he.

“You just what? Haru, if you do still love Louis, you need to tell me. It’s important that we’re honest, remember? Your words, not mine.” The glare she gave him when he said that almost made him back down. Almost. Funny how much more confident he was when he thought it might help her.

“... no, I don’t love him. Not the way… well, you know.”

“The way what?” Legosi was very, very tired. He did not know. Haru rolled her eyes. “The way I love you, you dumb wolf.” She smiled when she heard his tail smacking into the legs of his chair. “I’m just… I’m worried about him, is all. I don’t know if I ever really loved him the way we have because I don’t know if I ever really even knew him. He wouldn’t let me know him. I just knew that he was lonely, and sad, and I was lonely and sad.” Legosi nodded, and squeezed Haru’s hand - this was the most open she’d been about her relationship with Louis yet, and he wanted to encourage her the same way she encouraged him.

“Haru, I… I was thinking about what Louis said this morning. About inviting us to go over to his place if we got in over our heads.” Legosi paused, anxious about the topic. The last time they’d been at the Shishigumi’s hideout hadn’t exactly been pleasant for either of them, but he was pretty sure it had been much less pleasant for Haru than it was for him.

“You think we should pay him a visit?” Haru asked, almost having read his mind. Before he could respond, though, someone else cut into the conversation.

“Hey guys!” Jack’s voice was entirely too chipper for the amount of sleep Legosi had gotten in the past few days, but Legosi was glad to hear it anyways. “Here’s two coffees, one for Haru, one for Legosi,” he said, putting the drinks down in front of each of them to free his hands before he grabbed a chair and spun it over to the table. “I got notes for mathematics for you,” he said, addressing Legosi, “but I couldn’t really get history - sorry, I was getting called on waaaay too much to write. It’s like they pick on the dog in the class or something, it’s crazy!” Haru laughed, took her coffee and shrugged.

“I mean probably, but you can let me be humble, right?” he joked, rummaging around in his
backpack to distribute neat little packets of notes. “So…” he asked, voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone as he scooted in closer. “How’s the whole sneaking out thing going?” His wink and the wagging of his tail demonstrated exactly what he thought was going on - Jack had been helping Legosi sneak out without getting noticed, so of course he knew something was going on. Hey, look at that - Legosi suddenly felt so much more awake!

“U-uh, fine! It’s going um, y’know. Fine. Grrreat, really. Perfectly, uh, alright. No problems Nothing to, y’know, complain about.” Legosi looked to Haru for help - she was much better at this sort of thing than he was.

“Not that it’s any of your business, Jack,” Haru said with a wink.

“Aw, c’mon, guys! Not even one little detail? Anything?” Haru laughed at Jack’s eager curiosity, and Legosi leaned back in his chair. It was really, really nice to have good friends.

Louis’ ears twitched at the snap of the rubber glove he tugged over his hand, wiggling his fingers so that the material set snugly between them so they didn’t restrict his movement. The elevator ride down to the sub-basement was long - but that was fine, it suited him. What didn’t suit him was the tuneless whistling coming where his subordinate held the tool cart in the corner.

“Free,” he said cracking his knuckles to make sure his hands would be as flexible as they could be for when he saw their guest, “did you ever take music lessons when you were young?” Free laughed.

“No, boss. Why?”

“I can tell,” Louis said with a cold smile. He had to admit, one of the benefits of being the boss of the Shishigumi was that he had ample opportunities to make quips at large carnivores.

The whistling stopped.

Louis stepped calmly through the elevator doors as they slid smoothly open, hands clasped casually in front of his lap. He heard the faint rattling of the tool cart follow him into the large concrete room, and he couldn’t help the sardonic smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth - he’d been working on this for a few weeks, and it looked like his diligence was finally going to get some results.

Louis flicked a heavy switch, and the hanging lamp in the center of the room came on, bathing his prisoner in harsh exposing light. The leopard, to be frank, looked like shit - one of his eyes was swollen shut, his shirt was hanging open, and puddles of blood stained his white pants from where they dripped from his mouth and nose. The leopard winced in the light, tugging weakly against the bungee cables securing him to the metal chair, and Louis took that as his cue to approach.

“Good evening, sir,” he said in the misplaced tone of a friendly host, “are you enjoying your stay with us so far? I can see you’ve already had a taste of Free’s hospitality; I trust he’s been an amenable host?” The leopard spat blood - and with it, a tooth.

“Fuck… you,” he grunted, turning his golden eye up to glare at Louis. Louis showed teeth when he grinned - this was going to be fun. The red deer crossed the distance between him and the leopard in the span of a few slow, long steps, the heels of his shoes clicking loudly in the claustrophobic space. He regarded the leopard down the bridge of his nose with disgust - carnivores like these were the very essence of the scum of society. Carnivores like these put numbers on little children’s feet.
Lately, carnivores like these made him feel alive.

Louis’ grabbed the leopard by the jaw, jamming his hand into his mouth so that he could feel the leopard’s molars through his glove. He relished in the gagging noises the man made as he was abruptly forced to sit back in his chair, pressed uncomfortably against the steel back. “Now now, that’s no way to talk to your hosts, is it? Free, is that an acceptable way to address one’s host?”

The lion grinned wide, showing all of his fangs. “No boss. Not even a little bit.”

“Perhaps our guest is just cranky because he hasn’t had a good meal yet,” Louis teased as he tilted the leopard’s head to get a good look at the damage that had already been done to his face - fractured left orbit, crushed left zygomatic arch, missing second left premolar. Hm - Free really favored his right hand, then. Interesting. Louis could feel drool begin to pool in the leopard’s mouth around his hand, and could see the sweat beading on his forehead - he couldn’t help but wonder how the starved leopard must feel right now with louis’ scent so close and mingled with the scent of his own blood. Louis imagined it smelled something like power. “What are you waiting for? I’m right here, you know. All you’d need to do is bite down - what, are you afraid? It’s not like I could stop you.” The leopard’s eye nervously flicked to the gun hanging on Free’s hip and the way the Free’s paw rested idly on the weapon, before turning back to Louis.

“Hoo’d ‘ill mhe,” he said through Louis’ hand. Louis smiled, and tightened his grip.

“Ah, so that’s how it is. It’s plenty fine for anyone else to die for your meals, but when it’s your turn, you just can’t stomach the taste.” Louis’ foot shot out without warning and slammed into the leopard’s gut, launching the prisoner backwards and sending him toppling to the ground. The sharp report of snapping ribs echoed through the chamber as the leopard fell, which was immediately followed by desperate gasps for breath. Louis breathed in the smell of the room - blood, sweat, and piss: the aroma of fear. It was a potpourri he was getting used to, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. At the very least, it smelled better on animals like these than it did on anybody else. “Let me tell you how this is going to happen,” he said, snapping his gloves and shaking the spit from his hand as he slowly walked towards where the leopard lay on the cold floor. “I’m going to hurt you until you tell me what I want to know. If I get tired, Free will hurt you, and I will enjoy a cold glass of lemonade and a nice meal while I continue to ask you questions. At any point, you can put a stop to the game by answering one simple question.” Louis sighed, and crouched over the trembling cat, his face an expressionless, disinterested mask.

“Where is the White Court?”

The leopard said nothing.

“Free, bring me the pliers please. I think this will be an enlightening conversation.”

Haru yawned, reaching high above her ears in a tight stretch to keep her blood flowing - she got more sleep than Legosi did, but that didn’t mean that this whole detective, doctor, whatever business wasn’t still tiring. Between coursework, studying for entrance exams, keeping the gardening club running as its sole member, and doing all the forensic work she could manage, she found her free time rapidly vanishing into the fluffy vortex named Legosi. Still, it was better than him trying to handle everything completely by himself - thanks to her, he managed to stay awake through at least some of his classes. She felt a stitch in her back that had been bothering her for much of the day dissipate with the end of the stretch, and turned her sights back on her desk - the garden clubhouse was always empty, and that made it the best place to work on campus. She drummed her pencil against the desk, first reviewing the list of names that fit what she and Legosi
had already uncovered about the culprit - she could discount Bill right away, the crime scene hadn’t stunk of bad body spray - and then shifted her gaze to stare at the photos she’d collected. She frowned; maybe it was a little weird for her to be spending her afternoons comparing pictures of devouring remains and the carnivores who committed the crimes. She was pretty sure most of her classmates, regardless of dietary heritage, didn’t spend their afternoons this way. And yet…

Haru thought back to when she and Legosi tangled with the Shishigumi. What she did, and how she didn’t know that she was capable of it until after she’d done it. It turned out that killing someone was pretty intense. The strangest thing was that she never really felt all that bad about it - did that make her bad? She wasn’t sure - she hoped not. The lion was pretty bad, so maybe it cancelled out. She could remember clearly how the weapon felt in her hands - it was cold until she fired it, but once she did, it felt hotter than an iron. That kind of power - the power to kill someone so easily - was terrifying enough on its own. She wondered if maybe her life of constant proximity to the reality that she could die at any moment made it easier - after all, it hadn’t really been a conscious decision to kill someone. She didn’t choose to kill the Shishigumi chief for revenge, or because she hated him. It had been a very simple arithmetic - she could shoot, and both her and Legosi would live, or she could not, and they both would die.

And still, she couldn’t deny just how much safer even carrying her little knife made her feel. There was another kind of power in a weapon besides the power to take life - there was the power to protect, too. Haru wondered if this was how Legosi felt all the time - after all, he was a gray wolf, his whole body was a weapon. She thought about not being able to put her knife down, or if she hadn’t been able to drop the gun - what it would be to never be able to stop carrying that terrifying, almost intoxicating kind of power. She could understand why Legosi was always so nervous around other animals, and especially her.

“Ughhhhh,” Haru sighed, realizing that her existential crisis was preventing her from being productive as she slumped over onto her desk and squeezed her ears. “This is really frustrating. Maybe I just need more coffee. That’s probably it. I’m just tired.”

The shadow watched the gardening clubhouse intently - it had seen Haru in the computer lab doing research, seen her and Legosi exchanging papers after class, or during lunch. It knew that they must be getting close - if it was just Legosi doing the searching, the shadow wouldn’t be worried; that wolf was as scatterbrained and gullible as a cicada, and more and more tired every day. It would be impossible for Legosi to shed light on the shadow alone. But Haru… she was different. The shadow knew its classmates, for the most part, didn’t think much of Haru - but it also knew from experience that appearances could be deceiving. It knew Haru was smart - she was a beast of clever retorts and careful observation, and unlike Legosi, she had the luxuries of time and rest. The shadow sighed to itself - it knew what had to be done. If Tem’s sacrifice were to mean anything, anything at all, Haru would have to die. It shifted its weight from the wall to its feet, and pulled its cloak up around its head as it moved away from its hiding place and towards the garden - it knew it wouldn’t need its teeth.

After this, it really needed to see a therapist.

Haru ran as fast as she could, clutching her arm where she’d been nicked to stem the bleeding. The long shadows of late evening stretched across the school grounds, making it hard for any potential onlookers to see that she was covered in blood - though she didn’t know how much of it was hers. It had happened so quickly - she’d walked out the front door of the clubhouse, tired from a long
afternoon of study. She’d turned to lock the door, and that was when she’d heard it - the snapping of a stem, and a whistling sound she was all too familiar with from practicing with Gouhin. Haru knew she didn’t have time to turn and look at her assailant - if she did, the paw would hit her, and she would be dead. Instead, she dropped low, scrambling to dodge the attack. She barely got out of the way in time, a single claw tearing through her jacket and dress sleeves like they were tissue paper and opening a long, ugly gash on her upper arm. She wasn’t sure if she’d screamed - her body was moving on its own when she felt her fingers close around the handle of her knife. The shape that attacked her was huge - bigger than Legosi and bulky like a piece of machinery or one of the Drama club’s props more than it was a body. She leapt out of the way as the other hand came down - it was bad - she couldn’t win this fight, she had to get away. She remembered how it felt when her knife pierced a body - she could feel it sink through each layer individually from the vibrations on the blade. The harsh scraping of papier-mache, the soft plush fabric of a school uniform, and the wet, hard sliding of the knife as it passed through fur, skin, and muscle. Her assailant roared in frustration, and then a flick of his wrist against her wounded arm sent Haru to the other side of the roof.

And now, she was running for her life across campus, and her little knife was following her inside the body of an enormous beast who probably wanted to eat her head.

Haru had to think quickly - she couldn’t keep to parts of the school where nobody was, because then she’d wind up just like Tem. Just the same, it was late enough that nobody was out and about - or, at least, nobody was supposed to be out and about. She couldn’t just go back to her dorm - if she did, then there would be questions about why she was both injured and had someone else’s blood on her, and she probably wouldn’t be able to sneak out to help Legosi anymore.

Why am I so concerned about that? She thought to herself, annoyed. Focus on not dying first, thank you very much.

Haru glanced up at the sky, and realization struck her face - that was it! Right about now, Legosi would be sneaking out through his dorm room window. If she just made it outside his dorm, she might be lucky enough to catch him as he reached the bottom - and even if she wasn’t, she liked their chances of either beating or getting away from this monster together than she did alone.

This monster that was probably one of her classmates, she reminded herself. And also ate one of my classmates, she added for good measure. It was, after all, important to keep things in perspective.

Haru gritted her teeth, and ran like she’d never run before.

“Hey Legosi!” Jack called from the window in a voice that he thought was a whisper, but everybody else knew was more of a hollow shout than anything else. He knew the rest of the 701 boys were rolling their eyes at his excitement to be participating in helping their roommate sneak off campus to have nocturnal trysts with his forbidden rabbit girlfriend, but he didn’t mind - they were just jealous that Legosi and Haru had specifically entrusted him to help with this very important task.

“What?” Legosi called back up as quietly as he could manage, which was not particularly quiet.

“You should buy Haru a rose jelly!” Jack called back down. “I read that rabbits love to eat flowers, and roses are especially romantic!”

“Give it a rest, Jack,” Miguno laughed, his merry voice tinkling around the room like the music he liked to play whenever he was cleaning. “Let Legosi do what he’s gonna do! You gotta let him get
on Haru’s good side by himself or she’s gonna see riiight through it.” Jack turned to look at Miguno with a scowl.

“And what would you know about that anyways?” he asked, only pouting a little.

“Because I’m a hyena, man,” Miguno replied, steepling his fingers on his chest in an attempt to appear far more suave than he actually was, “and hyenas are excellent at pleasing the ladies.”

“Is that what your ex would say too?” asked Collot from his bunk, flipping the page of his manga on Voss’ signal and eliciting a tiny cackle from the fennec perched atop his head. Miguno huffed and stuffed his other earbud into his ear.

“Didn’t wanna talk to you guys anyways,” he said as grumpily as he could manage, but it was obvious to everyone in the room that he appreciated that it was a good jibe. Jack’s ear twitched when he heard the gentle thump of Legosi’s feet hit the ground outside, and he quickly turned back to watch - he barely looked in time to see Haru’s tiny form tackle Legosi, and the pair of them hurry off into the night with incredible haste. He leaned out the window as far as he could get, not noticing when Miguno grabbed his tail to keep him from falling out.

“Wow, they’re really in a hurry tonight, huh?” he commented to the room. “Think they have big plans?”

“I dunno,” Collot said, turning another page. “Don’t you think they have big plans every night? It’s not like it’s easy to sneak off campus, and there’s always the garden club if they want to do something small.”

“I meant like a fancy dinner,” Jack said in a complete, utterly disappointed deadpan. “You guys need to get your heads out of the gutter.”

“Hard to do that when the gutter’s taller than me,” Voss joked, and Collot laughed. Jack couldn’t help laughing a little too, even though he disapproved. It was a good joke. “Besides,” Voss continued, “I wasn’t the one asking them for details about their love life at lunch.”

“You heard that?!” Jack felt his cheeks heating up at having been caught.

“Voss hears eeeeverything Jack,” Miguno reminded him, having removed his earbud again so he could keep eavesdropping. “Big ears, remember? They’re like radio antennae.”

“If you really wanna give Legosi some good advice,” Voss said, “tell him to get her earwarmers. It’s getting colder, and you would not believe how fuckin chilly these get on a windy day. Page please, Collot.” Collot turned the page. Jack nodded.

“Hey, where’s Durham?” Jack asked, suddenly distracted.

“Sneaking off to meet up with a girl,” Voss answered. “I think Legosi’s life of mystery makes him feel insecure.”

Jack turned back to the window, watching his friends disappear into the night. “Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll have to remember that ear-warmers bit.” He hauled the bedsheets rope up into the room, then shut the window and turned back to his conversation with the boys. None of them saw the hulking silhouette that followed Legosi and Haru to the campus gates, then turn and angrily stalk off into the night.

Gouhin lounged in his chair, his feet propped up on his desk, a cigar between his teeth and a
magazine in his hands. He grumbled to himself - he hadn’t read one of these medical journals in years, and yet here he was, thumbing through the pages of a periodical meant for physicians new to the instructional field. Damn that boy - it wasn’t enough that Legosi wanted to date the rabbit, no, he also wanted Gouhin to teach her. He sighed, and dusted some ash from his smoke as he flipped the page.

Okay, Legosi didn’t want Gouhin to teach Haru. Haru wanted Gouhin to teach Haru. He still didn’t approve, but he did have to acknowledge that Legosi wasn’t exactly in love with a normal rabbit - he was in love with a batshit crazy one.

Well, at least they matched.

He was in the middle of reading an article on how to teach students the trickier parts of limb reattachment when a fresh new surprise burst through his front door. “Dammit Legosi you’re-”

“Gouhin, we need help,” Legosi panted, and when he shoved his way through the door, Gouhin’s eyes shot wide. Legosi was carrying Haru clutched to his chest, and Haru seemed to have undergone a color change - normally, her stark white color was one of her most distinguishing features. Now, Haru was more red than white. Gouhin quickly tossed his magazine below his desk and stood up, sweeping papers and pencils off the desk surface with a brisk swipe of his arm.

“Then quit blocking my doorway and get her on the table, dumbass,” he growled. “I told you this would happen! I warned you about what would happen if you kept-”

“Gouhin,” Haru interrupted him, and he froze. “Legosi didn’t do this. I think whoever killed Tem knows we’re looking for him.” Legosi set her on the desk, and she scooted to sit comfortably on the edge. Her left arm looked pretty bad, but she didn’t look like a predation victim either.

“... where’s your knife?” he asked. Haru grunted.

“Left it in the other guy. This uh. This isn’t my blood. W-well, mostly, isn’t my blood.” Her voice was small and surprisingly calm - that was definitely shock, Gouhin decided. Still, he couldn’t help but feel proud - which he absolutely should NOT do, because he didn’t approve of any of this nonsense.

“What were you reading?” Legosi asked him. Gouhin bristled.

“Pornography,” he answered, unable to come up with a better excuse to avoid having to tell them that he needed to review some medical basics so that he could teach Haru effectively. “Come on, let me look at that arm. You can tell me all about whatever the hell you’ve been up to at school while I work. Haru, take notes - you can improve your stitching technique while we’re at it.”

The shadow stuffed its disguise back into its locker. Its heart was pounding in its chest, and it could feel sweat beading on its brow. Fuck fuck fuck, she got away. No, correction - they got away. If it had just been Haru, it would have been fine - she didn’t see who it was, and it doubted she could identify him by scent. It could always try again. But it hadn’t been just Haru - it had been Haru, covered in its fresh blood, and it had been Legosi, and the shadow had no doubts about the strength of that wolf’s nose on a good day. He would have to hope that Legosi had a cold, or that he’d tripped and hit his nose, or… no. Those weren’t reliable enough. It was time to face the truth - it needed advice, and it wasn’t going to get it here. Maybe it was time that the shadow paid someone a visit.
Louis casually toweled the flecks of blood off his face and his horns, tossing the towel into the laundry bucket along with his rubber gloves once he was done. He looked down at the corpse with disdain, and his stomach turned - not because of the sight of the mutilated leopard on the ground in front of him, no. Leopard just tasted horrible. There was a part of him that couldn’t believe he was doing this, that told him that what he was doing was wrong and scary and that he was just a kid and had no business being anywhere near where he was. The rest of him reminded that part that he’d given up on holding back months ago, and that there were plenty of others who would never even get to be kids should he give up now. He heard Free chuckle from behind him, and he turned. “What’s so funny?” he asked, and Free shook his head.

“Nothing, boss,” the lion said, shifting his weight to stop leaning casually against the wall and taking his hands out of his pockets. “You’re just clenching your fist so hard that if you had claws, you’d cut yourself. Must be convenient to be an herbivore when you’re that pissed off, eh?” Louis rolled his eyes, but had to acknowledge that Free always had a way of lightening the mood. Free closed the distance between him and Louis in long, languid steps, simply oozing his lackadaisical nature and laid back attitude. He looked down at the body, which was now missing several parts including a leg and assorted fingers, and kicked it. Free grinned when it offered no response save to flop limply on the concrete. “You were really thorough with this one, boss - he annoy you in particular, or did you just have a bad morning? Maybe both?”

Louis sighed, reaching into his breast pocket and producing a pack of cigarettes. “Smoke?”

“Oh sure, thanks.”

Louis lit a cigarette for Free first, then put his lighter to his own. He regarded the body on the floor, and barely suppressed a shiver at the memory of how he had exercised the power he’d wielded over the leopard. Free was right - he did have a bad morning, and that morning was carved indelibly into the dead animal’s flesh. He’d taken all of his leftover suppressed rage, loneliness, and insecurity and poured it into the acceptable performance of torturing an animal to death for the purpose of extracting information. It was sickening. More than that, it was therapeutic.

Heavens above, that was fucked up.

“Something like that, yes,” he answered. “Do you remember what I told you my name was when we met, Free?” Free nodded.

“Product ID Number four,” he said. “Looks like you’re in a different spot on the food chain now, eh boss?” Louis failed to suppress a chuckle - yeah, ok. Free’s sense of humor always got to him.

“Yeah. That pretty much sums it up. Give me that bucket, would you?” Free handed Louis the bucket. Louis took it, and promptly vomited into the basin. “Come on - let’s go get some real food that isn’t mangy, illbegotten garbage.” He wiped the bloody bile from his lips with a kerchief, and produced his phone from his pocket as he and Free stepped back onto the elevator, swiping open the messaging app.

<Ibuki>

<Yeah Boss?>

<Arrange a meeting with my father. I need to speak with him>

<Right away sir. Will I be driving?>

Louis smiled, and typed in his response.
Legosi couldn’t tear his eyes away from Haru while she recounted the details of the attack. Not because she was in her bra so that Gouhin could properly tend to her wounds, though… admittedly, that didn’t hurt. It was because he could see first hand what even the slightest trace of a carnivore attack looked like on her - her left arm was one big bruise from shoulder to wrist, and her fingers were swollen to the point that she had trouble moving them. A long, ugly gash ran from her shoulder to her elbow, and there were small spots of purple that showed through her fur around her ribcage from where she’d fallen. Her knees and shins were badly scraped, and the circles below her eyes demonstrated the tax that adrenaline and stress had on her body. Seeing it made his stomach turn - not just because she was hurt, but because of how he was seeing a picture of what would happen if he lost himself and proved Gouhin right. Compared to what could have happened, these injuries were minimal - he could do that to her so, so easily, and it shook him to his core.

He also couldn’t help but imagine how much worse it could have been.

“So let me get this straight,” Gouhin said, snipping the thread of Haru’s stitches with his teeth. “You didn’t get a good look at this guy’s face, you can’t say even what species he is, and you lost your knife. That about sum it up?” Haru sighed, and nodded. “Good. You got away with your life instead, that’s the important part. You’re still a dumbass, Haru - remember, just because you have a knife that doesn’t make you a carnivore. You need to be more careful,” he scolded. “I don’t want Legosi eating half a neighborhood because he went mad with sorrow after you got yourself eaten by some punk murderer.” Haru looked upset, and Legosi cleared his throat.

“Uh, Gouhin,” he said. “I’m pretty sure Haru knows it would be a bad idea to get eaten. Shouldn’t we focus on how we can find whoever attacked her?” He sniffed the air as he spoke - the blood in Haru’s fur stuck out like a rusty nail in the room. Legosi committed the scent to memory, storing it in his mental vault - Haru said that the attacker was wearing a costume, so all he needed to do was find a way to break into everyone in the drama club’s lockers, and the scent of the blood that would be on the costume would give them away. Easy.

“Evidently not, given how much she hangs out around you,” Gouhin spat, angrily chewing his cigar. “But… you make a good point. Whoever this kid is they need serious help. Once you find out who they are, promise me neither of you will do anything stupid? Just get them here, and I can take care of it. Got it?” Legosi swallowed. Okay, but he really thought wanted to do something stupid.

“Legosi, we should - ow, hey,” Haru said, scowling at Gouhin when he slapped a sticky aloe pad over the top portion of her cut. “We really should follow Doctor Gouhin’s advice. Believe me, I’m as mad as you are, but… I really do prefer not being lunch.” Legosi whined, but he nodded his agreement. Yeah, that was probably best. Gouhin had the equipment to handle this, and Haru had the words to curb his impulsive decision making tendencies. He’d have to swallow his pride, but… well, things had been a lot easier since he figured out how to do that.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said.

“Of course she is! She’s telling you to follow my advice, and I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but things always go better when you do what I say.” Gouhin looked very proud of himself.

“What about when you said he shouldn’t come help me when I got kidnapped?” Haru asked, and Legosi could see the sly expression she always wore when taunting someone overconfident on her lips. Ohhh dear. Gouhin grumbled, and looked at the ground.
“Fine. One exception.”

“What about how you keep saying that I shouldn’t be dating Haru?” Legosi asked hopefully.

“I said one exception and I’ll stand by my damn words.” Legosi and Haru giggled in unison - Gouhin was stubborn, but they knew he cared. Legosi was really, really glad that he cared.

Pina idly checked his phone, grinding a piece of bubblegum between his molars while he waited outside the Drama club meeting room. As usual, Pina was bored. There was very little that interested him, really - classes bored him, and most of the students bored him too. The few students he had heard were interesting - Louis the Red Deer, Legosi the Gray Wolf, and Haru the Dwarf Rabbit in particular - were either missing, presumably never to be seen again, or too busy with each other to give him the time of day.

Pina hated it when people were too busy to give him the time of day - it usually meant that they had the best gossip on the menu, and he wanted in on it.

Lately, though, there’d been another student who he’d taken an interest in - Riz the Bear was hiding something. Pina knew the look Riz wore - friendly, soft, all smiles, and usually only speaks up when someone else says something to him first. Pina knew that look - it was the look that he wore when one of his partners found out about his other partners and wound up not liking it. It was a look he wore often, and he thought he wore well! But he knew it for what it really was - the look of someone trying to hide something because everybody else thought that they should feel guilty about it.

Pina didn’t know what Riz did, but he intended to find out.

When he heard someone approaching, Pina put his phone away and looked up. It was Kibi - Kibi got along with everyone, so Pina wasn’t surprised when the little anteater gave him a friendly greeting.

“‘Morning Pina!'” he chirped, his nasally voice almost illegally endearing.

“Good morning, Kibi,” Pina replied in his usual, intentionally sultry voice. He knew what he was doing. “How’s the day treating you so far?”

“Oh, fine, fine. Hey, have you seen Riz? I know you guys have been hanging out lately, and nobody else can seem to find him.” That comment actually got Pina’s attention - come to think of it, he hadn’t seen Riz today.

“Huh,” he said in surprise as the gears in his very, very pretty head began to start turning. “No, I haven’t. I wonder where he could’ve gone?”

Riz sat deathly still in the plush chair, staring at the packet of pills in his hand. He hated taking those pills - they made his head split like a log before an axe, dried up his throat, and made him feel dizzy. They forced him to rely on honey to function - before he started on them, he didn’t think it would be so bad. Now, Riz was acutely well acquainted with the feeling of honey as it slid down his throat, the way the sugars burned his nostrils and his gullet and made everything he ate for the rest of the day taste different. Mostly, though, he hated how they made him into something… less than what he was. It was fundamentally unfair - in order to keep everybody else safe, bears like him had to take medication that nobody else did to limit their natural potential. It was ridiculous -
dogs were specifically designed to be smarter than everybody else, after all. Why didn’t they have to take pills to limit their overactive brains? Wasn’t the emotional well being of the peers they made feel like dumb animals worth the sacrifice? Wasn’t it the duty of any good citizen to make sacrifices for the betterment of their community? That was what Riz had been told, after all. For a long time, it was what Riz had believed.

But ever since he started seeing this therapist, around when Legosi and Haru had started snooping, Riz’ eyes had been opened to the reality of things.

Now, Riz saw the truth - not every citizen had to make sacrifices for the betterment of their communities - only some citizens were called upon to make those sacrifices. Bears had to take their pills to make them weak and frail, poisonous animals had to shut themselves away and live like pariahs for fear of poisoning their neighbors. And, of course, all carnivores had to hide their fangs and conceal their claws, all so that the herbivores of the world could a little more comfortable because they didn’t have to see which they feared.

It was unnatural, and it prevented animals from experiencing true connection. Riz had experienced true connection - he knew what that felt like. Riz had true friendship, something that he was ever grateful for and constantly frustrated by the fact that everyone thought that he should feel guilty for it.

Tem knew what true friendship was like too, after all.

“Riz,” began his therapist, “it seems as though you are a young man who finds himself at a crossroads in life - a crossroads that we all come to at some point or another, where we decide who we wish to be. Your trauma originates from the simple fact that who you believe yourself to be does not align with society’s expectations for you - you feel strong desires and natural impulses which contradict the path laid out for your future.” His therapist’s voice was gentle and soothing - part of the reason Riz liked him was because even when the gazelle’s horns bobbed the most animatedly, or when he danced around the room with his slim physique, Riz felt no compulsion to attack him, to consume him. He was the only herbivore Riz had ever met whom he could truly be himself around - he was incredibly fortunate to have seen the ad for the office opening downtown and, on a whim, decided to try it out. The therapist sat across the table from Riz, and adjusted his mask before resting his hands delicately on the table. “You have a very important choice to make, Riz. Do you pursue your ideals and become your truest self? Or do you take those pills, and choose to make the sacrifice that all of your peers expect you to make for the greater good of those around you?” His therapist paused, and Riz rolled the thoughts over in his mind - it was difficult, he had a headache. He needed more honey. “Remember, neither choice is wrong, but only you can choose.” Riz could feel himself sweating, could feel the muscles in his hand squirming under the weight of the pills.

“Doctor,” he said, nervous and unassured, “what if… what if I know what I want to choose, but there are people looking for me because… because of something I’ve done? What if making that choice would also mean that I wouldn’t be able to carry through with it?” His therapist leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs and stroking his chin through his mask as he considered the conundrum.

“Well,” he said cautiously, “I would think to say, Riz, that you were in a toxic environment. It is my professional opinion,” he continued, moving a hand over his heart, the tips of his claws making little divots in his buttoned shirt - wait, could gazelles have claws? Maybe he just filed his nails - “that when one is trapped in a toxic environment, true mental health is impossible to achieve, and that one should seek an exit from that environment at their earliest opportunity.” Riz thought about it - it would be a big thing, but would it even be possible? Considering abandoning all his friends,
the Drama club, his classes was something he would have never done just weeks ago, but everything his therapist was saying just made so much sense. He fumbled his hands in his lap, eyes fixated on the pills. Those tiny, horrible pills - take us, they said. Take us so you can lose yourself in exchange for the keys to the world. Take us and be comfortably numb. Take us and forget What You Did.

“... but doctor, where would I go?” he asked, internally pleading that the therapist had a good answer. Riz looked up and couldn’t help but notice the pin on his doctor’s lapel - it was an enamel pin in the shape of a circle, surrounded by fantastical castle walls with six towers. Half the pin was white, and the other half was black. It was a curious, pretty thing. Riz liked the duality - it suited his therapist well, he thought. “I don’t know anywhere that I could do what you say I should - escape from a toxic environment, I mean. Does a place like that even exist?” His therapist smiled, his cheeks rising warmly behind his mask - he nodded.

“It does indeed, Riz. Would you like to go there?”

“Yes, more than anything.”

“Then pack your things - I’ll show you the way at our next appointment.” Riz’ heart soared at his therapist’s words, and the pills dropped from his hand to the carpet, utterly forgotten.

“Thank you. Thank you, Doctor.” His therapist smiled, and shook his head at Riz’ formality.

“Please. Call me Melon.”

Chapter End Notes

So! This chapter was a bit of a doozy; for what Melon is saying, PLEASE do not think I endorse literally any of it. He’s a nasty gross man who is using the language of therapy and comfort to emotionally manipulate a child. He’s bad, no exceptions. I’m very excited to finally introduce what’s likely going to provide the bulk of the intrigue in this fic - the White Court! Who are they? Why are they important? Why's Louis looking for them? Let's find out together! I had a blast writing this, as always please feel free to leave your feedback in the comments; I promise you that I will read them all. Thanks, and see you next time!

PS: for anyone worried about Louis' spot in the relationship because of what Haru said, don't worry, we'll get there. Feelings are strong and confusing, and he did pull some shit not too long ago, but we'll get there
Bullets Change More than a Body

Chapter Summary

Mizuchi gets what she wants. Louis confronts his father. Ibuki helps his boss out. Legosi endures an interrogation. The truth comes out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louis sat in the back of Ibuki’s car. He felt his surroundings acutely - the plush leather of the seats underneath him, the way his antlers brushed the velvet roof even though he barely filled out a single cushion, the electric hum of the built in minifrige and the alluring presence of the alcohol inside. He was suddenly aware of how gaunt his reflection in the window opposite him was - how his cheeks showed the hollow of his mouth, his fur had lost its ruddy glow, and his eyes bore dark creases underneath them from malnutrition, sleepless nights, and stress. He could taste blood in his mouth - he really wished that it was his. He allowed his eyes to shift their focus past the window, and almost immediately regretted it - his father’s estate was as ostentatious as it was cold, sprawling out across the property like a beached whale somebody took the time to wrap in white lace. It was disgustingly excessive with its proud columns, soaring buttresses, and elegant, neatly manufactured statuary; in short, it suited his father perfectly. Louis could feel his breath quickening as he shifted the focus of his vision back to his reflection - he could practically see his father looming over him locked in a disapproving scowl. He looked at the way the oversized collar of his shirt bunched around his neck - what was he thinking wearing this? A vest jacket with separate sleeves, a cloak, leg warmers? Why was he wearing three belts? He looked absurd, there was no way his father would take him seriously like this. He would just sit there, condescending, and wave that damnable pricetag over his-

“Louis,” came Ibuki’s voice from the front seat and broke Louis out of his anxiety fueled reverie with a single word: his name. “Are you doing alright, boss?” Louis scoffed at the question - was he doing alright? What a ridiculous notion. He was Louis, of course he was doing alright.

… was he doing alright?

“... I’m fine,” he grumbled, still not getting out of his seat like he was supposed to a few minutes ago.

“You’re sure?” asked Ibuki. Louis almost snapped, but Ibuki was one step ahead of him. “I heard about your session today from Free; he told me you might have injured yourself,” Ibuki lied, but it was enough to save Louis’ pride. To give him an out. “It is best, I’ve found, to conduct business on a clear head and a hale body, sir. If you are unwell, I am certain that Mr. Oguwa would be willing to reschedule this meeting at the convenience of the Chief of the Shishigumi.” Louis nodded, considering his options. As he did, something struck him - he had options. Louis was not used to having options - everything in his life had always been laid out so clearly before him that his path forwards was never anything short of painfully obvious. But now, he could choose. Sure, this meeting with his father was important for his objectives - otherwise, he wouldn’t be having it. But it didn’t need to happen right now, and Ibuki had just reminded him that he was in control of that. He had the choice to back down, return home, and nobody would judge him for it.
Louis decided that he was going to schedule the proper time to have a mental breakdown while processing that piece of information later, and that for now, he was going to take advantage of the momentary surge of confidence to get up, get out of the car, and go do what he came here to do.

“No need, Ibuki,” Louis said as he brushed off his cloak and lifted himself from his seat, ducking so he could open the door. “But keep the engine warm - knowing my father, it’s possible we might need to leave in a hurry.” Ibuki nodded, and turned the mirror so that Louis could see his eyes. He really didn’t know how he felt to see that kind of warmth and concern coming from someone who was supposed to be his subordinate.

“Of course, boss. I’ll be here when you need me.”

“Thanks, Ibuki,” Louis said, and climbed out of the car to confront Oguma.

Mizuchi tapped her foot irritably, leaning against the room’s doorway. Her arrangement with Haru was, well, mutually beneficial. She didn’t have to be happy about it, she didn’t have to particularly like it, but she did acknowledge that it accomplished a select few, highly specific objectives: objective one, it kept Haru out of her fucking hair. So long as she helped her stay out of trouble, Haru was occupied with that perverted wolf boy and far, far away from her turf; so far, this was the only thing that had kept that infuriating, common, vulgar dwarf rabbit away from what was hers, so it clearly had some merit. The second objective was a little more simple:

It kept Mizuchi supplied with a steady stream of Cherryton’s best kush.

It was a sort of a public secret, what many of the herbivorous students - small animals in particular - snuck off to do in the woods during lunch period or in the early morning before classes started. It was only natural - their heart rates were high, and their bodies were built for stress, after all. In the barbaric times before civilization, those impulses would have been the only thing standing between a small animal and a carnivore’s dinner table. As of now, though, they were slightly less convenient - an adrenaline surge in the middle of a lecture because someone across the room dropped their textbook was not exactly conducive to the learning environment. As a result, many of the students, Mizuchi included, engaged in the good old fashioned practice of self medication with all natural, locally grown THC.

Locally grown THC that only the sole member of the school’s gardening club - yeah, yeah, big surprise there - had the resources to produce.

Mizuchi remembered discovering this when she’d made the deal with Haru - it was a bit of a shocking revelation, given how diminutive and unobtrusive her rival usually was, but it wasn’t an entirely unwelcome one; cutting out the crass middleman of Cherryton’s vulgar student dealers and going straight to the source was well worth it even if that source was Haru. And not even for the savings - Mizuchi just fuckin’ hated those guys.

She checked her watch, and groaned curtly in frustration stamping her foot - dammit Haru she was supposed to be behind school grounds five minutes ago for her morning smoke with her friends! Finally, she heard a pair of small footsteps echoing slowly down the hallway - she pricked her ears, turned her head, and sure enough, there was Haru.

“Really took you long enough huh, dwarf?” Mizuchi almost spat, her blood boiling as the very frequent object of her irritation came into view. “Guess it makes sense, given your short little legs. What’s with the puffy jacket - isn’t that a little modest for your tastes?” As usual, Haru ignored the snipe, which only served to piss Mizuchi off more.
“I dunno,” Haru said with a shrug as she approached, “aren’t you the one who’s always going on about ‘continuing the species’? Maybe you should mind your own business and think about your modesty before you think about mine, hm? Sorry I’m late, I got held up.”

“What, did your dog drag you to the park to howl at the moon?” she mocked.

“Yes,” Haru said, her voice adopting that awful tone, “and it was very, very romantic.”

Mizuchi’s eye twitched as Haru walked past her into the room, and her arm shot out reaching to grab the smaller rabbit by the wrist. “Hey! Aren’t you forgetting - holy shit, what happened?” Beneath the jacket, Haru’s left arm was heavily swollen, and Mizuchi could feel the firm padding of bandages overlaid on top of the supple give of bruised flesh. She couldn’t stop herself from blurt out “Are you okay?” in misplaced concern when Haru winced at the physical contact. Shit, had to act cool, couldn’t look like she cared. “You’d better not go get yourself eaten so I don’t get paid.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m fine,” Haru said, yanking her arm out of Mizuchi’s grip before reaching into her pocket to toss the taller - and much well bred, thank you - rabbit a small packet. “I just fell down some stairs.” Mizuchi snatched the packet eagerly out of the air - enough for her and her friends, as promised. Finally. “Anything happen that I need to know about?”

“No, nothing out of the ordinary,” Mizuchi said as she greedily examined the package of marijuana. “Are you going out again tonight, or did you learn your lesson?” Haru laughed.

“Come on, Mizuchi, when have you ever known me to learn any kind of lesson?” Mizuchi’s lips twitched into an unwilling smile. Haru was right, of course.

They both knew she wasn’t that kind of rabbit.

Louis stood across the desk from his father, feigning confidence as best he could in the hopes that he could convince his brain that he was an actor taking a grand stage instead of a young stag staring down his disappointed father. He was much better at acting than he was at reading his father’s intents; Oguma’s emotions were an enigma at best, and completely absent at worst. On the desk between them sat a gift basket neatly wrapped in brightly colored, sparkly paper. Louis tried to ignore it, opting to endure the awkward silence rather than acknowledge his father’s crass gift. Ultimately, Oguma broke the silence.

“Well,” he said, turning his eyes from his son and back to the papers on his desk, dipping his pen in an inkwell that probably cost more than tuition as he got back to writing, “aren’t you going to open your gift? You know it would be rude to refuse, especially from a new business partner, Louis. I taught you better than that.” Louis swallowed his anger audibly - he had to remain calm and collected. He was in control here - not his father, him. He stepped briskly to the desk, shoes thumping far too loudly against the plush carpeting. The gift had a tag affixed to the bow that held the paper shut - Louis took it in hand and turned it over, lifting an eyebrow when he saw what it read.

“1/10.”

“What’s this?” he asked his father, gesturing to the tag. Oguma did not even look him in the eye when he responded.

“How much it cost.” Louis immediately understood what he meant - 1/10, or 700,000 yen. One
tenth of the sum his father paid for him. One tenth of his market value. One tenth the price of Product No. 4.

Louis pushed the basket aside - he could feel his hands trembling, he just hoped that his father couldn’t see it. “I’ll open it later,” he decided while he quickly formulated a lie. “It looks like it’s more than one piece, and I’d like to properly appreciate them all without wasting your time.” Oguma nodded, scribbling something on his documents and flipping a page.

“As you will. Louis, what exactly did you wish to meet regarding? I’m very busy, and from what I’ve heard, you haven’t been seen at Cherryton since before the end of last term. Don’t you have business that you should be attending to as well?” Louis was shocked by his father’s blase attitude.

“Is that it?” he couldn’t keep himself from asking. Where was Oguma’s anger? His disappointment? His disapproval? Where were the emotions that a parent was supposed to have when their delinquent child returned after going missing for months?

“What more would there be?” Oguma said casually. “Did you think I was worried about you? Please. You are Louis, heir to the Horns Conglomerate, and my son. I knew you were safe - if it really must be said, we both know that it takes more than the Black Market to kill you.” The pride in his father’s voice was confusing - it at once made him sick and tugged at his heart strings and at the longing for approval he thought he’d buried. Louis’ hand tightened. He inhaled, and let his breath out slowly - he needed to remain calm. He understood the situation his father had engineered - the gift demonstrated that plainly. Oguma was reminding Louis that he was a commodity good who had been purchased for a specific purpose, and that goods purchased to an end did not rebel against their function. “Son, if you have something to say, say it. There should be no hesitation between us - we both are above that.”

Oguma was about to discover that he’d wasted his money.

Louis tucked his hand into the flap of his coat, and tossed a paper onto Oguma’s desk. “That’s the problem, Father. I am not your son, and you and I both know it.” Oguma looked up from his papers to meet Louis’ gaze, his face a dispassionate mask. Louis had gotten his attention - good.

“I bought you from the market for seven million yen, did I not?” his father said with a smirk like he’d told an inside joke. “A bit higher than most adoption fees, don’t you think?”

“You made a bad investment,” he answered, and his voice was warmer than he wanted it to be. More sympathetic. Damn it. “It’s time to cut away this false pretense,” he continued, reciting his rehearsed lines word for word, “and exist as what we are.”

“And what is that, Louis? What sort of animals are we?” Oguma asked, lacing his fingers and leaning forward on his elbows. Louis felt his stomach turn. He drew his gun.

“Businessmen,” he said, and pointed the gun at his father’s head.

Legosi crouched over the spotlight in the drama club’s rafters, his claws wrapped awkwardly around the delicate silver handles that were far too small for him affixed to its sides. He watched the goings on of his friends below him with nervous intensity - one of them was missing, and his heart turned to think that he knew why. He didn’t have concrete evidence, and he couldn’t know for sure - maybe he’d just gotten sick, or was having one of his migraines. It could be entirely innocent, and Legosi felt awful of how certain he was in his convictions.
Legosi knew that Riz the Bear ate Tem and attacked Haru.

Riz was the only one who fit the clues that he’d collected and Haru had assembled aside from Bill, and almost everything ruled him out - the choking body spray he used that wasn’t present at the crime scene, the lack of scraping marks on Tem’s bones that feline tongues left behind, and now, the fact that he was here and Riz was not. Legosi was glad it wasn’t Bill - their friendship was awkward at best and violent at worst, but he was an okay guy despite his faults. But he also wished that it wasn’t any of his friends - after all, it’s not like he had that many. There was also the element of guilt - Riz had been able to kill Tem because he was so good at being friendly; Legosi didn’t know why he did it, but he knew that if someone had just seen through Riz’ disguise a little earlier, then maybe Tem would still be alive. Maybe Tem would have delivered that letter to Els himself. He shook his head, focusing on his job with the spotlight - just because he was agonizing over the knowledge that the bear he thought was his friend was actually a violent murderer, it didn’t mean that he had the right to mess up the rehearsal, after all. Legosi let himself get absorbed in his work, in guiding the spotlight from behind the scenes to shine on his friends who worked in the light. He couldn’t help but feel an ache in his chest when he remembered how Louis had looked in that light - radiant and transcendent, a creature born for the stage. He was worried about him, who wouldn’t be? Louis, an animal meant to dictate and command from the light, was playing dangerous games in the dark. He remembered how bad Louis had looked - how even thin and physically diminished, he’d still radiated his unassailable presence. Wherever Louis went, he was always center stage, and the spotlight always shone for him.

It terrified Legosi to think who was guiding that spotlight instead of him now. Louis was an herbivore in a lion’s den, and it wasn’t even a metaphor - he literally lived inside a lion’s den now. A very fancy one, with plush couches. He didn’t doubt that Louis had firm control over the Shishigumi - he’d experienced the deer’s undeniable authority first hand. Louis had a presence that made others want to obey him - it wasn’t the gang that Legosi was worried about. It was everyone else.

He’d seen first hand what kinds of animals were in the Black Market - sure, there were the meat peddlers and the well mannered customers, the people who went there to fulfill a purpose and left with a sated appetite. But there were others too - the crazed carnivores, the ones he helped Gouhin heal. Those animals weren’t like the others - they were wild, self destructive, and hungry. Louis’ command only worked because the rational thought of others made it work, and Legosi knew that in the Black Market, rational thought was a scarce commodity.

Rehearsal ended without incident, and Legosi swung down from the rafters on his long arms, not bothering to take the ladder. He heard familiar laughter when he landed, and when he turned to see the source, Bill was standing behind him. “Wow Legosi,” Bill said as he punched him lightly in the shoulder, “you’re sure you’re a wolf and not an ape? You really seem to know your way around a rooftop.” Legosi swallowed nervously - what was he supposed to say? Thanks! I’ve been swinging around fire escapes to drop down on unsuspecting murderous carnivores like a weird superhero so my grumpy old friend can do therapy on them, and it’s been doing wonders for my tris? No, that would be ridiculous, why did he legitimately consider it.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, scratching his head. “I just… like climbing. It’s fun.”

Dude, what the fuck was that.

Bill scoffed, and took Legosi by the shoulder as they made their way to the dressing room.

“Yeah, sure, and I just like helping the kitchen staff unload trucks,” he said, flexing to show off his biceps. Legosi rolled his eyes - he had a feeling he knew how this conversation was going to go.
Bill followed him to his locker, whistling idly to pretend that he wasn’t about to make things extremely awkward. When Legosi opened his locker, the tiger took the opportunity of the metal barrier between them and the rest of the room to put on his best subtlety face and leaned against the locker. “You’ve been sneaking up to the rooftop to visit the gardening club, haven’t you?”

Bill had made things incredibly awkward.

“So?” asked the tiger, arms crossed over his chest. “How do you guys, like, fuuuck?”

Bill had just somehow managed to make things even more awkward. If this line of questioning continued, Legosi was sure that he would earn an entry in the Zooness Book of World Records for most awkward conversation.

“Can she even walk afterwards?”

And there it was, folks. A record shattered.

“U-uh, n-no, I mean, what I mean is, um. I. We don’t. I don’t. It’s none of your business!” he stammered, now dealing with the complex and simultaneous emotions of relief that Bill wasn’t the killer, betrayal at the knowledge that Riz was the killer, concern for Louis’ safety, dirty thoughts about Haru, and wrapping all the way back around to almost wishing that Bill HAD been the killer because it would provide a really convenient end to this uncomfortable dialog. Bill snickered.

“Dude, are you really still keeping her waiting? Not cool, bro, not cool.” Legosi didn’t have time to formulate a response before someone else stepped in to the rescue.

“And aren’t you overstepping your bounds just a little, Bill?” said Pina, standing directly behind the tiger. Bill stiffened at having been caught harassing Legosi - it was a public secret that part of the reason he was so interested in the details of Legosi’s romantic life was because he was also interested in a particular herbivore himself, and wanted to take notes from Legosi’s experience. It was a secret Legosi was thankful that Pina wielded like a knife.

“Y-yeah, probably. Sorry about that - catch you later, Legosi!” Bill said sheepishly, quickly vacating the premises to avoid his previous lines of questioning from being turned back on him. Legosi sighed in relief.

“Hi, Pina. Are you going to bother me too?” he asked, internally readying himself for a continuation of the torment that was his life - if it wasn’t one thing it sure as hell was another.

“No,” Pina replied casually, “though I admit I am curious. I figure that I’ll just find out when it happens from the rumor mill. So… anything interesting happening lately? I heard you and Haru were pretty quick to head out last night - big plans?” Did everyone in the school except the faculty know he was sneaking out? What was the deal!

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“Y-yeah, you could say that,” he answered honestly - technically, not getting killed by a giant bear and taking your girlfriend to get her arm put back together was a pretty big plan, in Legosi’s opinion at least.

“Anything worth sharing?”

“No,” he said, blatantly lying. “Just visiting a friend.” Legosi sighed - Pina wouldn’t leave him alone until he gave him something, so he decided it was better to concede now than continue to deal with this later. “Look, Riz wasn’t feeling well so he asked me to grab him some things from his locker - you wanna talk while I get them?”

“Sure!” Pina said, his ears indicating an extreme curiosity about this mystery friend. Legosi stalked
over to Riz’ locker, nose twitching as it caught a familiar scent. A scent he dreaded. It wasn’t
difficult to open the locker - they weren’t usually actually locked anyways. Inside, he found the
proof staring him in the face: a crumpled, bulky costume crudely made with layers of papier-

“Yeah,” he lied. “I’m just tired.”

Louis felt the weight of the gun in his hand, the metal cold against his palm. He’d never really
appreciated how luxurious his father’s office was before - regal bookcases framed the room, and a
beautiful picture window admitted enormous amounts of sunlight from outside into the neat
workspace. Elegant, but understated lamps hung from the ceiling like necklaces, and the carpet
shimmered faintly in the light as though it were trying to mimic a field of grass. He could smell the
perfumes that hung lightly in the air - just a hint of wildflowers and the breeze that came off the
mountains in the summer. It was an intricately designed space, every aspect carefully arranged to
maximize the comfort of its occupant.

Louis imagined he must stick out like a broken antler.

He and his father regarded each other coolly from opposite sides of the barrel of a gun - somehow,
even now, it felt like Oguma held all the power in the room as he took the paper and looked it over.
“A form of leave from Cherryton Academy?” he said, and Louis couldn’t tell if he was feigning
surprise or if he was genuine. “A bit late for a rebellious phase, don’t you think? You’re running
the risk of looking tacky, Louis.” Louis’ eyebrow twitched. He thumbed back the hammer.

“You know as well as I do what I am, father,” he said, voice practiced and even. Stick to the script,
Louis. “You said it yourself - you bought me for the price of seven million yen. I am a creature of
the Black Market, and I’m going back to where I belong.” He paused to let his words get past his
father’s antlers. “Sign the papers. You of all animals should have known that I would never be a
cog in your machine - after all, you didn’t raise me to play the deuteragonist.” Oguma looked Louis
square in the eye - he was calm, completely unaffected by the threats. Oguma slowly lifted his
hand, as though he were reaching for a handshake, and then continued to lift it until his palm rested
firmly on the muzzle of Louis’ gun.

“Louis,” he said, the mixture of fatherly approval and business acumen that dripped from his tone
turning knots in Louis’ stomach and his heart, “you have always been an unpredictable animal. It’s
what made me decide to buy you in the first place - it was more than a desire for an heir, it was a
desire to bring that wild eyed fawn into the world and see what would happen. You are more than a
decision founded in greed - you are a decision founded in curiosity.” Oguma grinned, and wrapped
his fingers around the gun, holding it in place and keeping his son’s aim true. Louis hadn’t realized
his hand was shaking. “Is this to be how it ends, then? Will you pull that trigger, Louis? If I must
die, I wouldn’t mind my obituary telling the story of a distraught businessman committing suicide
following the betrayal of his son.” Oguma’s smile was like a disease boring its way into Louis’
heart. He could feel the muscles in his hand squeeze the gun so hard he felt it might snap in his
grip, his arm shaking with the sheer tension of his flesh around his bones. His face, however,
remained a stoic mask, and Louis acknowledged his father.

They were both very adept at the wearing of masks.

Slowly, Louis disengaged the hammer on his weapon, taking his finger off the trigger and re-
engaging the safety. Oguma released his grip on the weapon, and Louis replaced it in its holster.

“No,” he said, and the calmness of his own voice surprised him, “I’m not. I need your cooperation,
Father. Not only for school. I have my own objectives, and to see them through, I need to know what you know.” Oguma put his hand back on his desk, and took the paper.

“Good. I’m glad you have a hobby - it’s important to keep occupied.” Louis ignored the jibe as his father began scribbling on the form - he knew that he was doing more than just signing it, but getting anything out of Oguma was something Louis would count as a victory.

“You remember where you bought me. I’ve learned who sold me, and I don’t think that your presence there was a coincidence.” Louis stepped forward, placed both hands on his father’s desk, and looked him directly in the eyes. “I need you to tell me everything you know about the White Court.”

Louis stalked out of his father’s estate with a newfound confidence - he was haggard, but he’d survived the encounter. So much work was going to culminate over the next few days - it had not been easy to get to where he was now, but he was close. He could feel it.

The White Court were difficult animals to find. They operated in the shadows, hiding behind false names rooted in chivalric tradition and games of wit, only presenting their respectable masks to the public. They had plenty of subordinates, of course - the grunts who handled the day to day mundanity of the livestock trade. He’d had plenty of very enlightening conversations with their grunts. For weeks, Louis had leveraged his position as the Chief of the Shishigumi to claw his way closer to his goal - he couldn’t forget what he carried from his days in a cage, but by casting aside his honor, his pride, his good name and his future and crawling through the muck with the rest of the filth, the degenerates, and the broken souls too beaten down to stand back up, he might be able to do something about the animals who gave him those memories in the first place. He’d stopped counting the bodies he’d left in the gutter, broken and disfigured on his bloody path to justice, or maybe vengeance - they weren’t relevant to his ultimate goal. They had merely been pawns in the game of chess that controlled the Black Market from behind the scenes, just like everyone else who lived and worked there - herbivore and carnivore alike.

Louis stopped to take in the scent of Oguma’s carefully managed gardens on the way back to Ibuki’s car - ivy, lilacs, and freshly cut grass. Nothing unintentional, and nothing out of place - it was the opposite of the Black Market. The Black Market smelled like blood, sweat, sex, and a thousand animals clawing their way to survival again and again every day, drenched in the blood of their neighbors. It smelled like chaos - it was an odor Louis had never expected that he would miss. And yet, he did - for all its faults, the Black Market was an honest picture of society. It shed its pretenses and bared the ugly face behind the mask, just like its residents. It was beautiful in its own way - a portrait in miniature of what really went on when the niceties dropped, the clothes hit the bedroom floor and society left itself naked and unafraid for all to see. No matter his opinions on them as individuals, Louis admired the genuine nature of the beasts of the Black Market - it was infinitely preferable to a mask, at any rate.

“Welcome back, boss,” Ibuki said as Louis opened the door to the car and took his seat. He acknowledged the lion with a nod - he was busy with his thoughts. As of now, he knew of the existence of six separate potential locations of the White Court around the city, and the titles of four of its members: the Black Queen, the King in Yellow, the Green Knight, and the Red Duke. The information the thugs he’d interrogated had given him was useless on its own, but that didn’t make it useless - the six locations he’d been given might all be obvious cover facades or dead drops, but each was within two train stops of the docks. He had a lead, he had names, and following his deal with his father, he had confirmation that they existed and were what he knew them to be: the White Court, the kingpins behind the trade of live animals as meat the world over.
They were the animals who had locked him in a cage, and branded him with the number 4. “So,” Ibuki said with a heavy sigh, “did it go well?”

“Oguma is still alive, if that’s what you’re asking,” Louis said, setting the gift basket down on the seat next to him. He still hadn’t opened it. “He told me what I wanted to know, and… compromised on what I’d wanted to get from him.” He sighed as he regarded the form he’d come to have his father sign - “Leave” had been replaced with “Absence”, but the signature was on the page. It would be good enough, he supposed. “I wonder if I can take online courses,” he mumbled, setting the form down and placing the basket in his lap.

_You’ll be back, Louis_, his father had said with absolute certainty. _You’ll tire of this charade, and return to your responsibilities. Until then…_

“Really?” asked Ibuki as he shifted the gear from neutral to drive and the limousine began to putter away. “What was the compromise?”

Louis undid the ribbon holding the basket closed to reveal a collection of surprisingly thoughtful gifts - a gold plated lighter, a beautiful, custom engraved and very large revolver, a case of fine imported cigars, a set of priceless liquors, and a device that Louis could only assume was for removing fingers. There was a note alongside the gifts - _A collection to jumpstart your new career - Dad_. Hmph. Dad. How presumptuous. Louis sighed, and stuffed the wrapping paper back over the basket.

“He told me not to come back unless I’m ready to pull the trigger.”

Ibuki didn’t speak much during the drive back to the hideout - he decided to take a different route than he normally would, making a slight detour to cut along the service road that ran a circuit behind the Black Market. He drove slowly - in part to prevent the rough cobbles from jostling his passenger too much, but mostly to allow his boss to take in the sights of the market he’d worked to build. Neon lights advertising all the world’s many delectable vices shone gaudily through the tinted windows of the limousine, the dark of the night sky blotted out by the rancorous glow of the cookstoves and the bonfires that packed the crowded back-city streets. Thousands of voices melted into a chaotic, wild rumble, and the animals moved about with such dense abandon that they ceased to be individuals and melded into a sea of writhing, gyrating color.

It was a beautiful sight. It was home.

Since Louis had taken power, the Black Market had become a fundamentally different place - the Shishigumi now served in a capacity ironically similar to the role the police played throughout the rest of the city. The Black Market was not, perhaps, a neater place than it had been before - to be so would be to betray its nature. It would never be a neat place - it was a place to pursue passions, to indulge in the forbidden, to find satisfaction in the darkest corners where the light of day dare not tread. What it was, though, was more alive. The Market had always been a place defined by danger - it’s atmosphere teetered on the razor’s edge between life and death. Recently, though, the weight of the balance had seemed to shift ever more towards life, towards vibrancy, towards joy. The Black Market would never be a safe place, but under Louis’ careful management, and with the applied efforts of the Shishigumi as they existed underneath him, it had become a place where the well lit streets were not permeated with the stench of fear. Ibuki stopped to let a cart piled high with crates of disposable dishware pass - the man carrying it gave him a grateful wave, and Ibuki found himself needing to resist the urge to wave back. The market was a different place now - if not a kinder place, at least a less frightening one.
It was important that Louis see that. It was important that his young boss understand that even in this short span of time, he had made a difference, and he had done it by his own means.

Ibuki peeked in his mirror to check on his boss in the back seat - it was risky, but the worst that would come of it was chastisement, and he could tolerate that for Louis. The young deer was staring out the window opposite him, absorbing the hazy vision the alley market presented with the naked fascination of a child. He watched him for a moment, studying the contours of his expression and the details of his youth. He’d been that young, once - more than that, he’d been that alone, once. Ibuki adjusted the mirror again, turning it away from his boss’ face and back to the rear window of the limousine as he eased up on the breaks and resumed the car’s slow pace.

“Ibuki,” asked Louis in a tranquil tone that the older lion rarely ever got to hear, “why are we taking this route? Surely we would have been back by now along the main street. You aren’t planning on eating me now, are you?” Ibuki gave a well humored grunt at the joke - Louis was a weird kid, but it didn’t bother him. “No, boss,” he said, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “I simply thought you might enjoy the scenic route - you looked like you wanted a view.” It was Louis’ turn to swallow a laugh.

“You know me too well. That could be a liability.”

“And yet, it’s why I’m your driver, sir, is it not?”

“Ha. Yes, yes it is. Observant, Ibuki - very observant. The others could learn a thing or two from you.” Ibuki nodded, and wondered what exactly he’d meant by that. Louis rarely, if ever, spoke directly, especially when discussing merit.

“Thank you, sir.” He didn’t need to dignify the comment with any further response - if Louis wanted to talk, he would. All Ibuki needed to do was listen.

They drove for a long while, and the squares of the Market came alive before them. Animals danced, ate, laughed, and made secret love in the hidden corners and swallowing shadows of the alleys, consigning their passions to the secretive dark before they had to return to their dreary everyday lives. Ibuki knew the consumption of flesh either bothered Louis or obsessed him - but either way, it was important that he know he wasn’t just facilitating it. Ibuki thought again on the role of the Shishigumi under Louis - he’d likened them to police, but that wasn’t exactly correct. They didn’t perform arrests, they didn’t enforce laws - they created order. They culled behaviors and indulgences that surpassed the boundaries of the unspoken rules of the Black Market, and managed the roiling chaos to keep it at a comfortable simmer and prevent it from boiling over, and they did so without prejudice or opinion. The more he thought about it, the more unlike cops they were - they were hard and sometimes cruel, but they were also honest about what they were. Plus, they actually kept animals safe, sometimes.

Well, they killed them too, but that was a little besides the point.

*When it's your turn to die, you just can't stomach the taste.* Ibuki had heard his boss’ words secondhand from Free, but they’d stuck with him nevertheless. They defined the reason Ibuki could continue to do what he did without being sick - he had no illusions that he, or any of the Shishigumi, were morally unassailable. They murdered for profit and revenge and managed the trade of dead flesh - they were animals, nothing more, and nothing less. But they owned their actions - or, they did now. When they acted, they did so with conviction, and those they acted against were never those helpless to act against them. It was more comfortable now than it had been before.

“Ibuki,” Louis said, breaking Ibuki out of his silent reverie, “what do you see, on the streets?”
“I see animals living their lives,” he answered simply. “Nothing more, nothing less.” Louis nodded.

“I see a page,” Louis said, and Ibuki’s ear pricked up at his words. “I see an empty page waiting for someone to come along and pen a script. I see material, Ibuki. I see the opportunity to make something.” Ibuki saw a middle aged cattle couple, escorted by a bodyguard, on their way out of the market - he couldn't help it when the muscles in his back tensed, or when his tattoos ached. “Will you help me write my play, Ibuki? And more, will you perform?”

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

A very Louis heavy chapter this time! The pieces are all in place - the White Court rules in secret over the Black Market, and Louis aims his ambitions to rewrite the world one body at a time. Legosi has confirmed who killed Tem and attacked Haru - the very same Riz who, mysteriously, has not been seen on campus of late. I'm having a blast writing this, and I really hope you guys are enjoying reading it! As always, feel free to give me feedback in the comments below- if you want to chat, my tumblr is baeowulf.tumblr.com; feel free to shoot me a DM, and I'll be happy to talk!
To Have Teeth is a Horrible Thing

Chapter Summary

Louis grapples with the concept of freedom. Haru realizes that fear isn't that far from other emotions. Cosmo says thank you the only way she can. Two lovers share a lonely embrace. Legosi gets a taste.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: This chapter contains graphic descriptions of gore, beginning at the block of italicized text. If you're not comfortable with that, please skip

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cosmo gyrated on the stage, revelling in the sensation of the sweat rolling down her body as it mixed with the heady musk of the carnivores that filled the room. She was intoxicating, enrapturing, irresistible and delectable - through the bars of the cage she saw their eyes, hungry and lustful in more ways than one, and all on her. She lived for it - this feeling of being wanted, being needed, holding the room with every flick of her tail or twist of her breast. Plenty thought power was claws and teeth and muscle, and that was fine for them. But Cosmo knew what real power was - real power was being wanted, and it was the deadliest drug in the world. Her long lashes fluttered in the rose colored light as her gaze scanned the room and she bounced her hips in the air, keeping their eyes locked on her like they should be - the club was full mostly of her regulars, but she spotted a few new faces. A couple high school seniors who’d snuck out of school to catch the peep show in the back, and towards the front, a handsome, bright, and oddly familiar young lion whose eyes sparkled in awe at her every movement. She winked at him and pulled herself up against the bars, trailing down to trace his body with her eyes. She almost stumbled in her routine when she got to his hips - he was standing in front of an armchair, and when she saw his boss lounging in the chair too big for his body, antlers regally spreading out to declare his presence as the only herbivore in the club save for the lady on the stage, Cosmo realized where she knew the lion was from.

Haru could feel her muscles squirming against her bones against the throbbing in her arm. A trickle of sweat ran down her face, and she bit her lip - without intending to, she glanced to her left, to her right, and back ahead taking stock of the carnivores in the classroom. She felt her pencil’s lead snap under the weight of her grip - she was tense. Really tense.

Tenser than she’d been since she and Legosi first met, if she was being honest. She really wished she hadn’t stopped taking her weed jellies.

Ever since she’d committed herself to this weird, wild, wonderful, and incredibly dangerous relationship, Haru had sworn off taking them on the premise that if she medicated her impulses away whenever they felt inconvenient, then she’d never really get control over them. After her
encounter with Riz, though, she couldn’t stop thinking about those little sweet balls and their immediately calming aroma - her nerves were all on end from the near death experience and how it had felt to stab someone alike, and her instincts and impulses were all tangled up in a messy, knotted ball. Haru groaned as softly as she could, and sank into her desk.

She found her mind drifting to think about an entirely different sort of ball, and immediately tried to banish the thought. The world was a confusing enough place right now without her hormones melting through the barriers between opposite emotions. She tapped her foot rapidly, feeling where her new knife was hidden inside her dress - it was bigger than the last one, just in case. She normally wouldn’t carry in class - the risk of getting caught was too dangerous - but after being attacked by the mystery killer loose in their school, Haru had weighed the options and decided that getting expelled or even arrested on a misdemeanor was probably a better fate than being lunch. As she felt for the knife, she couldn’t help but remember how Legosi’s hands had felt on her body through his coat - large and dangerous, gentle and intoxicating.

And, a little longer ago, how Louis’ hands had felt on her fur, on her skin, on her tongue.

Haru shook the distracting memories from her head. They were not going to help her memorize the different components of a plant cell, they were not going to help her figure out who her attacker was, and they were not going to make her arm hurt any less. When class finished - the last class of the day - she raced to make her way out of the room. Legosi was going to be meeting her at the Garden Club to talk about his findings on who the attacker was, and she wanted to hunker down and lay low until he got there to talk about it. She was acutely aware of how vulnerable she was - it was a lesson her mother had drilled into her head since she could talk, and she knew that even with a knife, it was the difference between escaping and being dead, not between winning and losing a fight.

But more, she just wanted to pass the time until she could spend some time with him. She’d relished the time they spent together more and more since they’d committed, and right now, she wanted to be held because of the very fresh reminder that there was a very real chance that she could lose that chance at any moment. Haru took in a deep breath as she arrived at the top of the stairs, and walked quickly to the garden shed. She didn’t allow herself to relax until she’d made it inside, tossed her backpack to the makeshift desk in the corner, and hopped onto the bed by the window. She winced as she hit the mattress, immediately regretting the impact against her bruised arm, and slipped her knife out from under her blouse, peeling it from its sheath and studying the shape of it in the sunlight - it had jagged serrations on the back like teeth, and a curving tip like a claw. It was ugly - no, it was beautiful. Her nerves frayed as she compared its features to the carnivores she knew - she felt drunk. On impulse, Haru decided to try something - she let herself imagine she was there again, that the costumed assailant was on the other side of the room, claws bared and a malicious rumble deep in its chest. She sat up in a single motion, and surprised herself with her shout as her arm shot out and flung the knife in the direction of the phantom, sending it whistling through the air with deadly velocity towards its imaginary target.

“Oh well,” she grumbled, ears drooping as the blunt handle of the knife collided with the shed’s wall and it bounced harmlessly to the floor. “So much for that.

Ibuki waited patiently outside the door, idly tapping his foot and humming along to the music that pounded through the walls from the club’s main room. He supposed he shouldn’t be too surprised - after all, Louis was a young man, and Cosmo was about the only herbivore female he would find in the Market, let alone one from a similar species. He couldn’t help but think about how it was to see her on stage - she was clearly very skilled. He considered himself to be very level headed and
professional, but even he couldn’t deny that seeing her performance had made him feel… things which he wasn’t entirely comfortable acknowledging at the given juncture. The hunger he was used to - the lust? Not as much. He could only imagine how Louis had felt watching her up on the stage like that - the poor young stag needed to let off some steam. Ibuki just hoped he didn’t take too long - he really didn’t want to miss dinner.

Legosi slowly climbed the stairs to the rooftop, the weight of his knowledge tugging at his feet like a chain. It’d been confirmed when he went to Riz’ dorm - nobody had seen him since last night. When he attacked Haru. When he all but ruined her arm with just a graze from one paw. Legosi looked at his hands as he climbed the stairs - he remembered how Haru felt beneath his coat; soft, warm, and fragile. She didn’t have a wolf’s thick skin, or tough and protective fur like his.

His claws were sharp, she’d said, and he hadn’t even noticed the pressure.

They were strong hands, he thought. Maybe they could be good hands - after all, they’d done a pretty good job beating up Shishigumi. But they were dangerous hands. Bestial hands.

Dangerous enough that you could make a meal, said a tiny voice from inside his head, and he almost tripped. It wasn’t a compulsion, not like when he first met Haru. The growling voice in the back of his mind wasn’t telling him to do anything. It just reminded him of what he could do - whether it was what he could do if he wanted or what he could do if he wasn’t careful, though, he was unsure.

He reached the top of the steps, shook himself out to get the anxious tension out of his muscles, and stepped through the door into the cool October air. He heard Haru before he saw her - she was singing to herself, and he could taste the fresh fertilizer in the air. Without thinking, he shifted his stance to dampen the sounds of his movements - maybe if he was quiet, he would be able to catch her gardening before she came to greet him. He liked watching her garden - she looked happy when she did. Oh good, you’re stalking, said the voice in the back of his mind, congratulating him on his exceptional stealth.

Legosi stomped on a dropped branch, and it snapped with a loud crack.

“Oh!” came Haru’s voice from behind a rosebush that was past its bloom. “Legosi, you’re here! Good, good. I would have come to meet you, but with… well, things,” she said, putting her hand on her injured arm, “I thought it would be best if I laid low for a little while. Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s a good idea,” he said, and couldn’t stop his tail from wagging when she came to give him a hug, dropping to a knee to help her out. “I figured out who it was.” Haru’s ears swiveled to face him, and she leaned back so that she could look him in the eye. He could never get over how deep her eyes were. They were close - he could feel the electricity between them like there was something waiting to happen.

“You did? Come on, let’s talk about it in the shed,” she said, finally breaking the silence and the distance as she took him by the hand and led him towards the door. Legosi swallowed - he wasn’t sure he was ready for this.

Cosmo sipped her drink, leaning against her dressing room counter as she regarded the awkward young animal in front of her. He was intimidating, sure, but that really wasn’t surprising - he was
the head of the Shishigumi, after all. He was also very obviously a kid - he was dressed in what she could only assume a teenager would expect a gang leader to wear, and his body seemed a little too small to fill the space his presence created. He wasn’t eating well - she could see the shadows in his cheeks, and the ashy texture of his antlers - and he wasn’t sleeping very well either, given the circles under his eyes. “Louis,” she said with a faint smile, “you look like shit.” She couldn’t suppress a smile at the way his ears twitched in irritation at her words - she couldn’t help that she liked to tease.

“That’s an interesting way to talk to a mob boss,” he said, shifting his weight in the plush dressing room chair. Cosmo shrugged.

“You’re not my boss, and I don’t think you’re going to have me killed, so what’s the harm?” She winked, and only felt a little guilty - this kid really needed to loosen up. “What’s this about, Louis? Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to see you, but I thought you said before that this wasn’t going to be a regular thing.” She couldn’t suppress the feeling that she was obligated to help him out - after all, he had saved her life. “Have you been feeling lonely?” she offered. “You know I can help with that. Pro bono, since I owe you one.” Louis’ expression hardened and adopted what she recognized to be a performer’s mask - she’d struck a nerve.

“No, but thank you for the offer,” he said flippantly. “I’m engaged. I do, however, need your help.”

“Half my clients are married, but sure, go ahead - I’ll do what I can.”

“When we met,” he began, and Cosmo could already tell that this was going to turn out to be a very interesting conversation, “you told me that you knew that you were going to die here in the market, someday.” Oh, she wasn’t sure she liked where this was going.

“... yeah, I did. Hopefully a little later than sooner,” she said - was he going to say that his lions needed a snack? Cosmo wasn’t afraid of the truth that the Black Market would be her grave, but she wasn’t exactly sprinting headlong towards it either.

“I’ve been tracking a very dangerous group of animals,” he explained, and set something on her countertop. It was an enamel pin - a chess pawn. It had blood on it. “One of the places their grunts meet is at your club. I want you to keep an eye out for anyone in the crowd wearing something like this, and if you find anyone who is, I want you to come and pay me a visit so that you can tell me what the pin looked like and who they are.” He paused as though he was distracted by something. “Can you do that?”

“That depends,” she said, deciding to pry a little deeper. “Who are these animals, and why are you after them?”

“You don’t want to know who they are - trust me, you’re better off. As for what I’m doing... I have a vendetta, and they make the Market worse for everybody in it,” he said, and she could hear the honesty in his voice.

“Then yeah, sure, I can spy for you.” She kinda did owe him one. “But you have to tell me something.”

“Oh?”

“Whose help do you really want, Louis? I know what a lonely guy looks like, and you’re the worst I’ve seen in a long while.” Louis ground his teeth and stood instead of answering her question. That was fine.
“If you ever feel like you’re in danger,” he said as he collected his jacket and stepped out of the chair, “come to me first thing - my men will take care of it.” He headed to the door, and Cosmo stood from her counter.

“Whoever they are,” she said, and she could feel the tangible concern in her voice, “you should go see them.” He froze at the doorway, and he squeezed the moulding so hard she could hear the cheap paint crack. Maybe she’d crossed a line.

“Cosmo,” he said in a practiced voice, “you’re a very good performer.”

“You are too, Louis,” she said as he left, and she sank back onto her stool. “You are too.”

Haru sighed from her seat on Legosi’s lap, curled against his chest. She could feel his cheek fur brushing against her ears, and the gentle thrum of his heart against her head. Learning the attacker’s identity had been comforting, but also terrifying - Riz was the last animal anybody would have suspected, always calm, mild mannered, and friendly. She wasn’t sure if it was more or less concerning that he was missing - on the one hand, it meant he wasn’t at the school anymore, and she could let her guard down a little. On the other, it meant he was somewhere out in the city - and he could be anywhere. It made her feel like she was stuck in a cage - a big cage, sure, but still a cage. She nestled into Legosi’s warmth, and wished he made her feel safer than he did right now. She wished he didn’t need to. “So,” she said quietly, clinging to one of his wiry arms, “what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. Chase him when I can, I guess,” Legosi said glumly. “Him not being here doesn’t fix what he did to Tem, and he could always come back. I still have to fix this.”

“Wow,” Haru laughed. “You really are a dark guy.” Legosi shifted, and looked down at her, confused.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve been spending all this time hunting a murderer so you can keep your classmates safe, right? And now, you discover that he’s gone - he’s somewhere else - and instead of thinking ‘oh good, now I can relax’, you start making plans to go and chase him down to bring him to justice.”

“Haru, you know that’s just…” Legosi trailed off.

“I know. It’s just the way you are, and you can’t change that.” She could feel him swallow, and she looked up at him, turning her head so her ears didn’t get crushed against his chest. “Legosi? Are you alright?”

“I am, I just…” he began, and Haru just knew he was about to say something stupid. “I just… don’t think you should leave school for a while, is all.” Haru feigned a smile.

“Oh good! So we’re going to finally get to relax for a bit, yeah? I’ve been thinking about setting up an old TV in here so we can have date nights; what do you think?” Legosi whined. She knew what he was getting at.

“Haru, you know what I mean. I mean… Riz could have killed you, Haru. You have to take that seriously. If he’s out there -”

“What? If he’s out there somewhere in the entire city, I can’t set foot off school campus?” she said,
more tired than she was angry. “It’s a big city, Legosi. I really don’t think it’s particularly more
dangerous for me to go out there now that it has one more predatory bear in it than it did before.
Besides, we have a deal.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, defeated. “We do.”

“And that deal is?” she asked, shifting so she could stand and cup his face between her hands. He
had such a huge head, she couldn’t help running her fingers through the fur on his cheeks to force
him to look her in the eye. He sighed, and she felt his hot breath hit her in the chest.

“The deal is that if I’m going to go do something stupid, you’re going to come with me,” he
conceded, and Haru smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

“That’s right. I won’t ask you not to worry about it, because-”

“Because I worry about lots.”

“Yes,” she laughed, “because you worry about lots.” She could hear his tail thumping against the
shed wall. “But let me worry about staying alive, and you can worry about helping me do that,
okay? I’m not that little, after all - Voss is way smaller, and you don’t worry about him.”

“Voss doesn’t get into fights with bears,” Legosi countered.

“Okay, fair, that’s more a me thing. But if you’re that insistent on tackling this, we’ll tackle it
together, okay?” There was a long pause, and finally, Legosi looked away with a heavy sigh.

“Yeah, okay.” Haru nodded triumphantly, and plopped down in his lap, cuddling into his chest and
yawning.

“Hey, Legosi?” she asked, suddenly exhausted as the stressed alertness she’d carried throughout
the day washed away through his body.

“Yeah, Haru?”

“Will you hold me?” The longing in her voice caught her off guard as much as it did Legosi. “I’m
sorry, I just...”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, and wrapped his arms delicately around her small frame, enveloping her
in his body. His pulse quickened in his breast and she could feel it through the coarse fabric of his
vest. “Is this good?”

“Tighter,” she pleaded, and he pulled her into him until she was on top of him and they were lying
on the bed. Legosi was the one to break the silence.

“Do you worry about him too?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

“About Louis? Yeah.” Louis had been fixed in her mind since their reunion just a couple days ago -
the way he carried himself, and the coldness in his eyes. The sadness in his eyes that was all too
familiar and much worse than she remembered.

“He didn’t look healthy,” Legosi said, the sheets rustling as he hugged her gently into his chest.
Haru rested her cheek on his arm in the crook of his elbow - he made a good pillow. “Like he was
starving.”

“He didn’t look happy either,” she said, and felt a pang of guilt. “Do you... think it was a mistake?
Refusing his apology, I mean. I was just... so... angry.”
“Because he didn’t come for you?” Legosi asked. Haru shook her head.

“N-no, that... “ she sighed. “I never thought he would. He never did that. No, just for always pushing me away when he clearly needs help,” she said, and her heart hurt. “We were together since we were first years, and I still never knew him.”

“Did he know you?” Legosi asked, and the gentleness in his voice took her aback - here she was, worrying over her ex, and here he was, listening and helping as best he could. Maybe he was taking notes about what not to do.

“I... don’t know,” Haru admitted. “I didn’t really tell him a lot either. He was just...”

“Busy?” Legosi asked, completing her sentence.

“Yes. Busy. Louis was always busy.” She scowled when she heard Legosi laugh a little. “What? What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, I just. I thought I was supposed to be the glum one, is all,” he said, and pressed his nose against her head, breathing gently across her scalp. She shivered at the contact. Haru laughed this time.

“Well, we can’t always play our roles perfectly, can we?” she said.

“Do you think we should go find him?” Legosi asked, and she knew that he wasn’t just asking for her benefit - she knew he was worried about their friend, their mentor, their one time lover as she was. He needed guidance, like he so often did; Legosi was the opposite of Louis in so many ways. He was vulnerable, unsure, unconfident - afraid of himself and of what he could do, while Louis was always brazen, strong, and brash to the point that he was broken. Her boys were just impossible.

Her boys? She wasn’t sure what she meant about that, other than that she cared about them both.

“Well, maybe after a nap?” she offered with a smile and a kiss to Legosi’s chin. “I’ve been on edge all day, and you’re so nice and warm.” He hugged her, and while Haru waited for an answer, she realized that he’d already given it. She couldn’t help but giggle when she felt the first of his snores rumble through her back. He really needed to sleep more.

Louis carefully unlocked the door to his office, folding his cloak under one arm and stepping out of his shoes as he crossed the threshold. He didn’t plan on breaking anything today, and he wanted to let his feet breathe more than he wanted to look professional in private. Ibuki held the door for him as he entered, and Louis heard it shut behind him without a word exchanged between the two - he didn’t show it, but he was endlessly grateful for Ibuki’s understanding.

Despite his solitude, Louis didn’t take his mask off until he had crossed the distance to his desk, taken his seat, and checked his watch.

Ah, perfect - 10:00 o clock. Right on schedule to lose his shit.

Louis put his hand down, tapped his fingers on his desk, and smiled happily. Then, his smile cracked, and he collapsed in his office chair and deflated like a bad ragdoll. He sunk down into the chair until his elbows caught on the armrests, his cheeks puffing out as he let out all the stress of the day in a single long breath. His composure melted like ice in a cartoon and he imagined that if there was an onlooker, he would look like he just aged 20 years in as many seconds. Louis idly
kicked off the ground, letting his long legs kick in the air as he spun around in his chair and rolled towards the balcony overlooking the lake and the city beyond, the moon casting her pale light across his haggard features.

What the hell was he doing.

Louis took some time to process his position - even after he’d accepted his position of being abducted into his leadership position with the Shishigumi, he still hadn’t really accepted the idea that he had a choice in anything he did. For him, being free just meant being free of the expectations levied upon him - he’d still simply taken what he felt was the obvious course of action: you get a bloodthirsty gang, you use it to clean shit up. Simple. It’s what anyone in his position would do, really.

But was it?

Louis thought about the Shishigumi’s old boss - that vile, despicable old man whose brains he’d had commemorated on his office balcony with decorative golden plating. The old chief hadn’t done anything that Louis was doing now - he’d been a callous, pompous bully who thought that he was better than ordinary animals just because he was born a lion. He hadn't torn out those who made life shit for the Market's workers by the roots, he hadn't established reliable order that allowed those who partook of the Market's delights to do so in peace, and he certainly hadn't stopped a bear from murdering a prostitute just because he was there and he could. The previous Chief had been in the exact same position that Louis was in now, and yet his actions had all been entirely different.

“What am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing,” he murmured to himself as he spun in his chair, bouncing between the balcony and the desk on loop. Perhaps more importantly, why was he doing it in the first place? He could skip all this - he could choose to just not do it. He could wake up tomorrow and flee from the Shishigumi, run away home to Cherryton, tell his father to fuck off and sink into obscurity and obsolescence however the hell he wanted.

Except, of course, he couldn’t. Because he was Louis. And that wouldn’t be him. He was an actor, after all, and now, he was playing his signature role of Adler the Reaper on the grandest stage that the world had to offer.

Louis sighed, and wheeled himself back over to his desk - he realized that he’d been laughing, though he wasn’t sure for how long. Carefully, he sat himself back up in his chair, straightened his clothes, and took out his phone. He checked the time - 10:30. Oh good - right on schedule.

<Ibuki.>

<Yes sir?>

<I’m done now.>

<Shall I come in sir?>

<Yes please.>

_The beast crawled through the muck, raking its body through the thick organic sludge of rotted bile, faeces, and rotted flesh. The scents were overwhelming as it burrowed through the slime, dragging its horrible bulk along the miasma in search of its next meal. In search of something fresh to fill its belly in this endless sea of the waste from its slaughter. Its nose caught a familiar scent and its ears pricked up when they caught the sound of sobbing. It dug its claws into the filth, _
turning its body towards the sound as it wriggled along like a worm, caustic slobber drooling from its lips and hissing when it hit the putrid ground. Its eyes, half blind from rot, bloat, and excess didn’t see the animal until it got close - a white creature, small and delicate, sullied by the muck of the wretched landscape. It whimpered as it dragged itself along the ground on one arm, the stumps of its legs trailing a river of its blood while its other hand pressed against its stomach to hold in its offal. The beast slithered closer, sniffing at the prey it had been saving just to keep it fresh, and the animal froze in terror when it drew near.

“Legosi,” Haru sobbed, “please kill me.”

When his claws gripped her, they pressed through her flesh like it was pudding.

Legosi woke with a start, his heart pounding brutally in his chest. He was drenched with sweat, and his cheeks were soaked through with panicked tears. The sheets fell off his long, bony legs as he curled in on himself and clutched his head between his claws until his scalp bled as sobs rocked his body at the grim horror of the nightmare. His nose and mouth leaked saliva, and that only made it worse. The dream had made him hungry. “Haru, Haru, Haru, Haru,” he wept, and her name felt like a crime on his lips. Legosi! Legosi!!! His nose twitched at the phantom sound, and then the wave of scent hit him - copper and iron, and something else. Floral perfume. Legosi froze, and the horrible realization dawned on him slowly - it wasn’t sweat he was drenched with, it was blood. Trembling, he turned to see the form next to him, hardly daring to look.

Slick blood.

Purple viscera.

White fur.

“Legosi!!!”

Legosi shot up in bed, jaws stretched open in a feral scream that rapidly devolved into a fit of coughing and crying that burned his eyes because he had no tears left to shed. Dazed from sleep and fear, he checked his claws, and his stomach knotted in his throat - they were dry. He patted himself, frantically slapping at his body and gripping at his skin until his claws tore his skin and drew thin rivulets of blood along his legs and back, and he felt the sting of air on his fresh wounds - this was real. He was actually awake this time.

“Legosi!!!” came the voice again, filled to the brim with concern and hurt. His head snapped to the side, and there she was - Haru knelt by the bed, her hands tangled in his shirt and her cheeks soaked through with tears. “L-legosi, it’s alright, you’re alright - I-I couldn’t wake you, you were screaming in your sleep, I-”

“Are you hurt?” he asked, and his voice came out a dry, hoarse rasp, all the moisture having been sucked from his mouth and throat during the awful dreams. He hadn’t had one that bad in weeks. Haru’s chin quivered, and she shook her head.

“N-no, I’m fine. Just worried - you… you were hurting yourself in your sleep.” She looked so terrified of him, so small and vulnerable and - Legosi suddenly realized what had brought on the dreams.

It was the smell of her wound.

He jammed his palms into his puffy eyes and pulled himself into a ball, his whole body shaking with the force of his sobs.
“A-ah, ah, H-haru, Haru I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” He cried, and cried, and cried, and she sat there and held him until he cried himself back to sleep.

Louis stared at the horrible, disgusting, insulting thing that Ibuki had placed in the center of his desk, his chair looming behind his back like the shadow of his indignity. His eyebrow twitched - if it wasn’t Ibuki, he might have shot him in the leg right then and there to test out his father’s new gift. Instead, he settled on asking a question.

“Ibuki,” he said, his voice dripping with barely suppressed anger, “what exactly is this?”

_Garden Salad with Flax Seed and Sesame Dressing, 1400 ¥_ read the label on the neat plastic box like an accusation.

“It’s food, sir,” said Ibuki calmly, as though it was _obvious_. Louis snarled and rose from his chair, cursing the way his legs wobbled underneath him and almost accidentally knocking over the bin filled with empty nutrient shakes under his desk.

“It’s an insult is what it is,” he growled, reaching out to snatch Ibuki’s tie with one hand. “I’ve already shown you - I am not any ordinary _herbivore_. I dine-”

Ibuki’s hands were on his shoulders faster than he could react to them, and when the massive paws gripped his body, they did so with the gentle strength that defined Ibuki’s body. They were so close that Louis could see his loathsome reflection in Ibuki’s glasses - gray, diminished, and faded. “But you _are_ an herbivore, Louis,” Ibuki said, and the way his name rolled off the lion’s tongue stung something deep in his gut that he hadn’t known was there. “And it’s time to drop the act. Your men love you, Louis - you’ve brought us to heights of fame, glory, and respect that we never could have dreamed of before you arrived. You have long since proven your strength and earned our utmost and undying respect - and now, it is time to shed your pretense and eat.” Louis felt something strange - were Ibuki’s hands trembling? It was only the slightest bit, and the lion’s firm gaze from behind his glasses would never betray his bodily reaction, but sure enough, Ibuki’s hands, which could push a bullet through a skull without the smallest twitch, were shaking. “Please, sir. Eat. You will be no good to us dead.” Louis felt the muscles of his face contorting in ways he wasn’t comfortable with, so he took a deep breath and ordered them to stop.

As always, they obeyed.

Louis shut his eyes in annoyance, and lifted a hand to wave it dismissively. “... if you insist, Ibuki, fine. But only in private, and you will be the sole animal to bring me my meals. Is that understood?” He felt Ibuki’s grip loosen on his shoulders, and the lion gave him one final pat before withdrawing. He kept his composure well, but Ibuki looked exhausted.

“Yes, sir. I apologize for my outburst.”

“No need for that,” Louis said, and did his best to suppress the saliva budding behind his lips a the sight of the greens on his desk. “I appreciate your concern and your advice, as always. Will that be all?” He moved almost robotically as he took the box, every motion carefully practiced and concealing.

“Yes, sir,” Ibuki answered. “That will be all.”

“Good. You may leave,” he said coldly. Ibuki bowed, turned, and stepped back out the door.

As soon as the door clicked behind him, Louis put his head in his hands and laughed.
Haru wiped her forehead with her sleeve, holding the thread between her teeth as she worked. Thankfully her hands were steady as she maneuvered the needle back and forth, back and forth, but her knees couldn’t stop shaking - her bed was stained red with blood, and not a drop of it was hers.

She looked at the deep, fresh gashes that ran along Legosi’s back and sides, carefully stitching them shut as he either slept or lay dazed, exhausted, and absent - she couldn’t tell which one it was. When he’d woken her from her nap, he’d been snarling so violently that she’d been afraid he might eat her in his sleep - but then she’d heard his whining, and noticed that his claws were digging into and pulling through his own flesh. Thankfully, none of the wounds were deeper than what she could treat herself, but the sheer horror of what had happened made her sick to her stomach - Legosi had a nightmare that he had hurt her, and even in his sleep it had driven him to tear himself apart. She traced her eyes along the crimson stripes that wove through his flesh, and sighed as she returned to her work. Haru wasn’t sure which was worse: the fact that he’d done this to himself at all, or the fact that she hadn’t been able to stop him. She couldn’t help but wonder if it happened again, and if next time, they’d be as lucky as they were this time that Legosi hadn’t hit anything important in his fit. She sighed, and steadied herself to begin work on the next wound. Once again, she found herself wishing that Louis was here.

This would be much easier to do if she wasn’t alone.

Chapter End Notes

What a fun chapter this was, huh? It gets darker, sure, but don't worry! The gang is steadily being drawn closer together the farther Louis tugs his head out his own ass, and all the pieces are in place. If you have any feedback, please leave it in the comments below - in particular, I'm curious to what people think about content warnings at the top of the chapter. I know they might act as slight spoilers sometimes, but I'd rather avoid traumatizing my readers than ensure that the experience remains informationally pristine. Do you guys think they're necessary, or is the "graphic depictions of violence" content warning applied to the work enough? Let me know! See y'all next time - thanks!
Mistakes are Best Made Unarmed

Chapter Summary

Louis draws closer to his goals. Cosmo and Ibuki hatch a plan. The Shishigumi speculate about their boss. Gouhin explains what therapy is. Legosi makes irresponsible choices. The Hotel Rose crew start to worry. Agata is Very Good at his job. Haru can't handle all of this alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gouhin stared incredulously at the pair of juvenile delinquents seated in his office - it was the middle of the night, and his student had just dragged a wolf who looked like he’d lost a fight with a lawnmower into his clinic. Haru’s arms were stained red up to her elbows, and her uniform would need a bottle of bleach and a tumble in the washer - again - but she looked a hell of a lot better than Legosi.

“You know Haru,” he grumbled, leaning over his desk to get a better look at the pair, “when I suggested you practice your knife fighting with Legosi, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.” Haru scowled at him - she was just adorable. He’d find it endearing if she wasn’t so determined to get herself killed.

“Doctor,” she said, and her tone made Gouhin feel like maybe he had made a mistake, “I would appreciate it if you took this seriously - I don’t appreciate being mocked.” Gouhin swallowed, suddenly caught off-guard - he’d forgotten that unlike Legosi and unlike his patients, Haru would actually call him on his gruff n’ surly bullshit. She was probably right - it didn’t look like scolding would be an effective solution to whatever the fuck had happened this time, and even if it was, he wouldn’t know where to start.

Alright, alright, I’ll cut the crap,” he said, taking a deep drag from his cigar before setting it in his ashtray to show that he meant business. “Tell me what happened.” Haru gently reached over and tugged at Legosi’s shredded and bloodstained tank. The wolf shivered - something was bothering him.

“Legosi, it’s alright,” Haru said, trying to encourage him, but Legosi looked… bad. Gouhin had dealt with the impetuous wolf’s attitude and physical injuries before, but this looked like it went deeper than that - he’d seen Legosi worried before, but he wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen him well and truly scared. Legosi took a few deep breaths and clutched his shoulders, and Gouhin winced when he saw the kid’s claws tear open a few stitches. The wolf steeled himself, and spoke.

“I… had a bad dream.” Gouhin blinked.

“A bad dream,” he repeated in a deadpan. “And you’re here instead of talking to a pediatrician because..?”

“Because,” Haru said irritably, “he did this to himself because of that bad dream, and I couldn’t wake him up to stop him.” She was putting up a good front, but Gouhin could tell she was scared - he didn’t blame her. He imagined that waking up next to someone deep into a sleep induced rage
and clawing themselves apart would be scary as shit. Gouhin thought for a moment, and nodded.

“I’ve had a few patients like this,” he said, leaning on his elbows. “Generally like you two - a carnivore who thought it would be a good idea to crawl into bed with an herbivore and wound up eating their partner. Fortunately,” he said, raising one eyebrow for emphasis,” that isn’t you two yet. My prescription would ordinarily be for the two of you to cut off close contact and keep your relationship a distant friendship at worst, and completely cut contact at best.” Haru looked like she was about to say something snide, but he cut her off. “However, since I know you two aren’t going to do that, there are a few other things we could try. Legosi, I’m going to put this simply - you have a case of IEAD - Instinct Exacerbated Anxiety Disorder. Congratulations. It’s a very common condition, but most animals who have it never realize that they do because, unlike you, most animals don’t constantly put themselves in a position where they’re constantly at odds with their instincts. The good news is,” he grunted and pulled a magazine from his desk drawer to slide across the table, “it’s manageable. Even though one of the primary treatments - avoiding instinctual triggers - won’t work for you, some animals find significant success with physical blockers or instinct conditioning therapy.” Haru reached out and took the magazine, frowning when she scanned through the table of contents.

“There’s only one article, and it’s only one page,” she complained. Gouhin nodded.

“Very observant - IEAD isn’t a condition most doctors like to acknowledge; it’s easier to pretend it doesn’t exist and that negative reactions to instinctual triggers to the point of self destructive tendencies are just extreme cases of the norm, and the fault of individuals not managing their urges properly. Now, I want to be very clear - this does not mean that Legosi is any less of a threat to you than he was before, Haru. It just means that he’s also a threat to himself - I’m going to dig through my contacts to see what I can pull together, you’re going to read that article, and we are going to put together a therapy plan. In the meantime though,” Gouhin said before reaching into a separate drawer and placing a large glass bottle of pills on the table, “you, Legosi, are going to use these.”

“What are they?” he asked, his voice hoarse and hollow.

“They’re tranquilizers - sleeping pills. Don’t use them often, don’t take more than one at a time, and don’t think that they’re a cure all - trust me, waking up from the nap one of these causes feels like shit. Dehydration, headaches, nausea - they’re the genuine article when it comes to unpleasant side effects. However, if you’ve been experiencing predatory impulses throughout the day, take one - it’ll help keep you from dreaming so you don’t hurt yourself while we figure out a treatment plan.” Legosi reached for the bottle and Gouhin quickly grabbed it and slid it back across the table.”Woah, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I… thought you wanted me to take the pills?” Legosi asked, confused.

“Yeah, but not the whole damn thing - I’m going to give you four for now, and if you that’s not enough you can come back for more.” Haru looked at him quizzically.

“Why only four? Won’t those run out pretty quickly?” she asked, and Gouhin nodded.

“That’s part of it - as your physician, Legosi, I need to be able to monitor the effects of the pills on your health. The other part of it is that if you get stupid and decide to take them all at once, four will just make you sicker than you’ve ever been in your life instead of kill you. I’m not taking any chances with either of you,” he said, pointing at the pair of delinquents in front of him. “Neither of you have done a particularly good job proving you’re smart. Haru, I hope you’re ready to step up your classes, because we’re going to have a lot of work to do to treat your boy.” She nodded, and he could see the tension melting off her - Haru seemed like she worked better when she had a clear path forward. It was a good quality. “Now get out of my office, you kids drive me to drink.”
“You’re not going to look over his wounds?” Haru asked, concerned. Gouhin grunted as he got out of his chair and waved a hand.

“You did what I taught you? Disinfected and sewed them up?”

“Yeah?”

“Then he’s fine. Now go get something to eat and clean yourselves up, you two look like shit.”

Dave stared at the elevator doors - he couldn’t decide if he was baffled, concerned, or frightened, or if he was some mixture of all three. He decided it was the mixture of all three. “Hey Gertrude?” he called, and he heard her heavy sigh from the counter. “Is it just me, or did those kids look a little worse for wear this time?”

“Well, David, given that we’re supposed to give our customers their privacy, I’m sure that I don’t know!” He shook his head.

“Come on, Gerty, I’m being serious! I mean, yeah they’re loyal customers and don’t cause any problems, but they’re animals too you know. Should we. I dunno, should we do something? Say something?” Gertrude shook her head.

“Absolutely not! Look, Dave, let’s say you did say something, alright? How do you think the conversation would go? They’re obviously hiding something, and they obviously come here for whatever reason, they feel like it’s a safe spot to be. Do you really think it would help to start asking questions?” He sighed, and shook his head.

“No, I guess not. I just. Ahhh, I dunno, maybe I’m just sentimental.” He sighed, and felt his back twitch at Gertrude’s snickering.

“Well, unfortunately they don’t pay us to be sentimental, Dave. If you want to help, make sure their room is ready for them when they come in, alright? Just don’t expect tips! We both know they’re broke.” Before Dave could respond, Aisley burst through the maintenance door, straightening the cap of their uniform with the handle of their mop as they rushed into the lobby.

“Hey guys so I was listening in through the door of those kids room, you know the wolf and the-”

“You did what?” Gertrude asked, mortified, but Aisley just kept going.

“Nothing it doesn’t matter so anyways I was listening in through their door, and… and I think the wolf was… crying? Should we, I dunno. Should we do something?” Dave and Gertrude exchanged a heavy look. Aisley just looked confused.

“Guys?”

Cosmo shuffled her heavy jacket off and folded it neatly over the back of her chair before taking her seat opposite Louis in front of his desk. She couldn’t help her excitement when Ibuki wheeled the meal cart into the grandiose space and set the covered platter on the desk - she and Louis had done this a few times now over the last couple of weeks, and the Shishigumi’s young boss always made sure to feed her well. Better than she could afford, anyhow.

Ibuki lifted the cover of the platter, and the delightful scent of the meal within billowed out - stir
fried celery greens and kale with steamed artichoke, winter squash, and beetroot over a bed of quinoa and drizzled in a salty and sweet honey sesame dressing. She became acutely aware of the pit in her stomach - she’d skipped her normal dinner of cheap takeout for this meal, and once again, it had proven not to be a mistake. Ibuki bowed politely, first to Louis and then to her, and quickly left the room to leave the two alone.

“So,” Louis asked, unwrapping his chopsticks, “how was work?” Cosmo stifled a laugh - apparently Louis hadn’t gotten any better at making smalltalk.

“Good, good,” she said, unwrapping her own pair and taking the opportunity to admire the ebony utensils - much, much fancier than she usually got to use. “And you?”

“Difficult - like pulling teeth.” She could see him smiling at his own joke.

“Oh? Whose?” she asked, and plucked a large chunk of squash from the communal bowl. “Oh, this is delicious.”

“The last contact you sent my way - it turns out that coyotes are very attached to their canines. I’m glad you like it - I’ll tell Ibuki to keep this caterer on retainer.” Louis and Cosmo’s friendship was not the sort of friendship one might call normal, even for their very peculiar lines of work. Generally, the relationship between a sex worker and a mob boss would look a little more like something out of a cheap crime flick - business at best, and cheesy romance at worst. Their friendship was a little more like actors backstage - they could, if only for a moment, stop playing their roles and just blow off steam.

Or, at least, she could - Louis had a harder time with that.

“Was he informative?” she asked. They’d been at this for a while now - a couple weeks had passed since their conversation in the dressing room, and since then she’d called him to schedule a meeting four times. She wasn’t exactly sure how she felt about sending four of her club’s clientele to their deaths, but Cosmo reasoned that given the fact that she faced that risk every morning she got out of bed and a solid percentage of the evenings she climbed into one, the turnabout was only fair play.

“Very informative,” he said and took a bite of the food. He was looking healthier every time they met - it was nice not to need to worry about one of her few herbivore friends dying of starvation. “I’ve learned a few things - one, I’ve learned another venue that these animals frequent; an underground club called the Knight Lite over in the docks district. Two, I’ve learned that their local ringleader owns that club - the goons you’ve sent my way all had membership cards, and the last one confirmed it. And most importantly three, I’ve learned which one it is.” Louis tucked two fingers into his breast pocket and slid a note across the desk to Cosmo. She caught it in two fingers and gave Louis a wry grin.

“What, can’t just say who it is?” she teased. He rolled his eyes.

“Just open the note, you’re ruining the dramatic tension.” Cosmo unfolded the note, and frowned.

“A green knight?” she asked, carefully scrutinizing the paper. It was a crude sketch - a green chess knight in front of a shield and encircled by what looked like an attempt at drawing rose vines. “Surrounded by… roses? It’s a little hard to make out.” Louis nodded.

“I got our last informant to draw it - I don’t know their face or their species, but their local boss wears this pin. Cosmo, I have a favor to ask of you.” She could hear the hesitation on his voice, and continued her meal. Things had been… interesting since they’d started working together - she would bet a good chunk of cash that they were about to get a whole lot more interesting.
“Alright, shoot.”

“How would you like to perform at a new venue?”

Haru was exhausted. She looked at the calendar pinned to the garden shed wall, and sighed as she marked another X. It had been sixteen days since Legosi’s episode, and of those days, he’d used a pill on fourteen of them, and the two days he hadn’t were when Gouhin had refused to refill his supply. She knew that he wasn’t only taking the pills when he was at high risk for a night terror - Legosi was the kind of wolf who jumped at shadows, and she knew how acutely aware he was of his own. She felt her phone buzz in her pocket, and took it out to check who it was - three missed messages from Mizuchi, which she could ignore, and one new message from Jack.

<Hey Haru, could I ask you a question?>

Haru sighed in relief and leaned against the wall to type her reply - Jack was a huge help in dealing with her infuriatingly stubborn boyfriend of late.

<Sure thing - what’s up?>

<Do you know how often Legosi is taking his pills? He’s sick… again :C>

Ooof course he was.

<A better question would be how often isn’t he taking them - it’s almost every day. Is it bad?>

<Well, Voss is gonna need a shower :/>

Haru snickered.

<That’s terrible.>

Jack had a way of saying the right thing at the right time to lighten the mood - she’d hardly even heard of him before she and Legosi became a couple, but he’d quickly become one of her closest friends after. She imagined Jack had that effect on a lot of animals - lucky dog.

<Hey Haru>

<Yeah?>

<How do we get him to stop? Taking the pills I mean. He’s losing weight, his fur’s going white - I know he needs them sometimes, but… Haru, I’m scared.>

Haru sighed, and held her phone for a long time. She didn’t have a good answer to Jack’s question - getting Legosi to let her stick with whatever dumbass shit he decided to pull was one thing, but convincing him not to do something, or to do something else instead, was another matter entirely. She hated how stubborn he was sometimes - he didn’t care if he got hurt so long as he kept everyone else safe from himself, and because he didn’t care, she couldn’t get him to listen to her or any of his friends when they told him how bad he looked. She sighed - before... all this, they’d made such good progress through what she now realized to be a form of therapy, but she also saw how fragile all that progress was; how one bad night was all it had taken to destroy Legosi’s faith in himself. She found herself thinking back to a conversation they’d had that day - if he wouldn’t listen to her or to jack, maybe he would listen to someone else. She had a feeling that someone else could really use someone to talk to too.
Haru closed the messaging app, and dialed a number she hadn’t dialed in a long time - a number she should have dialed at least a week ago. To her great surprise, the line actually connected.

“Louis?”

Cosmo adjusted her jacket as she stepped out of Louis’ office - since he’d proposed the idea of her performing at the Knight Lite to draw out the ringleader of whatever group was the target of his vendetta, they’d been taking lunches together before her shift daily to hash out their plans. She couldn’t help but buzz with excitement - it had been a really long time since she’d put any real effort into designing a new routine, and she’d never had the budget that Louis was promising to work with. Cosmo knew that the mission was going to be exceedingly dangerous, but she couldn’t quell her excitement as a dancer to be working on a performance of this scale - and she couldn’t wait to see, and to smell, the reactions of her audience.

“So,” Ibuki said quietly as he shut the door behind her and leaned in to keep their conversation private, “he’s still eating well?”

“Better every day,” Cosmo murmured with a nod, pulling her hood up to limit the direction of her voice as they walked down the hall. “I think it helps that there’s a performative aspect to it - since I’m there, he feels like he’s doing it for my benefit, which makes it easier.” Ibuki bristled.

“That’s… good, but you shouldn’t talk that way about the Chief,” he grumbled anxiously, clearly worried for Louis’ image. Cosmo snorted.

“Your Chief, maybe,” she said, “but he’s just a friend to me. Besides, nobody else is on this floor besides the three of us and he can’t hear, so it’s not like I’m going to hurt his pride.” She heard Ibuki growl, and felt a paw on her wrist - she felt like that should make her more nervous than it did, but it really just annoyed her. Fear and Cosmo were two words that rarely appeared in the same sentence.

“You’re right,” Ibuki said, and she could hear the tough guy act dripping from his tone. “We are alone - so you should be more respectful of the boss.” Cosmo turned to face him, and when she grabbed his wrist in return, Ibuki’s expression softened to one of surprise.

“Or what? You’ll eat me up?”

“I could,” he said, but he sighed, and rubbed his temple - he didn’t mean it. “But I won’t.”

“You enjoy my company too much.” She squeezed his wrist, and when she let go, so did he. “Louis is lucky to have someone as loyal as you.” Ibuki chuffed, and straightened his jacket, looking away.

“You should be more careful how you talk about the Boss,” Ibuki grumbled, adjusting his coat. “I know you mean well, but the others might not agree, and you have to remember that you are, quite literally, in a lion’s den.”

“I appreciate your concern - I’ll make sure to keep my impudence between us,” she joked, and they continued walking towards the end of the hall. “Have you given my suggestion any thought?”

“Cosmo, you know as well as I do that would never work.”

“2000 yen says it will,” she said with a wink. She relished the way Ibuki’s face contorted - she
could never pass up an opportunity to catch him off guard, and it was just so easy. “Just try it. It’ll work, trust me.”

“The others will smell the difference,” Ibuki cautioned.

“No they won’t - they’ll be too busy with their own dinners. Besides, has Louis been finishing the salads you bring him?” she asked, already knowing the answer. Louis wasn’t as hard to read as he thought he was.

“... no,” Ibuki admitted.

“Then it’s settled - oh, I almost forgot - I’ve been talking with Louis, and we’re finalizing the plans for my new performance. I’m going to demo it at the club friday night - you should come, give me some pointers, tell me how I did.” Cosmo pulled her phone out of her pocket, checking to see if she had any work related messages before rapidly typing a message to her manager. Her ears pricked when she heard Ibuki’s footsteps stop.

“... you’re sure that’s a good idea?” he said, ever the soul of caution. “Wouldn’t I give you away?”

“Please, Ibuki - there’s lowlives of all sorts in the audience every night. What’s one more lonely lion skulking around the shadows?” She looked up from her phone - Ibuki was a little stiff.

“... well, I suppose if there’s no harm, it would be useful to have me there in case something goes wrong.” Cosmo grinned, and stepped into the waiting elevator to head back down to street level.

“It’s a date then,” she said as she crossed the threshold. “You can tell me all about how our bet went after the show. Bye!” she waved, and the doors shut between her and the lion.

“Bye,” Ibuki waved back to his reflection in the shiny elevator doors.

Free eyed the front door of the palace suspiciously, gnawing idly on a bone and completely ignoring the card table his feet were propped up on. He felt something jab his shoulder.

“Uh, Free?” said Agata, leaning over in his seat to reach. “It’s your turn. Is something wrong?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve found yet another tail to chase old man,” chided Dope from where he leaned against a pillar, touching up his mane with a pair of barber’s scissors and a hand mirror. “Dolph won’t like it if you’re late to any more meetings because you found another girlfriend, you know.” Free snickered.

“What, like you’re any different?” he joked, turning a toothy grin Dope’s way.

“Of course I am - I’m late to meetings because of my boyfriends,” the younger lion answered with a smile. Free laughed.

“No, no, it ain’t that - I don’t know if you’ve noticed, dope, but Cosmo’s not exactly my type. Not enough teeth.”

“I dunno,” mumbled Agata, “I think she’s pretty.”

“Agata, you say that about anyone who has big eyes.” Agata looked down and hid his face at Dope’s comment. From across the card table, Miguel groaned.
“Can we please get on with the game? I really fail to see how the boss’ side chick heading out after a date should be this big a deal,” he said, rapping his cards on the table to emphasize his point.

“Fine, fine,” Free said, and grinned widely as he put down his hand, eliciting a slew of curses and canine ethnic slurs from Miguel - it was a full house. “I’m just surprised about it is all - didn’t really think she was Louis’ type, you know?”

“Oh yeah? And why’s that?” Miguel said, gesticulating wildly in his exasperation at having just lost 20,000 yen. “I’m not into any of that herbivore shit, but just look at Cosmo - she’s any ungulate’s wet dream!” Free shrugged.

“I just really thought the boss was gay, that’s all.”

Louis set his phone down like it was radioactive in the exact center of his desk, and pulled open his desk drawer - Haru’s gun was still in its plastic baggie, untouched since he’d thrown his fit after she rejected his apology. He couldn’t help but allow Cosmo’s prying advice bubble to the forefront of his mind - _Louis, be honest with yourself. Sure, you fucked up - but is keeping distance really going to help with that?_ He hated that she was right, of course - he thought that he’d let go of his pride, but even now it dogged at his heels like a hungry wolf, and he found himself questioning the word choice of his internal narrative. It was the first call he’d taken from his old life since acquiring his new position - when he saw the name, he almost didn’t.

“Haru,” he said softly, looking at the phone like it was a demon. “Why would she call me?” he mumbled, spinning his chair to look out the balcony at the evening October sky. “Haven’t I already proven myself to be unreliable enough?” As much as he wanted to, Louis couldn’t get that day out of his head - his fight with Legosi over whether or not to go after Haru. Specifically, his stance on that particular argument. And before then, even - his memory traced along the path of his mistakes in his relationship with Haru; it was a very well trodden path in his mind. Pride had always been his enemy - how ironic that it had taken an arrogantly humble wolf to show him that.

_You can’t go back and do things differently_, Cosmo had said after she’d finally gotten him to talk about his relationships after what had, at the time, seemed like hours of badgering, _but you can stop feeling sorry for yourself and do something about it_. Maybe this was what that was. Maybe this was his chance to do something about it. Louis sighed, and picked up his phone, dialing in a number - Haru had asked for his help, and this time he was going to give it.

“Hello? Boss?” came Agata’s voice from the other end of the line.

“Hello Agata,” Louis said calmly, his gaze fixed on the firearm in his drawer while his spare hand played idly with the significantly heftier one at his hip.

“What do you need?” Agata asked immediately, and Louis couldn’t help a smile - Agata was always so eager to please.

“I need you to invite a couple friends over to visit, please. And make sure that they accept.”

Haru sipped her bamboo tea in Gouhin’s clinic while the sounds of brawling and violence echoed through the wall, trying not to let Legosi’s fight with one of the panda’s future patients distract her. She and the doctor were seated next to a giant whiteboard covered in scribbles, notes, and crossed out ideas. It was easily more than twice as tall as she was, and it was already nearly completely full.
trying to find a plan that would work for Legosi was difficult, especially when he seemed to be perfectly fine with slowly killing himself with tranquilizers.

“So,” Gouhin said, rubbing his temples, “what’ve we ruled out here, see… increased sleep regimen, daily self affirmations, dietary supplementary conditioning…” Haru was quickly learning that Legosi was a unique case when it came to IEAD - most carnivorous sufferers were able to self manage with a combination of entertainment that allowed them to satisfy their chase urges combined with frequent visits to the Black Market to maintain a diet rich in meat - the theory went that by providing an outlet for their instincts and keeping a full, meat-fed belly, they could prevent their instinctual behaviors from firing when they didn’t expect and avoid said instincts from tipping anxiety triggers - it all made perfect sense. For Legosi, though, the idea of eating meat in and of itself was one of his triggers - even if he wasn’t philosophically opposed to the consumption of flesh, he still wouldn’t be able to do that sort of treatment. The fact that his anxiety manifested as night terrors meant that sleep conditioning wouldn’t work, and affirmation mantras would only even begin to work after they’d made enough progress that he would start believing that they would work. Haru nodded.

“Yeah, plus a whole bunch of others,” she said as a snarling body struck the outside of the wall and knocked a few notes held onto the board with magnets loose. Haru scooted over to pick one up, and showed it to Gouhin. “Hey, what about this one? Sleep restraints?”

“It could work,” Gouhin said, thinking, “but I don’t think your school would allow muzzles and straitjackets on campus, and I know for a fact that your classmates would all get the wrong idea. Could be useful for when you two overnight in that hotel, though.” Haru blushed, and set the note down so she could take another sip of her tea.

“Right.” She wished Legosi would get the “wrong idea” already - trying to make any kind of advances with him was like pulling teeth, and a rabbit had needs. “I bet the staff there would hold onto them for us, they’re good people.”

“You’ve got a room reserved there, right?” Gouhin asked, gulping his tea down in one drink.

“Yeah,” Haru laughed, “502, the same one we stayed in after that whole incident with the Shishigumi. We go often enough that they just book all the other ones before that one.” She cupped her tea in both hands, enjoying the warmth against her palms. “Hm. Things sound like they’re really getting out of hand out there, huh?” Since she’d started working with him, Legosi had gotten better and better at corralling his targets closer and closer to Gouhin’s office over the course of their fight - at this point, the fights usually ended directly outside Gouhin’s door. “Should we do something about it?”

“You do too much about it already, in my opinion,” Gouhin said sternly. Haru’s ears drooped flat.

“Yeah, and it’s an opinion you can keep to yourself,” she retorted. Haru jumped a little when the tip of a knife blade sprouted from the wall like a flowerbud.

“HEY!” Gouhin shouted angrily. “Try and keep the property damage to a minimum, kid!”

“No!” came Legosi’s muffled voice through the wall.

“Anyways,” Haru continued after a few moments, waiting for the brawl to move to a different part of the clinic’s exterior, “the fighting seems to help. It’s harder to tell now that he’s on tranquilizers every night, but even now he seems a lot more laid back whenever, well. Whenever things go like this, the fights usually ended directly outside Gouhin’s door. “Should we do something about it?”

“Anyways,” Haru continued after a few moments, waiting for the brawl to move to a different part of the clinic’s exterior, “the fighting seems to help. It’s harder to tell now that he’s on tranquilizers every night, but even now he seems a lot more laid back whenever, well. Whenever things go like this, the fights usually ended directly outside Gouhin’s door. “Should we do something about it?”
boxing, do you think?”

“That doesn’t sound very legal,” Gouhin warned. Haru shrugged.

“Neither does carrying a knife on campus, and yet we make do,” she responded. Gouhin laughed.

“Y’know Haru, I think between you and Legosi, you’re the tough one,” he said with a grin and poured himself another cup of tea. “How’d you get that way, huh? I thought rabbits were supposed to be paranoid.” Haru eyed him suspiciously.

“... are you trying to psychoanalyze me, doc?” she asked. It was Gouhin’s turn to shrug.

“Look, I figure I do it for your boyfriend - the least I can do is extend the favor to you too.” He set down his tea, and pulled his cigar out of the nearby ashtray to grip it between his teeth before grabbing a notebook. “Shall we begin?” he joked - he didn’t even have a pen.

Haru thought about her response for a little. “Well,” she began, “I guess when you’re worried about dying all the time, you eventually get tired of it and start worrying about how to live.” Gouhin nodded.

“So… would you say you don’t fear death, then?” he asked, and his voice sounded like it wasn’t the first time. Haru shook her head.

“Not… exactly,” she said, staring into the bottom of her cup, “just that I don’t let it get in my way anymore. The idea of dying is scary, but not the same way….”

“The same way what?” Gouhin asked, this time actually grabbing a pen. Something heavy and wet hit the wall next to the front door.

“Not the same way that the animals I care about getting hurt is scary, or that being alone is scary,” she said, and appreciated the comedy to be found in the juxtaposition of her admission and her boyfriend’s fight just outside. “And not the same way that missing out on life is scary.” Gouhin nodded, and took a note.

“Haru,” he said, “have you considered you might-” before he could finish his sentence, the front door burst open. A bruised and bloodied weasel flew through the open doorway and slid across the floor - Haru was barely able to scamperv out of the way as the dazed carnivore smashed through the little tea table she and Gouhin had been sitting at and upended it completely, sending the iron kettle sailing through the air and spilling tea absolutely everywhere. Legosi stepped through the door - his shadow was huge and imposing, backlit by the golden street lamps and framed by the hazy smog that gathered near the alleys. Haru couldn’t help but stare - he was very, very pretty. Legosi closed the door behind him as he stepped into the clinic, shutting out the streetlamps and banishing the fantasy-wolves that danced hungrily in Haru’s mind to reveal his drowsy, droopy eyes, one of which was swelling terribly, and the numerous tiny nicks and scratches all over his body that made him look like he’d stood too close to the exhaust end of a woodchipper. He flailed his right hand about a little in the air to shake off the droplets of blood that clung to his knuckles - the weasel, meanwhile, groaned, tried to sit up, and fell back down again. “Sorry about the, uh, the mess,” Legosi said. “I got the patient, though, so uh, that’s good.” Haru slowly turned to look at Gouhin - Gouhin was crammed up against his desk, arms folded over his chest, legs crossed, and face locked in what looked to be a permanent scowl.

Haru had to put her hands over her mouth to stop herself from laughing until she cried.
Gertrude’s head swung up from her computer terminal when she heard the little bell over the front door jingle, quickly tabbing away from HotBullsGoneWild.Com and back to her decoy spreadsheet as a customer walked into the Hotel Rose’s front lobby. He was a handsome, nervous looking young lion wearing a neatly pressed suit and tie and a lovely curly mane which accentuated the spots on his face and his large eyes. He was also alone. “Welcome to the Hotel Rose, young man,” Gertrude said and swiveled her chair to face him so that she could give him her full attention. Carnivores weren’t really her type, but damn if this was not one pretty lion. “How can I help you tonight?”

“Oh? Lucky you,” Gertrude said, and pretended to punch something into her spreadsheet. “Can you give me their names, species, and room number, please?”

“Oh, Legosi, Gray Wolf, Haru, Dwarf Rabbit, and I believe the number is… 502?” She could practically see his anxiety coming off of him in waves - he reminded her a little of the wolf that he had just happened to mention.

“They kids looked like they’d been having it rough lately, she thought to herself as she finally found the key and held it up to inspect it triumphantly. They could use a good role model like this…”

“Um, hi!” he said awkwardly, striding over in long, smooth steps. “I’m, uh, supposed to meet a couple friends?” The lion gesticulated a lot when he spoke, and walked like he took up more space than he wanted to. He was just adorable.

“Welcome to the Hotel Rose, young man,” Gertrude said and swiveled her chair to face him so that she could give him her full attention. Carnivores weren’t really her type, but damn if this was not one pretty lion. “How can I help you tonight?”

“Oh? Lucky you,” Gertrude said, and pretended to punch something into her spreadsheet. “Can you give me their names, species, and room number, please?”

“Oh, the two who always show up looking like they lost a fight?” she asked as amicably as she could manage. He smiled so big it scrunched up his eyes and scratched his neck.

“Yeah, those are the two! A bit, uh, rowdier than I am,” he said, and gestured to his suit. “That… won’t be a problem, right…?”

“Yeah, those are the two! A bit, uh, rowdier than I am,” he said, and gestured to his suit. “That… won’t be a problem, right…?”

“Oh, no of course not! Gertrude said happily, quickly pulling open the 502 drawer to rummage for the spare key. Normally she might not be so forthcoming, but he was nice, knew their names and room number, and lions had an excellent reputation anyhow, so she was pretty sure he was trustworthy. Besides, the gray wolf up there was huge - the worst that could happen was that the lion would come back down with a black eye and a bloody nose for being a peeping tom. Those kids looked like they’d been having it rough lately, she thought to herself as she finally found the key and held it up to inspect it triumphantly. They could use a good role model like this… “Oh, I’m sorry, but I completely forgot to take your name,” she said, and placed a heavy guestbook on the counter. “If you’d just sign in here, please?”

“Oh, sure,” the lion said before signing his name - Antler. Weird name, but she’d had weirder clientele, so it checked out.

“Nothing to worry about, sir. I’ll send Dave right up. You have a good time!” she called out as he wordlessly thanked her and hurried to the elevator, key in hand. Gertrude shook her head a little, and waited for the elevator doors to fully close before she quickly sat back at her desk and brought her browser back up.

What a nice young man - ooh, just like that one with the long horns.

Agata bounced on his heels and hummed to himself happily in the dingy elevator, idly tossing the key the nice cow at the front desk had given him. It was amazing the places he could get into by playing up his youth and looking nervous - it really was wonderful how much people in this city trusted lions; he guessed he had the mayor to thank for that. What was more wonderful, though, was the fact that the Boss had entrusted him - Agata, the youngest member of the gang - with accomplishing a special mission. He didn’t know why Louis wanted these two, but that wasn’t his
place; if his boss wanted them, then his boss would get them. He slipped his phone out of his pocket, and dialed a number.

“Hey, you guys parked by the fire escape? Good. Uh huh, uh huh, yeah, I’m on my way up now. Got the key and everything. Keep the engine warm, alright? This shouldn’t take long.”

Legosi laid back on the bed with his hands behind his head, eyes closed and utterly content while Haru sat on his leg. The TV on the far side of the room blared staticky news into the room - something about traces of a new drug being found in the bloodstreams of carnivores killed by police during apprehension for predation - but neither of them paid it any mind; it was just there for white noise. He was glad he didn’t have any cuts big enough to warrant stitches this time - it meant that he could focus on simply enjoying Haru’s company.

“... so wait,” Haru said, shifting her weight on his thigh, “when you met that guy he had a gun, but once you started fighting, he threw it away and pulled a knife on you instead?” Legosi shrugged.

“Yeah, it was the weirdest thing - first time I’ve had a patient both decide to fight and swap to a less dangerous weapon to do it. Strange guy - it’s a good thing Gouhin’s got him now,” he said with a light laugh.

“You really like doing this, don’t you?” Haru said, and he could hear the smile on her voice. He nodded. “Do you know what happened to him?”

“Yeah, Gouhin told me about it,” he said, pulling the information back into his brain. “I think he was best friends with an, uh, a squirrel, and they were out drinking. They got too much, and the weasel wound up eating his friend’s leg in a stupor - poor guy seemed pretty distraught when I found him.”

“Huh,” Haru said, thinking. “I wonder what the gun was - oh.”

Oh. That’s why he’d thrown the gun away.

Neither of them felt much like laughing anymore.

Haru sighed, and scooted up to his thigh so she could lie down and rest her head on his chest. Legosi smiled, and brought a hand up to gently cradle her, lightly squeezing her side when he felt her hands wrap around his wrist. “Legosi,” she said, “what happens next?” He lifted his head to look down at her, eyes big and curious.

“Huh?” he asked. “How do you mean?” She smiled, and his heart fluttered at the way her cheeks scrunched against her eyes.

“Well,” she said, “I’m going to be in university next year, and you’re going to have to start thinking about exams and which schools you want to go to. You can’t just beat up predators for Gouhin to fix forever, you know.” She left out the implicit and I won’t always have time to put you back together afterwards. “What happens after that?” Legosi laid his head back on the pillow and thought.

“I… don’t really know,” he said quietly. “I didn’t really think that far ahead. I guess I’ll go wherever you go for school, and study… I dunno, something useful.” He yawned. “You’re sure I can’t just keep fighting forever? That sounds a lot easier.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Haru, hugging his hand against her body. “I mean, you wanna settle down
eventually, right?” Legosi swallowed.

“I… guess so,” he said quietly. It was hard to think - his head hurt. It was probably the pills he’d definitely been using completely responsibly. Haru crawled up him a bit to make it easier for them to look at each other.

“I think we should start a nursery,” she said. “I can tend to the plants, and you can be my handsome assistant.” Legosi smiled, and he could see the concern in her eyes.

“I could get used to that, I think,” he said. “So long as nobody’s biting me, anyways. I like helping Gouhin, but I could use less bites.”

“No bites,” she agreed, and kissed him on the cheek before hopping off his chest. “I’m going to go get some water, would you like some?” He nodded, and held her hand until he couldn’t reach anymore as she walked away to fetch the drinks.

Legosi fished a pill out of his pocket and swallowed it before she could get back.

Sabu squinted into the rear view mirror, staring at the pair of eyes behind him in the car. He locked gazes with it for as long as he could, but eventually his contacts dried out, and he had to blink, shaking his head and spitting curses under his breath.

“Ha!” said Hino from the back seat. “You lose, pay up.” Sabu grumbled, and pressed a wad of cash into Hino’s palm, the younger lion quickly pocketing it inside his suit jacket. “What’s the matter, old man? Something bothering you?” Sabu scowled.

“Nothing, nothing, it’s just… are you sure we got this right?” Sabu said gruffly. “I mean, he said to send them invitations, not stuff ‘em in the trunk. Don’t you think maybe Agata was a little generous with his interpretations?”

“I dunno, man,” Hino shrugged. “The boss was pretty clear - he said to ‘invite them back to the hideout’, just like with that coyote, and, and,” he snapped his fingers, trying to remember, “that other guy, the uh, the ermine. Seems pretty cut and dry to me.”

“Sure. But those guys were black market, not a couple of high school punks. I-” Sabu’s phone rang, before he could finish his sentence, and he quickly went to answer it, ignoring Hino’s snickering about how he still used a flip phone.

Fuck you, Hino, it still worked good as new.

“Mhm? Hi Agata. Yeah, we’re in the spot. You get past the front desk without any problems? No slowdowns on the elevator? … Yeah, alright. Sounds good - we’ll be ready.” He hung up his phone, tucked it into his pocket, and turned on the engine and set it to neutral.

“We go-time?” asked Hino, excited. Sabu nodded, and unlocked the car doors.

“Yeah. Go-time.”

Haru watched Legosi as he slept beside her, and she felt her gut turn in a combination of frustration and worry. He looked more like he was dead than asleep - she knew he’d taken a pill when she wasn’t looking. A theory bubbled to her mind while she ran her fingers through his fur, scratching
Legosi wasn’t usually big on ‘easy’; if he was, neither of them would be doing this thing that they were doing. It stood to reason, then, that he wasn’t just using the pills as an easy way out. Haru thought that the pills created a sort of feedback loop - when he took them he couldn’t dream, so he couldn’t agonize about his dreams the next day, and the unpleasant side effects made it just hard enough that he didn’t feel like he was using a cop-out. Haru wished Gouhin had never given them those pills - Legosi had every kind of self restraint except for the kind that stopped him from getting chunks taken out of him, it was like he was addicted to martyrdom. It was stupid.

Haru was thrown out of her thoughts when she heard the room door click. Her ears swiveled to the door before her head turned, carefully listening for anything they could pick up. “Dave?” she called to no response, grabbing her knife from the nightstand and holding it behind her back as she approached the door. “If you got a service request, it must be from a room down - we didn’t call.” Haru froze when she got close enough to the door for her nose to pick up a familiar scent: Lion.

“Oh, shi-” she started, but the door slammed into her face and knocked her against the wall before she could finish. Haru was on her feet almost as quick as she’d gone down - her assailant was a young lion wearing a suit with a well groomed mane: Shishigumi. He lunged for her and she leapt out of the way, stabbing out for his hand with her knife. His arm pulled back, and he rushed into the room, blocking the exit behind him. He didn’t let up the pressure, and it was all Haru could do to avoid getting grabbed.

“Legosi! Hey, Legosi!” she called, but there came no response - of course there wasn’t, he was hopped up on tranquilizers. That momentary lapse of distraction was all it took, though.

Before the bag went on over her head, Haru had the satisfaction of sticking her assailant good in the hand that had grabbed her.

Legosi woke up groggy and confused. He felt like someone had turned his stomach inside out and used his head as a hammer - but that part was normal, since he’d used one of Gouhin’s pills to get to sleep. The confusing part was that he was sitting upright somewhere cold and damp, he couldn’t see anything, and there was something tight over his face that held his mouth shut.

“Legosi! Legosi!!!” he heard a faint, muffled voice call from directly behind him. His arms were tied behind the back of the chair he sat in so his reach was limited, but when he pushed his fingers out he felt a familiar hand wrap around his pointer - Haru. Legosi struggled to scoot back, closing the gap between them so that they could hold hands properly - she felt surprisingly calm.

“Hrmrh?” he said in a futile attempt to say her name, but it didn’t get out through the muzzle around his face. The dreadful realization dawned on him; someone - probably somebody he’d pissed off - had figured out where they stayed and decided to nab them in the middle of the night, and because he was on tranquilizers, he hadn’t even noticed. He still felt groggy and out of place, and his stomach was trying to do parkour off his ribs - even if he managed to escape, there was no way that he could fight like this. Haru’s hand squeezed his - he could feel her pulse, but he was so disoriented that he couldn’t quite tell if she was scared or just a rabbit.

“Oh good, good, you’re awake,” she said, her breath coming in quick bursts. “I didn’t think anything would wake you after you slept through that lion who grabbed us. Those pills really work, huh?”

“Mmmhm mph.”
“Listen, so. This is, obviously, not great.” Yeah, not great was a bit of an understatement, Legosi thought - getting kidnapped by the Shishigumi so they could exact vengeance for their dead boss was a little worse than “not great”. “Right now, you’re the only one with, uh, sharp bits - can you get us out?”

Maybe the pills had been a mistake.

Haru could feel her heartbeat pounding in her ears, which were uncomfortably squished against her head by the rough canvas sack pulled over her face. Possibilities of what had happened raced through her mind - did one of Louis’ enemies figure out about her call? Was someone listening in on his phone? Was there a rival faction inside the Shishigumi that wanted to use her and Legosi to get to Louis? If crime movies had taught her anything it was that all of those were viable options, and all of them were equally bad. Legosi didn’t seem like he was going to be very useful in his half conscious state, so the task of busting them out would just have to fall to her. That was fine, she could totally break through zip ties with her bare hands. Just watch. Haru strained, pulling with all her might against the plastic prison around her wrists.

She could not, in fact, break zip ties with her bare hands.

That’s fine, on to plan B - wait for someone to get within range, and then just kick as hard as possible. That should, at the very least, be cathartic.

A pair of footsteps echoing angrily from the back of the room threw her out of her thoughts - whoever it was, they did not sound happy.

“Agata, please tell me exactly what the fuck is going on?” Wait, that voice was familiar.

“I, uh, I dunno Boss,” said the lion who’d grabbed her and Legosi - she recognized his voice from when he’d talked to his buddies before dumping her in the trunk - “didn’t you tell me to…”

“To what, Agata? What exactly did I tell you to do?” Haru knew that voice from somewhere, but the bag around her - wait, no. That couldn’t be what was going on - that would just be too funny. No, it couldn’t be.

“To ‘invite’ the kids from room 502 at the Hotel Rose over and to ‘make sure they accepted’.” She could practically hear Agata putting air quotes into his speech.

No fuckin’ way.

Agata slowly backed away from Louis, growing increasingly convinced by the second that he was about to go down in history as the second Shishigumi lion to be gunned down by one teenage red deer.

“And you assumed that I meant to abduct them, is that it? Is that what you thought I meant, Agata?” Louis said, one eyebrow twitching.

“I mean, that’s what you said to do with those White Court thugs you had us grab, so… yyyes?” The sub basement felt much warmer than it usually did, and Agata tugged at his collar awkwardly with his good hand - that rabbit, Haru, had gotten him good. “Boss, if I made a mistake, I-”

“Oh, mistakes were most DEFINITELY made, Agata!” Louis snapped, grabbing him by the tie and
tugging his face down to meet him at eye level. Agata became suddenly aware of two things - one, while Louis had consistently been a good, if somewhat irritable boss, the fact that he was an herbivore did not also mean that he had to be a good boss; he simply chose to.

Two, Louis had very, very pretty eyes.

Agata did the only thing he could think of to do - he bowed his head, and put his arms at his sides.

“I’m sorry, Boss,” he said, resigning himself to his fate. “I got carried away, and misunderstood. Please forgive me.” Louis said nothing for a time, but then Agata heard the deer sigh and felt a hand on his shoulder.

“No,” Louis said as he pushed Agata back into a standing position, delicately straightening the lion’s tie in a way Agata wasn’t entirely comfortable with but wasn’t about to complain about either, “it’s fine. You merely did as you were told, and accomplished your task well - next time, just be sure you accomplish the correct task as well, and-”

One of the captives cut Louis off with a sudden bout of hysterical, wheezing laughter.

“Wait, that’s not. This can’t be. Louis???” Haru laughed through the bag over her head. Louis sighed, and rubbed his temples.

“... yes, Haru,” he grumbled, and began briskly walking over to the chairs. Ahhh, they were friends, that explained a few things. When Louis pulled the bag off Haru’s head, Agata had to look away - this was all incredibly embarrassing.

“Louis what the fuck ?” Haru laughed, and it was obvious that she was happy to see him.

Chapter End Notes

Next up - the reunion chapter! With the gang getting back together, we're going to be quickly drawing the introductory arc to a close; expect more crime noir type detective stuff to infiltrate the character scenes in the near future, and vice versa. As always, if you have any feedback please leave it in the comments, and if you'd like to chat you can find me on tumblr at baeowulf.tumblr.com - I'm always happy to talk!
Chapter Summary

The gang has a reunion. Jack pries at Legosi's night life. Louis gets some good advice, and Haru schemes to help him give some too. Legosi is caught in a very uncomfortable position. Ibuki worries. Cosmo observes, and transcends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louis was, in this particular moment, unusually aware of his surroundings. The largeness of the furniture, how ostentatious the decor was, even the gaudy fucking gold plating he’d had installed where his predecessor’s brains had painted the balcony. Everything seemed too big, too loud, too… dramatic. He wished that they weren’t doing this here, where the extent of his performance would be so painfully obvious to the two animals who made his life so confusing. The two animals who filled him with guilt and frustration. The two animals who forced him to look in the mirror.

“I apologize again for the... “ Louis tapped his fingers together, trying to pick the word that would fit best here - awkward? Unpleasant? Regrettable? “Unique,” he settled on, “circumstances of our reunion. Agata is eager, but much like someone else I know, doesn’t always think things through.”

“I don’t think apologies work if you make fun of one of the animals you’re apologizing to,” Haru reminded him.

“What?” Legosi said, clearly struggling to stay awake and wearing an expression that made him look like he was hurtling through time and space in his chair.

“I-” Louis almost responded automatically with one of his signature snide remarks - he wanted to say “I wasn’t apologizing to the dog, Haru,” but Cosmo’s words rang in his ears before he could finish the sentence: Louis, you gotta be honest with this shit; trust me when I say that lying doesn’t help. “... you’re right. I’m sorry, I’m just.. Tired.” It was true - his sleep schedule wasn’t exactly regular, per se, but he usually wasn’t awake past two. But it wasn’t honest. Baby steps, Louis. Baby steps. Appearances had to be maintained, after all. “It’s… good to see you both again.”

“Louis, your chair is... so big,” Legosi said, and Louis couldn’t help but hold his nose in frustration.

“Is he always like this?” he asked, and Haru sighed.

“He’s been overusing tranquilizers lately. I’ve never seen him awake before they’ve worn off before,” she said, and when she turned to face Legosi, Louis felt an icicle pierce his heart at the way he turned to her and took her hand. “Hey, you doing alright big guy?”

“I love you,” he answered, his voice dripping with his dumb stupid feelings. This was the first time Louis had seen Legosi without the barrier of inhibition overlaid on top of his actions - he was so simple, so direct, so infuriatingly, beautifully pure . Louis wondered what he would look like if something were to strip away all his inhibitions, insecurities, and acts.

He wondered if there would be anything left.
“... so this is a problem, right?” he said.

“Yeah, it’s really bad,” Haru agreed.

“What’s really bad?” Legosi asked. They both ignored him. “Guys, what’s bad? Can I help?”

“No, Legosi, you cannot help!” Louis snapped, his fingers drawing up like a spider on his forehead.

“Oh, okay.” Legosi shuffled in his seat, and Haru patted him gently on the leg.

“Louis, I know that we’re not exactly… on great terms right now,” Haru began. “I’m still mad at you-”

“What for?” Louis found himself asking less sarcastically than he’d originally intended.

“We can get to that in a bit.” Ah, crap. “Anyways, I’m mad, but I also don’t think that I can do this alone - that we can do this alone - and we’re both worried about you.”

“Why? Trust me, Haru, I’m perfectly safe - I’ve tamed this den of wild beasts.” Louis crossed his legs and leaned back into his chair - Haru scowled at him.

“I bet your predecessor thought that too, before I shot him,” she retorted.

“How fortunate for me, then, that you don’t have a gun.” Louis opened a drawer on his desk, and slid a package across to Haru. She didn’t move. “By the way, here’s your gun - you should take it with you this time, just in case-”

“In case what?” she said, the corner of her mouth twitching into the defiant grin that he’d so rarely been blessed with. “In case one of your goons misinterprets your orders and tries to kidnap me again? I wonder if there’s a record for ‘most times kidnapped by lions’.”

“Something like that, yes.” He felt the tension easing from his chest - this verbal game of wit was easier than talking about real things. Haru picked up the gun, considered it through the bag, and then slid it back across the desk to Louis.

“Well, you can keep it for now. I’m still not accepting that kind of apology.”

“Haru, this isn’t about apologizing anymore, it’s about keeping you safe-”

“And you think that I need you to do that for me?” she bit, and he didn’t have an answer. He slumped in his seat, and resisted the urge to sigh.

“... no, but I do think that you need a weapon. Face the facts, Haru - you aren’t as fortunate as Legosi, or even myself. I say this with the utmost respect, but you are small, and you are fragile, and you do not have teeth, claws, or horns with which to defend yourself. You’d do well to keep something beyond your wits, because we both know that they will only get you so far.” Louis wasn’t sure why that had felt like a concession.

“I know, and I agree,” she said, “but I won’t accept your gift because you pity me. I won’t give you the peace of mind you need to hole up and shut yourself away again.”

“Then what can I do to give it to you, Haru?” he said, and the agitation in his tone must have been more palpable than he thought it was because Legosi immediately sat up in his chair, momentarily shaken from his stupor. Louis hadn’t realized he was standing.
“You can start by explaining what really happened that night,” she said. “At the time, I thought it was my imagination, but since that… weird, weird thing you tried to pull a few weeks ago, I’ve been thinking - when we left, there were two more shots. Was… was that you?” Louis said nothing for a time, unable to make himself meet her gaze. “Louis, tell me - was that you?”

“Yes,” he finally answered. “It was me.”

“Louis, what happened?” He was quiet for a long while, but when he realized why he didn’t want to tell her, he stood from his chair and turned away from Haru and Legosi, staring out into the night over his balcony. It was calm, and the bodies hanging from the gate cast long shadows in the moonlight. It was time to tell the truth.

“That day, when you were taken,” he began, clasping his hands behind his back to keep them from shaking, “I went to the mayor for help. He told me that there was no chance of saving you - that you were already dead, and trying to do anything would only damage the reputation he’d carefully curated for lions over the years. I… believed him. When Legosi came to me for help, I told him there was nothing to be done - that the life of one animal couldn’t be placed over the wellbeing of our society.”

“Wh-what did he say?” Haru asked - Louis was surprised Legosi hadn’t told her. What better way to win somebody’s affection than by telling them the animal who was supposed to have their back had abandoned them to the lion’s den?

“He said that he would show me the danger you were in, and punched me in the face. Then he ran off like a fool to go save you by himself. I didn’t stop him.” Louis clenched his hands, and stared at the blood spatter preserved in gold before him, pulling that day back into his mind and drawing his guilt out of the well he’d dropped it into. “I was a coward, Haru. But I also couldn’t let that get Legosi killed. I followed him here, and scaled the tower to discover that my princess had already slain her dragon.”

“Louis, I know that’s not what happened,” she said. “You killed him, didn’t you?” Louis’ ear twitched, and he almost didn’t speak.

“... yes, I did,” he confessed.

“Why didn’t you just… tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want to take it away from you,” he said, and for the second time in his life Louis’ words rang honest and raw in his ears. “Let’s be honest with ourselves, Haru - I was never there for you when we were together, even though I saw the way you looked at yourself sometimes. You didn’t need a red deer’s pride standing in your way, and I didn’t need to rob you of the power that comes with being the rabbit who devoured a lion. When I got here, the old man was on the balcony ready to shoot Legosi in the back. I made sure he never got the chance.” It was quiet for a long time.

“You really can’t avoid making everything about yourself, huh Louis?” Louis spun around at her words. Haru was standing on his desk, and Legosi’s eyes - those piercing, accusing eyes - stared straight into his soul and forced him to accept what she said as true. “I called you to ask for your help because… because..!” Tears were budding in the corners of her eyes. Louis watched with a perverse fascination as they spilled over and ran down her cheeks, and even in his current state, one of Legosi’s great claws reached up to gently wipe them away.

“Because we miss you, Louis,” the gray wolf said for her. Haru looked to Legosi like she wanted to disagree, but Louis knew a liar when he saw one, and Legosi was not lying. “I’m… really, really
confused right now, but Haru taught me something very important.”

“And what is that, Legosi?” Louis asked, wondering what wisdom was about to spew forth from Legosi’s tranquilizer addled mind.

“That you can’t do it alone.” The words hit Louis harder than Legosi’s fist had. “I don’t know if this is a dream or not, but I know that. You can’t do it alone, Louis.”

It was like a bad joke - a deer answers his friend’s call for help, and what does he get? Amateur therapy. Louis’ life was one big, failed comedy.

He couldn’t help but laugh.

Cosmo sat on the edge of the bed, pulling the strap of her tank back over her shoulder as the rumbling snores of the beast behind her filled the shabby apartment. She watched the smoke that drifted from the tip of her cigarette coil through the air in admiration - even if it was fleeting, it was light and free, existing wholly on its own terms until the wind from the propeller fan in the corner blew it away. If she had to be like anything, Cosmo wanted to be like cigarette smoke - joyful and free, and then gone. She snatched her bag from the nightstand and rummaged around for her phone, checking idly to see if she had any new messages while she waited for her heart to slow from the staccato rhythm it beat in her breast. A smile tugged at her lips when she saw the photo - when she’d first met Louis, she was worried about finding a new job because her manager decided that having an herbivore on stage was too great a risk. Now, he was sending her excited photos of the special stage he was prepping just for her special performance while her coworkers and friends posed in the background - she supposed the personal protection of the Shishigumi had its perks. She set the phone down on the bedsheets and looked to the carnivore sleeping beside her - his chest rose and fell as softly as any other animal’s, and she couldn’t help but watch the way the crocodile’s nose twitched in his sleep with a sort of morbid fascination. He seemed so peaceful as he slept; she wondered how many other herbivores had a chance to see this side of their neighbors - no fangs, no claws, just sleep.

She wondered how many would even want to.

Cosmo scooped her phone back up as she stood from the bed - Jean was nice, but by the time he woke up, she would be gone like she always was. She shuffled on her pants, and checked her phone one more time before pulling her sweater on.

Grumpypuss: 3 unread messages.

She thumbed the notification open, and stifled a giggle when she saw what Ibuki had to say with another long drag on her cigarette - it was best she didn’t wake her client.

<Cosmo.>

Rex, he was formal wasn’t he?

<I was selecting which suit to wear as your bodyguard for your performance - which of these three do you prefer?>

The following photo was of three identical suits.

<I like the middle one best!> she texted back once she’d gotten her sweater over past her head, tugging it down, shouldering her jacket back on and slipping into her shoes while she typed. <The
tie matches your glasses.> She paused in the doorway, taking one last look at Jean where he slept, her fingers wrapped around the edge of the door. She wondered if Ibuki looked the same when he slept - mouth open, a little drool dribbling over his lips, tongue stuck at a funny angle that made him look stupid.

“Bye, Jean. Sweet dreams,” she whispered, and gently shut the door behind her.

Haru sat stiff as a board in the passenger seat of the limousine, fingers wrapped tight as a vise around the firearm in her lap. If there was an alternative, she would take it - but no matter how strong she was, a dwarf rabbit simply couldn’t carry a wolf, and Legosi was about as useful as a sandbag at the bottom of the ocean right now. Just inches away, Agata sat awkwardly in the driver’s seat, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. The bandage around his hand looked tight, but he also didn’t look like he let it bother him. She heard him swallow over the constant rumble of Legosi’s snoring from the back seat, and turned her eyes back to the road ahead.

Yeah. This was incredibly awkward.

“Can… you see alright?” Agata asked, trying to ease the tense silence. She appreciated the effort, but given her past experiences with this particular group of lions, she wasn’t really sure how successful he expected to be.

“Y-yeah, thanks,” she said, shuffling on the booster seat Agata had improvised for her.

“Listen,” he said, starting to apologize, “I know we-”

“Don’t! Just… don’t,” she cut him off, and she could hear his teeth snap together as he shut up. “No offense, but I really don’t want to hear a lion’s voice right now.” Agata just nodded - good. She felt only a little guilty - sure he’d kidnapped her and Legosi, but he still seemed like a decent guy, and she’d had a weirder first meeting with her boyfriend. Haru turned her attention to the gun in her lap - it seemed somehow smaller than she’d remembered it being when she’d used it before, like it had been posturing when they’d first met and had since dropped the act. She ran her fingers over its chromed surface, feeling the texture of its grip, its slide, and its barrel. Haru understood well how dangerous the weapon was - when she’d pulled the trigger, all the fangs, claws, and muscle in the world wouldn’t have saved the Shishigumi’s old boss; all it took to kill was a tiny piece of metal. Haru glanced between the gun and Agata and shivered - what a terrible kind of power to have. But also…

She thought back to how Louis looked - he was healthier than the last time they’d met, though still not as well off as he’d been at Cherryton. She was glad that he’d actually agreed to regular meetings - she hadn’t been sure that she would be able to pull that off. She glanced over her shoulder to the back seat - Legosi slept like the dead, but even with the awful tranquilizers in his head, he’d managed to say what Louis had needed to hear, and it had been her words.

“You can’t do it alone.”

She couldn’t help but smile as she watched Legosi sleep. And to think, all it took for her to get under Louis’ shell was a big, sweet wolf.

Legosi woke up with a groan, checking to make sure Haru wasn’t on top of him before he jammed his palms into his eyes. His headache was worse than usual this morning - it felt like he’d gotten
into a fight with a gorilla and lost. Note to self: don’t get into a fight with a gorilla.

“Oh, you’re up!” he heard Haru chirp from the foot of the bed. He sat up against the headboard, blinking the sleep from his eyes until his vision cleared - she was completely engulfed in his shirt, surrounded by textbooks while she scribbled into the notebook in her lap.

“Yeah,” he grunted, wincing when he felt his spine pop - the tranquilizers always made him sleep stiff. This morning felt different from the usual - he’d gotten used to the blessed, dreamless slumber the pills brought, but last night had been different. Different and very weird. “Haru, did uh, did anything happen last night?” he asked, and she turned to him.

“Huh? How do you mean?” she said, closing her notebook and setting it down so she could turn towards him.

“I just.. I had the strangest dream last night. We were in a basement, and then an… office I think? There was this weird lion, and Louis was yelling at him, and then I think he gave you a-”

“Gun?” Haru continued, bouncing a plastic baggie with a pistol safely contained inside in his field of vision. “That wasn’t a dream, Legosi. That happened.”

“So you mean when I-”

“Confessed your love for me directly in front of Louis? Yeah, that was real.”

“And-

“When you told him that he couldn’t do everything by himself to his face, and said that I’d taught you that? Yeah, that happened too.”

Legosi hung his head over the side of the bed and vomited onto the floor.

Jack waited anxiously by the dorm room door, nervously checking his watch. “Come on, Legosi,” he whined, his tail displaying his nerves to the room, “I can’t cover for you much longer…” 8 AM - Legosi was late by an hour and a half, and if he wasn’t back soon, the faculty was going to start asking questions. He looked from side to side, frantically searching for his friend - the other boys had all already headed off to grab breakfast before morning classes, and if Legosi wasn’t back soon, he’d miss his chance to eat! He checked his watch again - 8:02. “Come on, Legosi, why do you have to be so difficult? Can’t you just board at the boarding school like everybody else?” Jack was about to try texting - again - when, finally, he saw Legosi’s hulking, stooped form groggily walking down the hallway. “Legosi!” he shouted, dashing down the hall to intercept his friend, backpedaling a little as he almost overshot the big wolf. Legosi sighed heavily, and gave him a weary wave. “Legosi, are you alright? You look exhausted, is everything ok with Haru?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine,” he sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Just had a bad night, is all.”

“Another nightmare?” Jack asked, trying to hide the hope in his voice - it felt wrong, but if Legosi did have a nightmare, it meant that he wasn’t taking the tranquilizers. Legosi shook his head - darn.

“No, no, just. Louis… accidentally kidnapped us is all,” he said like that was just a totally normal thing to say to someone.

“W-what?!” Jack shouted, dropping his voice when he noticed that he’d gotten the attention of the
entire hallway. “What do you mean Louis accidentally kidnapped you? You can’t just accidentally kidnap someone!” he said in much more subdued tone this time, clutching his book to his chest as he sped up his steps to keep up with Legosi’s long legs.

“If someone could, though, who do you think that would be?” Jack sighed - Legosi had a good point.

“It… would be Louis, yeah.” Wait a minute. “Wait a minute, you saw Louis again? Is he doing alright? Is it true what animals are saying?”

“That he’s the new Shishigumi boss? Yeah. And yeah, he’s doing better than the last time I saw him. I think he started eating again.” Jack frowned as they turned a corner and started down a flight of stairs on their way to the cafeteria before classes.

“Is… he ok?” he asked. Jack didn’t quite understand Legosi or Haru’s relationship with Louis the Red Deer, and he understood Louis even less, but he knew that the deer was important to his friends, and that was enough for him to be concerned. Legosi shrugged.

“No,” he said, “but I don’t think he’s in danger or anything either. He looks like he’s on stage.”

Jack nodded solemnly, holding the door open for Legosi.

“I guess he’s probably not coming back to school, then?” Legosi shook his head. “That’s a bummer, I was really hoping he’d be back for the spring performance. Oh, I have your notes for you,” he said as they stepped into the meal hall, pulling off his backpack to hand Legosi the papers he’d prepped. “I’ll be sure to get you the rest at lunch, alright?” Legosi nodded and took the notes, but he looked tired. He always looked tired lately - looking up at him, Jack couldn’t help but feel a weight in his chest at how Legosi looked. He didn’t look like a high school kid ready to learn and take on the world - he looked like someone who’d been taking it on for a long time, and was just trying not to lose. Legosi’s eye swiveled to look at him, and Jack turned away, hoping that Legosi didn’t notice his concern - he didn’t need any more stress added to his plate, after all.

“Thanks, Jack. I don’t know how I’d keep up with anything in class without these.” Jack laughed, happy to help.

“Oh come on, you’d still have Haru,” he said, and internally cursed himself for his complete inability to just accept some praise from his friend.

“Oh, right - she’d also be falling behind without your help because she’d have to deal with my school stuff on top of her school stuff, and… the… other things she’s doing too. So, also thanks for that Jack,” Legosi said, and Jack just let it roll over him this time.

“Speaking of that… I know I’m not supposed to pry, but what exactly do you guys spend all that time doing?” he asked. “I mean, I’m not one to judge, but I’m pretty sure it’s not exactly responsible to sneak out and cuddle with your girlfriend all night to the point you have to sleep through your classes, and I also really really don’t think cuddling with a bunny is the sort of activity that normally means you have to get stitches afterwards.” Legosi nodded, grumbling to himself as the two grabbed a seat and set their things down.

“Would you believe me if I told you that I’ve been running around the Black Market in the middle of the night to catch predatory offenders so a grumpy old panda can do psychiatry on them, and that Haru’s been practicing first aid skills so she can patch me up after and knife fighting so that she can defend herself if something else like what happened at the Meteor Festival happens again?”
“No, I absolutely wouldn’t!” Jack said. “Come on, Legosi, that’s like the plot of a bad shonen. What’s really going on?” Legosi pried open his energy drink and took a long slurp.

“Well, then I guess I won’t tell you that,” he said with a shrug.

“Legosi!!”

Cosmo sat patiently across from Louis while he frantically explained what had happened - she couldn’t help but notice how disheveled he was; his clothes were in disarray, his fur was ruffled, and the whole top three buttons of his shirt were undone. This might not have been the closest she’d seen him to a mental breakdown, but it was the most he’d ever shown how close he was to a mental breakdown. She sipped her boba tea while she waited for him to finish, listening intently - apparently, he’d actually followed through with her advice and invited whoever he missed over to talk, and the result was that… Agata had kidnapped them? Cosmo had to admit - she could appreciate the changes the Shishigumi had made to the market, but they were a weird, weird bunch. Finally, Louis finished and leaned on the table, staring at their shared meal and looking exasperated. Cosmo set down her drink.

“… so, I thought we were going to discuss my routine,” she said, “but it sounds like you took my advice.” Louis looked up at her and he looked very, very tired.

“… my apologies for getting sidetracked,” he said and sat up, buttoning his shirt back up to his neck. “But yes, I did take your advice, and to be frank I have no idea what to do about it now. I mean, how would I even recover from that? How do you recover from trying to apologize to someone and accidentally abducting them instead?”

“Well, I’ve never been in that situation, but I would start with another apology,” she advised, and took a cube of pumpkin from the bowl. “Listen, Louis. Listen. We’re both performers, right? What’s the worst stage mishap you’ve ever had?”

“I needed to intervene mid performance with an injured leg because my stand-in and one of the tech crew got into an open brawl in the middle of the production over blood doping,” he said flatly.

“Louis what the fuck kind of drama program does your school even have?” she asked because that was not even remotely close to the answer she’d expected.

“One with a hormonal, idealistic moron in it. A hormonal idealistic moron whom my subordinate kidnapped last night alongside my ex,” he grumbled.

“Is the idealistic moron the ex?” Cosmo asked, hoping to get a little more out of him before he shut her out again.

“No, he’s dating her.”

“Ohhhh, I get it. Well, look, regardless of how absolutely wild this scenario is, you can handle it pretty much the same way - you regain your composure, own your mistake, and sell it to the audience. Normally you can get away with making it look like it was on purpose, but this is a little big for that - just take responsibility and work to fix things, and it’ll be fine.”

“But how do you fix that?” he asked. “Gifts won’t work - that would be shallow and meaningless. And I can’t think of any grand gesture I can make to display my remorse for how things went either.”
“Louis,” she said, putting her hands together and leaning on the desk, “have you considered, oh, I dunno, talking with them? Not even about what happened, just in general.”

“I fail to see how that would address the problem.” Cosmo sighed and hung her head - this was going to be more difficult than she thought.

“Do you know what the biggest difference is between you and my clients, Louis?” she asked.

“I’ve never tried to bite your head off?” he snarked, being difficult.

“No, it’s the fact that we talk,” she explained. “As weird as it might be, we hang out, we shoot the shit, we get lunch - we’re friends. Maybe, if you want to make your apology mean something, you should try talking, hanging out, getting lunch. Otherwise, that’s not a friendship, that’s a transaction.” She saw Louis thinking about what she’d said, and Cosmo reached out to take his hand. He pulled it away before she could, and she drew it back to pick her drink back up and take another sip.

“... so, what should I do?”

“Well, there’s a good udon place I know.”

Louis waited at the table behind the little udon place they’d agreed to meet at, bouncing his foot and checking his watch through his sunglasses. He could feel the wait staff’s eyes on him - perhaps a white suit, pink undershirt, silver tie and gold wristwatch was a little overdressed for street noodles, but they would just have to forgive him for having standards.

It was 6:35 - they were late.

He set down his newspaper when he saw them approaching from the end of the alley, sticking an arm up to wave them over. Well, he didn’t exactly see them - he saw Legosi, and he saw Haru’s ears poking out over the small evening crowd. He hadn’t realized how sick Legosi looked last night - the wolf looked almost as bad as he did during the first draft of their reunion. As they got a bit closer, Louis had to suppress laughter; Haru was leading Legosi around by the hand like he was a puppy, being careful to guide him so that his wagging tail didn’t knock over anybody’s meal. A little voice in the back of his head wondered what he and Haru might have looked like out together when they were a couple.

Louis folded his newspaper into a small square, tucked it into his suit jacket, and rose from his reclining posture to sit straight in his chair. He thought about how to greet them - hello? Welcome? Legosi, Haru, how have you been? He settled on “you’re late.”

“Good to see you too, Louis,” Haru huffed, hopping up into her seat as Legosi took his next to her. Louis passed them their menus. “Busy day today?”

“No,” Louis said, flagging down a waiter, “it’s been slow. Ah, yes, I’d like the number 9, and a carrot ginger press. Thank you.” That wasn’t entirely honest - it was just that most of the business of the day had been ranting about his personal problems at Cosmo. He felt guilty about having let his face drop like that, but he was grateful that he had someone to talk to who didn’t need to always see him as an authority figure - maintaining constant control was tough. Maybe he’d have a couple more of those after today. “Just lunch with a friend.”

“You have friends now?” Legosi said. The fact that he seemed so surprised by that was a little insulting.
“What’s that supposed to mean, Legosi?” Louis asked as he set his menu down. “If I recall correctly, I was very popular at Cherryton.” Legosi looked thoroughly cowed by that - Haru, unfortunately, did not.

“Yeah but being popular is really different to having friends,” she said, looking over her menu. “Bickering aside, though… thanks for inviting us out, Louis. And thanks for not sending someone to grab us in our sleep this time.”

“... you’re welcome,” Louis grumbled, and grumpily hid behind his menu.

“So…” Legosi began, “you’re in charge of the Shishigumi now, huh?” The topic hung in the air like an open wound which Louis knew only he could disinfect. He sighed, and nodded - he knew they could see his antlers bob above his menu.

“Yes, I am. It’s a nice break from managing the drama club, if I’m honest - fewer personality conflicts,” he answered casually - might as well start this off well. Haru laughed.

“Really? There’s fewer - oh, wait, Bill’s not there, so I can see it. How did that… whole thing go down anyways?” she asked, and Louis lowered his menu to take a long sip of water.

“I’m not sure it’s wise to discuss my recent enterprises at particular length so publicly, but if you must know, there was a vote - it wound up evenly split, so they let the decision be made by trial.” He put down his glass and flipped his menu back up. “I passed.”

“So, they’re not going to be a threat anymore?” Legosi asked.

“Not to Haru. I can’t say if the same is true about you, Legosi - no pun intended, but the first time you met you wounded their pride, and that’s not something easily forgiven. I trust most of my lieutenants, but Free’s a wild animal, I can’t vouch for the grunts as much.”

“They’re your guys, aren’t they?” Haru asked expectantly.

“Yes, but there’s also thirty of them - I have authority, Haru, not telepathy.” The waiter returned with his drink, and Louis thanked him after Legosi and Haru placed their orders. “It helps that I have things to keep them busy with.”

“Like what? Extortion, kidnapping, meat trading?” Haru’s tone was sarcastic, but he could hear the accusation in her voice. He straightened in his chair, and rested his wrists on the table, drawing himself up to his full height - so about eye level with Legosi when he slouched.

“Security, actually - we’ve discovered that animals spend more money the safer they feel, and bigger deals can go through when there’s fewer rogue elements.”

“Oh, I do some of that stuff too.” That wasn’t what Louis had expected Legosi to say.

“Really?” Louis took a sip of his juice, and had to steady himself at the kick it gave him - ever since he’d started living in the Black Market, he’d developed a new appreciation for vegetable juices.

“Yeah, I, uh…”

“Let’s call it ‘intern’,” Haru offered, filling the gap in Legosi’s sentence.

“That’s it. I intern for a doctor whose patients can get out of hand sometimes. He has me go recover them.” Louis sipped his juice in mild annoyance - of course Legosi did, he was ever the noble martyr.
“Are you getting credits? I’m not sure what class requirements ‘vigilantism’ would satisfy.”

Legosi shrugged. “No, but we are getting paid.”

Louis stared at Legosi and Haru in thinly veiled shock - what had these two been getting up to while he wasn’t looking? “...we?”

“Yes - Legosi does the fighting, and I help with the fixing up afterwards. I know enough that I can patch up pretty much everything Legosi picks up on the job now!” The smile Haru wore was one he hadn’t seen before - it was a proud smile, unburdened with defiance or performance. It had a way of infecting the corners of his mouth - it was nice. “Hey, I wonder if I could get credit for that?”

Legosi thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think the dean would see ‘sneaking out after dark to stitch up street fighting wounds by the Black Market and also I’m a rabbit’ as an extracurricular. If he did, though, maybe I could put this towards my phys-ed requirements...”

Louis couldn’t help but laugh - it was good that these were still the things they were concerned about, even with everything they’d been through. “I somehow doubt it would be wise to ask - that sounds like a wonderful parent-teacher conference in the making.” Haru groaned, and rubbed her ears back.

“Yeah, I think my mom would have a heart attack on the spot and then my dad would die of grief - probably best not to bring it up, huh.” Legosi laughed nervously.

“Y-yeah! That would be the worst. Definitely wouldn’t want to have to, uh, talk to my parents at school.” What a weird wolf.

Louis marvelled at what was happening while the conversation continued around him - here he was, Louis the Red Deer, failed aspirant to the title of Sublime Beastar, Chief of the Shishigumi, and Heir to the Horns Conglomerate, and he was having dinner at a street noodle shop with his friends on a nice October night. It would be maddening if it wasn’t so normal - to think that his first brush with the experience of living a normal life would only come after he became a mob boss and his former rival and lover confessed their night-time vigilante heroism to him was beyond bizarre.

He really did live in a comedy.

“Oh really now?” he heard himself say after Haru finished recounting a story about how she’d had to relocate Legosi’s arm after a scrap with a hippo hopped up on cocaine. “And was that before or after she relocated your self preservation instincts, Legosi? I feel like those must have gotten knocked loose along the way somewhere too.”

Legosi laughed, and reached one of his stupidly long arms up to help the waiter carrying their food find the table as though they were an inconspicuous bunch and not a wolf, a rabbit, and a deer in a tux. “After. She made me promise not to wave through the window while on the job again first.”

“Rex, I’d completely forgotten you did that,” Haru groaned. “See Louis? This is what I have to deal with. This is the burden I carry.” She joked, but it came from a genuine place of concern, and seeing them laugh together made Louis’ stomach flutter in a way he felt might be unpleasant if he wasn’t laughing with them.

“I can see why you’d need my help then - he sounds even more insufferable than he was when we were classmates.” Louis took a bite of his udon, delicately savoring the vegetable broth; so much
better than meat, especially leopard - he still couldn’t get over how terrible that guy tasted. “And on that topic... Legosi, you are going to give me your pills.” Legosi stopped mid bite, blinking several times in surprise. Haru buried her face in her hands. Louis grinned.

Exactly according to plan. Flawless execution.

“Hmmph?” Legosi looked more like a pup caught with his snout in the carob chips than he did a teenage wolf slowly withering away because he was abusing emergency strength medication.

“You, Legosi, are going to give me your tranquilizers.” Louis rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers for emphasis, leaning forwards towards the wolf. He could smell Legosi’s breath - he could smell the sick on him. “Haru told me everything that’s going on, so there’s no use trying to hide it.” He reached into his pocket - Louis had come prepared for this conversation, after all - and tossed a small stack of photographs onto the table between them. His only regret was Haru’s gasp when she saw the images, but the way Legosi’s eyes locked onto the pictures was all the evidence he needed to know he’d made the right decision. The images weren’t easy to look at - animals slumped in the corner of their rooms, emaciated and half hairless, their eyes locked in vacant, hollow stares. “What, do you think that you were the first animal to be so frightened of themselves they looked for solutions in dreamless sleep? Look at them, Legosi - some of them went a year before they got here, some two, some three.” Louis blood heated under his skin and he felt himself leaning over the table, closer and closer to Legosi. “But they all got here, and the same cocktail dragged them here - shame and fear, alleviated with a little translucent capsule.” He was standing now, out of his seat with one palm on the table, and he was pretty sure that he had an audience - fine, let them stare. Legosi swallowed his food, back pressed against his chair while Haru watched in wide eyed fascination.

“I... I need them to protect-” Louis grabbed Legosi by the collar, hauling him forward over the table and rattling the dishes with the force his palm slammed into the tabletop. Their faces were mere centimeters apart, and Louis could feel the heat of Legosi’s nervous breath through his fur. Their eyes locked, and the stag relished in the intensity of the moment when he occupied the entirety of Legosi and Haru’s worlds alike. It was intoxicating and alluring, that kind of attention and gravitas.

“No,” Louis said evenly, “you need them so that you can hide from what you are, wolf, rather than confront it.” It was a plain statement of fact - a blade that pierced straight to the heart of the matter. “There are other, better ways to protect Haru, if that is really your intention; once you called me a coward, and now I am calling your bluff. Once I called you arrogant, Legosi, and said that such arrogance befit a beast such as yourself - but are you really so arrogant that you would deign to make yourself a hypocrite? That you would take this burden wholly onto yourself and refuse any aid with the same tongue that spoke the truth that no man can hold his weight alone?” Louis pulled Legosi closer and leaned in to whisper in his ear - the wolf’s lips nearly graced his neck at this angle, and he didn’t know what to do with the tingle that ran through his skin and quickened his pulse before the beast’s breath. “If you would, Legosi, then I bid you devour me now, and perhaps my flesh will grant you the strength you need to realize that it is possible to love without self destruction.” For a long while, they stood there - Louis could feel his heart hammering in his chest and his blood thrumming in his neck, he could feel the wetness of Legosi’s breath against his throat, he could feel the stares of the crowd on them and most of all he could feel Haru’s attention and anxiety. He glanced towards her over Legosi’s back, and he was calm - trust me, his eyes said. Let me do this thing for you, Haru, when I have failed you so many times before. Let this be a testament to my love, whatever form it may take.

Let it be a testament to my love for you both.
Finally, Legosi whined, and Louis released him. Legosi shot back into his seat, and Louis put on his best false smile and waved to the crowd as he addressed the shocked onlookers. “Look forward to our new production, flyers coming soon!” His cheeks felt hot, but he gave Haru and Legosi a little confident shake of his head as he straightened his suit, flung his arms out to adjust his sleeves, and took his seat again. He’d have time to unpack all this - and probably write a script - later, for now he just wanted to bask in the rush that whatever he just did gave him. The wolf looked shaken - Louis felt a little bad, but he wasn’t surprised. Sometimes, animals needed a dose of reality and a difficult choice before they realized they were making a mistake.

Legosi had given him that - the least he could do was return the favor.

Legosi was silent for a while, but when he opened his mouth to speak Haru interrupted him.

“I swear by our ancestors Legosi if you are about to say ‘what if I hurt Haru’ I will stab you in the leg. I told you before - let me worry about keeping me alive, and let’s let you worry about how you can help me with that. I don’t take pity from guys I’ve-

“Haru, we still haven’t done that.” Louis raised a brow at Legosi’s comment, but Haru ignored him.

“Yeah, not for lack of trying bud. And technically, we have slept together, so it still stands.”

Louis took another bite of his soup. “If you’re really that worried, Legosi, I can guarantee you that you won’t get the chance to hurt Haru. My men can make sure of that. But keep in mind that it’s for your peace of mind, not her safety.” Haru sighed, and rested her hand on Legosi’s leg. For whatever reason, Louis didn’t find himself jealous.

Legosi nodded, took a small packet out of his pocket, and slid it across the table to Louis. Haru breathed an audible sigh of relief and Louis almost echoed her - he didn’t want to admit it, but their little intervention could have easily gone a lot worse. They were lucky that Legosi was such a gentle and humble wolf - a more prideful creature might have just left. But Legosi was not a more prideful creature. Louis took the pills and shot Legosi a triumphant smile.

“Good pup.”

He could hear Legosi’s tail hitting the table leg.

Haru had to jog to keep up with Legosi’s pace - her heart was still pounding from the sheer theatrical intensity of the way Louis had decided to hijack her intervention, but she couldn’t deny that it had worked. With how quiet he was, it was easy to forget that Legosi was in the drama club sometimes - maybe grandiose, performative, and honestly borderline erotic confrontations were the only thing he understood. She felt like she should probably be angry at Louis for manhandling her boyfriend like that, but the part of her that should be angry was just happy that Louis had actually managed to get Legosi to agree to stop taking those awful tranquilizers every night, and the other part found itself wishing that she’d been between them. It must just be a side effect of her unprecedented dry spell - Haru hadn’t gone this long without having sex since...

Well, since she’d started having sex, in honesty.

Maybe she was just excited from the food and the tension - what had Legosi called it? “Male Mode?” Guess there was a Female Mode too. Ah well - it would pass. For now, she needed to put that aside and make sure Legosi was ok - after all, she wasn’t the one of them who’d just had her
former superior and romantic rival whisper her faults into her ear.

“I know that was pretty, um. Intense, Legosi, but… I’m proud of you.” He looked down at her and his posture straightened a little from his usual gloomy slouch.

“What for?” he asked, and she pulled his hand out of his pocket so she could hug it. People stared, but she didn’t care - Haru had gotten used to getting stares, and getting stares because she was out with Legosi were infinitely preferable to the kind of stares she was used to. Disapproval was a lot easier to stomach than pity.

“For making the right decision. It took Louis to get you to do it, but the decision was still yours, so.. I’m proud of you for that. I know it wasn’t easy.” They walked for a while, and took a turn that she didn’t expect - haru frowned. “Legosi, where are we going?”

“The Hotel Rose. If I’m going to stop on tranquilizers, we need to talk about what we’re gonna do instead, and that’s a good place to do it, right?”

“They’re going to think we’re having sex, you know - especially since you aren’t all cut up this time.” Haru secretly hoped that it did go that direction. She didn’t expect it would, but she could hope.

“I know.” Legosi was calmer than she thought he’d be; she recognized the expression he was wearing - he was thinking. “But that’s ok.”

Haru grinned, and squeezed his fingers. “Well, if you’re sure! Let’s go. Louis can’t meet up again until after tomorrow anyways, so we’ve got all the time in the world.”

Ibuki felt a bead of sweat drip down his brow as he surveyed the main room of the Happy Heaven Jungle Market. A dancer gyrated and pumped to the music on the main stage, but while he was certain that she was very pretty, he didn’t have time to pay attention to that right now - right now, he had to make sure that his men were in place and ready to act should something go wrong. It was Friday night at the club - the night of Cosmo’s big event, and when an herbivore stripper had a big event in a carnivore bar, it could only spell one thing: trouble.

Or maybe that was just when Cosmo had a big event in a carnivore bar - she played so freely with her life that it was impossible to tell if she had real reason to worry or if he was just paranoid. He sighed, and checked his watch - 30 minutes until her performance started. She reminded him of the Boss sometimes - it was incredibly vexing.

Ibuki scanned the balcony that ran the circumference of the room - his two men, Koichi and Miles, nodded to him from behind their mirrored sunglasses, and he nodded back in acknowledgement. They were nothing special - low ranking grunts who didn’t do much more than get the job done - but they were nice enough lions, and more importantly they were both exceptionally loyal and well fed; no matter what happened, Ibuki knew he could trust them to not lose their cool.

Still, he’d insisted they wear nasal meshes to help block scent, just in case.

Ibuki shook his head and rubbed his temples, and decided to check his phone again. He opened up his conversation with Cosmo, and smiled when he saw her last photo - she was backstage with one of her coworkers, both smiling in front of Cosmo’s makeup counter.

<Excited for my big show!! Wish me luck, Grumpypuss - you can tell me what you think after the performance <3>
He lingered on the photo for a bit longer than he felt he should - he told himself he was just memorizing the details of the dressing room and the eagle who clung to Cosmo’s shoulder in the photo, but even he didn’t buy that lie.

Ibuki let out a long breath, shook himself loose to regain his focus, and waited for the show to begin.

Cosmo inhaled deeply, letting the heady air and pounding music of the club rush through her bones before she let it free. The smells were intoxicating - cigarette smoke, alcohol, sweat and arousal and hunger. It was a cocktail that made her feel like the most powerful woman alive. It was a cocktail that was the single most exhilarating scent in the world. It was a scent that, tonight, she was going to crack wide the fuck open and drink deep. She focused on her breathing as she felt the wheels on the bottom of her cage unlock and begin to roll across the stage - Chrissi was announcing for her, but she didn’t pay attention. She focused on the itch her costume sent rumbling through her flesh, the moisture beneath her skin, and the feeling of the beat in her bones. She’d made a special request for her set tonight - a modernized take on the classical piece the Danse Macabre. Soon, the music that blared through the club would fade out, and the lights would dim, and she would be the only animal in the world who mattered.

She would take her throne as queen of this place, and she would rule over her subjects with reckless abandon.

“... without further ado, allow us to present for your viewing pleasure the one, the only, Cosmo the Okapi!”

Cosmo’s ears twitched as the lights clicked off and the club went completely dark, shaking any residual stiffness from her limbs one last time before assuming her starting pose. She heard the shuffling of fabric as the curtain was lifted from her cage, and felt the heat of the four spotlights that flashed on against her skin and left her the only thing illuminated throughout the entire club.

When she heard the music start, her eyes snapped open, and Cosmo began to dance.

Her arms were crossed over her chest as the music began, hands each clasping her opposite shoulder and her hips held off kilter by the uneven bend of her long, graceful legs. Her body was concealed by layers of sheer black fabric, and she resisted the urge to smile when the chorus of gasps told her that her audience had realized what she wore.

It was a funeral shroud.

Cosmo’s body began to move to the beat in slow, powerful, jerking motions - she was ethereal, her hips gyrating in wide circles on tiptoed feet as she clutched herself, her shrouds swaying intoxicatingly in the multicolored light of the spotlights. The cloak that fell over her shoulders was the first to be shed, drifting to the ground like a shadow as her hips pushed out from side to side and her feet twisted in the cage. She could see their faces through her veil, entranced by her every move - every carnivore in the club’s eyes were locked on her, wondering what she would do next in this strange, slow dance. Her skirt was the next to go.

Gradually, the pace of the song accelerated, and as it did so did Cosmo’s dance, her movements growing slowly more frantic as the tempo increased. One by one she shed her garments, casting aside shawls, skirts, gloves, and stockings in a dance that sped and sped and sped towards the music’s crescendo until finally the music came to a sudden, abrupt halt, and Cosmo was left in nothing but her skin and her veil.
She stood in silence in the cage, heel tapping a beat against the cage floor, her chest rising and falling with the exertion of her dance, her hands out to her side. Slowly, she folded in on herself and drew trembling arms first to her face and then behind her head, clutching at her scalp in a morbid mockery of grief.

Then the music started again, and Cosmo flung her body upright and yanked her arms down as she tore off her veil and her face in one fluid motion, and cast the dripping, bloodied mess into the crowd.

The gathered carnivores erupted into raucous, ecstatic cheers and the music flew into a wild frenzy as Cosmo danced like she had never danced before, each movement raw, primal, and deathly. She clutched and tore at the synthetic, edible skin that wrapped her body and flayed it from her in dripping chunks, hurling it into the crowd as she danced her dance of death - she watched the ravenous chaos erupt as her eager admirers grappled over every piece that she discarded, every scrap she’d flung their way, desperate for a taste of their idol. All except for one - in the back of the room she saw him standing and watching, utterly transfixed in his stoic composure. Cosmo thrust her body up and grabbed the bars of her cage with the echoing thud of wet flesh against metal and locked eyes with Ibuki even as she rubbed her body up and down the bars to coat them with her false blood.

She decided that the animals that thirsted over her flesh, whose admiration and desire she grew drunk on were mere voyeurs to her spectacle - Ibuki was the only one among them who deserved her dance, and so she did not dance for any of them. She danced for herself and for him alone.

The music howled its skeletal rhythm and the spotlights twirled and flashed wildly about her form as she ripped and clawed and tore and shredded herself until she stood completely nude in the cage, false blood spraying across the crowd with every wild movement and filling the air with its pungent metallic odor. As the music reached its climax, Cosmo reveled in her accomplishment - she had transfigured herself into the living embodiment of hunger, a twirling, gyrating, thrusting creature of meat, blood, bone and flesh who enthralled the senses of any who dared gaze upon her splendor. No other dancer before or after would ever match her triumph, and Cosmo knew it.

This was what it meant to live. This feeling was what it meant to truly be alive. To be wanted. To be needed. To be in control.

The music stopped as suddenly as it started, and Cosmo stomped her foot to the last beat and flung her arms to her sides and her head back as she snapped into her final pose in the blood soaked cage, exposing her throat to the starving jeering masses. She looked down her nose at Ibuki, chest heaving rapidly in the quiet room. Throughout the entire performance, his only motion had been to take a single step forward, and that single step she’d managed to elicit from the stoic lion made her more drunk than the cries of desperate hunger from all the others combined. The lights went out with a loud electric CLACK, and the room plunged into darkness as her show came to an end.

“Gentlemen, this has been Cosmo, the Okapi bathed in blood!”

When the crowd screamed her name, Cosmo screamed her victory alongside them and was free.

From the shadows, another figure watched and smiled with a flash of green in the dark.

Chapter End Notes
The gang's all back together! Things are developing as we go along, and I'm very very excited about where we're going. If you have any feedback please leave it in the comments below - I'm eager to hear anything you have to say at all about the chapter; what I did well, what I can do better, what you'd like to see more of.
Chapter Summary

Cosmo hunts her prey. Ibuki looks in the mirror. Louis grapples with new and unfamiliar emotions - Legosi joins in the fun. Haru derives joy from her boys' suffering. Miles and Koichi aren't paid enough for this shit. The Green Knight takes the stage.

Chapter Notes

Happy 50k+ words! This is officially novel length. Wild, right? Thanks to everyone who helped me to get here, and to SegantEnfield in particular who's provided so much valuable writing advice. If you haven't already, go check out his story Feral Beasts and Fine Clothes - it's an absolute blast! Without further ado, on to the plot!

The Knight watched the spectacle play out from their phone’s screen, viewing the intoxicating dance across the marvelous bridge that modern technology provided. They reclined in their plush leather seat and fondled the grip of their cane with their spare hand, admiring the play of the high carbon steel through the texture of their silken glove. The dancer on the screen was unlike any he had ever seen - it was one thing to find an herbivore brave enough to perform in the Black Market, but it was another entirely to find one who was willing to feed her audience. An avaricious smile spread across the Knight’s lips as their tail slithered happily over the tile floor in the dark, the light from their phone glinting off their many reflective teeth. Yes, they thought - she would do perfectly.

Louis sat in his office considering the dark fluid in the wine glass that rested between his fingers. Let it be a testament to my love for you both - those words had rung in his mind since his reunion dinner yesterday, bouncing around his skull and crashing through his thoughts like a cheap arcade game. Love - such a strange word, especially one to apply to a vulgar wolf. What was love, anyways? Louis wasn’t quite sure he knew. He stood, turning away from the documents and plans spread out across his desk and stepped out onto the balcony, his gaze moving slowly first from the moon, then to the horizon, and finally settling on the gate to his placid domain and the bodies that hung from it. A coyote. A leopard. A mink. An alligator. He found himself musing on what those Pawns’ motivations had been - why they had chosen to serve under the White Court and carry out their vile drudgery.

Had they done it for love, he wondered? Louis swirled his wine and took a deep sip, shook his head, and stepped away from the gruesome sight.

No. The only love animals like that were capable of - romantic, fraternal, or otherwise - was for themselves and their bellies, and that was why he was better than them.
Ibuki held the umbrella steady in the mid October drizzle, his tail tucked neatly beneath the fabric shelter to keep itself safe from the steady rainfall. Cosmo clicked her lighter three times, shielding the little flame that sparked to life as she brought it first to the end of the cigarette gripped between her lips, and then up to Ibuki’s own. He couldn’t help but notice her eyes in the flickering fire the little plastic lighter produced - they were huge, glistening dark orbs that sparkled like the sea. As she lit his cigarette, Ibuki couldn’t shake the fear that those captivating eyes might drown him.

He reminded himself that he could not allow that - that unlike his colleagues, he had a unique responsibility to his Boss, a duty that only he could fulfill. He had no time for distractions.

And yet, the way that Cosmo smiled at him never failed to distract.

“Thanks for the cover, Ibuki,” she said as she shoved her lighter back into her bag. “Lousy forecast didn’t exactly warn about this, huh?” Cosmo stuck one hand out from under the umbrella, letting the rainwater pool in her palm and run through her fingers. Her fur was still slick from the shower after her performance - it was all Ibuki could do to ignore the way the light from the streetlamps danced in the sheen on her stripes. Ibuki swallowed - he was not accustomed to this.

“Of course.” As they began to walk down the quickly emptying alley street, Ibuki kept his pace measured and even to maintain the umbrella’s shelter over his evening’s star performer, deftly maneuvering it to keep her dry even as the night wind shifted and blew the rain droplets to differing trajectories. “Plenty of things are unreliable these days - forecasts especially so. A wise cat is a cat who always carries an umbrella.” Cosmo laughed and took a puff from her smoke, blowing it out into the rain and watching as the water washed away the cloudy vapor.

“Then you, my friend, must be a very wise cat indeed to carry one big enough for two.” Her heels clicked along the cobblestones as they walked, sending up little splashes of mist with each step. She was so loud compared to him; Ibuki’s movements were the soft, careful movements of a stalking predator, but Cosmo was a different sort of beast entirely. Nothing about her was quiet - from the patterns on her body to the way she moved, she demanded to be seen.

Was it really any surprise that he noticed her?

“So,” she continued, “what did you think of the show?” Ibuki swallowed.

“Do you want my honest opinion?” he asked, subconsciously tightening the distance between them when they passed a carnivore he thought he recognized from Cosmo’s performance.

“When you say it like that I’m a little less sure, but yeah, go ahead. Gimme them thoughts, Ibuki.”

“It was transcendent - some of the truest art I believe has ever graced the Market. It was also incredibly dangerous.” Cosmo snickered at his words and mockingly bumped him with her hip.

“Ibuki, I’m an herbivore in a meat market - everything I do is dangerous.”

“True,” he conceded, “but there is a difference between acknowledging the danger inherent to your station and provoking a den of beasts into a feeding frenzy. How did you convince your manager to go along with this, anyways? He’s always struck me as the worrying sort.”

“Takes one to know one, right?” she joked. Ibuki sighed, but it came with a rumbling laugh.

“If you must, I suppose.”
"I wasn’t the one who convinced Mr. Gohen - that was Louis. His objections sort of melted away at the idea that three Shishigumi would be there to provide security.” Cosmo looked over her shoulder to wave to Miles and Koichi who were following a few paces back - Ibuki rolled his eyes. He didn’t need to look at them to picture their doopy, sheepish grins in his head as they waved back, but he couldn’t blame them either - it wasn’t their fault they were Cosmo was more beautiful than they were smart. “It also helped that Louis provided the costume budget - meat imitations are expensive enough without needing to be makeup too."

“And that is another combination of words that I never thought I’d hear.” There had been more and more of those ever since Louis had taken over as Boss - the kid had an ambition that Ibuki admired. Cosmo giggled again, and he felt her fingers lace around his. Ibuki almost stopped in his tracks at the jolt of the physical contact - he was certain she’d felt him stumble. Instead he kept his pace, and took her hand in his - it was completely normal for a bodyguard to hold his ward’s hand. “What gave you the idea?”

Cosmo pondered the question for a bit, swinging their linked arms as she walked. “There’s a… visceral part of what it’s like to be me. I’m a prey animal who stokes and sates the hungers of predators - I like what I do, don’t get me wrong, but I also understand the sort of contradiction built into what I do, you know? I guess I just wanted to push that a little further - I’ve slaked my clients’ lust before, sure, but I’ve never filled their stomachs.” She laughed, and squeezed his hand. “You must think I’m pretty fucked up, huh Ibuki? Going against the natural order like that in a place like this.”

He chose his next words carefully. “No, I don’t, and I think you’ve got things backwards, Cosmo.”

“Oh?” She was leaning against his arm now. He wondered if she knew exactly what she was doing - of course she was. She must know - this was what she did; to think she wasn’t aware of what she was doing would be an insult to her as much as a claim that the Shishigumi were simply poor lions enslaved by their instincts would be an insult to him.

“You speak like when you’re on stage, your audience takes more from you than you take from them.” Ibuki casually stuffed his hand into his pocket, linking his arm with Cosmo’s. “But I saw you on that stage - if anyone there feasted, it was you, not the crowd.”

“And I saw you in the audience,” she answered him sweetly. “You were the only member of the crowd who didn’t seem hell bent on devouring me. Tell me, Ibuki, why was that?”

“You said it yourself,” he lied. “I enjoy your company too much.”

Legosi lay awake in his bed in 701. It was strange just how unfamiliar his own bed felt - he hadn’t realized it, but between bringing in distraught carnivores for treatment and cuddling with Haru either in the Hotel Rose or the Garden Club, he hadn’t spent a full night in his own bed in weeks. He could hear the snoring of the other boys around him - his friends, Jack, Durham, Miguno, Collot, and Voss - and Kabu’s empty terrarium still sat at the foot of his bed. The last time Legosi had crawled into this bed and not immediately collapsed from exhaustion, he had lived in a different world - a world where his biggest concerns were keeping a low profile and getting through the day without somebody calling attention to his species.

Legosi turned on his side and sighed. He had very different concerns now.

He let his worries play through his mind like a script - at the top, of course, was his worry that he might hurt Haru. He didn’t feel a compulsion to devour her, not exactly, but Gouhin’s words still
rang true; his mind was constantly plagued by doubts regarding the intentions behind his attraction. He wondered if, perhaps, his desire to touch her naked body was a thinly veiled desire to peel her skin from her bones, or his private longing to discover the taste of her lips on his own was a ploy to get his teeth close to her neck. He knew now, of course, that these haunting thoughts were his anxiety’s fault - fear responses triggered by the leftover impulses from his instincts firing when they shouldn’t. It was comforting, but unfortunately just knowing that didn’t make the worries go away. Second on his pile of worries now was Louis - he’d forgotten just how intense the stag could be. Legosi could tell when Louis was playing a role, and the version of Louis he’d met yesterday had definitely been playing a role. He wasn’t sure what the script was, but he also knew that when Louis wrote, he wrote tragedies and gave himself the starring role. Legosi liked tragedies - but only when they stayed on stage. He turned to stare at the wall, not bothering with the thin sheet draped over his shoulders anymore. Since yesterday, Louis had been on the forefront of his mind - he remembered the smell and taste of his sweat: perfume, stress, and blood. He remembered the steady, quick pace of Louis’ heart under the thin flesh of his neck, and how his own pulse had jumped when Louis’ breath had graced his ear. Louis set him on edge and caught him off balance anytime they did anything other than fight in a way that no other animal - not even Haru - could, and yesterday had been a very stark reminder of that.

Well, now he wasn’t thinking about his worries anymore. He was just thinking about Louis. Legosi gave up on the idea of sleep and reached over the edge of his bed to snag his phone, blinking away the spots in his eyes when the brightness of the screen momentarily blinded him. He always smiled at his phone’s background - it was him and Haru on their first official, not-escaping-a-criminal-organization date. That time seemed so simple, now.

<Are you awake?> His claws clicked loudly against his phone, but he was sure it wouldn’t wake anybody.

<Yeah. Why are you up?> Haru quickly responded. <I thought you were too tired to come see a movie tonight, mister Legroggy.>

He HAD been too tired - this was his second night off the pills, and Legosi was beginning to understand why it was a bad idea to completely disregard all of one’s physician’s advice regarding the proper use of a medication. For the entire day, he had been groggy, his throat had been dry, and he hadn’t been able to focus; he hadn’t slept well last night, and now he could hardly sleep at all. His brain was desperately trying to remember how to functionally produce sleep without chemical aids, and thus far it hadn’t quite cracked the case.

<I was… I think I forgot how to sleep without the pills :( my stomach feels a lot better though>

<Aw, I’m sorry.>

<Why are you still up?> Haru took a little longer to respond this time - maybe she’d fallen asleep?

<I miss your loud snoring - it’s too quiet in my dorm -w->

<Haru that’s cute> Legosi shuffled into his pillow and sat on his tail - he didn’t need to be waking the others up. <Can I talk to you about something?>

<Sure - you ok? Did you have another dream?>

He hadn’t had a dream, unless that dream about egg sandwiches when he dozed off in history class counted.
<No, no dreams - just thinking about Louis>

<What about Louis? :3>

Haru bounced a leg rapidly over her knee and clutched her phone in her devious little claws. She hadn’t expected Louis to respond to her text. She especially hadn’t expected him to start asking questions about her love life - specifically, her love life with Legosi.

<So,> he’d begun, <you must really like that dog of yours, hm? Have you picked out a collar and a leash yet?>

<Well that’s a loaded question - can I ask why you think that’s any of your business?> Haru would have been offended by the question if she wasn’t so intrigued - even when they were, well, not quite dating but having sex, Louis was impenetrable; that he’d be interested in her relationship now was just too much to pass up.

<Because based on the table conversation, it would seem that the two of you are yet to properly couple.>

<Louis for fuck’s sake can you please just say what you mean>

<I mean you two haven’t fucked yet, Haru. Is that plain enough language?> Haru’s ears perked up and squished awkwardly against the bottom of the bunk above her - that definitely wasn’t the topic of conversation she’d expected.

<And why do you think that’s any of your business???>

<Because you put up with my neglectful ass as long as you did for the sex, so the fact that you’ve put up with him for this long without the sex must mean that you really care.> Her relationship with Louis was not exactly a bucket of worms she wanted to tip over right now - the fact that he thought it was about the sex for her was so infuriatingly like him - but the line of questioning intrigued her.

<Where are you going with this. Or are you just trying to show off how much of a creep you’ve turned into since you became a mob boss?>

<Well, you DID ask me for help with your boyfriend. Do I really need to spell it out?>

<Wait wait wait - are you saying you wanna help me get laid????>

<Yes, Haru. I am saying that I want to help you get laid.>

<Okay… but why tho>

<Because underconfidence doesn’t suit you any more than cowardice suits him.> Haru felt like she’d just been insulted, but then she remembered that when she’d asked Louis for love what she’d gotten was a bribe, so he was probably just trying to be nice.

<On the topic of confidence, that was a pretty big thing you pulled with Legosi yesterday huh?>

<What do you mean.> Haru raised a brow at the question - it was pretty obvious what she was talking about.

<Oh, I dunno, maybe how you grabbed my boyfriend by the collar and practically shoved his nose
down your shirt? Or do you do that to lots of boys these days - you DO have plenty of lions lyin’ around ;3>

<Haru that is a disgusting insinuation - I would never have such low standards.> She was getting a kick out of teasing Louis, and she wasn’t entirely sure why - maybe it was just the familiarity of it. The fact that they were staying up way too late to talk about sex like teenagers were supposed to, instead of running a mob, stopping murders, or piecing together broken bodies. Her phone buzzed and she was pulled out of her thoughts - 1 New Message - Leggosi Sandwich

<Gimmie a second, Louis, Legosi needs me>

<What, are you his therapist now?>

<Quite literally yes - smooth> Swapping between two conversations would have been a lot more difficult if she wasn’t a bunny - it was rare that Haru appreciated the virtues of her species, but running at a higher default speed than everybody else was definitely one of them.

<What does he want to talk about anyways? Is he doing alright? Don’t tell me he relapsed.>

The problem with running at a higher speed than everybody else was that when you got blindsided by the coincidence of the two boys in your life suddenly wanting to talk to you about the other, it took you a little longer to recover.

<He wants to talk about you :3>

<What.>

Legosi had to think about what exactly he wanted to say for a bit before he hit send. He had a lot of complicated emotions about both of them - he had to be sure his message communicated his concerns accurately.

<Is it just me or was he a little… weird.>

Well that didn’t work out the way he wanted it to.

<That’s one way to put it. I think I’d use “obsessive”. I didn’t expect him to print out photos.>

<Yeah… but I think that’s normal for him.>

<Oh, so it’s normal for him to almost give himself a hickey with your teeth? Should I be worried?> Legosi sat up so quickly he almost hit his head on the top bunk.

<What? No! That’s not what I meant I would never do that to you.> He was halfway through typing another message when he got Haru’s response.

<I know - I’m just teasing. I’m actually a little jealous.>

<Why?> He adjusted how he sat in bed, getting comfortable again and slumping into his cushions. He had no idea what was going on, but alas, such was love.

<Even when Louis and I were together, I never got to see that… intense side of him. He was always this perfect, reserved, well mannered animal. It’s weird that the best way I can think of to describe how he was in bed is “polite” - I guess I’m just a little sad that there was a whole side of him that I never got to know.>
<He shoved his hand in my mouth and told me to bite him once.> Legosi was not exactly sure why he thought that would help; because it was a piece of Louis he had that he could share? He also wasn’t sure why the memory swam in his thoughts so distinctly right now - ordinarily when he thought about Louis, it was either regret at how he’d lost his temper at the festival, or concern about whether he was safe and eating well. But now, it was all sensation memories - smell, taste, and touch. Now, more than anything, he remembered the control that Louis exerted - and more specifically, how that control banished his meddlesome impulses.

Well, some of his meddlesome impulses.

Oh no.

<That’s very horny of him Legosi. You realize the horny energy that has right.>

OH NO.

Legosi’s head spun as he realized the simple truth that when he was around Louis, he did not fear his body. Under the stag’s supervision, his teeth and his claws didn’t feel so sharp, and he didn’t constantly find himself running comparisons in his brain between his body and the knife that Haru carried to protect herself from large carnivores like him.

<I guess?? I mneab atthe time I was mnostly scared> He was typing so fast he was hitting extra keys - Legosi cursed his enormous hands. <I don’t know - I just think he’s lonely and angry all the time.> Yes, there we go. De-escalate. <He needs friends.>

<Well… if he needs friends… one second.>

<Haru what are you doing>

<I said one second!!> Obediently, Legosi waited for his life to end.

_I unread group message: UNKNOWN NUMBER, Too Good for Me_

<Haru, what have you done.> The message was from the unknown number, and Legosi’s stomach fell through his feet when he realized who it was.

<Louis???>

This was way too fast.

.Ibuki stumbled as Cosmo dragged him along the walk, abandoning his attempt at covering himself with his umbrella in favor of keeping it ahead of her.

“Cosmo! Cosmo where are we going!” he called as she pulled him through the crowds, the denizens of the Black Market barely making way in time for them to pass. He could only imagine how this incident would impact the reputation of the Shishigumi - he could only hope that the fame Cosmo would doubtlessly garner from her unique performance would outpace his spot on the rumor mill. He glanced over his shoulder - Miles and Koichi were still following, but they were having a hard time of it. The crowd turned and stopped to gawk as he and Cosmo darted past, and the result was that his underlings were having to weave through passersby while he and Cosmo had an unobstructed path.

“Somewhere private!” she called back as she ran - even as he frantically tried to piece together all
the ways this could go wrong, Ibuki had to admire how she was managing to do this all in heels. He gave up on trying to control the situation to any degree and let Cosmo take him wherever it was she wanted to go - if they ran into trouble, well, that’s why he carried a gun. Suddenly, she shoved a door open and yanked him inside immediately after they rounded a corner. Ibuki looked around and took stock of his surroundings - they were in a candy shop. Chunks of honey marinated jerky hung from strings along the windows, and a wide variety of dazzling sweetened preserved meat morsels glistened from behind the glass counter. The atmosphere - which by all means should have been lively - was awkwardly stifled instead, and everybody in the store was staring at them.

Ibuki straightened himself and patted down his suit, wiping the excess water from its surface as his mane dripped on the floor. The onlookers immediately went back to doing whatever they’d been doing before at the gesture - one of the perks of being objectively terrifying was the instant ability to remind any animal that they should really be minding their own business. Well, any animal except for Cosmo - Ibuki had long since learned that trying to intimidate Cosmo was a lot like trying to intimidate a rock.

Cosmo hid behind the door frame, waiting until she saw Miles and Koichi run past before turning back to Ibuki and heading back to the door. “There,” she said, satisfied, “that’s better.”

“Please enlighten me as to how losing most of your security detail has improved the situation,” Ibuki grumped, wringing some water out of his mane. “Because the only improvement I can see is for any audience members who decided to follow us out.”

“The improvement, Grumpypuss,” Cosmo said as she pushed open the door and the nickname made Ibuki’s fur stand on end, “is that you don’t need to look tough for your subordinates anymore, so we can actually walk and talk. Come on, there’s someplace I wanna show you.”

Ibuki followed her back out onto the street - the dwindling crowds seemed to have already lost interest in their brief spectacle and had returned to going about their evening business before shuffling home in the small hours of the night. Ibuki sighed as they stepped out of the store, leading with his umbrella even though at this point he wasn’t sure how much wetter he could really get.

“I’m not going to get out of this unscathed, am I?” he asked wryly as Cosmo led him back the way they’d come and ducked into a narrow alleyway.

“Of course you aren’t. I can tell something’s on your mind, and I intend for you to at least admit it to me.” Ibuki prided himself on his composure - cool, collected, professional. He bore his responsibilities as Louis’ right hand man as a badge of honor, and wore his persona as part of the Shishigumi’s elite guard exuberantly. And yet, Cosmo never failed to throw him off his groove - something about her defied understanding. She and Louis were so alike in that way - for a moment, he thought that it might be a trait common to all actors, but he rather doubted it. They were animals above the natural order of things, and both of them shook his world to its foundations.

“Fine,” he said, dropping his pretense. “I do have something on my mind.” Looking around the Market, Ibuki thought on how he very often had something on his mind - it was a common understanding that the Black Market was the uncomfortable fate of a small majority of the city’s herbivores. To be pulled into the Market’s hooked net, cut apart, refined, and turned into product. Ibuki knew firsthand that that understanding of the Market’s hunger was a myth - it did the same to carnivores too. He knew what he was, and he was comfortable with it - but he still thought about it more than he liked. “Louis told me what you said, the night you had your first meeting. That he should get out while he still could.” Cosmo nodded.

“I know he’s not going to, but I still think he should. He’s a nice kid - I see what he’s doing, and
I’m grateful. But…” she sighed, and took his arm to guide him down a winding path which climbed a steep hill. “We both know what this city does to niceness.”

Ibuki let the comment hang in silence for a time - she was right. Niceness did not long survive in this line of work. He remembered the sorts of jobs that his old boss had him do - Ibuki did not allow himself to feel guilt for his actions; he did not have that luxury. What he did carry guilt over, though, was how easy those actions had become - how easy it had been to twist other animals into the very same fate that he had escaped all for the sake of the purple pin on his boss’ lapel. It had taken Louis to remind him that a soft hand was no less valuable than a fist. “I’m not so sure.”

“Really?” Cosmo sounded surprised as she gently led him up the hill and onto the fire escape of an old abandoned building, the rusted iron steps rattling under their weight. They were well and thoroughly alone now, so it’s not like anybody could overhear him if he showed the slightest bit of vulnerability.

“Louis is… unique,” he explained. “You say he’s a nice kid, and he is. But I’ve also seen him eat a man’s leg and made him watch. You’re right that he’s nice, but he’s also hard - he understands rage. If anyone can survive the Market, I think it’s him.” She nodded as he spoke, eyes fixed on the rain that dripped from the edge of the umbrella. The pair stepped off the fire escape and onto the roof of the defunct butchery, and she led him to the edge - the city stretched out below them like a concrete plain, thousands of buildings reduced to so many blinking blades of grass. The horizon vanished into the curtain of October rain - somewhere in the distance, boats moved as lazily as pillbugs over the waves, evidenced only by the faint lights blinking from their bridges. It was breathtaking - from here, the whole world seemed so small, and so far away. He didn’t know how long he stared out at the city for - until he heard the clicking sound of Cosmo’s lighter, time didn’t seem to pass. “Cosmo,” he asked, “why do you do what you do?”

“What do you mean?” she snickered around her cigarette. “The dancing? You saw it, you know - I get off on the power. On being in control. It makes me feel…” She sent the smoke on her breath into the rain, watching it disappear as she thought of what word to use. Ibuki could feel his heart against his ribs. “Real,” she settled on, taking another deep drag and dusting ash from her cigarette to the ground. “It makes me feel real.”

“That I understand. But you’re so careless, Cosmo,” his words were heavy as he spoke them into the rain, standing next to her and watching the nocturnal city live out its night without one lion and one okapi. From here, it didn’t seem like their absence changed much. “Aren’t you worried that one day, you might lose control?” She laughed, and the sound surprised him. He turned to look to her - she was smiling casually, leaning her weight on one leg as she looked out over the city and smoked her cigarette. She was more than casual - she was at peace.

“I don’t worry that I’ll lose control, because I know that I will, someday.” Her voice was calm more than anything else - a tone Ibuki was familiar with: acceptance. “I’ve been here for eight years. It’s true what they say about this place - it’s heaven for carnivores, and hell for herbivores; but I’d rather die in hell than live in a heaven that’s a lie. One day, I’m going to die here - I’m going to die being torn apart and eaten alive, and nobody will miss me when I’m gone. But until then-” Ibuki interrupted her, grabbing her shoulder and turning her to face him. He was stiff, and he looked down at her through his glasses, not daring to angle his head. His paw was huge on her shoulder - she was small, but she was anything but weak. He felt his breath quicken, and his eyes etched her face indelibly into his mind - the way her pattern framed her face, how her fur stood up around her ears in the damp, how her eyes glistened in the faint moonlight. She swallowed, and waited for him to speak - he could see the question in her eyes. Is this when I die? Will you devour me, Ibuki?
“You’re wrong,” he answered, completely immobilized by his own words.

“... how, Ibuki? Tell me how I’m wrong.”

“When you die, Louis will miss you. And... I, I will miss you, Cosmo.” His voice was quiet and stern. He tore his gaze away from her - he was a lion of the Shishigumi, he should not be doing this. Louis relied on him - he could not be doing this.

When Cosmo’s hand touched his cheek, she stole him away from his torment.

When her lips touched his, all thoughts of duty and responsibility fled his mind, if only for this one moment where neither of them mattered.

Ibuki let the umbrella fall from his hand, and they kissed in the rain as it drifted to the street below.

Louis held his phone like it was a live grenade, staring in horror at the shiny little device. He could not - would not - believe what was happening. His wine glass lay shattered on the balcony floor, and he already knew he would never get the stain out of his slacks - but that was of minimal concern. Pants could be replaced.

Dignity and poise? Those were a little bit harder.

<Louis???> The message on his phone stared him down like an accusation. His pulse hummed in his neck - he felt hot, and he didn’t know why.

<Yes, Legosi - this is Louis. Haru, why did you give him my number? I know that I keep odd hours, but I’ll have you know that I do like sleeping sometimes.> Of course, that was the solution - if he just made an ass of himself, maybe this awkward situation would evaporate.

<Louis, Rex!!! Be nice!!!> Louis marveled at their combined skills - somehow, Legosi and Haru had managed to corner him when they weren’t even in the same fucking neighborhood. He imagined that the credit should mostly go to Haru - she was the mastermind here, she must have been. Legosi would backpedal to avoid being forward. <Listen, boys - you’re both talking to me about each other, so now you can ALSO talk to EACH OTHER, and if you need me, I’m right here.> Louis could see the grin on Haru’s face - he needed to stop underestimating that rabbit. If underconfidence looked bad on her, then idiocy looked even worse on him. He wasn’t about to give Legosi the chance to get in the first word.

<Alright, then, fine. Legosi, I know this might seem comically rapid, but it’s time for another intervention.>

<Haru I told you I didn’t take the pills did you tell him I took the pills>

<That’s not what he means just wait this is funny> He could feel her mocking him. He could feel the impudent joy Haru was getting from this. He wasn’t sure if he was more upset that he was being paraded around like he was, or more pleased that for once, he’d given Haru something to smile about instead of just easing her pain while she eased his.

<Haru might think it’s funny, but I think it’s tragic. Legosi, why haven’t you had sex with Haru yet? Surely it’s been long enough.> Louis found his mind wandering, imagining how they might look tangled up with each other. Gray and white, and perhaps with some red in the-

Oh look! Time to think about literally anything else.
Ah, Legosi dropped his phone, how quaint.

He right tho :3>

Louis wondered what he was doing - why was he doing it? Was it because after all this, he still loved Haru, and the guilt that he’d abandoned her tore at his heart like the jaws of a wolf? Was it because for whatever reason, all of the metaphors in his internal monolog were taking canine features as of late? Was it simply because, as much as he might try to hide it, he was cripplingly lonely and desperately longed for friendships he knew he didn’t deserve?

Where were Cosmo and Ibuki? They should have been back by now, and he needed them.

There are a Lot of Reasons. It isn’t safe! I don’t know what I would do, and even if I did I’m big! Haru is very small!>

Do you need me to hold your hand, pup? I’ll have you know that between tackling a lion and giving into Haru’s advances, the latter is much simpler.> Louis immediately regretted that text the moment he sent it. His mind, fuzzy from alcohol, was deep into the process of betraying him - he could picture it clearly, Legosi crouched over the bed, Haru’s words of encouragement, his hands gently rubbing the wolf’s back as-

Louis cut himself off again, digging his hard fingernails into his leg to banish all perversions from his mind. It was just hormones, he lied to himself. It was the end of the season, and his feral nature was merely reminding him that the ideal window to produce an heir this year was rapidly closing. He didn’t even think about how his place in the thoughts he was trying to avoid contradicted that theory. Louis paced in agitation - why was he the one getting flustered by this? That should be Legosi. He was the experienced mentor providing advice to his clumsy student - the relationship here should have been very clear.

And yet, as with all things related to Legosi, it was not.

Do. Do you think that would work?> Louis had to fumble to catch his phone and keep it from plummeting over the edge of the balcony when he read Legosi’s message.

I was trying to mock you!> he rapidly typed in response, almost shattering his screen protector with the force of his thumbs. Have you no decorum? Do you really think Haru would stoop to accept a voyeur? Forget I said anything.> Louis fumed. <Idiot.> He moved wearily from the balcony to his desk and sunk into his chair. These animals were impossible.

Haru stifled her cackling, unable to believe the shit that was going down before her eyes - creating this group chat had been the absolute best idea. She knew that they’d be annoyed with her later, but she didn’t care - she had successfully managed to get Legosi and Louis to worry about stuff that teenagers were supposed to worry about.

Look Louis I think you’re making a lot of assumptions. I think we should keep all our options on the table.> She could practically hear Louis’ indignant screeching and the heart attack that she was no doubt giving Legosi - she should probably be a little more sensitive, but she just couldn’t help herself; this was the closest thing to a normal conversation she’d had in recent memory and she was living. It didn’t hurt who it was with either - seeing Louis angry like this was surprisingly therapeutic. She’d seen him frustrated or even indignant before - but she’d never seen him allow himself to be flustered. It felt like late at night, talking dirty on brightly lit screens where nobody else could see, barriers that had been in place for so long were finally coming down. It was a side
of him she’d never seen before; it was strange, but she felt like she was starting to really get to
know him for the first time. Who knew that life altering trauma was all it took to open the door to
long fortified emotional walls? <I also think we should change the subject before Legosi dies
though> She slumped in her bed, unfolding her legs and pulling the covers up to her shoulders.
Visions of wolf swam through her head, and for now, she was content with that - though her cheeks
went hot when she realized that the strong, gray chest she imagined was encircled by red hands.

<Thx Haru. Sorry.>

<No need! I pushed it too far, I should be apologizing to you haha> Suddenly, she was as happy to
be changing the topic as Legosi was. Things were confusing enough as they were, she did not need
any more complications in her life right now. How could she even be thinking about Louis like
that? She’d just gone over how she felt like she barely knew him, this was ridiculous.

<Ugh, you two are just adorable. Fine, I’ll drop it - but you will be hearing from me again, pup.
Don’t think you’ve gotten out of this conversation forever.>

<Louis is… is this just how you apologize to people? Because really, you don’t need to, I’m fine.>
Haru’s phone buzzed - another private message from Legosi? Why couldn’t this be part of the
message he’d just sent to the group chat?

<Louis is really lonely, isn’t he?>

<Yeah. He is.>

<Why don’t we invite him to lunch tomorrow?>

<Why don’t YOU invite him to lunch tomorrow?>

2 new group messages: Ass-dler and Leggosi Sandwich

She should really change Louis’ contact name in her phone, she wasn’t that mad at him anymore.

<Also why do you keep calling me ‘pup’. I’m taller than you.>

<Start acting like the carnivore you are, and maybe I will consider stopping.>

She was about to send a snappy retort telling them to behave when Legosi sent another message.

<Hey, Louis? Why don’t we all have lunch tomorrow? It’s a saturday, so Haru and I won’t have
classes. I think your insults work better in person anyways.>

<That’s a great idea!> Haru texted. <You can tell us all about what you’ve been working on with
your Scary New Job.>

<Ha. I could, but I won’t. Lunch sounds good though - how does noon work?> Ah! Score!

<Noon sounds great! :3 Legosi and I know a noodle place that’s not far from your place. I’ll send
you the name, we can meet there.>

<Cool, it’s a date.> Haru snickered at Legosi’s word choice.

<Sure. A date.>
Cosmo pushed Ibuki clumsily through the door of her apartment, the two of them stumbling blindly into the darkened space. His breath was hot against her teeth, and his tongue gripped wetly against hers almost like she was licking a beach. Cosmo had never gotten used to feline tongues - most of her customers weren’t big on kissing, and this was the most extensive experience she’d ever had. They turned, and Ibuki pressed her against the wall - or did she pull him? She couldn’t tell - their hands excitedly exploring each other’s body like they were schoolchildren out past curfew. His lips were soft and powerful, and she shivered at the way he moaned when she caught one of them between her teeth. Her hands slid up and down Ibuki’s back, feeling the lumps of his muscles and his scars even as she pressed the water from his drenched clothes and breathed in the scent of his sopping mane. He reeked, but she didn’t care - for now, they weren’t mobsters, they weren’t dancers, they weren’t herbivores or carnivores or anything else. They were just animals - animals who could be honest with each other.

Ibuki’s hands were the only part of him which there was nothing clumsy about - the care with which they explored her body, gently squeezing and caressing her every curve and angle was nothing short of artistic. She wondered how alike sex was to butchering - finding the cuts of meat, separating them from bone and peeling them away from each other. The thought sent lightning up her spine - it wasn’t a thought that was alien to her, but Ibuki’s hands were the first pair she’d known in a long time which didn’t make her wonder if her partner was thinking about how her blood might taste. Ibuki moved with purpose and without fear - and more importantly, he moved without restraint. There was no ounce of him that was holding back a beast which at any moment would tear her apart and devour her, and she knew why. Ibuki did not suppress himself because he was himself - Ibuki and his beast were no different; they were one and the same, and it excited her. She gasped when she felt his knee between her legs and felt her body go warm and stiff. Ibuki pulled away, breaking their long kiss with her fingers still knotted in his mane.

“What’s wrong?” he said, his voice calm and steady even through his panting. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, no not at all,” she replied. “Just surprised, is all.”

“Why?” The genuine concern in his voice did things to Cosmo she hadn’t experienced in a long time - it was as though by willingly giving power over to her, he robbed her of authority. She smiled, hooked her hands behind his head, and pulled his forehead flush with hers.

“Because, Ibuki, I am used to having sex with selfish men, and you are not a selfish man.” He grinned, and she saw the steam puffing on his breath, and then they were kissing again. Cosmo stripped her jacket and kicked her shoes off, letting them fall discarded into a pile at her feet as she pressed forward into Ibuki. He stumbled backwards onto her bed and she fell on top of him, tail swishing as she wrapped his tie around one of her hands to keep him steady while her other began to unbutton his jacket.

“Mmf, Cosmo,” he murmured into her mouth as she carefully undid each button by feel, drawing her hand closer and closer to his neck and tighter and tighter into his tie. “Cosmo,” he murmured again, and she planted her weight on his hips, her legs on either side of his own. When she reached the last button of his jacket, she felt his hand wrap tightly around her wrist - not enough to hurt her, just enough to keep her arm from moving. “Cosmo, wait.” She could hear his voice catch in his throat when he spoke, and she carefully released his tie from her grip, eyelashes gracing his cheek with one last butterfly kiss as she broke away and sat up.

“Ibuki, is everything-” she began, but her heart jumped in her chest and she stopped when she saw him. His shirt was completely soaked, and through the translucent fabric she saw them - ugly black lines drawn in ink across his body that portioned him off as product. Ibuki turned his head away, his proud brow drooping in shame as she saw him under her, exposed and vulnerable. “Ibuki, I’m.
I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“It’s fine, Cosmo,” he said softly, and she rolled off his body to let him rise. “I… apologize. I should not have allowed you to see me this way.” He shuffled his legs over the side of the cheap bed and began to rebutton his jacket, carefully smoothing it down as he did. “Before, when you asked me why I was the only animal in your audience who didn’t look at you like a meal, I told you it was because I enjoyed your company. I lied.” She heard the buttons pop through the saturated fabric one at a time as he spoke, and scooted across her bed to sit behind him, intent on his words. “When I saw you dance, you reminded me of myself - you were such a spectacle, there in a room full of beasts who saw you as a piece of meat or an image for their consumption. The way you took that and used it for yourself transfixed me - there on the stage, their desire became your power, and I, from the shadows, was drawn to your light. I did not see you as a meal because I enjoy spending time with you, Cosmo. I did not see you as a meal because I admire you.” He sniffed, and put his hands in his lap.

“May I see them?” she asked, moving up to sit beside him. He stiffened, and she took his hand in hers, gently massaging his knuckles.

“What?”

“Your tattoos - may I see them?” she repeated. She looked to him, and he again turned away, avoiding eye contact. Cosmo reached out and took his chin in her hand, and turned him back to face her. His eyes were so deep and so full of sadness; she could only hope her own would prove a salve for his pain. “Ibuki, you don’t need to hide from me. When a customer pays to see me, I give them their desire, and they give me the power I want - it’s an exchange, a transaction, simple as that. You are different - when I danced on that stage tonight, it was the first time I danced for anybody other than myself. If you say no, I’ll understand - but I want you to know that nothing you can show me will make me respect you any less. Life’s too short for that.” The lion slouched, and she could see the streetlights through the window dance in the water droplets on his glasses as his hand rose to cup her face. They sat there for a long moment - each holding the other, quiet in their mutual understanding.

Slowly, Ibuki took Cosmo’s hand, lowered it to his shirt, and pressed her palm against the top button.

Koichi leaned against his knees, panting. He really needed to lay off the bean buns - he hadn’t realized that membership in the Shishigumi would mean so much running. Maybe it was just because he’d been assigned as part of Cosmo’s security detail - they’d been warned the Okapi was unpredictable, but Koichi hadn’t predicted that she’d be this unpredictable. He jogged off the soreness in his legs a little, putting a gloved hand to the button on his earpiece.

“Yo Miles - any luck?”

“Nah, they’re gone. How ‘bout you?”

“Nope,” Koichi groaned while he rubbed the tension out of the small of his back. “Cosmo’s a really good runner, huh? How the hell d’you think she pulls that off in heels?”

“No clue,” Miles laughed on the other end of the line, “but come on dude, she’s an ungulate and you saw how much cardio she fuckin does on stage, are you really surprised?”

“Aren’t… aren’t Okapi technically a kind of giraffe??” Koichi really was not used to this sort of
physical activity - he was much better as a bouncer than a distance runner and right now it showed.

“What??? No, that can’t be right. They don’t have the Neck.”

“Ahh, of course, because necks determine what species you are. Got it,” he replied sarcastically.

“Look, we can talk about what is or isn’t a Giraffe later, for now we gotta find Ibuki and Cosmo. The boss will KILL us if we tell him we lost them. We had one job, Miles. One job!” Koichi sniffed the air and cursed - the rain made it effectively impossible to pick up on a scent trail of any kind, so he was left with guesses and conjecture. He looked down a nearby alley - it looked good enough, so he may as well give it a shot. He slowed his pace to a brisk walk as he made his way down the alley, fixing his collar. The rain was letting up, but he was already drenched so it didn’t make much difference. Koichi grumbled and took out his actual phone to open up the zoozle app - *Are giraffes ungulates?* - well, shit, he felt dumb now.

“Yo, Miles, I’m a dumbass - turns out we’re both right. Giraffes are Ungulates too.” He frowned when he didn’t get a response. “Miles? You there?” He scowled and took his earpiece out, slamming it against his palm and too distracted to see the form creeping up behind him. “Damn interference, fuckin’ things never work when you need them to.” Satisfied with his percussive maintenance, Koichi replaced the device in his ear, stood up, and went back to his search.

He didn’t see his assailant until the knife was already buried in his back.

Overhead, a drone sped quietly away through the night.

Cosmo sat behind Ibuki in awe, delicately tracing her fingers along the lines drawn indelibly over his flesh. He shivered under her fingers and she snatched her hand away as though afraid she’d hurt him. “What?” he asked. “Do you pity me?”

“No,” she said, putting her hands on either side of his spine, taking pride in how his back arched as she worked her palms down his back, “they’re impressive scars. Why would I pity you, Ibuki? You’ve survived something very, very few make it out alive from - I thought you Shishigumi were all about battle scars.”

“Battle scars?” he laughed. “Is that what they are now?”

“What else would they be?” Cosmo ran her fingers over a long curved line that traced around his shoulder - *Muscle Building*, it read. “They’re a story about what you survived. Sounds like a battle scar to me.” The reminder that animals would do this to each other was sobering; the consumption of herbivores in the Market was old news, but she found herself wondering how many of her clients had taken a drug made from someone like Ibuki before their night for the sake of a little extra enjoyment. A little extra kick.

She understood hunger, but that made her sick.

“Hmph.” Ibuki grumbled and shook some water from his mane, spraying Cosmo with a fine mist - she didn’t mind, she thought it was cute. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.” Her fingers brushed up his flesh, tracing the line over his shoulder and onto his chest. Her other hand joined it on the opposite side, starting low, at his hip, and tracing the tattoo as it snaked up his body then up, up, and over his shoulder until her arms wrapped his strong chest in a gentle hug. She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, breathing deep as she let herself relax against him. She could hear the wind cycling in his lungs and feel the slow, steady beat of his heart - even through her thin, wet sweater, the heat coming off his body was exhilarating.
“It’s easy,” she whispered, “to miss what you don’t wanna see. Sometimes that’s a good thing, but… not always.”

“Hmmm,” he groaned as she rubbed his chest, and she grinned, “when would that be a good thing?”

“Well, do you think you could eat Okapi if you saw my face on it whenever you did?” It was an innocent question - a teasing one, but an innocent one.

“Ha. Good point.” Ibuki rumbled and drew his arms through hers, letting them rest at his sides and pin her arms to his body. He shivered again, and this time she didn’t worry that she might break him. She did, however, appreciate the irony in her worrying about that when he was the Lion. Stereotypes really didn’t mean shit, huh? He rose onto his knees, pulling her up with him. Cosmo yelped softly as he pulled her to her knees, and she felt her pace quicken as Ibuki loosened his grip on her arms to turn around in the bed, his huge hands coming up to brush her jawline and grip her shoulder as he pressed her back into the mattress. She marveled at the way he moved - everything he did was firm, but nothing he did could be described as forceful. He didn’t make her do anything - his hands made requests of her, and she indulged him. Ibuki stared into her eyes as his thumb traced the path of her pattern along her face - Cosmo laid back and brought her hand to grasp his, holding it against her cheek as she got comfortable underneath him. “What is this we have now, Cosmo?” he asked, so uncharacteristically uncertain. She laughed.

“I’m not sure - I think it depends on what you want, Ibuki. Do you want my flesh?”

“No,” he said, and she slid her other hand down his belly and to his belt. He gasped as she took the buckle in her fingers, and brought her knees up against his hips.

“My body then, do you want my body?” she asked, biting her lip as she carefully undid the buckle and pulled his belt loose from his pants, tossing it off the side of the bed.

“Mhh… no, Cosmo. I do not want your body,” he answered faithfully, and she could see the way his muscles tensed when she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his briefs. She looked up at him, and he looked down at her - the only light that shone on them was cast in the blues and reds of the late night flesh market that streamed in through the open window and the pale light of the moon. Their eyes sparkled - she had to know. She suspected, but she had to know.

“Then tell me, Ibuki,” she whispered as she pulled down his briefs with one hand and drew his mouth to her ear with the other, her heart fluttering in her breast, “tell me what it is you want.”

“I want you, Cosmo,” he whispered into her ear, and then there was a crash and he collapsed limply on top of her.

All Cosmo saw before the dart struck her neck and consigned her to sleep was a silhouette standing in the doorway to her apartment and the light that danced off its bright green pin.

Free grumbled irritably, bleary eyed as he stalked the palace in the early morning. Oh sure, he caught shit whenever he ran late because he was chasing a little tail, but the moment Ibuki decides to run off with the Boss’ pet Okapi HE got stuck with early morning driving duty? Yeah, sure, that was fair. He worked the toothbrush over his jaws vigorously as he grumbled his way down the stairs, taking a swig from his water bottle and spitting into a potted plant on his way down. Ibuki couldn’t at least have given him a day’s notice before he went AWOL? It was one thing to go missing, but it was another to do it without warning and load all your responsibilities on your
friend who had spent the entirety of last night failing to get laid. The whole thing just made him mad - or, more accurately, hurt his pride.

“What’s that smarmy, four eyed pussycat got that I don’t anyways,” Free grumbled, his slippers flopping angrily down the steps into the common room at the bottom floor. Dope, who was reclining on the central sofa with a sleeping young panther - his latest boy toy - turned to greet him with a lazy wave and a laugh as he entered the room; Free sneered at him. Was everybody here having sex except for him?

“Morning, Free - isn’t 9 a little early for you? I think you should probably put on some pants before you drive the Boss anywhere.” Free just flipped him off.

“Fuck off, Dope,” he grumbled, slapping his way to the front door and replacing the toothbrush between his teeth with a sprig of silvervine to help him calm down. He tugged the heavy keyring from his robe’s pocket, cycling through the bulky, outdated things one at a time. “Lessee… that’s the pantry key, that one’s the playroom, this is the product locker… ah, here we go. Front, front fuckin’ door.” He dragged a paw down his face as he jammed the key into the lock and turned it until he heard the loud CLUNK of the tumblers falling into place - he really needed his coffee. He swung the door open, blinking the sunlight out of his eyes as he stepped out onto the front step and swung the door closed behind him. The sooner he got the day started, the sooner he could get it over with.

Free turned to head down the front steps and get the car ready, but the moment he turned away from the door he froze. His fur all stood on end, and all traces of sleep were gone from his eyes - the smell of Lion’s blood hit him all at once, and in a split moment Free went from a sleepy male who’d had his pride hurt to a fearsome Shishigumi out for revenge.

At the bottom of the front steps, two bodies sat back to back, naked and tied together with barbed wire. He recognized them immediately - it was Koichi and Miles, the pudgy guys Louis had assigned to Ibuki and Cosmo as security detail. Their bodies were covered in stab wounds, their throats had been cut, and their arms ended in bloody stumps. Their hands had been stuffed into their mouths, forcing their jaws open grotesquely wide - but that was irrelevant. The insults done to his subordinate’s bodies could be avenged, and their souls could be laid to rest. What Free noticed most were two things: one, their eyes had been removed, and replaced with sparkling green enamel pins - a chess knight surrounded by roses. And two, a sign written in blood hung from their necks - “Come See Us One Night Only - October 31, a Performance Like No Other!”

Below the words there was a crude painting of two creatures in a cage.

An Okapi and a Lion.

Chapter End Notes

Intimate moments full of character development, you say? Did you mean "opportunities for tragedy to strike"? The Green Knight has taken the stage, but who are they? What do they want? And how did they know about the Shishigumi’s meddling? It looks like Louis wasn't as ahead of his enemies as he thought he was. This chapter gave me a lot of trouble to write, especially the texting conversation between our main three; something about casual conversation is so hard to capture, probably because it's most of what we do in real life so we have the most experience...
with it. As always, if you have any questions, feedback, or advice, leave it in the comments section! I’d love to see what you liked, what you didn’t, what you want to see more of or what you hope does (or doesn’t) happen next. Thanks for reading, and see you next chapter!
Chapter Summary

Cosmo and Ibuki discover their predicament. Louis admits that he is not infallible. Haru says "yeah no shit". Legosi considers his instincts. The Chess pieces array themselves upon the board. First move: Green Knight Advance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a quiet complex - an oasis of serenity overlooking the daily bustle of the docks district. She ran her claws along the white, plasticine wall in admiration, letting them click in the gaps between the panels and listening intently to the sharp sound of her boots striking the tiled floor. She was a well dressed animal - she prided herself on appearances, and her costume demonstrated that pride. She wore an elegant, crisp suit of iridescent green like the shell of a bluebottle fly, her silvery undershirt and deep black tie starkly contrasting their counterparts. Her face hid in the shadow of an extravagantly widely brimmed hat which left her winning, sharp toothed smile her only visible feature. As she walked down the peripheral halls of her domain on the long, wide spiral that led down to the depths below even the darkest reaches of depravity her lair housed, her scaly tail swished to the staccato rhythm her heavy cane tapped along the floor - she hadn’t been this excited about her position in quite a long time. The sophisticated animal tucked her cane under one arm and quickened her pace as she descended the staircase into the depths of her complex - pristine white tile traded its place for cold concrete, and sanitary silence was washed out by the distant thrum of dance music that bled through the wall. She paid no attention to the door that offered admittance to the garden of earthly delights she ruled over - she had something much more hellish in mind than that.

... following a tragedy this morning related to a high profile case of predation as Dax the Cougar, visiting CEO of the Bross Sporting Goods corporation devoured his business partner and fellow integration activist Tsuchi the Gazelle of the Horns Conglomerate. Local authorities failed to...

Louis ignored the stream of information blaring from the cheap TV mounted above the outdoor seating area and tried not to hyperventilate. Waiting was agony, but he dared not text his friends - until he knew how the White Court had figured out who was stalking them, he couldn’t afford to take any chances. His ears twitched at every stray noise and he saw lurking shadows around every corner - he hated this suspense. The waiting played against his instincts in the worst way possible - the core of his brain screamed at him to run, to flee, to escape the danger it knew lurked just behind the corner. The problem was that it was an aimless command; even if he was willing to stoop low enough to cower and fly before the agents of the Court who were no doubt watching his every move, he had no idea who or where they were. Thus, instead of his instincts providing a useful fear that Louis could channel into focused, targeted action, they just screamed at him to be anywhere other than where he was right now. Louis grumbled miserably and slurped on his complimentary water, and faced the fact that he’d been trying to avoid confronting all morning: he’d been overconfident in his crusade against the Court, and now Cosmo and Ibuki were paying the price for it.
He was about to hurl himself into another mental cycle of anguish and self flagellation when he saw them approaching. Almost immediately he felt his heart rate slow and the muscles in his hands loosen - his palms were wet, and when he looked to check, he saw that they were bloody. He wiped them off on the hem of the tablecloth and tugged on his gloves, straightening his posture to maintain his decorum in front of his friends. They were chatting as they walked down the hill towards the alley shop - they looked so... happy. He sighed, and pushed his troubles behind the wall in the back of his mind - all he had to do was get through a pleasant lunch, and then he could excuse himself. It was a simple role - one he'd played many times before. Louis waved, and put on his mask.

“Hi Louis!” Haru’s voice tugged at his face, her warmth reaching under its edges and threatening to tug it off. A bead of sweat ran down his brow. A trickle of blood ran down his sleeve. Something squirmed under his skin, begging to be let free. Louis tucked his hands in his lap and forced a smile, nodding to them both.

“Legosi, Haru, good to see you both. Thank you for inviting me out; it’s good to get away from work sometimes.” He was sure he used to be better at improv. Legosi started to say something, but froze, his eyes locking on Louis with an uncomfortable intensity. He saw the wolf’s nose twitch, and he knew that Legosi could smell his blood. He wondered if Legosi could smell his guilt too.

“Louis, what’s wrong,” Legosi asked, taking a step forward and scooting his seat in at the table. Louis shook his head.

“Nothing, I-” Legosi cut him off.

“Louis, you’re bleeding.” The thing squirming under his skin crawled up his throat, and out his mouth. Louis felt his mask crack.

“I need your help.”

She ran her gloved hand along the rail as she descended into the bowels below the polished facade of her lair, her steel toed boots tapping out a song as she danced down the concrete steps. She ignored her phone as it buzzed away in her pocket - she would answer that meddlesome Duke later when she was good and ready and had finished inspecting her new toys. One level, two levels, three levels, four… she inwardly wondered how many of her patrons suspected what went on below the Knight Lite - how many were suspicious of how many disappearances happened within a few blocks of the club and the corporate levels above it, or the fact that no subway or maintenance tunnels passed underneath the building even though, on paper, it was only supposed to have one basement level. She wondered how many of her clients caught on to what was kept in sub-basements two through four, or had seen the trucks coming and going from the warehouse across the street whose basement connected to the Knight Lite’s through a wide shipping passage. Her colleagues disapproved, of course - but they were too cautious, too subtle. She found the proximity to discovery intoxicating - and the Knight thrived on drunkenness. Finally, she reached the bottom of the staircase - the air down here was cold and damp, and she could hear the water rushing in the pipes that ran through the walls. She hummed as she slipped off a glove and pressed her thumb against the scanner set beside the thick steel door that marked the end of the chthonic passage - there was a loud screech of metal sliding against metal, a buzzer, and the door swung open. She stepped through with all the grace and swagger that the fairer of her new pets had so wonderfully displayed on stage and tossed her cane into her hand. The room beyond the door was dark, lit only by a few dim lanterns that hung from the ceiling whose light failed to pierce to the farthest corners of the shadows. From the gloom, her Rooks bowed their greeting to her:
Carlos, Echidna, Number 12.

Ezekiel, Pangolin, Number 19.

Huan, Water Deer, Number 8.

Clara, Spanish Ibex, Number 37.

“Good afternoon, gentlebeasts,” she hissed, her wild grin glinting in the dim light from below the brim of her hat in admiration of the green tower pins that sparkled on their breasts, their numbers showing proudly in gold on each. “Are they ready?” She gestured with the tip of her cane to the gloom beyond the ring of iron bars in the center of the room and the two unconscious silhouettes bound within. Clara nodded, and stepped forward, head bowed and a jeweled goblet of wine cupped in her outstretched hand.

“Yes, Lady Knight,” the Ibex said softly, and the Knight fell in love with her voice all over again. Such a pretty thing. Such a deadly thing. Such a good thing that she was not wasted with the chaff. Carlos stepped aside, the sword at his hip shimmering in the dark as he gestured at the heavy plush chair set before the cage.

“Your throne, Lady Knight,” he said, and his calm strength shook her bones just as much as it had the first time. She nodded, took the wine, and sauntered to her throne and sunk into the cushions, shifting her shoulders and crossing her legs to get comfortable. Ezekiel stepped forward, remote in hand, and Huan moved the work lamps into position on either side of where she sat - wordless and resolute, as always.

“Shall we wake them, my Knight?” Ezekiel asked, thumbing open the cover that concealed the button on the remote. She clasped the head of her cane in hand, and leaned to one side in her throne as she sipped her wine.

“Yes, my Rooks, we shall. I would like to get to know my new toys before I break them.”

The work lamps flashed on with an electrical hum, and her smile vanished before the blinding light.

Haru wasn’t sure whether she should be pleased or terrified - on the one hand, she’d never seen Louis like this, and she treasured any chance she could get to see past the wall he’d kept between them for so long. On the other, she’d never seen Louis like this - he wasn’t just tired, he looked defeated. For once, he looked his age - he looked like a teenage boy desperately trying to hide the fact that he was in way over his head and who had made a mistake he feared he would never be able to take back or make better before it was too late. She’d seen that look a lot before - Legosi had a terrible habit of using it way more often than he should. It didn’t worry her as much as it did when Legosi looked like that - for him, it usually meant he’d had a nightmare or an intrusive thought, or had accidentally destroyed one of her cherry trees when he tripped and fell on it. For Legosi, life-ending-teenage-dread could be solved through simple, gentle means - reassuring words, a hug, and a night spent watching sappy romantic films in the dark and eating popcorn all wrapped up together in a blanket.

She had a feeling that resolving the version of that look that Louis was wearing would involve someone losing a lot of blood.

“I need your help.” She could hear the hidden desperation in the words - normally, when Louis had
anything serious to say, he played it off as casual; on any other day, he would have asked for help in the same tone he’d ask someone to pick up extra milk from the convenience store. Today, he sounded serious - and that’s how Haru knew that it went much, much deeper than that.

“Louis, what happened?” she asked, taking her seat and quickly passing orders for all three of them to the kindly pelican who very obviously still remembered her and Legosi from the first night they’d been here. “If you’re actually asking for help, it must be pretty bad.” He laughed once - loud and brash. She’d never heard that from him.

“Oh, pretty bad is. That would be one way to put it, I suppose.” He sighed, and rubbed his temples - he didn’t even flinch when Legosi reached out to put a hand on his shoulder.

Maybe she needed to talk to Gouhin about therapy for Louis too. Surely he knew something about… well, whatever cocktail of repressed anxieties the poor stag was surely dealing with.

“Do you remember when you asked if we would talk about my scary new job over lunch, and I told you that we would not, in fact, be doing that?” he continued, and Haru nodded.

“Did that turn out to be a lie?” she asked, trying really hard not to stare at the growing red stains on the palms of his gloves.

“Yes. Yes in fact it did.” Louis exhaled sharply and shut his eyes, the muscles in his brow contorting anxiously. “I fucked up, guys. To put it plainly, I fucked up, and now some good animals are probably going to die.”

Okay yup. She was right. There was definitely going to be some blood.

Ibuki blinked against the harsh light that pierced through his eyelids like a bullet. He didn’t know where he was, and when he tried to move, the sharp bite of zipties dug into his wrists and his ankles. His head felt worse than it had since he was property - he could almost feel the tread of his handler’s boot against his scalp. Rage filled his chest as he tugged against the bonds that secured him to his metal seat, rattling its legs against the concrete floor - if he’d been alone when he’d been ambushed, this would be a mildly unsettling situation at worst; he’d gotten out of worse than this before. But he hadn’t been alone - he’d been with Cosmo. “Where. Is. She,” he growled through the agony in his skull, and he was answered by a slow, rhythmic clapping.

“I’d advise you turn around and see for yourself, my dear friend,” called a mocking voice from behind the beams of light that streamed through the bars of the cage that surrounded him, “but I imagine that might prove difficult.” Almost on queue, he heard a rattling convulsion from behind him followed immediately by the sound of vomit splattering against concrete. Ibuki strained against the chair, turning his head as far as he could over his shoulder - she was slumped over in her chair with a string of bile dripping from her lips, but she looked unharmed.

“Cosmo, are you alright?” he asked. She laughed, and then puked again.

“Wr… wrong question, dude.” He could hear the defiance on her tone - if she was hurt, she wasn’t showing it.

“Alright, fine. Are you hurt?” he asked instead, still trying to get his bearings - it was hard enough with his headache, and the lack of his glasses didn’t help.

“No,” she burped, clumsily pulling herself back into her seat as best she could. “Not hurt. Just sick.”
“Sorry about that,” called the voice from the light again - Ibuki’s eyes were beginning to adjust to the glare, and peering through the spotlights, he could see a vague silhouette watching him from the darkness. A suit, a cane, a wide brimmed hat. A sparkling green pin that caught and scattered the light like a dozen tiny mirrors. “Trust me when I say that my intention was not to cause you any discomfort, but… well, I needed to dose my tranquilizers for your very large friend, Miss Cosmo, so I’m afraid that you got a little more than would be strictly prescribed. Don’t worry - the nausea will pass.”

“Oh, will it?” Cosmo panted, and Ibuki felt her head rest against his as she leaned back in her seat. “Good to hear we shouldn’t be worried about anything, then. Normally would be a little worried, waking up in a spotlight, tied to a chair, but that really. Urp. That really clears things up, thanks.” Ibuki tensed in his chair - he wasn’t sure that it was necessarily a wise idea to be taunting their captors like that, but… well, it was a very Cosmo thing to do. The voice in the light laughed again, and Ibuki caught the stray light that glinted off their teeth - regular, uniform white shapes. A reptile of some kind - a komodo, maybe? Or perhaps a monitor lizard. From this distance and with the light in his eyes it was hard to tell.

“You’re spicy, Miss Cosmo - I can respect that. Ordinarily I might have your legs broken for it, but I respect it. Fortunately for you,” the voice continued, “I can’t do that - I need you functional.” Whoever their captor was, they loved the sound of their own voice.

“I’m sure I appreciate your courtesy,” Ibuki rumbled, sitting up as straight as he could manage in the chair, “but I wonder if you know exactly to whom you speak. I am-”

“Ibuki of the Shishigumi, operations specialist and right hand to your new boss, Louis the Red Deer. The Horned King of the Black Market.” The shape handed something to another silhouette and leaned forward in their chair, a pair of white gloved hands gripping the head of a cane that looked more like a mace than a walking stick fading into the light. “You’ve been hunting my Pawns for some time, and Cosmo the, oh how did that announcer put it, the Okapi Bathed in Blood has been acting as your informant for a little more than two weeks. You drive a stretch limousine, usually on your Boss’ business, and you have a very, very fascinating set of tattoos. Last night, following Cosmo’s simply breathtaking performance, you departed from the club at 10:30 PM, met on a rooftop and remained there from 11:00 to 11:30 PM, and retired to Cosmo’s apartment to engage in, shall we say intimate activities by 12:30 AM. Am I missing anything?” Ibuki felt his mane bristle - their captor was, they loved the sound of their own voice.

“You’ve done your research,” he conceded, though he figured it was no surprise that they knew about his marks - he was still shirtless, after all. “I will be blunt - what do you want? It would be best if we spoke briefly and civilly; trust me when I say that a confrontation with my pride would end poorly for you, and they will come for us. You need only wait.” The figure in the darkness laughed, and handed the cane to another silhouette who quickly vanished into the shadows. He heard a loud click, and some of the cage’s bars swung out into the nothing as an animal entered the cell. He was a young man, a water deer - he was dressed in a plain green suit, and wore a pin of some sort on his lapel. Ibuki could see him more clearly as he drew closer, gloves creaking with the force with which he held the weapon in his hands - on his cheek, just below his left eye, was tattooed the number 8.

“Oh Ibuki,” chided the voice gently as the water deer shifted his hands to grip the cane by its shaft, “it doesn’t matter what I want, it matters what she wants. As for your pride… I’m not expecting them to show up; I’m counting on it.”
Lunch had been awkward. Haru imagined this must be what it’s like to talk before a funeral - three animals eating noodles and making smalltalk to cover up the enormous issue that none of them wanted to address. They’d finished their food, paid their tab, and then followed Louis down a nearby alley and climbed into the back seat of Louis’ limousine. Once he took his seat, Louis gave a signal through the tinted window that separated the passenger compartment from the driver’s seat, and the car started moving.

“So, is it time to talk now?” she asked. “I’m betting that the fake money talk you were talking about at lunch wasn’t really what’s going on.” Louis shook his head.

“Have you ever heard of something called the White Court?” he asked.

“No,” Legosi and Haru both responded at the same time. “Are they like the Shishigumi?” Legosi asked, and Haru’s ears twitched at the low growl that emanated from the front seat in response to his comment. If Louis heard it, he ignored it.

“Much, much worse than we are, Legosi. We do business - the White Court makes it. They’re an international syndicate that exists to manage the trade of live flesh throughout the world. They operate like ghosts; it took me weeks just to prove that they existed, and more before I could root out the location of one of their lieutenants, and even then all I know is their title - the Green Knight.”

“They sound full of themselves,” Haru said with a scowl.

“They are.” Louis nodded. “Their false righteousness is unearned, but their confidence isn’t. A…” she could see him picking his words carefully - even now, Louis was working with a shield. “A close friend of mine planned a trap to lure them out of hiding, but-”

“But they were quicker than you,” Legosi finished for him. “Is this friend one of the animals you think is going to die?” Louis nodded.

“Her and my right hand man,” he sighed. “They never reported back in last night, and the security detail I’d sent with them was delivered dead to my doorstep this morning with an invitation.”

“What’s the invitation to? You said you needed our help, Louis; we can’t do that unless you tell us exactly what’s going on.” She knew she was right, and from the look on his face, so did Louis. Haru decided to push it a little. “You can’t keep us at arm’s length and expect us to actually be able to help you.” She reached out, and Legosi took her hand. “It’s like Legosi said before - you can’t do it alone, so stop trying to tell us enough to help you but not enough to let us in.” Louis sighed and laughed, and ran a hand through the fur between his horns.

“You two are impossible, you know that?”

“That’s what Haru keeps telling me,” Legosi said with a shrug, “but I think it’s something you get used to.” Louis sat back in his seat and his body softened. His posture dissolved into the cushions, and he suddenly looked so very, very tired. He nodded, and she could see him getting himself ready.

“Alright, fine. No holds barred. I’ve been capturing and torturing the Court’s grunts - they call them Pawns - for information for weeks with the help of my friend Cosmo, an Okapi who works as a stripper in the Black Market. We finally got a lead - the Green Knight owns a club called the Knight Lite somewhere in the docks district, and I think that’s the center of all the Court’s activity within the city. Cosmo and I planned a unique performance for her to get the Knight’s attention - my right hand was her bodyguard at the show in case something went wrong. They never came back after the show, and the two men I sent with them as extra security were dumped in front of
my door in the middle of the night with an invitation to a special show starring an Okapi and a Lion on October 31st. I don’t know how they found out who I was or what was happening to their Pawns, and I don’t know how they figured out where Ibuki and Cosmo would be. I don’t know how many soldiers they have, or what kinds of weapons they have. I don’t even know the layout of their building.”

“So?” Legosi asked. “You’ve got a bunch of lions, right? Why not just… do the thing I did with the Shishigumi before? Bust in, beat em all up, get your friends.”

“Legosi, their lair has a legitimate front. It’s a dance club - I can’t just break into a dance club in the middle of the city with 30 lions.”

“I dunno!” called an uncomfortably familiar voice from the front seat. “I think we could make that work, Boss.”

“And that’s why I’m in charge and not you, Free,” Louis spat back. The front seat went quiet.

“Ibuki’s your guy?” Haru asked. “Sorry, you just never said what your right hand man’s name is, or said who Ibuki is. I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“… yes. He’s been an invaluable source of advice and a loyal and trusted friend since I took over the Shishigumi.” Louis’ brow furrowed. “Are neither of you shocked at what I’m saying? I thought the revelation of ‘I’ve been working with a stripper to set a trap for a criminal underlord and it backfired’ would have gotten stronger reactions.” Haru shrugged.

“Louis, we’ve been helping an old panda fight mental illness in the Black Market by punching animals for weeks. The first time we met since you disappeared, my ex gave me a gun as an apology and it didn’t surprise me. At this point I don’t think either of us know what normal is anymore.”

“You react better to underworld dealings than I expected,” Louis grumbled.

“That’s what I thought too,” Legosi agreed, “but Haru really isn’t fazed by anything. I think because she’s small, it’s easy to underestimate her.” Haru snickered and punched Legosi in the leg, but only because he was right. It’s how she’d managed to stab Agata in the hand, and how she’d managed to shoot the old Chief in the back. She didn’t really care that she hadn’t landed the killing blow - she still fuckin’ got him. Louis sighed, and nodded.

“Louis, outside of uh. Killing folks. What kinds of research have you done?” she asked. Louis scowled.

“How do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, thinking back to her and Legosi’s investigation into Tem’s murder, “when Legosi and I were solving Tem’s murder—”

“You found out who killed Tem?” Louis sounded shocked.

“What? You’re not the only one who’s been busy you know, it’s not like we’ve just been cuddling and making eyes at each other for two months. Anyways, when we were investigating the murder, most of the good information I got wasn’t directly from the scene - sure, the scene was useful, but it turns out there’s a lot of publicly accessible forensic files on devouring cases. Old newspapers and crime scene footage are really the main keys that helped us figure out who it was. I bet that if we go to the library, we could find old architectural plans for the building the bad guys use as a lair.” Louis looked like he’d just been punched in the face - this was clearly a lot for him to absorb.
Haru would feel sorry for him, but this was the sort of thing that tended to happen when you assume you’re the smartest person in the room.

“Wait, you figured out who killed Tem?” he asked, suddenly sitting forward in his seat. “Who was it?”

“It was Riz,” Legosi answered softly. Haru could hear the sadness in his voice - it wasn’t an easy thing to talk about, especially for him. “I found out after he attacked Haru when we started getting too close - she stabbed him when she got away, and got a lot of his blood on her. I tracked the scent back to his locker, but… he disappeared before we could confront him about it.” Louis turned incredulously from Legosi to Haru.

“You fought Riz and he didn’t kill you?” She snorted and crossed her arms - someday these boys would realize she wasn’t as helpless as they thought, but until then, she would just need to remind them that bravado isn’t the same thing as strength.

“Legosi told you, Louis, I’m easy to underestimate. We can talk about this later, though - as ugly as it is, Tem’s already dead, and it sounds like your friends are still alive. While I don’t really want to help the Shishigumi, I do want to help you, Louis.” Haru could hear the conviction on her own voice and could feel her heart pick up as the pure desire to finally, really help Louis welled up inside her.

Come on, she thought, and realized she was biting her lip; I got through Legosi’s thick skull, how much thicker can yours be? Let me help you, Louis. Let us help you.

Louis sighed, quiet for longer than Haru was comfortable with. Finally, he nodded. “We should only work with paper documents, and we shouldn’t do it at my place - I don’t know how they monitor me, so we should avoid talking about this over the phone. Free, take us to the library - we’ve got some reading to do.”

Haru grinned, and clapped her hands together in her lap. “Let’s get started, then, huh?”

Cosmo’s heart stopped when she heard the sickening crack of metal impacting bone and the sharp, raspy cry that forced itself from Ibuki’s throat behind her at the blow. Her arms strained against the zipties that held them to the armrests of her chair, but it was no use - if a Lion couldn’t pull free, there wasn’t a duckling’s chance in a butchery that she could. She felt hot blood spray against her shoulder and heard it hit the concrete - for a moment, she sat there, frozen in shock at what was happening: Ibuki was being beaten to death behind her, and by her reckoning, there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her eyes felt wet - tears? Was she crying? For the first time since she’d started working the Black Market, Cosmo felt trapped and powerless. She’d stared death in the eye and asked if it would like a smoke, and now she felt completely and utterly powerless. She couldn’t wrap her head around what was happening.

The grunt of pain that accompanied the sound of something hard smashing into Ibuki’s stomach shook her from her thoughts. “H-hey!” she shouted indignantly, twisting in her chair to face their captor, but all she could see in the darkness beyond the spotlights that stared her down were those awful hands and that terrible, sharp toothed smile. “Stop! You’re gonna kill him!” her voice was hoarser than she thought it would be and she could taste yesterday’s kale on her tongue - she’d forgotten how real, full-bodied fear made everything so much sharper. The plastic ties around her wrists and ankles cut into her flesh like razors, her damp sweater clung to her hide like wet blood; Cosmo had come to terms with her own death a long time ago, but she hadn’t considered that she might not die alone.

He’s going to die first, a tiny, malicious voice that she hadn’t heard in a while whispered in the
back of her mind. He’s going to die, Cosmo, and they’re going to make you watch. They might not even kill you after. They probably will, but they might not.

The shape in the darkness laughed and rose dramatically from its seat - a full suit, a wide hat, and always that fucking smile.

“Cosmo, Cosmo!” the voice from the dark called, and she heard Ibuki mutter something that sounded like fuck you before his head whipped back over her shoulder as the club struck him in the chin. “What’s this? From everything that I gathered, I thought you were supposed to be composed! I heard about your performance, and I thought to myself, ‘wow - here is an herbivore that’s never heard of fear.’ I was so amazed! I just had to meet you for myself.” The voice stepped forward into the light, her silhouette framed by blinding white like an eclipse in the shape of a demon. “Are you telling me that I’m about to be disappointed?” All theatrics and joy vanished from the strange woman’s voice, and her hand shot up. Cosmo looked over her shoulder - the creepy water deer with the club was holding it over one shoulder, ready, but he didn’t swing. “Huan, dear, is our friend Ibuki dying yet?” Cosmo’s heart hammered in her chest. Ibuki coughed, and she heard more blood hit the floor. Huan shook his head. “How many more hits do you think he can take?” The Water Deer considered for a moment, and then lifted his arms.

“No!” Cosmo heard herself scream, her voice twisting in a way she wasn’t familiar with, and then the club’s haft smashed into Ibuki’s stomach once more before the Water Deer tossed it aside and stepped away.

“Relax, Cosmo,” the voice said coolly. “As much fun as this is, I do need both of you alive. You’re fascinating, Cosmo - I wonder if you’d react the same way if I was just hurting you? I’ll bet you wouldn’t. A woman like you, you’re accustomed to suffering, aren’t you? It’s what gives your life flavor.” What the fuck was this lady on about?

“What do you want? Why are we here?” she demanded to the dark. The smile melted back into the shadows and the voice held out a hand. Someone else placed a goblet in it - a gaudy thing, silver and covered in jewels. Their captor sipped from her drink, making Cosmo wait for her response.

“Release her.” The command rang through the cage as flatly as though her captor was describing an antique sale instead of the fate of a living animal. Huan moved wordlessly in front of her, and Cosmo resisted the urge to smash his nose with her forehead. She could see the number branded on his cheek from this close and she shivered - number 8.

She had a feeling that she knew what the people Louis was hunting did now.

Cosmo found herself unconsciously leaning away as Huan’s face drew uncomfortably close to her own, his eyes indifferently studying her expression. Without a word, he pulled a switchblade from his pocket, flipped it up, cut the ties securing her to her chair and stepped away to open the gate to the cage. She stood slowly - every part of her told her that something here was terribly wrong. She wanted to rush to Ibuki, to ask if he was ok, to check his breathing, but she knew that if she did, there was a very real chance that it would cost him. Instead, she turned quietly towards the voice, sparing a glance at Ibuki as she did. When she saw him, she almost dropped her composure - the right side of his face was swollen almost beyond recognition, and his nose twisted at a bad angle. Blood dripped from his nose and filled his mouth, and he was missing a tooth. She steeled herself, and focused on the figure beyond the bars, standing as proudly as she could manage. She hadn’t felt this small since high school. “What is this?” she asked, her hands curling into fists.

“Can’t you see, Cosmo? I’m giving you a choice! You can walk out of here right now if you want - none of my people will stop you, and I’ll give you a change of clothes and a spot to freshen up
before you leave. I’ll even send Ibuki back to your apartment once I’m done with him. Or, I’ll send
his head, at least. In a box.” The figure smiled, her fingers toying with the goblet in her hand. “Or,
you can stay here, and you can dance for me.” The figure sat in her chair, receding back into the
shadows. “Whatever you choose, I’m sure that I’ll be very, very entertained.” Cosmo looked at the
open door to the cage - if the figure could be trusted, freedom was right there. She could turn and
run now and never look back - she was almost surprised she didn’t. She was a solitary creature -
she looked out for herself, because if she didn’t nobody else would. In this world, nobody cared
who you were. In this world, animals died alone.

Except Ibuki cared, and she knew that she did too. She looked to Ibuki - broken and bloody in his
chair, but still doing his damnedest to sit proud and dignified. A born - no, a made warrior.
“Cosmo,” he grunted through his swollen lips, “Cosmo run.” She smiled at him, and shook her
head.

Cosmo slunk to the bars, regulating her breathing and allowing her hips to sway - this was just a
stage, and she was just a dancer.

This was a transaction, nothing more.

She leaned against the cage and wrapped her hands around the bars, putting on her best seductive
smile as she batted her eyelashes at the hateful figure in the dark.

“Well, if you want me to dance, don’t you think you should put on some music?”

A smile cracked the shadows and laughed.

Haru bounced her leg at the library computer desk, quickly scrolling through the catalog the library
had of the city’s municipal records. She was surrounded by a mountain of papers that sprawled out
across the table she was working at - they’d been at it for a few hours, and her hunch had proven
right - a tremendous wealth of architectural and municipal knowledge was readily available for
them to look at so long as they knew where to look.

Unfortunately, the trouble with researching a field that you didn’t know anything about and
couldn’t ask for help with was the knowing where to look bit.

Louis grunted as he set down another file crate on the table, wiping his brow as he took a seat next
to her. “How can there be this many papers about one city block. How can anything possibly
require this level of documentation.”

“How can there be this many papers about one city block. How can anything possibly
require this level of documentation.”

“Because,” Haru began, turning away from her computer so she could begin looking through the
files Louis had brought over, “getting anything done anywhere is a massive pain in the ass. How
much time do these cover?”

“The last 20 years of blueprints for the block the Knight Lite dance club is on.” Louis ran a hand
down his face and leaned dramatically against the worktable - he was lean and muscular, and not
as thin or pale as he’d looked before. “Are you sure I can’t smoke in here?”

“I’m sure you probably shouldn’t smoke at all, but you definitely shouldn’t open a lighter
surrounded by microfiche. You know you can be a real asshole sometimes, Louis?” Haru hummed
to herself as she popped open the lid on the file box, shuffling through the papers inside.

“It’s a skill,” he responded dryly and popped a stick of gum into his mouth. “Found anything
interesting yet?”
“A little.” The more Haru looked into the area, the less things made sense. “The infrastructure around the building doesn’t make any sense - here, look at this.” Haru took a sheet of microfiche she’d already looked over and handed it to Louis.

“It’s pipes,” he said, missing the point entirely. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Look at the circled area - that’s where the Knight Lite is.” Louis frowned, and closely examined the document. She saw when it hit him.

“The ones underneath the club don’t match - it’s just a generic grid. It doesn’t connect to anything.” He frowned, and looked closer. “And it’s a different color; this isn’t original.”

“Exactly. This is forged - somebody doesn’t want anyone to know what’s under the Knight Lite, and I think we need to figure out why. Fortunately, we have this.” Haru leaned on the hefty box of documents Louis had just brought over. “These’ll have what we need. I’m sure of it.” Her ears drooped when Louis looked away, his vacant expression bringing back so many memories. “Hey, cheer up! We’ll figure this out.”

“How do you do that?” he asked, and Haru froze momentarily.

“Do… what?”

“How are you always so optimistic?” The question caught her completely off guard. “You always act like you’re sure that everything will work out fine. Even when you’re at your lowest, I’ve never seen you move from sad to despondent. How do you do that?” Haru sighed, and put her hands in her lap, pushing her chair away from the desk. This conversation was probably a long time coming - it was only fair that if she wanted Louis to open up to her, she’d have to open up a little to him first.

“Well… what’s the alternative?”

“How do you mean?”

“Louis, look. I’m small, I’m often alone, and very few animals actually take me seriously.” The words felt like an admission - she’d only ever talked about this with Legosi before, and now, she was letting Louis in on it too. Haru wished she’d done this earlier - it would have made things simpler. But, of course, nothing with either of these two was ever simple. “I live in a world made for animals larger than I am, and I’m constantly reminded of how much danger I’m in. But what am I supposed to do? Lie down and let all that get to me? No, that wouldn’t make any sense. I am the way I am because I don’t have another option - sure, I could think about all the ways everything that could go wrong, and sure, I… actually do that quite a lot. But it doesn’t do me any good to focus on it - in a very practical way, if I had, we wouldn’t be talking right now, because I’d be dead.” Her memories scanned back again to the night she’d fired her gun - not a gun, her gun - and wondered what would have happened if she’d allowed her worries about accidentally hitting Legosi stop her. She didn’t need to think on it long - she already knew the answer. “I’m optimistic all the time because if I wasn’t, I’d just give up and die.” She laughed, and felt something on her face - she realized it was Louis wiping a tear from her cheek. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what came over me.”

“No,” Louis sighed and sank into the chair next to her. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Haru hung at the edge of her seat waiting for his response. Louis looked like he was fighting an internal battle over whether or not to speak, and ultimately one side won.
“Haru, there’s a lot that I should apologize to you for. It’s… difficult, to step outside my pride and let myself be, and I’ve gotten a lot better at it since stepping into my new position. I was never good to you, when we were together - I never let you get close, and I hardly even tried to know you.” She listened closely to him, thinking back on their relationship - those long moments they spent wrapped up in each other, running away from their loneliness and their troubles and into each other’s arms and a tryst that only existed behind closed doors. “Do you remember when I told you that I would supply any finances you required for the garden club, how I reacted when you said that you’d prefer love to money?”

“Yeah, I do.” It hadn’t been a good reaction.

“I had the audacity to think that I loved you, to… I don’t know. But I never tried to know you, and I hope someday you can forgive me for that.” Haru was stunned - not because of what he was saying; as far as confessions went, she’d heard weirder ones from Legosi before. She was stunned because of the way Louis was talking - his usual confidence and bluster was gone, and he just sounded tired. Louis the Red Deer, Adler the Reaper, Shishigumi Boss sounded like he was throwing in the towel.

Haru wondered if for Louis, honesty was always a loss.

“Well… I’m Haru, the White Dwarf Rabbit,” she said with a smile and held out a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Louis looked at her, and the confusion on his face tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“What… what are you doing.”

“Well, you said that you never tried to really know me before, and how you never let me know you. So… if you’re willing to let me, I’d like to get to know you now. I’m Haru.” Louis smiled gently, took her hand, and shook it.

“Hi, Haru. I’m Louis the Red Deer. It’s nice to meet you.”

Cosmo stood on the seat of her chair curled into a ball. The steel was cold against her feet, and her heel tapped a slow, dull rhythm against the hard, unforgiving surface. She was completely naked and covered in sweat - she was used to performing in front of ravenous audiences, but she’d never felt a gaze like the Knight’s. Usually when she danced, her customers displayed one of four desires - lust, hunger, pity, or superiority. Invariably, they wanted one of four things - to fuck her, to feast on her, to feel sorry for her, or to feel better than her. But the Knight was different - she’d watched her with the cold fascination of a collector studying a rare and valuable piece of artwork like she’d wanted to put her in a case and display her for her guests.

Cosmo was used to being wanted. She shuddered at the thought of being owned.

Behind her, she heard Ibuki shift in his chair. Cosmo quickly hopped off her chair and rushed around to crouch in front of him, planting her hand on his shoulder and patting the intact side of his face to gently usher him into consciousness. “Hey, Ibuki,” she said, her relief that he hadn’t died in his sleep evident in her voice, “come on, that’s it, no hurry. You uh, ha, they gave it to you pretty bad, huh?” He winced in pain when he tried to open his eyes - his right eye was completely swollen shut. At least they’d had the courtesy to relocate his nose before they left. His left eye opened slowly and Ibuki laughed when he saw her - a short, stuttering sound that quickly dissolved into a wet cough.
“Oh, hello Cosmo. Good to see you here,” he joked and she rolled her eyes. “How do I look?”

“You look like shit, jackass,” she snapped. Her hand tightened in the fur over his shoulder, and she turned her face away a massive clot of tension bled out of her core, and she felt like she could breathe again. “... you, uh, you really scared me.”

“Cosmo... why didn’t you leave?” His words hit her like an eviction notice.

“Why would I leave, Ibuki?” His face contorted into a wan smile, and he let his head rest back on the top of his chair and shut his eye.

“I’m a warrior of the Shishigumi, Cosmo. I am proud, and I comport myself with honor. When it comes time for me to die, I will do as I must and accept it with dignity. You, you have no such obligation. You could have escaped and lived - why stay? What, for this old lion?” She sighed, and pulled his head back up so that he could look into her eyes. She could see his pupils dilate when he saw her face, his eyes turning from thin slits to great round saucers.

Then she kissed him.

Ibuki’s mouth tasted like blood, but she didn’t care. Her fingers curled in his mane and she kissed him where he sat, because they were both there and they were both alive, and she wouldn’t let the opportunity pass. She wasn’t sure how many more they’d have. When she finally pulled away, Ibuki looked like he’d just been hit in the head with the mace again. “What happened to you scolding me for playing too loose with my life, Grumpypuss?” she asked softly, stroking his jaw. She stepped forward, and sat on his lap, careful not to put her weight on his bruised stomach.

“Wasn’t there that whole speech about how you’d miss me if I got eaten?” She could hear his claws scratching at the metal armrests of his chair.

“That’s... different. You haven’t killed anyone.”

“So what, you deserve to die? That’s bullshit and you know it. I sent four men right into Louis’ mouth - I’ve got blood on my hands too, and not just because you’re bleeding on them.” She steadied him when he coughed out another laugh.

"You're not... you're not letting me get out of this with my pride intact, are you?" Ibuki settled in his seat and relaxed as much as he was able. Cosmo patted his cheek smugly.

"Absolutely not. Cut the machismo self sacrifice shit, Ibuki. I stayed because I wanted to - you aren't getting rid of me that easily." He chuckled, but it was a pained sound that looked like it tired him out quickly. Ibuki sighed, and leaned back again, letting himself go limp in his chair.

"Fine, fine. But on one condition, for if - when, we get out of here." She was worried, but she wouldn't show it. Neither of them needed pessimism right now.

"What's that?" She asked dryly. "You want me to give up sleeping around? That's a bit much after one date, don't you think? It's quite a profitable career, you know."

"No, no, not at all," he said with a smile and shook his head. "I'd... not deign to intrude on you that way. I just... want you to let me stand outside the door, in case something goes wrong." Cosmo snickered, and kissed his bloody, bruised chin.

"Is that your way of asking me out again, Ibuki?" The gloom surrounded them, closing in like the suffocating sea. Their only shelter from the shadows were a set of thick iron bars - both their prison and, for now, their salvation alike. Cosmo appreciated the irony - ordinarily when she stepped into a cage, it was as a safety measure to protect her from the slavering beasts beyond its bars. This one...
didn't give her quite the same sense of power.

"Yes, Cosmo," Ibuki sighed as she held him, "I would very much like that."

Legosi swiped through his Beastbook feed as he stalked his way back to the library, his other hand occupied by a large sack filled with dinner, junk food, and desserts for the night. He didn’t read the posts as he swiped through, but the visual static helped calm him. When he’d suspected that Louis was Up To Something, he hadn’t suspected that he was waging a shadow war against what sounded like one of the biggest criminal syndicates in the entire world. He hadn’t suspected that Louis was making weird friends and getting into the kind of stuff he thought only happened in bad movies and good videogames. Legosi figured it made a certain kind of sense - Louis was the kind of animal who would do his best to excel wherever he was. At Cherryton, it meant ruthlessly pursuing the title of Beastar. In the criminal underworld that lurked beneath the palatable skin of the city, this was probably the sort of thing that meant. He felt strangely calm - Legosi had expected taking this on to be an immense source of anxiety for him given that the likelihood that he would be fighting genuinely terrible creatures soon should be amping up his combat instincts, and, ergo, amplifying his fears, but instead he felt more relaxed than he had in days. Part of him thought it was because he had a mission again - thinking back, he hadn’t been worried about hurting Haru when he fought the Shishigumi, and he didn’t have his more recent episode until after Riz’ disappearance. It was as though having an objective to channel his hunting instincts towards made them act up less in his day to day life; his Wolf was occupied hunting down whoever this White Court bunch was so he could help Louis rescue his friends, so it didn’t feel the need to remind him how tasty rabbit ass might be.

Legosi blushed and reflexively closed his currently open app. Okay, maybe certain instincts might still cause problems. “Maybe I should go into mixed martial arts,” he muttered to himself, swiping open the messaging app.

<Hey guys, it’s getting late. You have the materials we’re going to study back at the place?>

It had been his idea - Louis was worried that he was being followed and the Library was only open until so long, so he figured that the Hotel Rose not only provided a good, private workspace, but also that if any mobsters WERE following Louis, then they wouldn’t bat an eye about him going to a love hotel with two other young animals.

Legosi chose not to consider the implications of why that might be.

<Just wrapping up - why didn’t you tell me Haru’s an absolute powerhouse when it comes to research? It’s no wonder you solved Tem’s murder in a month - I can’t imagine how long it would have taken if you were working alone.> Legosi chuckled softly at Louis’ comment.

<Yeah, she’s pretty great. Meet you outside? I’ve got study snacks.>

<If I can get Haru away from her work long enough to go downstairs - it would seem they’re called “rabbit holes” for a reason. See you soon.>

Legosi tucked his phone into his pocket and rose up to his full height, breaking into a loping cross between a jog and speedwalking to get to the library quicker. There were some upsides to having been born a Gray Wolf - walking faster than his friends could jog was one of them. It wasn’t long before he slid out front of the public library - Haru and Louis were coming down the escalator into the main lobby and chatting up a storm. Seeing them talk so animatedly made him smile - Haru was never withdrawn, but Louis only ever really came alive on stage. Coming alive was a good
look for a man who favored playing the Reaper. “Hey guys!” he called as he approached the pair
while evening turned to night around them, streetlights coming on to pierce the early October
gloom. “Haru, I got you your gyoza and strawberry puddings, and uh, Louis, I didn’t know what
you like, so I just. Got. A bunch of stuff, and anything you don’t eat I’ll take care of.”

Louis grinned, his suit jacket billowing lightly in the evening wind as he crossed the square
towards Legosi. “Good to see you’ve found a way to put that appetite to good use, Legosi. We
appreciate it - we’ve learned at the very least that combing through municipal records is hungry
work.” Legosi dug into the bag, and drew out a pair of plastic baggies - kale chips for Louis, dried
strawberries for Haru.

Haru gasped when she saw the snacks, and Legosi’s smile matched the arc of his tail. “Legosi!
You! Are the best.” She hurried towards him and hopped up to snag his arm and drag it down to
her level - he would never get over the wild impressiveness of a rabbit’s vertical leap, especially
when motivated by a favorite snack. “Come on boys, let’s go - I’ve got a lot to go over with you,
and we’ve got all night to do it.” Haru snatched the snacks out of his grip and tossed Louis his
chips, the Deer’s hand coming up to deftly snatch the package out of the air in a single fluid motion
as he quickened his pace to lock step with Legosi and Haru.

“Productive day?” Legosi asked as the three set off together into the last fading rays of sunlight.

“Very,” Louis said, and his voice made Legosi smile because now he knew how Louis sounded
when he was comfortable.

Chapter End Notes

We have a concrete antagonist! Hurting Ibuki was hard, but it had to be done. At least
everything is still attached, right? In a competition with a bunch of named or one
chapter characters, he's doing pretty well. As always, if you have any feedback at all -
things I did well, things I didn't do well, things you'd like to see more of - please leave
it in the comments below. I love reading all of your comments, and they always fuel
my motivation to get the next chapter out. Gimme your thoughts!
**Sighting the Target**

**Chapter Summary**

The gang does their research. Louis gives Legosi some awkward reassurance. Cosmo contemplates how she got here. Free and Agata hatch an investigation. Haru considers her relationships. Gouhin tries to avert disaster. Number 37 remembers.

**Chapter Notes**

Hey guys! For anybody who's fallen into Ibuki/Cosmo as hard as I have writing this, 0Rocky41_7 has dome some truly visionary work on the subject! Check out their *The Reaper Speaks Softly* and its sequel, *Eat My Heart* - they're both excellent and quite a lot of fun! Without further ado, welcome to our feature presentation; enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, we have two weeks, right?” Legosi paced along the full length mirror that was now covered in notes and diagrams scribbled out in dry erase marker. “Until the performance, I mean.” Louis nodded from where he sat on the floor with Haru poring over subway tunnel maps that showed construction and expansion over the past two decades.

“Yes - the Knight Lite’s website is announcing their upcoming Halloween party, so whatever’s going to happen will likely happen during the festivities. I’ve the good fortune of it being a masquerade, so at the very least I won’t be recognized if we don’t have a better option than crashing the party.”

“You mean we have the ‘good fortune’, right?” corrected Haru, squinting at a paper on the hotel room floor before tossing Legosi a red marker. “Legosi, there’s a gap in all the piping that goes across the street north of the club, could you draw that in on the street map please?”

“Mhm, sure.” He fumbled the cap off the marker and carefully drew in two lines which crossed the street above the big circle with the angry chess piece in it, continuing until they hit another building. He stopped when the lines intersected with the big blue box he’d drawn on the mirror. “Looks like the gap goes under a big warehouse, do you think the basements might be connected?”

“It’s possible…” Haru stood and walked over to him, arms crossed over her chest. “But the level’s all wrong; all of the plans say that the Knight Lite only has one basement level, but this would be five levels down. Pick me up?” Legosi delicately grabbed Haru by the waist and lifted her so she could get a better look at the notes she and Louis had been having him make. “Legosi, if you don’t hold on better, you’re going to drop me.”

“R-right, sorry.”

“Legosi, Haru, I think I might have found something.” Legosi glanced over his shoulder at Louis as he approached - the stag had long since discarded his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves like he was some movie detective. Haru had bandaged his palms where he’d hurt himself on his nails.
before lunch - given that this set was clean, it looked like the bleeding had stopped. “Look - up
until 15 years ago, there were two metro tunnels running directly below the club, about three to
five levels down. According to the records, they had to be abandoned and re-dug due to a structural
collapse, but look at the tunnels now.” Haru clambered up onto Legosi’s shoulder so that she could
see, tucking her pen behind her ear.

“They make a circle around the club.” Haru was right - and not only…

“A circle about the same size as the building,” Legosi finished the thought for all three of them.
They all exchanged a glance, and then Haru hugged his neck and cackled.

“Guys I think we just found buried treasure.” Louis snorted at the comment and shook his head.

“Evil buried treasure, sure.” Louis stamped his foot into the carpet and cracked his neck. “I can’t
believe I didn’t see this coming, I have a secret basement. You’ve been there.”

“Do you have a death-ray too, Mister Luthor?” Haru hopped off Legosi’s shoulder, moved over to
the bed, and popped a mochi into her mouth as she took a seat on the edge. “Maybe some
kryptonite?”

“Very funny, Haru. I do have a death ray, so do you, it’s called a pistol.” Legosi watched as Louis
walked to the bed and sat opposite Haru, munching idly from the bowl of veggie crisps. “You
don’t have to do this, you know. This is my mess - I don’t want either of you getting hurt cleaning
it up.”

“I’ll probably get myself hurt either way, so if I’m going to, then I’d like to do it, you know,
helping a friend.” Legosi’s ears pricked up when Haru laughed at what he’d said - he loved the
sound of her laugh. He felt his tail starting to wag as he took his seat in front of the bed where all
the snacks were, so he made sure to neatly clear away all the papers they’d borrowed from the
library before sitting down. Legosi wasn’t really sure if they were technically allowed to borrow
this sort of stuff, but either Haru was very persuasive or, more likely, nobody wanted to disagree
with Louis. He knew he didn’t, anyway - if he was librarian, he’d let Louis take the whole darn
building.

“And if Legosi’s going to get himself hurt, then I’m coming too,” Haru asserted as she plucked a
crisp out of Louis’ hand and ate it herself. “And neither of you are going to storm a criminal
stronghold without a medic on hand. Understood?” Legosi traded a look with Louis that
communicated all that needed to be said: it’s a good thing Haru offered to help; without her, we’d
be in real trouble.

“Understood,” Louis sighed condescendingly and reached over to pat Haru’s head. Clearly, to him,
the look had said something more like let’s humor Haru for now, and convince her to see reason
later when it’s more convenient.

“Uh, Louis, I wouldn’t-” Legosi began, but his warning came too late. Haru’s hand snatched out
and caught Louis by the middle and ring fingers, pushing them back and forcing his hand down.
Louis gasped in pain and dropped his shoulder to alleviate the pressure, knocking the bowl of
crisps off the bed and spilling it all over Legosi’s lap when his elbow hit the exceptionally bouncy
mattress.

“Ow ow ow I’m sorry Haru let go,” Louis pleaded.

“Oh? I’m sorry, is the little bunny hurting your hand? How do you think you’re gonna take on a
whole gang of bad guys if you can’t even get away from one little rabbit, huh?” Legosi sighed, and
got to work cleaning up the scattered snacks - someday Louis would learn that you just don’t treat
Haru like she’s small.

“Alright! You win, just please let go.” Haru relented, and Louis quickly tugged his hand back across the bed, rubbing his poor fingers with his other hand to alleviate the pain from Haru’s hold. “Where’d you learn that anyways? I didn’t realize Cherryton had martial arts courses.”

“My internship. I’m learning more than just medicine, Louis - how did you think I got Agata’s hand, dumb luck? The Doctor’s been teaching me how to fight large carnivores too. Turns out there’s a lot of tricks you can use against animals bigger than you are.” Legosi grinned ear to ear as he saw Louis turn to stare at him in shock.

“I tried to warn you,” he said as he started to clear the food from the bed. “Hm. Poor Dave is gonna have to vacuum more this time, there’s crumbs everywhere.”

“I think that crumbs are a little less than Dave usually has to clean up,” Haru snickered and crawled towards the pillows at the headboard. Legosi glanced at the room clock - 2:07 AM. Study time was over. “I really don’t want to know what he needs the rubber gloves and the gas mask for.”

“Who are you animals?” Louis asked as Legosi stretched out to snag the remote and turned on the TV, thumbing through the channels. News, news, ads, pay-per-view pornography, more ads. He didn’t turn around when he responded.

“We’re friends with the Deer who runs a Lion mob; what did you expect, normal high schoolers?” He heard Louis stifle a laugh, and only winced a little when his tail smacked painfully into one of the bed’s legs. “What do you guys wanna watch, cartoons or action movies?”

Agata gawked at the way Free stalked down the back alley, one hand stuffed into his pocket, the other wrapped around his phone, and his back curled into a comfortable slouch. The young lion picked up his pace a little to pull up behind his older compatriot, making sure to keep his own posture straight and professional - they were Shishigumi for crying out loud, they had appearances to keep up.

“Free, I know you’re occupied with your GPS, but don’t you think you should, y’know, act a little less casual?” he said, glancing around to check, for the third time, that they weren’t being watched. “Whoever got Koichi and Miles could be nearby, and even if they’re not we’re in public.” Free looked up from his phone, squinting into Agata’s face - the young lion’s brow stiffened and he drew back; for some reason, he felt like he’d done something wrong.

“My GPS?” Free asked, and turned his phone screen to Agata - a comical photograph of an opossum posing in front of a flooded pothole was labeled WHEN YOU TAKE THE GARBAGE OUT/AND FIND A FREE BATH showed prominently across the device.

“You’re looking at memes,” Agata said flatly, “while we’re tracking down Ibuki’s phone.”

“Yeah, and? Wasn’t this whole thing your idea anyways?” Free’s lackadaisical attitude was almost insulting if it wasn’t so expected - it had been Agata’s plan, and it was a good one too: follow the Locate My Device ping from Ibuki’s phone, and it would either lead them to where he was or to where he and Cosmo got grabbed; both useful pieces of information.

“If you’re not looking at the GPS, then why are you walking ahead of me??” Free opened his mouth as though to retort, and then closed it because Agata made an excellent point and Free knew it. Agata rolled his eyes and pushed past Free, deftly scooping his own phone out of his pocket in a
motion he’d practiced several times to refine its efficiency. “Here, we’re getting close - just up ahead around the next left, and then it looks like it’s on the fifth floor of the building.”

Subconsciously, his free hand shifted over the pocket that concealed his firearm and his ears swiveled, taking in the city sounds around him; if they were being followed, Agata would be ready.

When they reached the building, Agata’s stance shifted - he rose up onto the balls of his feet, and his knees dipped slightly into a crouch. The apartment complex was a dingy building at best - decrepit might have been a more accurate description, but he was a polite lion and knew that living rough said nothing about an animal’s character, so he had no right to disparage anybody’s home that way. Silently, he shouldered open the front door, careful to fully twist the handle and brace his hand against the flat to ensure that any sound from creaking wood or hinges would be muffled by his bulk. He heard a loud click as Free slipped past him - his companion’s gun, a heavily customized and absolutely gorgeous object - was in his hand, a single claw resting casually on the trigger guard.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit early for that?” Agata whispered, swallowing - he really didn’t need Free getting trigger happy and shooting a witness. Again.

“I dunno, you wanna end up like our good friends Koichi and Miles, Agata?” the older lion asked, turning a golden eye to him and winking. “Don’t worry - if nobody needs a bullet in ‘em, nobody gets a bullet in ‘em, but the pride would kill me if I let something happen to our cub.” Agata smoldered as Free patted him on the head and stalked quietly into the lobby - he was not a cub.

“I’m older than the boss, you know,” he grouched quietly, this time letting Free take the lead up the stairs and silently thanking the building for having a concrete stairwell - no risk of them being announced by creaking floorboards. He blushed when the scent hit his nose - perfume, wet fur, and… something else. Ibuki and Cosmo had definitely been here. Up ahead, Free chuckled.

“What’s the matter?” Agata hissed.

“Nothin’, nothin’, I just didn’t figure Ibuki the type to fancy herbivores is all. Guess I shoulda called it, given how he got whenever Cosmo left; guess I thought she just made him hungry.”

“... she does have very lovely eyes,” Agata murmured quietly, remembering the way Cosmo batted her eyes and thanked him whenever he’d run an errand or fetched a drink for her - sometimes, being the baby of the Shishigumi and therefore the default errand boy wasn’t so bad. “Guess I can see the appeal.”

“Sure, sure.” It was a bizarre conversation to have in whispers on a stairwell, but at the very least Free was taking some of the edge off. Agata caught up to Free when he stopped on the fifth floor and glanced at his phone again, checking the position his app read.

“Four doors down, on the left.” He nodded to Free, and Free nodded back - he knew it was a childish fantasy, but Agata really hoped that Ibuki and Cosmo had just stolen away for a romantic… entire 24 hours and they’d just walk in on them having sex or something, and that the ominous message on Miles and Koichi’s bodies was referring to some other unfortunate Lion and Okapi. There was no chance of that being the case, of course, but it was a nice thought. Sooner than he would have liked, the pair had padded their way in front of the door - he saw what was out of place through the gloom immediately. He pointed at the latch, and Free nodded - the wood was splintered and the door hung slightly ajar; someone had kicked it in, but there wasn’t enough damage for it to have been locked either. He nodded to Free, and Free nodded back - Agata held up three fingers.

One -
Free burst through the door with a loud crash, whipping his gun out in front of him and scanning the room as he hurried in and very nearly discharged a round into what must have been a particularly menacing pillow on the bed. Agata sighed, and lowered his weapon as he walked into the empty room - getting a look into Cosmo’s apartment was a fundamentally surreal experience. On the stage, she was this glamorous persona, every bit of her carefully manufactured to captivate, awe, and dazzle - her apartment, though, was a different story. It was a small studio apartment, a cheap laminate countertop cordoning off the kitchen from the living area. Her bed, which was squeezed up against the window, took up almost a full quarter of the space - so Ibuki would have just fit on it - and sat across from a pressboard bookcase that was serving as the stand for an old television. The nightstand next to the bed was host to a laptop computer, and a camcorder, as well as a few other objects Agata did not think it was polite to acknowledge, and a modest photography setup was stowed into the corner of the room. In terms of personal belongings, Cosmo didn’t seem to have much, but what she did have wasn’t what Agata would have expected: an old scary movie poster, a few secondhand anime collectibles, a shelf of trashy manga. Aside from the broken door and the damp clothes scattered around the floor, it was a completely normal apartment, and completely alien to the Cosmo he was familiar with. Sure enough, Ibuki’s phone was still in his pants, which lay discarded on the bed, and another phone - smaller and in a red case - sat on the nightstand. They’d definitely been here. Agata turned away, and suddenly found himself staring at a terrified looking cheetah who stood in the doorway with a baseball bat.

“Howdy,” he said, noticing the thin, anxious man’s large eyes immediately.

“Sh-sh-shishigumi,” the cheetah sputtered, lowering his weapon. “What are you doing here? This ain’t your turf, I-I don’t want any trouble.” Agata was about to respond, but he Free laughed and pushed his way past him.

“Hey there, friend, you the neighbor?” Agata sighed and rubbed his temples - he already knew where this was going. The Cheetah nodded and tightened his grip on his bat.

“Y-yeah, I am. Thought there was another break in, like last night.”

Free grinned, and wrapped his gun arm around the Cheetah’s shoulders, dragging him into the apartment and shutting the door behind them. “Free, be nice,” Agata warned.

“Calm down, kid, I just wanna talk. Now, neighbor… why don’t you tell us all about what happened last night?”

Louis blinked sleep from his eyes and spared another look at the clock - it was well past 3 in the morning, and the bright animated colors still flashed from the hotel room’s TV set. Haru was already fast asleep a respectable distance on the other side of the bed, curled into a ball around the largest pillow the bed had, but Legosi was still awake where he sat at the foot of the bed. He was baffled by the amount of progress they’d made in one day of research - moreover, he was disturbed by it. Legosi must have somehow smelled his concern, because the great big Wolf turned his head to check on him. “Something wrong, Louis?” His question was far too casual.

“I’m just thinking.” Louis turned the events of the day - of his hunting over the past few weeks - over in his mind, mulling the details around in his head like it was a holiday wine. “We’re talented animals, but we’re also exactly three teenagers, and we managed to uncover the lair of an international crime syndicate over the course of an afternoon using only publicly accessible documents. Doesn’t that seem a little too convenient? How has nobody else found this out before we did? Why haven’t the police done anything?” Legosi shrugged, and turned back towards the television where a cartoon mouse dropped a brick on a cat’s head.
“After Haru and I got back to school - after we escaped the Shishigumi - I tried to tell the dorm mother what happened, but she ignored me. Told me not to mention that name around her. Maybe there are animals who know, and they just don’t care?” Legosi’s words hit a little too close to home - Louis knew well the sort of apathy that dominated general society’s views of the Black Market. So long as what happened there stayed quiet, the city was content to turn a blind eye, pretend it didn’t exist, and go about their business. He also knew what happened to animals who didn’t.

“And the ones that do care wind up food,” he agreed solemnly. Legosi was watching the images on the screen - it made sense, fast moving objects and flashing lights were entrancing to canines - but Louis watched Legosi’s back, the way the light played against the fringes of his fur and how the tips of his scars poked out from the back of his undershirt. He traced Legosi’s frame, and found himself thinking about Ibuki - a Wolf and a Lion, the two most important carnivores in his life. The two most confusing carnivores in his life. Louis had thought he understood carnivores - they were animals driven by hunger and strength, simple creatures moved by base desires. And yet, his time as a lord of the Black Market was changing him. Looking out onto the streets of his domain, he saw his ravenous subjects satisfy their hunger for meat - but more, he saw them live. He saw them make love in the alleys where they thought nobody could see, saw them take their children to candy shops and play cards outside of quiet cafes. He heard them suck marrow from bone, true, but he also heard them laugh, love, and cry. He saw them eat, and he saw them be eaten.

Ibuki’s tattoos were vivid in his mind’s eye - Recovery from Fatigue. Muscle Building. Sexual prowess. The words that marked his friend’s purpose as meat based medicine. It contradicted everything that Louis thought he knew about carnivores - and, he realized, so did Legosi. As he watched Haru sleep, soft and still, Louis thought about how very similar she was to Legosi. When he’d first met Legosi, the Wolf had infuriated him - he’d seen a violent beast hiding who it was from its classmates, pretending to be their friend, pretending to be weak out of pity for the animals around it. He’d been half right - Legosi did pretend to be weak, but it wasn’t out of pity. Legosi was a genuinely soft and kind animal, and when he could afford it, he was an honest one too. He and Haru were so alike each other and so unlike him - they were unfailingly honest about their desires, even if their motivations weren’t always clear. Louis’ fatigue-and-stress- addled mind came to an important conclusion - the reason that he had despised Legosi when they’d met was because he had made the incorrect assumption that Legosi was like him.

But Legosi wasn’t like him - he was like Legosi, and that made all the difference in the world.

“Legosi, you can’t be comfortable sitting on the floor. Come on to bed, you’ll hurt your back.” Louis was shocked by his own words - had he just invited a carnivore into his bed?

“Oh, no, I’ll be fine,” Legosi stammered anxiously. Louis reclined on the pillows and crossed his legs, leaning his head against the headboard to keep his antlers out of the way of the wall.

“What? Afraid that you’ll be overwhelmed by the scent of two herbivores next to you?” he taunted.

“Yes,” Legosi answered quietly. Uh-oh - that wasn’t the reaction he wanted. “Yes, I am.”

“Legosi,” Louis reasoned, “how often do you and Haru share a bed now?”

“... most nights,” the wolf confessed as he pulled his legs up into his chest. “That’s what the pills were for, so I didn’t need to stop. I haven’t since I’ve been off the pills.”

“Why not? You clawed your way through a lion’s den to save her, Legosi. I think if anyone has proven their noble intentions in all the world, surely it must be you.”
“Because it only takes one mistake, Louis.” Legosi’s voice belonged to someone who had been carrying a heavy weight for a long time and who had resigned to their fate of carrying it for some time longer; he had the voice of a prisoner. He turned to look over his shoulder at Louis - it was a look Louis knew well: acceptance. “You carry a gun, right?”

Louis nodded, and reached for the heavy object that rested on the nightstand beside him, turning it over in his hands and appreciating its cold weight. “Yes, I do. Your point?” Louis had become accustomed to carrying a weapon - it was necessary in his line of work. He was responsible, of course; he’d studied proper trigger discipline, practiced regularly at his personal shooting range, kept his firearm meticulously well cleaned and maintained, and only ever took the safety off when he intended to use it. If he wasn’t worried about having been followed, it wouldn’t even be loaded right now.

“I am a gun, Louis.” Legosi was staring at his hands and Louis couldn’t help but be drawn in - Legosi’s hands were huge, each long finger ending in a wickedly sharp claw with palms big enough to smother him. “But I don’t have a safety. You’re right - my intentions are good, I know that, or I think I do anyways. But all it would take is one mistake to ruin everything. I can’t put the gun away, Louis; I’m never unarmed. I can hardly even take my finger off the trigger, I can always hurt someone. There’s no escaping that - I know what I am. So I have to be careful.”

Louis swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood, setting the gun down again and allowing his body to act for him. He could only imagine what was going through Legosi’s head, though he thought he understood why Legosi took the pills now. “Alright, sure,” he said, and took a seat next to the wolf. “That’s objectively terrible, not even I can deny that and I am extremely well practiced in denial. Trust me.” Legosi laughed, and Louis heard him sniff and wipe his nose. “Look at me, Legosi.”

“What?”

“Look at me,” he repeated, the command sharp on his tongue. Legosi obeyed. “Do you remember, after I broke my leg, when you wanted to discuss the lighting for the show? Do you remember how that conversation ended?”

“Yeah. You made it weird.” Louis laughed, and tossed his head back against the bed, peering down his nose at the inane content on the television.

“Give me your face, Legosi.”

“What???”

“Give. Me. Your Face.” Louis felt his pace quicken as he rose onto his feet and grabbed Legosi by the chin. The two of them were perfectly still, illuminated only by the flashing lights from the screen. Louis stared down into Legosi’s face and studied his eyes - they were large, strange, and deep. They were eyes he wanted to see comfortable in their sockets. Slowly, Louis pried Legosi’s mouth open and slid his hand over the wolf’s teeth, casually pressing his palm against the sharp, crushing bone in the back of Legosi’s mouth while he rubbed the wolf’s tongue with his thumb. He could feel Legosi’s tension through the tightness of his jaw as he coolly regarded his friend. “I’m going to prove something to you now. Bite me.” Legosi’s jaw didn’t so much as twitch at the command, his eyes nervously flicking from Louis’ arm to his face and back again. “Remember when we did this last, Legosi? When I, in your words, ‘made it weird’? And before, when Kai attacked me? You told me then that you need to pretend; are you pretending now, Legosi? Is the reason you haven’t yet torn into my flesh and supped on my blood because you maintain the lie?” He stared into Legosi’s eyes, watching the anxiety in them be replaced by a different emotion - confusion. Slowly, he withdrew his hand from Legosi’s mouth, placed two fingers under his chin,
and pressed his jaw shut. “You know the answer, Legosi. Say it.”

“No, it’s not,” he said quietly. “Louis, you gotta stop sticking things in my mouth.” Louis shook his head and laughed.

“You’re a gentle animal, Legosi - the only thing you’ve ever pretended about is your strength. Now come to bed - if you’re going to fight for me, you need your rest.” He extended a hand down in the colorful light of the TV, and with no trepidation, Legosi took it.

Haru grumbled as she woke up, curling into something warm and soft. “Mmm, Legosi,” she murmured, leaning her nose forward to breathe in his scent. When what she smelled wasn’t wolf, her eyes snapped open - she was curled comfortably into Legosi’s belly, one of his big hands resting across her side, and in front of her, sheltering her from the morning light, was a sleek coat of red-brown fur.

Louis.

Haru had been sleeping in a pile between Legosi and Louis.

Slowly, she turned her head up, eyes going wide as saucers as she followed the line of Louis’ neck. The curve of Louis’ antlers crested gracefully over the pillow, and Legosi’s snout was resting placidly atop Louis’ head. Haru did not have words to adequately describe what was happening in her chest or in her head right now - if she did, she imagined that they might be very loud and have many syllables. She carefully reached out and planted her hands on Louis’ chest, shifting her fingers through his fur to get at the flesh underneath. He was harder than she remembered - leaner and more muscular, like he’d spent time playing baseball recently. She had to remind herself that if he’d been hitting something with a bat, it probably wasn’t sports equipment. Haru wriggled carefully out of Legosi’s grasp, not wanting to wake him since it seemed like he was finally getting the rest he needed. “Maybe the aftereffects are wearing off,” she muttered as she delicately climbed over Louis’ body in the bed and dropped silently to the floor behind him. She pulled her dress back on over her head and spent only a few moments considering the notes scrawled across the mirror; the three of them really made a good team. Louis filled in the holes Legosi left in her research, and Legosi helped Louis see the value in a blunt perspective, and she helped coordinate everything so that it all made sense. “And to think, just months ago you felt sorry for yourself because nobody took you seriously. Showed them, huh? Silly Haru. Rabbits might not have fangs or claws, but we are very clever.” She nodded curtly to her reflection, winked at herself, and grabbed a bag of snacks to sit in the sofa chair and watch the boys sleep. They looked so peaceful like this - she found herself admiring the way they slept in the soft morning light that streamed through the open window: the way Louis’ arm lay gracefully against Legosi’s side and the way their knees hooked together. Getting out from between them had been no small feat - their bodies had formed a veritable cage around her, and she wondered if she’d really escaped it at all. Haru found her mind rifling through her memories with Louis like a filing cabinet - the sex, the conversations, the quiet moments of shared vulnerability neither of them really dared to breach. She’d often complained that he was never willing to be open to her - to be open about her - but she also had to admit to herself that she hadn’t exactly been open with him either. And yet, despite them never really talking about it, they’d still been there for each other; having him back in her life wasn’t only a relief because she didn’t have to worry about him so much anymore, it was a relief because she could talk to him again. She could text him at odd hours and share her concerns about Legosi with someone who’s immediate advice wasn’t to cut off the relationship, change her name, and transfer schools. She could go to him for advice about the instincts that still troubled her and which she couldn’t bear to burden Legosi with given how much his own impulses weighed on him.
She remembered the way that they’d held each other in her tiny bed in the garden shed, naked and alone - Haru didn’t want things to be that way again. Even without the sex, the way that she and Legosi held each other now was healthier than her relationship with Louis had ever been; he was willing to share his problems with her, and, for the most part, she was willing to share her problems with him. Even she had to admit to herself, though, that she missed sharing those moments of quiet loneliness and understanding with Louis when each of them felt comfortable in their skins. Haru sighed, and sunk into her seat - she didn’t rightly know what was going on, or what she was thinking about. It was confusing, problematic, and felt a little bit unfaithful; though given the way the boys were holding each other, maybe it was less unfaithful than she worried - it was something she’d have to talk with Legosi about later. For now, what she did know was that she wanted to see what unfolded when the two woke up and discovered they’d been cuddling all night. Haru didn’t know what would happen, but she was very determined to enjoy it - some memories just needed to be cherished.

“Hey XXXXX! There’s a new smoothie shop opening on the subway line out of the city center, wanna come with us to try it out?” She couldn’t remember the face of the animal speaking to her - a gazelle, she thought. Her name - the names of her friends, the zebra and the wildebeest - weren’t important.

“Sure!” she heard herself answering - the girls were popular and being their friend had its advantages. They earned her respect, social connections, and a leg up over her classmates.

“What do you think you might study?” asked the zebra - she frowned, and pretended to consider the question. It didn’t matter, they all knew they were just going to filter into what they did best on during the placement tests.

“Hmm... maybe biology! I could see myself going into medicine, too,” she lied. This was the way of things - the other girls told similar lies, and told them constantly. So long as they did what was expected - got smoothies, avoided That part of town, kept their distance, ignored the text behind the news - everything would be provided for. Everything would be fine.

None of this mattered.

None of this was real.

Cosmo woke quickly, the dream vanishing into a figment behind her eyes. She shivered as the cold air of the chamber struck her now conscious mind and curled tighter into Ibuki; he was still asleep underneath her, breathing calmly and rhythmically. Slowly, her eyes explored their surroundings once more - the bars were evenly spaced and stretched floor to ceiling, each about an inch thick. The sick she’d coughed up when she first awoke in the cell had been mopped up, and so had Ibuki’s blood; whoever did the work, they’d been quiet. She stretched, lifting her arms high over her head to work the stress and the cold from her muscles, and carefully stepped out of Ibuki’s lap to pace casually around the perimeter of the enclosure. It was a small cell, but not cramped, about twice the diameter of her safety cage back at the club. The door was a clever construction - the thin cutout piece that connected the bars along the top was thin enough to be almost invisible in the murky gloom, and the bars rested flush against small metal pucks driven into the floor to make it seem as though they extended into the concrete below like the others. She sighed, and curled a hand around a bar - it didn’t surprise her that she’d been dreaming about her life before the Market - it was the last time she’d been locked in a cage, after all. She considered the bars before her, wondering if this cage was better or worse than the cage that all the animals who walked the well lit streets outside the Market lived in, and decided that she preferred these ones - at least she wasn’t
choosing her prison.

She rested her head against the bars, squeezing her hand around the metal until her knuckles went white - what was she doing? What was any of this? Why was she helping Louis in the first place, and why did she let the way Ibuki had watched her when she danced get to her like it did? A part of her insisted it was because Louis was making the Market a better place, and the misplaced nobility in her wanted to be a part of it. Another part reminded her that Ibuki was the first in her audience who had seen her performance for the effort and skill she put into it rather than just the end result in their pants. As had always happened, though, the quietest voice told the truth - she’d done what she’d done because they needed her, and what’s more, they respected her.

When Louis rescued her from her unruly customer (she never found out what happened to him, but she didn’t expect it was anything nice), he didn’t hold it over her head and didn’t try to act the hero - it was something he’d done because he was there, because he could, and maybe because he was a bit of a smug bastard who wanted to prove a point; nothing more, nothing less. When he’d needed her help, and she found herself in the position to give it, then, how could she refuse? “Sure did you a lot of good, huh?” she whispered to herself. But how could she refuse a job that only she could do? She turned and allowed her eyes to wander over Ibuki’s body - it felt stupid, it felt beneath her, but she couldn’t deny the way that he’d looked at her back on the rooftop had done things to her.

She didn’t intend to kiss him when she dragged him up there - she wasn’t sure what she’d intended, but it definitely wasn’t that. And yet it was what she did - she remembered his words clearly: “I will miss you, Cosmo.” It was a simple statement of fact - she’d expected a condemnation of her lifestyle, sure, or an attempt to reason with her sensibilities; she’d dealt with carnivores who thought she was throwing her life away before, hell she lived next door to one. The way Ibuki said it was different - there had been no advice or condescension in his words, only the simple acknowledgement that his life would be less without her.

Nobody said that to her! Cosmo groaned deep in her gut and tore her eyes away, forced herself to look away from him - she knew this was a mistake before she’d gotten involved, she knew how dangerous the Black Market mobs were. She’d never realized how much more dangerous being needed was - Cosmo didn’t have much experience as an essential person.

“I want you, Cosmo.”

It wasn’t the dying she was afraid of - it was being trapped in a life that rested on a lie which shook her. She laughed and let herself slide to her knees on the floor, still gripping the bars as she mocked her sorry state.

“You dumbass,” she muttered, chastising the beating organ in her chest, “you picked your prison way before you got grabbed, didn’t you?”

No matter how she covered her face, Haru couldn’t stop giggling. Legosi and Louis followed behind her a few steps back, both of them refusing to make eye contact with each other and Legosi sporting a brand new bruise above his left eye where Louis had nicked him with an antler. Watching them wake up cuddling each other in bed had been like watching someone try to untangle improperly tied shoelaces - awkward, clumsy, and with a fair bit of cursing. Her backpack bounced lightly on her back as they strode out of the Hotel Rose and into the golden sunlight of the autumn morning, and she whipped a note out of her pocket to go over today’s plans. “So, first we should run by the library to return all the documents we borrowed, and after that we’re going to stop by Doctor Gouhin’s place to see if he knows anything useful about these Court guys; given his line of work, I’d be willing to bet he knows a thing or two. Any objections?”
“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Haru?” Unsurprisingly, Legosi had concerns. “Gouhin already doesn’t like that you stick around me, and I don’t know how walking into his office with a mob boss is gonna help anything. No offense, Louis.”

“None taken. I’m terrifying.”

“I am sure it’s a good idea - Louis promised to help me with your therapy, and you’re overdue for an appointment anyways.” Over the past few days, Haru’s phone had been a constant stream of notifications that she had unread messages from Gouhin yelling about why she and Legosi hadn’t been in. Aside from letting him know once a day that Legosi hadn’t eaten her to prevent him from breaking into Cherryton and grabbing her boyfriend in the middle of the night, she hadn’t been dignifying him with a response - if he wanted to worry and gripe it was his problem, not hers. “Now that you’re clean, we need to build a plan to help you manage your IEAD - Gouhin knowing about Louis’ enemies would just be a bonus.” She heard Legosi sigh and how the rhythm of his pace changed when he dropped into that glum slump of his. “What, did you think you got out of that?”

“...yes,” he groused. “Don’t we have more important things to do right now? Like, I dunno, beat up gangsters?”

“Good luck convincing Haru there exists something more important than you are, Legosi,” Louis chided, and Haru felt her breast swell with pride. “You should see some of the texts she’s sent me - do you really think she’d try to force just any carnivore to eat her?” Haru’s ears shot up and a tingle fled down her spine - that had been a private conversation.

“Louis!” she hissed between her teeth, “I thought we agreed to not talk about the instinct stuff around Legosi!!”

“You told him about that?” Legosi asked, and Haru realized that she’d been cornered - well, no sense not coming clean now.

“Yes, I did,” she confessed. It had made sense at the time - Louis was in a situation tangentially related to hers, so he might have some pointers. “I figured that since Louis spends so much time around large carnivores, he might have some advice on how to suppress my prey instincts when in...” she glanced towards her feet and twiddled her thumbs; bashfulness was not an emotion she was particularly experienced with, so it usually caught her off guard. “Close proximity.” Yeah, that was the phrase she wanted to use.

“What did he say?” She could feel Legosi looming over her like a jealously protective shadow. He was right to be annoyed - they had agreed to keep that detail of their relationship between each other, but some things were easier said than done.

“I told her that what works for me is exerting my authority whenever I feel anxious - incredible what establishing dominance does for one’s peace of mind. Haru’s not so keen on eating steak in front of you, though, so I suggested a leash.” Legosi stumbled, and Haru nearly had to jump out of the way to avoid being knocked to the ground by his knee. This was just like when Legosi almost walked in on her and Louis having sex, except this time it was her insecurities about her instincts being laid bare and there was no convenient door keeping either of them from seeing her naked and embarrassed - in short, it was an incredibly awkward conversation.

“Haru,” Legosi said and snapped her out of what was quickly turning out to be a mild crisis, “if you were having more concerns about your instincts, you should have just told me.” She turned to look up at him in surprise - the last time Legosi had an episode, he’d torn himself apart in his sleep over the fear he might so much as scratch her; that she might talk to him about her impulse to climb
down his gullet, nice and cosy, never really struck her as being a particularly smart idea.

“Don’t you have enough on your plate with your instincts as it is? I felt it wouldn’t be a good idea to tell you that I still have intrusive thoughts about climbing into your mouth sometimes while you’re dealing with night terrors.” Legosi sighed, shrugged, and took her hand.

“And you told me I wasn’t allowed to do this alone - that goes both ways, Haru.” He squeezed her hand and she felt the corners of her mouth curl up into a smile despite herself - she wasn’t sure if he could feel it when she squeezed back, but she knew that she did. Louis laughed.

“Look at you two, you’re practically an old married couple. I didn’t realize animals our age were capable of resolving romantic troubles without enough drama for a late night soap.” Haru shot Louis a glare - when they’d been estranged, how abrasive he could be really hadn’t been that important to her; now that they were friends again, though, his personality problems, especially his ego, were clear as day. Haru knew what he was doing - she’d done it herself many times before, and it was a simple tactic. The best way to deal with uncomfortable emotions was to put the source of those emotions off balance - that was how she’d confronted Juno when Legosi was injured, that was how she’d kept Mizuchi off her back, and it was how she’d sent irritating boys who thought they could buy weed off her for cheap if they gave her a kiss packing. The problem she’d found with the approach, though, is that it was a band-aid solution for what was usually more like a knife wound; even though stitches were painful, they were the only way to really heal. Maybe it was time Louis got some stitches.

“What?” she asked coyly, and she could practically feel Legosi’s social anxiety flaring up through his arm, “are you jealous?” The way Louis’ nostrils flared was the only indication she got that she’d hit a nerve - good. Hitting a nerve was the whole damn point.

“No,” he answered coolly, like a liar, “I’m just complimenting your relationship. I hadn’t realized that was a forbidden subject.”

“It is when you mock us for it because you’re a lonely grump,” she retorted sharply - she heard Legosi open his mouth as though to interject, and then heard it close again when he thought better of getting between Haru and Louis - she’d have to apologize for putting him in this situation later, but right now Louis needed some sense talked into him and talking sense into stubborn males was a skill she’d discovered she was particularly good at. She watched Louis’ body language carefully - there had been a subtle transition in his movement between now and before the current topic of conversation was brought up. A few moments ago, his back had sloped slightly into his shoulders, his hands had been tucked into his pockets, and his steps had been long and easy - now, his shoulders had straightened and squared, his hands swung smoothly at his sides, and his footsteps were shorter and quicker, matching the pace of her own. Haru had never really noticed it before, but thinking back she could remember seeing this many times during their relationship - it was like he didn’t know how to be himself when he cared, so instead he acted. Haru reached out and, convincing herself that it was a friendly gesture of solidarity, took his hand - regardless of anybody’s feelings, animals who were very important to Louis were in real danger, and she needed to make sure he knew that he could ask her and Legosi for emotional support when he needed it.

“And when you do it instead of asking for help. We both know you’re under a lot of stress, Louis, but that’s why we’re here - a little vulnerability won’t kill you, you know.” Louis sighed and rolled his eyes, but just like she knew they would, his fingers curled around her hand in a gentle grasp.

“You don’t know that.” His tone was steady, but his word choice was revealing - those were not the words of an unshakably confident Louis, they were the words of a Louis pretending to be unshakably confident.
“Yeah I do. You gave me a gun, remember?”

Gouhin scowled at the three teenage delinquents sitting in front of his desk, his cigar trembling between his lips. “Legosi, Haru,” he growled, his dark eyes fixated on the antlered demon seated next to them, “would either of you like to explain why you brought this, this, this walking death wish into my office?”

“He’s a friend, Gouhin,” Haru explained as though her Impeccable Decision Making Skills - the same ones that lead her to date a carnivore more than twice her height - were any reassurance. “Gouhin, this is Louis. Louis, meet Gouhin, mine and Legosi’s mentor.”

“Charmed.” The deer’s voice was calm and collected like he expected to be in control of the situation - it got on Gouhin’s nerves. Who did this kid think he was, coming into his office and talking to him like he was in charge here?

The boss of the Shishigumi, probably.

“Significantly less so,” the old panda grunted, and squashed his smoke in his ashtray. “Why are you here - did one of your friend’s pet cats finally snap and try to take a leg off? I treat patients with a chance of recovery - I don’t help mobsters.” He studied the stag carefully - Gouhin knew that the Shishigumi had a weird new boss, and he knew that boss was an herbivore. What he hadn’t known was that their new boss was the same age as his pesky students. “And where do you children keep crawling out of? It was bad enough when there were two of you, now you’ve found a third!”

“That is an interesting way to address a lord of the Market, Mister Gouhin,” the stag - who was apparently called Louis, but he may as well have been named lunchmeat - said, clearly trying to intimidate him. Gouhin chuckled and leaned over his desk.

“It’s a perfectly normal way to address an idiot kid, Louis, and I’m not ‘Mister Gouhin’, I’m Doctor Gouhin; even here medical school means something, jackass. Haru, Legosi - what the hell are you doing here?”

“Well,” Legosi stammered, “I’ve been off the pills for a couple days, and Haru said we should come back here so that we could work on, well, on getting my anxiety under control.” He went quiet after that, but Gouhin could tell that he had more to say, so he fixed Legosi with the stiffest glare he could serve. Just before the wolf cracked, Haru came in and saved him - it was a game they’d played many times before, and Gouhin was certain that someday that poor rabbit was going to run herself ragged leaping to a wolf’s rescue.

“And,” she continued in place of her ill-advised partner, “two of Louis’ friends need our help, and we were hoping you could lend a hand.”

“What kind of help? If it’s studying for medical practicums, then I can see what I can do. If it’s-”

“Have you heard of the White Court?” Louis’ words silenced him like a punch to the nose, and Gouhin felt his heart actually build up the gall to betray him and skip a beat; he knew that name. He knew that name all too well.

All the demons in all the hells could take him now if he was about to let these children hurl themselves into that meat grinder. He’d washed his hands of revenge against the Court.

Gouhin stood, nostrils flaring as he rose to his full height and towered over the teenagers seated in
his office, summoning the full breadth of his intimidating aura to cow them into submission so it would be easier to set them running to go smoke pot or do something otherwise productive. He’d been battling the scum and safeguarding the victims of these streets for years - he was not about to be rebuffed by three over ambitious kids. Not again.

Louis sighed and turned to face Haru. “I don’t think he’s going to help us. This is a waste of time.” Gouhin felt his eye twitch.

“You three don’t know what you’re getting into, so I’m going to put this simply,” he growled. “You do not want to mess with the Court. You do not want to get within two metro stops of the Court. You do not even want to know that the White Court exists. Do I make myself clear?” Legosi glanced to Haru first, who nodded, then to Louis.

“Yeah, I don’t think he wants to help. It’s ok, we have directions.” Legosi stood from his seat and carefully pushed it back into place like the stubborn bastard he knew he was.

“What do you mean you have directions? Did you somehow manage to actually find their, their wretched hive?”

“That one was me,” Haru chimed in. “Louis knows where their boss - or, well, where the local one - is, and I got these two to help me out with some library work so we could find a way in. We’re pretty confident we can get in, but uh. You’re kind of the resident expert on beating up lots of animals all at once, so we figured you might have some advice to give.” Gouhin slowly lowered himself into his seat, rapidly deflating and sure they could see the steam coming out his ears.

“... I’m not deterring you three, am I?”

“Nope!” Haru chirped and then planted a handgun on his desk. The rabbit had just planted a Handgun. On his Desk. Gouhin looked down at the weapon in shock that these kids had somehow managed to throw him two curveballs in the span of one morning.

“... where did you get this.”

“It was a gift,” Louis explained, and Gouhin’s ear twitched.

“Oh, a gift. That’s cute. That’s real cute.” He sighed, and dragged a paw down the bridge of his nose. “Alright, alright. Fill me in on the details while I pull up the therapy plans I’ve drafted for Legosi here, and we can set to work.”

Clara tightened her grip around the linen straps that encircled her wrists, sweating profusely as she listened to the sound of her blood dripping onto the concrete floor. The crack of the Knight’s whip echoed through the small chamber again, and her elbows jolted as she felt the lash strike her naked back and heard her blood splatter behind her, but she didn’t make a sound. Instead, Clara stared calmly ahead into the undecorated wall and forced her body to relax, carefully regulating her breathing and calling her memories to the front of her mind. When the whip struck again, she wasn’t Clara, she was Number 37, and she was food.

**Number 37 squatted in her cell, knees huddled against her chest, her bloody knuckles and dark bruises wrapped in cloth bandages. Two adults - the Keepers - were talking agitatedly outside of her cage - she wasn’t sure what they were saying, but she knew it was about her. Number 37 was the oldest in her batch - it was hard to sell a product that so often bit, punched, and gored. She did not understand their words, but she knew what they were talking about: they were talking about**
how she killed The Man. Number 37 did not know who The Man was - he wore a shiny pin like the 
Keepers did, but he was not one of the Keepers. He had come, and the Keepers and The Man talked 
- they sounded angry at each other. Number 37 watched them talk, and saw the Keepers point to 
er her and beckon; obediently, she’d come to the bars of the cage, and The Man had grabbed her by 
the neck.

Number 37 remembered how his eye squished when she stabbed his pin into it, and how his skull 
fell under her tiny fists.

She curled into herself, and made herself a wordless promise: she would not be taken by a Man, by 
a Woman, by any Adult. She would not be food.

Clara bit back a tear as the brutal strike of the lash pulled her from her memories and back to 
lucidity, planting her feet firmly and adjusting her wide stance to let her weight rest more firmly on 
the straps attached to the bar above her so it would be easier to avoid slipping in the blood that 
pooled on the floor. She was panting - she couldn’t see, but she knew that the wool on her back 
was turning from pink to red. She could hear her Knight, her Master panting too - Clara grinned; 
the other Rooks could not make the Knight exert herself like that. There was a pause in the 
whipping, and she scowled privately - this was unusual. It normally would not be done so quickly. 
Then, she heard her Knight’s voice.

“Are you weak, Number 37?”

“No, my Knight,” she responded, her voice clear despite her wounds.

“Have you earned your name, Number 37?”

“Yes, my Knight.” The words came with pride. With strength.

“What is your name, Number 37?” The question hung in the air like an invitation, like a package 
waiting to be opened.

“I am Clara.”

The whip struck her again, and she sank back into her memories.

Chapter End Notes

If Haru does one thing, she gets shit done. This is the rabbit who has successfully 
managed, budgeted, and operated the Gardening club alone for more than two years - 
looking up poorly forged municipal records is like child's play to her. Understanding 
growing feelings surrounding her two complicated, stubborn boys? A little more hard! 
I was really excited to get a little into Cosmo's backstory with this chapter and where 
she is in general; I write a lot from Ibuki's perspective, so it's only fair she gets a turn. 
Once again, special thanks to 0Rocky41_7 for the inspiration I drew from their take on 
Cosmo, to SegantEnfield for their continued support of my work and help with 
spitballing ideas, and to all of you for reading! If you have any feedback, good or bad, 
(or ideas for fun ficlets about Cosmo and Ibuki so that I can be less stressed about 
them) please leave it in the comments below; I'm always happy to read what you have 
to say, and am curious as to how my recent chapters hold up in comparison to earlier 
chapters where the plot and dynamics were more set in stone. Until next time, stay
safe out there!

EDIT: Leaveamessageafterthescream on Tumblr has done some lovely fanart of this chapter! Please go check them out!!!

https://leaveamessageafterthescream.tumblr.com/post/621228448712687616/slowly-she-turned-her-head-up-eyes-going-wide-as
Indigestion

Chapter Summary

Ibuki wonders when lunch is. Cosmo has a business meeting. Clara puts up with so much for love - Ezekiel has an easier time of things. Free and Agata pick up some interesting news. Cosmo's poor neighbor has anxiety. Gouhin explains to three children why mobsters are dangerous. Haru exerts her authority. Louis has ideas of his own. The Green Knight plots.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Number 37 stared down the child on the opposite side of the ring from her. She felt the wraps around her knuckles creak in her fists and the sand shift under her toes - she’d had a chance to get big, but the boy on the other end of the arena was bigger. He wasn’t a Number like she was - sharp-toothed children didn’t get Numbers. Instead, his body was a tapestry of wriggling lines and words that explained which parts could be used for what. He looked nervous - perhaps this was his first fight? It didn’t matter. She grit her teeth, and hurled herself across the gap between them. The boy didn’t get out of the way - he thought he could counter with a block. When she felt his rib crack under her hard forehead, Number 37 knew that he was wrong.

It was a short fight - she didn’t feel the gashes his claws had raked into her back while she straddled him until he’d stopped struggling under the thunderous weight of her fists after she knocked out all of his teeth. Number 37 looked at her hands, and casually plucked a curved fang from her knuckles with her teeth and spat it to the dusty ground. She lifted a bloody fist into the air as adults came to drag the whimpering, bloody boy off for processing, and grinned when she heard the cheers of the adults who’d bet on her.

She was going to learn how to read.

Clara was pulled out of her reverie not by the sting of a whip, but by the soft texture of her Knight’s gloves. She felt the cool weight of her Knight against her bloody back and the gentle pressure of her hands sliding up one side of her belly towards her breasts and down the other to rest in the crook between her thighs. Her tail flicked as the Knight’s hand continued upward, delicately brushing over her trembling clavicles to rest on her neck, and she opened her eyes. Her Master’s face was next to hers, resting on her shoulder, and she was smiling.

“My liege… you will stain your suit,” Clara observed, but it was not in protest. Her Knight had saved her, and her Knight loved her, and for this she was grateful.

“There are other suits, Clara,” the Knight whispered, and kissed the number proudly tattooed under Clara’s eye. “There are not other Claras. Are you hurt?” Clara sighed, and regulated her breathing, shifting her weight to press into the Knight’s body - she could feel the sting of the lash wounds, but it was a familiar agony; only what was required to remain strong, faithful, and vigilant.

“No, my Knight, though I am not sure I could stand alone, now.” She heard the Knight giggle, and felt a cool hand hitch in her groin.
“Then it is a good thing,” her lover explained, “that you need not, for you know, Clara, of all my Rooks, I love you best.” Clara smiled, and allowed her breath to go unstable and her fists to loosen against the linen wraps as she closed her eyes and allowed her Knight and Master, Lady and Liege to hold her.

“I know as well, Lady Knight, that you tell all of us that,” she whispered, and waited eagerly for the response she knew was coming.

“I do,” the Knight said calmly, “but when I tell it to you, I do not lie.”

“L-look, I told you everything I know, alright?” the cheetah whined, anxiously fiddling with his hands. They’d been at this for almost twelve hours at this point, and Free was thankful he’d spent most of yesterday napping in Ibuki’s limo - well, technically the Boss’ limo, but Ibuki was the only one who ever drove the damn thing.

Except that one time when Agata drove it to take those punks home.

Or - fuck it, it’s Ibuki’s limo.

“Can I please go? I n-need to get to work soon.” Free leaned back in his chair and glowered his best glower at the whimpering cat in front of him - is this what passed for a feline carnivore these days?

“You’re sure you don’t remember any other details?” he asked, and decided that for putting up with the rambling, incoherent stories the cheetah had told all night long, he was allowed to have a little fun. Free reached into his jacket and slapped his gun onto the table, firmly grasping the weapon in his paw and pointing it directly at the gut of the much smaller man who sat across the table from him. He picked up his mug and took a sip of the coffee with his other hand, enjoying the way the coward’s eyes went wide at how casually he was taking this. “Thanks for the coffee, by the way. Really helps me keep my edge on, you know? Anyways, details, man, details. Someone busted into Cosmo’s place in the middle of the night. You’d been listening up against the wall, because you’re a fuckin’ perv, which is lucky for us. You mentioned you heard a conversation, which means there was more than one assailant - you catch voices?” The cheetah shook his head quickly. “It was quiet after that, and you never heard anybody leave the room - then, you heard a car pull away from the building outside.” Free lifted his weapon and pointed it squarely at the Cheetah’s forehead. “I want you to think real hard, and make absolutely sure that you didn’t see anything, alright buddy? Because I think there’s something you aren’t telling us, and I’m real curious as to why that might be.” The Cheetah was sweating bullets as he stared down the barrel of Free’s gun, frozen completely still in his chair. He saw the cat’s brow twitch, and thumbed back the hammer on his revolver; a classic weapon, and not the one he’d pick for a gunfight, but perfect for interrogations. For a moment, he thought either that the Cheetah wasn’t going to break, or that he actually didn’t know anything else and shooting his ear off would be a waste of time - fortunately for the both of them, it didn’t come to that.

“Ok ok listen, I. I didn’t think it was related, b-but a few days back, this uh, uh, this Ibex lady stopped by asking about Cosmo. It was during Cosmo’s shift, and she said she was an, uh, an outreach worker for herbivores in unstable living conditions? With a group called the Garden Courtyard. I told her when Cosmo usually got back, y’know, so they could talk; maybe she was involved somehow? Listen man I swear I don’t know anythi-” Free twitched his gun to the side of the Cheetah’s head and fired a shot. The bullet ripped through the thin wall into Cosmo’s apartment, and he heard it impact what sounded like a TV. Shit. He’d have to replace that. The Cheetah didn’t say anything - he just collapsed into a sobbing ball of panic on the table. Free frowned at him for a long moment, then shrugged and stuffed his gun back into his pocket.
“Alright Agata! Looks like he told us everything now. There’s three - maybe four - animals who did the grab, one of them’s an Ibex, and I don’t think any of ‘em were their boss. Seems he’s not the type to do his own dirty work, figures.”

“Free, I have ears you know,” Agata grumbled from the Cheetah’s kitchen where he was rifling through the fridge. The younger lion reached in and fetched a jar of jam, quickly setting to spread it over three toasted bagels. He closed the first one, and tossed it to Free - Free caught it in midair and scowled at it like he didn’t know what to do with the thing.

“How’s this?”

“Breakfast.”

“Agata, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this ain’t meat.” Free was certain he’d made his point succinctly.

“Free,” Agata parroted, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not back at base right now, and this dude’s only got bagels.” Agata kicked the fridge closed after replacing everything he’d removed, walked over to the table, and slid one of the bagels - the only one on a plate - in front of the Cheetah. “Sorry about the trouble, sir - the Shishigumi appreciates your cooperation. If you have any more information, come find us; we’ll be keeping an eye out.” Free snickered at Agata’s word choice - the cub was learning, he’d give him that. Free had never been much for thinly veiled threats - he preferred the kind that involved bullets or broken fingers - but he couldn’t deny Agata’s knack for them. He got up from his chair, dusted off his jacket, and patted the Cheetah’s head.

“Come on, cheer up! You can get back on with your life, and forget this whole thing happened. Lucky you. Catch you later, cat - or, well, you should hope I don’t.” Free took a bite out of the bagel as he and Agata stepped out of the Cheetah’s apartment - it was surprisingly palatable; it seemed Agata knew what he was doing in the kitchen. “Think we got everything?” Agata waited to answer Free until he finished giving a small wave to a Pangolin with a bandage under his eye who was fiddling with some keys down the hall - dumb kid. Nice kid, but dumb kid.

“I think we got everything we’re going to get,” Agata whispered as the two of them turned to head down the stairs. “You think that Ibex really had anything to do with it? Hard to believe Mr. Ibuki would get taken out by an ungulate like that.”

“I dunno,” Free said, trying to figure out how to light a cigarette with one hand. Agata’s lighter appeared in front of his face as they walked down the stairs. “Ah, thanks,” he mumbled. “As I was saying, I dunno - I think he already got taken out by an ungulate before that, know what I mean?” He elbowed Agata humorously in the side, but he didn’t seem to appreciate the joke.

“Free, can you take nothing seriously?”

“Agata, please,” Free said with a wicked grin as they exited the building onto the street below, “why the hell would you want me to do that?”

“So, let me get this straight, Louis - Cosmo and your guy got grabbed by the Green Knight, you three figured out where they’re probably being held, and you’re planning on getting in through a warehouse you’re pretty sure connects underneath the street, right?” Gouhin took a final sip of his tea before carefully setting the ceramic cup down on his counter - they were having this meeting in his kitchen space, since ample access to snacks and surfaces to put notes on always made these sorts of discussions easier.
“Yes,” Louis snarked, “and for the third time, he has a name; Ibuki.”

“Could not underestimate how little I give a shit. I’m agreeing to help you guys out for two reasons - one, Legosi and Haru seem determined to get themselves killed, and I am not about to let the last several months I’ve spent teaching them go to waste. Two, this seems like legitimately the only good shot anybody is going to get to bloody the White Court’s nose, and I’ve got a score to settle. Do you have a plan of attack?”

“I was thinking we’d just, y’know. Punch em.” It was, unfortunately, a predictable answer from Legosi. Haru looked like she had a better idea.

“We know that there’s hidden basements under their club that go down at least 4 levels, and we know that there’s a warehouse across the street with what looks like a hidden passage that connects to the underground levels. My gut says that we should call the police, but… well…”

“We’re convinced the authorities are aware of this sort of thing, and choose to keep quiet about it,” Louis completed for her. “Similarly to my conversation with the Mayor when Haru got kidnapped; the White Court is too troublesome to confront, so the officials sweep it under the rug.” Haru nodded.

“That’s why Legosi and I are going to go out to the docks next weekend - we can look at the traffic around the warehouse, and we don’t think they know about us yet. Besides, a couple of teenagers going on a date by the sea isn’t exactly suspicious behavior, so we shouldn’t have anything to worry about.” Gouhin nodded and leaned over the counter, plucking a half snubbed cigarette from his ashtray to settle his nerves.

“Sounds like you thought this out pretty well,” he admitted. “With how you choose to live, Haru, it’s easy to forget you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.” Before she could respond to the jab, Gouhin held up his hands - now wasn’t the time for another petty argument that ended with a life lesson he’d already failed to impart seven times. “But, it’s not my place to judge - still, that doesn’t address how you’re going to actually take these guys on. I’m talking staff, positions, layout, firepower. What weapons do they have, how many grunts will you need to fight, what species? These are dangerous animals - bigger than the Shishigumi or any of the mobs here. You’ve been picking off, what, their Pawns, Louis?” Louis nodded smugly.

“Like flies on an eyelash.” His tone was confident, collected, and self-assured - Gouhin was pretty sure that would get him killed. “They’ve never proven much trouble.”

“Well, unfortunately for you, you won’t just be taking on Pawns.” He sighed, and moved over to the window, resisting the urge to reminisce, to think about the last time he’d tried to address the systems that broke the Market instead of allowing himself to be content patching its wounds. “Just like you have your lieutenants, the Knight is going to have something called Rooks; elite soldiers that help run the whole operation. You aren’t going to be knocking down some upstart den of thugs and smugglers, kids; you are taking on a well organized, well funded, and well established operation. What was it you said, Louis? About jobs.”

“My Shishigumi takes jobs, the White Court makes them?” For a moment, Gouhin focused his disapproval on a couple in the alley outside his clinic who almost certainly weren’t exercising proper precautions against STDs so that he could cool off, and then turned to face his two - now three - young charges.

“That’s the one. Before you set foot anywhere near there, you’d better be damn sure you know what that means.”
Ezekiel casually slipped the knife into the dead Cheetah’s hand, humming gently to himself while he double checked that the apartment door was locked from the inside. He wasn’t particularly worried about discovery - nobody investigated murders in the Black Market, the extent of the justice that these savages understood was revenge - but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t take pride in his work. He tugged the bloody pair of latex gloves off his hands and pulled on a fresh set as he went about the work of finding any scraps of writing the Cheetah - one late Goswell - had left behind. A few sticky notes on the refrigerator, a whiteboard calendar, and an unsent letter to what appeared to be his estranged sister did the trick quite nicely - it was convenient that Mr. Goswell owned stationary, it prevented him from having to guess what kind of paper to use. He thought on the subject of the letter he was going to write for a few moments, tapping the Cheetah’s pen against his nose. “What do you think, Mister Goswell - driven to grief after your lovely neighbor went missing? Guilt over not confessing your love and not stepping in to help?” The corpse sat quietly, eyes wide in shock and fear - Ezekiel wished he could have framed this as suicide by firearm, but unfortunately this was a densely inhabited apartment complex, and he couldn’t have been certain nobody would have investigated a gunshot, so a knife had had to do the trick. He nodded curtly to the body and set about writing the false suicide note, carefully mimicking the dead man’s handwriting. “Not my best work,” he grumbled, “but it will have to do.” Ezekiel set the pen down on the table, and set about adding the finishing touches to the scene - adjusting the corpse’s pose, artistically placing flecks of blood on the faux suicide note, carefully arranging the apartment to a mixture of organization and disarray, and ensuring the victim’s phone was off. He patted Goswell on the shoulder, admiring the natural way the Cheetah’s throat hung open - it was a good cut, he hadn’t suffered long. “Sorry, friend - but, this is the sort of thing that happens when one is a peeping tom. Better luck next time.” The Pangolin stepped away from the body and slipped his phone out of his pocket, humming his favorite pop tune to himself as he waited for his Knight to pick up - she should be just about done with Clara by now, but if not he could wait; he had no reason to be jealous.

“Ibuki’s stomach complained louder than any other part of him. His back ached from having been locked in a chair for more than a full day, the zipties bit acutely into his wrists and ankles, and he was fairly certain he’d have a swollen jaw for much of the week, but it was the pit in his stomach that he was most aware of.

The Shishigumi, as a rule, did not go hungry - the last time he’d missed more than one meat-rich meal in a row was before he’d joined up, back when he was a hapless street-cur running from the butcher’s nets. But now, he hadn’t had anything to eat - much less meat - for at least 24 and more probably somewhere around 32 hours. Something soft hit him in the face, and he spat in surprise
and opened his eyes.

Cosmo’s hackeysack was in his lap, and she was sitting against the bars of their cage opposite him. He looked first at the toy, and then to Cosmo. She was staring at him intently - almost expectantly.

“If you want it back,” he said, only slightly sarcastically showing off his bound hands, “you’re going to have to come get it.”

“What, no ‘Oh, thank you for keeping me awake, Miss Cosmo - I sure am lucky you’re around,“ she sang in a mocking - and honestly surprisingly accurate - caricature of his low rumble. Well, surprisingly accurate for an Okapi half his weight. “You dozed off again, and I’m pretty sure you have a concussion.”

“Why would I be concussed, Cosmo?” Ibuki sighed, and cracked his neck - his head felt like somebody had hit it with a hammer.

“Uh, maybe you don’t remember, but I’m pretty sure that little water deer clubbed you in the face a couple times.” Oh right - he’d been hit in the head twice with a hammer.

“He’s a water deer, Cosmo,” Ibuki huffed indignantly - as though a tiny animal like that could truly injure a Lion of the Shishigumi - and turned his gaze away from her naked body. He wasn’t sure why they’d given her a hackeysack to keep entertained with but not a fresh set of clothes; he imagined it must be some kind of psychological torture for at least one of them, but the result had just been that Cosmo slept in his lap to escape the cold and damp, so clearly it wasn’t working.

“Yeah, with a mace.” Cosmo stood and dusted off her knees. “How’s your head?”

“I’m not sure, you seem to be the expert on that matter.” He was pouting a little - probably the delirium talking - but it didn’t change the fact that he was glad of her company. The cell was oddly sized - too small for proper chambers to keep, say, a political prisoner in, but too large to simply cage an animal. Over the last day, his eyes had adjusted to the gloom enough to know that the space their little cell was in extended far beyond its bars, large, blurry shapes squatting motionless in the darkness. If he’d had his glasses, he might be able to see them - if they’d been fresher, he might be able to smell them. Whatever they were, they made him uneasy - even concussed, Ibuki was a smart Lion, and a smart Lion would know two things: one, those objects out in the darkness were probably other cells, and two, this cell was the same size as a fighting pit.

“How was breakfast?” he asked as Cosmo approached him entirely too casually for their situation - it would be simpler, he thought, if she played the part of the panicky, frightened cow, so that he could ground himself in the role of the resolute and reassuring mobster; but, then she wouldn’t be Cosmo, life would be too like a romance novel for his tastes, and ‘simpler’ would probably mean that they were about to die in a dramatic scene sure to move the audience to tears.

Maybe he read too many romance novels.

As it stood, life in confinement seemed to have its routines - yesterday, Cosmo had been collected by the creepy Water Deer who never said anything once in the morning and once in the evening for a meal that she described as taking place in a repurposed broom closet while Ibuki was left in his chair. This morning, the same captor as before had collected Cosmo for breakfast again, and Ibuki had been left in his chair again - he expected that this would become a pattern.”Fine,” Cosmo said, rubbing a hand behind her ear to wipe away a little grime; neither of them had been afforded a shower yet. “Nothing like lunch with Louis, but a lot better than the movies made me think it would be. How was yours?”
“Oh, alright,” Ibuki lied with a half-hearted shrug. “Gamier than I’m used to, but at least it’s meat.” Their position was uncertain - they were imprisoned by enemies who knew more about them than the reverse, were in an uncertain location, and didn’t have any idea what their captors had in store for them. To Ibuki’s mind, telling Cosmo that he wasn’t being fed would just give her one more thing to worry about - she hid it well, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about the thought that it was for his sake, but she was worried - he could smell it on her.

Recently, Ibuki found that his sense of smell had grown keener than he was used to.

Cosmo nodded and sat in his lap, and it hit him all at once - her scent was intoxicatingly powerful; the smell of blood, sweat, fear and naked flesh washed over him like a tidal wave, battering his brain and tugging at his guts. He felt his pulse quicken in a primal sort of anticipation and felt his claws twitch inside his fingers. His pupils narrowed and it took all the strength he had to keep his breathing steady in the presence of a naked, female herbivore. With a naked, female herbivore sitting on his lap, her throat within easy reach of his fangs, her plump, juicy thighs ready for his gullet. He found his brain performing an unwilling calculus - if he were to act, she would not have time to react before he caught her, even tied to his chair like this. She was draped against his chest, curled into a ball, using him for warmth - Ibuki realized now why she hadn’t been given a fresh set of clothes.

He understood the torture better now.

He felt Cosmo stroking his chest, tracing the line of his tattoos. He imagined how her fingers might crunch between his jaws, or how the succulent flesh of her cheeks might taste from a different angle than when they’d kissed. She looked up at him, and he swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth.

“Ibuki? Did you hear me?” she asked - he hadn’t even noticed that she was talking.

“No, I apologize. You’re right - I must be concussed.” His tongue was agitated in his mouth - she was so close - and he remembered why he’d chosen Miles and Koichi to come with him as security for Cosmo’s show; the reason for their restraint and calm demeanor. They, like him, were well fed.

“I was asking how long you think they’ll keep us here for - I don’t mind having you naked and tied to a chair, but it would be nicer somewhere else.”

“... long enough.” Long enough. The words felt like ash in his mouth.

It had been a long time since Ibuki last starved.

… marks another tragic incident in a line of predation cases. Officials warn carnivorous citizens to avoid usage of any and all narcotics, and offer clemency for controlled substance related offenses...

The radio blared sordid news in the background, and Haru gawked in a horrible, morbid sort of fascination at the photographs Gouhin had pinned up to the wall. She was not a naive rabbit - Haru understood that the world was a dangerous place where animals did terrible things in the dark so that every day, the city could wake up and pretend that it lived somewhere nice. She’d seen so much more of her hometown’s bloated, impoverished underbelly since she’d started working with Legosi and Gouhin; carnivores destabilized by hungers and cravings there existed no support networks for, herbivores who’d fallen through the cracks in society and relied on portioning themselves off for consumption to get by, everyday animals who allocated a part of their lives to
indulge in self-prescribed medicines that they tried to forget about when they stepped outside the boundaries of the Market. She’d seen ugly animals, beautiful animals, cruelly honest animals - but she’d never quite seen anything like this.

The pictures were of cages - cramped concrete and iron pens scattered with loose straw and discarded children’s toys which had clearly provided some meager comfort for dozens of owners. Only some of the cages were the height of a proper room - most of them had plywood boards which partitioned them into multiple levels, each of which could be accessed by a small door, and none of which were deep enough that an occupant could get out of arm’s reach; the limited height of the artificial ceilings made it clear that the occupants were not expected to stay past early childhood. Past the “veal stage”, as Gouhin explained it. The cells the White Court kept were a stark contrast to their paraphernalia - everything about their accessories oozed wealth, from the standard issue firearms they supplied their grunts with to the polished, well made enamel and precious metal pins that constituted their uniforms. It was a perverse and sickeningly professional side of the meat trade that, until now, was completely alien to Haru - the White Court looked exactly the same as a legitimate corporation with its dingy, efficiency-minded production lines and the gaudy veneer of respectability it used to conceal its rotten bulk. It was a place where champagne flutes and the profound suffering of living beings - not bodies secretly obtained from hospitals and morgues, but living beings - were equally mundane topics of conversation.

The White Court was what pure evil looked like.

“I took these years ago during my first scuffle with the Court,” Gouhin explained, for some reason standing with one foot up on a chair - maybe he thought it made him look intimidating? “They had a small base of operations in a tower in the Market - they liked to pass it off as a harvest site, but that was only ever its secondary function; what the tower really was was a recruitment center.” Louis’ nose wrinkled as though he somehow took offence at what Gouhin’s explanation.

“And how do you know this?” he asked, very predictably.

“Because if it was a harvest site, Boss,” Gouhin sneered, spitting Louis’ title as though it were an insult, “I never would have been able to take it by myself. The tower’s location gives it away - no easy way in or out of the Market, but plenty of visibility to carnivores with neither cash nor morals to speak of.”

“It makes sense.” Haru jotted a few lines down in her notepad. “If they kept an outpost here, then they’d be able to hire new soldiers without needing to risk anybody talking, or getting in the way.” Gouhin nodded solemnly to her.

“Exactly - and, what with the shit state the city around the Market’s in, there’s a steady stream of parents desperate enough to sell one kid so that they can feed the others, so they didn’t need to worry about a supply chain.” Haru shivered.

“That’s horrible.” She found herself thinking back to her own family - her mom, her dad, her older siblings. She wondered if, had they fallen on hard times, she might have wound up in one of those cages.

“It’s survival,” Louis answered coldly. “Nothing more, nothing less.” Haru could hear the bitter edge on his tongue and swallowed. She’d only just started peeling back the skin on the Black Market and she was already sick; he’d been stewing in its putrid underbelly for months - she could only imagine the things he’d seen. “Is any of this lesson going to be actionable information, Doctor? Or are you just trying to scare us off? If so, I have better things to do with my time.”

“Do you have maps of the tower?” Haru was turning the topic over in her mind. “If it really was a
“That,” the panda remarked, “is actually a surprisingly good idea. Hmph. With the company you keep, Haru, I forget how often you have those.”

“We’re not having this conversation again, old man,” she spat. “Someday you’ll get used to the idea that I can take care of myself - until then we’ve got shit to do. Do you have the maps or not?” Gouhin withered under her gaze - Haru didn’t take her stern glare off the big doctor, but she could feel Louis’ eyes on her. His silence was enough to know that he was impressed. Gouhin broke before she did, turning his eyes down to his desk and making a note.

“We don’t, but the tower’s still there. I’ll get over this week and sketch out a map,” he sighed in defeat. “Let’s talk about hierarchy - you’re going after, what, the Green Knight?”

“Why do they call themselves that anyways? It’s a little ostentatious, don’t you think?”

“Two reasons, I’d imagine,” Louis answered. “One, anonymity - specific titles allow them to operate without names or faces, and to replace members of their organization without it being clear that a new individual has assumed a position. The second reason is simple vanity - from my conversations with their Pawns, they talk like they’re better than everyone else. Aligning their names with archaic nobility fits their aesthetic. I know of three other leaders active in the country besides the Green Knight, and I’m sure there are more that operate worldwide.”

“Alright, alright, why don’t we see if you can deal with one of them first and then we can talk about the global syndicate.” Haru listened closely as Gouhin explained the particulars of the White Court’s hierarchy from the lowly carnivorous Pawns, to the bizarre and unpredictable Rooks, and the mysterious Lieges who sat atop the order. The information wasn’t incredibly detailed - it seemed like Gouhin had picked most of it up from rummaging through the file cabinets the Pawns he’d taken out left behind - but it was still a lot to take in and, more importantly, enough to understand what their enemies were talking about if things went bad, which, of course, Haru assumed they would. She’d only had one experience with real gangland crime before - from everything she’d seen, it was a chaotic, messy affair riddled in hot takes and bad decisions, and she hadn’t even been the one stirring the pot.

Haru wasn’t sure if she should be excited about the idea of personally taking on organized crime. Whether or not she should be, though, that was a different and largely irrelevant story - with Legosi and Louis in her life, what she should do mattered even less than it did before. “Can you tell us anything about how they fight? What weapons they use?”

“Pawns are normal. Guns, knives, claws and teeth. Nothing you haven’t seen. Rooks and up? They’re rexdamn weird. Avoid them if you can - unpredictable bastards the whole lot.” Gouhin tapped his cheek with two fingers. “I’ve only taken on one Rook, and he’s the reason I don’t have binocular vision anymore.”

“You only have one eye?” Legosi asked, clearly surprised by the revelation. Gouhin just sighed in frustration.

“Yes, Legosi. I only have one eye. Try to keep up, please - when I told you you could sleep in class I didn’t mean this one, got it?”
“Sorry. When you say weird… do you mean like… you weird?” Gouhin looked like he was about to come back with a snappy remark, so Haru cut him off.

“I think Legosi means how you use a crossbow, or a staff, or… other things you make out of bamboo. Not exactly standard street weapons.”

“…yes, if you want to put it that way, they are. The guy I fought liked to use chains with old razorblades welded onto them. Called himself Kyton - the point is, it’s easier to fight if you know what to expect, and their weapons aren’t the sort that can cause collateral damage. You can’t get them to hesitate by putting their friends between them and you, and you can’t assume that you know what they’re going to throw at you. They’re extremely, extremely dangerous.” Gouhin deflated and sank back into his seat. “So, Haru, Louis - you know how to use those guns?”

“Yes,” Louis answered confidently.

“No,” Haru answered much the same.

“Great. Then you’ll both be coming back here every night. I’ve got a range in the basement - you can take turns and we can work on Legosi’s fragile mental health between.” Haru beamed in her seat and idly kicked her legs.

It was great to be taken seriously.

The Green Knight discarded her stained gloves and slid easily into her office chair. She kicked her feet up on the desk, the spurs at the back of her boots jangling lazily, and clicked the button on a sleek, steel remote. Dazzling matte panels descended from the ceiling to block out the windows, sealing away the sunlight that seeped into the room - once her office was cast in shadow, the projector clicked on, and her meeting could begin.

"Hello hello lady Knight, long time no see," joked the sultry voice of the ebony masked figure on the other end of the call, his twisting horns and gaudy black and white pin flashing in what looked like natural sunlight. The splashing of waves was easily audible in the background of the call matched his floral print button down and pasty white slacks - he must be at home. While the Green Knight didn't share the Queen's aesthetic, she could certainly appreciate his instinct for glamour.

"Not as long as some might like," she laughed from beneath the concealing shadow cast by the brim of her hat, "but long enough for longing. How's the new Rook?" Her counterpart cackled raucously, took a sip from his glass of wine, and then promptly poured the rest out.

"Eager and strong. You should see him on the Bacchanalia - truly a marvelous creature, wasted in that suffocating school. But please, we aren't here to discuss toys, we are here to discuss business. Have you made the arrangements?"

"Clara is putting them through now."

"Oh? Number 37 is on paperwork? What ever happened to her being your toughest - the abyss forbid that you're going soft, Greenie." The Knight's lips pulled into a terse smirk - she liked the Queen, but he could be grating on even her patience, which was, of course, legendary. She decided to make him wait on her response, and tucked into a bite of the succulent pumpkin in front of her instead.

"We had a meeting," she explained casually. "My darling Clara is still recovering."
"Ahh, so you are going soft - be careful, Greenie, a Liege must not pick favorites," the Queen chided, comically waggling a finger in front of his webcam. Her eyes fixated on the leafy tattoos that covered his arm - she wondered how they might taste.

"That's a little hypocritical, coming from you." Her tail swished irritably against the warm tile floor, spines rising at his childish games. It was, of course, the reason he was her favorite coworker - the Queen was anything but dull.

"Please lady Knight remember," he said, and tugged on his pin for emphasis - a bicolor pin, black and white. The Hybrid's Emblem. "I am a creature of dualities. Are the pieces in place?"

"Shuffling there, yes - the right Bishop's captured, as is the enemy Queen. The left I've given a little gift to deliver to his King, just to spice things up a little."

"What do the others think about that? I understand our dear friend the Duke has designs on that little fawn - what is it we're calling him now, the Horned King of the Black Market? Insufferably ostentatious, if you ask me." The Knight giggled and took another bite of her meal, savoring the rusty tang of its glaze.

"The King is constantly fretting about how this plan is too risky, how it will destabilize his city, and the Duke remains, as ever, an obstinate fool too blinded by commerce and statistics to appreciate real vision. But the King is as yellow as his piss, and the Duke always frets about profits being in the red, so I don't pay either of them much mind." She paused, appreciating the texture of coagulated blood on her tongue. Such a rare delicacy. "They disapprove of our correspondences, you know."

"Oh Greenie," the Queen sighed cheerfully, "when have either of us allowed someone else's disapproval get in our way? I've sent a batch of the product to the manufacturer as per your request, and the rest should have been delivered to your warehouse this morning. Do be careful with it - it's frighteningly potent stuff."

"I'm rather sure I will, my Lord Queen - you should come see the show yourself; I think the performance will be to your liking."

"Alas," the Queen sighed in mock disappointment, "I cannot. Business cannot wait, and quivering tongues won't silence themselves." The Green Knight smirked and stood from her desk, leaning over the heavy oaken surface.

"Then I'll be sure to send you a recording. Take care Black Queen - until we meet again." She terminated the call before he could respond and relished the pleasant tingle in her belly - getting the last word in with him was one of her life's many, many pleasures. "Clara," she called, bemusement evident on her voice.

"Yes, my Knight?" Replied the shadow in the back of the room - the shadow who has heard the whole conversation from just out of view.

"Invite Cosmo to lunch with me today. I think it's about time I interviewed our star."

Something was wrong with Ibuki.

Perhaps she wasn’t clever enough to figure out what - that creepy Ibex and the echidna in the biker jacket came to collect her before she’d had the chance to act - but Cosmo knew how to read a carnivore’s body language. They were like books to her - men, women, she was well versed in a
variety of literature, and she could tell natural behavior from unnatural behavior as easily as she
could tell night from day. And something was wrong with Ibuki.

The echidna - Number 12, given his tattoo - had stayed behind with Ibuki, while the Ibex - 37 - led
her casually across the darkened room to a metal, electronically locked door that led into a dingy
concrete stairwell. The steps were cold and rough beneath her bare feet, but the unease made her
shiver more than the temperature did - perhaps it was ironic, but Cosmo would have preferred if
her captors were meat eaters. She appreciated the humor in it - the morsel wishing it were in a
banquet hall - but for all she could understand Carnivores, it had been so long since she’d spent
significant time among her own kind that she had trouble deciphering her jailers’ motives or
moods. This one especially set her on edge - the Ibex cut a striking silhouette in her shiny green
suit and her golden knuckle dusters scattered the pale light of the bulbs set into the walls. Cosmo
quickly looked away as the Ibex glanced over her shoulder at her - it wasn’t a cruel look, or a
pitying look, or even a look that demonstrated the power dynamic; it bore the terrifying weight of
complete indifference. She could feel the fur on her neck standing on edge, but this time it was not
the pleasant, heady rush she got from the Black Market - carnivores, Cosmo understood.

Herbivores? They scared her.

Cosmo paid close attention as she scaled the wide circle the steps wound around the building - her
fear honed her senses to a razor’s edge, so there was no sense in wasting the opportunity. On the
way up, the steps passed four doors similar to the one at the bottom of the case before she heard
the faint sounds of traffic through the outer wall; and chemical sanitizers clung to the air like a
plague, and the hum of electrical cables ran underneath the floor. Her cell, she reasoned, must be 5
levels underground - the fact that she could hear the street through the outer wall of the staircase,
which never doubled back on itself, meant that it ran the circumference of the building, the fact
that she couldn’t hear anything from the inner wall meant it was either soundproofed or not
currently during their business hours, and the fact that there were no windows meant that the
interior of the complex, enclosed by the stairwell as it was, would be completely invisible from the
outside. The wide arc of the stairs told her she wasn’t in a small building, and their regularity
meant that it had to be an evenly cylindrical tower. After hitting the street level, the Ibex guided
her up a further 3 levels before the staircase - which was lit by oblong bulbs guarded by steel cages
- terminated abruptly in a fine oak door that smelled like reinforced steel. It was warmer up here,
and a thin film of sunlight crept through the crack under the door - the room on the other side had
windows, and it was day out. They waited there for a long time, and as they did, Cosmo carefully
watched that thin golden ray slowly shrink until it was gone; whoever was on the other side didn’t
want her to know it was light out. She swallowed.

“So…” it was a hazardous endeavor, but as much as nature abhors a vacuum, Cosmo abhorred a
silence. “Is this the part where whoever’s past that door pulls out my fingernails? Because I’d
really rather skip that bit.” The Ibex offered no response beyond a tightening of her fists. Oh, a
threat? Cosmo could handle threats. “Your boss knows that if she wanted some private time with
me, I charge a very reasonable rate, right?” That got the Ibex’ eye to twitch, and Cosmo’s ear
flicked a little at the way Number 37’s breathing increased slightly in pace. The only further
response she got, though, was the Ibex reaching out, opening the door, and holding it for Cosmo to
step inside.

The room beyond the door was a stark contrast to the dreary, claustrophobic stairwell - Cosmo
stepped into the spacious, white tiled office with awe plastered visibly on her face. The room was
less a room and more a hall - it curled along the circumference of the building, faint light glowing
from the broad white tiles that evenly coated the floor. Potted plants decorated the metal slats that
blocked the windows to the outside world, and the wall was decorated in countless examples of
what could only be original art pieces - or very good forgeries - from around the world over, each
depicting some depraved act of savagery cast in golden light. The decorations here were worth more money than Cosmo would ever make over the course of her entire life, and in the middle of the hall before her was a heavy hardwood desk with a covered silver platter placed in its middle. A luxurious cushioned chair sat casually in front of the desk, and on the opposite side reclined a familiar silhouette whose cheshire grin peeked out from beneath the swooping brim of her hat.

“Hello, Cosmo,” her captor said with a wave of her hand, a cheerful edge dripping off her voice like venom, “please, take a seat. You must be famished - I felt it appropriate, given you’re my guest, for us to share lunch. How are you finding your accommodations?” The animal in the chair was utterly incomprehensible, so Cosmo took the only available course of action.

She shoved her fear down her throat, put on her best face, and took her fucking seat.

“Oh, they’re just lovely,” she said, pleasantness tangibly dripping from her tongue as she leaned back and crossed her legs. “The bed’s warm, the view’s nice, what’s not to like?” The figure opposite her chuckled in her chest, and Cosmo felt the sound encroaching upon her from all angles like a snake coiling around its prey. Her gracious host gestured into the darkness, and the Ibex stepped forward and lifted the cover from the silver platter with a flick of her wrist - the scent that poured out was intoxicating, a medley of kale, summer squash, cinnamon, and stir fried quinoa. Her stomach grumbled traitorously - evidently, it missed her lunches with Louis.

“Good, good! I’m glad to hear that you and your… what, boyfriend? Pet? are keeping well.” Her captor paused, letting the atmosphere sink in. “Tell me, Cosmo; did your friend - that boy, the stag - ever tell you who we are?”

It was obvious she was talking about Louis - Cosmo decided to play dumb. She shuffled in her chair, and reached out to spear a chunk of squash on a chopstick, casually tossing it back with the energy of a performer repeating a conversation with her agent for the fifth time. “You’ll have to be more specific - I have plenty of friends, and many of them are boys.”

The figure leaned her elbows onto the desk, and nodded over Cosmo’s shoulder. Soft steps echoed through the darkened room, and suddenly a thin linen strap wrapped around Cosmo’s neck and tugged sharply back. For a moment, she choked on her squash as the garotte bit into her throat and cut off her air, and Cosmo thought that her last words would be a joke about work. Instead, the Ibex expertly wrangled the strap up under her chin to pin her head against the back of her chair, maintaining just enough pressure to make it clear that further attempts at humor would not be tolerated. Cosmo resisted the urge to snatch her hands to her neck and tug at her fresh bind - even through the medium of the cloth, she could feel the quivering tension in 37’s muscles, and the way that her chair didn’t budge when she slammed into the backrest informed her that it had been secured to the floor. If there was to be a struggle, Cosmo would lose. Cosmo stared daggers at the figure opposite her, digging her hands into the armrests of her seat as the shadow stood from her seat and pulled a knee up onto the desk. She strained to get a glimpse of the reptile’s face, but all she could see were the leaf shaped points of her many sharp teeth.

“You’re a particularly interesting individual, don’t you know Cosmo?” Cosmo moved to spit a response, but the cloth bit into her neck and strangled the words in her throat. “You’re weak - nothing about you implies any prowess in combat, nothing about you speaks to your suffering or your expertise - and yet, you insist on making your home in a stewpot.” Sweat beaded on Cosmo’s brow as a gloved hand reached through the darkness to grace down the side of her face, her neck, her shoulder. “Why is that? You clambering morsels, you piteous creatures know better than to crawl into the oven - are you suicidal, Cosmo? Do you have a death wish? Because if you are, then I assure you that can be readily arranged.” Cosmo was paralyzed under the dark creature that loomed over her - it was slight framed, and its height came from the desk more than its own mass.
The strap across her neck loosened, and when she coughed, something wet spilled onto her lap - her nose was bleeding. She steadied her breath, waiting for spite to overtake anxiety before she responded - this asshole knew how to cultivate fear, sure, but disrespect made Cosmo mad.

“You tell me,” she coughed, glaring up into the dripping maw above her. “Shouldn’t be too surprising that self preservation was never my strong suit. I want a thrill, doc - you gonna give me a thrill?” Death loomed over Cosmo every day she got out of bed - right now wasn’t any different. If she was going to die, she was sure as hell going to die with her pride intact. Cosmo was not the begging type. The room was filled by a tense silence for a long moment; the only sound she could hear was the pounding of her blood in her ears and the distant hum of an air conditioning unit. Finally, the figure seated on the desk waved a hand dismissively, and the strap unraveled from around Cosmo’s neck as the Ibex stepped away.

Cosmo fell forward in her chair, rubbing at the sore flesh under her chin and relishing in her shoulder blades’ complaints. The shadow on the desk clapped slowly and tutted her tongue - well, at least one of them found this funny.

“Well done - I’m impressed. I assumed that petty threats would work on you - it is a relief to see that I was incorrect. Tell me, is it because you know that I need you alive in two weeks time? Or is it simply because you recognize your life’s inherent lack of meaningful value?”

“Oh, little of column a, little of column b, and a little fuck you for good measure,” Cosmo rasped. “I live in the Black Market, what did you expect?” The shadow ignored the jab and idly plucked a vegetable from the plate.

“I’m going to assume that your employer hasn’t told you about us, so allow me to elaborate - I am the Green Knight, and the lovely lady behind you is my subordinate, Clara. Say hello, Clara.”

“Hello, Clara,” the Ibex grunted dryly.

“We represent an organization called the White Court, and you, my darling dancer,” she said, reaching a finger out to playfully boop Cosmo’s nose, “will be the star performer at my Halloween Party this year. I saw your performance at that dreary little pit the other night, and I simply had to have you. How lucky for me my claws run deep through the Market.” She’d had her suspicions, but here was confirmation - it seemed Louis’ plan had worked a little too well.

“You could have just hired me, I’m not expensive.”

“I’d beg to differ, Cosmo - your price included the lives of four of my men.” Cosmo swallowed. Right. “Now allow me to explain how the next two weeks will go - you will have rehearsal daily during my club’s closing hours, so that we can workshop your routine for the party and plan seating arrangements. If you put up a fuss, then one of my other lovely associates will start cutting extra bits off of your Lion.”

“And after the show?” Cosmo asked. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Miss Knight. Am I going to walk out of here, or will it be more a dining cart situation?” The knight grinned, and tucked a gloved clawtip under Cosmo’s chin, lifting it up. In the dim light, Cosmo saw a flash of silver from the Knight’s cheek, but nothing more.

“Get through the performance, and you’ll walk.”

Louis stepped out of Gouhin’s office with his heart in his throat. His blood pounded in his ears and the chill in the air bit the back of his neck like a snake - it had been a long time since he’d seen that
place. A long time since he’d seen those images. The number on his foot burned in his shoe like a coal. He felt sicker than when he ate meat.

This was incredibly inconvenient, he couldn’t vomit in front of his friends now Legosi had just picked up new anxiety management plans.

They were just behind him, chatting about medicine like nothing was wrong. Louis felt panic swimming between his skin and his muscles, the thin oily sheen of long repressed trauma wriggling through his flesh. His mind scrolled back to his earliest memories - the way voices echoed through the stone floors, the leering grins of his jailers, the ever present scraping of sharpening knives.

The distant cries followed swiftly by deafening silence.

A hand on his shoulder shook him from the grim reverie - his head snapped to the side, and Louis found himself nearly nose to nose with Legosi.

“You okay Louis?” the big wolf asked. Of course he wasn’t okay, did the sweat sheen and pupils the size of pinpricks communicate an animal who was ok???

“Yes, I’m fine.” The lie tasted like bile. Louis shrugged Legosi’s hand off his shoulder and wasn’t sure why - instinct, he supposed. Perhaps he and Legosi weren’t so different after all. “I’ve business to attend to - you two can get back to Cherryton on your own, yes?”

Legosi looked like he wanted to say something, but Haru cut him off. “Yeah, Louis. We’ll be fine. Is this the kind of business that involves bullets?” Louis considered his answer carefully - the plan as they’d discussed it with Gouhin was that Legosi and Haru would scout out the area outside the warehouse tomorrow after school, and at the end of the week, Gouhin would help them storm the place.

Louis had alternative plans.

“Yes,” he answered coldly. “It is.” He studied Haru’s face, searching for the disapproval he expected as his memories plunged him into a sea of melodrama - her scorn, her disgust at his involvement with the beasts who’d nearly killed her, her grudge for his abandonment. All he found was concern. The hate would have been easier.

“Okay - don’t miss. We’ll catch you tomorrow, right?” Louis looked between his friends: Legosi’s expression was peculiar, as though the wolf was trying to remind Louis of something he’d forgotten - but then again Legosi was always strange - and Haru just looked like she did back in the shed when he’d rebuked her time and time again, wearing the pleading expression that begged him to open up and let her help that haunted his waking dreams. After this was done, perhaps he would - but first, he had ghosts to kill.

“Of course. Keep safe, you two - I’m already dealing with enough stress as it is, and I don’t need you knocking my antlers off early.” They laughed; he waved, and ducked quickly into the alley, the clicks of his hard shoes ferrying him briskly to the waiting car.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know your thoughts on the chapter! Sorry this one took a little longer than
usual; with everything that's about to pop off, setting up all the connective tissue gave me a little trouble. As always, if you have any feedback - criticism, comments, just wanna say hi - please leave it in the comments below! I love reading your thoughts and interacting with y'all. As an additional question, would y'all prefer more shorter chapters, or is the longer-form working best? Thanks!
Castling En Passant

Chapter Summary

Haru practices at the range and forgets something. Legosi discovers some new and fun tidbits about himself. Louis plays his part damnignly well. Agata apologizes. Dolph loses some weight. Sabu smiles. A Rook takes the stage, and confronts a King.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mogel sat lazily at the computer terminal, his plastic suit crinkling around his limbs as he worked. The machines in the factory floor below whirred and hummed as they went around their vital business: the manufacture and packaging of the world’s finest imitation meat products. Mogel was proud of his work - it filled a vital need, and someday, when the kinks in the supply line were worked out and production costs went down, the food he engineered would solve the social schism between carnivores and herbivores forever.

Who cared if it wasn’t entirely animal protein and fat free?

He slumped into his seat and punched a string of quick commands into his keyboard - a new order had just come in for one of their specialty products, and corporate was insisting it needed to be manufactured and shipped out as quickly as possible. He watched as the metal arms descended into the material vats - perhaps it was vanity, but synthetic skins were his favorite of their products.

Building a cadaver from the ground up was, in his mind, one of the most amazing feats of culinary engineering ever achieved - a complex mixture of plant proteins simulated the texture of muscle in printed filaments, and the use of calcium condensate to create artificial, cruelty-free bone proved such an effective simulation that it was impossible to discern from the genuine article. But Mogel’s favorite part of the process was the skin - as it should be, given that he invented it.

Creating false skin had proved a difficult prospect - it was easy to make a stretchy edible film, but much more difficult to create a substance that would have not only the flexibility of hide, but its thickness and durability as well. The solution had come from an unusual place - one of their partner companies under the Horns Conglomerate: New Ewe Medicine, a cosmetic surgery firm which specialized in liposuction.

It was illegal, of course, but the efficacy of greased palms and large sums of cash in bypassing the regulations that everybody else had to follow never ceased to amaze Mogel, and the irony of it all was too delicious to pass up. The fact that the products he produced to satisfy the starvation of carnivores gained their unique flavor, texture, and consistency from the leftover dross wealthy herbivores left behind for the sake of their vanity delighted his sense of justice in a way little else could - he only hoped that this order would go alright.

It was a unique order; the client had sent in a shipment of some kind of dietary supplement - his boss hadn’t been specific - to be incorporated into the false blood layer that went under the skin and, similar to the last time they’d gotten an Okapi order, the skin wasn’t to be installed on an imitation corpse and was to be left with an entry slit in the back. Mogel watched intently as the machines went about their work, carefully monitoring the admixture components and curing
temperatures - this was his favorite part, and he had an inkling that whatever this unique skin was going to be used for would have a big impact; maybe as big as the videos he’d seen floating around 5chan of that Okapi stripper who used the last one as part of her show.

Creating art and speaking messages to the crowd excited Mogel, and he was very good at his job.

Coming back to Cherryton after the weekend she’d had was surreal - Mizuchi had, of course, been pissed that she hadn’t checked in, but the Harlequin was always pissed about something and, as usual, a little extra padding to her payment seemed to satisfy her. The day passed quickly by in a way she wasn’t used to - usually, class had a tendency to either drag on like an unwelcome cold or, when the subject for the day was more interesting, to flash by in an exciting burst of information. Today it had passed like a dream - she’d taken her quizzes, scrawled her notes, and completed her assignments in ephemeral montage, and even her gardening had been more by routine than any sense of care. Haru had entered a strange new world, one even more fraught with danger than her everyday life as a Dwarf Rabbit already was, and for some reason it was a world that felt perversely safer than her old life up until this point.

Perhaps, she reasoned, it was because the threats in this world were more honest about their lethality - with the gangs, the Court, and the underworld, a rabbit never had to guess whether or not an animal was a threat. Or perhaps, she thought as she stared down the sights of her weapon, it was because she was currently holding a handgun as big as her calf.

The gun leapt in her hands when she pulled the trigger, kicking like a feral horse, and almost simultaneously a metallic crash exploded from the other side of the firing range. She reached up and shoved one earmuff off in amazement - she remembered the gun being loud, but not that loud. Gouhin put one hand on her arm - she’d missed the bottle, her bullet striking the corrugated iron sheet propped up behind her target, but it had been a narrow miss, so it was better than she’d expected.

“You’re shooting too much with your arms,” he grunted, gripping her shoulders to shift her posture. “At your size, you’re fighting against your own mass; you need to aim with your whole body - and your stance is shit, this is real life not an action movie.”

“Hm. Maybe I should start eating more fast food.” Gouhin snickered, and Haru allowed herself a smirk.

“Hah. If it wouldn’t make you look more like a walking happy meal, I’d suggest it. Now fix your feet and try again.” The panda shoved the earmuff back into place, and Haru let the sound of her own pulse fill her mind and focused. She planted her feet like she would with a knife, and held both her arms out straight, clasping the weapon firmly with both hands. She twisted her body at the waist, not allowing her shoulders or wrists to move as she carefully lined up her shot with the glass bottle. She took a deep breath, allowed it to cycle in her lungs, cleared her mind, and pulled the trigger.

This time, the bottle exploded in a shower of green glass.

Haru leapt where she stood and tossed her earmuffs to the ground and Gouhin immediately snatched her gun out of her hands while she celebrated. “Did you see that!” she crowed, gesturing animatedly to the shards of glass 20 meters down the range. “Did you SEE that.”

“Yes, I did see that,” Gouhin grumbled as he set her gun - her gun! - down on the makeshift plywood table at the back of the room. “You took more than 10 seconds to line up a shot on a
target that could have walked up to you and bit your head off in that time. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, but I hit it, and it’s way smaller than any mobster I’ve ever seen,” she retorted, bouncing on her feet with the residual rush of the accomplishment. This was almost as good as picking the first fruits of her garden.

“Sure, a bottle’s smaller than a body. Smaller than an instant kill point? Not so much. I don’t think that a leopard you’ve fatally shot in the gut will take the time to compliment your marksmanship before he eats your ass and takes you with him.” Haru raised an eyebrow at Gouhin’s warning.

“Really? My ass? The mobster’s going to eat my ass?”

“Haru you know what I mean. This isn’t something to take lightly - you’re a damn walking meatball with a deadly weapon. Learn to use it properly, or you or somebody else is gonna get hurt.”

“I thought hurting animals was the whole point of a gun.”

“Fine, someone you don’t want to get hurt. Bullets don’t stop when you miss. I swear, you’re going to give me a heart attack long before the cigarettes do, ya damn squirt.” Gouhin slumped into his stool and rubbed his forehead - Haru carefully set the safety on her weapon, holstered it, and joined him so they could both enjoy some tea. “You’re too loose with your life, Haru.” She sighed and rolled her eyes as she took a sip.

“I thought I already told you we weren’t having this conversation again, Gouhin. You’re not going to convince me-”

“I ain’t talking about that, kid.” Gouhin leaned forward in his seat and rested his arms on his knees. “You know this is the first time in recent memory I can recall that you and I had a conversation that didn’t center around one of those boys?” It caught her off guard - her ears pricked up and she thought, cradling her tea in her hands (it was so much lighter than her weapon).

“What’s your point?”

“My point, Haru, is that you don’t think about yourself enough. Fine - you’re not going to acknowledge your own damn mortality, we’ve established that. But you’re here in a basement learning how to kill - why?”

“Because I want to learn how to protect myself,” she bit, but she heard the lie on her voice. Riz proved that she knew how to protect herself well enough to get to safety - a knife was enough for that.

“Bullshit. Guns aren’t self defense tools unless you’re expecting the other guy to have one too. Guns help you accomplish an objective - they ain’t passive like a knife. Guns have motive. What’s your motive, Haru? Are you ready to kill someone to help that boy get his revenge?” Haru looked down at the cold weight that clung to her hip, considering how its heft so far outweighed its mass.

“No,” she decided - and it was a decision she made in that moment - and patted the weapon.

“Are you ready to kill someone to keep either of those idiots alive?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

“Are you ready to kill someone to keep yourself alive?”
Once again, Gouhin caught her off guard - the answer wound up being yes, of course, but she thought back to what had been foremost on her mind when she’d shot that wretched old Lion in the back. It hadn’t been her safety - it had been Legosi’s. Before Legosi got there, she hadn’t even considered the possibility of actually hurting the Lion; just of dying with her dignity intact. “I think I need to be,” she answered with a curt nod. Gouhin got up from his seat and handed her the earmuffs.

“Move that one up your priorities list, Haru,” he said gravely. She took the earmuffs and started to slip them on. “If you stick with those kids, you’re going to need to.”

Legosi quickly tucked the floral patterned earwarmers back into his pocket as Haru came up the stairs, squirreling them away out of view. Hopefully she would like them - Voss had recommended the brand - but that was something to think about later, when it was time. For now, they had a task - with Haru’s shooting range practice done for the day and him putting all his meager acting training to work pretending to have read over the therapy plans that Gouhin put together for him, it was time to head to the docks and scope out the warehouse - just a nice afternoon walk, nothing to be concerned about.

Yep! Just a nice afternoon stroll where he had to spend the entire day holding a secret from Haru - he’d already made the arrangements with Louis, and he wanted tonight to be a surprise. Keeping a secret from Haru was definitely something that he could handle - just like when he’d kept his secret about helping Gouhin out with vigilante work, or trying to hunt down Riz, or that he was taking tranquilizers every night. Just like every single one of those secrets he’d managed to keep without issue. This? This would be a piece of cake.

Who was he kidding this was going to be an absolute disaster.

“So… you gonna say hi?” Haru’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts like a net, dragging him through the thick murk of his anxiety on her playful tone. He must have zoned out, because she’d somehow managed to teleport from the stairwell to the seat next to him without him noticing.

“How’re Gouhin’s plans?”

“Oh, they’re good. There’s definitely five of them. How’s the range?” Haru cocked a brow.

“You didn’t read them did you?”

Legosi sighed and tucked his nose against his chest in shame. “... no, I didn’t,” he admitted. “I was too busy thinking about our job today and worrying.” Haru snorted - Legosi was glad that when he turned to look at her, he saw an amused smile instead of a disapproving glower.

“So you were too anxious to read the plans for your anxiety therapy.”

“That about sums it up, yeah.”

“Legosi you’re positively impossible. Come on, we can talk them over while we walk - the docks aren’t that far, and it’s a nice afternoon.” Legosi breathed a hidden sigh of relief - she’d bought the lie. In reality, he’d spent the entirety of the time that she was in the shooting range texting Louis to plan tonight: Legosi would steer Haru to the restaurant after a day scoping out the docks, and Louis would swing by after work with the dessert. Despite how long it had taken to convince Louis to go along with it, the plan was simplicity itself. All he had to do was not screw it up.

By the time they finally approached the warehouse, Legosi was convinced he’d let something slip
on at least seven separate occasions. The earwarmers had almost fallen out of his pocket when Haru teased his hand out to hold, despite the stares they got from disapproving onlookers, he’d anxiously texted Louis to confirm the plans for the fourth time and gotten so nervous he dropped his phone in full view of Haru, and he’d gotten too distracted thinking about what special instructions he needed to give the waitstaff that evening to make sure that everything was in order for the main event. He was certain that the only reason Haru hadn’t caught - if she hadn’t, in fact, caught on, and wasn’t just humoring him - was because the Docks district was such a buzzing hive of activity that the nervous antics of one gray wolf were easily drowned out in the sea of noise.

The Docks were entirely unlike anything that he’d seen in the city before. Thousands of animals crowded the narrow streets, all of them busy with something - taking photos, moving cargo, construction work, business chatter. The environment was a cacophony of sensation - brilliant lights adorned every building, thousands of smells crowded the air from hundreds of storefronts, and the noise all blended together into a dull, roaring voice that spoke only one word: city. He felt Haru squeeze his hand, and he squeezed back - the two of them were stones in the Docks district’s river of activity, animals and machines parting around them like so much water, and before them was the whirlpool of evil. The Warehouse, just like Haru called it from the maps, sat directly opposite a four lane road from a tall corporate office tower, the bottom two levels of which proudly proclaimed their status as housing the Knight Lite Nightclub. It was a plain building - corrugated iron walls that looked like they didn’t do much more than keep out the weather, rolling shutter doors, and a gently steepled roof high enough that the building could fit a cargo ship if it needed to. In the light of day, it was a bustle of activity - laborers scurried around the place like ants, moving crates into place, checking manifests, and repainting portions of the wall where the color had been worn away by the combination of salt and smog that choked the atmosphere.

“Here we are,” Haru murmured, and Legosi nodded.

“Here we are.” He narrowed his eyes at the building, and felt the anxious tension of his instincts rising up his spine; the base level urge to spring into action, to burst through the building and find the hidden tunnel that surely led into the nest of termites which sat just behind him and pluck Louis’ friends out of that wretched hive. Legosi let out a low whine and focused intently on the muscles in his hand - he knew that when he was upset, he had a tendency to clench his fists. He knew that Haru’s hand was smaller than his. “I wish Louis were here.”

“You know why he can’t do that,” Haru, his Girlfriend, his much much wiser than him Girlfriend who was also so much more experienced with Louis than he was answered barely above a whisper. “They know who he is, so if he was here, they’d be able to do something. Come on, let’s circle around, yeah? There’s a sign that says there’s mochi shop out back, that’s as good an excuse as any.” Legosi nodded his agreement, but he didn’t move until Haru did, letting her drag him along the hard concrete walk to rejoin the current of the crowd. “We should make smalltalk, so it looks more natural.” She made a good point. “Which of the plans sounded best to you? I like the one where we do intimacy practice; it’s basically what we’ve already been doing, but with more structure.”

“I thought you said smalltalk,” Legosi grumbled as they rounded the corner of the warehouse and stepped into the comfortable alley street that ran behind it. The ground here was cobblestone - not the rough, uneven, lumpy cobbles of the Market, but the well maintained and deliberately placed concrete stones that spoke to an effort to give the area a sense of rustic charm. He sniffed the air deeply - when the scent of iron surfaced above the comforting presence of rabbit beside him, he felt a shiver in his hackles; there was blood between the stones. Not recent, and not noticeable unless someone was looking for it - it was the scent of blood washed deep into the cracks by a hose - but animals had died here.
“Yeah, and you always treat your mental health like it’s no big deal, so this counts.” The jab probably bit a little deeper than Haru intended, but it was a valid retort. “So which one do you like best?”

Legosi swallowed, and conceded he probably wasn’t going to get out of this without giving an answer - he just hoped that by getting it out of the way now, it wouldn’t spoil the night. Just inside the warehouse, an echidna in a biker jacket was helping a few burly saltwater crocodiles unload a pallet - the echidna gave him a friendly wave, and Legosi waved back. It was almost sickeningly normal. He wished there weren’t so many smells. “I… like the one with the, um. Well, you know. The restraints.” Haru looked up at him quizzically and he stiffened. He could see the look in her eyes out of the corner of his - the shimmer caught between concern, smugness, and the sort of excitement that only Male Mode could satisfy and which sorely mismatched the tone of the present situation.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. It’s like when I first started helping Dr. Gouhin, and he had me wear the muzzle, to keep a clear head in a fight by taking away my bite.” He kept his voice hushed even though he was sure nobody was listening in - there was enough chatter in the alley that a small child could go missing and nobody would notice. “It just makes sense that if there’s something to physically, y’know, disarm me, it’ll be safer.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t that be a little. I dunno.” He suspected the word she was thinking was “hot”, but what she said instead was “embarrassing?”

“Would you judge me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then it’s not embarrassing.” They took their seat at the little alleyway mochi place’s counter Legosi could see Haru’s ears swiveling like antennae to take in the crowd - how good her hearing was was captivating. Unlike his bulky carnivorous form, her body was full of wondrous and unique talents - hopefully her hearing would be more useful than his overcrowded sense of smell. Something wasn’t right, but the thick miasma of the Dock air was as impenetrable as a wall and about as interrogable as a corpse.

Legosi was sure that if Louis were here, he’d have some equally useful talent; probably related to being imposing, composed, and condescending. He took his mochi, but his eyes wouldn’t focus on the treat; he could feel his teeth in the back of his mouth. Haru nodded, but he didn’t hear the words that came out of her mouth. There were too many sounds, too much activity, and too many smells. His brain was kicking itself into overdrive trying to pick out the thread it found in the jumbled mess of sensation, but it was too much to unravel; Legosi suddenly found himself drowning, plunged into an abyss formed by the conflict between his pursuit instincts and his psychological inability to cope with his body’s desire to act without his instruction. He tried to speak, but his mouth wouldn’t open - his jaw felt wired shut. He felt cables biting into his bone.

What’s happening? Why do I feel cold?

He heard a distant crashing sound - the mochi wasn’t in his hands anymore, where had it gone?

I think I might be freaking out.
“Well, if you’re sure, I think we should try it!” Haru reached across the counter and took her plate of mochi with a snide glare at the way the server was eyeing her and Legosi. *If Louis were here*, she thought, *would we get more looks? Or less?* Fortunately, most animals in the Docks district seemed refreshingly willing to mind their own damn business; it seemed that most everyone here had more important things to do than pass judgement on a pair of strangers. The Docks presented a strange microcosm that Haru was unfamiliar with - looking at it all, she could see why Legosi derived so much joy from watching bugs.

It was this precise lack of idleness that set her on edge - Legosi had his nose, and she was sure that he was putting it to good use sniffing out trouble, but she had her own tricks; being a small animal, it turned out, had its perks. “We can talk to the Doctor about getting some, and I can keep them in the shed; that would probably work best.” The tension in the air here was palpable - even in the seating area of the little mochi shop, nobody here was relaxed. It was like the unique sensation of having her finger on a trigger and a gun pointed at an animal’s back had been expanded into an entire urban landscape: the docks were on edge, and she got the feeling that sooner than later, they would explode. Something here was off - she couldn’t quite pick out what, but something was missing. Her ears swiveled back, filtering out the sounds of the crowd and the noisy clinking of Legosi’s claws against his plate to her side; it was faint, muffled by concrete, soil, and tar, but if she listened closely she could hear the water moving inside the pipes that ran below the sidewalk. It was a sound that confirmed her suspicions: she’d been listening for the same sound as they passed the warehouse; it was conspicuously absent. She was right - no pipes ran under the street between the club and the warehouse; either the two were connected, or somebody in the office of civic engineering needed to be thrown into the ocean. “The file says that restraint therapy usually works best with-”

The tinkling crash of ceramic shattering against the ground interrupted her - the sound of the crowd rushed back into her ears like a wave crashing against a cliff: harsh, abrupt, and overwhelming.

“Hey, you okay big guy?” someone on the other side of the counter said. Haru looked up to her side - Legosi was frozen in place, his body as rigid as a prop, his joints all locked painfully in place. It was the most terrifying she’d seen him yet - aimlessly trembling in place, muscles spasming without direction, foam beginning to form at the corners of his mouth and his eyes darting without seeing.

Legosi was having a panic attack in public, and if someone mistook what was happening with a large breed carnivore in a shop full of herbivores, it could prove fatal.

She needed to get this somewhere private - out of view of the main thoroughfare where some well meaning animal could turn a crisis into a disaster. She snagged Legosi’s hand - the wolf’s head snapped to face her, drool splattering from his slick lips and trembling jaw. A chorus of gasps rose from the afternoon restaurant crowd - out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone going for their phone. “Legosi, can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me.” He wasn’t nodding. Shit.

“Everyone,” said the stall’s operator in that calm, quiet tone someone uses when they see a monster, “evacuate the seating area, I’m going to call the authorities.” Shit shit shit - what to do, she couldn’t just drag him, could she? Of course not - Legosi was too big, too heavy-

“Excuse me! It looks like your friend is having some trouble; can I- excuse me, excuse me.” A small voice interrupted the developing disaster as it shoved its way through the retreating crowd - the tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife, and all of it hung on the small form that emerged into the seating area. The echidna wasn’t much larger than she was, and he was dressed kind of like an idiot - a biker jacket, a hard hat, and a fanciful lanyard with a green card in it. He had a few pins on his chest - cheap shiny things that resembled a variety of chess pieces in different
colors - and a bandage under his left eye. “I know this wolf,” he said with the utmost confidence of a liar who knew what he was talking about; “he’s on my work crew during school vacations. This is normal, I’ll handle it from here.” Haru’s heart was beating like a drum against her ribs - the echidna watched her, waiting for her to respond, if she’d play along to this little game.

“Y-yeah, thanks,” she stammered as the tension drained from the air. Legosi was still shaking, salivating, and completely unresponsive, but nobody was going to arrest him - or worse - for it now. The Echidna casually walked up to Legosi, and took his other hand.

“Heyyy big guy, easy now, there we go.” His voice was shockingly casual given his size and the situation. Legosi’s eyes didn’t leave Haru, fluid running from his nose and mouth. “You got a name, lady?”

“Y-yes. I’m Haru.” What the hell was going on? This was the foreman from the warehouse across the alley - was he working with the enemy? Crap, she shouldn’t have said that. Didn’t matter now - and besides, it’s not like she had much choice; the Echidna looked like he knew what was going on.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Carlos - our friend here trusts you, so you’re gonna have to guide him.” He moved to brace a hand in the crook behind Legosi’s knee - the wolf’s leg seemed to relax a little, and his foot slipped from the crossbar on the stool to hit the floor. “Bring him to the alley - we need to get him away from stimulus.” Haru nodded, and hopped off her stool - with Carlos exerting pressure on the back of Legosi’s knees, she was able to guide her bumbling boyfriend out of the restaurant (among whose patrons she was certain they’d be the gossip of the day) and into the narrow alley next to the store. Legosi collapsed against the alley wall, shivering and twitching.

Haru’s throat felt like it would never open up again, but Carlos looked calm - he just gently patted Legosi’s knee and nudged him so that he could sit in a position where he wasn’t likely to fall over. “There you go, big guy. He got a name?”

“He’s Legosi,” Haru murmured. “Why did you help us?” Carlos chuckled under his breath and shook his head.

“He’s got IEAD, right?”

“What?”

“Instinct exacerbated anxiety disorder, right? I used to have it pretty bad. You guys settled on a treatment?” Haru was numb with surprise; today started with a firing range, and now she was talking to a guy she was pretty sure was involved with the visage of Pure Evil about her boyfriend’s anxiety disorder - if it wasn’t so stressful, it’d be fucking hilarious. She felt the weight of her weapons keenly in her pockets - her knife where it rested against her belly, and the bulky gun in her backpack - as she looked him up and down; the green Rook pin on his chest stuck out like an accusation, but with its others, she couldn’t be sure. “Hey, you ok? Haru, was it? I know this is pretty scary, but don’t worry, alright? He’ll pull through.”

Haru decided she wasn’t going to kill him - she wondered if he could see it on her face. She sniffed, wiped away a tear she hadn’t realized she’d cried, and nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. The last time he had an episode, he uh, hurt himself pretty bad. We’re looking at treatment options right now.” Carlos nodded and gave her a warm smile that crinkled the skin around his eyes.

“Good, good. You two are a couple, yeah?” Haru stiffened a little - this was a very observant animal.
“... yes,” she answered hesitantly - if he was going to be judgemental, maybe stabbing him was still on the table. Just a little stabbing - it would probably be cathartic.

“That’s nice. Glad to see young folks not letting anyone tell ‘em what’s right or what’s wrong.” Carlos’ accent was strange, like speech wasn’t as familiar for him as it was for most; it reminded her of Louis. They both had the same crisp enunciation and a similar unique blend of formality and ease that lent their diction an unusual specificity. Carlos stood quickly, and jammed his hands into his pockets. “Wait for him to calm down, and keep away from busy streets for at least an hour or two after he comes back - don’t try and rush him, but let him get your scent; it’ll help him establish you as safe, and try not to shoulder all of this by yourself. I’ve got a work crew I need to get back to supervising - you kids gonna be alright?” Haru nodded and idly crawled into Legosi’s lap, too stricken by the completely unanticipated advice to speak. Carlos flashed another friendly smile, gave a little wave, and stepped out of the alley on his way back towards the warehouse. Haru turned her eyes up - Legosi was still shaking, but his drooling was going down, and he seemed less stiff than before. She noticed what was wrong when she climbed up him to rub her face against his muzzle, calmly working her scent into his fur.

The entire time they’d been here they’d been moving through alleys in the densest part of the city she’d ever been to, and she hadn’t seen a single beggar, a single homeless person, a single drunk.

Haru tugged her phone from her pocket, and sent a message to the arcane number that denoted Louis’ burner phone.

<This is the place.>

Carlos fiddled anxiously with his phone as he made his way back to the warehouse, his stomach heavy with anxiety. He was a Rook - he owed his Knight his life, like all the others, and he owed her his love too; she was his driving force, the center of his muses, the source of his ambition. And yet, this situation gave him pause. Carlos was no stranger to doing terrible things - atrocities, these days, were his bread and butter - but seeing that wolf shook him. He found his mind cast back in time to a cell, a cell mate with thick tattoos, sharp teeth, and beautiful eyes, and a choice he made. He felt the old familiar tensing of his muscles and the fuzz behind his eyes - his body wanted him to hide and his brain wanted him to flee, and his gut preferred he do both at the same time, ideally underground.

_I am a Rook, and my Knight loves me best._

_I am a Rook, and I love my Knight best._

_I am a Rook, and I love my fellows best._

It was a simple mantra, but effective - Carlos held a delicate handkerchief to his nose while he spoke the words in his mind, inhaling the perfume of his four deepest loves to help push his fear down his throat and wash it away through his body. He felt his quills tremble, and the episode passed - good. It had been a long time since he’d had an episode - since he’d worn his claws bloody trying to burrow into concrete, or hurt himself on his quills. It had been a long time since he’d looked like the wolf.

Carlos rolled their names over in his mind - Legosi and Haru. Haru and Legosi. They were nice kids, he decided - the girl was carrying, and he’d seen her debate on what to do plainly on her face; if these were the Horned King’s friends, which he was pretty sure they were, then that deer was in good company. He had a duty - his Knight had given him a Duty, and it was his to fulfill.
But, then again, Carlos’ strong suit had never been following instructions.

“Hey Zeke,” he said calmly into his phone’s reciever. “I met the kids; they’re no threat. Don’t even know about us. Mhm - just like you said, they’re just dumb teens; we won’t need to worry about them.” He chuckled at Zeke’s joke, and couldn’t help but picture the pangolin’s ridiculous scales and the expression he must be wearing at the humor. “Yeah, I like it when I don’t have to knife a couple teens in an alley too. Love you - pass it on to the others, alright? I’ve gotta get back to work. Mhm. Yeah. Yeah, I’m still on for dinner with you and Clara tomorrow; did you get Huan in? Eh, of course you didn’t. Alright alright I really gotta go; we’ll talk later.” Carlos clicked the call off, and his claw punctured straight through his phone.

His hand was trembling.

He hurried into his office’s bathroom and vomited on the floor.

<This is the place.>

Louis grinned joylessly at the cheap Croakia in his hand. It was a wretched thing, but it served its purpose well - pay-as-you-go plans were hard to track.

<Good. How’s the pup - did our ploy work? And does mochi taste as good on another animals lips as your own? Please tell - I am dying to know.> Typing on this thing was infuriatingly slow - no matter, it just meant he wouldn’t have to explain himself to his subordinates on his way to the ground floor.

<No - he had an anxiety attack in public instead :c> Haru’s response stopped Louis in his tracks - almost enough to reconsider his plan. It was his fault; this was his fight that he’d dragged them into. That he’d dragged all of them into. He should have known better.

No. He was going to end this, and then he could have feelings.

<Hm. With the way he stresses himself, that is unfortunate but not surprising. Is everything alright - do I need to have anybody disappeared?>

<Fucking Rex Louis can you please take this seriously? I wish you were here, you’re better at keeping him from falling apart than I am.>

<You know why I can’t be there.> Louis’ fingers trembled as he punched in the keys, the phone’s plastic case creaking in his grip. <Don’t worry - this will be over soon, and then we can get to doing whatever group therapy Legosi clearly needs.> Haru and Legosi were important to him - if he were capable of it, he thought he might love them. It was an uncomfortable admission, but the way he’d awoken yesterday morning was burned into his brain; fingers tangled in gray fur, claws against his back, the scent of wolf in his nose. It hadn’t scared him the way he’d thought it might, which terrified him even more.

But now was not the time of love. Now was the hour of vengeance and blood. Now was the hour of the Horned Prince.

Louis flung the front doors of his stronghold dramatically open, his cape billowing behind him as he flew down the front steps to the waiting cars, guns glistening on his hips in the dying light of day. A swarm of waiting lions crowded around the hearse-black vehicles, silent as the grave and with the caustic lumps of deadly weaponry showing prominently through their suits. He surveyed his army with the cold analysis of his father - in this moment, he did not need Ibuki’s caution, care,
or decency; he required Oguma’s economicality: death was a cost/benefit analysis. His heels clicked as he crossed the drive to his waiting limousine, and his stern glare met Free’s wicked smile as the lanky beast pulled the passenger compartment door open for him. His trusted Lieutenants towered like obelisks around the vehicle; onyx statues of deadly judgement.

Free.
Agata.
Dolph.
Hino.
Dope.
Jinma.
Sabu.
Miguel.

He looked to them each and committed their faces to memory; Sabu’s sour mask, Agata’s youthful eagerness. Dolph’s grim experience, Dope’s nonchalant disposition. Hino’s placid beauty, Miguel’s raw strength. Jinma’s cool professionalism, and Free’s violent bloodthirst. As he lead his men into battle, their faces would be at the front of his mind; such was the burden of leadership.

It was a burden he found rested naturally upon his horns.

“Free, Agata, you drive with me. Dope, you’re with Sabu. Jinma, take Hino. Miguel, you ride with Dolph. Nobody eats until we’re done; then you can feast.” His lieutenants dispersed, and Louis climbed into the car. There would be a funeral tonight, and it would not be his.

Jacques grumbled idly to himself and adjusted his grip on the machine rifle held against his scaly chest. The caiman was out here every damn monday night, and the only action the warehouse ever saw was an empty damn main street. Still, the pay was good and the food was better; nothing beat fresh meat.

“Yo Jacques,” his companion, a coyote called Ned, called from the other side of the warehouse entrance, “you ever think about how you wound up here?”

“What, playing security for the boss?”

“Nah, dumbass, on this side of the law. Crime shit. Come on, don’t be daft.”

“Hmph. My dentist thought it would be funny to tap my nose with his arm in my mouth.” Jacques thought often about how he wound up here - one day an accountant, the next jobless, homeless, and divorced because a fucking antelope thought it would be a good joke to test his bite reflex and land him with a predation record. He was glad he’d bitten that bastard’s arm off; if he hadn’t, he never would have seen the truth of the world - that meat is absolutely delicious, and that these herbi pricks had it coming. “Kinda hard to get work when you’ve got a record, you know how it is. How ‘bout you, Ned?”

“Eh, nothing so dramatic for me - it’s just a good way to put steak on the table.” Jacques nodded -
being a Pawn had its benefits. A shadow moved through the streetlights on the other side of the main road and he stepped forward - the Docks drained like the tide at dawn once the sun set and the day laborers went home, so seeing anyone out here at this hour was unusual.

Seeing some teenage stag dressed like an idiot was downright interesting.

“Hey kid!” Jacques called, tightening his grip on his gun as he stepped into the light of the lone streetlamp. “I think you’re a bit early, halloween party ain’t for another couple weeks. Why don’t you run on home before you get hurt, huh?” The shadow moved closer, and as he passed into the light, Jacques got a good look at the metal glinting on his hips.

“Thanks for the advice; but I don’t think I’m going to be who winds up getting hurt tonight.” A choked gurgle echoed from the entrance to the warehouse, and Free’s claws found Jacque’s throat before he got the chance to see Ned’s body hit the floor.

Louis nodded to Free as the caiman’s body slumped lifeless and quiet to the street - the big brute was grinning like a monster and licking the blood off his claws. “Enjoying yourself?”

“You bet, Boss. Caiman tastes like shit, but oh revenge is sweet.” Louis clapped Free on the shoulder and passed him on the way to the entrance to the warehouse while the three cars full of his Lions pulled up behind him and opened their doors. He stalked into the entrance and surveyed the scene before him - heavy wooden crates lay stacked in neat towers around the space, and their sparseness clearly indicated that many had already been unloaded. Louis suspected that their destination had been the cargo elevator set into the Warehouse’s wall. It was a clever design, and he could only tell it existed because its doors - which blended seamlessly with the corrugated iron on either side - were currently open, two Pawns busy loading a stack of crates into the chamber. He inspected the Pawns he could see from here - none of them were obviously armed, and they were too busy working to notice the silent pride of lions gathering at their front door. Louis felt their presence behind him - his lieutenants, then his peons, falling into file in silent ranks before their king. A smile tugged his lips when one of the Pawns looked up and caught his eyes, and the eyes of the Shishigumi - 20 strong.

“Light them up.”

A storm of bullets ripped through the warehouse and made Louis’ divine wrath manifest - the three Pawns caught in the open spasmed as hot metal perforated their bodies and left them honorable Madaragumi by the time their corpses hit the floor, and wooden shrapnel exploded through yellow beams of fluorescent light as wooden crates crumbled before the gunpowder onslaught. Louis revelled in the cacophonous wave of thunder that washed over him from behind as it smashed against the ocean of gore-laden air that flooded from the warehouse. He was trapped in the eye of the storm, and the storm was Death - if it weren’t so poetic, it might make him sick.

If he didn’t like it so much, it might make him sick.

The roar of gunfire didn’t stop until the last of his shishigumi ran out of bullets - a few of the Pawns had valiantly attempted to put up a resistance, but they never had a chance; the space they ducked out of cover into had been all but a solid wall of killing steel. Louis waited for a moment anticipating return fire - when none came, he gave the signal for his Shishigumi to filter into the building.

There were four more shots as his men poured around the crates while he made his way to the elevator, his Lieutenants at his side, and Louis knew then that those four would be the last four.
“Excellent work, boss - looks like once again, your instincts were correct. What’s next?” Louis appreciated the way Dope’s town was always cool and suave, no matter the situation; the blood on his hands was as comfortable as a silk glove. Blood was less comfortable on Louis’ hands once he was done spilling it - it stuck under his nails more than he liked.

“Free, Miguel, Dolph, and Sabu are with me. You, Hino, Agata, and Jinma secure the ground level. If the police take the stage, use the Pawns’ weapons; that should make our job a little easier.” Free’s sharp footsteps bounced up to his right and Sabu took his left, with Miguel and Dolph falling in step close behind as they moved to the elevator.

“We going in bloody, boss?” Free asked as he slid a fresh clip home into his sidearm and the elevator doors slid closed. Louis smirked.

“Is there any other way?”

Carlos calmly supervised the frantic activity of his subordinates in the subterranean tunnel, lightly tapping his leatherclad fingers against the sleeve of his jacket. It was a quality costume - he’d selected the skins which composed it himself.

“You’re certain that you’re going to be alright, Carlos?” Clara’s words shoved a smirk to his lips - she worried too much over him.

“I’m fine, Clara - it was my first episode in years, and it wasn’t even that bad that bad.” The dampened report of a few more gunshots filtered through the elevator shaft and into the spacious loading tunnel. His ear twitched at the sound. Clara nodded, and shifted her weight to her left, staring down the corridor. “Nervous?”

“Yes - I’m worried you’ll decide to play hero and head up there to help them.” Carlos snickered at her words and plucked his motorcycle helmet off a nearby folding table. “You can be too dramatic for your own good half the time - we all say it.”

“I know, but please, they’re just Pawns, Clara. Even I’m not that soft.” He stepped forward to check on his materials - his lance, his mighty steed, his armor. Everything was in place, and the empty metal crates in the tunnel had already been moved into position to create his joust. “Alright everyone!” he called to the assembled Pawns who weren’t busy finishing up moving the product into secure storage. “Take your positions, use your cover, and keep your weapons at the ready - and remember, you are Pawns before the White Court; if you want to keep your jobs, I expect you to comport yourselves with dignity and honor on the field of battle. They’ll be here soon.” Carlos slipped on his helmet and stepped into the space beside his motorcycle, ensuring his gun was securely strapped beneath the handlebars. “You’d best get on, Clara.”

“Ha.” She laughed dryly, and Carlos smiled. “Are you actually worried about me, Carlos? Please - why don’t you get on, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Because a long narrow corridor doesn’t suit your skills when your enemy has guns, Clara,” he laughed, buckling the helmet under his chin and making sure that his quills stuck out appropriately above the neck of his jacket. “And if anything happened to you, our Knight would be inconsolable - she does love you best, you know.” His words hung in the air for a long, quiet moment, almost like an accusation. It was a truth he would only speak to her - it was important that Clara understood her responsibility, even if it pained him to admit it.

“Carlos…”
“It’s alright, Clara,” he said softly. “I’ve got Zeke, I’ve got you, and I’ve got Huan. And I’ve even got our lady Knight, though I know she lies when she tells me that she loves me best. Wish me luck - and give Huan my love, that mute is incorrigible.” She nodded, and quickly crossed the distance to clasp his shoulder before she left.

“We’re on for dinner tomorrow, yes?” Clara’s tone was cold, professional, but her grasp on his padded shoulder was warm and firm - Clara showed her love with her hands.

“Of course - we can tell jokes about all this once it’s over.” Carlos watched her leave, and shut his visor.

Louis’ ear twitched at the obnoxious music streaming through the elevator’s speakers, silently cursing the fact that Miguel and Dolph sliding metal crates in front of the elevator’s doors wasn’t enough to drown it out. It wouldn’t have been so terrible if it was something more fitting to the situation - Flight of the Valkyries, perhaps, or Danse Macabre. A generified, talentless rendition of The Girl from Ipanema, however, did nothing to set the mood. Dolph and Miguel slid the last crate into place, completing their makeshift cover, and Louis carefully exhaled - he just had to get through this, and Ibuki and Cosmo would be saved and he could give Legosi and Haru the attention they deserved before turning his attention on his objectives. For a moment, he felt guilty - he’d lied to them, told them that he’d wait for them to help him with this - but Louis steeled himself and set his teeth together in his mouth; he was Louis the Red Deer, the Horned Prince, and he did not need to jeopardize his friends to clean up his messes.

“Free, Sabu,” he said calmly as the elevator began to slow its descent.

“Yes, boss?” Free’s tone indicated he knew where Louis was going with this - as did the way he hefted his violin.

“This music bores me - when the doors open, I’d like for you to play your concerto.” He could hear Sabu rolling his eyes at the theatrics, but he could also hear Free’s manic smile and the tightening of the lion’s claws around his violin case’s plastic grip.

“With pleasure, boss.”

Louis drew his weapon - the one he’d stolen from his father when he was still a student, not the garish thing his father had given him as a gift - as the first crack of artificial light peeked through the middle of the elevator doors, readying himself to drop behind the metal crates. He felt his pace begin to quicken, and breathed deep - the scent of lion filled his lungs, and he felt his senses hone themselves to a sharper edge.

How ironic his prey instincts never failed to help him perform the act of the hunt.

How ironic, he thought as he heard the buckles on Free and Sabu’s violin cases snap open and allow the plastic containers to clatter to the metal floor, that thoughts of how Legosi stirred a fiercer instinct in his breast now filled his mind in the moment before he was to murder.

“Boss!” Dolph hissed. “Get down!”

Louis was lucid again for a fraction of a second before Dolph’s grip pulled him to the metal floor, just long enough to get a sight down the 30 meter aisle of death which stood between him and his prize. A bullet tore the air where his head was just a moment before, pepperling a small jagged hole in the back of the elevator. Before he had a chance to say anything, the staccato rhythm of Free and
Sabu’s concerto filled the space.

The rapid music of gunfire echoed dramatically through the small chamber, and Louis found himself briefly returned to a time his father brought him to a performance of the Horns Conglomerate Orchestra - the rapid eruptions of bullets from Free and Sabu’s tommy guns mighty percussion, the choked screams of two dying beasts thunderous applause. Free and Sabu maintained their covering fire, stepping slowly out of the elevator and steadily sweeping the corridor just over the lip of the cover their enemy had built out of their own spare shipping containers. Dolph and Miguel swiftly ducked out from behind the crate, taking advantage of the opportunity to wordlessly move into the hall and up to the next line; Louis followed and got a chance to survey the passage in detail.

The tunnel was a vast concrete space caught halfway between a staging ground and a shipping lane. Shipping containers stacked at various heights provided makeshift cover along each wall, with a clear lane running down the center of the space. The walls curved up gently into the ceiling, giving the tunnel a sturdy, dome shaped cross section, and evenly spaced lamps set into the ceiling’s concrete amply lit the corridor. He hurried to the right of the chamber alongside Dolph and ducked behind the metallic safety provided by one of the shipping containers while Miguel took the left, Free and Sabu hurrying their pace to get to cover before their wheel clips ran dry. Free dropped into a crouch by Louis’ side just as his ammo ran out - Sabu, who conserved his ammo better than Free ever did, got another two seconds of measured burst fire before he was forced into cover with Miguel. Dolph rolled his eyes at the way Free quickly lit a silvervine cigarette against the glowing muzzle of his weapon and champed it between his lips before tucking a hand into his coat for a fresh clip to slam home in his Thompson.

“Taking this a little casually I see, Free - would you like some lemonade with that?” Dolph grumbled.

“Aw, come on Dolph! What’s the point of killin’ if you can’t enjoy it?”

Louis ignored them - he heard movement on the other side of the crate, his dished ears swiveling quickly to pick up on the sound of a boot scraping against concrete and the distinct clatter of unsure hands on a weapon.

He racked his pistol’s slide back, tensed his legs, and whipped over the edge of the cover.

Louis found himself face to face with a Hyena. She looked young, no older than he was, and her weapon - a cheap revolver - shook wildly in her hands. The muzzle of his gun was practically against her forehead, and for a moment, their eyes locked - she had deep brown eyes, wet with fear.

“Pl-

Louis pulled his trigger, and she was gone.

That was one - his ears caught three others, and he swiveled at the waist with his weapon outstretched, braced in one hand as he popped off rapid shots at the points the sounds originated from. He didn’t hit - but he didn’t need to. The first was a coyote - he hesitated as Louis’ bullet zipped over his head, and stood directly into a burst of Sabu’s fire that nearly sawed his head from his neck. The second was a mountain lion - middle aged, probably worked in accounting as a day job. Louis caught her in the shoulder, and Miguel caught her in the head. The final sound he’d heard was the trickiest - the grizzled monitor lizard threw up the lid of the container as makeshift cover when he heard Louis’ shot and fired from around the edge in a brief exchange with Free. Free’s machine gun riddled the shipping container’s lid with deep dents, but the metal held, and the Lion hissed in pain when one of the Lizard’s bullets grazed his arm and dropped back into cover.
When the sound of Free’s tommy gun quieted, the Pawn peeked out from behind his shield…
directly into the path of Dolph’s bullet as it pushed his eye through the back of his head. Louis held
his weapon at the ready for a moment as the room went silent, listening for other assailants - his
ears twitched. He heard someone - small, hyperventilating. Afraid.
“W-wait! D-don’t shoot!” A gun slid out from behind one of the containers alongside the feminine
voice, and a second Hyena remarkably similar to the one Louis had ended stepped out from behind
the cover with her hands up. Wet streaks dampened the fur on her cheeks, and she was wearing a
suit of thick padded leathers that seemed a little too large for her proportions. “I surrender, okay? J-
just. Lia, are you okay? Li-”

A bullet from behind the container smashed into her shoulder, and then another into her cheek, and
another into her side, and another, and another until six shots peppered her right side and sent her
sprawling in a bloody heap to the floor that twitched twice, and then was still. Louis lowered his
weapon in shock - that hadn’t been any of his men. It didn’t make any sense - but he hardly had
time to process it before a scattering of sharp explosions echoed through the enclosed space.

“Boss! Look out!” Louis didn’t have time to react before Dolph slammed into his knees and
knocked him backwards out of the way of the shipping container’s lid as the force of the explosive
charges concealed within slammed the metal panels open into the concrete floor. Free, Sabu, and
Miguel scrambled out of the way, but Dolph wasn’t so lucky - the battle-worn Lion screamed, and
Louis’ eyes snapped to where his subordinate lay - where Dolph’s legs should have been, there was
instead a bloody smear of crushed flesh and blood where the force of the container’s sharpened lid
slamming into the ground had amputated them at the knee. Louis felt his lungs climb into his throat
- the white of Dolph’s kneecaps, the spray of thin red that swirled across the surface of the bone,
the way the fine fabric of his slacks absorbed the blood of the injury. He breathed a sigh of relief -
it looked clean, if they could recover the legs, it should be reversible.

“Shit! Dolph!” Free’s cursing brought Louis back to the present, the grazed Lion rushing past him
to grab Dolph and drag him away from the container - there was a horrible tearing sound, and the
container’s lid dropped the last half centimeter to the floor. “Dolph, you with me? Come on, shit
shit shit.”

“Stop panicking,” Louis felt himself say, “and get him back to the elevator. Sabu, Miguel, we’ve
got one more. Get ready.” Free dragged Dolph’s half-delirious form back to the elevator, cursing
all the while, and Louis dusted himself off and stood in the middle of the aisle - he was two pieces
down, and his enemy was seven; by his count, he had the advantage. An engine revved, and
slowly, a dark form emerged from behind the stacked containers at the end of the corridor where
the Hyena had been, rolling coolly past her limp body. The sleek green motorcycle rolled into the
center aisle before Louis, the broad dish of its windshield extending up past a small creature
dressed from head to toe in green-black leather and plastic armor. The figure tossed a small firearm
away to clatter to a rest beside his former subordinate’s body, and braced what looked to be an
absurd cavalry lance against the side of its helmet, which was proudly emblazoned with the gold
number 12. Louis subconsciously shifted his weight off his right foot - it had suddenly gone sore.

He had to buy time - he checked his weapon; he’d fired six shots so far, so that left him with 9
rounds. He needed to give Free time to get Dolph up the elevator and to medical attention; he
needed to make them count. “I didn’t realize that the Court found its Pawns so expendable.” The
words rolled off his tongue like poison as he stepped forward over the body of the girl he’d shot
for emphasis. “Don’t you think this is a somewhat melodramatic response to my disassembling
them? The way you throw them away, they must be easy to come by.” The figure on the
motorcycle’s response was to rev the engine, and lower his lance. Louis saw a mane of quills
bristle from the gap between his jacket and his helmet before the motorcycle’s headlights clicked
on and shielded the rider from view. He heard the elevator doors sliding closed behind him, Sabu
placing his final wheel clip on the ground for easy access, Miguel taking off his jacket so it would be easier to draw his backup weapon when the time came. Louis braced himself and struck his best commanding pose, one foot angled gracefully towards his enemy while the other pointed sarcastically away. He raised his weapon, and the Rook opposite him pushed off the ground and into a charge. “Fine. Let’s joust.”

**Bang! Bang! Bang!** Louis’ bullets ricocheted off the Rook’s windshield as his vehicle picked up speed. He was down to six - this wasn’t working. He stepped to the side, hoping to get a different angle and squeezed off two shots, but the Rook swerved out of his charging lane towards him and Louis understood why all the containers had opened - the motorcycle sped up one of the lids, using it as a ramp to propel the vehicle into the air. The Rook’s cycle flew over the empty container like an absurd stunt show, landing and picking up speed before ramping again, and again; Louis put shot after shot into the air towards the rapidly approaching vehicle, but he’d never had to fire on a target that moved like this before, and every shot either missed or bounced harmlessly off its armored plates. The motorcycle bore down on him like a reaper clad in forest, and as the machine crested the final ramp, the Rook leveled his lance at his throat, and the baleful glare of the headlamp stared him down, Louis suddenly found himself unable to move.

He was about to die 4 stories underground, speared at the tip of a weapon that hadn’t been relevant for centuries by a guy in a colorful uniform who was riding a motorcycle. He imagined if this were one of Ibuki’s novels, this would be the moment that he, the dashing hero, would produce a contrived gadget from his breast pocket, thwart the villain, and save the day.

But this wasn’t one of Ibuki’s novels - he was going to die, Dolph would probably bleed out, and Ibuki and Cosmo were going to be tortured to death because he was not good enough. Louis stared down the tip of the lance in slow motion, closed his eyes, and accepted the end.

And then he was horizontal on the floor, and a growling, snarling weight was pressing him down. He opened his eyes as he heard the motorcycle land and speed away - Sabu crouched over him and pressed him into the ground, his normally expressionless face locked into a pained snarl. Blood dripped onto Louis’ face from where the Rook’s lance had torn a gash in his face, opening his mouth from the corner of his lips to his ear. The Lion’s muzzle was too slicked with blood to make out any details; square and narrow, and through the hole in Sabu’s face, Louis saw the flat teeth that hid tucked in the rear of his jaw. Sabu growled, and a splat of blood soaked Louis’ jacket.

“Bossh… with all due reshpect.” His voice hissed through the hole in his face, a gorey rasp undercut by a distant diesel roar. “Get out of your fuhcking head, and ushe ush. You are not alone. Shtop acting like you are.” Then, Sabu wheezed, and collapsed. Louis scrambled out from underneath him - three sharp quills were embedded in his back, each slick with some kind of oil. Louis checked Sabu’s pulse anxiously - it was depressed, calm; he was… asleep?

He didn’t have time to ponder the absurdity of the fact that their opponent had coated his quills in sedatives and was using them as throwing weapons - he heard Miguel’s hurried footsteps and suppressing gunshots moving towards him. Louis quickly pulled Sabu’s mask back over his face and turned to face Miguel. Sabu’s words rang in his mind: *You are not alone; stop acting like you are.*

Hm. It was like him to get called out by a subordinate.

“I’m out on my primary, boss,” Miguel hissed as the Rook revved his engine, taunting them from the elevator entrance, “and it doesn’t look like my secondary is going to be much use. Shit - Sabu dead?”

“Asleep,” Louis responded. “Our foe is using his quills as tranquilizer darts, it would seem.
Miguel, I have a plan, but I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“Hmph. Me not liking a plan’s never said much about whether or not it works. What do you need me to do?” Louis thought carefully - from the front and from below, the Rook was invulnerable; a bulletproof windshield and armored undercarriage made sure of that. Nothing, however, protected him from the side - and Louis suspected that the center lane of the tunnel was left open for a reason; it was a gamble, but it could work. He just needed to rely on Miguel’s ability not to flinch; he looked his lieutenant up and down: the strong contour of his jaw, the serious set of his brow, the grim scowl that stretched his lips and betrayed his concern for his comrades.

He decided he could bet on that.

Carlos panted inside his helmet shaking the blood from the tip of his lance with a wet slap. He’d gotten one - maybe two - and if he’d counted their shots correctly, they couldn’t have much more left in terms of ammunition. He could feel himself shaking - he’d had to shoot Kils. Her voice was fresh in his mind - her concern for her dead sister, her fear; the kind of primal, uncertain fear that only a carnivore could know. That only someone accustomed to being at the top of the food chain could know. His breath fogged on his visor, and for a moment he saw his own reflection in the glass - after all these years, he really was still that scared child, wasn’t he?

No matter. He would end this, and things would go back to the way they were. The status quo would be preserved.

The Court would persevere.

The sensation of the tranquilizer gel trickling down his neck from its ruptured storage cell in his helmet brought him back to the moment. He revved his engine, taunting his foes - he didn’t need to make the first move; from this angle, he had every advantage. Carlos scanned the hallway carefully - they’d moved past the first row of ramps, where the one with the scar on his face got his legs chopped off, so he couldn’t see them. They couldn’t be far - the second, maybe the third row was when he’d tossed his quills; it was hard to keep track of which row he was on when he was Jousting. His eye caught movement, and his vision focused - there, the pretty lion with the dreadlocks. He was scrambling over the crates, making more distance before he turned to stand defiantly in the middle of the aisle; Carlos smirked, and revved his engine - Lions; such pompous beasts.

Well, at least he would die with his Pride.

Carlos leaned forward in his seat, and lowered his lance to pierce the Lion’s heart, slowly picking up speed on his motorcycle. Just this one, and then a check to make sure the deer was dead; his liege’s colleagues wanted the stag alive, but damn the stag and damn the other lieges - Carlos intended to protect his own. He felt the thrum of the engine beneath him, the weight of the lance in his hand: killing was what it meant to live, and in this moment, as the lion drew closer, he felt alive.

Just before he would strike his target, he heard a click to his right, and turned to look - time slowed to a crawl as Carlos came face to face with the largest revolver he’d ever seen.

His last thoughts were of how the wolf and the rabbit - Legosi and Haru - would be the ones to pay for his hubris.
A wet splatter hit the shipping container opposite him and Miguel dove out of the way of the now driverless motorcycle as it spun out of control down the tunnel. He balked in amazement at the weapon in his hand - when he’d pulled the trigger, the thing had damn near shattered his wrist, and all that was left of the Rook was a gory smear spread like jam on the side of a shipping container, and a helmet which still presumably held a head. He stared at the mess that used to be a beast - the pull of one trigger, and he’d reduced an animal to mush. A small animal, but an animal nonetheless.

Louis had to be quick - the tunnel was taken, and his window of opportunity to rescue Ibuki and Cosmo was rapidly closing. “Miguel, get Sabu to safety and send Free, Agata, and Jinma back down. And drive Dolph to a damn hospital so they can staple his legs back on.” He didn’t wait for a response - his nostrils flared with rage as he turned to walk towards the entrance to the club. He’d come this far - he could not falter now. He heard the elevator open and close behind him as he stepped over bleeding bodies, sending Sabu and Miguel up to the main level; he had 6 shells left in his beast of a handgun, so he could kill six more animals before he had to reload. He plucked a spare shell from his breast pocket, opened the cylinder, and jammed it home - no sense in being underprepared.

He stepped over the twitching corpse of the hyena at the end of the hall, taking care not to slip in the slowly growing pool of blood around her body, and then he felt the floor shake beneath him. He nearly lost his footing - puffs of smoke burst from the walls in rapid succession. His heart sank and he charged forward, but he was too late; the whole tunnel shook with the detonation of charges hidden in the walls, and the last two meters of tunnel in front of the door to his goal collapsed to form a ruinous sepulchre for his ambitions. All of this: the beasts he’d killed, Dolph’s legs, Sabu’s face, the girl he’d shot between the eyes - all of this had been for nothing.

His face felt clammy - there was a weight in his stomach. All of this had been so easy - it would be easy for anybody. He felt the weight of his gun in his hand - the Rook had been about the size of Haru, and now he was a stain on the wall; screw his guilt over nearly allowing her to be eaten, he’d just so thoroughly destroyed an animal just like her that there was nothing left to eat. The scent of blood hit him like a court sentence - Sabu’s blood in his coat, Dolph’s vital fluids smeared into the concrete, and the mingling aromas of the corpses he’d sent tumbling to an early grave rose around him in a chorus of accusations. Your fault, they spat at him in his mind. It’s your fault, and you didn’t even win. You’re a failure - you betrayed their trust, and you failed.

He looked down at the body of the hyena at his feet, and saw his own dead face staring back up at him.

Louis took his burner phone out of his pocket and dialed the authorities. When the line connected, he crushed it in his hands and fled.

He was falling, tumbling through an endless expanse of stars and smells. Legosi reached out into space, eyes full of wonder - the stars swiveled and gazed back at him, honey-brown and pink-black. He felt their love, the stars - he wondered how he could.

He hit the water with a splash; his body curled in on itself with the impact. A flood of powerful sensation filled his nose, and he felt himself start to drown. He was calm - drowning would not be so bad, not for a beast like him; drowned, he could finally be still. He started to allow his eyes to shut, but the stars through the water still gazed at him, and in an instant, it began to rain, great heavy droplets falling from each weeping star. They arrested his gaze, distraught and accusing - how could he sink, and not swim? How could he allow himself to plummet away from the stars who
Loved him, and who wished to help?

Legosi kicked his feet, and swam - no, clawed, his claws helped him here - his way to the surface, and in an instant he was no longer afloat in an endless sea. He sat now at the center of a great, infinite mirror; when he looked down, he saw his face: fearsome, but only as a mask upon anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. The fearsome wolf melted away in the mirror, and left the lonely boy beneath - he felt a hand on his shoulder, and looked away from the haunting image: a white form stood before him, small, delicate and naked, unafraid in her vulnerability and made immeasurably powerful by her perseverance. A small hand drifted to his jaw - that terrible crushing machine, fueled by dark hunger and impulsive rage - and her touch banished the tension trapped within. He felt another, larger set of hands embrace his body from behind, and he felt the fear leave him.

“Kiss me, Legosi,” the white form said, and when she spoke, she spoke with two voices.

He did, and when he opened his eyes, a shape in white had been replaced by lustrous browns and curling antlers.

Legosi’s brain replayed the dream behind his eyes over and over, carving every detail into his memory. How he imagined Haru’s lips - how he imagined Louis’ lips. His heart quickened in his breast, and he felt himself flush; he was a mass of confusion and guilt, and he was about to ruin a pleasant evening by making it all about himself.

Should he feel guilty that Louis was there in his fantasy? Should he feel guilty that on today, a day that was supposed to be nice and fun for Haru, he’d lost his cool and made her cry? Should he feel guilty at how useless he’d been during their investigation at the Warehouse, should he feel guilty that he wasn’t pulling his weight? He looked across the table at where Haru sat, happily slurping down her noodles; he could still smell the tears she’d wiped off on his shirt. Ordinarily, when he was confused like this, he might wish he could go to Louis for advice; now, not even his imaginary upperclassman-turned-mob-boss would be of any help. He realized he’d been staring at Haru - at how calm and cheerful she was even after she had to deal with his mess all day, and after she had been dealing with his mess for weeks now. He heard her skirt swish under the table with how she kicked her legs, and his wave of self-pity broke.

*Herbivores are so strong.*

Legosi glanced at his phone - Louis should be here soon, it was getting close to 9. They’d agreed on 9 as a meeting time. He took a deep breath, and curled his hands into fists in his lap - his problems and temptations could wait, because today wasn’t about him.

“So, you going to say anything, or are you just gonna stare at me like I’m what your udon’s missing?” Legosi’s fur bristled - he’d even realized he was staring and he couldn’t stop??? He was hopeless. Haru laughed, and her shoulders did that little thing they did whenever she was actually, genuinely happy. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Sorry, it was a bad joke.”

“No, no it’s fine,” he said, and to his surprise, his voice was calm and pleasant. “If anyone should apologize today, it’s me - I didn’t think I’d lose my cool like that before.”

“Have we learned that maybe we should take our mental health seriously now?” Another pang of guilt stabbed him in the heart - here they were again, talking about him.

“Y-yeah. Lesson learned,” he stammered. He needed to change the subject. “I was thinking, maybe tomorrow, I could come up to the roof and help with anything you need to get the garden ready for winter.” The fact that Haru hadn’t brought anything up - asked if he was forgetting something, made some remark about Louis being absent, *anything* - worried him; had she forgotten?
She raised a brow and he knew she could tell he was thinking about something, but if she suspected his schemes, she chose not to say anything. “What, just because I’m a little rabbit I need a big strong wolf to help me?”

“N-no! That’s not what I mea-” she giggled again, and Legosi found himself once more at the butt of her jokes.

“It’s fine you oaf, I’m teasing again - come on, I get to have some fun after today. That would be great - it usually takes me hours to put all the tools away and stack the fertilizer, since a lot of it weighs more than I do; you’d make that go a lot faster.” She paused to take another bite of her food, and it was the sort of pause that was weighted by a question coming after it. “Fast enough to have a movie night after, maybe? I was thinking we could sneak Louis up to the roof; I can pay Mizuchi off to get her to help out too.” Hm. Wasn’t prepared for that one.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he heard himself say too quickly to stop the words from escaping his lips. Haru’s ears perked up and her expression, for a brief moment, was wrapped up in pure, pleased shock - as usual, she quickly corralled it back to acceptable levels, but in that moment, she looked about ready to jump out of her seat.

“Great!” she said in that tone she had whenever she was plotting, “I’ll text him an invite.” She snickered when she pulled out her phone and chewed her lip a little. “At least for personal stuff we don’t have to use that dumb burner or whatever; he acts like he’s in a spy movie.”

“I thought I was the one who acted like I was in a movie?”

“You act like you’re in a dumb superhero movie,” she corrected him, busy typing away on her phone. “Louis acts like he’s in a spy movie, and I have to act like a director to keep you idiots in line.”

“I - no, you’re right.” He was literally a vigilante, so he had no ground to stand on.

“So… what’s the occasion?” Legosi looked at Haru in shock - surely she knew, right? “You only take me here when it’s special; almost getting eaten by lions, reuniting with Louis; it’s not our anniversary, so what’s the big deal?”

Legosi’s fists clenched under the table - screw the surprise, if she really had forgotten he’d remind her; it was the least he could do. He reached into his pocket, fetched the small gift, and brought it up onto the table. “Happy birthday, Haru.”

Haru stared at the package on the table in confusion. “Happy birthday, Haru.” What? No - she counted the days in her head - today was Monday, Saturday had been the 17th, so… the realization shocked her more than anything: she’d forgotten her own birthday.

Maybe this is what Gouhin was talking about?

Maybe she did care a little too much about everybody except herself.

“I-I had some help picking it out! I uh, I hope you like them, they’ll be useful, I think.” Legosi’s words twitched her nose and she scooped up the carefully wrapped present in her hands, turning it over between her fingers; it was light and soft, some kind of clothing perhaps? Maybe it was a new holster - she kind of hoped it was a holster. It probably wasn’t a holster. “Um. Are you going to open it..?” His words caught her off guard; of the trio, Haru was not accustomed to being the one caught staring dumbfounded.
Hm. She’d started thinking of them as a trio - well, it made sense, they’d become a pretty effective team.

“Oh, right - yes, of course.” She tore back the wrapping paper and set aside the little note - which had a doodle of her face and Legosi’s face with a little heart in between them on it - on the table. Inside was a pair of fluffy, dark brown wool tubes; one side of each was a thin mesh, and the soft fabric was patterned with puffy yellow flowers: the same flower that Legosi handed back to her when they met in the hall months ago after Mizuchi pushed her. She held them up to inspect them - they felt comfortable and warm. “Earwarmers?”

“Yeah! Voss helped me pick them out, the mesh goes over the front of the ear so it doesn’t limit your hearing so much, and I thought you’d like the pattern, since you’re such a good gardener.” Legosi was fidgeting like he had something to justify; it was cute, he was cute - funny how a thoughtful gift was more romantic than a daring rescue. “Do you like them?”

Haru clutched the earwarmers to her breast and smiled, sniffing away the tear at the corner of her eye. It was stupid - that she would be crying about this - but it was just nice that he’d remembered; not just her birthday, but the little moments they’d shared. “I love them! This is so thoughtful, thank you Legosi.” Dumb Louis - she’d been so caught up in his problems that she’d forgotten her own birthday. “Hey, wait a minute, where’s Louis?” Was he skipping out on her again? She couldn’t believe his gall, to get her wrapped up in his nefarious plots and-

“He’s on his way - he’ll be here at 9. He had some stuff he needed to do, so he’s a little late.”

Haru blinked, and this time, she did jump out of her seat to go hug her wolf.

Clara watched dispassionately as the Green Knight screamed and raged - there was a time she would have flinched at the sound of ceramic shattering against a tile floor, or the sight of potted flowers scattering in a messy heap, but that time was long past. She had paid the tax of scars and blood - she was made of harder stuff now.

In truth, she shared her Knight’s rage - Carlos was the best of them, if she had to admit it; he was the most open, the warmest, the one who helped them all smooth themselves out through nurturing and being nurtured. His death was a blow to her gut; the fact that the cops showed up after, before they had a chance to even recover his body, was worse. Carlos was her lover, and more importantly, her friend - she could only imagine the pain the Knight was in now. The Green Knight shrieked, and her laptop smashed into the wall and clattered to the ground in a thousand pieces. The reptile fell into a heap, sheltered by her hat, and wept into the fragments.

“... is it done.” The Green Knight’s words were more a statement than a question - asking for reassurance of an answer she already knew.

“Yes,” Clara said calmly. “The tunnel is collapsed; we are secure.”

“Good. Good, good. Blow Ezekiel’s device.” Clara hesitated - her Knight had plans; detonating it now would ruin them, not to mention make an enemy of the Duke.

“My Knight, are-” Clara was interrupted by the sharp crack of a whip and her own cry of pain; the Knight’s steel tail spine ripped across her cheek, drawing a thin line of blood across the Ibex’ face as her tail flung it through space with deadly velocity. She clutched her face, and stared first at the blood staining her glove, and then at her Knight, whose eyes spat hate and disappointment in return.
“I said to blow the device, you simpering bitch. Damn the Duke, and damn the plan, I want blood. Is that understood? Or are you not Clara? Should I have Ezekiel at my side instead?” Clara steeled herself, and pushed the pressure rising in her throat down to her gut. Her gloves creaked in her fists, and she relaxed.

“Yes, my Knight.”

THE PLAN WORKED! HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO ASK; MOVIE NIGHT’S TOMORROW, WILL U BE THERE? :3

IT WAS MY BIRTHDAY AND YOU DIDN’T CALL?????

LOUIS!!! RESPOND!!!!

LOUIS I SWEAR TO REX IF YOU DO NOT RESPOND I WILL SHOOT OUT YOUR TIRES

Louis flicked his phone’s screen idly up and down, resting his chin on his spare hand as he sat gloomily against the real leather seat of his limousine, scrolling aimlessly through his message history with Haru. The Rook’s head bled onto the seat from inside its helmet next to him - the mission today had been a disaster, and now they didn’t have a back door into the Club. Opposite the Rook’s head was the object of the errand Legosi’d given him - a bulky cake, far too big for the three of them, decorated with fondant flowers and the garishly written words “HAPPY 19th HARU”. Louis admitted, he’d taken some liberties with ordering the cake - the little cake topper statuette of the three of them at a card table was his personal touch. He pushed thoughts of his failure from his mind - he could explain that later. For now, it was time to do a birthday party.

“Sir, uh, could I ask you a favor?” Louis looked up - Agata had opened the barrier between the front seat and the back, and was looking at him expectantly.

“Yes, Agata? What do you need.” Louis expected to have to chastise his subordinate - he was not in the mood for Agata’s perfectionism right now - but instead, Agata extended a hand through the little window and passed him a neatly wrapped parcel. On the front was written “Sorry for the surprise invitation! Maybe these will help next time. - A”. Louis raised his brows expectantly.

“Would you pass this along to Haru, please? You mentioned it was her birthday, and I wanted to apologize for my mistake before.” Louis smirked - alright, he was in the mood for Agata’s perfectionism maybe a little.

“I think I can do that, Agata - I’m sure she will appreciate your responsibility.” Agata smiled a little, and lingered a little too long before shutting the barrier window. Louis hoped that the Lion didn’t have a crush on him - he had enough problems working through his feelings for the carnivore he was currently plotting vigorously to wingman for Haru with; he didn’t need these issues infiltrating his organization. But, then again… he thought on Sabu’s face, his flat teeth, his narrow muzzle; maybe an Herbivore dealing with a Carnivore worked better than he’d thought.

“You alright up there, Free?”

“YES, SIR - JUST THINKING.” Free’s voice was unusually cold - Dolph’s recent amputation was weighing heavily on everyone, and Free most of all. “Plotting revenge for when I get my claws on the Knight.”

“GOOD - THINK AWAY.” They’d gotten Dolph and his legs out in time - with luck, he’d walk again next year. His phone buzzed again, and he looked down - another message from Haru.

LOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOS you’d better not be killing anybody on my birthday>
He sighed, and picked up his phone; it was about time to respond.

<No - I already took care of that earlier.> Well, it wasn’t a lie.

<Ah! He can type! You’d better not show up with a bloody suit; we’re meeting in public you know.>

<Relax, Haru - I changed my clothes. Legosi told you, then? That wolf can’t keep a secret>

<I think he told me because I FORGOT MY BIRTHDAY >:( Been thinking about your drama too much>

<What drama?>

<Oh, You Know What Drama.> Louis felt his chest lighten a little - the thing with failure was that one could move past it. Today, he’d failed - tonight, all he needed to do is be a good friend. The limo rounded a corner, and he saw the sign of the udon shop pull into view.

<Well, rest assured, we can discuss any grievances you have soon - we’re pulling up now.>

The car rolled slowly to a stop, and Louis shoved the Rook’s decapitated head out of view from the street and picked up the cake. Free stepped out of the driver’s seat to get the door, and Louis stepped out onto the street, the enormous cake filling his arms. He caught his friends across the small nighttime crowd - the look on Haru’s face and how she stopped hugging Legosi to hop excitedly in a circle lifted his spirits more than anything else could. The crowd was catching on - as he stepped out of the car, someone started up a round of “Happy Birthday”.

Louis sighed, took a step forward, and readied himself to turn a bad day into a pleasant evening.

And then his car exploded, and the force of the blast sent him and his hopes smashing to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

100,000 words! Thank you all for sticking with me this long; our first real confrontation with the court, and 12 days away from Halloween! Looks like there's dwindling options now, and Louis is learning that sometimes, his actions have consequences. Honestly, I'm just glad Paru let me cut peoples legs off without remorse - we'll have to see if blowing up cars goes the same! :D

End Notes

Hi! Thanks for reading - I hope you enjoyed. If you have any feedback, please feel free to leave it in the comments! I'll respond as quickly as I can manage.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!