House of Cards

by darkinterval

Summary

Disbarred and shamed, Phoenix struggles to raise Trucy through the pain and darkness. Unfortunately, being a poker-playing rentboy has its hardships. At least he has Kristoph’s love - something he’s told himself for the past 7 years. But things change when he meets Apollo Justice and Phoenix learns that love isn’t all like a game of cards, the truth can be a curse, and there are consequences for dancing with the devil.

AU, from Pre-AJ:AA through AJ:AA (end).

Current arc: Turnabout Corner

Notes
This is a Dark AU that takes place before AJ:AA and eventually, catches up to its events.

As the synopsis suggests, this is an established Kristoph/Phoenix and developing Apollo/Phoenix, because if you've read my previous works, you'd know that submissive Phoenix is my thing. This story delves into mature themes such as, physical/sexual/psychological abuse, questionable morals, mind games and the dangers of obsession. If this warning or the prologue's content and tone disturbs you, then please turn back. If it excites you, then by all means, I hope you will enjoy your stay.

I'll also be tweaking the backstories and characterization of some characters, as well as their relationships with each other. This way, I'll be able to develop them accordingly to the pace and plot of this story. Examples include Olga and Klavier.

"House of Cards" is my first multi-chapter Ace Attorney fanfic of foreseeable length. It's a little ambitious; I have no idea what I'm doing exactly, but I got the broad strokes figured out. If you like what you see, please subscribe and/or leave me a kudos. Comments are always appreciated, even simple words of encouragement. Believe me, they go a long way.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

Playlist for "House of Cards" can be found on my profile. Alternatively, you may access the link here: https://soundcloud.com/darkinterval/sets/house-of-cards

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A pen scratched across paper; the frantic scribbling of practiced cursive vengeful and maddening in the otherwise silent bedroom. A window was left open, but the night air was still; the shrill wails of a passing ambulance lingering against the faint resonance of a speeding train in the near distance. On the wall, the quiet, rhythmic tick-tock of the clock seemed deafening. A young man with brown hair sat at his cluttered desk, hunched over his books; a single reading light shone over his notes and cast looming shadows on poster-covered walls. They were all Phoenix Wright; variations; the posters that is – Turnabout King and courtroom revolutionnaire turned tragic has-been, who fell from grace, fell out of law, and ultimately off the face of this earth. But the young man liked to keep them there. He liked to look at them – at that face, those eyes, bask in that sexy aura of conviction – and took great pride and pleasure in his fantasies.

The brunette's hair had a peculiar pair of spikes at the front, the rest of the short locks unruly from lack of hair gel to hold them back. But it was close to midnight, he was off work and there was no need to keep up appearances without his boss breathing down his neck. Instead, a different presence watched over him, motivated him; silent, invisible, imagined yet remarkably effective. Abnormal worship; an unhealthy obsession – call it what you will, but he wanted to make his hero proud… even if said hero didn't know he existed. Even if those brilliant blue eyes watching him weren't real despite him desperately wishing they were.

Phoenix Wright.

A large, strong hand gripped the pen; the complexion slightly tan and coarse; masculine like his physique, but his wide, expressive hazel eyes and soft youthful features bestowed him a certain boyish charm. The brunette was hard at work, slumped over his material, taking notes in quiet desperation, driven by his need for personal fulfillment. He would handle his first case one day; get behind that defense table; continue his legacy.

"One day, Justice. One –"

His phone rang and without once glancing up from his readings, answered it.

"Justice speaking."

"Sup, Apollo! Miss me?"

The enthusiastic, carefree voice of his best and childhood friend made him smile despite his choice of words.

"No, not really. I was plotting how to get rid of you actually."

"Humph, they shouldn't let psychos like you study law! Some friend you are." Came the wry
response, but it was without any real menace. In fact, the caller laughed it off. "Anyway, I just finished training for the week and I'm in the area. Wanna hang? Drinks' on me this time, I swear."

"Maybe next time. Studying."

"Studying again?! But it's Friday night!"

"Technically, it's already Saturday – "

"That's worse! Besides, aren't you already done with work this week?"

When Apollo started lecturing him about the difference between work and study, his friend blew him a raspberry.

"Ok, ok, I get it! Geez! Honestly, if I were you, I'd only hit the books when I actually get a case."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" he replied with a pout. "Just you wait, Clay Terran. One day, someone's going to walk through the doors of 'Gavin Law Offices' and ask for Justice."

"Phfft! Of course they'll want justice. It's a law firm."

"Clay…” he said in warning and his friend chuckled. He rolled his eyes; sometimes he couldn't believe he was the younger of the two of them.

"As I was saying, one day, someone's going to come in with a big case – I'm talking real big – and specifically request for Apollo Justice, attorney of law – "

"You mean junior attorney of law," Clay corrected and Apollo wanted to strangle his friend so bad.

"Come on, Clay! Have a little faith!"

"It's not that I don't believe in you, Apollo. I do, more than anyone in fact," Clay defended, this time serious. "But your boss is the Kristoph Gavin and he's the best defense lawyer in the whole country!"

"True… But does he have Chords of Steel?"

"I don't see how yelling's going to help your case…"

"Um… It… Instills… Blazing confidence?"

"Apollo, I'm being realistic. Why would they want you when they can have him?"

Apollo sighed and allowed his gaze to pass over his notes; his stacks of law books; the folders of incomplete paperwork he was due to hand his boss on Monday. They were cases and they were all Kristoph's. He was only made to fill in the administrative stuff in triplicate because his boss was always too preoccupied with ongoing trials to bother about miscellaneous crap like that.

Oh, the privileges of working for Mr. Gavin was indisputable, make no mistake. He still remembered how he almost had a heart attack when he had been selected out of the 200-over applicants to work at 'Gavin Law Offices'. If that wasn't an indication of his capabilities, then he didn't know what was. However, months following his employment met with little to no change: Kristoph was taking on more cases by the day and he was still stuck in the office daydreaming of his first courtroom debut. It was extremely frustrating considering the amount of hours he poured into his work beyond normal expectations. What was the point of studying so hard when he couldn't put theory to practice, when nobody would give him a chance? Also, he really wanted to point that pointer finger of his and shout
"Objection!" at the top of his voice just once.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." Clay paused, sensing his friend's sorrow through his silence. "Listen, I'll drink to your dreams." Apollo could practically picture Clay raise his shot glass in the air. "Here's to my best friend: may he soon receive his first big case and make a name for himself in the law books of tomorrow."

And despite his depression, he managed a grateful smirk.

"Thanks, Clay. But you know, Mr. Gavin wasn't always the best."

"Apollo…" He heard the man sigh, impatient yet sympathetic. "I know you practically worship the guy, but you got to stop mourning. It's creepy and really weird: you don't know him and he doesn't even know you exist. Besides, no one knows where he is; what he's doing; if he's still…"

"I know he's still out there, Clay," he interrupted fiercely, pressing his pen onto the paper so hard he bent its tip, "and he'll make a comeback. He's just waiting for the right moment. You'll see."

"But it's been seven years."

"I can wait."

"Do you really believe he's innocent?"

"I do."

"You're completely mental."

There was an exasperated edge to his voice and Apollo could practically see Clay shaking his head.

"Stop this nonsense, Apollo. As a friend, I'm begging you to relax. You're way too tense and if you work any harder, all your hair's going to fall out and you'll turn into a wrinkly old potato before you hit 23."

"Clay, I – "

"Tell you what: why don't you call it a night and go get off on those court videos you like watching so much? Get your Wright fix."

Apollo crimsoned and completely ignoring that lousy pun his friend just made, muttered, "I plead the fifth."

The last thing he heard was Clay's annoying laughter before he hung up on him.

This was why he didn't miss him. Clay always knew which buttons to press and he tended to press all of them at once.

Apollo ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, face still hot and red from his previous embarrassment. He glanced up at the posters, at the various poses of his sharply dressed hero for inspiration; an answer; something. They originally meant to serve as motivators, but now proved insanely distracting. He heard Clay's words replay in his head; knew the blush on his cheeks was still there. How the hell was he supposed to concentrate now? His gaze traveled to his television, specifically at the laptop connected to it and bit his lip like he was resisting something wholly immoral.

Maybe just one video.

He switched off the reading light and plunged the entire bedroom into darkness; the only source of
light streamed in through the window from the dim glow of streetlamps outside. Then, he selected his favorite trial – the DL-6 incident – and threw himself onto his bed, propping his chin on his elbow as he took in the familiar scenes, speeches, faces… him.

He had watched this trial a thousand times, memorized the lines by heart, but he simply couldn't get enough of how his hero carried himself that day. Phoenix Wright was more than just confident; he was on fire, unstoppable, fearless. The way his jaw set in determination; eyes blazing with conviction and an inherent desperation to protect his client and childhood friend; raining objection after objection on his opponent; going against all odds and at such lengths to pursue the truth, uncaring of the consequences… It was a mysterious blend of professionalism and character, an untamed passion for order and justice, and Apollo relished it. He knew every tactic, saw every involuntary twitch, felt the intensity, and involuntarily shuddered.

Hot. He felt hot and an unmistakable pressure between his hips. Shit. That was fast – much faster than previous nights. His hands traveled downwards and with a swift tug, it didn't take long for his boxers to fall to the floor.

'Hold it! I've made my case transparently clear: there was only one gun in the lift, two shots were fired, but only one bullet was recovered from the crime. Someone else shot Mr. Gregory Edgeworth and took the evidence with them… a piece of vital evidence they no doubt still have on them until this day!'

The video continued to play and Apollo lowered the volume to a comfortable level. Then, he rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling. He could picture Phoenix's expression in his mind's eye: triumphant, smirking; taste the man's desperation for the truth on his tongue. Likewise, he too was desperate, but for something – he shamefully conceded – completely different and definitely far less philosophical.

'Objection! The second bullet does exist and I'll prove it!'

Phoenix's voice grew in its intensity; tension in the courtroom spiked. Apollo wanted to experience that raw passion himself, tame the flame that burned deep within Phoenix's heart, and set it ablaze with his own hands. He wanted to own him; worship every inch of him; love him.

Apollo's breathing turned heavy, panting; and through half-lidded eyes he stared up at the posters – images of his hero in all his glory. They seemed to surround him, occupy his thoughts, cloud his judgment, and fuel his desire. He reached down to wrap his hand around his arousal. It was hard, dripping precum and throbbed painfully in untold anticipation. Blushing, he forced aside all indignity and allowed himself this private moment of guilty indulgence. He touched himself and moaned.

The first few times had been awkward, embarrassing, clumsy – was he defiling his hero's honor with his base urges? But the more he did it, the more satisfying it got, and the less he cared. And then, over time, masturbating to thoughts of Phoenix was no longer enough – it evolved into the desire to claim him, tear his clothes apart, roll and pinch his pretty pink nipples between his fingers and take him hard and fast, over and over.

"S-Sir… feels so – ah! – amazing…!"

As he continued to stroke himself with Phoenix's voice playing in the background, he wished that hand around his cock was something else; wished to open his eyes to see a submissive Phoenix riding him, nothing but his open shirt and tie hanging off his beautiful naked body, back arched sexily and screaming his name in pure bliss as they fucked. But he kept his eyes shut because he knew that once he opened them, the illusion would shatter, he'd be back to staring at pictures in-between office breaks, and nothing would change.
"Mr. Wright…"

He had watched this trial a thousand times, but this time, he didn't feel guilty cumming to his hero's name on his lips.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I hope I didn't make Apollo too creepy lol. My main focus was to push that whole "hero worship" idea into something more... borderline obsessive. I also wanted to show how much time has passed since Phoenix's peak and that seven-year gap, so I thought what better way to do it than through old courtroom videos. The prologue is something different than what I would normally write, but then what's fun without a little challenge?
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warning: the angst starts here, along with other mature themes. Reader's discretion is advised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Deal.”

It was always the same: the same actions, same moves, same dark and cold environment of the underground club room. Still, it was warmer here than it was upstairs, at least, that was what others told him. For him, it didn't make a difference. It was always cold wherever he went; the customers were different, sometimes, but the sight of their smug, condescending smirks were a constant; the smell of their sweat, greed and desperation for victory unchanging. He supposed he liked that. Not really the competition, rather the predictability. Things had been changing so rapidly in his life, he appreciated a little familiarity, a little routinely reprieve from the same nightmare of different faces he woke up to each and every day for the past seven years.

It was always the same. The customer would throw their cards down and cry:

“Hah! Full house. Looks like your luck’s finally run out.”

… or something to that variation.

And he would in turn respond with a tip of his beanie and a well-placed smirk, “Sorry,” showing his own hand, “Straight flush. Better luck next time, sir.”

There would be a moment of befuddled silence; the dealer, Olga Orly, would contain her knowing laughter behind a pair of smiling Russian-red lips; then, the accusations would start flying. Impossible. Swindler. Bluff. Forger of victory. No shred of respect. A leopard never changes its spots. Liar. Deceiver. Crook.

This would then be followed by the demand to search him. He would raise his arms like always, while the customer searched him: his hoodie, inside his pockets, under his beanie, strip him down to his bare, shivering flesh sometimes; and he always let them with that same unassuming smile on his face. From his underprivileged position, it was his only hold over their egos. It brought them immense shame and frustration – they hit him sometimes – but it secretly gave him a rise knowing that he could turn the tables and humiliate them even though he was the one naked and on his knees.

Finally, begrudging acceptance would kick in, the customer would throw their money onto the table with a curse, and he'd pull his clothes on and rise to his feet to collect his earnings for the night.

“Unbeaten Poker King for seven years straight – the rumors hold true,” said the customer, stubbing out his cigarette on a nearby ashtray. He was a young man no older than 25; tall, lanky; a street kid with a twisted smile. “Whatever. It's not like I came here to beat a legend anyway.”

Olga paused in shuffling the cards, a frown across her brow. With a huff, she blew a stray lock of curly blonde hair away from her face to tuck it beneath her bandanna. She did not just waste her time
with a sore loser, paying customer or not.

“What do you mean?” she demanded, slamming the deck onto the table. “People come to the Borscht and Bowl for one reason and one reason only – and I can tell you, it's not for my soup.”

Someone laughed.

“Aw… But I love your food, Olga.”

“Can it, Wright. We both know how undiscriminating your taste buds are.” She turned narrowed, suspicious eyes to the young punk and hissed, “Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Said the man with a laugh as he turned his leering gaze to the third figure in the room. “I came for a different form of entertainment – a song request if you will. Something you should be more than familiar with… aye, Mr. Ex-lawyer?”

Said man chuckled, waving him off with a shake of his head. “Aren't you an odd one. No one wants to hear me play piano. In fact, their evenings have a happier ending when I'm nowhere near the thing.” He avoided the customer’s eyes and shrugged. “Besides, I only know one song and I'm not even good at it.”

“That's not what I hear, Phoenix Wright.” The young man paused before smiling to himself, like he was in on a private joke. “And here I thought you couldn't fall any lower…”

“I'm giving you three seconds to start making sense, or I'm chucking you out!” Olga growled, but fell silent when Phoenix casually inserted himself between them. He glanced at her briefly over his shoulder; a look of trepidation shone through her gaze; and his hollow blue eyes seemed to say, “I'll be alright.”

Shoving his hands into his hoodie pockets, Phoenix leaned against the poker table, that same unassuming smile on his face and said, “Go on.”

The man rounded the table to slide up next to him, invading his personal space, body language confident and assertive. His dark eyes gleamed with perverse delight, the smile on his thin, pale lips shifting into a wide, malicious grin. He reached up to roughly grasp Phoenix’s jaw to force his gaze on him, scrutinizing his features, feeling the barest traces of stubble beneath his fingertips. Despite the tragedy of seven years past, the years had been good to Phoenix: he was as handsome as he always was, the stubble, smoldering gaze and callous attitude lending him a rough, devil-may-care exterior that was both darkly attractive and inexplicably thrilling. Not to mention those gorgeous blue eyes… It was difficult to resist, especially when the opportunity for vengeance against that humiliating poker defeat presented itself so openly, so willingly.

Phoenix felt the man lean in; his hands wandering; could smell alcohol on his breath; but workplace ethics prevented him from pushing the guy away. Instead, all he could think about were those hands and how dirty they made him feel, how he had to bear the shame like he had always done and continue smiling through the despair. It was the one advice from Mia that he had left. Wouldn't she be disappointed? Then again, it’s been seven years and her ghost hadn't come back to haunt him, so he stopped thinking about his little betrayal.

He was so preoccupied with thoughts of his late mentor however, that he jumped when the customer slammed a wad of cash on the table.

“Word from the underworld is you're good at another song,” the man began as he leaned closer to whisper into Phoenix’s ear, hand shamelessly groping his ass.
“Oh? And what might that be?” returned Phoenix mysteriously.

“Fantasie Impromptu.”

Those words were like a trigger and he felt his heart sink. His body was so cold, the thick material of his hoodie could no longer warm him. He felt shut off; disconnected; his world seemed darker, pitch black, lonely. But he had to keep smiling, he told himself. And if it got darker, his smile would only grow wider.

“That's one grand for a night at my place… and a cute outfit,” said the man with a wink, tipping Phoenix’s chin with a bony finger to get a better look at those hypnotic blue eyes. “More than what you're used to, but I hear you promise a good time for the right amount and I want it all.”

When Phoenix looked into his customer’s eyes, he already knew what he’d see: pride; a perverse sense of glory and gratification; occasional desire and overwhelming lust. But most of all, if not always, it was the anticipated promise for bragging rights. Most of his clients were men, ordinary citizens who bore no personal grudges against him apart from their losses in poker. No, all they were interested in was the name “Phoenix Wright” and how they would have single-handedly subjugated a once proud and reputable man of law by making him do the basest things in bed. It was a fascinating yet horrifying thing, the human condition: man relished in seeing another powerful man suffer misfortune for it bestowed a sense of privilege for the non-sufferer and by extension, an idea of superiority. Lust for power translated to lust for existential freedom, and that's how Phoenix knew that all his customers were inherently weak. But now wasn't the time to brood over philosophy; it was time to make a quick buck, or in this case, a quick thousand dollars.

He turned his gaze to the cash. Tempting. With money like that on top of this month’s earnings, he wouldn't have to worry about rent and getting evicted; no more IOU’s at Eldoon’s Noodles; he'd be able to stock up on and whip up nutritious meals that were not instant noodles; and most importantly, his main concern, was properly providing for Trucy – his precious little girl, his raison d'être, his light and his world. She lit up his darkest times with her wonderful smiles and thrilling laughter, lifted his sorrows with her magic tricks, and he promised to protect and love her till the end of time. They had both been alone – she abandoned by her father; him shunned by society. She needed him just as much as he needed her, and they learned to make do with what little they had. If she knew what he did apart from playing poker, she would be heartbroken; devastated… But he needed the money. He could afford new textbooks for her, pay off that overdue school fees, buy her a lovely new dress so she wouldn't have to feel embarrassed around her friends anymore. They could live comfortably for the next month instead of scrimping on the smallest of expenses; and if there was enough left, he could finally get her that pasta display piece she always wanted for her birthday.

Ask him seven years ago and he'd say that money meant nothing to him. What defined him were values like honesty and trust; principles of truth and the happiness of his clients. But that was all in the past, he wasn’t a lawyer anymore, and people change.

And so, Phoenix put on his sexiest smirk – the kind he knew his customers adored – and flirted in return, toying playfully with the ends of the young punk’s unruly, spiky hair. With practiced sensuality, he crawled onto the man’s lap and without once breaking eye contact, plucked the wad of cash from the table top and shoved it into his pocket.

“Mm… Well, when you ask so nicely, how can I refuse?”

The man grinned and wrapped his arm around Phoenix’s waist possessively. “Then come with me before the Friday night crowd streams in. I'm... averse to sharing.”

“My, aren't we possessive? Unfortunately, I won't be able to provide my full services tonight,” he
breathed against the man’s parted lips, amused by the way they quivered in anticipation and secretly priding the obvious effect he had on his latest customer. “It’s my daughter’s birthday and I’m needed home, but…” he trailed off suggestively, his hand wandering down to stroke the area between his customer’s legs, “if you’re not opposed to a quickie, we can do it right here, right now.”

“U-Uh…”

“Here’s the deal.”

Phoenix tugged the stuttering man towards him by the collar of his shirt, licked languidly along the shell of his ear before whispering into it, hot and sensual. “For $1000, I'll even let you blow your load in my ass.”

“Deal!”

He bowed his head, the rim of his beanie obscuring his eyes, a small smirk playing across his lips. The extent people paid just to further run his name through the mud. It was painful, but he only had himself to blame. It all started five years ago when someone dangled $500 in his face. He had followed the guy home for a night and word spread like wildfire. Over time, the kinky outfits and accessories they made him wear got increasingly lewd and expensive, as did his techniques and price quotes. But, that didn't stop them from coming back for more. He could only thank his lucky stars that his customers had the sense and sensibility to keep their exchanges from the authorities.

“Wright… Please, you don't have to do this.” Olga eyed him unsurely, sadly and he grabbed her hand to shove in a hundred dollar bill.

“For your troubles,” he whispered, eyes gentle and kind as he watched her hesitate, bite her lip, before reluctantly pocketing the money.

“... I'll be back in an hour to help you clean up.”

Then, with a professional bow to the customer, she turned around and made her way back to the restaurant. As she ascended the stairs, she pretended not to see the eagerness in the man’s eyes and Phoenix’s despair as he led him into the back room; covered her ears to the crude things the man said he’d do to Phoenix in the next hour. It was times like this Olga wished friendship didn't get in the way of her throwing trash like that out.

An hour to midnight.

Struggling with a big box topped with a bright red bow, Phoenix stood outside the door to his old office-turned-home, catching his breath. Seriously, those 13 flights of stairs were no joke and he wasn’t as young as he used to be. That, and he ran all the way up, but there was no way he was going to miss his daughter’s 15th birthday.

Inserting his key into the lock, he pressed his shoulder against the door, pushed it open and was just about to announce his arrival, when the melodious tunes of a piano made him stop. There, in the living room, just across from where he stood, sat a beautiful blonde man at the piano; long, slender fingers dancing effortlessly across black and white keys. His complexion seemed tan against the pale, platinum blonde of his hair – remarkably flawless, long, glimmering and styled to the side in an elegant drill. He had enchanting, ice-blue eyes framed by a pair of delicately shaped glasses, which
worked to accentuate his overall sophistication. As always, the gentleman was formally dressed like he was heading to a ball instead of paying a casual house visit, his expensive, sharply tailored blue suit further granting him the dignified grace of an aristocrat despite his humble background. But this man had made a name for himself and his business through his amazing intellect, natural charisma, and relentless strive towards perfection.

When Phoenix first met him, the blonde was already running his own law firm and was an established figure in society, recognized by prosecutors and defense attorneys all around. His conduct in court was cool and exceptional, members of the law and civil service respected him, and he bore somewhat of a celebrity status amongst the common folk. His face replaced Phoenix’s in law textbooks; his name on everyone’s lips. There was no one in need of defending who didn’t want him as their lawyer, and there wasn’t a single case he lost until this day. His record was clean; flawless; perfect like him in every way… which made Phoenix wonder what on earth the man actually saw in a pathetic, washed up has-been like him.

Phoenix watched the man’s eyes slide shut from his passionate play, posture arched in rapture, and he couldn’t help but feel both smitten and jealous over his gift of beauty and music. Chopin was his lover’s favorite and tonight, it was Fantasie Impromptu. Normally, the song reminded Phoenix of his job and self-loathing, but it was different when it came to his lover. The way the blonde played it; the music itself reminded Phoenix so much of him: how it began in a flurry of mad passion, gracefully descended into a soft and soothing romance, before picking up once more in a frenzied crescendo of power and control. It was complex; a clash between calm and madness; reflected the intricate patterns, ups and downs and profundity of his lover’s mind. The man was a genius; ruthlessly professional; courtroom devil with the face of an angel, also known as “the coolest defense in the West”; but to Phoenix alone, he was just Kristoph – tender, kind, and amazingly supportive boyfriend. He was the man who caught him when he fell from grace, believed in him when no one else did, and Phoenix vowed to love him till the day he died.

Quietly placing the box aside, he snuck up behind his boyfriend and wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

“Hey,” he breathed, nuzzling Kristoph’s cheek, “Sorry I'm late… Did you wait long?”

Said man stopped playing and with a gentle smile, turned his cheek to bump their noses affectionately.

“Not at all,” he replied with the patience and gentility of a prince. “In fact, you're just in time.”

Phoenix blinked. “For what?”

“Daddy, you're home!”

Kristoph chuckled behind his hand. “That.”

Phoenix released him and turned to face the source of that high-pitched, excitable voice. A young brunette emerged from her bedroom, her hair done up prettily and donned in a lovely blue-and-white lace dress. The gown was both sweet and elaborate, suited her perfectly and when she twirled to show off the skirt’s numerous ruffle layers, Phoenix felt his heart melt, hopelessly charmed.

*She’s lovely.*

The girl stopped to clasp her hands behind her back while smiling up at him bashfully, a light blush staining her cheeks.
“How do I look, daddy?”

“Like a princess,” he answered and she giggled.

“A magician princess?” And as if on cue, a giant wooden puppet with a blue cape and top hat emerged from beneath the ruffles. Phoenix didn’t know which was more disturbing: the fact that his daughter still insisted on keeping the thing with her whenever she changed clothes, or that it emerged from under her skirt. But he realised he ought to be used to her peculiarities by now.

“My one and only.”

Kristoph approached the pair with a smile, fixing his enchanting gaze on Phoenix. “Do you like it?” he asked with a slight tilt of his head.

“You got this for her?” replied Phoenix in disbelief.

“Custom-made, right down to the exact shade of blue to match her magician costume,” Kristoph replied, holding up one of the layers between his fingers. “French lace: specially imported. I even got the designer to embroider the four card suits along the lace trimmings. Here – he held up a section – if you look closely, there's diamonds, clubs, hearts and spades in that specific sequence all around.”

“Kristoph…”

Phoenix was at a loss for words. His boyfriend had outdone himself yet again. He wouldn't be surprised if his daughter became the most popular girl in school tomorrow if she came dressed in dollar bills.

Each year, Kristoph’s gifts would get grander and increasingly expensive. Heck, two years ago, Trucy received her first magic escape box. The thing was so huge, they had to leave it at Kristoph’s place and that led to the longest sleepover of their lives. His daughter couldn't get enough of it and he and Kristoph had to take turns tucking her into bed in it for the first few weeks.

“Forget the designer. The material alone would’ve cost me an arm and leg,” he commented dryly to which Kristoph laughed.

“Well, I wasn't going to let that happen, so I offered my latest pay cheque instead,” he replied, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. "It's only sensible."

“How did you know she wanted a new dress?”

“I remember whatever you tell me, Phoenix. And even if I didn't, trust that I would've gotten her the same thing in a heartbeat.”

Overwhelmed with love for this man, Phoenix pulled him in for a sweet kiss.

“You spoil her,” he whispered and immediately felt a pair of strong arms wrap around his waist.

“Nonsense. Nothing is too expensive for our Trucy.”

Phoenix smirked. “Careful. At this rate, she's going to start calling you ‘mom’. Then, we’ll really have to get married.”

“If it comes to that, rest assured that I'll design your wedding dress.”

“Kristoph!” Phoenix smacked his shoulder playfully and the man laughed.
They pulled away from each other and Phoenix went to retrieve his present on the table. When he
handed it to Trucy, he had to resist laughing when she excitedly took it in her arms… only to grow
worried when she began to shake it violently.

“S-Sweetie… why don't you just open it?”

“But I must figure out what's inside!”

“Um… That's why it's called a surprise?”

“Leave her be, Phoenix,” said Kristoph with an amused smile and shake of his head. “She did the
same for my present. As long as it's not fragile, I'm sure it'll be fine."

“But what if I got her a puppy?”

“… Then we best pray the puppy has a thick skull.” He leaned in to whisper into Phoenix’s ear, “I'll
be right back,” before quietly slipping away into the kitchen.

With a curious frown and pout on her lips, Trucy turned the box around in her hands. It was
wrapped with playing cards instead of normal colorful wrapping paper, which meant that the gift was
something she really wanted. Her daddy tended to do that: poker cards meant something worth
remembering and she enjoyed a little mystery. And then, when she finally lifted the box’s lid and
peered inside, she let out a loud scream.

“Oh my god – you didn't!” She pulled out a pasta display piece, complete with suspended fork and
hugged it tight against her chest. “Pasta! My pasta! I've wanted this for years!

Small tears pricked at the corners of her eyes and she wiped them away. When she was eight years
old, Phoenix took her out on Christmas Eve and she remembered walking past an Italian restaurant’s
display window and it was love at first sight. Of course, it wasn't for sale, and even when Phoenix
pleaded with the grumpy manager, he was quoted a hefty sum that was plain unjustifiable. They
were already struggling with their living expenses as it was, so they left. She just didn't realize that
her daddy actually looked back.

Trucy ran up to Phoenix and threw herself into his open arms, kissing him over and over on the
cheek.

“I love you, daddy,” she squealed, “Thank you, thank you, thank you! This must've cost you a
bomb!”

“Well, it took me a few years of persistent saving, but I'm just glad you like it,” he replied with a
laugh, patting her on the head, eyes filled with so much love for his little trickster. “Happy birthday,
Trucy. May this year be a good one.”

She flashed him a warm smile in return. “It already is, daddy! I can feel it!”

“Sorry for breaking the family moment,” interrupted Kristoph as he emerged from the kitchen,
carrying a large chocolate cake with 15 candles precariously perched on its surface, “but who wants
cake?”

Twin choruses of “I do!” sounded about the room. Trucy clambered behind her birthday cake, eyes
already closed and bouncing excitedly as she prepared her wish. Amused murmurs of “wait” and “let
me light the candles first” sounded from Kristoph as he struggled to perform the deed without
burning the birthday girl by accident. The sight proved so endearing, Phoenix pulled out his camera
to video the whole thing. A sentimental smile graced his lips. Seven years… Had it been that long
already? He still remembered how tiny and mischievous Trucy had looked in that bright red
magician getup when she landed in his lap one fateful spring day; pranking him daily and swapping
his shampoo for blue dye once; bringing her to the playground to watch her climb the jungle gym for
hours; explaining to angry parents when she had tried to make it disappear along with their
children… How time flies. 15 years old and already a teenager. But she would always be his little
girl.

After making her wish, Trucy blew out the candles, only to do a double-take when she regarded
Kristoph with wide, surprised eyes.

“Mr. Gavin! You have something on your face!”

Kristoph blinked at her curiously. “Hm? I don't think I –”

SPLAT.

“Haha! Now you do!”

After wiping the chocolate icing off his face, Kristoph grabbed a generous dollop himself and
proceeded to playfully chase Trucy around the living room, the latter squealing at the top of her voice
when he caught her and exacted his revenge. Laughter filled and warmed the walls of the old, once
lonely apartment, something that Phoenix would treasure now and for the years to come.

With his camera, he focused on the two people he loved more than life itself: on Trucy’s beaming,
chocolate-covered face and the honest amusement dancing in Kristoph’s eyes. There was a wide
smile on his lips, not the smug or mocking kind Phoenix often witnessed during the blonde’s trials,
but laughing and true. It was rare, beautiful and it was a side of Kristoph reserved for their eyes only.
It was a side of him that made him a part of their little dysfunctional family. “You can't see me! I'm
invisible!” Trucy exclaimed under the cover of the dining table. “Commendable technique,” he
remarked, bending to grab the ends of the tablecloth, “but what if I did… this!” He pulled back the
cloth; Trucy gasped dramatically; Kristoph smeared more chocolate on her nose and with that, they
began to laugh again.

Phoenix smiled behind the camera, let the video linger longer on his lover and daughter as they
played, until the battery bar began to flash in warning, and then watched a little longer before
lowering the device. This one, he decided, he would keep in a special place in his heart.

“Sorry about the dress, Mr. Gavin,” mumbled Trucy guiltily beneath the towel as Kristoph dried her
hair. “After all the money and trouble you spent on it, and I got chocolate all over it…”

They were seated in the living room: Phoenix leaning comfortably against Kristoph, an affectionate
smile on his face as he absentely played with the ends of the latter’s hair; while Trucy sat cross-legged
at their feet. She had bathed and was dressed down to her pajamas.

“That’s quite alright. I'll just get my employee to send it to the dry cleaner’s tomorrow.”

“Tee hee! You keep making your poor employee run errands.”

“If I didn't, he'd either be daydreaming or disturbing the peace with his needless shouting. At least
making him run around helps justify my paying him.”
With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, he motioned Trucy over with a finger and she rose to her knees, giggling when he leaned down to whisper something in her ear. She whispered excitedly in return.

“And what secrets are you two hiding from me?” interrupted Phoenix with playful curiosity as he watched them share a knowing grin. “Come on, don’t leave your old man hanging.”

Kristoph chuckled in response. “Now, Trucy, isn’t there something you wish to tell your father?”

Phoenix’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Why did he have a bad feeling about this?

“Kirstoph... what are you planning?”

The man's smile reached his eyes. “You'll know in a second.”

“That’s right,” Trucy chimed in with gusto as she crawled into Phoenix's lap. “I got a job at the Wonder Bar, daddy! Surprise!”

“Wha - A BAR?!?”

But Trucy carried on talking, oblivious to the growing aura of disapproval that surrounded Phoenix.

“I know I’m not legally allowed to work, but Mr. Gavin talked to the owner for me and they worked out a sort of agreement. I start next week! That way, you can quit playing poker; the magnificent Trucy and Mr. Hat will finally make their debut on national stage; and best of all, I get paid doing what I love most! Isn’t that great, daddy?”

No. No, it wasn’t. Phoenix felt his world crash around him as he struggled to process this latest change in his life. It wasn't like he didn't support Trucy's dreams or anything – heck, he loved it whenever she got that sparkle in her eyes whenever she succeeded in her latest trick; but she was only 15 years old, just started high school; least of all legally qualified to work. He had no idea how Kristoph managed to argue his way out of that one, but he didn't like it. As her father, it was his job and responsibility to provide for the both of them. Trucy ought to be enjoying her childhood, not working twice as hard as anyone her age and certainly not at a bar! Sure, the Wonder Bar was the classiest, most talked about entertainment establishment in town, but it was still a bar with adult customers! What in the world had Kristoph been thinking?!

“Judging from the look on your face, I suppose it's my turn to alleviate your fears,” spoke Kristoph in his usual calm and collected manner, as if it was a completely natural occurrence for a minor to work after hours in an adult establishment.

“I've done my fair bit of research on the place and spoke with the owner personally. The Wonder Bar caters to families on weekends. We've worked out a comfortable schedule for Trucy, so that it wouldn't cut into her school life. As her father, you're entitled to accompany her during performance nights – all for free, of course.”

“But how did you… That is, the owner…” Phoenix stuttered, unsure of where exactly to begin.

“The Gramarye name is known far and wide, Phoenix,” he answered simply with a patient smile. “Once the owner heard of Trucy’s ties to the famed magic troupe, she wouldn't take no for an answer. In fact, she's promised triple the pay of any full-time employee, per show. That's an estimated $5,000 a month.”

"Five thousand?!"
"Of course, no contract is set in stone, unless the father himself approves it," finished Kristoph, curt as always.

“So, will you, daddy? Will you, will you?” Trucy pleaded with wide, eager eyes as she bounced on his lap. “Just think of it; my name in lights: Trucy Wright the Magnificent - sold out for weeks! And since you wouldn't need to work anymore, you can be my–”

“No.”

Trucy paused abruptly; her heart stopped.

“What? Why not?”

“I said, no,” Phoenix repeated, this time more firmly as he stared into her wide, confused eyes. “I won't have you working when you're supposed to be in school. Your job is to be a student; mine is to look after you.”

“But–”

“Sweetie, look, I appreciate your concern, I really do,” he continued, hoping that she would be able to hear his desperation and understand his love behind his reasons. “But I'm alright. I'm doing fine at the Borscht and Bowl. You don't need to do all this for me, ok?”

“But daddy, I –”

“It's not terrible there, I promise. They treat me well.”

“No they don't!” she yelled, slapping his hands away when he tried to reach for her. “You come back late every night with bruises! Sometimes, you don't come back at all! Even tonight there's a limp in your step! You always try to hide these things from me, but you can't fool my eyes! What's really going on down there?!”

Phoenix started to grasp desperately. “Nothing! You saw it for yourself: just poker –”

“You're lying!” she screamed, hot angry tears streaming down her cheeks. “Why are there blood stains on your pants sometimes? Why do you smell funny whenever you come and kiss me goodnight? Why can't you let me do this one thing for you?!”

“Trucy, please –”

“Daddy, I love you!”

That final scream did it. It shook him harder than any physical blow and Phoenix found himself at a complete loss, staring shamefully at his hands on his lap. Next to him, Kristoph watched father and daughter trade silences for a good minute, before sighing as he rose to his feet. Murmuring a quiet, “It's late,” he took Trucy by the hand and gently led the poor, heartbroken girl to her bedroom.

“Don't worry, I'll talk to him,” he assured her before bidding her goodnight and quietly shutting the door. Then, steeling himself, he turned to the brooding man on the couch.

“Not exactly the perfect ending to a birthday party, wouldn't you agree?”

“Not now, Kristoph…” Phoenix sighed loudly, tugging his beanie over his eyes so that Kristoph wouldn't be able to see his sorrow. “... How long has she known?”

“I never mentioned a thing, though I believe she doesn't fully know what it is you do exactly.”
He took his place next to Phoenix and expressed no disapproval when the latter climbed into his lap and buried his face in the crook of his neck. Kristoph removed Phoenix’s beanie and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

“Trucy’s a good kid, Phoenix.”

He felt Phoenix nod against his neck.

“I’m just trying to protect her.”

“I know,” he replied, winding his arms around his lover in a comforting embrace. Phoenix always got exceptionally touchy whenever he felt depressed. “But please understand, we’re just trying to help you.”

However, as soon as those words left Kristoph’s mouth, an inexplicable anger gripped Phoenix and he pushed Kristoph away. Hands balling into fists, he kicked himself off the couch and glared down at his partner, a mixture of hurt and rage swimming in his eyes. It further aggravated him that Kristoph could be so calm at a time like this; look at him with that infuriatingly expectant smirk on his lips and a bemused raise of an eyebrow. Was he a joke? Was that what he was to Kristoph? A big, stupid, sorry joke?

“Help? Help?!” He snapped, resisting the urge to kick the innocent coffee table next to him. “If you really wanted to help me, you’d be working to clear my name!”

The smirk on Kristoph’s face was gone in an instant to be replaced with an unappreciative frown.

“Phoenix, we’ve been through this: for seven years I’ve stayed by your side and for seven years I’ve cared for you. Don’t you think I tried?”

The aloof way he said it made Phoenix believe otherwise.

“Why do you always have to sound so cold?”

“Would it make you feel better if I coddled and kissed you; showered you with empty promises?” he countered in the same professional tone he used with his clients. It hurt, but Kristoph had a point. He was sharp and direct that way and over the years, Phoenix has grown accustomed to it. But it still didn't make all the pain and frustration go away.

“If you want to help me, let me work in your law firm or something,” he grumbled bitterly, which didn't go unheard by the blonde who sighed in exasperation.

“If you want to help me, let me work in your law firm or something,” he grumbled bitterly, which didn't go unheard by the blonde who sighed in exasperation.

“Now you're just being unreasonable,” Kristoph commented with a shake of his head. "We both know you lost your badge and your right to practice law. And yet, here you ask me to defy our legal system and make an exception. ”

"You're not trying hard enough!" Phoenix growled, chipping away at his partner's cool exterior.

"And I've told you a thousand times, I have!"

By then, they were both on their feet, equally riled up, though in comparison, Phoenix wasn't doing a good job controlling his emotions or his volume.

“Goddammit, Kristoph! Why can’t you just shut up and support me?!”

“Tell me how I haven’t been doing so for the past seven years, Phoenix,” Kristoph barked, on the
verge of losing his patience himself. “I sponsored the renovation of this office; turned it into a home; helped pay your daughter’s school fees; offered the same for your living expenses. ‘Support you?’ – what do you think I've been offering you since day one?”

“I don't need your money, Kristoph, don't you get it?!” Phoenix cried, tears in his eyes, nearly breaking down. “I need you! I need you to believe in me and what I can do for myself!”

The blonde lowered his voice into a disdainful hiss. “A rentboy? Is that it, Wright? You're proud of that? You're proud of swindling people with your body and making me live with the shame?”

Kristoph had switched to calling him by his last name. He tended to do that whenever he felt the need to distance himself from him and it hurt, now more so than before because it was here where Phoenix needed his love the most. And now that the truth was finally out, with Kristoph revealing his disgust towards him, it felt like a knife had brutally cut open the lie seven years in the making and Phoenix had to deal with the pain and self-loathing alone.

“Kristoph, I'm sorry, but what choice do I have?” he answered sadly, eyes hollow and the smile on his lips empty. “After that whole deal with the forged evidence, no one would believe me; trust me; hire me. All I had was poker and even that wasn't enough to pay the bills. It's not a matter of pride; it’s my duty as a father; to actually be able to do something and do it right.”

He paused momentarily, wondering if his lover was mad at him or had really stopped to listen. Kristoph could be as unpredictable as a storm, so he wanted to make sure. When it seemed like the blonde wasn't going to say anything, Phoenix tentatively continued, his confidence building with every sentence.

“I know you hate what I do – I see the disgust in your eyes whenever you look at me, yet you choose to stay and for that I'm grateful.”

He lifted his gaze to meet those alluring ice-blue swirls he adored so much; tried to ignore the building rage within and his own apprehension.

“But Kristoph, making Trucy work in my place isn't going to solve anything. For the rest of my life, I’ll have to live with my own shame and uselessness. Not letting me work, keeping me away from society… You're not helping me, Kristoph. You're keeping me down.”

And then, it happened: Kristoph moved to strike him and Phoenix whimpered, automatically raising his arms to defend himself. But the usual blow never came and when he peaked nervously, fearfully at his lover, he realised why. Trucy was sleeping in the next room. Come morning and there would be too many questions.

They stood facing each other in complete silence; Phoenix’s heart pounding rapidly from the adrenaline, while Kristoph breathed heavily, slowly lowering his hand to his side as if fighting the urge to go through with the deed. A few locks of hair had come undone from his elegant drill and the corners of his mouth twitched in displeasure. Finally, he straightened up, cleared his throat and in a blink of an eye, the aloof countenance was back.

“I'll never understand you, Wright,” he commented with a flippant shake of his head as he made quick work to neaten his neck ribbon; his suit; his hair and general appearance.

Inwardly – morbidly – Phoenix couldn't help but marvel at his ability to rattle his lover’s perfect composure; let a glimpse of the devil within show through the cracks. In the beginning, when they first made love and he’d seen it, experienced its wrath and had the bruises and marks to show for it, he had been frightened. But for all his obsession with control, Kristoph loved him, stayed with him
through thick and thin and was always so patient, Phoenix learned to deal with it because he felt that was the least he could do in return for the man’s kindness. Also, this side to Kristoph only ever came out whenever he made him mad (and Kristoph never got mad at anyone), so Phoenix figured the fault lied in him.

“I’m sorry.”

The apology seemed to leave his lips so easily, like it was programmed into his brain and when he bowed his head, he realised it probably was.

“As the years go by, I start to understand less of myself; know less of what I once thought I knew. I don’t know what I’m doing; what I’m saying; why I say them…”

The more he talked, the more he saw how unreasonable his previous outburst had been and he felt immensely guilty. It wasn’t Kristoph’s fault. It never was.

He flinched when he felt a hand on his cheek, but it took him a while to realise the act bore no malice. In fact, it was tender and soothing and he found himself leaning into Kristoph’s touch, assured and relieved that he was finally doing something right, that he was pleasing the man he loved and devoutly trusted. Smiling, Kristoph held Phoenix close, continued to stroke his cheek and gaze deep into his eyes with what could only be described as immeasurable affection. Then, he closed the space between them and placed a chaste kiss upon Phoenix’s lips.

“Do I really keep you down?” he asked, breath hot and voice sultry and had to resist a smirk when he felt Phoenix shudder from the implications.

“Kristoph, I…”

But he gasped when the man unzipped his hoodie and pushed up his t-shirt to run his fingers teasingly across his abdomen. It traveled higher and higher; the t-shirt bunched above his chest; and Phoenix let out a low moan when a slender, manicured nail tweaked his left nipple. The finger rubbed and rolled it expertly and it was hard in seconds.

“Phoenix?” Kristoph pressed, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice, a telltale smugness on his lips. “How would I know, unless you tell me?”

When all he got for a reply was another moan, he further pressed himself against the older male and sank his teeth into his neck. The skin broke; Phoenix cried out; and Kristoph began to lick and suck on the wound greedily, possessively; groaning when he tasted the ex-lawyer's blood on his tongue. It gave him a rush to know that he was in control, and Phoenix knew this well.

“What are you – ah!”

He felt Kristoph mark him again just beneath the first bite, squirmed and panted in his arms when hands descended down the back of his pants to pry his butt cheeks apart. Long fingers poked and prodded his hole; a bit of semen trickled out and down his thighs; and Kristoph let out a scoff of contempt.

“It appears I have my work cut out for me tonight,” he commented, roughly shoving two fingers up Phoenix’s ass, twisting and scissoring them mercilessly, generally apathetic towards the other’s protests and general discomfort. Phoenix was already wet anyway, an observation that displeased him rather than brought him pleasure. Another man’s cum on his fingers and marring his beautiful nails… Disgusting. The way he saw it, Phoenix deserved to be punished for this insult.

"N-No, you're too... r-rough – Ngrh! P-Please, it hurts..."
Kristoph bent his head to growl into his ear, “I won't stop until I've reclaimed every inch of you, until I've drowned out the putrid stench of the lowly animal that fucked you, and you will scream again and again for me to fill you. Your mind will know nothing else. Your body will crave no one else. And I will enjoy seeing you on your hands and knees begging for more and for my forgiveness.”

Phoenix blushed from the dirty words that spilled from Kristoph's polished tongue, mortified yet immensely turned on by his brutality. To hear someone so morally upright and cultured speak to him like this... It made him want to please Kristoph in every way possible, just to prove him right.

“K-Kristoph… ah… don't…”

The fingers inside struck and caressed his sweet spot and he momentarily saw stars. Trembling, Phoenix clung on for dear life as the blonde continued to pump his ass, knees weak. More cum flowed out his hole as Kristoph inserted a third finger, spreading him, moving roughly and rapidly inside like he was desperate to clean him out.

“K-Kri… stoph...” he moaned, eyes hazy and clouded with lust.

It felt so good… It always felt good when it was Kristoph who touched him, did unspeakable things to him; and even when it really hurt, his body learned to enjoy it.

Slowly, tentatively, he leaned up to capture the man’s lips in a tender, loving kiss.

“I love you,” he breathed, soft and full of longing. He meant it with all his heart and every fibre of his soul. It was desperate and needy and it filled Kristoph with pride.

“You're mine, Phoenix.”

He felt himself being dragged into the bedroom, stripped of his clothes and forced onto his hands and knees. The last thing he felt was Kristoph entering him roughly from behind and he knew no more as he succumbed to his lover's control.

All was calm and silent in the bedroom; nothing save the muffled sounds of the occasional passing car down along the street. Phoenix himself was halfway in dreamland, his mind and body lulled from the effects of their vigorous and passionate love-making, until the rustling of bed sheets roused him from his half-sluemner. It was dark, but not to the extent that he couldn't see Kristoph slide gracefully out of bed to pull on his pants and button his shirt. Turning to his side, Phoenix propped his chin on his elbow and watched him quietly, longingly, almost sadly. When the handsome blonde turned to leave, he immediately sat up, the blanket sliding down his naked body to pool around his waist.

“Won't you stay?” He pleaded in a quiet whisper, knowing full well that Kristoph heard him.

The man stiffened by the door; Phoenix licked his lips and decided to push his luck.

“I miss you when you're gone.”

He saw Kristoph’s shoulders visibly relax, his own heart fluttering in relief and hope when his lover crossed the room to return to his side. He bent down to claim Phoenix’s lips in a soft kiss, but it was more apologetic than yielding.
“I’m sorry, but I have some things to settle in the office later. Maybe next weekend?”

Phoenix pouted. “But that’s what you said last week! Geez, you’re such a workaholic...”

Kristoph chuckled and leaned in once again to plant an apologetic kiss on his forehead.

“I’m really sorry. I promise, I’ll make it up to you…”

“Tomorrow?” Phoenix finished hopefully. “That's Sunday and we could go to the park –”

“Unfortunately, I'm booked tomorrow... Please don't misunderstand, I'm not avoiding you on purpose,” he quickly added as soon as he saw Phoenix practically deflate from disappointment. “I'm to attend a special ceremony down at the precinct. Klavier’s going to receive his ‘King of Prosecutors’ award and he's been asking for me.”

Phoenix cocked his head at that familiar name. “You mean your younger brother?”

“That’s right - Oh, do forgive me,” Kristoph interrupted himself when he made a certain realization. “I hope there’s no bad blood between you two from that incident seven years ago... I should've been more sensitive.”

“Nah, it's fine,” Phoenix waved off his concern. “Even though we never figured out who actually fabricated that evidence, your brother was just doing his job. He did the right thing calling me out. I never held anything against him, Kristoph.”

“That's good to know,” he said with a smile, ostensibly relieved.

Phoenix couldn't stop staring at him. It was truly amazing how Kristoph could be so sweet one moment, and fiercely possessive the next.

“Um... Kristoph?”

“What is it?”

Phoenix clasped his hands nervously, eyes darting to the side as he struggled with himself. He wanted to ask so badly, but he could already picture Kristoph’s rejection clear in his mind. He had tried; asked many times in the past, but to no avail. It was a selfish request, he knew by default, but still, he wanted to try his luck. Maybe one day, Kristoph wouldn't be so embarrassed by him anymore. Maybe things would finally turn around and they could appear in public together.

“Can I come?”

It came out meeker than he expected and he honestly wasn't in the least bit surprised when Kristoph simply shook his head, like a parent berating their child.

“Phoenix, you know very well the severity of your reputation,” he admonished and Phoenix had no trouble reading between the lines to know that his presence would affect Kristoph’s credibility by consequence. “You'd be under constant scrutiny and I can't be held accountable for people’s actions, whatever they may be. In the eyes of the law and the general public, you're guilty. And need I remind you that majority going are prosecutors?”

“No, you're right,” Phoenix relented with a sigh, sadness clouding his once bright blue eyes, “it's better this way. For everyone.”

Kristoph watched him with growing sympathy. He knew better than anyone of Phoenix’s longing to
return to the local law scene, his desire to go back to the way things were before those seven years of darkness and reclaim his dignity. But time had been long and cruel, and even he could see the flickering flames of hope gradually die in the ex-lawyer’s eyes, despair eat away at his tortured heart. If Kristoph had to be brutally honest, he’d say that apart from Trucy and him, Phoenix ultimately had nothing else to live for.

“Don't talk like that,” he murmured, cupping Phoenix’s cheeks to turn his face to meet his eyes. “No matter what happens or what people say, I'll always be here.”

“You promise?”

“I'll never let you go.”

Moved beyond words, Phoenix reached up to place his hands upon Kristoph’s. At this moment, he felt incredibly lucky. Here he was, at the lowest point of his life, dating the most supportive, beautiful, sensitive genius of his time and he couldn't ask for anything more. Kristoph Gavin loved him. For some strange, wonderful reason, he loved him. A perfect man with a perfect life, who had throes of admirers throwing themselves at his feet, and Kristoph chose him to spend seven years of his life with and counting. He, who had nothing, while his lover had everything. But most of all, Kristoph accepted Trucy – in fact, he loved her just as much as she loved him and Phoenix thought there could be nothing in this world that could make him happier.

Speaking of Trucy…

“Kristoph,” he began all of a sudden, “I've given the matter some thought and I… I think I'll give Trucy and the Wonder Bar a chance.”

Kristoph's eyes widened in honest surprise.

“Phoenix, are you sure? I wouldn't want you to feel like I coerced you into making such a decision.”

“Don't worry, you didn't,” he assured him. “Although I would've preferred you to discuss matters like this with me first, I know you did it because you genuinely care.”

“You're not upset?”

He chuckled, light and honest. “I said I love you, didn't I?”

Phoenix smiled through his laughter and Kristoph knew that he would be ok.

"Of course."

"When will I see you again?" Phoenix asked, voice soft yet ringing with hope.

"I'll let you know when it's convenient. And preferably somewhere less public."

With one last parting kiss and bidding each other goodnight, Kristoph straightened his suit, adjusted his glasses, and left without once turning back to see Phoenix collapse onto the mattress, a sad, lonely smile playing on his soft, quivering lips.

To be continued...
So, I made Olga a sort of sister-figure to Phoenix because I didn't like the relationship the game gave them and I thought doing this would give a huge boost to her character in the chapters to come. Also, I always thought it would be sort of badass if a professional dealer and professional poker player became close friends. Let's just see how it goes.

This chapter was quite emotionally painful for me to write, especially with all the suffering I made Phoenix go through. I've always been a sucker for angst and I wanted to give this seven-year gap a darker spin, as well as give you guys a better idea of the hardships he's had to endure, both for himself and for Trucy. I think this is the most important aspect of a father's love for his daughter, which I feel the game failed to fully convince.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A special thanks to "PierceTheVeils" for your wonderful review and support! Fingers crossed on you sticking around for more. And for those who've read and left me kudos, I really appreciate them too! Enjoy the fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Switching the stove off with one hand while catching the slices of toast that popped out of the oven with the other, Phoenix turned and tipped the scrambled eggs onto a plate along with a generous serving of bacon. Then, he reached out and flipped off the kettle switch; pouring a generous two cups of tea. After setting the table and taking his usual seat on the right, he glanced up at the clock, smirked and took a deep breath.

"Trucy, you're late for school!"

He gave it till the count of ten. Loud footsteps thundered about the house, followed by the sound of a door slamming; and right on cue, Trucy burst into the kitchen, school uniform hurriedly thrown on, her right sock hanging halfway off her foot, and hair a complete disaster.

"Ehhhh?! No way! I could've sworn I set my alarm an hour…” she trailed off, eyes traveling to the clock on the wall.

There was a brief pause; Phoenix’s smirk grew wider; and when Trucy’s brain finally processed the fact that it was 6.30 a.m. instead of 7.30 a.m., she screamed.

"DADDYYYYY!

And then proceeded to punch Phoenix repeatedly on the arm, the latter laughing while playfully fending her off. Trucy pouted; honestly, her daddy was so childish! This was the fourth time this month! Scaring her like this first thing in the morning… that couldn’t be good for the heart.

Suddenly, her nose picked up the tantalizing smell of fried bacon and eggs, and nostalgia seized her. It was like a blast from the past; a dream from childhood buried deep in her unconscious. It shocked her so much, she actually stopped hitting him.

“Y-You… made us breakfast?” she whispered in awe, taking in the rare sight of a proper meal lovingly prepared and laid out on the table; her daddy in an apron smiling at her, looking like he used to when they had their first ever breakfast together as a family. That was seven years ago. The memory was too much for her. She picked up her plate and stared at its contents.

“But we never… eggs…” Trucy sniffed, blinking back tears. “P-pancakes too… shaped like top hats…”

The last time they had breakfast – a proper breakfast – was when she was eight years old. Back then, they had been living on Phoenix’s savings from his days as a lawyer and could still afford certain luxuries, like basic dairy and produce. She didn’t understand the value of money then and would often badger her daddy to buy tons of junk food and baking ingredients so they could bake ‘the
biggest cake in the world’, never mind that every attempt met with failure and progressively less money in his bank account. But Phoenix never complained and continued to spend on her happiness; they did a ton of things together as father and daughter; until reality came crashing down on them, resulting in him having to desperately secure a new job. Although he always did his best to hide his problems from her, Trucy knew there was never a time when her daddy wasn’t struggling to pay off something, be it her books, school fees, the bills, take-out, etc. At first, she wondered why he couldn’t just accept Mr. Gavin’s money; but as she grew older, she began to understand, respect and even admire her daddy’s honesty, strength and noble character. He taught and loved her so much through his actions; and when any of her classmates mocked his status or accused him of being cheap, they tended to find themselves the sorry victims of a series of intricately-designed pranks. Of course, she never got caught – a magician never revealed their secrets… or left any incriminating evidence behind. And speaking of magic, she wondered what sort of miracle allowed her daddy to afford such an elaborate breakfast in the first place; though she could wager an intelligent guess: he probably hit the jackpot with last weekend’s poker crowd.

“Surprise!” said Phoenix as he flashed his speechless daughter a wide grin. “Sorry about the scare, but how else was I going to get you to come down so early?”

When Trucy started to cry, his gaze softened and he reached forward to gently thumb away her tears. He knew how much something as simple as having breakfast together meant to his little girl, especially when she hadn’t had a good, home-cooked meal in years.

“Shhh… There, there, sweetie. Think of it as part two of your birthday present.” Phoenix pointed at a particular smiling pancake on her plate. “See? It’s happy to see you because you’re so pretty!”

Trucy giggled despite her tears, her hand going up to touch her unruly brown locks.

“N-No, I look… terrible… a-and it’s all your f-fault!” She waved her hairbrush at him accusingly and he laughed.

“My bad, my bad,” Phoenix conceded, plucking the brush from her grip. “Why don’t you sit down and eat? I’ll fix your hair.”

The next half-hour was spent in idle conversation. As Phoenix brushed and tied his daughter’s hair, Trucy went on animatedly about her first gig at the Wonder Bar the coming weekend in between spooning some eggs into her mouth. She sounded so excited, so ecstatic, it brought a warm smile to Phoenix’s face and chased away any remaining doubt he had over Kristoph’s plan. Starting young and at the most popular leisure spot in town – it could be good for her; get her name established; secure her iron rice bowl for the future; but most importantly, it was something she loved and he never wanted Trucy to walk down the same path as him.

“And you’d appear right before their eyes; the crowd would go crazy! Oh, oh! And I'll saw you in half and –”

“Alright, alright,” Phoenix interrupted her with a laugh as he pulled out her chair and helped her with her school bag. “Talk anymore and you'll miss the bus. We’ll continue this conversation tonight, ok?”

Trucy pouted and let out the longest, most reluctant “Ok” Phoenix ever heard. She really was excited.

“Oh yeah, Daddy, when are you seeing Mr. Gavin again?” Trucy suddenly asked with big, curious eyes. “I haven't properly thanked him for his help yet.”
“Actually, since I'm off today, he asked me to go down to his office in...” He glanced up at the clock. “Two hours.”

“Huh? That's strange,” she commented with a frown. “Normally, he'd ask you to wait at his house...” she trailed off with a thoughtful pout. “But you know what I don't get? Why does he want you over all the time even when he's not in? It's your day off! You should be having fun!”

Phoenix laughed and patted her on the head. “He's just overprotective. Don’t worry, he means well. Besides, the most ‘fun’ thing I want to do today is rest.” And with that, he gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Go on now. Have a good day at school.”

“Take care, daddy!”

She returned the kiss and performed her usual morning routine, bounding over to the piano. Staring up at an old photograph of a pair of magicians – a dark, stern-looking man and a beautiful, mysterious woman with kind eyes – she allowed herself a wide smile. “Morning, papa, mama! I'm going off now!”

Phoenix stood behind her, eyes trained on Trucy’s late-mother with her long, flowing sandy-brown hair; a pair of gold bracelets around her wrists. She was elegant, gorgeous and it was a no-brainer where Trucy got her good looks from. And speaking of Trucy, she was still staring at the photograph, an unreadable expression on her face. Placing his hands on her small shoulders, he bent down and lowered his voice to a sensitive murmur. “Do you miss your mother?”

“Honestly, I don't remember her. She died shortly after I was born,” Trucy replied, only to shake her head with a fond smile. “But there hasn't been a day when I don't miss her. Papa said she was amazing though.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think he was right.”

There was a brief pause, Trucy gathering her thoughts before she tugged on Phoenix’s sleeve to get his attention. Her eyes were sad, an expression he thought didn't suit her.

“Daddy... Why did papa leave me? Didn't he love me anymore?”

A pang went through Phoenix’s heart and he quickly pulled her into a protective embrace. How could he tell her? He wasn't too clear on the reason himself. Zak Gramarye had his daughter help stage his disappearance following the unfavorable outcome of his trial, without taking Trucy with him, something Phoenix himself failed to understand until this day. Of course, a country-wide search had taken place – the man’s guilt more or less established through his actions – but Zak Gramarye was never found and no one heard a peep from the famed Gramarye heir until this day. He had taken the troupe’s secrets presumably to his grave and left his only child and daughter with nothing but his short-lived legacy and the burden of his shame.

“I'm sure he had an extremely good reason, sweetie. And it's definitely not because of you. Your papa loves you, more than you can ever imagine.”

Trucy sniffed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “H-How do you know?”

Phoenix laughed his usual laugh, the one that sounded so wonderfully carefree, the one that never failed to lift her spirits whenever she felt down; made her feel that everything was going to be fine.

“I'm your father; I know everything.”
At that, Trucy smiled and hugged him tight. It was enough for her.

**I’m a dead man walking.**

Bag slung over one shoulder, a set of folders tucked precariously under an arm and a slice of toast in his mouth, Apollo dashed across the road, jumped and slid over the bonnet of a car that had applied its brakes at the very last minute, and turned a sharp corner around a block of flats before a bunch of angry drivers could get out of their vehicles to curse him to kingdom come. But he wasn’t in the right state of mind at the moment to process the fact that what he just did was plain suicidal. No, all he could think about was that he was exactly nine minutes late, his boss was going to kill him, and he’d receive a cut in his salary for the second time this month.

He seriously regretted downing all those shots at the party last night.

Oh sure, it was an honor following Kristoph around as he introduced him to the various faces that made up their country’s legal system; stressed the importance of networking and knowing future opponents; but when it came to his boss’ brother… Apollo didn’t know where to begin. Perhaps ‘chaotic good’ was the best description for Klavier Gavin; the two brothers couldn’t be more different. Both shared a similar strive towards perfection, no doubt about that, but in completely different fields. While Kristoph prided himself in his ability to present a solid, flawless case in court, all Klavier seemed to be interested in was his (horrible) taste in music. In fact, the guy talked more about his band’s latest single and upcoming concert than his accomplishments in court. It baffled him how someone so reckless had received the ‘King of Prosecutors’ trophy at all. Then again, there was something about Klavier’s overly-friendly demeanor that rubbed Apollo the wrong way, but for the sake of his boss, he had remained cordial. After all, this was the guy who faced off against Phoenix Wright (at a young age of 17 no less!) and effectively brought the man’s law career and reputation to an abrupt, tragic end. He supposed blood really ran thicker than water and genius ran in the Gavin name. Still, he didn’t trust the guy. Plus, he owed it to Mr. Rockstar Prosecutor for giving him the worst hangover of his life.

As a dozen scenarios played in his head – a majority centered around Kristoph firing him for his nine minutes of tardiness, and by extension, resulting in said man missing his usual brew of Darjeeling being served to him at exactly seven minutes after 9 a.m. – Apollo failed to notice an oncoming passerby until he, quite literally and painfully, ran into them.

BAM.

They crashed noisily onto the ground; the folders a scattered mess on the pavement; papers flying. Apollo sat up with a groan, rubbing his forehead which no doubt had a bruise forming by now. Latest update in the Journal of Justice: he was 15 minutes late and it was time to look for a new employer. Boy, did he hate Mondays.

“God, I so sorry! I swear I didn’t see you and… Huh?”

Apollo paused, staring at the small objects that got innocently mixed in with his papers. Playing cards? He picked up one and turned it over. It was the Joker.

Suddenly, someone moaned in front of him and he immediately scrambled to his feet, offering the person a hand without a second thought. Everything was going wrong today; and he was panicking.
too much to really focus on the person in front of him apart from the fact that their baggy clothes, slippers and brightly colored beanie made them look like – for lack of better description – a hobo.

“Are you alright, sir? I… Uh… I'm really sorry! P-People say I have a thick skull and two left feet, which would make me a pretty terrible dancer, but that's not the point – I'm not the point. You're the point. Well, uh… my point is –”

The man laughed, which stunned Apollo to silence. Normally, people would get pretty mad and annoyed at him by now; start cursing and lamenting the stupidity and hopelessness of the youth of their time; but this stranger just… laughed. And it wasn't the mocking sort either; it was an absurd, charming little laugh; had bright things in it originating from a bright passionate mouth. It told of wonderful things said and done; promised wonderful things yet to come; and carried an inherent excitement that Apollo found difficult to forget and resist.

“Uh… my point… my point…” he fumbled and the stranger laughed again, accepting Apollo’s hand as he rose to his feet.

“No worries, kid.” He flashed Apollo a teasing smirk. “Mondays. It happens to the best of us.”

He then proceeded to help pick up the scattered pieces of paper and his cards, and Apollo never felt more grateful for the distraction because he was pretty sure he was blushing crimson like the shade of his suit.

Despite his sloppy attire, the stranger appeared to be in his early thirties and was handsome; darkly alluring; a strange and slightly awkward combination between the bad boy and sleazy guy-next-door type. It was almost impossible to tell the sort of body the man had beneath the thick, shapeless layers of his hoodie; but he had a finely chiseled jaw; sharp, attractive features; soft cheeks and even softer looking pink lips; and remarkably unblemished fair skin, which surprised Apollo because it didn't seem to suit his careless appearance and slight stubble. In fact, his entire face didn't suit his sloppy outfit. Not that it looked bad or awkward, rather it seemed to betray his natural fair countenance, like a geisha who was forced out of her kimono and into common everyday garbs. There was a sad beauty about him; an underlying gentle meekness originating from his tentative body language and smile. The only other thing that Apollo didn’t get was that ridiculous-looking beanie on the guy’s head - ‘PaPa’? He certainly hoped it was all part of the design, otherwise its implications were just borderline disturbing. Then again, it wasn’t any of his business.

As he watched the stranger bend down to pick up the papers, Apollo saw a small golden locket dangle from around his neck and couldn’t help but be overcome with the sudden urge to open it and see what lay inside. It took him a few seconds though, to realise he had been shamelessly staring, at a completely ordinary man no less, and he wondered why.

“H-Here, let me,” Apollo stuttered as he helped the man retrieve his cards along with his workplace documents. All the while, the man never said a word, only continued smiling that amiable smile of his and Apollo blushed when their fingers touched as the stranger handed him his folders.

“You work at ‘Gavin Law Offices’?” asked the man.

“Yeah,” Apollo answered, only to catch himself. “Wait, how did you know?”

“Relax, kid.” He indicated at the folder’s company logo with a nod of his head. “It’s no mystery.”

“Oh.”

The man chuckled and leaned forward teasingly. “If I knew they were hiring errand boys, I
would’ve submitted an application.”

“I’m not an errand boy! I’m a lawyer!” Apollo fumed and the stranger pulled back, giggling behind his hand.

“Sca-ree… Well then, I won't keep you,” he murmured, low and sultry; flashing Apollo a flirtatious smile. “See you around, lawyer-boy.”

Apollo blushed. The stranger turned to leave, a sway in his gait and against his better judgement, Apollo took a step forward and called out to him.

“Wait!”

The man stopped. Apollo approached him and held out the card he had picked up earlier.

“You missed one,” he said, but frowned when the stranger made no move to take it from his fingers. Instead, the older male simply stared at the card, before lifting his gaze to smile at Apollo mysteriously.

“Do you know what’s the Joker’s role in poker?” he asked out of the blue.

“Uh… Sorry, I'm not familiar,” Apollo replied warily with a nervous frown. “I never played poker before.”

A look of surprise flashed across the stranger’s eyes, but it disappeared as soon as Apollo saw it and he wondered if his eyes had been playing tricks on him.

“Well, in some games, it has no role or function at all – it does nothing; changes nothing; doesn’t exist; it’s as good as useless,” said the man, as he reached out and held Apollo’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, lifting it so that their eyes met.

“But… in other games, it's a trump card. It's wild. It has the ability to change a player’s fate; tip the scales in their favor; turn things around.”

“Sir…?”

Smirking, he released the flustered young lawyer and tucked the card into the front pocket of the latter’s suit.

“I’ll let you hold onto it,” he whispered, held Apollo’s gaze a little longer, before walking away as if their meeting never happened.

Snapping out of his reverie, Apollo quickly turned to catch a glimpse of the mysterious poker player, but he was gone, the only evidence of their encounter being the red Joker card which peeked out from his pocket. He couldn’t get the stranger and his words out of his head; the sound of his thrilling laughter; the memory of that temptatious smile; the sound of his thrilling laughter; the memory of that temptatious smile; but the main thing he couldn't stop thinking about were his eyes. They were a beautiful, mesmerizing blue; the color of September skies; lonely and distant like a waterfall; and Apollo couldn’t shake off the feeling that he had seen those eyes before.

“I'm very sorry, Mr. Gavin! It won't happen again!”
Apollo bowed, low and deep, eyes trained on the ground. His posture was tense and his face had lost a considerable amount of colour. At his desk, Kristoph never once averted his eyes from the latest case file he was reading. He brought a cup of tea to his lips, sipped on it elegantly, before returning it to its saucer.

“See to it that it doesn't,” came his cold response, which Apollo had learned to interpret as his boss being gracious and quite possibly in a generous mood. It was when Kristoph delivered patronizing comments with a smile when things got really dangerous.

“Yes, sir!”

“Please consolidate these latest reports.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Oh, and Apollo?”

“Yes, sir?”

He flashed the brunette a wide, pleasant smile.

“You might want to lower your volume indoors. It would do my patience and your career a great benefit.”

Apollo gulped. “Y-Yes, sir…”

_Yup. Definitely not hot on that smile._

Returning to his small setup by the window, Apollo plopped onto his chair and breathed – as quietly as he could – a sigh of relief. _Thank God._ Any longer under Kristoph’s scrutiny and he would have peed in his pants. However, he wondered what was behind his boss’ uncharacteristic leniency. Kristoph didn't dismiss him like he feared, much less threatened to cut his salary, and even went ahead with brewing his own tea! Something was amiss and unlike any normal person who would just accept their luck and call it a day, Apollo was consumed by an inexplicable desire to know the truth. Maybe it was his lawyer instincts kicking in, or he was just having a really weird morning. His hand unconsciously moved to touch the Joker card in his front pocket.

Speaking of weird mornings, that strange hobo on the street still invaded his thoughts. Try as he might, he couldn't get his mind to focus on his work and often found it drifting to the stranger's amazing laugh and hypnotic blue eyes; his cryptic words a constant source of frustration and intrigue.

‘Who is he?’ he wondered to himself for the third time that hour, refusing to believe that their meeting had been the result of pure chance. And why did those eyes look so naggingly familiar?

“Oh, yes, Apollo,” he heard his boss call for him from across the room. “I'm expecting someone shortly. Would you please prepare him something to drink?”

“Is he a new client, sir?”

“No, nothing of the sort,” replied Kristoph, not once betraying the slightest bit of interest as he made a quick note in his papers. “He’s – how shall I put it? – a close friend.”

Suddenly, the sound of the main door opening got their attention and Kristoph checked his watch with a pleased hum. “Ah… Right on time. My faith in humanity is restored.” There was a knock on the office door; someone was going on and on about something; and he called out with a bemused
smirk, “Come in.”

The visitor stepped into the room, closed the door behind them, but didn’t once stop talking.

“...really don’t get why you want me here on a Monday morning on my off day. You better have a good reason, Kristoph, or I’m –”

“AH!”

Apollo jumped out of his seat and pointed accusingly at the newcomer. Those baggy clothes; that lazy drawl; that PaPa beanie. It was destiny, albeit a cruel one.

“YOU!”

The man turned to blink at him innocently, though it was obvious he took no surprise or offense to Apollo’s careless address.

“Hey, lawyer-boy,” he played along, feigning innocence, though his voice took on a seductive tone.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were following me.”

Apollo openly bristled. “As if! You're the reason I was late!”

But the man didn't appear to be listening as his eyes darted about the room idly, distractedly; hands casually stuffed into the front pockets of his grey hoodie; and Apollo had a sneaking suspicion he was pulling this flippant act on him on purpose just to annoy him. The temptation to punch some sense into this guy’s head proved exceedingly hard to ignore. Why did Mr. Blue-Eyes have to be so irritating?

“Apollo, you should stop pointing and yelling at our guest so much,” interrupted Kristoph politely with a smile, “or I might just change my mind about your salary this month.”

Eep.

The man laughed – whimsical, open and carefree – just the way he did when Apollo first met him and the brunette felt his heart race. He didn't know why, but it made him all flustered to the point he forgot all about his initial anger towards said man himself.

“Aw, go easy on the kid, Kristoph,” said the stranger with a teasing grin. “He wasn't that far off from the truth.”

“So, you do know each other,” remarked Kristoph with a delicate raise of an eyebrow, folding his arms. “How quaint.”

The way he said it however, was clear indication that it wasn't so quaint after all. Sensing the brewing storm within Kristoph, the stranger hurriedly took it upon himself to explain, throwing in a few laughs and grins to ease the mounting tension.

“We just crashed into each other along the way here – quite painfully, if I might add. Nothing to get your panties in a knot.”

“Was that all?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much.”

Kristoph visibly relaxed at that and Apollo nearly fell over from shock when the former approached the blue-eyed man to take his hand gently in his. He saw the man give a start, a light blush staining
his fair cheeks, a shy smile adorning his lips; and couldn't help but feel both awkward and... a little jealous of his boss.

“I'm relieved,” said Kristoph, that single expression conveying volumes in a way that only his companion understood.

“You worry too much,” his partner replied, voice hushed and tender; eyes knowing. “I came here for you, didn't I?”

“You're right, that was foolish of me,” Kristoph conceded, mood improving significantly as he led his companion to the nervous brunette standing awkwardly by his work corner.

“Apollo, allow me to introduce a dear friend of mine,” he began, nudging the hobo forward. “This is Phoenix Wright, my confidant of seven years. Perhaps you've heard of him. His advice is impeccable and he's helped me a great deal in some of my past cases.” Kristoph paused, shooting said man a charming smile. “If not for him, I wouldn't be where I am today.”

Phoenix blushed, embarrassed by the sudden attention and wholly flattered.

“Kristoph, you give me way too much credit,” he said.

“I give credit where credit's due,” Kristoph replied. “Plus, it is my hope that you'll offer your experiences to Apollo in the future, if need be.”

As the two men continued to exchange light conversation, even mentioned Apollo’s name a few times, Apollo himself unfortunately, wasn't quite paying attention. In fact, his whole mind had pretty much self-imploded from the extreme shock and disbelief associated with the sudden, heart-stopping, paralyzing knowledge of the stranger’s true identity. He couldn't have heard it right. Phoenix Wright. Holy shit! And he'd thought that guy was just an ordinary hobo! All those years of watching old court videos on repeat; keeping his old textbooks just to gaze at his idol’s portraits for hours on end; relentlessly trawling through the Internet for clues to Phoenix’s current whereabouts and theories surrounding his sudden disappearance; studying his tactics and reading everything he could about him; knowing everything he could about him; hoping, praying, wishing his hero would return one day… And now, Phoenix Wright was standing right in front of him. There. Right in front of him. Real. Alive. Albeit disappointing and anticlimactic, but screw the shabby wardrobe and stubble. What mattered was that Phoenix was here within his literal grasp, and he wasn't crazy for believing in the impossible. This was so surreal, he would've jumped out the window to check if he was dreaming, except that if it wasn't a dream, then dying as soon as he came face-to-face with his idol would really suck. Was his tie alright? His breath? Maybe he should have spiked his hair more. What if Phoenix talked to him? What would he say? Oh, wait... they already talked, hadn't they? Argh! And he'd choked! ... It didn't matter. Phoenix Wright. Here. Hah! Take that, Clay! In. Your. Face.

“Apollo!” Kristoph raised his voice, which pulled Apollo back to the present moment. Unfortunately, the shock prompted him to say the first thing that entered his mind.

“A-Apollo Justice is fine and ready to go, sirs!”

That effectively blew Phoenix’s beanie off his head and made Kristoph sigh loud, long and torturous. He already felt a headache coming on and it wasn't even halfway into the day yet.

“Apollo Justice,” he introduced to Phoenix with ostensible reluctance and poorly concealed impatience, “my employee and... understudy.”
Incredibly flustered, Apollo bowed low and deep.

“I-It’s an honor, Mr. Wright! Meeting you is like, the highlight of my career and… and… I really love how you bluff your way through court all the time!”


“Well, I love his enthusiasm,” remarked Phoenix.

“He’s a huge fan,” explained Kristoph simply, “the shock must have gotten to his brain. He’s usually more eloquent.”

“A fan, huh?” said Phoenix as he closed the gap between himself and the brunette. Apollo eyed him sheepishly and Phoenix giggled, gaze tender. “It's been a long time since I heard something like that… Thank you.”

It was a shy, grateful whisper; sentimental and lonely, and Apollo thought it was beautiful.

Kristoph cleared his throat. “Apollo, you might want to offer Mr. Wright a drink?”

“R-Right!” he stuttered, meeting Phoenix’s smiling eyes. “Can I get you anything, sir?”

“Please, just Phoenix is fine, even Nick,” Phoenix answered hastily, not at all accustomed to such formalities. Besides, it made him feel 10 years older. “And grape juice will do.”

Apollo cocked his head questionably. Grape juice? Well, that was unexpected. The last time he himself drank that stuff was when he was a kid.

“We have a crate of grape juice in the back room,” said Kristoph absently, already having gone back to his work.

*We do?*

“It's just next to the Chardonnay. Note the labels; we wouldn't want to mix them up.”

*We have wine too?*

“Grape juice. Ok! Coming right up, Mr. Wright!”

Phoenix opened his mouth in a bid to correct him, but Apollo had already sped off. Apparently, the kid hadn't heard a thing he said apart from grape juice. He sighed. Oh well; time to embrace his seniority he supposed.

“He hasn't handled his first trial yet, hasn't he?” he observed with a teasing grin, to which Kristoph rolled his eyes behind his papers.

“How can you tell?” came his sarcastic reply; then he lowered the case files and motioned Phoenix over with a finger. The latter casually perched himself on the desk and Kristoph placed his hand on his thigh.

“You haven't figured out why I called you here today, have you?”

“If I did, I wouldn't have come,” Phoenix replied bluntly, but there was laughter in his eyes.

“Valid point,” returned Kristoph with an affectionate smile, “but I wouldn't have let you miss this
either way. I'm inviting you to join me for lunch.”

Phoenix stared at him dubiously. “What's the occasion?”

And then, Kristoph surprised him by tugging him forward by the front of his hoodie to claim his lips in a demanding kiss. Phoenix’s eyes flew open; Kristoph chuckled and with a final peck, pulled away, but their lips remained a mere breath apart.

“Welcome to ‘Gavin Law Offices’, Mr. Phoenix Wright,” he breathed against the ex-lawyer’s lips. “If there's anything you need – anything at all – I'll do everything I can to support you in your darkest time. You're not alone.”

Those words resonated within Phoenix’s memory and caused his breath to hitch. His chest tightened from all the emotions he was experiencing and he had to bring a hand up to his mouth to hold back his sobs, touched beyond measure. Seven years ago, Kristoph had stood at the end of the office walkway, arms folded and smile assuring; now, he was less than a breath away and part of every aspect of Phoenix’s world. He wrapped his arms around his lover’s neck, pulling him into a tight embrace.

“You remembered,” Phoenix mumbled against his boyfriend’s cheek, shaking from happiness.


“It does, doesn't it?” giggled Phoenix, a sentimental smile on his face. Though what truly filled his heart with joy was the fact that Kristoph wanted to be seen in public with him. Hope fluttered in his chest; perhaps his years of wishing and waiting were finally paying off.

“I've been thinking of what you said last weekend,” began Kristoph, “and I realised we've not gone anywhere together for some time. So, allow me this privilege of treating you to a wonderful lunch. I booked a table at Gatewater Hotel’s Restaurant – and if anyone has a problem with the way you dress, I'll speak with them personally.”

“Kristoph?”

“I hope this makes up for my behavior last Saturday, though I seek your kind understanding that we have to do this in the middle of a work week. I'm –”

“Kristoph!”

“Hm?”

Phoenix rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Just shut up and kiss me.”

And with a chuckle, Kristoph did just that.

Apollo looked up from his laptop for the third time that minute to stare at Phoenix who was lounging lazily on the office couch, nursing a bottle of grape juice in his hand. After finishing the glass Apollo prepared for him earlier, he had wandered into the backroom to grab a new bottle without bothering about a glass this time. In fact, the bottle he now held in his hand was the second one. Apollo had never seen anyone drink so much grape juice in under 20 minutes, much less enjoy it so much.
Phoenix drank it like it was water and Apollo couldn't help but wonder about the implications of the older male’s health.

His eyes took in his idol’s shabby attire in a whole new light. Phoenix Wright – proud, successful hero of his time – dressed in old, worn-out hand-me-downs; unshaven; disposition careless; unconcerned of his appearance; lazy; the lively spark gone from his blue eyes that were now dull and hazy from fatigue. The Phoenix he was seeing now hovered between untouchable and a grave disappointment; it was worse than he feared: the ex-lawyer had not only fallen from grace, but appeared to have lost all will to climb back up. The longer he looked at Phoenix, the more he started to eat his own words about said man’s comeback, and the sadder it became to simply sit aside and watch the tragic nightmare further play out before his eyes. It was conflicting: Apollo felt like he was staring at both his idol and a total stranger. It was distinctly Phoenix, yet it wasn't.

He didn't know why, but every time he looked into Phoenix’s eyes, he saw immense pain behind the smiles, smirks and laughter. It didn't feel like he was pretending though; rather, he did all that because they were the only things he knew how.

Then, there was Kristoph. All this time, his boss had known where Phoenix was hiding; what he did for a living; that he was still here; but never once breathed a word. Seven years of undisclosed friendship, intimacy; and Kristoph wasn't even upset when Phoenix decided to crash on the leather sofa with his slippers on until lunch break. Apollo couldn't stand all this secrecy. What sort of relationship did the two of them share? And why did he get this feeling that his boss didn't want him around?

He was too absorbed in his thoughts that he failed to notice a looming presence over his shoulder.

“Hey –”
“Argh!”

He gave a start, jumping out of his chair.

“Don't do that!” he screeched, whirling around to face his tormentor, hand over his rapidly beating heart. “And yes – can I help you?” He ground out through clenched teeth, already predicting Kristoph’s displeasure from his outburst and mad at the very guy responsible for it.

Phoenix offered him a blank stare and just when Apollo thought he wasn't going to say anything, he shrugged noncommittally. His subsequent speech was delivered in a drawl.

“Nothing… Just wondering what you've been typing for the past few minutes.” He shot the brunette one of his teasing smirks. “It sounds like you’re trying to murder your keyboard.”

Apollo spluttered, “I just – type… very loudly!”

“Ah… I'm bored…” Phoenix sighed. He pretty much ignored Apollo really, as he leaned forward to rest his chin on the kid’s shoulder.

“So… What’cha doing?”

Apollo desperately fought down the blush on his cheeks; but Phoenix was so close… He could feel the man’s stubble lightly graze his cheek; his breath on his skin; the warmth of Phoenix’s body against his own. From the corner of his eye, he saw his idol smirk and he had the sinking feeling it wasn’t because he read something particularly funny on the screen.

“C-Consolidating evidence,” he explained, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the screen and not
wander to the very distracting man hanging off his shoulder. “Though it'll really help if I knew all the
details of each case…”

“And you don't?” remarked Phoenix bewilderedly. “Boy, you're more hopeless than I thought. And they let you practice law…” He trailed off with a pout.

“I-It's not like that!” Apollo hissed, his gaze darting quickly to Kristoph who didn't seem to have heard him, before returning his attention to the pouting man. “It's just… these are all Mr. Gavin’s
cases and he never keeps me in the loop. I don’t get to follow him to the detention center. I don’t get
to participate in his investigations. All I have are the charges made against his clients and a list of
evidence that I can't further contribute to.”

“Because you don't know what you're supposed to be looking out for?”

“Exactly.”

Phoenix frowned as he glanced up briefly at his lover. He didn't understand how Kristoph's mind worked sometimes. Honestly, how was the kid going to ever handle his first case without getting any hands on experience?

“... Apollo, right?” he tested that name on his lips.

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Maybe I can help you. We’ll start with something simple… Ok, take a look at this blood sample,”
he indicated on the screen, enlarging the image and pulling up its details. “DNA test results show that
it belongs to the victim from the scene of the crime. Your aim is to prove your client innocent.”

“Won't evidence like that make things worse for my client then?” asked Apollo, honestly confused.
His question however, made Phoenix smile.

“That's right,” he replied, “but remember that evidence is evidence, no matter how incriminating it
may be for your client. Your duty as a lawyer is to find out the truth. Ask yourself questions: if my
client didn't do it, then how could the victim have died? If it's really the victim’s blood, how did it
come about? Could there have been other external factors? Underlying causes? An accident?”

Apollo nodded frantically, gaze intense and never once taking his eyes off Phoenix. Mentally, he
was taking notes, humbled by the very prospect of being taught by the man he had idolized since
childhood. And it wasn't just because he was star struck – a lot of things which Phoenix said made
perfect sense and he was starting to see what he was supposed to be seeing. And so, the more the ex-
lawyer taught him, the more he learned.

“Right, so I should make a note on the evidence to get the victim’s updated autopsy report; check for
abnormalities in the blood; and check the victim’s health records for possible illnesses?” Apollo
clarified excitedly, eyes big and shining.

“Looks like you're getting the hang of it,” said Phoenix with a wide grin. “In the future, be it
assisting Kristoph or handling your own cases, always remember two important things – he held up a
finger – always believe in your client – he held up a second finger – always seek out the truth.”

He reached, placed a hand on Apollo’s shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Let these principles be your guide, and you'll be fine.”

“Got it!”
Phoenix chuckled, his gaze soft and kind, while Apollo blushed from the attention, fumbling over the other evidence. ‘He really is cute,’ Phoenix thought to himself as he watched the kid work, taken by how incredibly earnest he was. Just being with Apollo, feeling his warmth and burning passion from his honest smiles and assuring presence… it filled Phoenix with an emotion he hadn't felt in years, so much so that he didn't quite know what it was. But what he did know, was that he liked it. For a moment, his life seemed brighter. For a moment, Apollo helped him forget.

“I do hope I'm not interrupting anything,” said Kristoph all of a sudden as he watched the pair from his desk, bemused. “But, I think you just made Apollo the happiest man in the world. I'm almost jealous.”

Phoenix gave a sheepish laugh. “I'm just helping the kid out. Feels good to get back in the game even if it's only paperwork.”

His eyes were sparkling with so much glee, Kristoph couldn't help but be affected by his partner's overwhelming happiness. It tugged at the corners of his mouth and allowed a sweet tenderness to enter his ice-cold gaze – something only Phoenix and his inherent innocence could do.

Suddenly, his cell phone rang and he quietly excused himself to the waiting room to take the call. That left Phoenix and Apollo alone – the former still as thoroughly bored as ever, while Apollo was doing everything in his power not to jump his idol and screw everything up. After all, being in the same room at such close proximity to the man he not only admired and respected, but also secretly masturbated to, really made for one awkward moment.

“So… What're you doing now?” Phoenix broke the awkward silence.

He was sitting on the edge of Apollo’s desk in the same manner he did on Kristoph’s, except that the brunette’s workspace was comparatively smaller and he had to push aside a stack of folders to make room. Apollo watched him for a brief moment before letting out a loud, miserable sigh.

“Actually, I was going to do some record keeping, before you swiped all those files onto the ground…”

“Oops.”

Another sigh, this time one of resignation.

“It's fine, Mr. Wright.”

Apollo bent down and proceeded to pick them up, but paused when he felt one bump against his forehead. Arms full of folders, he looked up curiously at Phoenix who grinned at him, only to grow irritated when said man kept nudging the thing against his forehead in a childish manner.

“Thank you,” he said through clenched teeth, hoping his annoyance didn't show. Everytime he gained a shred of respect for this guy, Phoenix would do something to bring it back down to baseline.

Rising to his feet, he accepted the file. However, as soon as he extended his arm, Phoenix’s hand shot out and grabbed his wrist so tightly, his fingers splayed open and he dropped the folder.

“M-Mr. Wright?! What's wrong?”

But Phoenix wasn't paying attention. Instead, he was too focused on a certain accessory around Apollo’s left wrist. It was a thick gold bracelet with peculiar designs etched onto its surface; gleaming innocently under the light. A dawning horror entered Phoenix’s eyes; so shocked was he
that his grip around Apollo’s wrist started to shake. He hadn’t noticed it before, but now that he did, it became impossible to shake it off as mere coincidence. He recognized this bracelet; saw it every morning for the past seven years that mistaking it would be a crime onto his eyesight and memory itself; but the implications didn’t make sense. After all, why would a normal, lawyer-in-training with completely no relation to the Gramaryes, be wearing one of Trucy’s late-mother’s bracelets?

“This bracelet.”

“Huh?”

“This bracelet,” Phoenix repeated, this time more firmly. “Where did you get it?”

His heart was pounding so hard, he could hear his blood rushing loud and fast in his ears. The design and engravings were too similar and specific; and to see it emerge now after all those years meant something. He just didn't know what exactly.

“Um… I don't really know,” Apollo answered hesitantly as he struggled to recall something from his memory. “I've always had it for as long as I can remember. Even the director said that I was already wearing it when she took me in.”

“Director?” Phoenix echoed.

“Yeah, I'm an orphan.”

His heart skipped a beat and a sense of urgency flooded his eyes.

*Seven years. Seven years and I finally have a lead.*

“Listen, Apollo, I—”

“Is anything the matter, Phoenix?” interrupted a familiar voice, soft and smooth as silk.

Phoenix immediately released Apollo’s wrist and whirled around to face his boyfriend, a sweet and innocent smile plastered on his face.

“Oh, Kristoph! No, nothing really,” he said with an evil grin as he turned his head slightly to regard Apollo from the corner of his eye. “I was just teasing your understudy for wearing jewelry to work.”

“It's an accessory!” Apollo snapped.

“Potato tomato.”

“As much as it pleases me to see you two getting along so well,” Kristoph interrupted coldly as he turned his attention to his nervous employee, “Apollo, I need you to pick up my item from Astoria Dry Cleaners. It's ready for collection.”

“Now, Mr. Gavin?” Apollo asked with a hint of reluctance.

“Did I imply otherwise?” Kristoph returned with a patronizing smile.

As soon as Apollo left the office, the sound of his footsteps receding into nothingness; Kristoph’s smile disappeared and he whirled around to backhand Phoenix painfully across the face. It happened so quickly, Phoenix didn't even see it coming. He crashed onto the carpeted floor, whimpering and nursing his bruised cheek; dared not look at his lover who loomed dangerously over him.

“After going through all that trouble of arranging lunch, and you still can't stop whoring yourself…”
“It’s not like that – urgh!” Phoenix cried out when Kristoph kicked him in the stomach. Coughing, he curled into himself protectively.

“Nor can you stop lying it seems.”

Adjusting his glasses, Kristoph bent down to observe his whimpering, shaking lover before reaching down to pluck the beanie off Phoenix’s head and pull him up by the hair. The latter clung onto his wrist as he continued to cry and protest, but resisting only made it worse; Kristoph’s grip on his hair merciless; so he went along with it and struggled to his feet. However, the blonde refused to release him.

“P-Please, Kristoph,” Phoenix begged, “it’s not like that! I was only teasing… I didn't… We didn't… Not Apollo!”

“Is that so?” said Kristoph in a way that clearly indicated he was far from convinced. “Well then – he forced Phoenix onto his knees right in front of his crotch – prove it. As you know, evidence is everything.”

When Phoenix failed to act immediately, Kristoph tsked in open disdain and turned away. His posture was guarded; his voice cold and heavy with disappointment.

“As I thought,” he muttered, “all my years of tireless sacrifice and kindness… And what do I get?”

Phoenix crawled towards him, tears in his eyes. “No, Kristoph… Please! Don't!”

“An inconsistent, ungrateful whore who'd launch himself at the nearest cock he sees.”

“Please, stop! I'm not –”

“Do you know how much you've hurt me, Wright?”

Phoenix immediately stopped screaming. The way his lover uttered those words… it sounded so pained and it cut through his heart; hurt him deeper than anything Kristoph ever said to him. With his lover’s back turned to him, Kristoph seemed so far away, like the time he had first stepped into this office, like it was the start of his seven years of darkness and pain all over again; and Phoenix didn't want to go back. The only crime Kristoph ever committed was love him and he felt like such a fool. He should have been more attentive; sensitive; grateful; appreciative… Why couldn't he do anything right?

“No…” he pleaded, his voice coming out in a desperate whisper; reaching out to grasp thin air. “Kristoph… Kristoph, I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you… I don't want to hurt you…”

Slowly, meekly, he approached the stoic man and wrapped his arms around his waist, hugging him from behind. No reaction. Phoenix buried his face between his lover's shoulder blades and sobbed.

“Please… Please don't hate me. Please don't leave me… I love you.”

A brief pause, before Kristoph turned around to face him and Phoenix felt his heart flutter in hope and relief. When he felt thin, soft lips descend upon his lovingly; felt Kristoph smirk against them as he led him into his private room; Phoenix simply let him, all thoughts of Apollo, that bracelet, his pleasant warmth, bright eyes and shining smile; forgotten.
Apollo stumbled into the office and threw the sparkly, frilly dress across the sofa with a vengeance. The first time he dropped it off at the dry cleaner’s, the woman at the counter had given him a weird look, but otherwise said nothing; when he went back to pick it up, the same woman shot him a cheeky grin and he spent a good five minutes explaining that it wasn't his; stuttering, red-faced and all. He wondered whom it belonged to though; Kristoph said he was doing a friend a favor and the sudden thought of Phoenix in it gave him a nosebleed. Then again, it looked too small for him, though Apollo didn't know if that made him feel relieved or disappointed.

“Mr. Gavin, I'm back!” he called out, but silence greeted him; nothing but an empty office.

‘Strange,’ he thought to himself, ‘it’s not lunch break yet…’

That was when he saw Phoenix’s beanie lying innocently on the ground and picked it up with a dawning sense of trepidation. He even realised that the window blinds were down – something which normally didn't happen.

Something’s off.

“Mr. Gavin? Mr. Wright?”

Suddenly, he heard a series of strange, muffled noises coming from his boss’ private room. They sounded like a man’s voice and whoever was making them seemed like they were in pain. Apollo’s heart hammered in urgency.

“Mr. Wright…?”

The door was ajar and Apollo tentatively peeked into the room, only to let out a quiet gasp. In the center on a small leather sofa, were Phoenix and Kristoph; the former stripped naked, legs spread shamelessly while Kristoph moved rigorously on top of him. Phoenix’s body was covered in angry red love bites – marks which Apollo failed to notice before underneath the layers of the man’s thick hoodie. Whether they were old or new, he didn't know; but he could also make out a few scratches and yellowish patches here and there, a telltale sign of healing bruises.

“N-Noooo…! Ha… Kristoph… no more… If you hit it any harder, I'm going to…!”

Mr. Wright…

His idol’s lewd moans weren't helping; and just watching Phoenix get brutally fucked into the sofa was hotter than any fantasy he'd ever imagined. The sight of his beautiful, temptatious body; his hard, dripping cock slapping against a chiseled abdomen; the saliva pooling from his mouth and eyes wide open in rapture – it was pure sin and Apollo relished every moment of it.
With shaky hands, he unzipped his fly, pulled out his member and supporting himself against the wall, dark eyes fixed on his long-time crush and hero, he stroked himself. All the while, he imagined, *wished* that cock pounding relentlessly into Phoenix’s pink puckered hole was his; the name his idol was screaming out, his; those love bites made not by Kristoph, but himself; longed to shove his tongue past Phoenix’s soft pink lips and drink up every moan and desperate keen like precious nectar.

Apollo moved his hand over his cock harder, faster; panting from the pleasurable stimulation. He wanted Phoenix. He wanted him so bad, for so long...

“*Mm… Mr. Wright… ’*”

“*K-Kristoph… s-stop! It's too much…*”

Kristoph bit into Phoenix’s neck; blood trickled down fair skin and stained the beige cushions a deep red. Phoenix was crying. Apollo thought his tears were beautiful.

As Phoenix clung on and let his lover have his way with him, a sudden flash of red from the corner of his eye caught his attention. Amidst the haze of lust, passion and heat, through the gap between door and wall, he saw Apollo staring right at him. Immediately, he felt his heart leap to his throat, fearful of the repercussions; the displeasure Kristoph would no doubt feel if their relationship got disclosed (and honestly, Phoenix didn’t know if his body could take anymore beatings for today). But then, he noticed how red the kid’s face was, how short and sharp his breaths were coming out from his parted lips; saw his hand wrapped around his hardness, desperately pumping it in time with Kristoph’s thrusts, tip leaking with so much precum, it unconsciously made Phoenix’s mouth water.

He wanted a taste.

The kid’s gaze was dark and passionate, heavy with desire and the way his lips moved as he silently moaned his name, sent a pleasant tingle straight to Phoenix’s groin. *What’s happening?* He never experienced anything this powerful before. The fact that Apollo stood a mere five meters away from them and was shamelessly fapping to thoughts of him, fueled Phoenix’s lust. The way the kid looked at him – purposely looked right at him – and his voyeuristic tendencies was incredibly sexy. Apollo was obsessed with him. It was so open, so passionately honest, it made Phoenix feel special, wanted and painfully desired – something he hadn’t felt from any of his clients or Kristoph in a long, long time.

*Apollo…*

When Kristoph suddenly stopped to turn his head in the direction his lover was looking at, Phoenix had no idea what came over him when he purposely grabbed the blonde's face to pull him into a demanding kiss. All he knew was that Kristoph couldn't find out his understudy was there; and he would go on pretending it was his lover’s cock that he was enjoying instead of his fantasy involving a certain loudmouth, hot-blooded lawyer watching him from behind the door.

It was an effective distraction.

Apollo went on uncaught; Phoenix continued watching him, his own breathing growing heavy, his every gasp and moan a secret encouragement for Apollo to do more. When the kid finally hit his climax and spilled his seed all over his hand in a quiet moan, Phoenix simultaneously shut his eyes, pulled Kristoph tight against him and with a scream, came all over his chest.

A few more thrusts and Kristoph finished inside him. With a satisfied smirk, he brushed aside Phoenix’s bangs to place a loving kiss upon his forehead and the ex-lawyer shuddered from both the
pleasure and his own guilt.

It was the first time Phoenix came to the thought of another man, and what truly scared him was that Apollo never even touched him. Not even close.

*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Ok, this is the last time I'm making Apollo fap to Phoenix, I swear lol.

And so, the plot thickens along with the drama. Forgive me if the pace is slow, but I promise we're getting to the action soon enough.

What I mainly wanted to achieve through this chapter was to show the complexities of Apollo and Phoenix's feelings, such as their confusion and repressed desires, especially for Phoenix who doesn't even know what he's feeling anymore after years of Kristoph's conditioning. Anyway, there's a fine line between love and lust, devotion and obsession, and the relationship these three men share with and between each other will eventually contribute to future events and propel the story forward. Also, like I mentioned in the prologue, I wanted to push the whole hero worship idea further (and give myself an excuse to write some smut).
Chapter 4

Thank you for the comments, kudos and 170 hits.

No warnings for this chapter, but this is where things start to get interesting. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phoenix stopped coming to ‘Gavin Law Offices’.

At first, Apollo thought he fell sick or something, but when three days passed and it was now already Thursday and there was still no sign of Phoenix, he started to grow anxious. Kristoph mentioned he wanted Phoenix around to guide him – had he changed his mind? Had Phoenix changed his mind? Things didn’t help when he recalled the memory of said gorgeous, naked man watching him masturbate as he made love with his boyfriend of seven years. Apollo had allowed his desires get the better of him and for that he felt ashamed. Was Phoenix disgusted by him? Creeped out perhaps? There was really no avoiding the idea of a crush at this point; then again, no crush was as unhealthy as what he felt whenever he was confronted with thoughts of Phoenix Wright.

As a child in an orphanage, void of parental affection and guidance, yet like most kids; Apollo grew up with tales of valor and bravery, of heroes up against titanius challenges, victorious against all odds. The characters in his books were extraordinary men, destined for greatness, immortal; but they were only fairytales and as he grew older and watched the happy faces of the other children getting adopted, he stopped believing in them. That is, until he picked up the morning papers on the orphanage doorstep one fine Monday and saw Phoenix Wright’s photograph for the very first time. From then on, his whole world changed.

He still remembered the date clearly: 3rd August 2016. It had been Phoenix’s court debut in a murder trial (Harry Butz? Larry Butz?) and despite his status as a greenhorn, had managed to deliver his defense flawlessly and with admirable confidence. That was also when Apollo was first exposed to the lawyer’s would-be infamous bluffling tactics – an unorthodox, albeit slightly questionable technique, but it was different and Apollo found the blend of cunning and queer, fascinating and oddly charming. Back then, 24-years-old was considered exceptionally young, even for a rookie, so much so that Phoenix had risen up the ranks and popularity charts, as well as posed a common feature on the front page of various publications; affectionately dubbed by the media and public alike as ‘The Turnabout King’.

From then on, subsequent trials were followed mostly by success and Apollo enthusiastically, loyally followed every single one. The way Phoenix always managed to turn even the most unfavorable cases around, made the impossible possible, and showed that the underdog could emerge on top – he was a real life hero; Apollo looked up to him, and when he was old enough, he actually obtained a ticket to watch one of Phoenix’s trials with his own two eyes. It was the one with Shelly de Killer: Phoenix had been willing to forego justice for friendship and it was there in the gallery where Apollo learned that not everything was in black and white; the truth wasn’t always pretty; the law had its limits; but trust went a long way. There was more to trials than winning; and even when Phoenix had lost that case in paper, Apollo was convinced that his hero was amazing.

After that trial’s drama, he had nervously approached his idol in his middle school uniform, blushing;
autograph book in hand. He shyly asked for the man’s autograph, his voice as quiet as a mouse back then, and thought his hero wouldn't notice him. But when Phoenix actually disregarded the reporters in favor of signing his book, complete with a sweet smile and an encouraging message; innocent admiration turned into a full-blown crush and Apollo had fallen head over heels.

That was eight years ago. He doubted Phoenix remembered him, but he certainly couldn't forget.

"Hello? Earth to Apollo! Come in, Apollo!"

Someone waved a hand in front of his face and he jerked back in surprise. Then, he remembered he still had his spoon from his sundae in his mouth and hurriedly removed it.

“Sorry! Wait – what were we talking about again?”

Clay facepalmed and released the longest sigh ever known to mankind.

“Forget it. I was only asking if you wanted to watch me train for my upcoming HAT-2 launch for like, the third time.” He paused to sip his milkshake. “So, what’s on your mind? You've been quiet all evening – he made a face – It's fucking weird.”

“Nothing much,” Apollo replied with a shrug as he stirred his half-melted sundae, his mind wandering off again. “It's just that Mr. Wright hasn't come in since Monday and the last time I brought it up to Mr. Gavin, he asked if I had a problem understanding the word ‘privacy’ and nearly threw a dictionary at me.”

Clay spat out his milkshake.

“Woah, woah! Rewind and freeze – Wright as in Phoenix Wright?!”

Apollo blinked with honest surprise. “You mean I didn't tell you?”

“Oh, sure, you told me. I just like freaking out over stuff I already know because I like people to think I’m completely crazy – OF COURSE YOU DIDN'T, YOU BASTARD!”

Clay threw his straw at his friend and Apollo immediately recounted the events of Monday in extensive detail, minus the part where his boss and Phoenix were going at it like bunnies in a bloody law firm. The act still embarrassed him after three whole days and at the same time, left him feeling exceedingly bitter. So what if he had only been 13 years old? It was petty, unreasonably selfish and he knew it was his own jealousy talking, but he saw Phoenix first.

“Well I'll be…” Clay slapped himself on the forehead, nearly pushing his visor off his dark unruly hair. This was madness!

“Seven years – that's… that’s…” And then he started snickering. “Please don't tell me you went full fanboy mode on the poor guy.”

Unfortunately, Apollo didn't quite share his amusement.

“Not quite,” he replied as he tapped his spoon on the table with impatience, a contemplative frown on his face. “I don't know, Clay. He's… To put it generally, he’s not exactly what I hoped for.”

“Well, seven years really changes a man, Apollo,” answered Clay, matter-of-fact. “Not to mention, a single moment was all it took for him to lose everything he’d worked so hard to achieve. You said you'd wait forever, right? Just give him time to climb back up again.”
Apollo ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. He didn't expect Clay to understand what he was going through; the raging emotions swirling in his chest. Clay hadn't seen Phoenix, not the way he had; and frankly those hollow, glazed over eyes and empty smiles continued to haunt him well into his unconscious. There was barely any trace of his hero left and whatever remained was hardly enough to be chalked up as cautious optimism or hopeful in the slightest.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Phoenix – the old Phoenix – who had proudly signed his autograph book along with a message which read: “Good luck in law school! Pass that bar exam and see you soon in court. You'll be fine!” But that memory seemed more distant than a dream and just seeing what his hero and long-time crush had become, a mere shell of his former self, made Apollo wonder if the Phoenix he met nine years ago even existed or if it had been a mere figment of his imagination. His hero was getting further and further away from him, and the pain of Phoenix’s sorry state mirrored the pain Apollo felt in his heart. He wanted to help him, would fly to Phoenix’s side in a heartbeat, but he didn't know how and he wondered if he would even be needed when Phoenix had Kristoph to count on.

“That's the problem – I don't think he wants to climb back up! Heck, I don't even know what he does or what he's been doing for a living!” Came his answer as he slammed his fist onto the table; shaking his head. “I don't know, Clay… I don't know if I can go on believing in someone who can't even believe in himself.”

Said man fell silent, unsure of what to make of his friend’s cynical disposition. Hearing Apollo talk like that; giving up on his idol after years of persistent devotion – it was like the world had gone topsy-turvy. The abrupt change was almost ridiculous. In the past, Clay had begged his best friend time and time again to give up on his silly little crush and blind faith. Now, when Apollo actually appeared to veer towards his opinion, Clay felt terrible, apprehensive, and longed to eat his own words at the sight of his best friend’s sorrow.

“Apollo, don't say that,” he admonished gently as he reached out to squeeze the brunette’s arm. “You know, meeting your idol is pretty awesome. Not many people get to do that for their whole lives!”

When Apollo started to smile a bit, Clay went on, “You told me you believe he's innocent, and I can bet you all the stars in the galaxy that you're the only one who truly does. Gavin’s got nothing on you… maybe except your pay cheque.”

“Clay…” Apollo warned jokingly.

“My point is: imagine living seven whole years in darkness. Nowhere to run. No one to trust. Out of options, save the will to survive. He needs support, Apollo. Your support. You just need to continue believing in him, so he will find the strength and confidence to believe in himself again. Don't give up.”

“But –”

“You're fine!”

Apollo jumped from his friend’s outburst. Clay rubbed his nose with a cheeky grin. “Right?”

Slowly, a smirk inched it's way across Apollo’s lips and it didn't take him long to get back to his old self again. He stood up, clenched his fists in determination and shouted at the top of his voice. “Right! Because my name’s Apollo Justice and I'm fine!”

“That's the Apollo I know!”
They burst into laughter, never mind that the other patrons in the sweet shop were shooting them annoyed glares. Apollo could always count on his best and childhood friend to give him a good smack whenever his spirits took a nasty beat-down, just like how Clay could always count on him whenever he felt alone. Although he wasn’t able to comprehend the immense devastation Clay felt when he lost both his parents in an accident, Apollo understood the pain of having no family to call his own. He grew up in an orphanage; Clay grew up in a loving home. To suddenly lose all that at a young age of 13 and struggle to pick himself up again – it was a feat greater than waking up every day to the same loneliness and dark walls. At least there were other kids in the orphanage. In a way, Clay was stronger than him and as a result, probably understood the tremendous loss and suffering Phoenix had and still was going through better than anyone.

“So, are you going to find him?” asked Clay all of a sudden, to which Apollo returned with a grimace.

“Haven't had any luck with that, I'm afraid. The only person who knows anything is Mr. Gavin, but I seriously doubt he'd be happy to share information about his boyfriend with another guy.”

“Why not? You're his understudy, aren't you?”

“... Possessive.”

“Ah. Those types.”

“Yeah. Like I said, no one’s seen Mr. Wright for years and suddenly, he appears in the office on Monday because of a lunch date.”

“That's strange, don't you think?” Clay commented after some time. “I mean, someone so famous dating someone so... well... infamous – and nobody knows a thing? What, has your boss locked him up for the past seven years or something?”

As Clay snickered at his own joke, Apollo forced a smile, but couldn't help but feel disturbed by the implications. After working for Kristoph for almost four months and witnessing his possessiveness on Monday, it certainly wouldn't surprise him if theory indeed proved true. He recalled the numerous love bites all over Phoenix’s fair skin; the bruises he wasn't so sure, but unless his idol had a tendency of getting into fist fights, he seriously didn't like where, or rather whom their source pointed to. Then again, Phoenix could be into stuff like that and he could be reading too much into it.

The two friends shrugged it off.

“Nah-/ Nah-”

“Jinx! You're paying!”

“Fuck!”

Apollo smirked. Clay dug out his wallet and grumpily made his way to the cashier.

As Apollo happily finished his last spoonful of ice-cream, he spotted a familiar figure emerging from between two blocks of flats across the road on the opposite side of the street. If it had been any normal person, he wouldn't have paid them any heed, much less notice them, but this man’s distinct, trademark spiky hair successfully grabbed his attention. He only knew one person with hair like that and he almost pushed back his chair and ran across the street in his excitement, but stopped when a tall gentleman came up behind the spiky haired man to wrap his arm around his waist. Apollo saw the smaller man jump slightly from the contact, but otherwise shot his companion a tentative smile; and under the glow of the streetlights, Apollo’s suspicions were confirmed: it was indeed Phoenix
Wright. But his date definitely wasn’t Kristoph Gavin.

His beanie was gone and he appeared to have shaved, making him look 10 years younger and more like the man Apollo once respected and desperately admired. He saw the ex-lawyer gracefully shrug off his thick coat and actually sputtered from the sight of his attire underneath. Phoenix had traded his hoodie and baggy sweatpants for something far more indecent: a black, off-shoulder see-through blouse of a provocative, feminine cut which drew attention to his pert nipples underneath; tight leather short-shorts that ended just below his ass; high-cut black heel boots; studded earrings and a metal-and-chain choker. The entire outfit was slutty; dark makeup donned his eyes and he had gloss on his lips. If not for his hair, Apollo wouldn’t have even recognized him. Phoenix looked stunning, sexy, gorgeous...

The gentleman’s hand moved from Phoenix’s waist to dip past the waistband of his shorts. Phoenix simply let him, encouraged him even, and Apollo watched the man lead the both of them into a nearby apartment. The whole scene stunned him so much, he didn't even sense his best friend’s incoming presence.

“Your damn sundae’s more than half the total bill! And who the hell eats ice-cream in winter… Apollo?” Clay paused in the middle of his rant and approached the silent attorney worriedly. “Apollo,” he repeated, “are you ok?”

“... Yeah. It's nothing.”

Apollo turned his gaze away from the apartment entrance. He felt sick.

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Not here… Not here either...

A pile of folders tipped over and crashed noisily onto the floor. Someone cursed. The room was dark, shadows playing tricks with the eyes; save a single beam of dim light from a portable torchlight. A dark figure scrambled to set the objects in order, before moving onto the next section: a small setup by the window, desk littered with nondescript papers and law books. The figure smirked; figures the kid was messy, or he just had a really unique organizing system.

They sifted through the contents.

No… No… No… Nothing.

Next location. The figure moved to a towering bookcase against the wall.

It has to be here somewhere...

The lights suddenly came on. The figure jumped, ended up tripping over their own feet and crashed into the shelves. A few thick volumes landed on their head and someone else winced.

“You make a pretty lousy cat burglar, Mr. Wright,” commented the newcomer dryly.

With a groan and pushing the books aside, Phoenix sat up and held his throbbing head in his hand. When the room stopped spinning, he slowly looked up at his unexpected companion for the evening.

Apollo stood by the office entrance, arms folded and expression a cross between bemused and
suspicious. He was dressed down in a pair of casual jeans, sneakers, a white t-shirt and a dark red jacket with its sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It gave him a stylish, youthful edge and actually made him look his age compared to his red suit. Phoenix also noticed that Apollo was staring at him, specifically at his groin which was emphasized by the tight, unrelenting material of his shorts. His outfit really didn’t leave much to the imagination and with a shy blush, Phoenix closed his legs.

Upon realizing he had been shamelessly staring (and drooling), Apollo crimsoned and awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Um… Uh… W-Who let you in?”

Phoenix’s embarrassment disappeared at the young lawyer’s fumbling. His blue eyes sparkled with something knavish, and he gracefully, sexily rose to his feet, approaching Apollo with a slight sway in his hips. He saw the kid’s resolve crack fast, saw the beginnings of desire enter his dark brown eyes, and didn’t bother hiding his smug leer. Wearing his heart on his sleeve like that – the kid really was easy.

“Looks like you caught me, officer,” Phoenix teased as he sidled up Kristoph’s desk, crossing his thighs. The move made the shorts ride up and gave Apollo a generous view of his long, shapely legs in the process.

When the kid eyed him, wary and confused, Phoenix winked.

“So, whatcha gonna do with a bad boy like me?”

“Stop fooling around!” Apollo snapped.

The pain in his voice rang true. Didn’t Phoenix have any idea how much his dressing, the way he spoke and shamelessly carried himself, hurt him? Then again, with the way the guy kept smirking at him, taunted him with his tasteless flirtations, Apollo supposed he didn’t. Yes, he wanted Phoenix, but not like this. _Never_ like this.

“You disappear for three days and I find you here in the middle of the bloody night!”

“Aw… You missed me.”

“Shut up!” he seethed, grabbing Phoenix by the front of his blouse. “Why are you here? How did you get in?”

That infuriating smirk remained. When Phoenix opened his mouth to answer him, Apollo released him with an aggravated sigh. He was wasting his time.

“No, forget it. You probably broke in. Pretty fitting for a dishonest guy like you.”

He missed the sad expression that entered Phoenix’s eyes, or pretended not to care at all. The ex-lawyer mumbled something, but it was too soft for Apollo to catch it.

“You disappear for three days and I find you here in the middle of the bloody night!”

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“Come again?” he clarified as he went to collect his laptop from his work station. Whether it was a good thing he had forgotten to take it home earlier, he honestly didn’t know.

“I’m innocent,” repeated Phoenix, this time louder and noticeably frantic. “My case… I’m looking for my case.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” said Apollo with a frown as he looked up from his packing. One moment, Phoenix seemed to enjoy pissing him off; the next, he sounded so pitiful and looked
close to tears.

“If you're referring to that fake evidence charge, you never had a case. You were immediately disbarred after Zak Gramarye’s trial, remember?”

“He, I may be older than you, but I'm not that old,” Phoenix openly bristled, insulted. “I know I never had a case. I was referring to Kristoph’s private investigation.”

His answer made Apollo stop and stare. The brunette blinked slowly, incredulously. Why was this the first time he was hearing about this?

“Private investigation? Mr. Gavin?”

“He spent seven years looking into the forgery on his own,” Phoenix explained, “but he eventually gave up because the culprit left no loose ends. I was hoping to take a look at his findings. Maybe he overlooked something.”

‘Gave up? That doesn't sound like Mr. Gavin at all,’ Apollo thought, feeling strangely unsettled.

“All records go through me, Mr. Wright,” he explained with a shake of his head. “There's no such thing.”

However, his response failed to alleviate Phoenix's distress. If anything, it made things worse.

“No… No, that can't be right!” Then he paused as if realizing something. “You probably don't know about it. It's private after all. Kristoph… Kristoph wouldn't lie about such things. He'd never lie to me.”

“If you're so sure about that, then why not ask him yourself?!” Apollo fired in return, his anger and annoyance rising.

Kristoph, Kristoph, Kristoph… Frankly, it was starting to get really sickening. If Phoenix loved and trusted Kristoph so much, why did he have to go through all that trouble of sneaking around and breaking into his boyfriend’s own office? Why not ask him himself? Why did he need to go around whoring himself? Why couldn't he stop seeing Kristoph wherever he looked? Why couldn't Phoenix ever see him?

Phoenix fell silent, unable to dignify that with an adequate response. Apollo knew he was definitely hiding something… and the way those blue eyes kept sneaking quick glances at his bracelet made him feel uneasy. What the hell was Phoenix’s deal with his bracelet?! He recalled the man’s startling reaction on Monday and unconsciously hid his left hand behind his back. The worst thing that could happen was for him to find out his idol was secretly a kleptomaniac too.

“D-Do you know Trucy?” Phoenix asked all of a sudden, catching Apollo off-guard.

“What? Who?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

Phoenix dropped the subject as soon as he brought it up. The cryptic questions and remarks were seriously grating on Apollo’s nerves. On one hand, it enticed his curiosity; on the other hand, he would rather not know. The way things were now; how unbelievably messed up Phoenix’s life was; it was probably best not to get involved. After all, he didn't know if his heart could handle anymore disappointment.
However, the way Phoenix looked—his teary gaze, tentative naïveté, and sorrowful disposition—made Apollo’s heart soften and he quickly found himself giving in.

“Look,” he began after a moment’s hesitation, feeling sorry for the ex-lawyer, “if it's anything private, it's probably in Mr. Gavin’s desk drawer…”

“…”

“…”

Fuck.

“Wait, don’t!”

Too late. Phoenix dashed to said location and Apollo threw himself after him, wrestling the older male onto the ground. If Kristoph found out someone had messed with his personal stuff on his watch, he was as good as f*cked (fired). Fortunately for him, killer heels didn’t make for very good mobility and subduing Phoenix proved less of a challenge than he initially feared.

“Let me go! I need those files!” Phoenix growled, struggling against Apollo, but the kid was stronger than he looked.

“There aren't any files!”

“You don't know anything!”

“Sir –” When Phoenix elbowed him in the cheek, Apollo held his wrists down and tugged him forward. “Mr. Wright, stop it! Even if they do exist, it's been seven years! Why are you suddenly so eager to look at them now?!”

“Ah!” Phoenix cried out in pain and Apollo immediately released his wrists out of concern. There were rope burns around them, violent gashes of red against pure, soft white; and upon closer inspection, around his neck and thighs as well—raw, fresh and disturbingly distinct. There was so many of them… and the way their redness blossomed around the skin was clear indication that Phoenix had resisted until the very end.

“Mr. Wright?” Apollo’s voice shook, eyes wide in horror. “How did you…?”

But when he tried to touch him, Phoenix flinched away, acting as if nothing had happened.

“It's locked,” he said bluntly, indicating at the bottom-most drawer with a nod of his head, “open it.”

His voice was cold. Apollo was this close to telling him off, but held back his temper in favor of teasing the truth out of him.

Let’s just see where this goes.

“I can't. It's installed with a very specific lock mechanism and Mr. Gavin’s the only one with the key—And don’t even think of picking it,” he interjected as soon as he saw Phoenix stick his fingers into the pocket of his shorts. “If you break it, we’re both screwed.”

He turned around to grab his things.

“Go home, Mr. Wright. I'll see you at work tomorrow—”

“You believe me, don't you?” interrupted Phoenix all of a sudden as he took a step forward.
Apollo paused, barely registering the question. “Excuse me?”

“That I’m innocent,” Phoenix clarified, his desperation returning. “You believe I’m innocent, don’t you?”

At that moment, Apollo felt the pressure of the situation weigh heavily on his shoulders, couldn’t help but feel cornered in which whatever answer he gave, no matter which side he took, would result in a vain setup for his own downfall. Clay’s words continued to echo in his head; the memory of his encounter with a younger Phoenix refused to leave him alone; and now, there were these horrific scars on top of all the bruises he had witnessed three days ago. Exactly what was going on between his boss and Phoenix behind closed doors? Bedroom kinks were one thing, but even that had its limits, right? Or was it something else? He suddenly remembered that stranger leading Phoenix into his apartment and wondered if such arrangements happened often… then again, if Kristoph and Phoenix shared a normal relationship, none of this would have to happen.

“... Does he hit you?”

Phoenix stiffened at the question and that reaction was enough for Apollo to draw his own conclusions. It didn't take a genius to read between the lines, analyze what hadn't been said, to know that Phoenix couldn't run to Kristoph and that his lover, in terms of the famed forgery, had abandoned him along with everyone else. He longed to believe in Phoenix’s innocence, but growing up made Apollo realize that things weren't so simple, that the law wasn't so simple, and faith could be easily displaced.

“Evidence is everything,” Apollo found himself emulating his boss and watched as the hopeful light in Phoenix’s eyes gradually diminished

“What?” came the disbelieving whisper.

“You heard me, Mr. Wright. Evidence is everything,” he reiterated with conviction. “I can't help you if you’ve nothing to show for your innocence.”

“But do you believe me?” Phoenix insisted.

Apollo hesitated, “Well… Yes...”

“Then isn't that enough?”

Apollo was visibly torn. Phoenix closed the space between them and held the kid’s face gently between his two hands. The gesture was initiated without a second thought and it felt far too intimate to be anything but an affective expression between lovers – at least, that was what Apollo secretly wanted to believe.

“What made you become a lawyer?” asked Phoenix in a kind whisper.

“You,” was what Apollo wanted to say, but realised he lost that reason a long time ago. Disillusioned, he remained silent. Phoenix however, took it as a cue to go on.

“You know, at the start of each round of poker, all players are required to place a bet,” he began with a mysterious glint in his eyes and a sly smile playing on his lips. “It's called an ‘ante’. That's why there's always risks when a player decides to fold, but an amazing payout if they win. The same goes for life.”

Apollo felt those fingers trail down his neck to tug at his tie, bringing him closer, and he gulped. Those gorgeous blue eyes held him prisoner and he was powerless against their charm.
“Everything has its risks, even the truth. If you don't make the first move, nothing will change and for the rest of your life, you'd be chasing shadows.”

Apollo shook on the spot from the impact of Phoenix’s words. He’s asking for my help. But could he really bring himself to forego his mentor’s trust and work behind Kristoph’s back? Because that was essentially what Phoenix was begging him to do. It wasn't right – he knew it wasn't – and yet, the idea of being the one to actually save his hero from that great injustice done unto him from seven years past, seemed far more appealing than any promotion or recommendation his boss could throw at him.

As he contemplated his position, Phoenix watched him with an opportunistic gleam in his eyes. Now he was getting somewhere. It was no secret how the kid felt about him and he’d be a fool to allow this chance for redemption to slip past his fingers. Admittedly, taking advantage of someone wasn't something he felt particularly proud of, but there was just something about that bracelet that told him his luck was changing. He had fallen too far to be above cunning and deceit; and after Kristoph lost his temper the last time he begged him to resume his private investigation, it hurt to sleep on his back for six weeks. Phoenix needed an alternative. He couldn't do this alone and now, he found the perfect replacement.

Now, for the final icing on the cake...

“It appears my lawyer needs a little motivation,” he commented with a playful leer as he ran his fingers across Apollo’s thigh.

He moved closer; stroked and squeezed. Apollo crimsoned when he felt those skilled fingers move higher, dancing around his crotch. They pressed against the zipper of his jeans, lingered there, provocative.

“S-Sir?”

He squeaked when Phoenix pushed him onto the desk and blushed when he felt a sudden weight on his thighs. Phoenix climbed onto Apollo’s lap, straddling him; pressed his body flush against the younger male’s chest and caressed every inch of him tenderly, like a temple maiden who worshipped her god. Then, he leaned in to breathe against Apollo’s ear, low and sensual; his lip gloss shimmering under the pale moonlight.

“So, what do you say, Mr. Justice? Everything has a price and I'm willing to give my all.”

With a well-placed moan, he ground his hips against Apollo’s for emphasis. But instead of the flustered reaction he expected, Apollo pushed him away. Phoenix stumbled back a few paces, shock registering clear across his face. It was the first time in a long while someone actually rejected his advances, and out of all people, he certainly didn't expect it from his adorable, hot-blooded fanboy.

“Get out,” Apollo growled, livid and dangerous.

When Phoenix made no move to leave and continued to stare at him bewilderedly, Apollo pointed at the door and raised his voice.

“Get out!”

The surprise on Phoenix’s face gradually gave way to a wry smirk and he shut his eyes in resignation. Perhaps he gave a little too much.

“As you wish.”
With a low chuckle, he brushed past the young lawyer and confidently sashayed out the office. The door shut with a soft ‘click’, leaving Apollo alone in the silent office to his thoughts. Shaking his head in frustration, he crossed the room in long strides to his desk to grab his laptop, only to pause when his gaze landed on an old newspaper cut-out of Phoenix Wright on his bulletin board. Apollo reached out to lovingly trace the picture’s outline, stared at his hero’s smiling face a while longer, before bowing his head to finally let the tears fall.

The man he had grown up to respect and admire, he realised, proved no more real than a fairytale.

“What the heck took you so long?” Clay grouched at the building’s entranceway as he kicked off the wall he had been leaning against for the past half hour.

Apollo ran up to him, doubling over to catch his breath. “Sorry, sorry!” He gasped and wheezed, hand flying to his heart.

Yeesh, he seriously needed to hit the gym. For all this office’s class, it could really use an elevator.

“Just some last minute things I needed to take care of.”

“And you didn’t think of calling first? I was waiting out here in the cold like some–” but Clay stopped abruptly as soon as he got a good look at his friend’s face, softening his tone in concern. “Hey, you ok? Your eyes are all red…”

“It’s nothing.” Apollo answered hastily and Clay dropped the subject in favor of conserving his friend’s pride.

“Oh yeah, some weird hooker dude wanted me to pass you this.” He fished a slim disk from inside his coat and handed it over with a shrug. “Said something about helping your case… Woah!” He clapped Apollo on the back as soon as he realised the implications behind those words. “Hey, your first client! Congrats! See? Told you it was only a matter of time!”

You said no such thing, you ass, Apollo was half-tempted to remind Clay, but decided against wasting his breath. Nine years of friendship taught him as much.

“For your information, that ‘weird hooker dude’ is Mr. Wright and no, he’s not my new client,” he muttered and was about to demand Clay to toss the damn disk into the nearest trash bin, when the latter suddenly shouted.

“Wright?!” Clay’s eyes bulged comically. Apollo was suddenly reminded how dramatic his childhood friend could be.

“As in the Phoenix Wright? That Wright? The OBJECTION! Phoenix Wright?”

“Yes…” Apollo ground out through clenched teeth, growing increasingly annoyed – not at Clay, but how his friend seemed to be unconsciously reminding him about his disgust and disappointment with said ex-lawyer.

“Oh,” Clay mumbled lamely, rubbing the back of his neck. “He was kind of hot…”

“Clay Terran!”
“What?! He was! I’m not gay… but he was!”

Apollo chose not to dignify that with a response. As usual, Clay was missing the point entirely.

“Mr. Wright approached me regarding that case from seven years ago – the one that got him disbarred… He wants my help.”

“So help him!” Clay exclaimed, frustrated and at the same time, hopelessly confused; nearly tugging his hair out. “This could be that ‘big case’ you've always dreamed –”

“I refuse to help a whore like him!”

Apollo’s sudden outburst shocked Clay so much, the young astronaut actually took a nervous step back and stared at his friend with wide, disbelieving eyes. The young attorney was visibly shaking, his fists clenched tight by his sides. His brows were knotted and a fire borne from betrayal and rage burned bright in his hazel eyes. At that very moment, Clay knew the cause of Apollo’s tears.

“It's like you said, Clay: seven years changes a man,” said Apollo, looking away as he struggled to force down his hurt. His tone had gone quieter; considerably grave.

“I can't continue believing in a guy like him – inconsistent, cheating, a complete slob…” he trailed off sadly and it sounded like he was holding back a fresh wave of tears.

Finally, he gave into the doubt that he persistently denied over the years, yet continued to haunt him; a popular claim that he never thought he'd ever hear himself say: “For all we know, he could have really forged that evidence. After everything that's happened, I honestly wouldn't rule out that possibility anymore.”

They swapped silences for a whole minute: Apollo despondent and Clay gradually feeling the hopelessness of the situation as well. There was only so much he could do as a friend. Perhaps there was some merit in Apollo giving up his silly crush and childhood hero for good; after all, it was time to grow up.

“Maybe you're right. Plus, we both watched the trial and that cool young prosecutor even said he got a tip about Wright’s forgery,” added Clay as he fiddled with the slim disk between his fingers. “Guess you won’t be needing this…”

He was about to flick the thing into the trash when Apollo’s hand suddenly shot out to pluck it from his fingers.

“Hey! What gives?! I thought you said –”

“What did you say just now?!” Apollo demanded urgently, leveling Clay with his eyes. There was a brilliant spark in his gaze, the kind that indicated he’d just figured out something.

“Uh… That you were right?”

“No, after that!”

His hearthammered in urgency. Why hadn’t he seen this before?

“A cool prosecutor got a tip about the forgery?”

Apollo grabbed a confused Clay by the shoulders and shook him. The dark shadows on his face had disappeared to be replaced with a wide, excitable grin. It made Clay wonder if his best friend was
secretly bipolar, and was admittedly a little worried.

“Exactly! Where do you think he got that tip from?”

“Uh… The police?” answered Clay blankly, to which Apollo facepalmed. This guy… Then again, mysteries were never Clay’s forte: astronauts didn’t really need much brain power in space.

“No, you idiot. There were only three people who knew the details of the case before it entered court: Zak Gramarye, Mr. Wright, the forger and – assuming Mr. Wright’s innocent – a fourth person: the forger’s real client. All are likely suspects, until you consider that tip-off.”

Clay stared at him helplessly as he made weird confused sounds. Apollo meanwhile went on.

“Unless Zak Gramarye and Mr. Wright had a death wish, I doubt they would sabotage their own defense.”

“Meaning…?”

Apollo sighed. “You wouldn’t tell the prosecutor handling your trial you forged your own evidence, would you?”

“Ohh…”

“Which leaves the forger and their client –”

“Assuming,” Clay interjected, “there really was a fourth person involved.”

“I don’t know yet,” returned Apollo honestly. “But I need to look into the identity of this mysterious forger first. With some answers, I might be able to move forward.”

Clay shot him a knowing grin. “So… Does this mean you’re taking up Wright’s defense?”

For a moment, Apollo remained silent, the gears in his head turning. Despite his hurt and disappointment, he knew he couldn’t continue lying to himself: he wanted to save Phoenix. The only reason the man led such a shameful, terrible life was because of this one accursed case, and all he had ever wanted to do was pursue the truth… even if that ended up costing him gravely. There was tremendous pain and suffering behind his smirks and flirtatious touches, steamy techniques of coy seduction; and Apollo had a feeling the rate of Phoenix’s fall was proportionate to his despair and gradual acceptance of his fate. The world had turned its back on him, Kristoph gave up after years of chasing ghosts, and when Phoenix came to him on his hands and knees, he had turned him away too. Whether he believed in Phoenix was one thing; wanting to believe in him was another. But what he did know was that back there in the dimly-lit office, in the middle of a cold winter’s night, when they had been so close they could’ve kissed, Phoenix had looked deep into his eyes and saw him for the very first time.

‘Always believe in your client. Always seek out the truth… Let these principles be your guide, and you’ll be fine.’ He remembered those words of advice and though he was scared and anxious over the repercussions of his decision, knew that he would rather quit law than live on with the guilt and regret of abandoning Phoenix when he needed him most.

Meanwhile, Clay rolled his eyes so hard, he saw the back of his skull.

“I know that look; you’re planning something crazy,” he observed with a shake of his head. “Figures you’ll never stop believing in him – Hey!”
Apollo grabbed Clay’s wrist and tugged him down the snow-covered street.

“Come on, we’ve got work to do!”

“We?! When did ‘we’ ever happen?! And my house is–”

“You’re staying over!”

With the mysterious disk weighing heavily in his pocket and consumed by a passionate desire for the truth, Apollo dragged his kicking and protesting friend all the way home. Phoenix left him a clue. It was his duty to see what it was.

“Oh my God, we’ve been watching the same thing for over an hour!” Clay moaned on the bed as he smashed his face repeatedly with a pillow. “No more… please…”

Apollo meanwhile, remained vigilant on the floor, eyes glued to the television, brows set in a frown. It was almost 4 a.m. on a Friday morning and it was clear as day neither boys were getting any sleep before sunrise.

As it turned out, the disk contained undisclosed footage featuring the mysterious forger behind the fake evidence – a fake journal entry from the victim, Magnifi Gramarye. The man was a local artist by the name of Drew Misham: hermit by circumstance; unestablished talent, but earned a name for himself from his astounding ability in reproducing authentic masterpieces right down to its tiniest detail. The whole video was a testament to his (unknowing) involvement with the trial.

“The old man was just doing his job, like we heard him say for a whole 15 times,” grumbled Clay as he sleepily stared up at the walls. “… Did anyone tell you how creepy you are with all these Wright posters?”

“Rewind to the 20 second mark.”

With an exasperated sigh, he grabbed the remote and did as instructed. Honestly, he wondered why he didn’t just fall asleep like his brain screamed at him to.

‘All my clients are anonymous. I have a policy of communicating solely through letters, including all matters of payment. I’ve never stepped foot outside my house for consultations.’

‘Is this the first time you worked with evidence?’

‘Yes… But I admit I didn’t know anything about it, nor do I question my clients.’

‘So, Mr. Wright really did go to you for help.’

‘Yes.’

Apollo suddenly sat up. He didn't hear it wrong, did he?

“Clay!”

“Alright, alright…”
He replayed the scene.

‘All my clients are anonymous. I have a policy of communicating solely through letters, including all methods of payment. I've never stepped foot outside my house for consultations… So, Mr. Wright really did go to you for help… Yes…’

“Got it!”

Apollo jumped to his feet while Clay fell off the bed. The former’s eyes shone with triumph (never mind those dark eye circles); excitement coursed through his veins. Finally! The first and only contradiction all morning!

“What, what? What'd you get?!” Clay scrambled back up, more awake now than when they first started.

“A rat,” said Apollo, folding his arms with a smirk. “Or to be more precise, a rat by the name of Drew Misham.”

“How so?”

“Tell me: how do you know how someone looks like if you've never seen them before?”

“It could've been a slip of the tongue… Or Wright actually disclosed his identity before…”

“Think again, Clay,” Apollo interrupted, tapping his forehead for emphasis. “I've spent all my life forging expensive works of art, structured my livelihood around illegal activity and stayed hidden to avoid the authorities. I've done the same thing for many years. Why then, would I be so careless as to let my client see my face and vice versa?”

“Because… I was having a bad day?”

Apollo nearly fell over. But seeing as it was 4 a.m. he was willing to give Clay the benefit of the doubt.

“What about this: because I never actually saw my client’s face.”

Clay frowned so hard, it looked like he could kill himself from simply thinking.

“But that goes against his claim! Does that mean Wright’s clean?”

“I’m willing to stake my faith on that,” Apollo replied as he fixed his gaze on the younger, despairing Phoenix on the screen. ‘I promise: I’ll save you and clear your name,’ he made a silent vow and deep in his heart, he hoped his hero heard him.

“If anything, it sounds like Misham’s covering for someone and I’m willing to bet it has something to do with his real client,” he continued with his line of reasoning. “That should explain the contradiction and his nervousness. He might not know the identity of his client, but something tells me he knows it’s not Mr. Wright either. That alone is good enough for me.”

“So, you’re saying the forger’s the real suspect? That Misham intentionally created that fake evidence to frame Wright?” asked Clay.

“I didn’t say that,” returned Apollo, voice grave as he began to realise how dark this particular case actually went. “Our forger could simply be a very good liar… or very good at hiding things.”

*But why? What’s his motivation?*
Apollo quickly grabbed his cell phone from his bag and sent a text message to his boss. Usually, he'd be up by now practicing his 'Chords of Steel' routine, so the timing wasn't that suspicious. If Kristoph had been investigating this case for seven years, whatever evidence he gathered might prove vital for this next step. All he needed was access to those private case files, find a way to rendezvous with Phoenix, and a little bit of luck.

‘Good morning, sir,’ he typed, ‘would you be free for lunch after your trial? There’s something important I need to discuss with you.’

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hah! If you thought Clay was just going to be a phone call in the prologue, think again!

So, Phoenix has been playing this game for years and he's seduced a naive Apollo into his web. Poor guy thinks he's a hero. Things certainly don't help with that white knight complex of his and Phoenix willingly taking advantage of that. And what's the story behind those mysterious private case files? Dun, dun, dunnnn...

If you like what you've read so far, please leave a kudos and/or comment. I enjoy reading what you guys think and a little encouragement goes a long way.
I can't thank you guys enough for all the kudos, hits and subscriptions! Your support really goes a long way and I'm always happy to read your wonderful comments. Thank you PierceTheVeils for being such a loyal follower/reviewer, as well as theDisinherited for leaving your comment in the previous chapter!

Anyway, enough of my rambling. Enjoy this latest chapter!

"On what grounds do I hold this unexpected arrangement, Apollo?"

Kristoph raised his wineglass and took a delicate sip – Rosemount Diamonds, "Black Label", 2010. The restaurant was lively, yet not too crowded; the violins could still be heard over the polite chatter of patrons and the clinking of silverware. Kristoph had refused the invitation unless it was one of his usual spots, preferring something – using his own words – "less common". Apollo meanwhile, was just happy he remembered which one was the salad fork.

"I-I was hoping we could d-discuss my employment terms... sir," he said, nervously placing his utensils on his clean plate.

Initially, he felt mighty confident about his plan, but when lunch dragged on and his boss insisted they began all serious conversation after their meal, he started to lose his nerve, which explained all the stuttering. Dining with Kristoph proved more stressful than taking a college entrance exam. It must be a real talent to be so intimidating while simply slicing steak.

"Clean your mouth before speaking, Apollo."

"Y-Yes, sir..."

What did he tell you?

Kristoph paused in his meal, placed his utensils aside with practiced grace and reached for his wineglass again. He cupped its base, swirled the liquid with a contemplative gaze, before sipping it – more than the previous amount. Then, he returned the glass onto the table and dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin.

"And what, pray tell, might they be?" he inquired with a bemused grin.

"Well... it's been four months since I joined the firm and I was wondering when I'll get to handle my first case," answered Apollo, lacing and unlacing his fingers under the table. "I mean... I don't think I'll do that badly..."

"Apollo," Kristoph interrupted as pleasantly as he was firm, "do you think you're ready?"

Was that a trick question? He really wished he could tell whether his boss was sincere or baiting him.

"Um… Yes…?"
Kristoph chuckled and shook his head almost fondly, like a parent who had just witnessed his child perform something ridiculously naive. It made the hopeful smile on Apollo's face fall. Why did he get the feeling his plan was going down the drain?

"I think," began Kristoph, "while we're on the topic of your employment, I should use this opportunity to review your conduct thus far."

He took out his leather bound planner and flipped to his notes at the back. There were so many bullet points. Apollo gulped and openly shook. **Bad idea, bad idea, worst idea ever.**

Kristoph began reading off his list.

"Has a problem coming to work on time. Has a problem maintaining decent voice levels indoors and in front of clients. Adherence to deadlines: inconsistent. Adherence to workplace standards: questionable. Accurate reports: needs work..."

'I think I'm going to be sick,' Apollo thought, face turning pale. If this was Kristoph's idea of laying him off gently, well, it wasn't at all very gentle.

"... overall, very impressed."

His eyes, which had scrunched shut in fear, flew open. **What?** He had tuned out most of the comments because they sounded depressingly negative, until that last remark. Kristoph… was impressed? At him? **Really?** Was the world going mad?

The blonde snapped his planner shut, a proud smile reaching his eyes and said, "To be realistic, I never expected perfection from a fresh graduate, but you've certainly proved your worth and capacity under my instruction. My previous employees all resigned after a month. Perhaps you're right: you deserve a chance to prove yourself in court. Phoenix suggested the same thing. Of course, you can expect me around to guide you."

Apollo's jaw fell open. Was he hearing things? All those months of dreaming and he finally got not only the green light, but also **Kristoph Gavin's** approval. Perhaps it was partially influenced by Phoenix's recommendation, but his boss certainly didn't seem to express any qualms on his end.

"Still, I find your sudden enthusiasm curious," Kristoph continued as he flashed his understudy a knowing look. "Perhaps you have a pending client?"

"H-Huh?" Apollo's heart skipped a beat. "No, sir! It's just… This matter has been bugging me for a while… I was worried I'd be bound behind a desk forever."

"I see… Then I hope I have alleviated your fears."

**Too close.**

Apollo looked up just as Kristoph placed his planner on the table. A thought suddenly occurred to him and he eyed it discreetly. His boss put everything in there: names, meetings, miscellaneous appointments and their respective timings, personal reminders… He wouldn't be surprised if he found Phoenix's name in there; after all, couples date, right? Even Kristoph had to be a loving boyfriend from time to time. Maybe with a bit of luck, he could find out where Phoenix worked and/or lived – and he realised that came across as rather stalkerish.

"Speaking of Mr. Wright, there's one other thing that's been bugging me," began Apollo in all seriousness as he looked his boss in the eye.
"What is it?" Kristoph returned imploringly.

"Isn't he guilty?" He decided to drop all formalities and cut to the chase. "I mean, he's pretty much a hopeless case now. How on earth did you two get so close?"

"Ah," came Kristoph's amused reply followed by a deep chuckle. "Considering my standing, I suppose our relationship is quite hard to believe." He folded his arms and shrugged. "But to answer your question: no, I don't believe he is."

Absently, he ran his finger along the rim of his wineglass, the action itself surprisingly tender. There was an uncharacteristic gentleness about him, as if the mere thought of Phoenix and his dorky grin was enough to turn his entire personality around. And when he next spoke, his voice carried a subtle warmth that Apollo never heard before.

"Phoenix… Phoenix is special. He's a gentle soul whose loyalty and kindness knows no bounds. At his core, he's incapable of such brutality; he's as honest as they come. Fair enough, he's a bit rough around the edges, but the truth is he's scared – he's frightened and vulnerable and more than anything, I wish to protect him."

As Kristoph said all that, he had a fond smile on his lips, his eyes twinkling with something genuine and affectionate. His expression had softened so dramatically, it made Apollo feel self-conscious. He wasn't Cupid, but that was true love right there and he was suddenly confronted with his own insecurities. Maybe those marks of abuse originated from someone else. Maybe Phoenix had chosen to remain silent last night because he didn't want to burden him with his problems. If the two weren't in love, Phoenix would've left ages ago. Had he misjudged Kristoph all this time?

"So… You two became close because you believed in him," Apollo clarified.

"Correction: I believe in him."

Suddenly, a sharp pain gripped his wrist and he jerked forward, banging his knee on the underside of the table. *What the hell?* He stared down at his arm, breathing through clenched teeth, his free hand gripping his left wrist tightly in order to dull the pain. It felt like someone had shoved a vice around his arm and effectively cut off his blood circulation – had he injured himself without realizing it?

"Apollo, are you alright?" asked Kristoph in wide-eyed concern.

"Y-Yeah…" The pain soon faded and he sat up again. "Just a sharp pang… Weird."

Kristoph hummed; there was a frown on his face. "Hm… Perhaps it's a sprain? You might want to get that checked."

"Yeah."

"I could give you the rest of the day off if you need it?"

"N-No, I'm fine! Really!"

It was then Apollo felt somewhat bad for sneaking around his boss like that. Kristoph, underneath all his professionalism and insane-at-times expectations, was actually pretty understanding and kind. Apollo began to have second thoughts on seeing his plan through. Was helping Phoenix really worth it? Was all this secrecy necessary? Phoenix had implied that his boyfriend wanted nothing more to do with that accursed case. Maybe he could speak to Kristoph about this; reach a compromise between the three of them. But, before he could fully make up his mind, Kristoph had already raised his hand and called for the bill.
"Please excuse me," he said with a polite nod, reaching into his pants pocket for his wallet. "There's somewhere I need to be and I'm not fond of running late."

"I... I see... Thanks for lunch, sir."

"It was my pleasure."

Apollo watched Kristoph ready his car key while he was at it, only to do a double-take, his eyes honing in on a peculiar black metal object dangling off the keyring. It was long and crooked, a little like a corkscrew only angular, and had strange ridges and grooves along certain intervals. Any normal person would have easily passed it off as a random trinket, but Apollo had seen his boss use it enough times by his desk to know that it was a key. And it was this very key that both himself and Phoenix needed... But how to swipe it from Kristoph? He'd surely notice if it were gone.

It was at that moment when Kristoph decided to leave and Apollo started to panic. No! Not yet. His eyes darted about frantically and as luck would have it, a waiter carrying a jug of water was passing by. No time for regrets. He only prayed he wouldn't get caught, otherwise he'd be fired for sure.

_Sorry, Mr. Gavin._

He stuck out his foot and the waiter tripped, tipping the ice water all over the front of Kristoph's suit and dousing his hair. The reaction was immediate: the blonde gentleman lost it and screamed at the poor waiter, hurling insults and threatened to make sure the young chap got fired from this job and other subsequent jobs for his carelessness and incompetency. Apollo winced and silently prayed karma wouldn't be such a bitch and come bite him in the ass for this.

_Note to self: never ever get on Mr. Gavin's bad side._

By then, that little accident created quite a commotion and Apollo used the distraction to take out his handphone and quickly snap a few pictures of the weird key from all angles. Thankfully, Kristoph was too busy dealing with frantic service staff desperately trying to dry him off with a ridiculous amount of napkins to notice his understudy fiddling around with his personal stuff. Eyeing his boss' slim planner on the table, Apollo spared one last quick glance at him before hurriedly flipping through it, taking care not to mess with any bookmarks or crease its pages.

'Mr. Gavin must never know,' he told himself silently as his eyes scanned through Kristoph's numerous appointments.

His priority was locating Phoenix's name. With any luck, he'd be able to find out where the guy was hanging around, as well as the exact date and time. Perhaps he had been expecting too much for a private address, but there had to be something pertaining to the ex-lawyer's whereabouts – a dinner date venue, a pickup address, _something._

Unfortunately, he didn't see Phoenix's name anywhere, which made him a little disconcerted. He knew for a fact Kristoph wrote _everything_ in this one planner. It was almost as if his boss was intentionally hiding his association with his boyfriend – in case someone happened to read his planner perhaps? No, he seriously doubted that, but still as a lover – this was going to sound a little petty – wasn't Phoenix good enough to have his name written down at all? So much for meeting his idol. What he did find though, was a particular location that was mentioned once every week without fail: _Borscht Bowl Club_ – it was everywhere, sometimes even twice a week and it was always around dinner time. _What a strange name._ Maybe it was Phoenix and Kristoph's usual meal joint; maybe the former worked there. It was a long shot, but it was worth checking out.

Mentally, Apollo made a note to leave the office an hour earlier today. But right now, he had to play
his cards right, so he pretended to fumble around like the other waiters until the manager finally came and Kristoph let the poor man have it. When his boss stormed off and left him filling up a complaint form in his place, Apollo couldn't help but think back to the names he saw in Kristoph's planner. None really stood out for him, save one:

'1.25 p.m. – pick Trucy up from school'

Phoenix's question from last night replayed in his head. It was precisely that which primed his attention to the very name in the first place. Trucy... Who the heck was she? What was her connection with Phoenix and Kristoph? And why did Phoenix seem so sure that he met this mysterious girl before?

Trucy stood outside her school's gate, kicking up pebbles as she whistled to the funny yet annoyingly catchy tune of her father's ringtone. The 1.30 p.m. bell had rung five minutes ago and she was still waiting – a fact that wouldn't have bothered her when she was in elementary school, but now verily so after years of routine. Kristoph was always exceptionally punctual; in fact, he was beyond punctual and often already had his blue sports convertible parked along the curb at exactly 1.25 p.m. – no earlier, no later. Of course, if she had activities in her self-managed Magic Club, she would board the 5 p.m. bus and, depending if Phoenix had to work overtime, arrive at Gavin manor approximately ten minutes past 6 p.m.

'Where is he?' she wondered as she looked up and down the street with a nervous frown, toeing the pavement.

Typically, her Fridays consisted of Kristoph picking her up and sending her home; spending the afternoon (attempting) to finish her homework, then get picked up again where he would send them both to the Borscht Bowl Club to join Phoenix and Olga for dinner. Today's schedule however, was different. Tomorrow was her live debut at the Wonder Bar, so Kristoph made arrangements with the owner for a full-dress rehearsal at 3 p.m. Initially, she had laughed his concern off with a toss of her head and a wave of her magic panties (magicians didn't need rehearsals and she was a Gramarye by blood – a natural!). But as the day drew closer with less than 24 hours to spare, she started to get the willies. Maybe a full-dress rehearsal wasn't such a bad idea after all.

It was only after she heard a very familiar car horn when she realised she had been spacing out.

Looking up with a grin, she waved at the handsome blonde gentleman, who politely waved in return. Jogging up to the convertible while ignoring the envious stares of her schoolmates (frankly, she was impartial to the special treatment she received from peers just because of her relation to Kristoph Gavin), Trucy didn't even bother with the door as she vaulted over it and landed right in the passenger's seat. Of course, she made sure she didn't mess up the paint job and over the years, Kristoph had learned to close both eyes to her idiosyncrasies and sometimes less-than-appropriate mannerisms. After all, wasn't there this saying? – like father, like daughter.

"You're late," she remarked with a teasing grin, nudging him in the side. "Getting old, Mr. Gavin?"

Kristoph chuckled and shifted the car from park to drive as he turned out of the school zone and sped down the street.

"You wish," he replied with a smirk.
"Hey, how come you're not in your usual suit?" Trucy pointed out with a curious frown. "Which reminds me… You know, I had a bet with daddy once."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah! I said you only had suits and probably slept in them too. Daddy said – and I quote – that's a common misconception. I guess he'd know better."

Kristoph laughed at her innocence.

"Well, I can't argue with that." He paused. "My apologies for making you wait. I had a little accident during lunch, so I rushed home to change into something more comfortable."

"Cuz you're going to watch me practice all day, right?" she returned with gusto, leaning towards him.

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Right."

"Oooh! Tomorrow's going to be great!" she squealed, cupping her cheeks. "Daddy's going to have the biggest surprise of his life!"

"Not too surprised I hope."

"Don't worry, I took your advice and cut out the chainsaw act…"

"That's sensible-"

"... cuz I couldn't secure three in time for the show."

"... Hm."

"You think I'll make him proud, Mr. Gavin?" she interrupted and it was then Kristoph saw a trace of the scared, broken little girl who had been forced to grow up so quickly.

"I have no doubt," he murmured with kind eyes and would've taken her small hands in his too if he wasn't gripping the steering wheel.

"Argh! I just wish he'd quit that evil poker job," she said with a pout. "Imagine he becomes my assistant. We'd be famous magicians – the amazing Wrights! Won't that be a dream?"

Kristoph heard her sigh wistfully and couldn't help but share her hopes and expectations. Though he seriously doubted Phoenix would quit playing poker (among other things) to become a full-time magician's assistant, the thought still had significant merit. Trucy simply wanted her daddy home; he wanted Phoenix by his side and all to himself again.

"Speaking of Phoenix," he interrupted, "there's something I've been meaning to show you."

He took a little detour just before the traffic light and that effectively got Trucy's attention. Wait a second, wasn't the Wonder Bar at least two more blocks away?

"Mr. Gavin? Where are we going?" she asked.

"Just a quick visit to the jewelry lane," came his brief reply. "I was hoping to get a second opinion. Don't worry, we won't take more than 12 minutes."

Trucy stared up at him with big, curious eyes.
"So… what does this have to do with daddy?"

"Do you want him to be happy?"

"Of course! More than anything!"

Kristoph flashed her a mysterious smile, his ice-blue eyes gleaming under the sunlight.

"Then can you keep a secret?"

Apollo stopped outside an old club – a rundown establishment wedged between a drugstore and a Chinese restaurant – looked at its signboard and its flickering neon lights, a letter or two missing from its name; down at the slip of paper clutched between his fingers, then back up again. *The Borscht Bowl Club*. He crushed the paper, tossed it aside and prayed this wasn't a cold trail.

"Here goes."

Steeling himself, he pushed the door open, only to reel in shock and wrap his arms protectively around himself when a blast of cold wind smacked him dead in the face. He would've yelled if his teeth weren't chattering so much. *What the hell?! It's freezing!* What was up with the AC?! Maybe he made a mistake. He was just about to turn around and put as much distance between himself and this urban Antarctica, when a soft, timid voice with a thick Russian accent stopped him in his tracks.

"C-Customer! *Dobryj vyechyer!* Welcome to *Borscht Bowl Club* where ve serve best borscht cold like vinter."

She was a petite waitress with rosy cheeks and a soft, childlike disposition. Her curly blonde hair brushed her shoulders just so and she wore a thick woolen ensemble complete with mittens and a fur hat; an old-fashioned film camera hung from her neck. The waitress only reached Apollo's shoulders despite her heels and he would've mistaken her as a child if not for the fact that this was a club. She offered him a pleasant smile and held up a finger.

"One, da?"

"Da – I mean, no. I'm… uh… Not here to eat," Apollo replied, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Ah!" She raised her camera and snapped his picture. Apollo stumbled back, momentarily blinded by the flash. The waitress giggled as she watched him frantically rub his eyes.

"You vant peekcha, da?"

"Argh – no! What is wrong with you?!!"

Why the hell would he come all the way here for a photograph?! And why did this club want their service staff to carry around cameras?!! Whoever ran this establishment had very strange priorities…

"Vrong? I take again?"

"No!"
Great, just great. Someone who couldn't speak and understand proper English. And who the heck drank cold borscht in a cold environment? He guessed this place wasn't known for their food and warm customer service and judging by the empty tables and chairs, he supposed he was right.

"No?" echoed the waitress as she blinked, confused.

"No," he repeated more firmly, this time speaking slowly. "Actually, I'm looking for someone."

As soon as he said that, he noticed a bright turquoise beanie dart across the room and out of sight. Unfortunately, the waitress was still blocking his way and despite her innocent grin, seemed to be doing so intentionally. Apollo couldn't help but wonder if she was really a waitress or a part-time bouncer.

"Friend, da?" she asked.

"No, not a friend," he answered with slight impatience. "I'm looking for Mr. Wright."

"Vright…? Ah! Feenix Vright! Yes, yes, I know Feenix Vright."

Now he was getting somewhere.

"Great! Excellent! Could you take me to him?"

However, something in the waitresses' expression changed and with a giggle that sounded more evil than coy, she pulled her woolen outfit off her body to reveal a tight-fitting black-and-white dealer's uniform underneath complete with a red bow tie. Even her hat was gone and a bright red bandana with printed dice took its place. In a blink of an eye, the innocent little girl with soft rosy cheeks was gone and in her place stood a deadly femme fatale, lips as red as a rose; her dark eyes shining with something mischievous. As Apollo gaped at the transformation, the blonde beauty smirked while playing with a strand of curly hair, alternating between tugging and winding it around her index finger.

"I'll do more than that, Horns," she said with a chuckle. "Olga "Quick Fingers" Orly at your service – professional dealer and your new worst nightmare. Quit dreaming: you can't beat the undefeated Poker King of seven years. My advice? Keep your money and go get a haircut."

Apollo was so mad his face turned purple. The nerve of this woman! Not only could she actually speak and understand English, she wasn't even Russian! Her accent had completely disappeared, she was rude and obnoxious, and what the heck was her problem with his hair?! It was fine, thank you very much. 'You don't see me dissing your height, munchkin,' he thought to himself bitterly.

"Listen, Ms. Orly, I'm not here for poker – or cold borscht," he added just when the waitress/dealer looked like she was about to interject. "I neither care for Mr. Wright's poker escapades, nor am I interested in his title. I'm here to see him about something else, so I'd really appreciate if you could just –"

But something in Olga's expression changed and Apollo had to quickly stick his foot out to prevent the door from slamming in his face. Her back remained turned to him as he pushed his way into the club.

"What gives?!!"

"There's no one by the name of Wright here," she snapped, glaring at him over her shoulder, body language guarded. "If you're not here for poker, then get out."
"But earlier you said –"

"I was mistaken."

Apollo's fists shook at his sides as he fought to suppress the urge to punch her. True, this woman really had a natural talent for pissing him off, but with the way she kept sneaking worried glances at the stairs by the side, he knew she was not only hiding something, but quite possibly protecting someone too; and he was willing to bet all the cash in his pocket that it was Phoenix. Why? He honestly didn't know; but he was beginning to get the impression that this wasn't a usual date spot for Phoenix and Kristoph, and there was a lot more to this Russian themed club than met the eye. Undefeated Poker King, huh? Apollo wondered what sort of shady dealings took place here and at the same time, felt his heart sink at the thought of his idol neck deep in such dark affairs. As if sleeping around for cash wasn't bad enough, but illegal gambling too? If he didn't care about Phoenix so much, he would've used his attorney's badge and predisposition towards the law, against him.

"With liars like you, who needs criminals?" he commented, before attempting to reason with the blonde once more. "Ms. Orly, like I said, I'm not interested in the happenings down here. I only care about Mr. Wright."

She snorted. "More like care about getting into his pants..."

"No! I care about seven years ago," he explained, "I care about him and his capacity for redemption."

When Olga's posture began to relax, Apollo took a cautious step forward.

"Please, I want to help him; and if you care about him too, show me where he is."

"Who are you – really."

He presented his badge. "Apollo Justice – attorney of law, Mr. Wright's defense... and a friend."

There was a moment's hesitation. Olga eyed Apollo warily, conflicted; then at the badge, before she gave in with a sigh. "Fine. This way."

She indicated at Apollo to follow her and they proceeded down a flight of stairs towards the club's basement. Pausing before a set of tattered, wine-red curtains, she pulled them back and with a wry smirk, nodded at the darkness within. "Try not to get lost, Horns," was all she said and they continued moving, Apollo clumsily meandering his way around nondescript objects and nearly tripping over a bunch of empty grape juice bottles as they went deeper. With an exasperated sigh, Olga felt for his hand and tugged him along.

"This place used to be a hideout for criminals," she explained. "It's loaded with secret passages and if you're not familiar with the layout, you will get lost."

"Is this really necessary?" Apollo muttered.

"Well, if you spend most of your life dodging the law, yes," she replied. "I'm pretty much breaking the rules for you, Horns – you know that?"

"I feel so special."

Olga felt around for something and there was a soft 'click', followed by the sound of a door sliding open. They descended what Apollo assumed to be another flight of stairs and entered a dimly lit room, the sudden light (though little) a contrast to the previous darkness. It made Apollo wince
slightly, but it didn’t take long for his eyes to adjust to his surroundings. Judging from how far and
depth they walked, he assumed he was at the lowest level of the club’s basement. It was a fairly large
room: a poker table stood in the center; an old sofa to the side; an empty bookcase against a wall; a
small fridge tucked inconspicuously in the corner; a stack of crates containing grape juice, some
opened and some empty; and a short, narrow passageway that led to a back room.

Now, Apollo noticed two things upon stepping into the room. First, the poker table was a mess of
chips and cards, like whoever had been playing had decided to abandon the game halfway. Second,
he heard muffled noises, specifically gasps, low moans and the occasional squeals of pleasure. They
were coming from the back room and seeing as Olga had led him here, Apollo didn’t need to guess
what she had desperately tried to hide from him earlier, as well as what exactly Phoenix was
preoccupied with. And speaking of Olga, the young dealer wore the most passive expression on her
face, like she was used to her colleague’s sexual dealings and had learned to block it all out. It was
both painfully disturbing and sad.

"He shouldn’t be long now – sounds like they're having a quickie. Have a seat, Horns," she offered,
patting the spot next to her on the sofa.

Apollo balked at how casual she sounded, while he on the other hand had trouble concealing his
mortification. But without much choice, he did as he was told and kept his gaze trained on his lap,
clenching and unclenching his fists every time he heard the customer’s grunts and the slapping of
skin against skin. Just thinking about Phoenix, his beautiful naked body shamelessly laid out before
some faceless pervert – it was horrifying. The only thing that kept him from barging in, tearing the
man away from Phoenix and punching him square in the face, was his own fear of seeing Phoenix
actually enjoying himself.

"Hey, you said you're a lawyer, right? What made you decide to defend a man who can't be
defended?" asked Olga in a bid to distract Apollo from the discomforting noises.

Her attempt had some merit. He actually paused to consider her question.

"Mr. Wright's my salvation," he concluded after some careful reflecting. "I grew up in an orphanage
and his stories made the years more bearable. I looked up to him; he's my hero. He's my light and my
hope and it was because of him that I became a lawyer. Without knowing it, he saved me and now, I
want to do the same for him."

"Gavin gave up because he claimed it was impossible," she said with a frown. "What makes you so
different?"

"He doesn't love him the way I do."

Olga's mouth fell open in honest surprise, but the look in her eyes told Apollo that she was
convinced. Perhaps it was the passion in his voice or the conviction in his eyes, but he could see the
beginnings of trust slowly seep into her gaze.

"What about you? You look a little young to be a professional dealer," Apollo pointed out, turning to
her. "What's your story?"

"My story? With whom?"

"Mr. Wright."

Someone moaned; a bed creaked in the distance.

Olga clasped her hands together and hummed. Her eyes darted to the abandoned game of poker on
the table and lingered there, only to shut them sorrowfully when she heard a familiar voice sob and beg for mercy as the sound of creaking springs grew louder and more erratic. Five years of this bullshit and she still couldn't desensitize herself. Some friend she was: Phoenix didn't need the extra burden of seeing his own pain reflected in her eyes. But it hurt so much because she cared; because he had cared for her first.

"I don't give two fucks about what the world thinks or what the bloody evidence says – Wright's innocent. He's kind, sweet, generous; has a heart of gold and no matter how tough things get, he'll always be there for you. He'll never abandon you."

As she spoke, her expression softened considerably; the barest trace of tears in her eyes; and Apollo was suddenly reminded of the timid, childlike waitress that had greeted him at the entrance. At that moment, the notorious dealer of the underworld turned into a broken little girl.

"I was a homeless pickpocket, pinching fools along the street to survive. That's how I got the name "Quick Fingers" – I never got caught. Not until six years ago when I met him."

"I followed my target that night to this very club and Wright caught me trying to steal the guy's wallet. But instead of reporting me, he simply asked if I wanted to work here. I said I had no qualifications. He told me dealers didn't need any. I said I had nowhere to go. He got me settled in his place until I earned enough to rent a room on my own. That's how I got to know him and his daughter, Trucy."

"Hold it," interrupted Apollo, his mind reeling. "This Trucy person… is Mr. Wright's daughter?"

Ok, why was he only hearing about this now? All this time, Phoenix had been whoring himself for cash because he was struggling to raise a little girl? Although his current job scope didn't exactly count as stellar parenting, Apollo finally understood how tough Phoenix's life truly was. So, was this Trucy's connection between him and Kristoph? Was she their kid? That last thought made him feel both jealous and disappointed.

"Yeah… You probably heard of her – Trucy Gramarye. Poor sweetheart got dumped by her real dad after that trial. Wright's raised her as his own ever since."

"So she's…"

"Adopted, yes," finished Olga just as the customer groaned, no doubt riding out his climax. She cleared her throat. "Come around often enough and you might just meet her."

"He brings his kid here?" Apollo exclaimed, aghast. Someone needed to give Phoenix a good smack in the head with a 'Parenting for Dummies' book, pronto. This club was no place for a child!

"What can I say? Trucy's his good luck charm," said Olga with a shrug. "Seven years she's watched him play and seven years he's won. People from all over have tried to break his streak, but end up humiliated after each loss. And before you suspect his daughter, he's won just fine without her around. Plus, I've dealt his cards for six years – no dirty tricks; just honest poker."

"You're pretty protective of Mr. Wright, aren't you?" Apollo observed.

"If not for him, I'd still be starving on the streets," she answered with a sentimental smirk. "Phoenix Wright saved my life. I refuse to believe anyone so kind would resolve to such dirty tactics for victory."

The longer they sat there and talked over the sounds of sex, the more Apollo's initial impression of Phoenix began to shift. The context was different, but Olga's story proved that the old Phoenix he
grew to love and admire was still in there somewhere, albeit small and meek. Phoenix always took on the burdens of others, cared about them before himself, even if that meant securing their happiness at his own expense.

'The truth is, he's scared – he's frightened and vulnerable and more than anything, I wish to protect him' – he recalled Kristoph's words back at the restaurant and realised how true they were. He didn't expect someone like Phoenix to know how to ask for help.

The creaking stopped. Muffled words were exchanged, followed by the soft rustle of clothing. Apollo looked up from his lap and braced himself. The door to the back room swung open and out walked a middle-aged man – smug, thoroughly satisfied, a confident swagger in his step. When he passed by Apollo, he gave the latter a knowing wink, tossed him a spare condom and left. Apollo shuddered and dropped it behind a bunch of old, dusty crates. It was only after an exhausted Phoenix emerged from the room, hoodie slipping off his bare shoulders and cum staining his kiss swollen lips, when Apollo fully made up his mind.

"I'll defend you."

There was so much conviction in his voice that it held both Phoenix and Olga in silence. The two men stared at each other – Apollo determined and Phoenix surprised – before an understanding was reached. Phoenix's gaze softened, his eyes brimming with gratitude and relief; the smile on his face beautiful and free, like a huge burden had been lifted from his heart.

"Thank you," he whispered, and he meant every word.

Apollo approached the older man and touched his cheek, gently cupping Phoenix's face. All thoughts of Kristoph or Phoenix as a father escaped his mind. He didn't care. Right here, in this dark and private space, it was just the two of them and nothing else mattered. He leaned in at a slight angle, his lips barely grazing his idol's soft cheek and inhaled the sweet, addictive scent that was Phoenix. His calloused hand brushed against fair, sensitive skin as he pushed the material of Phoenix's hoodie back over his shoulder in a bid to conceal his modesty. There was a quiet gasp, an involuntary shudder; and to their surprise (Apollo more pleasantly amused than anything), Phoenix actually blushed from the attention. He was so shy, so nervous, yet undoubtedly curious. Apollo smiled at the precious sight. He realised he liked Phoenix like this.

_He's so cute._

"O-Olga?" Phoenix called out to the blonde, but didn't make a move to pull away.

"What?"

"Could I trouble you to watch Trucy tonight?"

Olga watched the two men, an unreadable expression on her face, before she gave in with a shrug.

"Sure. I can tell you two have plenty to discuss anyway." She got up and dusted her pants. "Just give me some time to head home and pack first."

Phoenix nodded, then flashed Apollo a sheepish smile as he took a step back, fished out his cell phone and called his daughter. He didn't need to wait long for her to pick up.

"Hey, sweetie… Daddy's going to be here all night tonight. It's a madhouse."

"Aw… Fine. Just don't forget my show tomorrow!"
"I won't. I promise I'll be there," he said with a loving smile. "Did you manage to get any practice done with Kristoph?"

"Yup! He's helped me all day! Just you wait, daddy. Tomorrow, you're going to be blown away by the amazing Trucy Wright! ... Oh, but he just dropped me off. Should I call him to come back and get me?"

"Let's not trouble him, sweetie," Phoenix dodged the question as he glanced at Apollo from the corner of his eye. The kid was busying himself at the poker table, manipulating the chips and cards and looking more lost than ever.

"I'll have Aunty Olga come over tonight."

"Yay! Then we can prank the neighbors! I haven't seen Aunty Olga in ages! Tell her to bring water balloons!"

"Hey! I'm only 21, you bastards!" Olga growled playfully, which earned her a laugh from both father and daughter. "Heh. Tell the brat I'll see her soon."

As soon as that was done, Olga feigned an emergency to their boss and left.

Meanwhile, still in the Hydeout, Apollo pulled up a chair from the poker table, while Phoenix lounged lazily on the couch. The latter broke the silence, "So, did you manage to look into those files?"

"Not yet, but I'm close," Apollo replied, pulling out a set of photographs and dangled them before Phoenix's eager eyes. "Only problem is the key – not a single locksmith in town can replicate it. I checked."

"Well, I know someone who just might be able to help us," said Phoenix as he made a grab for the pictures, but Apollo held them out of reach.

"Tut, tut, Mr. Wright," he tsked with a shake of his head. "If you want my help, I have a proposition."

"And what's that?"

"No more sexual services, and I'll do everything I can to help in your investigation."

Phoenix narrowed his eyes in displeasure. "You're hardly in a position to stake your demands."

"Am I?" Apollo got up and slung his bag over a shoulder. "Then I guess you won't be needing these photos and you can find yourself a new lawyer."

"Wait!"

He turned to regard Phoenix expectantly with a raise of an eyebrow. The ex-lawyer looked frantic, humiliated, torn.

"D-Deal," Phoenix conceded, bowing his head. "But what about poker? I need the money..."

"None of that either."

"But-"

"And don't even think of sneaking behind my back, because Ms. Orly and I share an understanding."
Once I find out you've gone back to gambling or whoring, the deal's off."

"She won't betray me for you," Phoenix growled at the brunette's arrogance.

"She will if she cares," came Apollo's answer.

"Kristoph didn't demand-"

"I'm not Mr. Gavin!" he snapped and they reached a temporary stalemate.

"... Possessive, aren't you?" Phoenix muttered after a while.

"Sir, I care."

When Phoenix avoided his eyes with a pout, Apollo sighed and sat down next to him. Clapping a hand on the older male's shoulder, he turned Phoenix towards him and leveled him with his gaze.

"You're better than this. Go look for another job, sir. A real one."

"But, Olga… all alone…"

"She's a grown woman, Mr. Wright. She can take care of herself," answered Apollo patiently. "And what about Trucy, your daughter? Have you considered her feelings? It's not just about raising a child – it's about raising them well."

That hit a mark. For once, Phoenix had nothing clever to retort.

"Alright, kid… You win."

Apollo finally handed him the photographs. As the brunette quickly went over what he knew, Phoenix studied the key's images thoughtfully, carefully.

"I reviewed the court footage and narrowed our suspects down to two or three, depending on how you look at it," Apollo began as he referred to his notes. "As we know, according to judicial regulations, all detailed information pertaining to any case is prohibited beyond the knowledge of all preceding lawyers prior to the trial itself. Even the appointed judge is only made aware of each case 24 hours before the trial commences."

"Wow… Feels like a refresher, prof."

"Assuming," Apollo continued irritably, "Misham needed sufficient time to forge that diary page, he would need to know the details of the case way in advance. In other words, we got a leak."

"And how do you know it's not me?"

"Impossible. You had less than 24 hours."

"And your suspects, Sherlock?" said Phoenix with a frown.

"Drew Misham, of course; Klavier Gavin – as long as he received that so-called tip, I'm not buying his total innocence."

"And our third person 'depending on how you look at it'?"

"Misham's real client," Apollo explained, "also our mysterious mastermind himself… or herself." He paused as he considered something. "Mr. Wright, have you pissed off any woman in the past that
would make her want to seek revenge on you specifically?"

Phoenix chuckled nervously. "Well… Yes. But she's already dead."

"Anyone else?"

"Hey, what's your point?" he pouted. "I might not be Prince Charming, but I'm not that annoying."

'Oh, I beg to differ,' thought Apollo with a roll of his eyes, but quickly continued. "Anyway, we can't do much without a key… How long will your contact need?"

"Less than a week; five days tops," Phoenix replied, "depending how fast the mail works."

*Mail?* Apollo found that mode of communication odd; after all, didn't most people talk via text or phone these days? Then again, if this person was the only one who could replicate Kristoph's very complicated key, he supposed it wasn't his place to complain.

"Alright. In the meantime, let's make do with what we have – think you'll be able to get close to Prosecutor Gavin, Mr. Wright?"

"Klavier?" Phoenix echoed dubiously, having gone noticeably nervous at the mere mention of that name; reluctant even. "I guess… I mean, I sort of see him every weekend… What do you need?"

"A slip of the tongue. I need to know what happened the night before the trial – if it really was a tip off and if so, from whom. It'll take some time, but try to be convincing."

"I-I'll try…"

Phoenix didn't sound too confident, depressed even. Apollo reached out was half-tempted to turn his idol's cheek towards him and ask why. However, as soon as Phoenix's nervousness appeared it quickly fell away.

"What about you? Think you can keep a secret from your boss?"

"Think you can?" Apollo countered.

Phoenix flashed him a wry smirk in return. It made Apollo visibly falter. Honestly, he didn't expect Phoenix to respond with such confidence (Kristoph was his boyfriend; didn't he feel remotely guilty?); then again, this was the underworld's undefeated Poker King. If there was anyone who could get away with bluffing, it was Phoenix Wright.

"Anymore questions?"

"Just one," he replied, retrieving a small red playing card from his breast pocket. "You told me before that the Joker could either be a trump or something completely useless."

Phoenix raised an eyebrow in question. "And what of it?"

"I made up my mind."

With a flick of his wrist, Apollo sent the card at Phoenix who caught it effortlessly between his fingers. It was the red Joker he'd given the kid on the day they first met. He stared at the young lawyer in honest surprise, while Apollo's eyes narrowed in determination.

"Teach me how to play poker."
There was a moment's pause, but when the shock finally registered, Phoenix chuckled, his eyes obscured by the shadow of his beanie.

"Alright," he acknowledged with a smirk, "but if you obey all the rules, you'll miss all the fun."

A letter was dropped in a bright red mailbox. Someone shuffled over, stepped around half-complete paintings laid out to dry, their right hand gripping a black coffee mug. The figure sniffed, the smell of thinner and oil paint finally getting to him; but it was a job hazard he had willingly accepted, not out of pride or passion, but for survival. Everyone was a critic, but in this harsh, unforgiving world, society ate people and the ends always justified the means.

The man reached into the mailbox, his hand covered in colorful splotches of paint like his hair, and pulled out a small stack of letters. They were all addressed to him and were probably bills.

The last time he had a real client had been seven years ago. He was as careful as always, but he figured paranoia got to people as soon as word got out he had appeared in court. Now, he was back to painting for indie art shows and selling his work for less than $10 if he was lucky. At least his daughter's avant garde pottery was gaining traction.

As he went through his mail, he brought his mug of coffee to his lips, only to spit out his drink after reading the contents of one of the letters. It was a request and there were photographs; but that wasn't what first got his attention. It was the sender's signature – they didn't even bother about anonymity and it was a name he never thought he'd have the privilege of encountering again.

He felt torn – would helping this man further endanger his and his daughter's life? Then again, it was seven years. Perhaps it was nothing significant, perhaps it was. He was probably thinking too much, but he was afraid. He had lived in constant fear during those dark seven years and he still was. Maybe he would help this man. Maybe no one would notice and things could finally go back to the way they once were before all the madness. Maybe...

*Maybe he can help us.*

He could barely contain the excitement in his voice when he called out to his daughter in the kitchen.

"Vera! You have a new client!"

*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Alright, guys. Gear up for the next chapter, because it's going to be the start of the first arc! ... I know, sounds pretty long, doesn't it? But my intention is to re-imagine the 4th game, so it's not going to be all smut and rainbows if that's what you're hoping for. Events will change; characters will develop; there will be murder and what's Ace Attorney without its trials and tribulations? I just needed to set up the relationships,
characters' positions and motivations first, so thank you for your patience and I hope I don't end up disappointing anyone!

If you like my story so far, please leave a comment and/or kudos! I appreciate all forms of support and it's always nice to know if I'm doing something right.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

This chapter is longer than usual because it provides context and sets up for the first case (which I've tweaked). Hang in there guys!

A special shout-out to Heliodora and Anon for your reviews. They were plenty encouraging and left more than a smile on my face :) Also, thank you everyone for the 300 hits, subscriptions and 36 kudos! Read and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keys jingled in the darkness; a lock turned and someone pushed open the door of Gavin Manor. A flick of a switch and the main lights came on, but the warm glow of the giant chandelier overhead failed to make the place less lonely; after all, there was only so much life two brothers could pump into a solitary mansion’s high walls and its elaborate 20 or so rooms. That's why Kristoph had Phoenix.

With a charming smile, he held the door open for his lover, who stepped into the foyer with Trucy cradled tenderly in his arms. She was out like a light and snoring ever so softly, exhausted from the evening’s sold-out performance. Phoenix had removed her hat earlier, but there were still some pieces of confetti in her hair and glitter on her round cheeks. Smiling at his daughter fondly, he placed a soft kiss upon her brow. 15 years old and he was still carrying her to bed – she would always be his little princess.

“She's all tuckered out,” he whispered.

“With good reason: that was quite a performance she put up,” returned Kristoph with pride as he shut and locked the door behind him. “I've been to my fair share of magic shows, but I have to say, our Trucy’s a genius.”

Phoenix chuckled. “I'll say. When she made a hundred doves appear from under the tables, I nearly soiled my pants! I mean, where the heck did she even get a hundred doves?”

Kristoph cleared his throat awkwardly. Phoenix shot him a bemused grin.

“Kristoph?”

At his boyfriend’s playful accusation, the blonde didn't bother suppressing his amusement.

“Well, I might have offered some assistance. There was an old client of mine who owned an aviary...”

Phoenix shook his head fondly.

“You really love her,” he commented; gaze soft, his heart melting. “You're so supportive... I... I don't deserve you.”

“We'll see about that.”
Kristoph wrapped his arms around Phoenix’s waist from behind and pressed his face affectionately against the latter’s temple, breathing in his sweet scent. It made Phoenix smile blissfully to himself as he basked in his boyfriend’s attentions. And then, Kristoph angled his head and kissed him – wet, demanding and full of tongue. Phoenix felt his toes curl. Oh, how he missed this. Away from the prying eyes of society and the pains of the past, they were finally free to love each other. No Apollo, no games, no shame and regret; just the two of them together as lovers. At that moment, with Trucy in his arms and Kristoph’s warmth pressed against him, Phoenix couldn't help but feel that the three of them were the perfect image of a loving, happy family.

Kristoph broke the kiss and reluctantly pulled away.

“By the way, Trucy said something to me yesterday afternoon,” he began in a gentle murmur. “She asked if she's made you proud. I would've thought the answer to be obvious.”

“She said that?”

“Quite so.”

Phoenix stared down at his daughter and had to resist giggling when she started sleep-talking, her mutters a nonsensical garble of gibberish and odd sounds. He knew what she had meant: it wasn't a desire to please him – not what Kristoph interpreted – but guilt. Trucy felt responsible for the way things turned out: the fall that immortalized his shame; the hardship and humiliation he dragged himself through every single day; and the extra burden of caring for her when she had no father to call her own. Although he never once saw her as a burden and despite many years of constant reassurance, he knew she always felt so deep in her heart. She had given him that diary page, sealed his fate and doomed him to an everlasting nightmare. She hated herself for her innocence, for not remembering the person’s face – whether it was a man or woman – but she had been too young and he never held it against her. Every day, she sought to make things right, even though it was never her fault – and that was why he loved her so much. He loved her so much, he realised how wrong his mentality in raising her for the past seven years had been, and how right Apollo was. If he was ever going to change anything, he needed to start with himself.

“There's never a moment when I'm not proud of her,” he answered, to which Kristoph flashed a knowing smile.

“As I thought,” he commented, taking Trucy from Phoenix and pulling the sleeping teen into his arms. “I'll get her settled into bed. Wait for me in the drawing room? I have something to discuss with you.”

“Sure.”

Kristoph made his way up the grand marble stairs and disappeared into the darkness of the second floor. Phoenix meanwhile padded quietly to the drawing room, inwardly marveling at the mansion’s baroque decor and shivering from the cold. No matter how many times he came here, stayed here, there was no getting used to the place’s distinct class. It was disgusting: the Gavin brothers were so needlessly wealthy, Phoenix wondered what on earth they needed all this space for. A home was supposed to be warm, intimate and cosy, lived-in, but Gavin Manor always felt and looked creepier at night. It was the loneliness. Kristoph often commented on that too, which perhaps led to the frequent invitations for him and Trucy to stay over. Of course, Trucy never minded – she loved Kristoph like a second father. Himself on the other hand… well, it wasn't the house; certainly not his boyfriend that made him nervous and hesitant, but someone else. And this someone always made it their sole mission to remind him how much they loathed his every existence and wanted him out.

Phoenix switched on the light and crossed the room. He walked past seemingly endless shelves of
books and a desk in the center and was just about to take a seat on a plush armchair, when a new voice stopped him. It was as smooth and refined as silk, carried the same feel as Kristoph’s, but with a distinct careless edge. It was the kind of voice that naturally pulled at people’s ears and beckoned them to listen; Trucy often likened it to an angel’s song; but for Phoenix, he heard nothing but contempt – contempt reserved exclusively for him.

“No strays allowed on the furniture.”

Phoenix stiffened and automatically avoided the chair, regarding the newcomer with sad, anxious eyes.

“Oh. H-Hey, Klavier…”

The young prosecutor was decked in his usual black leather ensemble, purple jacket draped over his shoulders, and a large metal chain with the ‘G’ logo of his band – The Gavinners – hanging from around his neck. Phoenix always thought it said something about you if you named your entire band after yourself.

The thing about Klavier Gavin was that just like his brother, he was ridiculously successful. It was like whatever he touched turned to gold. Not only was the 24-year-old the country’s top prosecutor, he was also the founder/leader/lead guitarist/vocalist of his platinum award winning band.

Apart from that last bit, Klavier and Kristoph shared most things in common (perfectionists being the dominant quality). The two brothers had the same piercing, gorgeous ice-blue eyes, wore their long blonde hair in an elegant drill and were equally, devilishly handsome. There were some key differences between them though. While Kristoph was fair, Klavier was noticeably tan. Another thing was obviously their choice of clothing and the way they carried themselves: Kristoph was elegant, pure poetry, a charming prince from a fairytale; Klavier was exciting, sexy, hell’s prince of rock and roll.

“If it isn't the has-been,” Klavier mocked as he stepped into the light, the smirk on his face antagonistic. He leaned his guitar against the wall.

“Tell me, do you still date mein bruder to ease your irresponsible father ways?”

Another thing that set them apart: while Klavier had a tendency to pepper his speech with German, Kristoph did no such thing. Phoenix still remembered his shock when he first discovered his own boyfriend’s German origins through Klavier, which subsequently led to his knowledge of Klavier’s intolerance towards him after that trial. Dating big brother dearest of course, only made things worse.

Phoenix had to resist a sigh. Honestly, seven years of Klavier rubbing salt into an old wound was getting – well, old. Though right now, he wasn't feeling too keen on flinging insults and banging tables.

“I'm not the one living in Kristoph’s house and off his name,” he countered flippantly.

“It’s our haus, has-been. Something you wish you have,” Klavier sneered.

“You have a house. I have a home – a good one: warm, happy and honest,” Phoenix returned calmly.

“Says the one with the bad reputation, ja?”

“At least my reputation comes from my own name—”
“Schnauze!”

Klavier slammed his fist against the wall so hard, the ‘BANG’ made Phoenix jump and avoid the younger male’s furious gaze. Well, he certainly didn’t expect to get such a reaction from Klavier, though now wasn’t the time to congratulate himself on witty comebacks (even if it was true Klavier’s solid reputation was mostly due to his brother’s fame). Perhaps disgust was a better term to summarize the rockstar/prosecutor’s feelings. The only thing keeping Klavier from running him over with his precious ‘hog’ was his respect for Kristoph, his concern for Trucy, and the fact he didn’t want ‘the has-been’s’ blood dirtying his motorbike. Although the state hailed him as a prodigy when he started prosecuting at the age of 17, Klavier was spoiled. It was always his way or the highway and if anything, Apollo’s request made Phoenix further despair. *How the hell am I going to get close to him?* Rolling over wouldn’t change a thing: Klavier hated everything he stood for, hated his perceptiveness, and hated him more for dating his brother.

“Ach! The has-been’s grasping straws,” Klavier spat, waving Phoenix off as if he were nothing more than dirt beneath his boot.

Personally, he had nothing against Wright’s daughter – Trucy was innocent and it was nice having her around as she listened to him play the guitar, watched him write and compose songs, sang along to his music. If only her father wasn’t such a hopeless, good-for-nothing. He had heard enough from Kristoph to feel both sorry for the girl and his own brother. A rentboy and gambling? Kristoph deserved better; he *was* better, and Klavier wondered what in God’s name his big brother ever saw in Wright that kept him committed. The guy was bad news. At the very least, he refused to let Trucy suffer her father’s brokenness.

“Verlassen Sie mein Haus! Just leave Fraulein Trucy here and nev-“

“Let me work for you.”

The request was so sudden, it actually made Klavier sputter.

“W-Was?”

“Trucy told me she’s helping you with a magic trick for your show. Let me work for you too.”

“B-But… Ah…”

“What am I hearing, Phoenix?” interrupted a third voice.

Phoenix whirled around and came face to face with his boyfriend’s smile. Kristoph had his arms folded, his expression a cross between bemused and expectant. Klavier meanwhile, looked like he had just swallowed something particularly nasty.

“Ja, I would like to know too.”

All eyes were on Phoenix, who simply shrugged in response.

“You have a concert coming up, I heard you need people.”

“Ja, people. Not has-beens-”

“Klavier!” Kristoph raised his voice and the young prosecutor immediately snapped his mouth shut.

“Why the sudden interest in *The Gavinners*?” Kristoph asked, genuinely curious. “And I thought you already agreed to let Trucy handle the family income?”
“I quit my job,” answered Phoenix hastily. “All three of them.”

That earned him a long pause from the two brothers, though Klavier was the first to break it.

“Na, it's not like you actually could play piano…”

“Thanks.”

“Phoenix,” Kristoph interrupted, the frown on his face disapproving. “that’s incredibly reckless, even for you.”

“I thought about what you said, about all the poor life choices I made,” he explained, carefully selecting his words. “I thought about Trucy, about you, but most importantly, about myself. I want to change, Kristoph. You've been good to me and you frankly deserve better – and I want to be that man. I… I want to climb back up. Please, let me work. Let me get back out there. I think I'm ready.”

Throughout his speech, Kristoph’s expression remained impassive, as unreadable and cold as ice, but there was no trace of hostility lurking beneath the surface and for that he felt relieved. Kristoph wasn't mad at him. In fact, it appeared he was actually listening, albeit unnaturally serious. Phoenix could even see the intricate gears in the man’s head turning. And then, after what felt like forever, Kristoph gifted him with a rare and pleasant laugh.

“And I'll be there for you every step of the way, Phoenix.”

There was so much pride and love shining in his eyes, Phoenix felt his heart melt. The last time Kristoph looked at him like that, so tender and wonderful, was when they first fell in love.

“Kristoph…” but he was immediately silenced with a finger to his lips.

Kristoph flashed him an understanding smile, before turning to address his brother who had spent the past few seconds gagging at their exchange.

“Klavier.”

“Was?”

The grimace on the young prosecutor’s face was clear indication of his reluctance. He had a pretty good idea where this was going…

“I don't see any harm in letting Phoenix help out,” began Kristoph with his usual placid smile. “Besides, didn't you say that your dresser quit at the last minute?”

“Ja, but the only help I really need is fraulein’s for the opening number. The Gavinners can handle their own wardrobe.”

“A performance without a dresser?” said Kristoph, astonished. “I've never heard of such a thing. How terribly inefficient.”

Klavier struggled with his response, “But, bruder–”

“Klavier, can't you see that he's trying to turn his life around? Phoenix needs help, our help; and I've done so much for you after all these years… Can't you do this one little thing for me?”

The guilt card. Klavier relented with a sigh. When it came to Phoenix, there was no winning against Kristoph.
“Fein…” He turned to address the source of his angst with barely concealed contempt. “Rehearsals start tomorrow. If you're not ready by 9 a.m., I'm leaving without you. Ist das klar?”

“Um… Uh… kla- I mean, clear,” Phoenix replied, only to pause when he realised something. “Oh, wait. I… uh… Have a question.”

“Ja?”

“What's a dresser?”

The only thing that prevented Klavier from clobbering the ex-lawyer with his guitar, was Kristoph standing between them. He needed to break something so bad.

Phoenix grinned sheepishly. Klavier didn't share his amusement as he walked out of the room with a cranky “Nacht”, leaving the couple to their own devices. Awkward and unsure, Phoenix turned to Kristoph, who wrapped an arm around his waist and slowly led him up the stairs to their bedroom.

“Get some rest,” he said in a gentle murmur, “tomorrow’s going to be a long day, both for you and Trucy.”

“But didn't you want to tell me something?”

When wide, curious blue eyes met his, Kristoph chuckled and placed a chaste kiss on Phoenix’s soft lips.

“Don't worry,” he replied, “it can wait.”

“NEIN! You idiot, nein!”

Chaos exploded backstage, specifically in The Gavinners ’s dressing room. While most of the crew had grown used to the German rockstar’s whinging and his so-called ‘moods’, many steering clear of him altogether in fact, a certain temporary dresser unfortunately didn't get the memo and Klavier let the poor guy have it. All of it. Including some choice German swear words that would make any mother cry, as well as whatever he could get his hands on that wasn't enough to kill, but could potentially cause severe damage to the cranium if thrown right.

“But it had a stain!”

“I refuse to let you touch mein pants again!”

“But - “

“WHO PUTS LEATHER IN A WASHING MACHINE?!”

Phoenix dodged a can of hairspray and quickly held up Klavier’s jacket in a last ditch effort to appease his new boss.

“A-At least I fixed the hole in your sleeve,” he said, displaying his handiwork for all to see.

Klavier twitched. “I don’t see a hole, I see a whole bunch of Weiß auf lila!”
Phoenix blinked dumbly. “Uh… sorry, what?”

“White and purple!” he screeched. “You don’t use white thread on purple, verdammt! And why was there even a hole?!”

“Ahaha… um… you see, there was this loose thread and… uh… I cut a little… too... much?”

*Oh my god.*

Klavier slapped his forehead and wondered what on earth he did to deserve this. *Amazing.* Less than 10 minutes on the job and Phoenix already found a way to fuck up their *brand new* costumes. Honestly, the guy only had *one job* and he was severely close to losing it. Unfortunately, Klavier could only pray that Phoenix decided to quit on his own because firing him, according to his brother, was out of the question.

“Ach! Tell me you share my angst, Daryan.”

The man in question pointed at his best friend mockingly, his giant black-and-white pompadour bouncing as he laughed.

“Dude, it's just *your* costume, lighten up! Look on the bright side: at least the audience would know who to look at.”

“Daryan!”

As the two friends bickered, Phoenix couldn't help but giggle as he spared a quick glance at *The Gavinners*’s handsome, second guitarist. Daryan Crescend – 24, over-the-top sense of style, talented musician by night; high-ranking Interpol agent by day. That was *The Gavinners*’s gimmick: each member of the famous rock group were all employed by local law enforcement and shared the same questionable (according to Phoenix anyway) fashion sense. However, despite all the glitz and glamor, Daryan still managed to stand out from his fellow band mates.

Phoenix recalled the dramatic double take he did when Klavier first introduced them; after all, it was kind of hard to ignore a giant pompadour staring you in the face. So, outrageous hair – definitely a check. The other thing was his magnetic personality: Daryan was *so nice*, you couldn't help but be naturally drawn to him like a moth to a flame. Sure, he possessed the same confidence, cool and charisma as Klavier, but he was a little more down-to-earth; reasonable; witty; perhaps a tad condescending with his jokes, though it was all in the name of fun. But most importantly, as an Interpol agent, he had been through hardship, seen things that changed people, and that made him a firm yet sympathetic soul. Daryan was a brother, a wolf in a pack, humble at his core with a heart of gold, but also as assertive and passionate as a flame. He could be painfully direct, a little rough around the edges, but he was real and Phoenix liked him. Besides, *someone* needed to keep the band’s spoiled leader in check.

“It's the man’s first day on the job, cut him some slack. With you being such a princess, no wonder he's screwing up,” admonished Daryan, folding his arms. “You know, this is exactly why our last dresser quit. This guy sucks, but at least he was brave enough to tell you he fucked up.”

Phoenix nearly fell over. If Daryan wasn't defending him, he would have taken offense to his bluntness. Meanwhile, the other members too expressed their support.

“Egal!” Klavier yelled, throwing his hands in the air. He couldn't believe this: his band’s first major disagreement and it was over a *dresser*? *Lächerlich!*

“Achtung, Has-been!” he snarled, pointing accusingly at a confused Phoenix. “I won't forgive this
insubordination. Stand five meters within mein new kostüm and you're fired! The rest of you – he glared at his band mates – let him handle yours at your own risk.”

“Aw, quit being so dramatic, leader,” said Crow, the drummer and also the youngest member of the group.

“Yeah, man, it’s not the end of the world,” chimed Valerian, keyboardist and ever the optimist.
“Besides, weren’t you saying you wanted a new costume because that shade of purple didn’t go with your guitar? Right, Amaranth?”

The beautiful bassist simply hummed in agreement, but never once looked up from his reflection as he continued to apply his lipstick.

“Verpiss dich!”

“Bro, come o-”

Klavier stormed out of the room and slammed the door shut before Daryan could finish his sentence. Screw them and screw Wright! Never in his entire life had he felt so humiliated.

Meanwhile, still in the dressing room, Phoenix released an awkward laugh (though it sounded more like a cross between miserable and disbelieving) and buried his face in the jacket he ruined. So much for a positive, lasting first impression. At least he got the lasting part down. Hopefully, Trucy was faring better with Lamiroir and her magic than he was at sewing clothes.

“Sorry… Please tell me I didn't just break up The Gaviners,” he said, honestly horrified.

Crow laughed and waved him off. “Nah… Happens every concert. Stick around with us long enough, old man, and you'll see what I mean.”

Phoenix chose to ignore that ‘old man’ comment. He had changed out of his baggy hoodie and sweatpants into a form-fitting black t-shirt and jeans; honestly, he would've thought that made him look a little younger. Well, at least he didn't have a million piercings in his ears… Wait, wasn't this kid supposed to be from traffic police? Then again, Daryan was from Interpol and he had that hair…

“I bet you're thinking how we’re all still together,” said Daryan with a grin as he sat down next to Phoenix. “Seriously, it all boils down to trust; after all, brothers fight.”

“Enough chatter, my crop top doesn't show enough of my midriff,” Amaranth interrupted as he gazed critically at his reflection. “Think you could take off an inch or two, dresser?”

“Um… I can try,” said Phoenix as he approached the silver-haired bassist with a set of pins. “Ok… How’s… that ?”

“… Not bad.”

“Ok, I'll alter it by Tuesday. If you're lucky, it'll look great. If you're unlucky, there won't be much fabric left, but you'll still look great.”

“Nice.”

“Woah, you know Amaranth’s taste?” Valerian gaped. “You sure you haven't done this before?”

Phoenix shrugged. “Let's just say… I've worn my fair share of revealing clothes. I know what people like.”
Daryan shuddered. “TMI, old man.”

“Hey, I'm only 33, you jerks! And I'll have you know people say I don't look a day older than 25,” he pouted and threw a cushion at Daryan, who caught it with a laugh.

“Alright, alright…You win.”

Suddenly, the amusement disappeared from his dark eyes and Daryan’s face took on a contemplative expression. He studied Phoenix, making the latter feel slightly nervous and inadequate under his scrutiny. When the second guitarist went serious like that, he seemed to age from the experience gained from his perilous line of work. It actually made Phoenix wonder which Daryan was the real one: the agent on a mission, or the life of the band.

“Yo, this has been driving me crazy all morning, but I got to know,” said Daryan, plucking the beanie off Phoenix’s head and freeing his spikes. “You’re Phoenix Wright, aren't you? The Turnabout King.”

“No way!” Amaranth, Crow and Valerian gasped in unison, scrambling to where the pair sat.

“Nah, nothing like that.” He waved them off with a laugh. “Just Phoenix Wright, rookie dresser at your service.”

“Aha! I knew it!” Daryan grinned, slapping his thigh. “Don't know what Klavier’s deal is, but getting dressed by you – man, that's quite an honor!”

Phoenix paused and blinked slowly, confused. “It… It is?”

“Sure!” Then it was his turn to pout. “… Ok, fine, maybe it's kinda lame for someone from Interpol to say this, but I'm a fan. Still am, actually.”

“Really? But you're Interpol! That's where all the action is! I'm just a defense lawyer – well, I was …” Phoenix trailed off, shocked, embarrassed and flattered all at once.

“What can I say? You gotta love and respect a man crazy enough to cross-examine a parrot and fall off a burning bridge in the middle of friggin winter!”

They laughed and for Phoenix, it was genuine; full of mirth and nostalgia. He hadn't felt this comfortable around strangers before – though he couldn't say that now, could he? Colleagues. It was strange. He never thought he'd have colleagues, not after everything that’s happened. But The Gavinners (minus Klavier) were different: they felt more like a weird combination of friends and family; and things certainly didn't help when he had to sew their stuff. Phoenix felt like a proud, demented mother, who had just realised she had four outrageous, reckless sons on top of an already excitable, peculiar daughter.

“Hey, Phoenix – I can call you that, right?” asked Daryan hesitantly.

“Actually, you guys can just call me Nick,” he answered with a smile.

Daryan’s jaw dropped. “S-Seriously? Wow… Ok.” He recovered quickly and that confident grin was back. “Listen up, Nick, if you need anything – questions, directions, giving Klavier’s face a good smack – don’t hesitate to ask me or the boys, you got that? Except for that last one: you come find me.”

“Got it,” said Phoenix with a laugh.
“I’m serious, ok? Down at Interpol and in this band, we work as a team. If I find out someone’s been ill-treating you and you don’t tell me shit, I’ll play my baby, crank up the volume, and handcuff you to the speakers.”

“Haha! Alright, alright!”

He was still mostly confused by his job and the most sewing he ever did was patchwork when him or Trucy got holes in their clothes, but he figured high school home economics ought to count for something, right? Plus, he had the wrong impression of Klavier’s band the whole time: The Gavinners were great. Being a dresser was alright. It made him wonder why he hadn’t thought of quitting poker sooner.

“Hey, guys. Do you think he’d sign my left butt cheek? That way, when girls check my ass, they’d know they’re doing it wright.”

“Argh, Crow, don’t be gross!”

“That’s just as bad as your sense of humor.”

“What?! It’ll be cool!”

Phoenix smiled and shook his head. Yeah… he could get used to this.

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Lunch break.

Phoenix snuck into a quiet corner backstage and took out his cell phone. There wasn't really much to do after this morning’s fitting session. The Gavinners had taken to the stage for rehearsals (and inevitably causing everyone’s ears to bleed), but that was ok because the walls were mostly soundproof and Klavier had the courtesy of turning off the backstage speakers this time.

So, as always, Phoenix decided to call the only person he ever really could talk to for the past few years. His thumb hovered over the number 2 button, having saved Kristoph’s number on speed dial, and hesitated. He knew his lover was expecting his call, even maintained that he did so exactly once daily, but he honestly didn't feel like calling Kristoph. For the first time in seven years, he didn't miss the sound of his voice. Instead, he accessed his contacts list and when he found who he was looking for (not that he had a lot of people to go through anyway), he pressed ‘call’, placed his phone against his ear and waited. It rang for what seemed like forever; he wondered why he suddenly felt nervous; and just when he was about to chicken out and hang up, the person finally answered.

“Jus – yawn – Justice speaking…”

Phoenix couldn't stop the warm smile from gracing his lips.

“Hey,” he breathed, feeling strangely at ease, “rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty. It's 1 p.m.”

"Huh…?"

“In the afternoon. 1 p.m.,” he repeated.

"Right, right… 1 p.m… 1 p.m…”
Phoenix could've sworn he heard snoring.

“Oi, don't fall asleep on me.”

"Mnrgh… Who… Who's this? Why're you calling me? It's Sunday. Let me sleep. Go away."

Wow. Apollo could be quite cranky when he didn't want to wake up.

“It's me, kid. Spare me a minute?”

The reaction he got was immediate.

"Oh! A-Afternoon, Mr. Wright! Talk? Sure, we can talk! I'm free! Is anything the matter? What do you need? Apollo Justice is fine and ready to go!"

Talk about selective attention. Phoenix had to hold the phone away for a second, ears ringing. Honestly, those Chords of Steel...

At least Apollo was more alert and very much awake by now. Phoenix could practically see the brunette struggling out of bed… and by the sound of it, falling out of bed too.

“Does it have to be a problem if I call?” he replied, amused. “How's the arm? Did you see a doctor yet?”

Apollo had complained about it all night/morning when they stayed up to play poker at The Borscht Bowl Club. It became so disruptive every time he tried to pull a bluff over Apollo, that they eventually called it quits. So much for bringing the kid to the dark side.

"Oh, yeah. He didn't find anything wrong, but I’m guessing it might just be a slight sprain – sigh – Looks like I won't be cycling to work for a while."

“That's good to hear. You should get more rest. Sorry for bothering you.”

"Why did you call anyway? I mean – it's great! Uh... That is, not that you calling me is great – well, ok it is. And you're great, but that's... Wow, I can't believe Mr. Wright actually called me– Ack! Did I just say that out loud?! Uh... Please don't hang up, I got this."

He was stumbling again. Phoenix found Apollo’s blatant crush on him adorable.

“I got a job,” he explained, taking pity on the younger male, “as a dresser for The Gavinners’ upcoming concert. It's only temporary, but it sure beats… well, you know. Anyway, I think Klavier might be a scarier boss than Kristoph, just more glimmerous. And a fop.”

"A job? That... That's great, sir! I didn't expect you to find one so fast, but wow... I'm happy for you!"

“Thanks!”

"No luck getting Prosecutor Gavin to spill, I'm guessing?"

“I'm still trying to get us in the same room for more than five seconds without arguing,” he answered with an exasperated sigh.

"I see... Well, let’s hope working for him gets us what we need. Anyway, The Gavinners? I didn't expect you to be a fan of their music."
Phoenix grimaced. “Are you kidding me? I think I’m already half deaf! It’s actually Trucy who’s got a real deal with them – she’s making Diva Divine disappear.”

"Diva Divine?"

“Oh, sorry. Lamiroir – their international guest from Borginia. Her singing’s really – well, divine. Anyway, I’m just tagging along as last minute help.”

"Haha! Careful, Mr. Wright. Soon people would start calling you ‘Trucy’s dad’ instead of your real name.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, I always knew she was good; I just didn’t expect her to be this good. And The Gavinners aren’t so bad actually. Even though it’s slightly weird that I’m working with people a decade younger than myself, I think they kind of accepted me into the their… uh… gang. Oh yeah…”

As Phoenix went on about his day in ostensibly high spirits, like a child who had attended his first day of school, Apollo listened to him patiently with a sense of endearment and pride. It felt wonderful to hear his idol so upbeat and passionate, a sheer contrast to his previous cynicism, and the more he listened, the more it strengthened his resolve to see their investigation through. He wanted Phoenix to always be happy like this.

“And don’t worry, I’ll get you a souvenir and an autograph – which member is your bias? Trucy likes Klavier of course. Come on, I actually got connections this time and I want to use them!”

"Uh… Sir? No offense, but I hate The Gavinners and I hate that kind of music. Too loud."

Apollo? Too loud? That’s a first.

“Really? Huh, I thought all you kids these days were into the same thing…”

Apollo laughed at his idol’s naivety. He really was cute. It was only when Phoenix started stuttering when Apollo realised he actually said it out loud. But this time, instead of being embarrassed about it or taking it back, he simply decided to let his feelings flow.

"Mr. Wright?"

“H-Huh?”

There was a long pause; the only sounds being that of Apollo’s steady breathing. It was hard to picture what the brunette was actually doing, thinking; and the thing that surprised Phoenix was that he didn't mind the silence. It was oddly comfortable, pleasant and inexplicably reassuring, like he had nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, because Apollo was right there on the line listening to him. In all his years of dating, be it Dahlia/Iris or Kristoph, none of them ever spoke to him on the phone longer than necessary or for the mere pleasure of hearing each other’s voice. He admitted he was a sucker for long conversations into the night (or day), but he never got to indulge in it. It didn't have to always be just business; the conversations didn't have to make sense, but the time spent was what made them special.

"I wish I was there."

“Apollo?”

Phoenix heard the young lawyer chuckle at his confusion and the charming way it sounded made his heart flutter.
"I wish I was there to see you. You sound so happy."

He had to hold back a gasp. The way Apollo said it was so full of longing, so sincere and affectionate, it made them sound like lovers. If Apollo could fool him into thinking that, he most certainly could fool the world as well. Before Phoenix knew it, he started to shake, overwhelmed by emotion. At the back of his mind, he wanted Apollo to be here too, just to make sure his attorney was real, and he didn't know why.

That thought made him pause. *His* attorney… Phoenix didn't realize when he himself got so possessive.

"I… I *am* happy," he replied with a fond smile, the one he used to reserve only for Kristoph. “More than you know.”

"I'm glad, sir."

Another long pause, and then…

“Apollo?”

"Yes, Mr. Wright?"

“Thank you. For believing in me,” he whispered, so softly that one had to strain their ears in order to hear it. But Apollo did and Phoenix didn’t have to see him to know that the lawyer was smiling too.

"You're welcome, sir. Good luck at work!"

“Wait!”

Phoenix paused, hesitated; never in his whole life had he felt this embarrassed. It was a first for him and he could feel his heart pounding relentlessly in his chest. He swallowed nervously and when he breathed, his words came out shaky and uncharacteristically shy.

“I…” he cleared his throat, “I… I’ll see you soon, right? I get Mondays off.”

For a while, Apollo failed to respond, but when he realised what that last statement suggested, he sounded more eager than before, perhaps even slightly embarrassed himself. Was Phoenix trying to get him to ask him out?

"Y-Yeah! Of… Of course… I'll, er- call you."

“Ok!”

"Great!"

"Um… Bye."

"Bye."

But neither men actually wanted to hang up. Phoenix gripped the phone tighter. *Say something!* *Invite him to come.* However, it was only after Apollo laughed and chided him to quit slacking, when he caught himself and hurriedly ended the call with a quick “B-Bye!”.

Flustered, Phoenix stared at his phone screen, at Apollo’s handsome picture he’d secretly, jokingly taken at the club the previous night to use as the kid’s profile photo, and felt his entire body turn pleasantly warm. For a full minute, he remained where he stood alone in his little corner, a small
smile on his face, blushing.

Under the harsh glare of the spotlight, Klavier struck a pose, held up three fingers and called out to his band mates.

“Achtung, baby! On the count of three, from the top! Ein, zwei, dre–”

“GLIMMEROUS FOP!”

Everyone faltered; electric guitars sounded like dying cats; and a drumstick flew off somewhere into the distance. Someone threw a bag of snackoos. Klavier ducked with practiced grace and it ended up getting stuck in Daryan’s hair. Valerian snickered and pointed at him.

“Haha! Dude, you got food in your hair!”

“Really? Where?”

“Seriously? Can't you feel it?”

Klavier twitched as he repressed the urge to scream. Verdammt! Was nothing going right today?

There was only one person he knew who called him that name and would continue to resist his princely charms until the day she supposedly died and beyond. Also, seeing as they needed each other during investigations and were pretty much (very reluctant and resentful) partners, she was someone he had the greatest misfortune of working with and vice versa. He had given up appealing to her good will a long time ago. If there was ever an instance where two people were simply not meant for each other with zero chemistry, this was it. This person hated his guts; the feeling was mutual; the only difference was that he was very good at being professional, while she made it a point to be as explicit about her opinion as humanly possible.

“Ah, Fraulein Detective. How may I help you?” he greeted as civilly as his patience could manage.

“Don’t ‘Fraulein’ me,” she grouched, jabbing the blonde in the chest with a snackoo. “The name’s Ema Skye – Use it! And what's this about needing security? I'm a detective not a security guard, stupid!”

“Klavier, what's her problem?” asked Amaranth with a grimace. “Can we go on or what?”

“... Take five guys,” said Daryan, bringing his hands up in a sign for half time before clapping Klavier on the shoulder, meeting his friend’s grateful stare. “If it's work, make it quick,” he whispered.

Klavier led Ema to the backstage walkway and regarded her expectantly. The grumpy detective noticed that he was leaning forward in a patronizing manner, hands on his hips, flashing her a charming smile which didn't work on her. ‘When would he ever learn?’ she thought with a roll of her eyes.

“What's this about hiring me as security? And you are aware that ‘hiring’ entails payment, which by the way, you aren't.”

Klavier laughed. It was the kind of carefree laughter with a sexy touch of suggestion that normally
made fangirls swoon, but only made Ema want to splash hydrochloric acid all over his pretty little face.

“Think of it as a favor, Fraulein,” he began smoothly as he played with a lock of his fringe. “Mein konzert is in five days and I'll need someone on konstant watch. Especially with Fraulein Lamiroir as my opening act, I can't afford for anything to go wrong.”

“Sounds more like you overshot your budget,” she accused the frivolous rockstar. “For the last time, I'm a detective; and what's more, I'm not even going to get paid for this! Find someone else to extort, maybe one of your millions of fangirls. I don't owe you shit, you glimmerous fop!”

“Ja, I think you do, Fraulein. I think you do,” said Klavier with a wink, the smirk playing on his lips playful yet foreboding. “Let's not forget you failed that forensics exam… You must've felt so disappointed. Perhaps almost as much as Fraulein Lana—”

“Shut up!” Ema screamed, only to inwardly cringe at her own outburst.

Seven years and she still let this pompous diva get the better of her. But the man was right: being a forensics investigator had always been her dream and no one supported her greater than her sister. Lana bought her tons of books, sponsored a good portion of her forensics kits, indulged in her ‘scientific’ escapades; and what did she do? She let her down. The least she could do was accomplish her dream and in turn, make her sister proud after all those years of tireless sacrifice. Unfortunately, reality proved a tough pill to swallow and nine years struggling at the bottom of the food chain could make a woman desperate.

“If you want that recommendation, I can help you; after all, as top prosecutor, mein word is law,” continued Klavier, giggling at his little joke. “But everything comes at a cost, or has Fraulein Detective forgotten our deal?”

Lana’s smiling face flashed across her mind, along with all those years of scientific investigative work she did with people she would always cherish. Especially a certain defense lawyer whom she promised she’d come back a scientist for and help in his future investigations. They worked great together as a team and she had given him her first and only fingerprint powder as a promise. But that was all in the past; he was gone now; and they were precious memories she could never get back.

“No, I haven't…” she sighed in resignation. “So, this security thing, when do I start?”

Trucy raised her magic wand from her spot in the audience and gave the cue, or rather sang it into her mouthpiece. “It wraps itself around me… And now through the air I fly!”

She waved her wand; the costumed figure on stage spread their arms and as soon as their cloak was pulled down, their body disappeared and in its place a series of sparks burst into the air in a brilliant display of color and magic. As choreographed, the cloak continued to sail through the air towards an elevated platform in the middle of the audience.

“Keep singing, Lamiroir,” she spoke into her mouthpiece. “Just because we can't see you, doesn't mean you're gone.”

‘Ah, sorry! Burning on in my heart. Fire... Burn my love away. All away...’
Trucy watched the cloak slowly make its way to the marked spot on the platform. If they got the timing right, Lamiroir would need to hit her last line right about…

Sparks exploded on the platform like fireworks; the cloak seemed to drape itself over it and in a blink of an eye, the light faded and a figure began to take shape.

… Now!

‘Guitar, guitar… Up together to the sky.’

And there she was in all her glory. Lamiroir allowed her eyes to drift shut, her hands falling to her sides; and when the last note faded, she opened them. Trucy cheered and applauded enthusiastically from below. Perfect! The illusion worked! Now that they managed to get the individual timings and music cues to synch up, all that was left was to work with The Gavinners together for a full trial run.

Just then, her cell phone rang and she scrambled to answer it, all the while addressing the singer as she did so. “Great job, Lamiroir! Just remember to keep singing when the sparks go up – don't let it scare you!” She accepted the call and brought the phone up to her ear. “Hiya! The Amaaaaazng Trucy Wright speaking! If it’s illusions and magic you need, I've got just the spell for you.”

The person on the line chuckled and Trucy’s smile immediately brightened.

“Mr. Gavin!”

“Already marketing yourself, I see?”

She puffed up her chest proudly. “You bet! Once word gets out that The Gavinners hired me to stage their concert’s opening act, I'd be answering calls and taking requests all day! And can you imagine when news travels to Borginia? Woohoo! I'd be Miss Worldwide!”

“Well, I most certainly can't argue with that. You are after all, a natural genius. I expected no less.”

Trucy giggled and stuck out her tongue, more flattered than smug. She knew as much as anyone that drawing forth compliments from Kristoph was no easy feat; and he didn't even sound patronizing.

“Perhaps Phoenix could consider becoming your full-time manager.”

“Nah… Daddy can't stay organized to save his life,” she waved off his suggestion. “Knowing him, we'd have to hire someone to remind him to remind me of performance dates or promotional ventures.”

“A valid point,” he conceded, before his tone turned slightly mischievous. “You didn't breathe a word about it, did you?”

His question earned him a pout from the young magician, but even she couldn't contain her own excitement bubbling within. Heck, she even surprised herself for being able to keep a secret as awesome as this one for this long; and to hold it back for one entire month? Urgh, this was torture; after all, this was the one thing she had been dying to hear since Kristoph walked into her and Phoenix’s lives; dreamed of since the handsome, famous and prince-like defense attorney kissed the back of her daddy’s hand and asked him to be his.

“No way, I swear! My lips are sealed,” she replied with gusto and Kristoph chuckled from how adorable she sounded.

“Alright, I trust you. Ah, by the way, is Phoenix with you? He hasn't called all morning and it's
already well past noon. It's not customary for him to forget.”

“Daddy?” she said with a frown. “No, I'm with Lamiroir right now. You mean he didn't call you? Really? Not even for a short while?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Oh. Cuz I saw him on the phone earlier during lunch break. I could've sworn he was talking to you though…”

“And why do you say that?”

“Well… Daddy doesn't talk to anybody but you, Mr. Gavin. And he was smiling. You know, that really pretty, happy smile he only gives you!”

When she heard nothing but silence from the other line, she grew worried.

“Mr. Gavin?” she encroached tentatively.

“I see…”

That was the first time Trucy heard the man sound so distracted, like he had fallen into deep thought and was now seriously contemplating his next course of action. But then, after thinking back to her previous speech – about Phoenix and that mysterious caller – it didn't take her long to put two and two together. If it wasn't Kristoph who called, then who had her daddy been talking to? And the way his defenses came crashing down when he allowed that special smile to surface… Was her daddy seeing someone else?

‘I won't allow it!’ she thought furiously and her heart immediately went out to Kristoph. After everything he did for them, there was no way she was going to let some tasteless, faceless Romeo steal her daddy away from him. Then again, that was mere speculation and for all she knew, she could be overthinking things again, like Phoenix often said she tended to do, like Kristoph often cautioned her against committing. Sometimes, being raised by two defense attorneys had its benefits in terms of moral and intellectual grounding.

‘Right, evidence is everything,’ Trucy mentally reminded herself. ‘Without it, everything is mere conjecture.’

“Mr. Gavin?” she called out to him again, just to make sure. “Are you ok?”

“... I'm fine. My apologies, something came up and it requires my immediate attention. We'll have to cut this conversation short.”

“Oh, alright.”

And then Kristoph’s tone changed to something unnaturally cheery, which made Trucy wonder if things were really as fine as the man had proclaimed.

“Thank you, Trucy. You've been a tremendous help.”

“Erm… You're… well… come?” she replied unsurely, genuinely lost and confused.

When Kristoph hung up after a brief yet courteous “Goodbye”, Trucy stared blankly at her phone for a few seconds, before tossing it back into her bag with a shrug. Grown ups.
“Stupid concert, stupid band, stupid glimmerous fop…”

Ema paused to angrily shove a handful of snackoos into her mouth, munching them with a vengeance.

“Just you wait, Klavier Gavin. When I get into Forensics, I'll cut you up so good, you'd be labeled a crime-”

“Ema?”

A new voice startled her – but not in a bad way – though she supposed one couldn't exactly call a voice new when you heard it before from a memory long past.

Ema whirled around to face the unexpected newcomer, shock and disbelief written clear across her face as she observed the man’s careless attitude. That stubble was a tad disorienting, but there was no forgetting that distinctly spiky hair and those compassionate blue eyes that had looked into her own when she was a teenager; told her to trust him and that everything was going to be ok.

“Nick?! What are you doing here?” she exclaimed, hand flying to her cheek in surprise.

Her reaction drew forth a laugh from Phoenix, who approached her with a lazy smile. He took in that topknot; those rose-tinted glasses perched on her head; that white lab coat; and finally, the detective’s ID that hung in place of those badges with the funny faces. Nine years and he still remembered everything clearly: her penchant for science, how excitable she was, her eagerness and determination for answers, her love for her sister, her dreams, her smile… But she was a grown woman now; taller; tied to the force; her features sharper; lovely. He remembered helping her once upon a time, remembered how she would cling onto his side as a child, noted down his every word like they were from God; and wondered where all those years went.

“Oh, nothing much,” he began with a smile, “just a temporary dresser for The Gavinners. You wouldn't believe the amount of costume changes I have to handle per mem-”

“That’s not what I meant,” Ema interrupted and Phoenix thought she sounded unusually cold. “I mean, after that case with Zak Gramarye, getting disbarred... they let you work? They actually…”

“Trust me?” he finished.

She stiffened and avoided his stare. Phoenix’s smile fell, his eyes sad. This wasn't the Ema he used to know.

“Ema, I didn't do it. You... You believe me, don't you?”

You have to.

“It's not that simple, Nick,” she replied, wrapping her arms around herself and inching away from him as if being burnt. “I can't just choose to believe you're innocent and expect everything to be ok.”

“Why not?”

“Because it's not that simple, ok!” she snapped.

“But, Ema-”
“Look, I read through the whole case and in the court of law, evidence is everything. No matter how you look at it, you can't turn things around. You had the diary page – what am I supposed to think?”

The more Ema spoke, the more she reminded him of Kristoph, of Klavier, of what Apollo had once believed, of the world that shunned him, and it broke his heart.

“Please don't talk like that. It's not like you.”

But when Ema turned her back on him, Phoenix felt his heart plummet. The last friend from his past and he lost her.

“Being a detective has taught me to follow the truth over my heart, and the truth points to your guilt,” she paused to look over her shoulder. “Nick, I'm grateful for what you did for me and my sister, really I am… but that's all in the past.”

“Ema…”

She walked off and left Phoenix alone in the hallway to pick up the pieces.

“... Daddy? Who was that?”

He turned around and found himself staring into his daughter’s big brown eyes filled with concern. As always, she insisted on wearing her magician costume instead of normal clothes, but he supposed in this case, it gave her credibility.

“Are you ok?” she asked, noticing his sorrow and disappointment. “If that evil security guard insulted you, I'll give her a taste of Trucy Wright’s magic!”

It appeared Trucy already met Ema – but a security guard? Boy, was Klavier running low on manpower.

“I'm alright, sweetie, no worries,” he recovered quickly and flashed her a wide grin. “Though care to introduce me to your new friends?” He indicated at the slender, feminine hand in hers.

“Oh! Where are my manners?” she said, sticking out her tongue and bopping herself sheepishly on the head. “Daddy, this is Lamiroir – your ‘Diva Divine’, famous blind singer from Borginia and also the lady I'm helping with her disappearing act.”

Said beauty bowed respectfully, but kept her eyes lowered to the ground. Thankfully, she didn't make any snide remarks about that ‘Diva Divine’ comment because that was really embarrassing. Looking at her, Phoenix noticed she barely blinked, her gentle, enchanting blue eyes darting about in an unconscious habit. She had on her stage costume – a dark blue cloak embroidered with numerous, constellations which apparently glowed in the dark – and a dark veil obscured the lower half of her face. The singer carried herself with calm dignity, her natural grace and silence granting her a mysterious air. Phoenix couldn't see her mouth, but her eyes were smiling and he thought she was beautiful.

“And this – Trucy indicated at a petite blonde boy next to her – is Machi Tobaye. He's Lamiroir’s show partner and pianist. He can be a little shy.”

‘Shy’ probably wasn't the right word to go about describing Machi – in Phoenix’s opinion anyway. The way the boy refused to meet his gaze and appeared to have his nose permanently stuck in the air, told him as much. All in all, he was comparatively less approachable than Lamiroir – and she was the international star!
“Lamiroir, Machi, meet my daddy. He'll be your dresser,” Trucy finished.

“The name’s Phoenix Wright. It's a pleasure to meet you, Diva Div- uh, I mean, M-Miss Lamiroir…”

Lamiroir giggled at that slip-up. Machi looked unimpressed.

“Oh yeah! Daddy, could you bring Lamiroir to her room for me and keep her company?” said Trucy all of a sudden as she placed the singer’s hand in his. “Machi wants to see the pyrotechnics for the magic act…”

Pyrotechnics. He knew he ought to be worried about his daughter playing with stuff like that, but this was Trucy and it had been seven years... As long as she didn't end up setting their guest on fire, then it was all fine and dandy.

“They’re in my dressing room, so we won't take long.”

“Yeah, sure, no pro- you have a dressing room?” Phoenix did a double take and Trucy let loose an innocent giggle.

“Ehehehe… Well, I needed a place to put all my stuff…”

That's a lot of stuff.

“And Mr. Klavier said I could have my own dressing room as long as you didn't share it with me…”

That glimmerous fop.

“Anyway, thanks, daddy! I'll be right back!”

With that, Trucy zipped off with Machi in tow, leaving Phoenix and Lamiroir standing around awkwardly in the middle of the hallway. Breaking the silence with a nervous chuckle, Phoenix held the singer’s hand gently in his and slowly led her to her dressing room.

“Sorry about my daughter,” he apologized, “she just gets a little too excited about her magic tricks – oh, careful, there's some wires here – could I get you a drink?”

It was Lamiroir’s turn to laugh, low and rich like velvet. She hid it behind her hand. Something gold glinted around her wrist, but the movement was too quick for Phoenix to catch what it was. It disappeared under her robe when she lowered her hand.

“Trucy is a wonderful girl; you raised her well. And thank you, Phoenix, you're too kind.”

He blushed and was immensely thankful that she couldn’t see it. Not only was Borginia’s famed ‘Siren’ incredibly gorgeous, but her voice was enchanting as well. No wonder Klavier wanted her on his show for the opening act. He felt like he could listen to Lamiroir forever.

“I try,” came his humble response.

“Well, that’s all any parent can do.”

A brush of her long sandy-brown hair and the jingling of a bracelet – two innocent actions that caught Phoenix’s attention. With a mysterious smile, Lamiroir slipped into the room and Phoenix followed after her, moved by a strange inclination that he had seen this woman before.
“Is there anything else you need, Lamiroir?” asked Phoenix as he helped wrap said woman’s fingers around the handle of a teacup.

“I’m fine, Phoenix, thank you,” she replied before slowly bringing the drink to her lips.

He observed that she never once removed her veil and simply tucked the cup under it. Lamiroir really was as mysterious as her name and music implied. He wondered if her blindness had been a defect from birth or an unfortunate result over the years.

It was then he noticed a nasty tear in the singer’s cloak and rushed right over. From the looks of it, an entire chunk of a constellation seemed to have ripped out.

“Excuse me, Miss Lamiroir? Your costume’s… uh… kinda torn up at the ends. Do you mind if I take it off you and fix it?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed in surprise, her veil momentarily flying up and Phoenix got a quick glimpse of her mouth. “No, of course not! I didn't realize… I suppose you can't have me performing in front of all those people in tattered clothes, can you?”

“Well, I could,” he answered jokingly, “but my boss is a real stick for details and I honestly had enough of him screaming in my face to risk anything.”

Lamiroir clasped her hands and furrowed her brows worriedly. “Oh dear… perhaps you could talk to Klavier? He's a wonderful man. He might be able to work something out between you and your boss.”

Phoenix nearly fell over. Lamiroir really was exceptionally pure and kind. Unfortunately, she couldn't be more off about her judge of character, though he decided against telling her that his evil boss and Klavier were one and the same. No point bursting her bubble if Mr. Rockstar Prosecutor treated her well.

“It's ok. Here, let me just get that for you…”

He helped her out of her cloak and at the very moment she reached up to brush her hair aside, he saw it – a golden bracelet of peculiar design fastened innocently around her right wrist. The sight of it startled him so much, he nearly dropped the cloak. Now he knew he hadn't been imagining things. It was the same bracelet Apollo wore around his left wrist. It was the same bracelet Trucy’s late-mother had around her wrists. It was the one image that haunted him every single morning for the past seven years. Thalassa Gramarye. Apollo Justice. Lamiroir. Three completely different people from completely different worlds. How were they connected? Was it merely a coincidence? What was his ex-client, Zak Gramarye, hiding from him? And most importantly, was he still playing into the man’s game? Too many questions he was honestly too traumatized to seek answers to. He had taken but a mere step into the Gramarye’s dark secret seven years ago and look what it did to him and Trucy.

_But I have to know._

“Excuse me, Lamiroir? I couldn't help but notice your bracelet,” said Phoenix as he took a seat opposite her. “Where did you get it? It’s… really unique.”

“Oh, um…” Her free hand unconsciously moved to touch the golden band around her right wrist. “To be honest, I myself don't remember where or how I got it. Did I have it since the accident? All my life? I really don't know…”
Phoenix immediately sat up. “Accident?”

“I'm not entirely clear what happened,” Lamiroir continued with a troubled frown as she fought to recall her past. “All I remember is waking up to darkness – that was my life and all I ever knew. My body wasn't used to navigating spaces, so whatever happened to me must've caused my blindness. The doctors said I have amnesia.”

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried.”

She shook her head good-naturedly. “No, it's alright; though you're the first person to ask about my bracelet, Phoenix.”

“It seems very special to you,” he observed with a gentle smile.

“Oh, it is,” she replied, her fingers lovingly tracing the lines and grooves of the jewelry’s elaborate pattern. “I can't quite explain why, but I feel it's tied to my past somehow. My hope is to go on singing until one day, I finally find the answers I seek. I suppose you could say that this bracelet is my most prized possession.”

“I see… that's a lovely story, Lamiroir. It, uh, kinda puts mine to shame,” mumbled Phoenix sheepishly, albeit inadequately as he removed the locket from around his neck, opened it and presented the small photograph inside to the older woman. “That’s Trucy when she was 8 years old. Don't let her looks fool you – she's cute, but your impression quickly changes when she turns you into her next magic trick. Everyday. More than once. Probably for the rest of your life.”

When Lamiroir remained uncomfortably silent and simply stared at him helplessly, Phoenix caught himself once more and quickly withdrew his hand. Blind. Right. He felt like such an insensitive bastard.

“Ack! Sorry! I, uh…”

Lamiroir hid her mouth behind the back of her hand and laughed, low and sultry, at how earnest he sounded. Although slightly careless, there was something undeniably sweet about Phoenix that fueled his charisma and made her enjoy his company. Besides, she had shared with him intimate secrets she never thought she'd ever divulge, not even to Machi and they had known each other for years. Somehow, she felt that Phoenix would be able to understand.

“Trucy is a bright and beautiful soul,” she said as she reached out with one hand to stroke Phoenix’s cheek with her fingers, her eyes dancing with a knowing glow. “Just as beautiful as her father.”

Phoenix crimsoned like a rose.

“M-Me? B-Beautiful? No way! Ahahaha… I’m not–” and then he froze. “Wait a minute, aren't you…”

“Blind?” Lamiroir finished for him, amusement evident in her voice. “I don't see with my eyes, Phoenix; I see with my heart. That's why they call me the Landscape Artist.” She groped around the coffee table in front of her and handed him a postcard. “Wherever I go, I reproduce my world through music, and the music that surrounds your soul, Phoenix, is beautiful.”

His face turned redder if that was humanly possible. When he looked at the postcard, he realised it doubled up as promotional material for the songstress. Depicted on the front was Lamiroir in her stage costume, painting on an easel. She was in a forest, the background magical and dream-like. The words printed on the card were, “Lamiroir” and below it, “‘Sight-Seeing’ Music”.
“Thank you… Do you mind if I hold onto this?”

“Please, it's yours.”

Phoenix pocketed it carefully.

“You know,” he continued, “we have something in common: we’ve both lived in darkness, but we found our light – yours in music; mine in Trucy.”

“You lived in darkness?” asked Lamiroir sadly.

“For seven years,” he replied. “I thought I could salvage it, you know? Make do with what life threw at me. I found someone who loves me, got a job or two… but I was alone. My struggle was real and many nights I contemplated just ending it all… but then, Trucy came along. She fell into my lap like an angel and she always encouraged me to never give up or lose hope. She kept me going and I found strength and purpose despite all the pain. I wouldn't even be a dresser if not for my wish to be a better dad.”

Lamiroir listened to his story and offered him a sentimental smile. “You’re already a better dad, Phoenix. Just hearing you speak the world of Trucy tells me as much. I respect and admire your selflessness, especially from such a young father. If I were a mother, that's the kind of mother I'd want to be.”

Her warm praise caused Phoenix’s heart to melt and he tried to change the subject, least he ended up succumbing to his emotions and embarrassing himself in front of his international guest. Parenting was hard and hearing someone so appreciative of his efforts was both relieving and gratifying.

“Oh yeah – do you happen to have any talents besides singing? You know, while we’re on the topic of ourselves.” At her hesitance, he began first. “I'm good at poker – I haven't lost a single game in seven years. People say I'm just good at bluffing my way through anything, but I like to see it more as a skill,” he ended with a sheepish grin. “Alright, your turn.”

Lamiroir paused to consider his question. She had no idea why she felt both eager and comfortable to share things with this man, but he felt like someone she could trust. Besides, all her life (as she knew it) she only had Machi to really talk to, and the young boy barely had much to say. It felt nice to establish such an intimate connection with another, especially someone whose life seemed to resonate with hers.

“Well… I have this special ability… though I'm not sure if it counts as a skill or my imagination.” Her hand moved to touch her bracelet again. “When someone lies or feels nervous about something, I'm able to sense it. My bracelet just… tightens up – rather strange, don't you think?”

“Urgh, that's cool,” muttered Phoenix, both impressed and slightly put off that he once again got outdone by another. “Actually, Trucy’s able to do something similar. The whole sensing and lying stuff, though hers is more of an inkling compared to what you can do.”

Lamiroir flashed him a rare smirk. “Should we have a lying-detection competition next time with you around, Mr. Poker Champion?”

Phoenix faltered. “Guh, please don't. Bluffing’s all I have.”

The dressing room echoed with the pleasant thrills of their laughter.
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

So, I decided to make Klavier the glimmerous fop that he is, complete with a side of "asshole" and "egotistic jerk" to go. The game made him far too lovable on the outset, which didn't leave much for character development. I actually like Klavier and I see tremendous potential for him to go further as a character, thus the choice I made to have him start of slightly antagonistic. His new personality would also give Apollo a more challenging rival in court later.

I have a personal inclination towards this case and the Gavners, so I was disappointed that the game didn't talk about the other members. I created Crow, Valerian and Amaranth from scratch. I hope they'll grow on you and would make a nice addition to the plot and drama. Daryan is my bias (was I obvious enough?) and I wanted to write him in a positive light, make people see him as him and not for what he has done (in the game).

As mentioned, consider this chapter a prologue to the case that's happening very soon (like in the next chapter)!

If you like what you've read, please leave a comment and/or kudos! As always, I'm eager to read what you guys have to say :)}
I'm truly ecstatic that "House of Cards" is catching on :) I never expected such a favorable response, so I can't thank you guys enough for the 360 hits and kudos.

Also, I really enjoyed reading and replying to all your comments! Your support enables me to churn out chapters faster and update more regularly. For those of you who have been itching for some mystery, here you go!

The room was dark; the smell revolting. Smoke rose into the air from the giant lump of charred flesh lying at the base of a few crates – props; pyrotechnics; some lost from the blast. The fire, it seemed, had been contained; the explosives fortunately, unaffected. The worst that could have happened was for the entire venue to catch fire.

A figure closed the door behind them – it wouldn't do for the smell to get out and alert others. They inspected the damage, stared blankly at the pair of small sunglasses half-melted from the heat, at the little fingers with its skin peeled back and the bones exposed, and had to look away. Then, they raised their cell phone to their ear and let it ring for a bit. Someone answered. The voice that sounded through calmed them down a touch.

"Hey, I think I'm in trouble."

"An unfortunate accident?"

"You could say that."

They spared a pensive glance at the body.

"Anyway, there isn't much time and there's a detective here on security duty. I'm in your hands, should it come to it."

"A request like this demands a huge favor in return."

"Tell me what is it you need and I'll do it."

"In due time. For now, the facts."

They explained the situation thoroughly; the other party listened; and after a moment's deliberation, the voice spoke up once more.

"Alright. Here's what you need to do…"
another over the sound of Lamiroir's singing, Klavier and Valerian's playing, and the cheering audience combined; all amplified through the aid of backstage speakers, and by extension, elevated the stress levels and frustration of all those present.

Everything that could possibly go wrong today, did. Trucy's fireworks had gone off in her dressing room before the start of the concert, though thankfully she still had enough for the opening act. Lamiroir's costume went missing and Phoenix had to quickly cut and sew her a new blue cloak, throw it on her and shove her on stage without any constellations because there was no bloody time for shit like that. No one would notice anyway. The grand piano was placed on stage according to schedule, but Machi went AWOL, so Valerian had to substitute at the last minute with his keyboard. Klavier wasn't happy in the least bit (his grand vision was ruined!), but the show had to go on. Also, Valerian on stage when he wasn't supposed to meant hell for Phoenix, because the rest of the Gavinners were due to come on after Lamiroir and Klavier's serenade, which meant quick costume changes for the boys, which meant – how the bloody hell was he going to change Valerian when the guy was stuck on stage?!

"Make it happen, has-been!" Klavier had demanded – but how?! He wasn't God. Did all members have to match for the next segment? Phoenix was half-tempted to stick a feather in Valerian's hair and call it a day.

"Shit! Yo, Nick, my pick's on my dresser. Could you help me get it?" asked Daryan, panicking. The Gavinners were on in 2 minutes.

"What?! Of all things – you forgot your guitar pick?!"

"Come on, man! Please! My entire music career rests on your feeble dresser shoulders."

"Argh, ok, ok," grumbled Phoenix. "And stop stressing! Your hair flops when you're stressed and hair-and-makeup has no time for you."

"Thanks, Nick." He tossed him a lighter. "And could you leave this on my dresser for me too?"

"And why do you even have a lighter?"

"I took a quick puff, ok! I smoke when I'm nervous…"

"Fine, fine..."

And Phoenix was gone and back with a minute to spare.

He pushed the guitar pick into Daryan's hand just as Lamiroir finished her song, and Valerian guided the blind singer backstage to where Phoenix stood. The latter's eyes lit up. There was his opening.

"Valerian, you just saved my job."

The brunette gave him a thumbs-up and winked. "What'd I tell ya, Nick? I got this!"

And then he shimmed out of his tank top while Phoenix quickly helped him into a shimmering bright green open-vest. Crow was next and Phoenix tied a glitzy turquoise headband around his head to hold up his unruly, spiky orange hair. When that was done, he turned to zip up Daryan's top while said man added more hairspray to his glorious pompadour one last time.

"Any time now, ladies." Amaranth had his black rose ornament secured firmly over his left eye and motioned the other members to follow him on stage to join their leader. After Crow opened with his drums to the beat of "Guilty Love", the crowd roared to life and Phoenix could finally breathe a sigh
of relief. One song down, 29 to go. He was just thankful this wasn't a world tour.

"Daddy, there's not enough fireworks for the closing number!" Trucy ran up to him screaming and tugging at the rim of her hat. "Ohhh… What do I do?! Mr. Klavier's expecting his grand finale!"

"Not now, sweetie! I'm busy!" he snapped as he quickly helped Lamiroir out of her cloak. "It's much too late to place a new order anyway. Tell Klavier to live without his dramatic exit."

"But my reputation!"

"Trucy, I have five sets of costume changes to handle before intermission! I don't have time for this!"

As father and daughter continued to yell over the sounds of heavy metal, Lamiroir turned to address the grumpy security guard on duty. Her hands were clasped together nervously, an anxious frown upon her brow.

"Miss Skye? Any sign of Machi yet?"

"WHAT?" Ema shouted, leaning in and cupping her ear; Lamiroir repeated the question. "Oh, the kid," she said disinterestedly and momentarily stopped stuffing her face with snacks. "You were the last one with him during rehearsals?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure he didn't tell you anything. Nothing suspicious."

"No… Oh please tell me you have some clue, Miss Skye!"

"Don't worry, ma'am. I'm doing everything I can."

As she spoke, bits of snackoos flew everywhere. If the songstress wasn't blind, she would most definitely have her doubts.

In a nutshell, the entire crew were keeping Machi's sudden disappearance on a strictly need-to-know basis; after all, it wouldn't do for word to get out to the media and let a bunch of careless, bloodthirsty reporters blow the story out of proportion. At first, Ema was highly tempted to do so and therefore, put that gimmerous fop of a prosecutor and his career on the spot, until she remembered she was the only one on security duty and would thus be digging her own grave, which in turn would mean kissing that sweet, forensics recommendation of hers goodbye. If she took him down, he'd take her down with him. That darn pretty boy had everything sorted out.

"Please do," said Lamiroir, downcast and consumed with worry. "He's only 14 years old and barely knows any English. I… I fear for his safety."

"Hah, don't worry so much. No one's left the concert venue since this morning. The kid probably fell asleep somewhere. I'm sure we'll find him soon."

Ema took Lamiroir by the hand and guided her to her dressing room. Seeing as Phoenix looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel with his daughter fairing no better herself, she figured she might as well help out a bit. Being stuck on security duty sucked and if she had to walk up and down that stupid dressing room hallway one more time, she swore she'd go bat shit bonkers. Besides, Phoenix was hanging around the stage area and Ema didn't feel particularly inclined to remain in his presence after that bitter reunion last Sunday. Now, things were awkward between them. She had wanted to talk to him again after all these years, hear his side of the story, get to the truth… but the disappointment and betrayal she felt far outweighed her curiosity, and mending their friendship was
"Ok, here we are," said Ema as she held open the door for the older woman. "Just sit tight until that glim– Mr. Gavin comes and collects you during intermission. If you need anything, I'll be in the hallway."

"A-Actually…"

"Yeah?"

Lamiroir bowed her head shyly. "I'm… ah… a little hungry."

"Oh," said Ema, blinking dumbly. Perhaps she should've offered to share her snackoos instead of eating it all. "Well… there's a vending machine, but it's quite a distance. Do you mind waiting?"

Lamiroir flashed her a wide grin.

"Not at all, Miss Detective."

The final chord; a loud cheer from their adoring fans; and *The Gavinners* were back behind stage for a 10-minute intermission. As the boys shrugged off their tops and chugged down bottles of water (a beer or two in there somewhere) Phoenix rushed to help Klavier out of his jacket, only to get a face full of his screaming.

"Ach! Where's that Pixie of the Arpeggio?!!"

"Who–"

"Herr Tobaye!"

Phoenix winced and actually had to take a step back. Klavier was a whole different level of pissed, but it was obvious the stress was getting to him, so Phoenix didn't take any personal offense to that and chose to remain silent. Besides, living with the Gavin brothers for seven years made him entirely familiar with their dramatic coping mechanisms. While Kristoph tended to shut himself off from the rest of the world, Klavier needed to *scream*.

"He's screwing up mein konzert!"

With a loud, aggravated sigh that sounded more murderous than despondent, Klavier plopped his ass on a nearby trunk and buried his face in his hands.

"We need Herr Tobaye for the grand finale… An hour and *still* no sign of him… Their manager's going to have my head… I can't afford *The Gavinners* to have bad press! This was supposed to be mein dream!"

Phoenix watched him silently, sadly; gradually lowering the blonde's next costume hanging off his arms when it became clear Klavier wasn't in the mood to go on. In a way, he felt sorry for him. For all the man's bossing around, needless glamour and insane expectations, it all boiled down to Klavier's passion for music and the greater good for his band and his friends. Lamiroir and Machi were international stars, Borginia’s national icons for music and culture; and Klavier was in trouble. If he took the case to the Borginia embassy, it would no doubt reflect poorly on his conduct as the...
country's top prosecutor. To make things even more difficult, he couldn't even look into Machi's disappearance personally because he had to lead his band on stage. At that very moment, Phoenix forgot about the seven years of spite between them and remembered that Klavier was only 24 years old, yet was shouldering far more responsibility than an average middle-age man. Klavier dreamed big and Phoenix felt that there was significant merit to that.

Meanwhile, Crow, Amaranth and Valerian eyed their friend and leader uncomfortably, before nudging Daryan forward. He cursed and they innocently avoided his glare. Normally, Daryan was the only one able to handle his best friend's moods, pull Klavier back up and slap some sense into him, but even he was at a loss.

Another sigh, this time heavy and hopeless, which did not quite suit the usually devil-may-care prodigy. Klavier took out his cell phone and stared blankly at the screen – no missed calls, no text updates. Truthfully speaking, he didn't expect Ema to actively keep him in the loop (years of insufferable partnership taught him as much), but he felt crippled and helpless and by appointing said woman as concert security, he had little choice but to place his faith in her… even if he honestly would rather disband The Gavinners before admitting that.

The blonde was so caught up in his own thoughts that he failed to recognize a fair hand with long, slender, piano-playing fingers wrap assuringly around his wrist. The person's touch was sympathetic, warm and supportive – something Klavier hadn't felt ever since Kristoph earned a name for himself, left him in the shadows and kept him chasing. It almost made him give an appreciative smile in return for the kind gesture, until he realised who it was holding his hand.

"What do you want, has-been?" he hissed, though it came out more of a pathetic mutter; tugging his hand away from the older male's touch.

Instead of being hurt by Klavier's rejection, Phoenix knelt before him and sought his gaze like a flower seeking out the sun.

"Klavier, don't be so hard on yourself," he spoke in a manner he often used on Kristoph whenever the latter got worked up over his cases. "Yes, this is your dream, but this is our concert too. You're not alone; you have friends and a dedicated crew to support you, not to mention Lamiroir too. She has faith in you and this performance, you know that?"

Klavier's resolve began to crack and the slivers of helplessness slowly shone through. He felt lost and anxious; Kristoph always expected the world from him and in turn, he always aimed high and big. This was the first time he handled an international collaboration and already, it was turning out to be a complete disaster. His brother would never slip up like this, was more than capable of handling things on his own; worse still, would his negligence of Machi's safety affect his credibility as a man of law, and by extension, top prosecutor? He could already picture his brother's disdain and disappointment.

"The night's not over yet," said Phoenix with a wide grin, forcefully pulling Klavier out of his negative slump. "There's still some time left for intermission; Trucy's not on till the finale, and I have some time in-between costume changes. Let us worry about Machi; you just worry about rocking your heart out and giving your fans the greatest show on earth."

"But…"

Phoenix rose to his feet and held out Klavier's jacket encouragingly.

"Come on, boss, you have a show to put on."
A moment's hesitation, before Klavier accepted the jacket, the frown on his face contemplative. He grasped the garment tightly, almost as if the feel of the leather could provide him with some substantial reassurance. He felt the cool smoothness on his fingertips; couldn't shake off a certain ex-lawyer's kindness; felt so confused; and when he opened his mouth, the words came out without the usual malice or authority.

"Herr…"

But Phoenix was already gone.

It was funny how good help was never around when you needed them most.

Phoenix stood in the center of the dressing room hallway and pushed back his beanie in bewilderment. Wasn't Ema supposed to be patrolling these halls? Sure, he heard her complaining about not getting paid for her time, but still, he certainly hoped she wasn't slacking off… or snacking off… or both… Seriously, every time was snack time for her. He started to wonder if grumpy and inattentive was the fate of all detectives in their country and was a little worried Ema would end up like Gumshoe one day.

"Ema! You there? Hellooooo! Em-" he stopped abruptly when he noticed a certain cloaked figure standing helplessly outside Trucy's dressing room, their hand grasping the doorknob for support.

"Lamiroir?"

He approached the songstress and she whirled around sharply in the direction of his voice. Her hand flew to her breast in surprise, before she eventually lowered it with a smile of relief.

"Ah! Phoenix, you startled me."

"What're you doing out here?" he asked, eyes momentarily darting to Trucy's dressing room. "And this isn't your dressing room…"

"It… It isn't?" she answered sadly, clasping her hands together as she bowed her head in shame. "Ah… sorry… I suppose I should've stayed in my room like Miss Skye instructed…"

Phoenix rubbed the back of his neck and sighed in exasperation. What was with these Borginians and wandering around? They already had a young pianist missing and he seriously doubted Klavier's blood pressure could handle two untimely disappearances in a single evening.

"No offense, Lamiroir? But we're in the middle of a concert and we're not free to keep an eye on you all the time."

"I understand," she replied, "but I'm worried about Machi. His phone's dead; it's not like him to go off without telling me; the nice detective still hasn't found him… I can't help it – I'm restless!"

The poor woman was shaking so much, she looked like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Lamiroir was really trying to keep it together and it amazed Phoenix how she had even managed to calmly perform her item at the start of the evening. So, heart softening and taking pity on her, he took her by the hand and led her away.
"You're not due to perform until the finale, right?" he clarified.

"Why, yes..." she trailed off, unsure.

"Good." Phoenix stopped to face her, a wide dorky grin plastered across his face. "Because I plan to look for Machi too in-between segments, and you're more than welcome to tag along."

Lamiroir's eyes lit up like stars. "Oh Phoenix... Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"But that means you'd have to follow me up and down when I have to report back for every costume change. It'll be a lot of trips and you'd have to move fast. No letting go of my hand, you hear?"

"Yes, and that's no problem at all!" Her enthusiasm waned however, when she became self-conscious of her disability. "I... I hope I'm not a burden..."

Phoenix laughed and the sincerity that rang through effectively set her heart at ease.

"Nah, if you were, I wouldn't have asked, would I?" he chided with a slight tease as they moved along. "Alright, work with me. We only have five minutes of intermission left. Where would Machi be? What does he like to do?"

Lamiroir considered his question carefully. "Well... If he's not playing with Trucy, he'd be at his piano."

"Hm, that's definitely out of the question. As everyone knows, the piano's on sta-- ... why the heck is the piano back here?"

And there it was, sitting innocently, though not at all inconspicuously, at the side near a ramp leading up to the stage. Phoenix stared disbelievingly at the grand piano, darted his eyes up and down the empty hallway, before returning his shocked gaze to the large instrument. Had someone moved it? But why? Wouldn't Machi need it eventually? Then why go through all the trouble?

Suddenly, Phoenix felt something bump against his back and realised Lamiroir had caught up.

"Phoenix? What's wrong? Why did you stop?" she ventured tentatively, unconsciously clinging onto the back of his t-shirt for assurance. "Phoenix?"

"Did you see anyone move the piano backstage?" he asked, only to mentally kick himself. "You know what, forget I asked." He really needed to stop sticking his foot in his mouth like that.

"The piano's here?" exclaimed Lamiroir, her own perplexity mirroring his. "But why? Machi needs it to perform."

"Maybe Klavier decided to cancel his appearance just in case..." Phoenix caught himself before he made the mistake of making Lamiroir feel worse. "You know, because Trucy ran out of fireworks."

The siren said nothing; Phoenix didn't know if Lamiroir heard him or was secretly doing her best to ignore his pathetic attempt at a coverup. They were about to resume their search, when Phoenix paused to sniff the air, his nose cringing in disgust as he smelled something distinctly foul – and no, it wasn't sweat or an overwhelming amount of gel and hairspray. It was... sour and oddly unsettling; the barest traces of a metallic odor; like sizzled meat gone bad, like a wound that had festered after 12 days of neglect. Absently, he wondered if the day's trash had piled up again and the cleaner forgot to dispose of it, but there was no trash bin or bag in the immediate area, so he ruled that out.

"Is it just me, or does this hallway stink?" he remarked with a slight grimace.
Lamiroir hummed in agreement. "I smell something too…"

"Woah – hey!"

His sudden exclamation made her jump and she quickly clung onto him like a frightened deer at gunpoint. Unconsciously, she buried her face in the back of his t-shirt; her fingers digging and pulling at the soft material so much, she probably stretched it out a tad bit.

"W-What?! What is it? Why did you yell?"

"YES! I found your costume!"

Lamiroir blinked slowly, dumbly. "... What?"

"Remember? Your missing costume?" Phoenix went on excitedly, all thoughts of Machi forgotten.

He ran to the piano and tugged at a portion of deep blue fabric which stuck out from under the lid; little bits of embroidered constellation patterns peeking out. Unfortunately, it appeared to be stuck, so Phoenix threw open the piano lid, only to reel back in disgust when the horrid stench attacked his senses full force. Urgh, gross! What the hell happened to Lamiroir's costume? Did someone dunk it in sewage or something? If this was prank, it was a really shitty one – no pun intended.

'Looks like I got my work cut out for me tonight,' he thought with a reluctant groan and tried to gather the cloak in his arms. He stopped however, when he realised there was something bundled in the fabric that weighed the whole thing down. Curious, he pulled the cloth back and immediately dropped the bundle with a scream.

A black, shriveled, bloody face stared at up at him; it's eyelids melted shut into a pair of hollow eye sockets. The skin was as brittle as ash; the flesh receding; muscles and bone exposed. Bacteria had already begun to settle in, which explained the putrid stench. The corpse's mouth hung open in its final cry of horror and anguish, but its lips had burned away, exposing teeth and jaw in an unnaturally wide, terrifying grin. A peculiar pendant hung from around its neck. Although the hair had been completely burnt off, the person's identity completely unrecognizable, it was obvious it was the body of a child – one, Phoenix feared, that they had been searching for since before the start of the concert. It was an image that had burned into his brain and would continue to haunt him for the rest of his life. Thankfully, Lamiroir was spared the horror and trauma of this tragedy – at least, that was what Phoenix thought, until he heard her release a sharp, terrified gasp.

No way.

He turned around to face the songstress and froze in disbelief when he saw her gaze focus on the small corpse, tears in her eyes, the hand over her mouth trembling.

"M-Machi… No… No, Machi! "

She was mumbling to herself over and over. It was obvious she was in shock – that was understandable, but what wasn't was the startling fact that…

"Lamiroir… you can see?" Phoenix whispered, deceived, confused, not knowing what to think or believe at this point.

Lamiroir stiffened and avoided his stare guiltily. She stood silent, wringing her hands in distress. Her lips beneath the veil kept moving, but no sound came out, save the panicked inconsistency of her breathing. Then, when the truth couldn't be avoided any longer, she shut her eyes in resignation and bowed her head in shame.
"Yes. Yes, I can see," she replied woefully, "I'm so sorry for lying to you, Phoenix… But it's my stage gimmick. I have to maintain the illusion of the blind siren. P-Please… Please don't tell anyone."

"So, no one knows?"

"O-Only Machi, our manager, and you…"

She looked so nervous, so incredibly distraught that Phoenix found himself dropping the issue with a troubled sigh. How ironic: the walking lie-detector turned out to be the biggest liar of all.

"Alright, I'll keep your secret."

"Thank you, Phoenix–"

"But, understand how bad this looks for you," he interrupted, pointing at the cloak wrapped around Machi's body. "You were the last person seen with him, he trusts you, and that's your costume. I've been a lawyer long enough to know how this is going to go down in court."

"What do I do?" She sounded like she was about to breakdown and cry.

"Look me in the eye and answer me truthfully," said Phoenix, tone grave and his blue eyes hard and intense. "Did you kill Machi?"

"No! I would never! I love him – he's like a son to me."

Phoenix saw no reason to doubt Lamiroir's pain.

"You're sure that's Machi," he clarified.

"Yes," she replied, breathless and heartbroken. "That pendant around his neck – I recognize it anywhere."

It was clear this discovery was taking its toll on her, both physically and emotionally. Phoenix feared for her well-being and capacity to last in court, or to be interrogated in the police station for that matter. Lamiroir looked so fragile – she wouldn't last 30 seconds.

"Ok. Stay here, while I go find Ema. From here on, no matter the pressure, no matter the situation, you must never let anyone know you can see," he warned, leveling her with his stare. "Never."

She nodded, grateful, and Phoenix ran off, alerting the crew and screaming the young detective's name.

The whole hour following Machi's death was a whirlwind of chaos, confusion and disaster. Police and forensics flocked to the crime scene and placed the entire venue on temporary lockdown as they commenced their investigation and questioning. As a result, The Gavinners' concert was canceled, though fortunately the police eventually let the audience go when they ruled out the possibility of outside interference. Seeing as Trucy was the only backstage crew member that had been in the audience throughout the concert (much to Phoenix's relief) and Lamiroir was blind, the two females were exempted from questioning. Meanwhile, Phoenix and The Gavinners waited in the dressing room for further news and instruction.
"Damn… So are we, like, suspects or something?" Daryan broke the awkward silence with a nervous laugh. "Oh boy, HQ's going to have a field day when they find out."

"Apparently so," drawled Phoenix and the group felt disconcerted by his blatant nonchalance. "Ema concluded the murder took place during intermission and all six of us have no alibis."

"Hey, Nick! How's it like finding a dead body?" Crow interrupted, only to get bonked on the head by Amaranth whose patience seemed to be wearing increasingly thin by the second.

"Idiot, don't ask stupid questions."

"But it's cool!" he whined. "And I'm a suspect to a homicide! This sure beats issuing parking tickets."

"Well, I guess it's nice seeing your colleagues scramble around while you take a backseat for a change…"

Amaranth slapped his forehead. "Argh, not you too, Valerian! I swear, Crow, your stupidity's contagious."

"Hey!"

Suddenly, someone cleared their throat a little too forcibly and the three bickering friends nervously turned to meet Daryan's death glare. With a nod of his head and a soft grunt, he indicated at a broody figure hunched miserably on the sofa. Klavier had his face buried in his hands; silent; body unmoving; broad shoulders slumped in insurmountable despair. It was tragic: Klavier gave his all for this concert, but with Machi's unexpected death, he stood to lose his credibility as a respectable member of law – all because of his negligence. He shouldn't have scrimped on security; should've employed bodyguards; did more roll calls and safety checks; paid more attention. Now, an innocent child was dead, Borginia Embassy would no doubt chew his ear off, and it was all his fault.

"Hey, dude, chill out," Daryan attempted to comfort him by patting him on the back. "You're too hard on yourself. It's not the end of the world."

Unfortunately, his words had the reverse effect on Klavier, who shot to his feet and practically exploded.

"Chill out?! Chill out?! Mein Gott! Do you have rocks in that big hair of yours? I'm finished, Daryan! Erledigt!"

"Don't be so dramatic, unless you… uh… you know, killed the brat—"

"It doesn't matter who did it!" he screamed, desperation ringing in his voice, his ice-blue eyes wide and pleading. "Daryan, don't you get it? I'm in charge of this concert and I had Borginia's trust! Das Pixie des Arpeggio died because of me!"

Enough was enough: Phoenix refused to hear Klavier blame himself any further. He grabbed the blonde by the shoulder and forced the younger male around.

"Kla—"

But the door slammed open and in ran Trucy close to tears, flinging herself into Phoenix's arms. Ema followed after, quietly closing the door behind her.

"Daddy, what's going on?" Trucy demanded, her voice pitching as fear and worry seized her heart.
"Miss Skye told me she's taking you away to the police station – why? You didn't do it, I know you didn't! Don't leave me alone! Let me go with you!"

He gathered the poor, shaken girl in his arms; shushed and coaxed her gently.

"Don't worry, sweetie. She's just going to ask me some questions because I'm a witness. No one's going to jail, ok?"

"W-Witness?" she repeated, sniffing and blinking back tears.

He nodded. "That's right; because I found the body. Anyway, it's late. I want you to take Lamiroir, call Olga, and stay at her place until I get all this sorted out. We're not sure why Machi was a victim, but I don't think it's safe for Lamiroir to hang around here."

"O-Ok, daddy! Leave it to me!"

Phoenix bent down to place a loving kiss on her forehead.

"That's my good girl."

"Ahem."

Ema cleared her throat and all seven pairs of eyes turned to regard her expectantly, apprehensively. The sudden attention made her tense up – even Klavier was looking at her in reverence like she held all the answers – and she felt strangely inadequate. Truth be told, although she had been a homicide detective for a few years, this was technically her first real case (yes, it was painfully hilarious), so she fumbled quite a bit (and maybe got a little too distracted by the forensics on site), but at least she didn't end up screwing up the crime scene – oh, and she took down notes too.

"Forensics have confirmed the identity of the body – it is in fact, Machi Tobaye."

The silence and tension was so thick, it was suffocating. She decided to continue in favor of alleviating her personal discomfort.

"We have reason to believe that the actual murder took place in Lamiroir's dressing room: a lighter was found along with a container of kerosene. The killer committed the crime there, wrapped the body in her costume, and hid it in the piano. Of course, all of this happened during intermission, giving the killer enough time to carry out his plan, including moving the piano from stage to the hallway. Lamiroir was ruled out as a suspect for obvious reasons. Also, because of her condition, she's unable to testify if the kerosene and lighter were already in her room during the break."

"So, you're saying one of us is the culprit," said Crow, folding his arms as he shot the detective a wry smirk. "Ok, sweet cheeks, I'll bite – where's your proof?"

"I'm getting to that, bird brain!" Ema snapped, ignoring Crow's indignant stuttering and his snickering band mates. She consulted her notepad once again.

"I would like to speak with the dresser."

Phoenix perked up. "Here."

"The victim caught fire from head to toe," she read off her notes, tapping the page with her pen. "Was his costume flammable?"

"No, only his stockings," Phoenix replied. "I think Klavier even ordered him a new costume in light
of Trucy's magic trick with the pyrotechnics."

"Ja, I even have the invoice," Klavier reinstated.

"Then that settles it." Ema snapped her notepad shut, crossed the room and slapped a pair of handcuffs around Daryan's wrists. "Mr. Daryan Crescend, you're under arrest for the murder of Machi Tobaye."

The whole room erupted in protest.

"What the hell, man! Not cool!"

"WHAT?! I've been friends with a murderer all this time?"

"CROW, ARE YOU DAFT?"

"You're right, Val. Clearly it's Amaranth—"

"I'll fucking kill you!"

"See?!"

"Fraulein Detective!" Klavier growled through clenched teeth. "Tell me this isn't your idea of a joke."

Ema regarded him flippantly and had to force down the wide, triumphant smirk that threatened to grace her lips. It felt good to get a rise out of Goldilocks, rattle his composure and be on top for a change. And for the final icing on the cake, she opened a brand new bag of snackoos and proceeded to shamelessly, noisily munch them in his face.

"Ok, one more question then."

She turned her attention to Daryan and held up a clear zip-lock bag with a lighter inside. The miserable, confused Interpol agent appeared more anxious than ever.

"Is this yours, Shark-boy?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Forensics found two sets of fingerprints on it – yours and Nick's." She dangled the bag in his face. "A guitarist and his dresser: unlikely, yet conveniently logical partners."

"No!" Daryan struggled against his restraints, panic setting in and causing his hair to flop. "I asked Nick to help return that to my room before The Gaviners went on."

"Then how did it wind up in Lamiroir's room?"

"I don't know, ok! All I know is, he didn't do anything; he's innocent!"

"Daryan..." Phoenix whispered in disbelief, his heart going out to the first person who ever saw him as anything but a failure. Even Klavier shared his surprise as the young prosecutor struggled to process this series of unfortunate events.

"This isn't happening," the blonde muttered to himself, shaking his head so furiously, as if the mere thought of Ema's insinuation brought him tremendous pain. This was a nightmare. It had to be.
Phoenix watched on with growing sympathy and trepidation; felt Trucy's fingers dig deeper into his t-shirt as she clung on tighter. Even in a pinch and Daryan fought to protect him.

*This isn't right.*

He quickly turned to regard Klavier; their eyes met: his pleading and insistent, but the latter's torn and doubtful. In that single moment, they understood each other. Technically, Klavier was supposed to be on Ema's side, the side of law and justice, and as such, had no right to interfere with the police's investigation. Besides, facts were facts and the evidence pointed to Daryan's guilt. But this was his best friend, an Interpol agent at that, and he felt terribly compromised.

"Scientifically speaking, that leaves your fingerprints," said Ema with a thoughtful hum.

"Well, it's my lighter…" Daryan replied.

"Then it's clear who did it. Fingerprinting power revealed no other prints indicating anyone wore gloves. Ah… the beauty of science!"

"Can you stop with all this science bullshit?!"

"It's not bullshit!" she fumed. *Seriously, could no one* appreciate the wonders of scientific discovery?

"Anyway, your fingerprints were all over the kerosene container too," she went on with her observations. "You doused Machi in kerosene, lit him up like a bonfire, and then wrapped him up in Lamiroir's costume – in her dressing room – to make it look like she did it. Unfortunately, you forgot one important thing, Einstein: she's blind."

"That's crazy!" Daryan yelled. "I don't even have a fucking *motive*!"

"And that's what you're going to tell me down at the detention center."

On cue, two police officers flanked him on both sides and proceeded to drag him out of the dressing room, while Ema brought up the rear. Daryan snarled; kicked and struggled; threw out colorful expletives, but that only made the officers hold on tighter. He began to feel the desperation and helplessness sink in. It was over: his badge, his music career, everything. As he allowed his gaze to make one last sweep across the room, he immediately wished he didn't. Valerian looked betrayed; Crow confused and disappointed; Amaranth didn't even want to look at him; and Klavier…

His best friend was a prosecutor – he couldn't help him.

"Ngh, No! Nick!" He dug his heels into the ground and fought to look back one last time. "Nick, you're the best lawyer out there! You got to defend me! Please!"

Phoenix gasped and openly shook. Daryan's eyes… the fear in his voice… They seized him, haunted him, reminded him of the reason he became a layer in the first place – to defend those who needed someone to believe in them when no one else did. But that was all in the past and he felt so helpless.

"I… I can't!" he cried, his own voice breaking. "I lost my badge… I… I'm not a lawyer anymore!"

"Find someone! Please… I didn't do it! I'm not a murderer! I didn't do it, Nick! I didn't!"

As the police led Daryan away with Klavier reluctantly trailing behind in silence, Phoenix made up his mind, frantically took out his cell phone and with trembling hands, called the one person he trusted and knew could help him at a time like this.
Kristoph and Apollo exited the office building stairs and proceeded down the pavement in the direction of the nearby eateries. Granted, it was a little late for dinner, but the day had been long, moderately eventful and to Apollo, thoroughly enlightening and rewarding.

They were engaged in idle chatter, mostly about the trial earlier this morning; and while Kristoph went through the finer points of his defense techniques and pointed out the weaknesses in the rival prosecutor's delivery, Apollo was still giddy over the fact that he actually assisted his boss on a real case and got to stand behind a defense table for the very first time. He didn't get to shout "Objection!" yet, but he figured the opportunity would come in due time; though honestly, he was just glad he got out of the office for a change.

"And when it comes to the cross-examination, I… uh… what was it again?" he asked with a sheepish grin.

"Always start with the time," came Kristoph's patient response as he smiled at his understudy. "Memory is a beautiful but unreliable thing. Press it hard enough and people start to recall events they never—" He paused abruptly when his cell phone rang.

"Excuse me." He accepted the call and brought the slim device up to his ear. "Hello, Gavin speaking."

There was a brief pause before a noticeable smile inched its way across Kristoph's face — inexplicably soft with a hidden mirth — and Apollo instantly knew who was on the other line. On one hand, he felt jealous of his boss and the fact the man had Phoenix's unconditional love; on the other hand, he respected his mentor and so, forced down his bitterness while discreetly inching closer in hopes of catching his idol's sweet voice. There was just so much love-hate in his and Kristoph's relationship these days, that Apollo absently wondered if it was just him, or if Kristoph shared his sentiments and was responsible for some of the emotional spillover as well. He had a crush on Phoenix; Kristoph was the possessive, protective lover; the undercurrent of tension that ran between them was obvious.

However, just when Apollo thought the call was going to be one of romantic intent, Kristoph's smile fell to be replaced with a troubled frown.

"You are unharmed?"

Those words caused Apollo to stiffen in dread. Mr. Wright? Was he alright?

"Good… Yes, go on… I see… Well, that is unfortunate. I take it Klavier didn't respond well to that."

What? Kristoph's brother?

"... Phoenix, you know I would help in a heartbeat, but I'm sure you're as familiar with the law as I am," he said with an exasperated sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "If my brother's prosecuting the same case, my involvement is limited, if not illegal."

Phoenix continued talking. Kristoph's gaze wandered until it eventually landed on Apollo. A sudden thought occurred to him and he interrupted his lover in mid-rant with a sly smirk.

"However," he began, "I do believe I have a way around that rule…"
A quick exchange of goodbyes before Kristoph hung up and regarded his understudy thoughtfully, critically and with the barest hint of amusement. If Apollo wasn't confused before, he most certainly was now. Finally, after much deliberation, Kristoph offered the brunette a placating smile and said in a voice that Apollo hadn't been able to refuse until this day, "How would you like to handle your first court case, Mr. Justice?"

Apollo blinked once, twice, and then three times, before letting out the loudest yell ever known to mankind when the implications finally sank in.

"EHHHH?!"

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Bahaha! So, I killed Machi. Sorry all you Machi fans out there, but because I'm changing quite a substantial number of things from the original game, I needed him to die lol. Maybe I went slightly overboard by burning him, but it had to be done.

So, we have six (or seven) people with no alibis... did Daryan do it? Did Phoenix do the right thing protecting Lamiroir? Who's truly as innocent as they say? And Apollo finally gets his first official case! I wonder how things are going to turn out...

Anyway, if you guys are interested, the playlist for "House of Cards" can be found here: https://soundcloud.com/darkinterval/sets/house-of-cards
Alternatively, you can access the link from my profile. It's not complete yet, as I'll be slowly adding onto the list as I write.
“How did you end up as a witness to a murder?!”

“Hey, Polly, did you know the Chief Justice’s son has Incuritis?”

“Don’t call me that!” Pause. “And don’t change the subject!”

With a carefree laugh that made Apollo want to take his spoon and shove ice-cream down the man’s throat and hopefully give him a brain freeze; Phoenix folded the newspaper, placed it aside, and supporting his chin with his left hand, regarded the young, hot-blooded lawyer with amusement dancing in his beautiful blue eyes. Instantly, Apollo felt his irritation subside. Two weeks since they first met and that enthralling gaze still held him captive. Not to mention it was Monday, and he eventually did get around to asking his idol out for lunch and dessert at the sweet shop he and Clay frequented – all outside his boss’ knowledge of course. Kristoph was always too preoccupied to give Phoenix the time of day anyway, so it didn't take much convincing for the latter to say yes. Hah, score one for Justice!

At first, he thought it was going to be a casual, innocent date (you know, apart from the fact that they had a murder on their hands). Then again, it was Phoenix and he should've known anything involving the man and his playful promiscuity would come and bite him in the ass.

As it turned out, Phoenix had one heck of a sweet tooth and ate his ice-cream in a way that could only be described as inappropriately erotic. That skilled pink tongue; soft, full, delectable lips; those sensual, toe-curling moans… who knew anyone could make eating an ice pop look so damn sexy? Whether it was second nature from his years as a rentboy or Phoenix was simply teasing him, Apollo didn't know. What he did know, was that watching his idol only made his pants feel tighter. And then, without warning, Phoenix deep threated the entire ice pop, swallowed its juices, and moaned around the base in pure bliss. Apollo crimsoned and dug his fingers into his thighs as he fought down a nosebleed.

They were in public! God help him if he ended up doing something he’d live to regret.

“Mr. Wright, please stop that.”

“Aw… Don’t be so stiff, Polly,” Phoenix continued to tease, flashing him a row of pearly whites. “I thought you lured me out on a date, not an interrogation.”

“W-W-Who said anything about a date?” he stammered, screeched it out really, and Phoenix had trouble holding back his giggles at the sight of how red Apollo’s face had become.

“Anyway,” Apollo resumed their conversation in a bid to remain professional, “if I didn’t care about you so much, sir, I would hit you. Hard. Of all people to find the body… why…”
Good lord, did Phoenix have a propensity for trouble or something? It was hard to tell if the ex-lawyer really had the luck of the devil, or if he was just plain unlucky.

“With this homicide, it'll put our investigation on indefinite hold.”

“Well, you didn't have to take on this case, Apollo…”

“No, I had to,” he interrupted, looking Phoenix in the eye, voice low and full of conviction. “You're personally involved, Mr. Wright. I… I have to make sure nothing goes wrong. You may be a witness, but you're still first and foremost my client and I won't have anyone pointing fingers at you just because your fingerprints were on that lighter. If anyone's going to turn things around, it'll be me. I don't trust anyone else with your life.”

Phoenix gasped when he felt a strong, calloused hand wrap protectively around his. Apollo probably didn't realise it in his passionate delivery, but to Phoenix, that simple contact made his heart pound. He stared at that large, slightly tan hand against his fairer one. The kid’s touch was warm, reassuring, yet callow in his youth. It didn't offer him the same calm confidence Kristoph’s did, but he felt safe and content and the sincerity behind it along with Apollo’s words made him smile.

“You're sweet, kid,” he commented, tugging his hand free, “but Daryan Crescend’s your client now and as his lawyer, your faith needs to be in him 100%. The evidence is stacked against him and you'll need a powerful, convincing defense against the Judge’s verdict.” He leaned forward and flashed Apollo a knowing smirk. “Don't let distractions screw up your case.”

“But-”

“I'll be fine. I trust you.”

Apollo snapped his mouth shut and lowered his gaze to the table, glaring at his hands that were clenched into fists; his jaw set in a frown. As Phoenix watched him silently, sympathetically, he could see Apollo’s doubt, sense his fear, and understand his struggle. Kristoph was barred from personally handling this case and leading the investigation; the kid was alone and didn't know what to do.

“... Hey.”

Apollo immediately looked up. Phoenix stroked his chin thoughtfully and said, “If I were a lawyer, my first stop would be the detention center.”

“Detention center?” he echoed.

“Yep!” Phoenix stole the kid’s half-finished sundae, scooped and swallowed a generous portion, then proceeded to wave the spoon around as he talked with his mouthful. “I'd want to talk to my client. Get his side of the story. Fill in the gaps.”

“That's my sundae…” Apollo pointed out pathetically.

“I'd ask questions,” he continued as if he never heard him. “Compare his answers to what I already know of the case. Maybe he’d bring in some new facts you could use for your defense. And then when the prosecution tries to pull a fast one over you – Take that!”

“Gah!” Apollo jumped and Phoenix withdrew the spoon with a sheepish laugh. “Ahahaha! Sorry, old habits die hard.”

The brunette allowed himself a small, bemused smile and shook his head. Sometimes it was hard to
believe that his hero was 33 years old.

“Detention center. Got it.”

“You should hurry though. Visiting hours end at 5 p.m.”

“You seem pretty eager to help this Daryan person,” Apollo pointed out. “Kind of ironic that you're testifying against him.”

“That's not necessarily the case, Polly,” said Phoenix with a wink. “Just because I'm the prosecution’s main witness, it doesn't mean I'm taking sides. I'll keep you guys on your toes. The point is: Daryan’s a good, honest and dependable friend. I believe in him, and you should too.”

He reached into the pocket of his hoodie, took out a small, plastic bottle and handed it to Apollo. “Here, you might need this.”

“What is it?” he asked, curiously turning it over in his hand.

“Fingerprint powder,” answered Phoenix simply. “A… friend gave it to me during an old case. It could come in handy during your investigation.”

“Oh, uh…thanks?”

Apollo pocketed the thing skeptically. He seriously doubted he'd resort to forensic science to crack this case; after all, what needed to be found was probably already established by the police. But he supposed there was no harm humoring the older male.

“As a key witness, I'm bound by law not to reveal details about the case to the defense,” Phoenix explained, “but that shouldn't stop you from questioning the other suspects.”

“Including Prosecutor Gavin?”

“Especially Klavier,” he stressed. “Even though he's prosecution, the murder happened during The Gavinners’ performance and it was his concert. By theory, he's still a suspect. It's a strange presentation of events – normally prosecutors are inclined to withhold all information until the trial itself; but I'd take advantage of this rare opportunity if I were you.”

Apollo nodded and began listing the things he needed to do off the top of his head. “Ok. Talk to Mr. Crescend. Investigate the crime scene. Talk to other suspects. Talk to Prosecutor Gavin. Practice Chords of Steel. Remember to sleep. Wake up early. Practice Chords of Steel...”

Phoenix watched the rookie with a fond smile. In an oddly endearing sense, it felt like he was looking at his younger self through Mia’s eyes. Was this how it felt like to have a protégé?

“That's right. Anything else?”

“Just one,” Apollo answered with a laugh, leaning in to gently thumb away a bit of ice-cream from the corner of Phoenix’s lips. “You missed a spot, sir,” he said and flashed him a charming smile.

The fingers that lingered there were warm and soft, and with the way Apollo’s dark hazel eyes gazed at him with such tender affection and want, Phoenix felt his breath catch in his throat and his heart skip a beat. He felt paralyzed from both the sight and knowledge of the young attorney’s desire; and when it became too much to confront, too hard to breathe, he turned his face away. A bright pink blush bloomed across his cheeks and when he next spoke, he couldn't stem the pleasurable shudder that wracked his form.
“T-Thanks,” he mumbled shyly, mind reeling and wondering what in the world made him act this way. It was just an innocent touch to the lips; Kristoph kissed him all the time. He experienced far greater stimulation than that, handled more demanding clients in the past few years than a young man’s childish infatuation; was usually more in control than this.

And yet...

“Don't mention it, sir,” said Apollo and Phoenix knew he couldn't.

With some reluctance, Apollo released his hold on his hero, but secretly relished in his ability to make the ex-poker player so flustered. It sent a thrilling tingle down his spine to know that he had such an effect on the older male. So, the confident, devilishly promiscuous Phoenix turned submissive and coquettish from a little teasing? Cute. He decided to file this information away for another day; perhaps for future dates.

“S-So… um… the bill…” Phoenix stammered and reached for the receipt, only to pause when Apollo placed his hand over his, gently curling his fingers around his own.

“I'll take care of it, Mr. Wright,” he spoke kindly. “After all, didn't you say this was a date?”

The blush deepened; Phoenix let out a small smile; and maybe, just maybe, he held onto that hand around his a little tighter.

On the bus, Trucy watched a certain lawyer flirt with a certain ex-lawyer outside her window; fuming. *That smile.* So, *this* was the guy her daddy had been talking to last Sunday – and this… this… *punk* was openly wooing her daddy even if he already belonged to Mr. Gavin! *The nerve of this homewrecker!* The guy had nothing on Kristoph: he wasn't *that* handsome; couldn't pull off a suit properly to save his life; that gold bracelet was just tacky – ok, maybe it was kind of pretty, but what the heck was wrong with his hair?! *Urgh!* More than anything, she wanted to smack that smug grin off his face, slap that hand away from her daddy’s, and snip off those annoying hair spikes (what *were* they anyway? *Antennae*?); but the bus started moving and she lost sight of the sweet shop when it turned the corner.

The pair’s romantic exchange confirmed things: Phoenix was seeing someone else; she didn't understand why and it hurt. All this time, she thought her daddy and Kristoph’s love was eternal, but in a blink of an eye, her vision of a perfect, happy family with perfect happy parents, shattered along with her faith. However, refusing to give up, she took a deep breath to calm her raging nerves.

*Keep cool, keep cool… Remember what Mr. Gavin said.*

She was determined to stay focused on the end-game. Phoenix and Kristoph *would* remain together and no red-suit, immature, second-rate polliwog was going to come between them - especially not someone sporting a hairdo like *that.* Also, seeing as how dense her daddy could be at times, he probably didn’t even know he was being seduced. Yeah, that was probably it. He wasn’t the cheating type anyway. As always, it was up to Trucy Wright to look out for him and make things - well, right.

“Hey, babe, we said we were sorry. Why not we take you out for a little drink, hm?”

“Yeah! Don’t be such a princess.”
Trucy frowned, the sound of those taunting voices effectively dragging her out of her thoughts. Turning around, she noticed a group of high school boys crowding around a teenage girl. She didn't recognize their uniform, but the poor blue-haired beauty they were harassing looked frightened and close to tears as she clutched her sketchbook tight against her chest, trembling like a leaf. Trucy watched as the boys continued to shove the pretty girl around, belittle her and throw in a few catcalls; and felt her anger rise. If there was one thing she absolutely abhorred, it was bullies, and seven years watching her daddy live through the ridicule conditioned her to regard such cowardly acts as intolerable and downright unforgivable.

Worst of all, why wasn't anyone stepping in to help?

"Hey, we're talking you! Gods, you're one fucking rude bitch, you know that?"

"Heh, wonder what it'll take to get her to scream..."

"I don't know, man. Maybe she's mute?"

The girl shut her eyes tight and pressed herself further into the corner in a desperate attempt to get away from her tormentors. She wished she could cry; scream and defend herself; call for help, but no sound came out of her mouth. If only her father hadn't fallen ill, then she wouldn't need to leave home to replenish art supplies before the deadline. As it were, her latest project was already well-past the period of acceptable standards.

"Mute, huh?"

Her face contorted in pain when someone grabbed her long, wavy hair and violently tugged her towards them. She knew she shouldn't have left home today. Bad things always happened whenever she stepped outside. Inwardly, she cursed the fact she forgot to bring along the good luck charm her prince had given her.

"Haha! Only one way to find out."

She shut her eyes in fear.

Someone, please, help me.

"Hey, dummies!!"

Four heads turned to face the source of that yell. At the center of the aisle stood Trucy, hands on her hips, a deep scowl across her pretty little features.

"Leave her alone! She's obviously not interested and I can see why – have any of you looked in a mirror lately? Plus it smells like someone hasn't bathed in 10 years!" she complained, scrunching her nose and fanning an armpit to illustrate her point.

The bullies looked insulted. The young girl peered over their shoulders in awe, a light blush tainting her pale cheeks as she stared at the brave, blue-eyed girl in a magician’s costume. The brunette looked like a sorceress from a fairytale. She felt her heart hammer against her chest, but unlike her previous fear, it was exhilarating, pleasant and left a comfortable warmth in the pit of her stomach.

Who is she?

"Hah! And what're you going to do, ‘Magnifi Gramarye’? Scare us with your magic?" taunted one of the bullies.
“Sure! Why not?” said Trucy with a playful glint in her eyes as she sized him up. “Time for a little magic trick! Now you see me…”

And with a swish of her cape, Mr. Hat sprang out and punched each bully square in the gut. She smirked as they doubled over in a series of curses and miserable groans.

“Now you don’t!”

Then, she grabbed the blue-haired girl by the hand and raced out the bus just as the doors slid shut.

The bus sped off and the last thing she saw was a bunch of salty, red-faced boys flipping her the bird from the backseat window. Panting and with the adrenaline gradually subsiding, Trucy collapsed on the bus stop seats as she fought to catch her breath. Granted, that little stunt she pulled set her back on her schedule by a good half hour, but *Sunshine Colosseum* wasn't going anywhere and she figured she still had plenty of time to clear out her dressing room.

“Humph, those guys were a bunch of first-rate jerks! Are you alright, miss…?”

She paused when she realised she was talking to an empty bus stop, the silent, mysterious blue-haired girl with the sketch pad she rescued, gone without a trace. Puzzled, Trucy scratched the back of her head with a pout.

“Huh? Where did she go?”

Apollo arrived at the detention center with a face so lost, a police officer actually stopped and asked him if he was at the right place and if he needed directions. It took some explaining and a longer time convincing the officer that he was indeed a defense attorney and that he did not earn his badge from the back of a cereal box; but as soon as he mentioned Kristoph’s name, things proceeded a whole lot more smoothly.

“Oh, Mr. Gavin sent you? Why didn't you say so?”

Apollo had half the mind to reply, “Because it's my case and my client, you doughnut-munching prig,” but thought better of it. He knew he was just feeling salty that he would be nothing without his boss’ influence.

They took the lift down to the basement and as soon as the doors opened, the policeman indicated down the corridor on the left where a guard stood next to a small office and a reception counter.

“You need to sign in and declare all electronic devices and weapons should you have any on hand. Once you're done, the guard will take you to Room 6.”

“Right, thanks!”

The officer shot him a hesitant smile. “Good luck, rookie. You're going to need it.”

Apollo blinked skeptically. “Thanks, but I don't think—”

“No, seriously, you're going to need it. That guy’s a dead man walking.”

And with a laugh, the doors closed and Apollo was left alone to his own devices. Balling his hands
into fists, he took a deep breath and steeled himself. *I'm fine!* Then, he proceeded down the hallway in long, quick strides. No low-ranking policeman was going to get him down: he'd prove his worth and get his client a ‘not guilty’ verdict, or his name wasn't Apollo Justi—

“Ah, Apollo, I see that you decided to see Mr. Crescent first – good instincts.”

“Mr. Gavin! What're you doing here?”

Kristoph stood by the entrance of Room 6, arms folded with a pleasant smile on his face. His shoulders trembled as he chuckled.

“I applaud your enthusiasm – I believe it would do Mr. Crescent’s mood a great benefit,” he commented favorably. “And to answer your question, the law states that I can't have any direct involvement in this case, but it didn’t say anything about overseeing an interview.”

“Everyone’s against him, aren't they?” said Apollo in all seriousness.

“Yes,” replied Kristoph with a regretful sigh as he peered into the detention room, “but we mustn't get distracted by baseless accusations. Humans are cruel beings: we need a subject to direct all our hate and scorn onto, and if it doesn't exist, we create one.”

“Sir?”

At his apprentice’s confusion, Kristoph shook his head. “Excuse me. I got a little sidetracked.” He turned the handle and held the door open. “Shall we?”

They stepped into the room and the first thing that stood out for Apollo was the glass panel that divided their side from the convict's; two microphones were set up on either side of the divide; and a guard kept watch at both doors. The second thing he noticed (actually, come to think of it, this was probably the first) was an outrageous black-and-white pompadour slumped depressingly across the table on the other side. The large structure of hair moved according to the rhythmic rise and fall of its breathing, and it was only after a few seconds of careful observation on Apollo's part when he realised that hair wasn't an independent entity and he was actually in fact, looking at a man.

“Mr. Crescend?” began Apollo tentatively as he and Kristoph took a seat in front of the glass. No response, save another heavy sigh. He pressed the button of the microphone and spoke into it. “Mr. Crescend?”

That seemed to get the man’s attention, who reluctantly lifted his head off his arms. His gaze landed on Kristoph and he acknowledged the older male with a curt nod. “Oh. Hey, Kristoph.”

Said man returned the greeting with a smile. “Afternoon, Daryan.”

A beat, then a double take, before Daryan’s face lit up like a child’s on Christmas morning. He threw his arms in the air and cried in relief, “Thank you, Nick!” Then, he kicked back in his seat and flashed the famed attorney a wide grin.

“Man, Kristoph, for a minute there I thought I was a goner! You know, as an Interpol agent, going to jail does the *shitiest* thing to your record. But hey, you're the coolest defense out there – I'm saved!”

“Actually,” Kristoph interrupted politely, “since Klavier’s prosecuting your case, my understudy will be your lawyer instead.”

That was when Daryan finally noticed the elephant in the room.
“I’m doomed!”

Apollo twitched and had to resist saying something particularly unpleasant. Wow. This guy was just overflowing with rousing faith and positivity, wasn't he?

“Hi, Mr. Crescend. I'm Apollo Justice and I'll be defending you in court,” he introduced himself with an earnest bow. “I promise: I'll do everything I can to prove your innocence.”

“Hah! Pretty confident for a punk like you,” Daryan scoffed, pointing his finger at him, voice and face laden with doubt. “Not even Klavier can look me in the eye and confidently say he believes me – and that asshole’s my best friend!” He crossed his arms and blew a raspberry. “Fine, it's his job; whatever. But if everyone thinks I'm a psychotic, murdering maniac, what can a rookie like you do?”

“Everything I can,” Apollo repeated with so much conviction and solemnity, both Daryan and Kristoph paused to regard him with interest.

“I know you think things are hopeless and I know I’m a greenhorn, but everything starts with a little bit of faith and trust, and I need you to believe in me,” he began, unsure where his sudden burst of confidence was coming from, but allowed it to seize him. “It’s a lot to ask for, I understand; but trust takes two people, Mr. Crescend. I can’t do this alone.”

Daryan frowned. “Why are you so determined to help me?”

A small smile graced Apollo’s lips as he thought back to a certain ex-lawyer’s advice.

“Someone once told me to always believe in my client and to pursue the truth - I plan to do both. Whether or not the truth turns out beautiful or ugly, we’ll see through it together. I’ll fight for you until I can do so no further, and whatever the final verdict may be, we can both rest assured that we gave our all.” He met Daryan’s stare, unflinching. “I believe you’re innocent and I’m willing to stake my faith in that. What about you?”

For a moment, Daryan did nothing save regard the brunette in stunned silence, before he flashed him a wide, grateful grin. He didn’t know whether to laugh or admire the rookie’s guts, but people always said he was a good judge of character and this young attorney - though he might not be Kristoph Gavin - was all right.

“If you’re going to be my lawyer, there’s one thing you need to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Call me, Daryan, ok?” He laughed. “Formalities cramp my style.”

Apollo smiled in return. “You got it.”

“Cool.” Daryan reclined in his seat and propped his feet on the table. “So, this is kinda my first time in the slammer… What do you guys need to know?”

“Perhaps you could start by telling us what exactly you did during intermission,” asked Kristoph right off the bat. “Please try to recall as much as you can in detail.”

“Sure, no problem,” Daryan replied. “Well, we were all backstage just behind the curtain - the band, that is - and Klavier was feeling pretty depressed over the state of the concert.”

“Depressed?” Apollo clarified.
“Yeah, it really wasn’t a good night for him. Machi went missing; Lamiroir’s costume disappeared and she almost couldn’t go on; Trucy-doll’s fireworks went whack, so we had no grand finale - heh, come to think of it, we didn’t even have a finale… Oh, and someone busted his guitar case and stole his baby before the concert. I’m still saying it’s airport security’s fault.”

Apollo frowned as he struggled to process that seemingly endless string of information. *Yeesh,* once Daryan got started, he could really talk.

“Yeah, it really wasn’t a good night for him. Machi went missing; Lamiroir’s costume disappeared and she almost couldn’t go on; Trucy-doll’s fireworks went whack, so we had no grand finale - heh, come to think of it, we didn’t even have a finale… Oh, and someone busted his guitar case and stole his baby before the concert. I’m still saying it’s airport security’s fault.”

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“And what does the airport have to do with his guitar?” He asked, admittedly rather lost.

“Ah, don’t mind Klavier,” said Kristoph, waving him off. “He employed a special service to bring his new guitar all the way from Borginia. I believe it was Lamiroir’s gift to him.”

“But a special service?”

“Hey, the flight and condensation really messes up the wood and sound, you know?” Daryan pointed out.

“Yes, but what does this have to do with the case?”

“Klavier’s guitar has something to do with the case?”

Apollo facepalmed. Never mind. They were getting nowhere and he hadn’t even asked his first question yet, much less received a complete answer from Kristoph’s leading question.

“Anyway, you were saying?” he pressed on, inwardly praying he would gather some relevant facts by the end of the afternoon.

“Oh yeah, Klavier was depressed as fuck, alright. So, I tried to cheer him up, but nothing worked and he just told me and the boys to leave him alone to sort things out himself. Then he left.”

“Back to *The Gavinners*’ dressing room?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” replied Daryan with a shrug. “Maybe, but you better ask him about that. Shortly after that, the boys and I went our separate ways as well. It was a 10 minute break – doubt anyone wanted to waste it.”

“The report claimed that all five members of the band and Mr. Wright didn’t have solid alibis,” Apollo recited from memory. “None of you saw each other? Can you think of anyone who could testify to your activities? The crew? A cleaner?”

“Nope. Saw no one and no one saw me… Well, maybe Machi did, but he’s kinda dead.”

“Oh, well that’s-” Apollo stopped as soon as he realised something. “Wait, you saw Machi?! I thought he went missing!”

“Why didn’t you inform Miss Skye or anyone else, Daryan?” Kristoph continued with just a smidgen of urgency.

“Hey, cut me some slack, ok?” The guitarist defended. “I was about to, but that crazy detective wasn’t at the dressing room hallway like she was supposed to. So, I tried to find Klavier, but I got distracted by the piano in the hallway. I freaked because I thought that idiot changed the programme without telling me – then I really picked up the pace.”

Apollo winced when he felt his arm acting up again, but ignored it. This new reveal was big,
significant enough to divert the focus of suspicion to another party even. So, the leader of the band and manager of the concert himself had been MIA the whole break and the detective, or in this case security guard, wasn't at her post either. The hallway with the piano had been empty – a little too convenient a setup for the killer to move about freely.

“And what about the piano?” he sought to clarify. “Where was it at the start of the break?”

“Still on stage,” Daryan answered, holding up three fingers. “Basically, to summarize the events: one, piano on stage; two, saw Machi; three, piano in the hallway.”

“But that's impossible,” Apollo interjected fiercely, desperately confused. “If you saw Machi during the break, that doesn't give the killer enough time to set him on fire and stuff him into the piano!”

“Hey, I saw what I saw!” Daryan argued back. “The kid was in his frilly white costume and disappeared around the corner before I could call his name.”

Apollo and Kristoph shared a meaningful look, before they excused themselves to consult each other to the side.

“Sir, what’s going on here?” Apollo hissed. “This testimony changes everything.”

“I'm... not too sure myself,” said Kristoph, adjusting his spectacles, and the slight hesitation in his voice indicated to Apollo that he was clearly as perplexed as he admitted.

“Daryan didn't see a ghost, did he?”

“Don't be absurd.”

“Then what's going on?”

Kristoph considered the question for a moment, mentally went over the facts of the case, before he leaned back with a knowing smile. Apollo eyed his boss warily. He knew that look: his mentor figured out something.

“A word of advice, Apollo, if you will,” began Kristoph mysteriously. “Not everything is what it seems. It's your job to separate the truth from the lies.”

And what exactly was that supposed to mean? Honestly, he was getting really annoyed here. First Phoenix and now Kristoph – would it seriously kill these guys to be less cryptic about their advice?

“Yo, you two done talking or what?” said Daryan grumpily from his side of the room.

“Y-Yeah, sorry,” Apollo stuttered, scrambling back to his seat. Questions, right. Questions. “And what happened after that? Did you manage to find Prosecutor Gavin?”

“Nah. But intermission was almost over, so I figured he'd be back by the stage anyway. I was the first to arrive, followed by Am, Crow, Klav, then Val-”

“Uh…”

“Bass, Drums, Vocals, Keyboard.”

“Oh. In that order exactly?”

“Yep. Then after that, Nick came screaming to us about a dead body.”
‘Ah, that's where things left off,’ Apollo mentally recapped. If he remembered the case report correctly, Phoenix had been with Lamiroir when he stumbled upon Machi’s corpse. After that, police came and immediately singled out the six men as suspects since none of them could testify to each other's whereabouts, and Lamiroir’s testimony regarding Phoenix’s presence couldn't be taken seriously due to her disability.

“One last question,” said Apollo, “where exactly did you, uh, see Machi?”

Daryan frowned as he fought to recall that bit of information. “… Just around the corner of Trucy-doll’s dressing room. There’s a ‘staff only’ door just next to it that leads out to the concert floor. I think he disappeared through there.”

“I think that's all the information we can get from here,” said Kristoph, gracefully rising to his feet. He turned to regard his understudy, who followed suit. “It would be wise to investigate the concert venue: speak to the other suspects; question the crew; perhaps they might tell you things they were otherwise too frightened to tell the police.”

“Are you coming along, Mr. Gavin?” Apollo asked, earnest and hopeful.

Kristoph shook his head regretfully. “I'm afraid not. This is as far as the law permits me to assist you. However, trust that I'll guide you during your trial tomorrow. Good luck in your investigation and I look forward to reading your report by this evening.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Oh, and Apollo?”

“Yes, sir?”

Kristoph flashed him an encouraging smile. “Don't be so nervous.”

“Yeah!” Daryan chimed from behind the glass, giving the brunette a thumbs up. “I'm counting on you, dude! If you find anything weird or want to ask me more questions, I'll be here. Well, at least until 5 p.m.”

Apollo grinned and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. Yeah, Daryan was alright. Though they started off a little bumpy, he wanted to come through for the guy, take his faith and trust in him and make it amount to something worthwhile. His first official client was counting on him, had a lifetime sentence hovering dangerously over his head, and Apollo had no plans to disappoint. Quickly, he glanced at his watch – 2 p.m. He had three hours.

Alright. Next stop, Sunshine Colosseum.

“Don't worry, Daryan, Mr. Gavin! I won't let you down! Because I'm Apollo Justice and I'm fine!”

And with that, he zipped out the detention room. The door slammed shut. Daryan stuck a finger in his ear and winced.

“Wow, I actually heard that through the glass… Is he usually so enthusiastic?”

Maintaining his smile, Kristoph casually removed a set of earplugs from his ears.

“Oh, you get used to it.”
Goddammit! Why was it so hard to get a cab when you needed it?

Apollo stood outside the police station along the curb, his arm stretched out in the same manner he'd been doing for the past 15 minutes. He seriously regretted not taking the train or flagging a bus, but like any logical person racing against time, he thought a direct cab ride would keep him on schedule. Well, nope, because for some strange reason, no cabs came here and it was much too late to change his mode of transport. If he took a train, he'd be late; if he took a bus, he could kiss his chances of winning in court tomorrow goodbye.

Suddenly, someone horned and he whipped his head around. A black motorcycle helmet wearing a GYAXA space center uniform stopped next to him. The pleasant surprise on Apollo’s face was palpable. The rider killed the engine, removed his helmet, ran his fingers through his unruly black hair, before flashing the young lawyer a wide grin.

“Hey, 'pollo! Fancy seeing you here.”

“Clay!” he greeted and they performed their secret handshake – a childish indulgence, but a habit that they followed through for almost a decade. “What're you doing here?”

“On my way home,” he replied. “Starbuck got a panic attack again, so my training’s suspended until he’s ready to get back on his feet.”

“Honestly, Clay, with a mentor like that, I worry for your future in space,” Apollo deadpanned, wondering how on earth a guy like Solomon Starbuck became the first-rate astronaut he was today, despite his fear of space. There was definitely some irony in the way fate worked.

“What about you?” Clay indicated at the police station with a thumb. “Apart from your hair, I don't see any crime here.”

“Funny guy,” he muttered wryly. “Nah, I just spoke to Daryan Crescend-”

“And did you hear the news about him?” Clay interrupted all too eagerly. “An Interpol agent and a murderer, though not a very good one with all that incriminating evidence. Man, I'd hate to be that guy’s lawyer!”

“…”

“... You're that guy’s lawyer, aren't you?”

Apollo sighed and Clay facepalmed.

“Why do you get all the hopeless ones? Apollo Justice, you’re supposed to be helping Wright!”

“I know that,” he snapped, “but I’m not the one who called whining to his boyfriend to help defend a friend who's being prosecuted by that friend’s best friend, who also happens to be said boyfriend’s brother, therefore making the whole thing bloody illegal unless I step in to help.”

Silence.

Clay blinked slowly, paused, then blinked slowly again. Apollo held his breath. Wait for it…

“So, who called the boyfriend?”

There we go.
“Mr. Wright.”

“Ah.”

Apollo quickly summarized his predicament from Phoenix’s phone call last Friday to his recent interview with Daryan. His boss had pretty much thrown him into the deep end, and with a ton of things to do within a ridiculously short amount of time, it would take a miracle to have everything sorted out before the trial the following morning. He just hoped it wasn't going to be a short trial, otherwise that would be really embarrassing for him and really bad for Daryan.

“Well then, from a best friend to another,” Clay offered him a second helmet with a wink, “need a lift?”

Apollo accepted the helmet all too gratefully, put it on and climbed up behind him. Thank you, GYAXA sponsored vehicles.

“Clay, I could kiss you.”

Said man laughed. “Please don’t. Save them for Wright.”

He revved up the engine and they sped down the street, cutting corners and running yellow lights.

“Well anyway, since I'm on indefinite leave, I thought you could use an assistant,” Clay yelled over the rushing wind and sounds of the city. “After all, we did start this together, so we might as well see it all through!”

Apollo took a while to process his friend’s statement, lest he heard him wrong.

“You’re serious!” he exclaimed.

“Of course I'm serious! But all I'm good at are tech, stunts and space rocks. You gotta tell me what to do, boss!”

A small smile wormed its way across Apollo’s lips. It didn’t matter if he didn’t have Kristoph or Phoenix by his side. Suddenly, he felt like he could achieve the impossible.

This was impossible.

Less than five minutes since their arrival and Clay was already more distracted than a cat with a ball of yarn. When he saw the massive Gavinners concert banner draped outside the stadium earlier, he had squealed like a girl. When they entered the main performance space and saw the stage, he fell to his knees and praised the Lord for his kindness. And now, he was busy fanboying over all the instruments. Apollo told him not to touch anything – it'd ruin the investigation and they might be important – but the young lawyer could see from Clay’s spazzing that said instruction was quickly taking its toll on his sanity.

Apollo slapped his forehead with a loud sigh. Clearly, Clay had other reasons for tagging along than helping him. Damn idiot’s nothing but a fanboy.

“And this is the guitar Klavier used for their first world tour – GASP – Oh my God! Crow’s drums! Hey, hey, Apollo, could you take a picture of me? I'm going to get behind-”
“I told you not to touch any-”

“Herr Justice?”

They froze. A cymbal crashed in the background. Apollo nervously turned around and flashed the speaker a sheepish grin.

“P-Prosecutor Gavin, hey! Uh… How long have you been standing there?”

Klavier laughed. “Long enough.”

“Oh,” he said lamely, embarrassed and silently cursing Clay to kingdom come and back. “H-How’s it going by the way?”

Mentally, he winced and kicked himself for that question. Of course nothing was going great: a murder happened in the middle of the guy’s concert and he was prosecuting his best friend in court tomorrow. Still, it impressed Apollo that Klavier could stay cool about the whole thing. Could nothing rattle this guy?

“Could be worse,” Klavier said with a smirk, before his expression turned serious and he lowered his voice. “You’re Daryan’s lawyer, ja? Listen, I really appreciate you taking up this case, both for mein bruder and friend.”

“Y-Your welcome– oh! And this is Clay Terran,” Apollo quickly added, tugging said man over who sported a wide, enthusiastic grin. “He’ll be helping in my investigation.”

“Klavier, I… ah… just wanted to say that – wow, I never thought I’d get to meet you and the Gavinners in person! I mean, you guys are great and I love your mu– Ow.” Apollo elbowed him roughly in the side. “I mean, nice to meet you.”

Klavier chuckled at the young astronaut’s enthusiasm. “Ja nun, it wouldn’t do to keep mein fans waiting.”

‘Just one fan,’ Apollo thought with a roll of his eyes.

“I take it you want to see where the victim’s body was found?”

“Yes,” Apollo answered, only to pause to regard Klavier warily. Was it just him, or was this a little too easy?

“No offense, Prosecutor Gavin, but… uh… you seem awfully cooperative.”

“Did I rub Herr Justice the wrong way during the party last month?” he said, leaning towards him with a playful grin.

“No!”

Yes.

“The thing is, Daryan’s like a bruder to me,” Klavier explained, gazing at the lone rhythmic guitar on the stage sadly, conflicted. “I refuse to believe he did it, but mein investigation suggests otherwise.” He fixed Apollo with a hard stare. “If you’re able to prove his innocence, Herr Justice, I’ll hear it. If you can get him that ‘not guilty’ verdict tomorrow, by whatever means necessary, I’ll endorse it.”

Apollo regarded him silently, disconcerted. It was obvious what Klavier was asking him to do, whose side he was on… But was it right? Suddenly, he feared for tomorrow’s procession. If Klavier
was going to go easy on him because his best friend’s life was at stake, then what would that say about his own capability as a budding lawyer? What would that say about Klavier’s moral integrity as their country’s top prosecutor? Should he take up his sword and fight like he promised Daryan, or would Klavier roll over and give him an easy victory? Who would have thought law had its politics too?

“So… the body?” he reminded.

“Ja, this way.”

The duo followed Klavier to the backstage dressing rooms and the blonde motioned at the grand piano to the side of the hallway with its lid open. A shape of a body was outlined on the inside with white tape; a dark blue cloth draped next to it to simulate Lamiroir’s cloak. If Apollo remembered the photograph in his evidence folder correctly, the original had constellations embroidered on it.

“Cool… There was a dead guy in this thing!” Clay gushed as he stuck his head inside. “It even still smells a little funky.”

“Did forensics figure out approximately when the victim was killed?” Apollo asked, ignoring the fact that his best friend was currently embarrassing him. Again.

“Sorry, I can't disclose such information,” Klavier replied with a hint of annoyance, while Apollo inwardly growled. Damn all this red tape.

“All right, what about the approximate time the body was discovered?”

“About 9.30 p.m. – an hour and 20 minutes from the start of the konzert; 10 minutes into intermission. Lamiroir, Valerian and myself had already finished the opening number without Herr Tobaye. Everything playing after that were all Gavinner hits.”

“You opened without Machi?”

“Ja, he went missing from the start, so I had my keyboardist take over,” Klavier replied.

“That means all five members were on stage before intermission, which rules out the murder taking place then – at least, it wouldn't have involved any of you or Daryan,” said Apollo.

“Achtung!” Klavier exclaimed, making Apollo and Clay jump in surprise. “Herr Justice is surprisingly sharp.”

While Apollo twitched at the insinuation of the word “surprisingly” (seriously, one moment the guy was supporting him and the next, he was acting all condescending), Klavier carried on talking.

“All crew members were busy – niemand had time to commit murder. Fraulein Detective claimed no outside involvement too.”

“And Wright found the body, correct?” Clay chimed in. “Has he – what's the word? – testified to that?”

The blonde prosecutor paused with a nasty grimace on his handsome face. “He has,” came the cold reply, a drastic change from his prior enthusiasm, and the two friends immediately knew that was all they were going to get out of him about the matter.

“Herr Justice, Herr Terran. Es tut mir leid,” he apologized, “there are other matters I need to see to. If you have more questions, or better yet, if you kann connect Has-been’s fingerprints to the murder,
“come find me in mein dressing room.”

He paused momentarily in his speech before whispering, more to himself than anyone, “For Daryan, any other suspect will do.”

With a parting salute, the blonde turned around and left. Apollo watched him go, unsettled by that last remark. Sure, prosecuting his best friend was heartbreaking, but was Klavier hoping to pin the blame on someone else? Still, he didn't want to jump the gun by accusing Prosecutor Gavin as corrupt. Perhaps it would be good to start by establishing motives; after all, nothing was a better recipe for murder than relational conflict. The deeper he delved into this supposed clear-cut whodunit case, the more drama he found himself submerged in.

“Has-been?” Apollo and Clay simultaneously wondered out loud.

“He means Nick.”

The pair gave a start, whirled around sharply and came face to face with a young woman in a white lab coat. Her long brown hair was done up in a topknot and a pair of rose-tinted glasses sat upon her head. A detective’s ID was clipped onto her blouse. She had a lovely disposition, save for that grumpy frown on her face and the callous tone of voice. Raising an eyebrow in question, the brunette regarded the two men, unimpressed. Fortunately, it didn't take long for Apollo to find his voice.

“Excuse me, Miss…” He spared a furtive glance at her ID. “… Ema Skye. Nice to meet you. My name’s Apollo Justice and this is Clay Terran.”

“And what of it?”

“Miss Skye, could you tell me more about Mr. Wright and Prosecutor Gavin’s rela-”

“Quiet please,” she interrupted rudely, producing a back of snackoos and munched on them noisily. “It's snack time.”

Apollo’s face fell. Yeesh! What was her problem? What was everyone's problem? Less than an hour and he'd already met three antsy people connected to this case who seemed motivated to make his life exceptionally difficult. First, his own client; next, Klavier Gavin; now, this detective…

“Ooh! Snackoos, nice! Can I have some, detective?”

And then, there was Clay.

Apollo smacked his friend’s hand away and tried to appeal to the grumpy detective’s good will.

“Sorry, Miss Skye, but I really-”

She shoved him aside to stand in front of an unassuming Clay.

“Sure,” she proclaimed with a full mouth, handing the young astronaut the bag. “Always nice to know someone loves snackoos as much as I do. Hope you don't mind chocolate.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Clay in-between stuffing his mouth. “It's the best flavor! I think the spicy squid is a close runner-up, but chocolate still wins.”

“You think so too?” Ema’s eyes widened in surprise. “Hm… How do I put it? Chocolate just has that extra…”
“That special little…”

“Crunch. / Crunch.”

They gasped in unison, then proceeded to happily devour the snacks while Apollo watched on, incredulous. *Ok... now I've seen everything.*

“Oh yeah, sorry,” said Clay casually, returning her the bag. “You were talking about some ‘Nick’ person?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah, Phoenix Wright. Maybe you've heard of him – he's the dresser.”

Apollo did a double take. *Hang on.* Maybe ladies man Clay had something good going on here. He quickly whispered something in his friend’s ear and nudged him forward.

“Oh, uh…” Clay cleared his throat, “did he and Klavier get into a fight?”

“No, nothing like that,” Ema replied after some thought. “Sure, that glimmerous fop has issues with everyone, but what he has against Nick seems more… personal?”

“What do you mean?” Apollo quickly interjected, his own curiosity getting the better of him. Ema meanwhile, pulled a face.

“I'm not telling *you* anything, dumb lawyer!” She threw a snackoo at his forehead and he winced. “I know you're shark boy’s attorney. If that glimmerous fop finds out I said something that ends up putting him on the spot, I can kiss my career goodbye.”

Clay frowned as he considered how to approach this. Poor Apollo simply had no luck with women. So, this detective doesn't like her own partner, huh? He wondered if he could use her own emotions against her.

“Wow, no offense, detective? But Klavier sounds like an ass,” he remarked.

“Clay, what are you doing?” Apollo hissed beneath his breath. "We shouldn't be talking bad about Prosecutor Gavin. What if he finds out?"

“Just trust me on this.”

“Oh, he is ,” she replied with a huff, wagging a snackoo in his face. “That glamour boy thinks he's such a prince, but all he *really* is is a royal pain in the butt. Oh he's professional alright – professionally petty .”

“Really? Can't be *that* bad…”

“Hah! Where do I start?” she went on complaining, oblivious to the knowing smirks the two boys shared between themselves. “I heard the previous dresser quit because he didn't like how she ironed his shirts. And he runs Nick flat just because he doesn't want him working here – seriously, it's like he'd do anything to get him to leave. And did you know he's not even paying me for security?!”

As Ema rambled on with her 101 reasons of hatred and spite, Apollo mentally took a step back and thought through her confession. It wasn't much, but he was able to tease out some highly suspicious snippets of information. For example, the obvious question on why Klavier didn't want Phoenix of all people hanging around the concert venue. He recalled Phoenix phoning him up last Sunday afternoon telling him about Trucy’s gig with The Gavinners . If Klavier didn't mind Phoenix’s daughter, why would Phoenix himself be a problem? After all, it wasn't like they didn't *know* each
other – Phoenix was like a pseudo brother-in-law. Could there have been something Klavier didn't want the guy to see? Did he view Phoenix as a threat somehow? He didn't know if he was overthinking things or if the reasons behind Klavier’s actions were more simple than that, but it was still something to consider.

Apollo nudged Clay again and whispered into his ear. The latter’s eyes widened momentarily before he paused, considering how to go about asking the next bit.

“Oh yeah, Miss Skye?” he interrupted her rambling. “Are you a fan of The Gavinner’s? Since you’re security and all.”

She gave an unglamorous snort of contempt and turned up her chin. “As if! I got off duty as soon as I could!”

‘Amazing. With guards like her, who needs slackers?’ Apollo thought.

“What'd you do? Was it snack time?” Clay teased.

“You could say that,” Ema replied with a smirk. “Actually, Lamiroir got hungry, so I went to the vending machine outside the stadium to get her something to eat, but… uh… I couldn't decide what to get. So I ended up getting two of everything.”

Meanwhile, Apollo was discretely taking down notes. Minus that last comment, Ema revealed a very interesting fact that had yet been disclosed in the reports: her disappearance during the supposed time of murder. So, Lamiroir had sent the detective on duty on an errand at the exact moment the crime was committed? Interesting. If only he could question Lamiroir about this, but he didn't know of the singer’s whereabouts.

Suddenly, Ema’s phone buzzed and she whipped it out to scan through the text message. Her face turned black and she shoved it back into her pocket. *Speak of the devil.*

“Sorry, boys, got to run. I guess you're allowed to check out the crime scene and stuff, but don't touch anything,” she stressed, jabbing Apollo in the chest for emphasis. “Mess anything up, and I'll mess you up, clear?”

“C-Crystal.”

She walked off and left Apollo and Clay in the middle of the hallway wondering if they had just indeed consulted a detective, and if that in turn, said something about the standards of their country’s law enforcement. While Clay commented he’d never date a woman so impossible as that, Apollo prayed he’d never have to work with, much less encounter Ema in other cases, again.

“So, while Ema’s inner self was chewing Klavier’s head off, did you manage to find anything suspicious about the piano?” Clay asked.

“Nothing that doesn’t match the case report,” said Apollo with a disappointed shake of his head. “Everything’s just as Mr. Wright found it. No telling when or who moved it either.”

“And it came from the stage?”

“No where else,” he replied, indicating at a low ramp to the side. “Also, it could've only come by that way. That ramp leads directly to the stage. Unless the killer took the stairs… but the piano doesn't fit through there.” He waved his notepad in the air. “Oh well, at least I got a bunch of confessionals from the detective.”
“Damn, what now?” said Clay. “Dead end?”

“Well,” answered Apollo, directing his gaze at the last door along the hallway. “I don’t know about you, but I’m more interested in Machi’s ghost.”

Apollo raised his fist and knocked on the door of Trucy Wright’s dressing room. Admittedly, he felt a little nervous. True, Phoenix had shown him her photo in his locket before, but that was taken years ago and children grew up. All this time, he’d only ever heard of the girl from Phoenix, Olga and Daryan; though it left him feeling a little disappointed on the dark circumstances surrounding their first meeting.

Not only was this his idol’s precious daughter, but she was also the heiress of the famed Gramarye lineage. The Gramaryes were legends and everyone, lawyer or not, knew of the case that put a dramatic end to both Zak Gramarye and Phoenix Wright’s careers and legacy. Apollo felt bad for the poor girl - she had lost her father and a bright future in a single moment. It was then he took back all his shallow judgments and preconceived notions toward Phoenix’s choice in adopting and raising her, despite his unfavorable financial situation and employment. His idol had a lot of heart, but he took in Trucy, and the darkness of the Gramaryes wouldn’t leave him alone. It wasn’t that Phoenix hadn’t tried to climb back up. He willingly traded his future with a poor child’s; he chose to suffer, because he had fallen in love.

“Coming!” sounded an excitable, high-pitched voice from behind the door and Apollo smiled at its innocence.

Trucy must truly be a wonderful girl.

The door swung open to reveal a pretty, vivacious brunette with big, sparkling eyes as blue as her father’s. She wore a peculiar light blue magician’s costume, complete with a matching top hat; and had a bright red scarf tied around her neck. Trucy was all smiles, however her face soon fell at the sight of the person standing before her.

“Hi, you’re Trucy, right?” Apollo greeted with a pleasant grin. “Mr. Wright’s daughter.”

No response. All the girl did was stare at him with an unreadable expression across her face, significantly less friendly than she originally sounded. Maybe she's shy? Apollo pushed on undeterred.

“Um, sorry if we disturbed you. I’m Apollo Justice and this is my friend, Clay Terran,” he introduced, gesturing at said raven haired male who waved enthusiastically. “I’m Mr. Daryan Crescend’s lawyer.”

He presented his attorney’s badge. Trucy looked at it, unimpressed, then returned her gaze to him.

“Anyway, I’m here investigating my client’s claims,” Apollo continued. “Daryan said that he saw the victim, Machi Tobaye, outside your room during intermission. I was wondering if you could let us look around your-”

“No.”

Apollo stopped to blink dubiously. “Eh?”
“You heard me,” said Trucy with a deep scowl as she crossed her arms. “No. You're not the police and since I have no involvement in this case, I have the right to refuse your investigation.”

Clay nudged the stunned lawyer at his side and whispered, “Hey, ‘Pollo. The kid knows the law better than you do.”

Apollo stuttered, “But I-”

“Listen here, Polliwog ,” Trucy snapped, pointing accusingly between his brows and making him go almost cross-eyed. “I don't care who you are, or if you think you're some hotshot lawyer. Stay away from my daddy!”

And before Apollo could get another word out, he was introduced to his new best friend, the door. He rubbed his nose miserably. Geez! What the hell was that about? That made it the fourth person who didn't like him, today.

“Seriously, bro, you need to start working on your people skills,” said Clay with a sympathetic frown. “What in the world did you ever do to her anyway?”

“Nothing!” Apollo screamed, on the verge of popping a blood vessel. He consulted his watch. “Urgh, we’re running out of time!”

He handed Clay a photograph of Machi and shoved him towards Trucy’s door.

“You try and talk to her and see what you can find out; I’m going to find the other band members. Hopefully, they're more cooperative and don't hate me for no bloody reason.”

“And if I see something odd?”

“Snap a picture. Or better yet, take it and file it as evidence. Mr. Wright’s daughter is hiding something, I'm sure of it.”

They agreed to meet back at the piano in 50 minutes.

Apollo followed the melodious tunes of a keyboard up stage, only to slip on a puddle of water and crash noisily into the drums set. God, this really wasn't his day... Suddenly, the playing stopped and he found himself staring at a proffered hand with at least a dozen bangles and leather wristbands around the arm.

“Careful. The smoke machine tends to leak. Need a hand?” said a friendly, upbeat voice, almost brotherly in its protectiveness.

Gratefully, Apollo accepted the hand and the older male helped him to his feet. The latter watched the kid dust himself off and straighten his clothes with a bemused smile, his emerald eyes honing in on the golden badge pinned to the lapel of his red vest.

“Hey, what do you know? You must be Daryan’s lawyer!” The handsome brunette tucked a stray lock behind his ear and extended his hand in a handshake. “The name’s Valerian Keyes.”

“Apollo Justice,” he introduced himself, returning the gesture. Finally, someone nice. He took in Valerian’s short, neatly-styled hair; the choker around his neck and cross-shaped earnings. Among
The Gavinners, the brunette seemed the most normal and approachable.

“You must be the keyboardist. I, uh, heard your playing…”

Valerian chuckled, sheepish. “My bad, was I interrupting your investigation or something?”

“Huh? Oh, no, no! Not at all,” Apollo hastily defended. “Actually, you could say your playing helped me find you. Do you mind if I asked you some questions, Mr. Keyes?”

“No problem, but please, Valerian or Val’s enough – I’m only pushing 26,” he said with a laugh as he sat atop an amplifier and opened himself a bottle of water. “If there’s anything I know that can prove Daryan’s innocence, ask away.”

“Are you two close?” Apollo began with an easy one.

“Sure are! Even outside the band, we tend to hang out after work. He and Klav are inseparable of course, but I’d say I’m a close runner-up. You could say we’re drinking buddies, plus I’m usually the one saving his ass with my car if his missions go sour.” Valerian snickered at the memory. “There was this one time he was busting some drug smugglers south of town, when I had to pick him up cuz they stole his car along with his pants.”

“That’s… nice,” commented Apollo awkwardly before moving onto his next question. “Ok, please tell me what happened during intermission from the moment your song ended to Mr. Wright discovering the body.”

Valerian gulped down a mouthful of water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Mm… Well, Klav was majorly depressed, so Daryan tried to offer some cheer, but ended up getting rejected. Klav wanted some time alone. After that, we all left too.”

“Separately? In what order?”

“Yeah. Amaranth left first, kept muttering this was a waste of time and had somewhere to be; followed by Daryan, Crow and then myself.”

Amaranth, Apollo recited that name silently. The bassist… But it was only a 10-minute intermission! Where or what did he need to do in the middle of a concert that was so important?

“I wouldn’t worry too much about Amaranth if I were you,” Valerian interrupted Apollo’s thoughts with a flippant wave of his hand. “That guy’s like that – always mean, silent and mysterious. Anyway, I went straight to our dressing room and stayed there the whole break. I saw the piano in the hallway on the way back and figured I’d ask the boys about it and what that meant for Machi.”

“Argh!” Apollo clutched his arm in pain, gritting his teeth. Goddammit, this was the second time it acted up today.

Concerned, Valerian scooted over and took his arm in his hands.

“Here, let me see that,” he offered, examining the redness around the younger male’s wrist. “Hm… Your bracelet’s way too tight, man. I wear them frequent enough to tell. Either you’ve been working out, or it’s gotten smaller.”

‘My bracelet?’ Apollo wondered to himself as he rubbed his sore wrist just under the golden bangle. That seemed pretty far-fetched, especially since he had the thing on since infancy.
“Anything else you want to know?” asked Valerian.

“Huh? Oh yeah.” He presented a photograph of Machi. “Daryan mentioned that he saw Machi during intermission in this very costume.”

“What?!”

Apollo nearly fell off the stage from Valerian’s outburst. At least he knew he wasn’t the only one who thought the guitarist’s claim was bogus.

“I take it it’s a surprise to you?” he ventured.

“No duh! But why didn't he tell us? Everyone was running around like headless chickens looking for him!”

“He claimed he was about to, until he saw the piano in the hallway and momentarily forgot,” Apollo replied, keeping the picture. “What can you tell me about Machi?”

“Not much,” Valerian said with a shrug. “You'd have more luck asking Lamiroir. Generally, the brat keeps to himself.”

“Brat?”

“Uh…” The keyboardist blushed guiltily from that little slip-up. “Well, to put it bluntly, Machi’s not the nicest boy in town. He's proud, stuck-up, unfriendly 24/7… Between you and me, Apollo? None of us guys cared much when he went missing… well, except for Lamiroir. And maybe Klav, but that's cuz it's his responsibility.”

This is new.

“Even Mr. Wright?”

“Ho! Don't even get me started on Nick,” said Valerian, slapping his thigh in anticipation of a good tale. “I swear, those two are worse than cat and mouse! We might dislike Machi, but Nick really dislikes him – and I think the feeling’s mutual.”

“Why?”

“Don't know. Got off on the wrong foot; treated Nick like dirt; a bad influence on Trucy-doll,” he replied with a shrug. “There was an accident up on the rafters about two days before the concert – Trucy-doll and Machi were playing and that spoiled brat forced her to get something he dropped and she fell.”

“Fell?!” Apollo exclaimed in horror. “Is she alright?”

“Yeah, thanks to Crow actually. Landed right on top of him. Poor guy nearly broke his back, but at least Trucy survived. It was a freakishly close call. Nick nearly had a panic attack and hated the brat even more after that.”

“I'd imagine,” Apollo remarked. “Anything else about Mr. Wright and Machi I should know?”

“Well… during rehearsals a day before the concert, they got into a huge spat – screaming and shouting and I think Machi even threw his songbook at Nick’s face. Then Nick called him a spawn of the Devil and said he ought to be burned alive, and Machi replied, 'I dare you.'”

“You're not serious.”
“Ask anyone and they'd tell you the same story.”

A wide-eyed Apollo regarded Valerian in silence. Were they talking about the same Phoenix? Dorky, carefree, oftentimes-childish Phoenix with his unassuming smiles and infuriatingly teasing smirks – *that* Phoenix? It seemed so unlike him, yet why hadn’t his idol ever mentioned something like this in their previous conversations? Among all the testimonies he heard so far, this was the strongest and closest in terms of establishing a motive for murder. Machi nearly killed Phoenix’s daughter; they fought; the former disappears; Phoenix conveniently finds the body. Apollo didn’t like where his thoughts were going and worse still, he hoped not to pursue this line of reasoning in court.

“Thank you, Valerian,” he said stiffly. “You’ve been a big help.”

*To be continued...*

**Chapter End Notes**

Yup, Apollo's got himself a new assistant and it's none other than his best bro. I've always entertained the thought at the back of my mind since PW:DD (you know, provided Clay didn't die, which is why this is an AU *gross sobbing*). Plus, Trucy's being difficult, so Apollo needs a more cooperative confidant. I know, I really love Trucy, but I thought it would spice things up a bit if hers and Apollo's relationship didn't start off swimmingly.

Poor Klavier's in a stick. Things are tough when you're made to prosecute your best friend and he's definitely going through his own share of insecurities and moral dilemmas.

And what's this? More dark secrets of The Gaviners' concert and the drama behind-the-scenes, revealed! Who's lying? Who's telling the truth? Who's the one with the real motive? And who the hell moved that damn piano? More mysteries to be uncovered in part two of Apollo Justice's investigation!
Alright, here's part two of Apollo's investigation! For those of you who have patiently waited, I hope your memory serves you well because there's a lot of things happening and unlike the actual game, you don't have a court record to refer to lol. Everyone gets to be a detective, yay!

Thanks for the 500 hits, wonderful comments, and all the kudos! I really appreciate it.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Go away, or I'm calling security!"

"Trucy, it's just me, Clay," he spoke through the door in a manner that was both patient and kind. "Mr. Justice just left. I swear it on my life."

All he got for an answer was silence.

Clay stood alone in the hallway, rolling and unrolling his own set of case documents in apprehension. When he had first agreed to tag along as Apollo's assistant, he never thought he needed to personally convince and earn a young girl's trust. He still remembered that cold winter's night outside Apollo's office building when he had unknowingly met and spoken to the courtroom revolutionnaire himself. He hadn't realised it at first (that outfit barely left a favorable impression or much to the imagination), but the subsequent reveal left him feeling both shocked and honored. *The Phoenix Wright*, he had told himself in awe; and now, he was going to meet the man's daughter. Seven years ago, that guy was a professional lawyer. Clay just hoped he wouldn't get outsmarted by his little girl.

He knocked again.

"Trucy? Please, I'm just trying to help a friend, helping him clear an innocent man's name," he appealed. "I don't know what Apollo ever did to you, but right now, he's fighting to defend Daryan because he's the only one who believes in him. He needs all the information he can get and he can't do it without every last piece."

Still, there was silence; not even the slightest stir from the other side. Dejected, Clay turned away, but the 'click' of a lock unlatching made him stop and look back. A shamefaced Trucy emerged from her room, a sad, guilty expression adorning her soft, lovely features as she avoided his eyes, hugging herself.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I… I know what's it like to scream your innocence, but no one believes you," she said in a broken whisper. A memory of her father's pain from her childhood flashed through her mind: the tears he shed at night when he thought no one was looking; the despair in his eyes when he surrendered his attorney's badge; the pain he fought to conceal when he donated his blue suit.
"Mr. Daryan's a really nice guy – he always stands up for daddy. If…" She bit her lower lip. "If whatever I know can get him out of jail, then I'll do my best. I… I don't want to see another innocent person get hurt."

Clay’s heart clenched. "Trucy…"

"But I'm only letting you in," she quickly added with a pout. "No calling that polliwog, you hear?"

"Didn't plan to," he said with a laugh.

She stepped aside and he entered the dressing room, or at least he tried to as he maneuvered around all the magic props, bags, cardboard boxes, and a few costume racks. He tried to find a couch, or at least a chair; something to sit on; anything. But stuff were buried under stuff, so he settled uncomfortably on a large wooden crate labeled: "WARNING: EXTREMELY DANGEROUS".

"Sorry about the mess. Daddy ended up moving all the costumes here because he needed space to work with them."

'The costumes aren't the main problem… Oh well, at least it's a good view,' Clay thought as he raised his cell phone and snapped a picture of the main area. He made sure he got in everything from the costume racks to the random props scattered across the floor. Boy, were the Wrights messy. Whether or not the photograph would prove useful, he wasn't sure, but at the very least, Apollo wouldn't miss out.

"So, how can the Amaaaaazing Trucy Wright help you?" she began enthusiastically after taking a seat by the dresser, all previous antagonism forgotten. Discretely, Clay noticed the tabletop was strewn with more bizarre trinkets instead of the typical perfume bottles, makeup or hairspray.

"Uh…" How did Apollo start again? Oh yeah. "Where were you during the concert?"

"Don't you mean during the break?" Trucy corrected with a curious tilt of her head.

"Uh, both. Where were you during both times?"

He hoped the young magician wouldn't pick up on his blunder and make him feel more inadequate than he already did.

"Hm… if you say so…" she conceded, though didn't sound very convinced. "I was mostly in the audience – I wouldn't miss The Gavinners' performance for the world! There was this brief period I came backstage to talk to Mr. Klavier about the fireworks, but I went back before the break ended."

"Fireworks?" he repeated, discretely fiddling with the recording function of his phone in his pocket.

"Uh huh! Something went wrong before the start of the concert. I think I put a crate of fireworks too close to the switches and they must have short-circuited. That's what made the fireworks go off. Here, I'll show you."

She led him to the second section of the dressing room that was noticeably less cluttered than the main area. Almost everything that didn't end up getting burned from the accident was moved to the other section of the room. The ground was charred. Clay inspected the damage before snapping a few pictures.

"Basically, there wasn't enough left for the grand finale and Machi was still missing, so Mr. Klavier and I had a quick discussion during the break on what to do."
"And where did you have your little talk?"

"Right here in my dressing room," she replied.

He showed her the photograph of Machi used in the concert's promotional poster. It depicted him wearing a pair of stylish shades, his trademark pendant, and a feminine white costume lined with soft frills.

"So, I take it neither you nor Klavier saw the victim outside your room during the break?"

Trucy gave a start. "Machi? Someone saw Machi?"

"Apparently Daryan did."

She laughed the whole thing off. "Haha, you're funny Clay! If I was in my room, it'd be impossible for me to see him outside, no?"

"Guess you have a point there," he conceded as he consulted the case file, or rather, struggled with all its documents. Everything looked so confusing; he felt like he was deciphering hieroglyphic code. Trucy's skepticism didn't make things any better; and it was times like these that reminded him once again that he had graduated with a degree in Science and Engineering, not Law.

*Ok, no point asking her about the lighter... She wouldn't know about the detective's absence either... Doubt she'd know anything about that kerosene container... Oh yeah!*

"What about the piano?"

"When I came back to my room, it wasn't there. When I left, it was already in the hallway."

_Goddammit._

"Sorry I can't help with that." Her expression was sincerely apologetic. "You see, this is why the police didn't even consider me as part of their investigation. I was barely backstage for half the break."

"It's ok, I-"

Clay looked up from his notes when he suddenly noticed Trucy had only one boot on, while her other foot was wrapped with bandages. How the hell he missed that earlier, he didn't know.

Concerned, he gently touched the injury and asked, "Are you alright? How did you get this? If you were resting earlier, I'm sorry for bothering you..."

"Teehee! It's ok, Clay," she said sticking out her tongue. "I sprained my ankle, that's all. Two days before the concert, I was up on the rafters playing with Machi. He dropped something and asked me to help him get it. I didn't want to... it was hanging off the sandbag so precariously... but he said it was really important and looked like he was going to cry, so I tried to swing across, but my grip slipped and I fell."

"What?!" Clay nearly fell off the crate. "No offense, Trucy, but how are you still, I don't know – alive?"

"Oh, I landed on Mr. Crow!" she answered so casually, she could've been talking about the weather instead of a near death experience. "He happened to be passing by just at that very moment and BAM! he broke my fall."
'Or broke his back,' Clay thought before continuing, "And all you got out of it was a sprained ankle – Seriously?"

Trucy giggled. "Well, that funny doctor at Hickfield Clinic did say that I inherited daddy's luck..."

That's some insane luck.

"And what was the object that Machi made you retrieve?"

"Mm... I'm not too sure, maybe some remote?" she answered after considerable thought. "It was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand and had a button in the middle. There was also some antennae thing sticking out from the top."

A transmitter, Clay realised. To send a signal to a designated source – but what? He had worked with enough electronic and radio devices in his line of work to recognize something as basic as that. If only he could get his hands on that remote and take it apart; then he'd be able to figure out what it was meant for.

"Do you know where it is?" he asked.

"The remote? Machi had it, but I never saw it after that."

As expected.

It didn't take long for them to conclude their discussion and Trucy happily saw Clay to the door, apologizing once again for her behavior and wishing him all the best for his investigation. He casually corrected her that it was technically his friend's case, but the mere mention of Apollo's name instantly made the pretty brunette's face turn dark and explicitly bitter. The abrupt change made him release a sigh of frustration.

"Trucy, I don't want to be nosy, but for the sake of my friend, what has he ever done to you?"

In response, Trucy balled her hands into fists.

"He took it from me."

"Took what?"

The scene of Phoenix, Kristoph and herself laughing happily together on her 15th birthday flashed through her mind; then, the romantic exchange she witnessed midday at the sweet shop. That hand around her daddy's. The pure smile on his face. And all the love shining in a pair of warm, hazel eyes that did not belong to Kristoph...

"Everything," was all she whispered and before Clay could get another word out, much less utter a sound, she closed the door in his confused face.

Crow leaned over the rafter railings, looked down at the empty stage and all its instruments, and sighed loud and long for the umpteenth time that day. This sucked. Sunshine Colosseum was the largest concert hall in the whole country and he had been so looking forward to playing here. But now, the band had bad press and it was all because of a bunch of dumb Borginians. He told Klavier not to invite them over, but noooo – he didn't listen. What was the point of a collaboration
anyway? The Gavinners were doing more than fine on their own.

"Keep up that sighing and you'd grow old faster," said a voice to the side.

Crow gave a start and turned his head to the speaker, but otherwise made no move to abandon his spot. Apollo kept his hand on the railing as he slowly edged towards the band's youngest member, his right hand which gripped the case folder stretching out comically in a bid to maintain balance. *Don't look down, don't look down.* How Trucy had survived the fall was beyond him. How Crow could still walk upright was beyond him.

When it became too painful to wait and watch any longer, Crow released an exasperated sigh, grabbed Apollo's wrist, and tugged the fumbling lawyer towards him.

"No, keep *that* up and I'd grow old faster," he joked in return, flashing the brunette a wide grin. "Polly Pocket, right? Everyone's been talking about you. You're like Sherlock!"

"Actually, it's Apollo Justice," he corrected with slight annoyance. "And Sherlock's a detective. I'm just an underpaid lawyer."

"Ah, like Harvey Birdman!"

Apollo ignored him and consulted his list of suspects, specifically the profile of a certain spiky orange-haired, 22-year-old drummer with over a dozen piercings on his ears and face. No wonder Valerian warned him not to talk to Crow when in a bad mood: less than a minute and the band's youngest member was already coming across as exceptionally annoying and (he didn't want to say stupid) air headed. It was hard to believe they were the same age.

"Kusanagi Karasu, right?" he clarified, only for Crow to slap a hand over his mouth and shush him.

"Urg, way uncool, Lawyer dude! Only my parents call me that. It's Crow, ok?"

"But in official-" Crow glared at him and Apollo chuckled nervously. "Crow. Right. How you doing?"

"Not bad. Bored as fuck, but not bad," he answered with a carefree laugh, swinging his legs over the railings and making himself comfortable while Apollo fretted over his safety. "Ah well, at least I get off parking duty. Can you believe it? I signed up as a cop and they got me issuing parking tickets instead! Man… what I'd give to be in Val's shoes…"

"I feel for you," Apollo deadpanned, "but as much as I'd love to chat about jobs and how unfair life is, there's something I want to ask you first."

"Shoot."

"Where were you and what were you doing during intermission?"

"Haha! Making a dookie."

"I'm serious, Crow!" Apollo raised his voice. "Daryan's very *life* hangs on your testimony. Whatever you say, whatever you know could prove useful."

"Alright, alright. Yeesh!" Crow held up his hands in defense. "Man, lighten up. You sound like someone's gonna die or something…"

"Why the hell does everyone get that point but you?" Apollo internally seethed, wondering how he
got stuck with these characters… or just this one hopeless character.

"Honestly, my memory's not the best thing in the world, but I'm pretty sure that after leader left, everyone left too," he recounted the facts to the best of his ability. "Leader was super down – everyone felt it. I think Amaranth went off first… then either Daryan or myself after, can't really remember, but the last was definitely Val. I think. Oh, I vaguely remember someone saying something on where they'd be, but can't… quite… Nrgh…"

Crow looked like his brain couldn't handle this much stress. Apollo wanted to smolder himself to death with his papers. Good God, this guy was the most unreliable witness yet! And why was his memory so bad?! Wasn't he only 22 years old?

"Think carefully, Crow. Try to recall as much as you can – even a rough idea would do."

"I'm trying," he said through gritted teeth. "Phone call? Someone said phone call. Someone said he had to do something important. So many people said things. Whatever the case, I definitely remember spending the whole break chilling in the dressing room."

There was never a time when Apollo's notes had this many question marks until now. Just when he thought he gained some new concrete information, Crow succeeded in undermining every single statement and in turn, his own reliability. Either someone made a phone call during the break, or claimed to have an important errand to run… or in the most likely case, Crow made that all up because the guy had no idea what he was saying.

Suddenly, Apollo ceased his train of thought and frantically flipped through his notes.

*Wait a minute.*

"Crow, you said you were in The Gaviners' dressing room during the entire break, correct? Then how's it possible you never saw Valerian?"

"Haha, that's easy! Because he wasn't there!"

It was like someone had walked by and mercilessly kicked down his tediously constructed sandcastle of truth. Apollo had little choice but to take a step back and reconsider the facts. So, Valerian lied about his location; then again, considering how unreliable Crow was, he could be the one mistaken. Well, if there was one thing he was sure of, it was this: somebody was lying.

"Let's stay on the topic of Valerian for a minute," he picked up from where they left off. "He mentioned that Mr. Wright and Machi got into a huge fight a day before the concert. What do you know of that?"

"Now that I remember," said Crow with a snap of his fingers. "Never knew Nick could lose it like that – he went all crazy! If Truce hadn't held him back, high chance he would've tackled and beat up the brat. Then, he threatened to burn the pipsqueak and Machi still had the balls to goad him."

"Any idea what they were arguing about?" Apollo asked.

"It was more of an accumulation, actually. Machi insulted Nick as per usual, but when he failed to get a rise out of him, that brat just had to bring up that accident with lil' Truce. It was downright cruel, Lawyer dude. No one deserved to hear those words."

"What did Machi say?" said Apollo with a frown.

"He told Nick that he was a pathetic father, so nearly losing Truce shouldn't have come as a surprise."
The only reason social workers hadn't come to take her away was because she was stupidly loyal, and the fact that he decided to have a kid when he couldn't even support himself, shows how stupidity ran in the Wright name."

Ouch. Hit the nail on the head twice. No wonder Phoenix lost his cool. On top of having to cope with the near loss of his daughter, Machi even dug up the past and threw it at his face. The more Apollo heard, the less sympathetic he felt towards the victim. Not well-liked and sharp tongued, it was clear anyone who had a bone to pick with Machi could've easily wanted him dead, or at the very least harmed. Was there some redeeming factor about the kid at all?

"It's not just with Nick though. The brat can be quite temperamental – one moment he's as peaceful and quiet as a dove; the next he's all fired up like a firecracker," Crow continued, recalling some observances during past rehearsals. "Believe it or not, Machi and Lamiroir argued more than Nick. Only Lamiroir's too soft to fight back most times, so they never amounted to anything serious."

"But aren't they partners? I think Lamiroir even mentioned in an interview that she loves him like a son."

Crow chuckled and waved off his naivety. "It's showbiz, dude. People always say what the fans want to hear. My question to you is this: what benefit does a group have sticking together?"

"Uh… Great support?" Apollo replied optimistically.

"Eh, wrong!" Crow answered, forming an 'X' with his arms. "Popularity. Fame. Money. Especially if fans love you more as a group, then more money. Machi always talked about going solo, but he's smart – he knows his fame rides on Lamiroir's blindness; but it's a double-edged sword."

"What do you mean?"

"It means he can't go anywhere or do anything without her hanging off his arm," he replied tersely. "Doesn't help that Machi's generally a private person. God knows what he does in his free time, but he often complains to Lamiroir to leave him alone. I don't know if she's sincere about that statement, but I'm pretty sure what's keeping them together is money."

Now he wanted to speak to Lamiroir even more.

"Ok, what about the lighter?" Apollo drew up the relevant information and presented it. "Daryan and Mr. Wright's prints were both found on it. Do you know anything about that?"

"Can't say for sure, Lawyer dude. All I know is, during the opening number when the rest of us were waiting for our cue backstage, Daryan asked Nick to help return his lighter to our dressing room. I can't say if Nick did as he was told or what happened to that lighter during the break."

"But you were in your band's dressing room during the whole intermission, weren't you?" Apollo insisted, terribly confused.

"Yeah, but no one came in to grab it or anything." He paused. "Actually, I don't even remember if the lighter was in the room or not."

Apollo nearly fell over. Typical. Just when things got really important, Crow's memory failed him again. He couldn't help but notice how it proved rather useful in retaining gossip though. That probably said something about the drummer's priorities.

"What about the kerosene container?"
"Don't know that one, sorry."

There was a moment of silence, before Crow nudged him.

"Hey, Lawyer dude, wanna know what I think?"

Apollo shot him a wary stare. He was almost afraid to find out.

"What?"

Crow closed the distance between them and whispered into his ear, "I think that the killer's one of us Gavinners."

"WHAT?!"

Crow cringed and had to wait until his ears stopped ringing.

"Hear me out, dude. Daryan was the only person Machi seemed to get along with, not majorly, but just enough to be civil. Think about it: whoever framed Daryan must've known about their good blood and used it against him."

Apollo desperately tried to wrap his mind around the recent turn of events.

"And what about Mr. Wright? Why not him?"

"That's what makes it so sweet!" Crow gushed. "The killer knew about that fight too. Why do you think he chose to use the lighter with both their fingerprints?"

"This is insane! Only five people including Mr. Wright and Daryan knew about that lighter. You're implicating yourself!"

"Hey, Lawyer dude?" Crow interrupted solemnly, so ominously that Apollo gulped in trepidation.

"Y-Yeah?"

"Maybe… I killed Machi."

There was a moment of painful silence, before Apollo broke it with an anticlimactic, wholly skeptical, "What?"

"Yeah, you know, like maybe on a full moon, I go crazy or something and do bat-shit crazy stuff that I don't end up remembering, but like, it was me," Crow explained, only to get violently smacked on the head with the case files courtesy of Apollo.

"You idiot! I can't use a testimony like that! And you just confused split personality disorder with a werewolf!"

Apollo pulled away and massaged his forehead with a grimace. Seriously, kill him now. Crow was an idiot and obviously watched way too much TV. He scanned through the evidence list and consulted his watch. Perhaps it was time to check out the scene of the crime itself.
Apollo knocked before pushing open the dressing room door - and nearly slammed it shut when his eyes fell upon the back of a slender, half naked beauty with long, silky-smooth silver hair. The shimmering locks cascaded down a broad, flawless back as pale as moonlight, it's ends just barely brushing over its owner's tight, leather-bound ass. Embarrassed, Apollo blushed and made a pathetic attempt to excuse himself.

"I'm so sorry, m'am! I thought the room was empty and I didn't…" However, when the silver-haired beauty turned around, Apollo immediately ceased in his stuttering.

The person wasn't a woman, but an incredibly gorgeous man – androgynous on most part, save his sharp features, toned masculine build, and that telltale adam's apple. Though if he wasn't shirtless, he could easily pass off as an elegant woman. If Klavier was the band's prince, then Apollo had just found its princess.

Greatly displeased by that sudden, unforeseen interruption, the tall man crumpled up the letter he had been writing, tossed it into a bin, and regarded Apollo with a death glare so potent, the latter literally felt the beginnings of frostbite creep up his spine. Eep! There went his pleasant streak on meeting people who didn't hate him on the outset. This guy was worse than Kristoph on a bad day.

"S-Sorry… You're the bassist, right?"

The man continued to glare at him, even more deadly if that was possible. The silence was toxic. Apollo could've peed in his pants.

"Amaranth Talvinen?" he tried, stumbling over the Finnish surname. "Am I saying it right? Taal-vii-nen?"

"You're wasting my time," the bassist cut him off coldly.

Another thing that betrayed his femininity: that low, husky, obviously male voice.

"Wait!"

Amaranth paused in the middle of packing his things.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Apollo asked with obvious suspicion. "Isn't this Lamiroir's dressing room?"

"None of your business."

The bassist tried to shove past him, but Apollo quickly moved to block his path. Amaranth shot him a contemptuous stare, but the brunette stood his ground, unrelenting. No more being pushed around. He wanted answers and no scary, cranky ice queen was going to stop him.

"I think it is my business, Mr. Talvinen," he uttered calmly, face hard. "This is a crime scene, you're a suspect, and I'm your colleague's lawyer. I'll be asking my questions now."

Amaranth faltered; a look of sudden, momentary helplessness crossed his features, before his face hardened again and he backed off, conceding. Apollo didn't miss a beat and launched right in.

"Where were you and what were you doing during intermission?"

First question and Amaranth already looked immensely uncomfortable, or as uncomfortable as his
stoic disposition allowed. Immediately Apollo recalled that particular 'important' errand Valerian told him about and figured this was probably it. If it was something personal, too bad: this was an investigation and he was entitled to the truth. He asked again. The bassist refused to testify. Apollo decided to move on and come back to it later after (hopefully) lowering the man's defenses with more questions.

"Crow and Valerian have testified to an argument between Machi and Mr. Wright the day before the concert. Is this true?"

"Fights between Nick and the brat are common," was Amaranth's simple answer. "If you're being swayed by those idiots' opinions, you're more stupid than I thought. Nick wouldn't kill over a petty squabble."

"I never said anything, Mr. Talvinen. You're just assuming things," said Apollo with a smug grin. "That, and you seem awfully quick to defend Mr. Wright when I never even implicated him."

Amaranth stiffened and cursed beneath his breath. Damn nerves. With a sigh of resignation, he turned to face the young attorney and that was the first time Apollo met his piercing golden stare.

"Look, I just know Nick's innocent. And when I say innocent, I'm not referring to the crime alone – I mean in terms of intentions." Amaranth gazed at his own reflection, but had a strange, faraway look in his eyes. "Everyone has secrets. The Gaviners are full of them – dark ones."

"Mr. Talvinen?"

"Don't trust anyone," he cautioned, fixing Apollo a pointed stare. "I was the first member Klavier recruited, and I've been in this band long enough to know that keeping silent avoids trouble. We may be brothers on stage, but everyone's really a bunch of wolves and just in it for themselves. We're called The Gaviners, but all Klavier wants is for us to make him look good. I'm fine with that. Crow's sticking around for the money and fame. I'm fine with that too. And Valerian's just waiting for the day Daryan leaves for good."

"Hold it," Apollo cut him off mid-rant. "There's a rivalry between Valerian and Daryan? Why am I hearing this for the first time?"

"Because it's two years of careful observation on my part and it's purely one-sided," replied Amaranth matter-of-fact. "Daryan was the last member Klavier roped in, mainly because he never thought he needed another guitarist; but Daryan was good and his popularity shot up overnight. Valerian got kicked to third place and his keyboard solos were scrapped to accommodate more of Daryan and Klavier's playing. In some songs, you can barely even hear the keyboard now."

'Poor Valerian,' Apollo thought, sympathizing with the kindly, good-natured keyboardist. It was hard to believe someone so tolerant and who spoke highly of Daryan would harbor a deep grudge like that. Perhaps Amaranth didn't know the pair had worked out their differences and became close friends?

"So, you're saying Valerian has a motive."

"Everyone has a motive," Amaranth corrected. "Even Klavier. When he doesn't like someone, he won't even play politics. He doesn't need to. Nick had it the worst – he was practically Klavier's punching bag; but I think it's because Klavier was just desperate to get him to quit. I don't like it, but I don't interfere."

Apollo's heart felt even heavier. Just hearing how his idol had been ill-treated for simply doing his
job was heartbreaking. When he had urged Phoenix to get a new job, he never anticipated the shame and spite to follow him. He’d thought his idol was slowly making progress with his life; Phoenix sounded so happy whenever they talked on the phone about work; but he was beginning to see that it was all a lie. All the older male did was hide behind his fake smiles and forced laughter; went on pretending, believing that everything was alright. The stigma persisted. No one gave him a chance. Nothing had changed.

"You're saying that everyone has a motive to frame each other," said Apollo, "but none of them have a motive for murder. That's why I'm here to investigate – I believe Daryan's innocent."

Amaranth snorted. "Believe all you want. You want a motive for murder? Here's one – he made a sweeping indication at the dressing room – The Siren lures men into her trap, withlies and beguiles them, then disappears into the fog without a trace."

*The Siren? Does he mean Lamiroir?*

"Are you telling me that this 'Siren' murdered Machi?"

"You suspect nothing from the person you trust the most," he replied mysteriously. "I'm sure that idiot told you about their arguments?"

"Are we talking about the same idiot?" Apollo clarified.

"There's only one idiot," Amaranth deadpanned. "Anyway, if you can trust Crow on something, it's that statement: the brat and the Siren fought a lot. He might be talented with the piano, but their music contract favors her and his cut in salary is pretty pathetic. Borginia isn't a flourishing nation, so this collaboration was their biggest deal yet. Unfortunately, Klavier only wanted the Siren; there was some disagreements; but he eventually allowed Machi tag along. Klavier's heart is soft; theirs aren't."

"Is this all about money then?"

Crow had mentioned about money too.

"It was never explicit, but it was most certainly implied during their arguments. Though they fought mainly over the rights to privacy, Machi was sick of dragging his blind partner around the world; often complained about not being able to get his shit done too."

"And you think Lamiroir killed Machi out of greed?"

"Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. Maybe they fought, maybe it was an accident-"

"You can't expect me to believe that!" Apollo snarled, holding up the details about the kerosene in Amaranth's face. "Machi was doused in kerosene and set on fire! How is that not intentional to you?!"

All he got in return was a nasty smirk.

"So, you know who did it then? The one who used the kerosene."

"No... Do you?"

"Who knows?"

Forget it. He was wasting his time. Amaranth was leading him in circles, intentionally or not, he had no idea. Besides, Lamiroir was blind and whether she had the capacity for murder left a lot to
speculation.

Judging by the way Amaranth spoke, he didn't seem to like anybody, not simply Machi alone. The bassist was full of secrets and proved a tougher nut to crack than Ema.

"At least tell me what you know about the lighter," he said, calmly reading off his notes. "During the opening number, Daryan asked Nick to help return it to the dressing room…"

"Yeah."

"But during the break, when Machi was murdered, Crow was in the dressing room the whole time and said no one came in at all, which leads me to believe that the killer already had it on them before the intermission itself." He paused and his next statement already left a bitter taste on his tongue before he even uttered it. "Did Mr. Wright even return the light-"

"You know, I can't believe they call you a lawyer," Amaranth interrupted rudely, the murderous glare back in place. "If you can't make correct deductions, do me and the world a favor and shut the fuck up."

"Look, I just want to know what you did during the break!"

"And I want you to stop asking me stupid questions!" Amaranth yelled back. "If there's one thing I do know it's this: you're an even bigger eyesore than Machi, and if you piss me off again, I'll fucking roast you, you got that?!"

He pushed past a dumbfounded Apollo and slammed the door shut so hard, the walls rattled. Apollo pulled a face and flipped him the bird. While Amaranth might look as pretty as an angel, he sure as hell wasn't one. The bright side to all this? The room was empty and he could finally proceed with his investigation proper.

There was a section of the dressing area warded off with police tape where some of the kerosene spilled, most likely the area where Machi was doused and then set ablaze. The place where the lighter was found was marked with an 'X' in red tape on the tabletop – about less than an arm's length from the murder site. The rest of the dressing room was neat and divided into two halves – Lamiroir's on the left near the door, and Machi's on the right. Apollo went through Lamiroir's things first: a ton of flower wreaths and bouquets from fans; a stack of promotional postcards; some Borginian literature judging from the strange symbols; and some jewelry. Nothing suspicious there. Also, for a crime scene, the place was surprisingly neat and underwhelming. He moved to Machi's side and did the same thing.

"Hm… Nothing out of the ordin – Argh! " He tripped over the floorboards and nearly crashed into the wall. One of the panels was loose; he crawled over and inspected the damage. Apparently, someone had already loosened it beforehand.

Apollo peered through the crack and gasped at what he saw beneath.

What the hell?

Screw Ema and her threats. He scrambled around the room for a pole of some sort, jabbed it into the crack and forced the floorboards apart. After removing the very last panel in the way, he reached into the darkness and pulled out a large wooden object. It was an ordinary guitar, but the abnormal thing about it was that all its strings had been removed.

"What the hell's going on?"
Wasn't this the missing guitar Lamiroir had gifted Klavier? Then what was it doing under the floorboards in said singer's dressing room?

'Klavier was feeling pretty depressed over the state of the concert... it really wasn't his night...
Someone busted his guitar case and stole his baby before the start of the concert.'

Apollo felt his heart race as his brain started making all the connections. Someone stole the guitar and hid it in Lamiroir's room, but only a few people knew about its existence, namely Klavier, Daryan, Lamiroir and maybe Machi. Had the two Borginians taken it back? But then why go through all the trouble gifting it to Klavier and sending it over? What did this seemingly harmless guitar have to do with the case? And why was it hidden in Machi's side of the room?

Unless...

The image of Machi's corpse wrapped in Lamiroir's costume flashed through his mind; the lighter used to frame both Phoenix and Daryan; the accident and argument before the concert; Amaranth loitering around this very room and his vehement refusal to testify his whereabouts during intermission...

'Everyone has secrets. The Gavinners are full of them – dark ones... Don't trust anyone... Everyone has a motive.'

Had he been going about this all wrong? What if the killer wasn't just one person, but two?

'What benefit does a group have sticking together? Popularity. Fame. Money.'

But who were they?

'That's what makes it so sweet! The killer knew about that fight too. Why do you think he chose to use the lighter with both their fingerprints?'

Why was Machi the victim?

'I've been in this band long enough to know that keeping silent avoids trouble. We may be brothers on stage, but everyone's really a bunch of wolves and just in it for themselves.'

Amaranth knows something, Apollo told himself. He knows more about this band than he actually let on. Was this murder a planned operation between two people? Why was Amaranth the only one who refused to testify his activities during intermission?

Unless there's no way to hide his guilt.

Suddenly, he remembered Amaranth was writing something earlier before throwing it away, almost out of fear. Now, Apollo normally wasn't the kind to go through other people's personal documents, but this situation was special and he couldn't care less about a person who obviously couldn't care less about him.

Going through the trash, he found the paper and unfolded it. It was a letter penned in lovely, delicate cursive and addressed to 'Pikku lintu', whoever that was.

'Great, it's in Finnish,' he thought glumly, but fortunately, the rest of it was in English. A quick scan revealed that the letter was in actual fact, a poem. He read through it carefully:

Rakkaani,
A knock sounded quietly across The Gavinners' dressing room, but received no acknowledgement. The knob turned and Apollo and Clay poked their heads inside. Empty. While his friend explored the obnoxiously large space and unleashed his inner fangirl, Apollo entered feeling a little disappointed; a ton of questions still begging to be addressed. Klavier said he'd be here – had he missed him?

"HOLY. SHIT. Signed copies of 'Gunna Lock U Up'! I wonder if they'd notice if I take one… Wait – are those limited edition promotional merch?! Apollo, you gotta look at all this!"

Said lawyer rolled his eyes. There he goes again…

"I am," he muttered. And boy was this place messy. Then again, this was probably the fate of cramming five bros in a single space.

He took in all the clutter: musical instruments; a mountain of fan mail and presents in a corner; police tape lining the mirrors as decoration with one mirror signed 'Amaranth' in what appeared to be lipstick (no prizes to whose dresser that was); thick, heavy chains draped here and there in what he guessed was the band's theme; police-themed props and accessories lying around; and a poster of a policeman on the wall next to the entrance. Apollo stared at that poster a little longer, wondering why on earth The Gavinners had something like this in their dressing room; after all, considering their genre of (very noisy, tasteless, garish) music, he had been expecting something more metal or hardcore or even apocalyptic like Armageddon.

"Why do they even have this? I feel like I'm in the police station waiting area reading up on crime prevention," he commented.
"Don't know. Maybe they're trying to trick kids into thinking the police are some kind of band?" Clay suggested.

"But that's just silly. Who'd want to name a band the 'police'?"

"Aw, I thought my answer made perfect sense…"

Apollo looked away and his gaze landed on a bunch of papers spread neatly across the dressing room coffee table – the only clean surface in sight. Had Prosecutor Gavin been working on the case? Taking a seat, he picked up the nearest report and read through it briefly. Meanwhile, Clay scanned through a reference document.

"What's this?" Apollo wondered, reading over some write up about Borginia and cocoons. Did this have something to do with the case? He also noticed the Interpol crest printed on each document.

Why would a prosecutor be reading confidential reports by Interpol?

"Hey, check this out," said Clay, handing him a piece of paper with a strange, colorful oval object printed on it. "Apparently, these cocoons are a Borginian heritage and the penalty for theft is death. And look here – he pointed at a date circled in red – one was smuggled out of the country last weekend."

Apollo regarded the image skeptically. "A death penalty? Are they really that valuable?"

"Mehr than what you can imagine."

The pair looked up and came face-to-face with a certain Rockstar prosecutor's bemused expression. Klavier retrieved the papers from their hands and gathered the rest on the table back into a folder.

"Touching things without permission – did mein bruder teach you that, Herr Justice?"

"S-Sorry…" said Apollo, sheepish. "Why do you have these reports anyway?"

"With Daryan in prison, there's no one handling his assignment," Klavier replied smoothly. "He told me about it, so I thought I'd update him on the latest reports."

"But if he can't resume his mission?"

"Then we best hope he's innocent, Herr Justice."

He delivered that statement with so much severity, it sounded like a threat and silenced any further questions on the matter on Apollo's part. Talk about pressure.

"So, what have you found? Did you figure out who Herr Tobaye's killer is yet?"

"Actually," Apollo replied, holding out the guitar he found, "I found your guitar – the one missing since the airport."

Klavier immediately grabbed it and inspected its condition, frowning at the missing strings. Apart from that, nothing else seemed tampered with; no scratches, though it had some dust.

"Where did you find it?" he asked in a low murmur.

"Would you believe him if he said under the floorboards of Lamiroir's dressing room?" said Clay and the blonde was unable to dignify that with a response.
"I don't know why Machi removed the strings, but he seemed pretty determined to hide it before his death," Apollo explained. "Is this guitar particularly valuable for him or even Lamiroir to want it back?"

"Nein. Not that I know of," Klavier replied as he ran his fingers over the fine wood thoughtfully. "In any case, danke, for returning it. Did you have any luck with the fingerprints, or find out how the has-been is tied into all this?"

Apollo suppressed his suspicions. Again with the blonde's eagerness to bring Phoenix into the case. He didn't understand it: wasn't Phoenix already Klavier's main witness? How would directing suspicion onto him help with his argument? Unless Klavier had succumbed to his heart and made up his mind to lose for the first time in his seven years of flawless prosecuting. The situation he was faced with suddenly reminded Apollo of Phoenix's case with Shelly deKiller, but at the same time, it was different. Phoenix had struggled with the truth; Klavier wasn't even trying. But who was he to decide what was right or wrong in a world devoid of black and white?

"No, but speaking of Mr. Wright, could I confirm some things your band members said about him?"

"Like?"

"Valerian spoke about an accident involving Trucy, which led to that huge argument between Mr. Wright and Machi. Crow and Amaranth more or less said the same thing. Were you aware of this?"

He watched Klavier lean back in his seat with a knowing smirk.

"Ja, which explains how I connected the has-been's prints to the killing of Herr Tobaye."

"You can't confirm that," Apollo argued. "He touched that lighter because of Daryan. That doesn't equate to murder."

"He's the only one with a motive."

"But you're incriminating Mr. Wright without solid evidence! What's the point of making him your main witness then?!"

"Apollo, calm down!"

Clay held him back, while the German rockstar shot them a dirty look.

"Don't think you have mein methods figured out, Herr Justice," Klavier countered darkly. "And we have something in common: we both believe Daryan's innocent – or have you forgotten?"

'But this is wrong,' Apollo thought, wishing he could convey his feelings into words. He refused to implicate his idol on any grounds. However, as soon as he thought that, he realised how much of a hypocrite he was. Him and Klavier both had people they wished to protect. This was so messed up.

"What about Lamiroir and Machi's sour relationship?" Clay decided to change the subject. "Is this true, or were Crow and Amaranth – I don't know, imagining things?"

"I can't confirm or deny that," Klavier answered, "but they did argue a lot, if that's what you're asking."

"Bad enough to inspire murder?" Apollo pushed against Clay's warnings and couldn't help but shoot the blonde prosecutor a smug smirk when he scowled in return.
Klavier felt his blood boil. He did not appreciate that jibe and it was obvious what the young attorney was trying to accomplish with that accusatory remark. But he refused to give up on his line of reasoning and get bested by a rookie's tasteless attempts on shaking his faith.

"It's poor judgement to base motives on petty disagreements, Herr Justice."

"But that's your argument for Mr. Wright! It's a glaring contradiction!"

"Achtung, baby!" he yelled and pointed at Apollo. "Not as glaring as your forehead!"

"WHAT?!"

Clay quickly threw himself between the two men before their verbal fight escalated into an all-out brawl. Whatever happened to being on the same side of justice?

"Anyway," he sought to divert the conversation again, "we just have two more questions - Uh, that is, if you don't mind?" He shot Klavier a hopeful, appeasing smile and the latter relented with an irritated, "Na ja."

That was German for "ok", right?

"What do you know about the kerosene container found in Lamiroir's room?"

"Die Null," he replied with a careless shrug. "Apart from establishing it as one of the murder weapons, the police still can't quite place it."

"Ok, main question: I spoke to Trucy," Clay continued, effectively gaining both Klavier and Apollo's attention. "You changed the finale and spoke to her about it in her dressing room."

"Ja, but what does this have to do with the case? Fräulein Trucy isn't involved."

'Better not reveal my trump just yet,' Apollo thought and quickly took over Clay's questioning.

"Machi was needed for the finale, but he went missing. Daryan claimed that upon seeing the piano, he tried looking for you to confirm things. I take it you didn't tell anyone the change in plan," Apollo diverted the question smoothly. "That means, the person who moved the piano was the only one who knew about the new finale."

"You're not suspecting me, are you?" said Klavier with a dangerous sneer.

"I don't know," Apollo countered with a triumphant smirk, folding his arms. "Why don't you tell me what you did during the break, and the three of us can judge for ourselves. Unless of course, you have something to hide?"

There was a brief pause, before Klavier reluctantly gave in with a grimace. He swore he would get back at the brunette for this humiliation.

"Fein… I was in a state of panic – there wasn't enough fireworks and Herr Tobaye went vermisst! So, I arranged with Fraulein Trucy to talk in her dressing room. Mein main concern was Herr Tobaye; she said to trust in her magic. That's all I know."

"How long were you in there?" Apollo pushed on.

"Only a few minutes, maybe less than five," he replied. "When I left, the piano was already in the hallway. I went to look for der Dummkopf responsible."
'So, Prosecutor Gavin would've missed Machi's ghost,' Apollo mentally concluded; but that didn't add value to his defense and still left him empty on a real motive for murder. At this point, he was riding on the bet of joint criminal enterprise. He considered all possible pairings – Crow and Amaranth, Amaranth and Valerian, Valerian and Crow, possibly even Lamiroir with any of the men – but they all drew blanks. If he didn't find a motive soon, he could end up losing both Daryan and Phoenix to the judge's gavel. But he had exhausted all leads...

Except one.

"Prosecutor Gavin-"

"Ach! If it's another one of Herr Forehead's blöd accusations-"

"Forehead?!"

How impossible was this guy? He almost withdrew his offer for cooperation, but remembered he stood to benefit from it too. So, he shrugged the insult off and tried again.

"Prosecutor Gavin," he began gravely, "if you want a solid defense for Daryan, I'll need a strong motive for murder. I think I'm onto something, but I can't be sure until I have every last piece of the puzzle – and someone in your band refuses to testify."

The implications of the brunette's words were obvious and Klavier fell silent as he mulled over his options. Apollo was throwing him a bone: one man's reputation for another man's innocence – it was a tough call; but him and Daryan were brothers, and he had already come this far to turn back now. No one's life was more important to him than Daryan's, not even The Gaviners. Whatever it took, he told himself and braced himself against his own question.

"Who?"

"Your bassist, Amaranth," Apollo answered. "When I questioned him, he was aggressively defensive for everything. He refused to tell me where he was or what he did during the break and was really dodgy about that lighter as well. I found him in Lamiroir's dressing room penning a letter."

"A letter?" echoed Klavier, a troubled frown crossing his features at the familiarity of that observation. Apollo was quick to pick up on that.

"Do you know about it?"

"Not that letter in particular, but letters," the blonde replied with an uncomfortable expression. He couldn't believe he was feeding the defense band secrets – and putting his bassist on the spot at that!

Remember: you're doing this for Daryan.

He swallowed his pride.

"Every day for four days straight before der konzert, Amaranth wrote a letter during his free time, but he did it in secret. I only found out by accident when I picked them up instead of mein lyrics sheet. He writes like music – they're so much alike."

"Any idea who he wrote to?"

Klavier shook his head. "Nein, I try not to pry. But they all contained meeting times and places – spots within this very venue. There was also this phrase that kept popping up in all his letters."
"And what is it?" Apollo dared to breathe.

"Pikku lintu," Klavier answered and quickly added as an afterthought, "and don't ask me what it means – even I don't understand Amaranth sometimes."

After they concluded their discussion and Apollo and Clay left the room, Klavier buried his face in his hands and repressed the urge to scream. He never wanted this case, but Interpol demanded the best and his desperation was slowly tearing his band apart. He did everything for Daryan because he believed in his innocence, but why did it feel so wrong?

"My brain hurts!" Clay moaned as he clutched the sides of his head.

Apollo himself wasn't faring any better. The duo stood in the hallway by the piano gathering their thoughts and trading opinions. Amaranth wasn't kidding about his warning on not trusting anybody – everyone was beginning to sound suspicious, including the man who warned him himself! What the hell was up with that letter? What was with Crow's obsession with money? Was Valerian still jealous over Daryan? Why was Klavier using Phoenix as a scapegoat? Did Lamiroir and Machi's arguments mean anything? And who the bloody hell moved that godforsaken piano? He must have said (or yelled) that last one out loud, because Clay jumped and Apollo realised it was because he had punched said instrument in his frustration.

"If only there was a way to find out who moved it, huh?" said Clay with a nervous laugh. "That would really help narrow our suspects down."

"Unfortunately, not all of us are magicians who can make evidence magically... appear..." Apollo trailed off, his eyes widening as a gradual realization dawned upon him. *Or maybe we can.*

"I know that look," Clay observed with a sly grin. "Alright, spill: who taught you the hocus-pocus?"

Apollo took out a bottle of fingerprint powder from his pocket.

"Oh, just a little magician's father."

He uncapped the lid and slowly tipped the bottle over the keys...

"Back off, dumb lawyer!"

"WAHI!"

The pair jumped and Apollo just managed to stop himself from flinging powder all over the place.

"D-Detective Skye!"

"What did I tell you about messing with the crime scene?" Ema glared at them, clearly upset and looking about three seconds close to hurling a snackoo at both their foreheads. "And what's that you got there?"

"Just fingerprint powder," said Apollo with a nervous laugh, holding it up before her gaze. "See? Harmless."

Ema scrutinized the bottle, only to feel her anger wane; her resolve slacken; her heart tremble and
give a passionate lurch. It was an old bottle of an old packaging, it's label peeling at the corners and wrinkled at some parts. It was small, the perfect size to fit into a child's hand – *her hand*. And she knew that if she touched it, she would still be able to feel the ghost of a young lawyer's touch; the warmth of an old partner, an old friend.

"Where did you get that?" she whispered, voice trembling.

"Huh?" Apollo glanced at the bottle. "Oh, Mr. Wright gave it to me."

"Nick…"

He paused and shot the detective a worried frown. Ema's difficult disposition had changed so drastically. Her eyes were dull and laden with sorrow; her voice small and timid like a lost child's. Even Clay showed his concern when he bent down and sought her gaze.

"Detective? Are you ok?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I'm fine." She sniffed, recovering quickly before flashing the boys a smug leer. "So, even a dumb lawyer like you knows how to use fingerprint powder, aye?"

"Uh… not exactly…"

"WHAT?" she exclaimed, cupping her cheek, scandalized. "But it's one of the most basic procedures in forensic science!"

At Clay's inadequacy and Apollo's embarrassed laugh, Ema sighed and reached up to lower her rose-tinted glasses over her eyes. An excitable grin danced across her lips and before they knew it, the grumpy, callous, disinterested detective was gone and in her place stood an enthusiastic, accommodating, enigmatic young woman. Her gaze landed on Apollo and she started to see him in a new light. Was this rookie attorney a friend of Nick's?

*Maybe I'll give him a hand.*

"Well, I can't have you two conduct a scientific investigation without proper supervision," she said, hovering over their shoulders. "Let me teach you how to get a fingerprint the right way. First, you use the cotton puff to dab some powder onto the surface of your choice. *Don't pour it!*"

Apollo and Clay shared a weird look. Did Ema have any idea she was actually helping them? Oh well, not like they were complaining.

Apollo did as he was instructed. "Like this?"

Ema nodded. "Yup! Don't be afraid to dab more. The more coverage, the better."

"Cool! Apollo, I want to try!"

"Hey! I was using that!"

Discretely, Ema watched with a fond smile as the two men fought over the powder. She had forgotten the last time she ever felt this happy. Just seeing them work and observing their antics reminded her so much of Phoenix and herself eight years ago. It was bittersweet.

"Alright, I think that's enough powder, boys," she chuckled. "The particles should adhere to residue left by the ridges of skin on fingers, palms or feet – pretty much anything that can make up a fingerprint, handprint, or footprint. Now, blow them off."
Apollo and Clay took turns and their eyes lit up as soon as a set of prints appeared on the piano keys.

"Next, compare the prints to those in the suspects list to determine a match. Fingerprints are normally unique to an individual, so it's the most effective way of pinpointing your culprit," Ema explained and removed her glasses with a blissful sigh. "Isn't it amazing? Ah, the power of science. It's my life!"

"Fräulein Detective!"

Three heads turned to the source of that yell from down the hallway. Klavier stuck his head out of his dressing room and beckoned Ema over with a deathly serious expression on his face.

"Bitte, a word. It's about that."

All previous mirth died. A troubled frown crossed Ema's features; she acknowledged him with a nod, but not before turning to address the boys.

"Sorry, Clay, dumb lawyer. Gotta go! If you need any scientific assistance in the future, you know who to call."

Meanwhile, Apollo wondered how he got stuck with 'dumb lawyer' while Clay managed to retain his name.

They watched her go, utterly stupefied, but returned to their investigation as soon as the door shut and they heard the lock catch with a sharp 'click'. Apollo first took a photo of the fingerprint, then consulted the list of prints compiled on the suspects list. However, upon making the comparison, his eyes widened in horror and he nearly dropped the folder.

*No, it can't be.*

"Clay!" he yelled and pointed at the piano. "Use the powder on the piano's edges, anywhere you'd touch to lift and carry it easily – hurry!"

"Got it!"

Clay moved quickly and before long, the edges of the black piano and its keys were dusted in specks of white. Apollo compared each and every print, made especially sure to check and double check them, until the truth couldn't be avoided any longer and he surrendered to the inevitable. He knew he should be happy – this was a breakthrough; the motive was clear; Daryan had his defense! And yet, the truth was everything he feared.

*No… Oh God, no!*

"Apollo? Apollo!" Clay scrambled to support him when his knees gave way. "Apollo, what's wrong?! Hey!"

But Apollo failed to register anything save one painful truth: all the fingerprints belonged to Valerian and Phoenix.

*To be continued...*
Dun, dun, dun... so, what does this mean? XD

That concludes "Investigation Day 1". If you think you've figured out this little mystery, don't be too sure of that because - spoiler alert - it's only the tip of the iceberg. I do enjoy my drama, so you can expect more of that in court. In the meantime, I shall leave you to mull over your speculations until the next update.
Turnabout Serenade - Interlude

Chapter Notes

I can't thank you guys enough for all the hits, kudos and wonderful comments! I enjoyed reading and replying to every single one of them, and it brought me tremendous joy and satisfaction to see how this fic has been so well-received. Special mentions go to Anon, Bloop, and my new, ever-excitable fan, Vaiin1997! I can't express my appreciation enough, so I hope this little mention is enough to convey my gratitude. To all my readers, I look forward to hearing from all of you as well, so please don't be shy. If commenting isn't your thing, just knowing that you've been following my updates is enough to make me smile :)

Ok, enough of my ramblings. Please, enjoy this latest chapter, and I'll see you guys in the notes below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Crescend, you have a visitor."

It was the same guard; or perhaps they all started to look alike with the same neatly pressed white-and-black uniform and black officer's hat with its polished rim, until the only set of eyes he could see were those from his own jaded reflection. He was sick of the questions, sick of the shame; remembered the disappointment of his mother and stepfather and their masks of cool indifference that did not quite reach their eyes. The old man had refused to look at him, as if the mere sight of his eldest son brought great injury onto his pride and reputation; and the acknowledgement of their shared surname akin to a curse. No son of justice would descend into a life of crime. He must have got it from his mother. He must have got it from his father. Daryan was just thankful his little brother was too sick to come visit.

The passageway to the detention room was always longer than it looked: whether the light was playing tricks with his eyes or his feet had started to drag, he couldn't tell. All he wondered was who could be visiting him so close to closing time and at the final minutes before tomorrow's trial, until he spotted a flash of red and a pair of familiar brown hair spikes waiting expectantly on the other side of the glass. A small, bemused smirk tugged at his lips.

The punk doesn't give up.

"Back so soon, rookie?"

However, his amusement was short-lived. His lawyer refused to look at him; instead, he kept his gaze fixed on the open case file on his lap. A man with a visor in his unruly black hair sat next to him, a similar foreboding expression on his young, handsome features. The pair were studying something on a piece of paper, and with the hushed way they conversed and the obvious air of affinity between them, Daryan guessed they were close friends. Still, that thought did little, if not nothing at all to comfort his anxiety.

"Oi... What's up?" He shot Apollo a wary stare. "You know, it's not good for your client if you look like it's the end of the wor-"
"Daryan," Apollo interrupted in all seriousness, and his tone made said man freeze, "your friends aren't going to be much help tomorrow – and I don't mean in a clueless way. They're willing to let you take the fall for them, and I have reason to believe that one of them is the real killer. They're going to pull all the stops in their testimonies against you – prepare to get hurt."

Daryan's lips quivered. No way. Not Crow, Amaranth, Valerian… But he didn't consider Apollo a kidder. It was a tough pill to swallow.

"Does this mean that Klav… Even Klavier doesn't believe me?" he found himself hesitating.

Apollo meanwhile, recounted his heated exchange with said German prosecutor and shook his head at the mere thought of the man's less than moralistic methods. But corrupted values aside, he too found himself in a similar position as Klavier: confronted by allegations against a man he owed his hopes, dreams, and life to; but was too caught up in his own sense of betrayal to feel sorry for his rival.

"I can't speak for him," he answered, "but rest assured that I'll get you that 'not guilty' verdict the honest way."

'What does he mean by that? What's he know about Klav?' But Daryan's trepidation receded as soon as the guy with the visor and space center logo started talking.

"Apollo just needs one last thing from you though-"

"And you are?"

"Ahaha… sorry! It's, erm, it's Clay," he fumbled in his response, both starstruck and sheepish. "I'm… ah… Apollo's assistant – and he's right. Things don't look good for you and your band."

Daryan rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah? Tell me something I don't know, space boy."

"That should be my line," Apollo pointed out as he fixed him with a hard stare. "That kerosene container's still bothering me. It sticks out like an inkblot on paper, no one knows anything about it, and it has your fingerprints. Daryan, have you ever seen it before? Please, think carefully."

"Yeah – was it always on set? Did you touch it before? Did anyone else carry it around? See you carry it around? Was kerosene needed for the show?"

"Good thinking, Clay."

"Thanks!"

He furrowed his brows and thought hard. Was kerosene needed for the performance? Not that he knew of. The only person who supposedly needed to go up in flames (figuratively speaking) was Lamiroir, and that only required Trucy's fireworks. Had someone smuggled it in with the intent of committing arson? But then Ema would've caught them – a bulky kerosene container wasn't exactly easy to hide. That means the container had been in the concert venue from the outset, but where? And he had touched it?

Suddenly, Trucy's dressing room flashed through his mind and it made him hesitate.

"Actually… now that I think about it, there's this small chance I might have touched it."

His answer made Apollo sit up. "When?!"
"Trucy-doll's room was originally the venue's storage space," he explained. "But when Klavier pulled her on board, he made me clean out the whole shindig, that bitch. There was a ton of junk in there. I must've touched the container at some point, if it was even in there at all."

"So you put all the stuff in another room?" asked Clay.

"Actually, I kind of got creative and chucked them under the stage."

'More like lazy…' Apollo thought with a grimace. On the bright side, at least they figured out where the kerosene came from. Whoever wanted to frame Daryan must have grabbed the container, which conveniently already happened to have his fingerprints all over it. It was guys like this that made murder that much simpler.

"Hey, dudes?"

Apollo and Clay met Daryan's apprehensive stare; the latter's pompadour actually sagged a bit from his disappointment and mounting anxiety. He had his arms wrapped protectively around his shoulders; fingers digging into the sleeves of his top. The once proud Interpol agent had lost his confidence against the steady passage of time. With every second, his trial drew closer; his position precarious; and his fear increasingly palpable.

"You said the guys are using me as a scapegoat – is this true?" Daryan whispered and Apollo and Clay knew that the guitarist felt terribly betrayed.

His words seemed to have a depressive effect on Apollo, who chose to remain silent, not out of empathy, but from a stubbornness to conform to the truth. The case folder on his lap was open to the fingerprint profiles. Clay immediately knew what the brunette was thinking and felt sorry Apollo had to deal with a matter so close to his heart. The way he almost broke down at Gatewater Stadium earlier; the hurt he was going through; the way he looked now; inconsolable…

He really loves him.

"I think so," Clay answered on Apollo's behalf, "but don't worry, Apollo's got you covered – he found out who moved the piano."

"Really? Who?"

"Well-

"You'll find out tomorrow," Apollo interrupted and spared one last lingering stare at Phoenix's carefree, smiling photograph, before quietly shutting the case file. End of discussion.

Clay looked sympathetic; Daryan confused. There really wasn't much left to say at this point.

The guard announced their time was up. Daryan panicked again. Apollo did his best to alleviate the older man's fears and once again reminded him to have faith in his defense. "Remember: just be truthful when you take the stand tomorrow, and you'll be fine," he reassured with confidence, before him and Clay left and Daryan found himself alone once more to his dark thoughts and inner demons.

What if things weren't fine? What if believing in a rookie attorney's abilities was mere idealistic thinking? What if his parents decided to disown him? What if he'd never get to see his brother again? What if –

"Stay where you are, Crescend. Special orders from the prosecutor's office."
He gave a start at the guard's words. Stay? But weren't visiting hours over? And then, the strangest thing happened: the officers on either side of the divide, left. He remained in his chair, alone, uncomfortable and unsupervised. This wasn't usual protocol.

Suddenly, a tall blonde man in a purple jacket and giant chain around his neck entered the other side of the room. His demeanor was calm, completely at ease, and the way his cerulean eyes melted at the sight of his best and childhood friend, seemed to scream his relief and longing, made Daryan crack a small smile. He hadn't seen his best friend in three days, though it honestly felt like forever.

"Hey bro," he greeted with an affectionate laugh. "Special orders, huh? Should've known it was you."

"Daryan…"

Klavier reached out and pressed his palm against the cool glass, desperate for contact, for an escape from all this confusion, for an answer to his dilemma. His voice was pained; tortured by the endless sobs and screaming.

"Daryan, I'm sorry… I'm so sorry!" He punched the glass; his knuckles turned red from the impact, but his brain failed to register any pain. "You shouldn't even be here! It wasn't you… It can't be… Nicht du…"

Klavier was a wreck: his clothes were rumpled like he had fallen asleep in them; dark circles clung stubbornly under bloodshot eyes; his complexion was noticeably pale; his fingers twitched ever so often; and his soft, beautiful blonde hair, which he always painstakingly groomed until it set just right and shimmered under the sunlight, appeared course, dull and disheveled. As Daryan looked at him, really looked at him, he felt guilt and a sudden sadness creep into his heart. All this time, he had resented Klavier for doubting him; turning cold and treating him like everyone else; forgetting about him. But he had greatly misjudged his friend and for that Daryan felt truly guilty. Klavier hadn't been ignoring him; he was suffering too.

"Klav, listen," he said with a sigh as he rubbed his neck awkwardly, "I know what you're thinking, and it's not your fault. It's not anybody's fault but-"

"Es ist!" Klavier yelled, his anguish echoing off the walls. His fist against the glass shook and when he next spoke, his words came out in trembling whispers.

"Don't you understand? I let this happen. When Fräulein Detective and the police took you, I said nothing, I did nothing. All I did was follow quietly behind like ein der Waschlappen! Nichtsnutzig!"

Klavier wasn't making sense; his words all over the place. Daryan knew his friend tended to slip more German into his speech the more upset he was, but it was never this garbled and he worried for his sanity. Yet, he knew that Klavier needed the release; their roles reversed; so he kept silent and listened to him like he always did, like they were kids again and 10-year-old Klavier cried because Kristoph had said that mother loved him best whereas he was an accident.

"Hey man, you're a prosecutor, remember?" Daryan tried to soothe him with a reassuring grin. "A crime happened and I was the main suspect. You were just doing your job – I understand."

But anyone could see how forced that smile was.

Klavier dropped onto the chair, his shoulders sagging in defeat, head bowed. He knew Daryan was just trying to comfort him, but every statement felt like a handful of salt smeared on an open wound that would never heal. If friendship wasn't keeping them together, would the man utter those same
"I never wanted this case," he said softly, more to himself than anyone; but the small, silent room threw his voice around in pervasive echoes and there was no escaping his own weakness. "I tried to appeal, but the Chief Prosecutor said there wasn't anyone better qualified for the job."

"And he's right-"

"I won't prosecute you, Daryan!" Klavier screamed, before dropping his voice to a hopeless whisper. "I won't..."

"Klav..."

Their eyes met and Daryan gasped at the sorrow and tremendous pain swirling in the blonde's beseeching stare. Worn out, defeated, desperate; Klavier struggled against a fresh wave of tears. Every time he thought about this case brought him unimaginable turmoil and anxiety. He didn't trust the rookie, but if he prosecuted – even with just a smidgen of his usual standards – he ran the risk of sentencing his best friend behind bars forever. He was out of options and out of time.

"Daryan, you're mein bruder. And you'll always be mein bruder before anything else. Back when I was the new kid, you always stood up für mich. You were always there; mehr than Kristoph ever was..." He trailed off and bit his lip, his fingers clasped so tightly that they shook.

He remembered their days of summer vacation in 4th grade pranking the neighbors; riding their bicycles through the park and pretending they were motorbikes; getting in trouble with Daryan's stepdad because they tried to catch the 'food thief' during a sleepover and caught said man stealing cake from the fridge with a fishing net instead; pretended the brooms were guitars and getting in trouble with Daryan's mom. They were all wonderful memories. Klavier just didn't want them to be their last.

The King of Prosecutor's trophy flashed through his mind along with his brother's proud smile. Seven years of hard work and earning rapport with the police and fellow prosecutors. Seven years of chasing his dreams, so that his brother would finally acknowledge him as more than a second-rate attorney, more than his poor baby brother. And it only took less than seven days to see it all fall apart. Kristoph would be so disappointed. But...

"Herr Justice will win tomorrow. I have decided."

"WHAT?!"

Daryan shot to his feet and his chair clattered noisily onto the floor. He wasn't hearing this.

"Bro, you're crazy! That's an offense! If anyone finds out, you'll get into serious trouble. You'll lose your title, your credibility, your career..." He paused when he realised his words weren't getting through to Klavier.

He's really going to do it.

"What about Kristoph?" he finally said.

Klavier visibly stiffened.

"Have you thought about him? How your choice would negatively affect him and his reputation? How you both might never recover from this?"
"Then what am I supposed to do, Daryan?" Klavier looked at him tearfully, shoulders trembling. "What am I supposed to do?"

Daryan had no words. The terrible knot in his gut twisted and turned until his chest felt like it would collapse and his throat burst from the pressure. On one hand, he knew Klavier's plan was wrong and he refused to stand by and watch the man throw away his entire career because of him; on the other hand, there was a fear of his best friend winning, of going to jail and being locked up for life; no friends, no music; never to see his family again. Sure, he believed in Apollo, had promised to give him a chance (the rookie worked so hard), but what if his faith wasn't enough?

"Bro?" he spoke tentatively, so sadly that it's severe lack of confidence effectively got Klavier's attention.

"What is it?"

"I…" Unable to take it anymore, Daryan buried his face in his hands and finally broke. "Bro, I'm scared..."

Klavier felt as if a bucket of ice cold water had been dumped on him. Daryan's walls had crumbled and he found himself looking at a man who desperately needed help – his help. It was disorienting: Daryan was usually the stronger one between them, but to see his friend like this – It was painful; it was tragic, and it made the dilemma inside him grow. He needed to think about his brother, the very person who raised him and the only family he had left. What about Kristoph? But then what about Daryan?

_How can I protect him?_

He hated this glass and how useless it made him feel as he sat and watched his friend break down in front of him. Daryan was crying into his arms, his shoulders shaking with every agonizing sob. It was this one time his best friend needed him most and he couldn't even get to him. All he could do was place his hand upon the cool surface and comfort himself with the beautiful lie that that fairer hand pressed on the other side, was touching his.

A quarter past 9 p.m., Prosecutor's Office.

Klavier sat hunched over his desk, over all the reports and evidence list Ema had sloppily compiled (he would have a serious talk with her tomorrow on work ethics). Maps of Borginia; papers detailing Interpol's investigation on the recent cocoon smuggling; studies on _Incuritis_; and Daryan's last mission log before concert night. He selected the file, threw the projection outside the screen, and tapped the translucent play icon hovering in midair. Daryan's voice sounded about the office. He must have heard it a hundred times by now.

"5th May, 11.22 a.m. Earned Machi's trust. I don't think he suspects anything. Arguments with Lamiroir increasingly heated. To maintain and persist affiliation until new leads surface."

The audio recording ended. Klavier collapsed the screen with a flick of his finger and went back to his papers.

The same day the two Borginians left the country was the same day a single cocoon was reportedly stolen. Daryan had been onto something, but his search left him with a dead body and himself
thrown into jail. Who was the real murderer and why? The two incidents couldn't be a coincidence. There had to be a connection, but where? What?

His train of thought made him pause.

Why am I doing the Defense's job?

Klavier reached for the phone, dialed a certain number of a certain hot-blooded, loud-mouthed, rude junior attorney, only to slam the phone back onto the receiver before it could even ring. Again. This was the fifth time he hesitated, resisted his compulsions, and with good reason: everything on his desk was strictly confidential. If he fed the defense this information, his position would be made obvious and Interpol would have his head. Kristoph would know. The whole court would know. He'd be tried for corruption and unlawful practice and worse still, Daryan might not even be declared innocent after all his efforts. The guy would get a new lawyer; a new prosecutor would take up the case; and he'd be out of the job like some pathetic, washed up, useless has-b–

"Knock, knock, Klavier!" sang an unassuming yet annoying voice behind him.

He felt an aneurysm come on and resisted the urge to chuck his King of Prosecutors trophy at the door.

"Wenn man vom Teufel spricht…"

"Aw… I missed you too."

"What do you want, has-been? We already rehearsed your testimony drei hours ago."

Phoenix giggled and stepped into the office with a wide, beguiling smile on his face; a three tier bento box wrapped in purple cloth cradled proudly in his arms. Ignoring the younger male's obvious irritation, Phoenix crossed the room and casually sidled up on the desk, never mind the fact that whatever Klavier had been reading was now held hostage under his ass. The blonde glared at him, but Phoenix continued to feign ignorance as he picked up the nearest report and scanned it dully.

"Haaaa…? You're still working?" He dragged out his speech lazily in precisely the way Klavier couldn't stand. Then he laughed. "Huh, come to think of it, this might actually be the hardest you ever worked in seven years."

Phoenix was mocking him; he knew it. He snatched the report from the older male's fingers.

"Laß mich! I don't have time for this."

"Klavier, you haven't budged from that chair in hours."

"Leave me alone!"

That scream took the remaining energy out of him. Klavier buried his face in his hands and let out a miserable sigh, his lower lip quivering with every exhale. His throat was parched; lips chapped; and he had clearly lost a bit of weight. He had stopped coming home for dinners since last Friday, sometimes never came home at all. Kristoph didn't seem concerned, had claimed Klavier to be a grown man capable of looking after himself; but Phoenix was, and complimented himself for his good foresight. Klavier wasn't looking after himself.

This can't go on.

"At least have something to eat," he offered kindly as he set the bento on the desk and untied the
"Here, I made this for you."

"Nein! I refuse to eat your cooking! Verpiss di-?!"

Phoenix pinched Klavier's nose and shoved a spoonful of rice and shredded radish down his throat. Klavier almost choked. Phoenix released him so he could chew, swallow, and catch his breath. As the younger male coughed and grasped his chest in resemblance of a heart attack, Phoenix simply replaced the lid and set the utensils aside.

"Look, I don't care how you see me, or how you've treated me. You're Kristoph's brother. His family. My family," he stressed as he placed a hand on Klavier's shoulder, voice dropping to a tender murmur. "I don't want to see you do this to yourself, Klavier."

The blonde fell silent, unable to validate his emotions. He felt so confused. Seven years of fighting, yet Phoenix still found the capacity to treat him with kindness. The guy was either extremely foolish or had the patience of Buddha. He didn't even protest when Phoenix went through his things again.

"It's a clear-cut case. I doubt that's what's bothering you," he observed with a knowing smirk, eyes twinkling. "You're worried about Daryan."

"Ach, you wouldn't understand…"

"On the contrary, Klavier, I think I do. More than you know."

Phoenix picked up a photo frame on the blonde's desk. The picture was taken five years ago and had Kristoph, Klavier, Trucy and himself smiling at the camera – well, everyone except a young Klavier, who was too busy giving the him in the photograph the evil eye. Years later and the kid still didn't approve of him dating his brother. Some things never changed. He chuckled at the image. What an odd little family they were.

Meanwhile, Klavier continued to observe the ex-lawyer with a wary stare, torn between intrigue and frustration. Daryan's very future was at stake, and here this Dummkopf was sentimentalizing the past. Understand him? Impossible. No one so naive could comprehend his affliction.

"Why must I prosecute him?"

He didn't even realize he said that out loud until he actually received a reply.

"So that you can trust him again," came Phoenix's calm response as he replaced the photo frame on the desk. "You want to believe him, but what good is faith without a little doubt?"

"Doubt?" Klavier echoed, the sound of his tentative voice foreign to his ears. Was that what was holding him back? Doubt not in Daryan, but in himself? It was then when he realised that the thing he was actually afraid of wasn't losing Daryan, but the truth.

"10 years ago, a close friend of mine was tried for the murder of his own father. Wanting to believe in him wasn't enough and it wasn't the right answer; seeking out the truth was. If you truly believe Daryan's innocent, clear your doubt; prosecute him; pursue the truth – don't be afraid." Phoenix's eyes were gentle and understanding as he sought Klavier's gaze like a flower seeking out the sun; a small smile gracing his lips. "This is something only a best friend can do."

With a final pat on the shoulder, Phoenix begged a soft, "Please come home tonight," before quietly exiting the room. The door slid shut and the lock caught. For a full minute, the young prosecutor sat in complete silence, Phoenix's words running through his head over and over like tape loop.
Pursue the truth – don't be afraid.'

Another minute passed, then two, then three, before Klavier swiped all the case reports into a drawer and untied the purple cloth around the bento box. To his amusement, he noticed the cloth was the same color as his jacket and had little cartoon guitar prints all over it. Carefully, he unstacked each tier: the first had some pickles, an omelette, a slice of grilled salmon, and hot dogs cut to look like baby octopuses; the second tier was a layer of minced meat and strips of radish on a bed of rice; and the third tier was two pieces of Dampfnudel. Klavier's heart skipped a beat. The last one was what really impressed him – sweet bread was his favorite; he used to eat it a lot as a kid. He brought a bun up to his mouth and bit into it, and moaned at how good it tasted.

It was a piece of childhood with every bite. In fact, everything Phoenix prepared for him were his favorites. As he ate, his right hand automatically reached out for the photo frame and he stared at the very picture that had made Phoenix smile. Soon, he started to see why himself and suddenly, the food tasted sweeter.

'You're Kristoph's brother. His family. My family.'

Klavier stopped chewing and bowed his head in shame. The last time he had such a lovingly prepared home cooked meal was before his mother died when he was 12 years old.

It was late, well past 11 p.m. when Phoenix poked his head into the music room wearing nothing but a fluffy bathrobe and a mischievous smirk on his lips. His gaze honed in on the figure at the piano, watched in rapt fascination as long, slender, incredibly skilled fingers glided across the keys in a sensual caress, an intimate dance; like the man was possessed and the music commanded his every mood, feeling and thought. As always, his lover played beautifully, though Phoenix didn't expect to find him here less than 12 hours before tomorrow's trial. Normally, Kristoph would be in his study going over the case one last time, or even just finishing up in the office. For him, everything had to be absolutely perfect; anything less was indubitably unacceptable. Then again, it wasn't his case, so he could probably afford the reprieve.

Chopin's Nocturne – that was what filled the air in the middle of a chilly spring night. Phoenix sauntered over, a slight and provocative sway to his hips, a flirtatious smirk playing across full pink lips. He enjoyed his lover's playing, but he was in the mood for a different kind of entertainment tonight.

Snaking his arms around Kristoph's torso from behind, Phoenix pressed himself against the blonde's firm back, and in a sexy manner no guy could resist until this day, moaned into his ear, "You know, it's been awhile since we had the whole mansion to ourselves… We could get creative."

He reached down and untied his bathrobe. It fell past his bare shoulders, but before it could slip down to reveal more skin, Kristoph's hand shot out and pulled the flaps close. Confused, rejected, and a tad disappointed, Phoenix pouted and was about to accuse his boyfriend for loving the piano more than him, when the terse, disapproving frown on Kristoph's face stopped him; and that merciless, unrelenting grip on his robe sent alarm bells ringing in his head.

"Where were you?" Kristoph demanded coldly, his tone dropping to a dangerous hiss. He wasn't in a playing mood tonight.
That was when Phoenix realised he'd forgotten to inform his boyfriend of his whereabouts, and knew better than to push his luck or personal desires. Kristoph always got testy whenever he didn't know where he was or what he was up to. So much for helping his lover relax before the trial.

"Just Klavier's office, I swear," he replied, growing nervous; praying Kristoph wouldn't suddenly lash out and accuse him otherwise. "We were going over my testimony for court tomorrow. And I went back again and brought him dinner. That's all we did. He didn't look so good, Kristoph. I was worried. You should've seen—"

"Phoenix."

Said man snapped his mouth shut and obediently stood in wait. Kristoph calmly placed a cloth over the piano keys and lowered the fall.

"With all this fuss about Daryan's trial, I believe we haven't quite discussed your… gratuitous involvement in this case," he commented in the same unfeeling manner as he began. "I went through Apollo's reports – they left me feeling less than pleased with your incumbence. Yet again, I find myself needing to repeat one simple, basic instruction."

He rose to his feet and stared down at Phoenix, the impassive look on his face scaring the ex-lawyer more than any negative expression could. What Phoenix feared more than Kristoph's rage was his unpredictability, and right now, his highly distressed brain was picking up threatening cues like no one's business. Naked beneath his robe and confused over what he did to inspire such displeasure, he felt small and vulnerable under his lover's scrutiny.

"What did I say about working, Phoenix?"

"Um… Not to?" was his hesitant answer.

"And yet I find you doing the exact opposite," said Kristoph with an exasperated shake of his head. "Look at all the trouble you've caused. Putting Trucy and myself through such unnecessary worry – are you that intellectually challenged? Do you enjoy tormenting me?"

Phoenix felt himself grow angry at Kristoph's inconsistency and raised his voice.

"Working? Tormenting you? You were the one who convinced Klavier to fucking hire me! You said you'd support m—"

The slap pierced through the air and reverberated off the high walls and windows in deafening, disorienting echoes. The pain came after the shock. Phoenix's eyes were wide open in disbelief. With trembling fingers, he reached up to cup his stinging cheek, the beginnings of tears threatening to spill from his eyes. Why? He felt so confused. Kristoph withdrew his hand without the slightest hint of compassion.

"Because, Phoenix," he explained with the impatience of a tutor dealing with a hopelessly uneducated child. "I placed my fondness for you along with society’s general expectations of a romantic, supportive partner, before logic – an error I seek to rectify immediately."

Kristoph took a step forward and roughly grasped Phoenix's chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing the latter's frightened blue eyes on him.

"Karma works in cycles; nothing good awaits a man wronged. I warned you about how cruel and unforgiving the world is, did I not? Was getting disbarred not enough for you? Didn't I predict that something of this nature would happen again?"
"You did," Phoenix replied softly, miserably.

"And you never listen." Kristoph released him and shook his head. "Instead, you spite me and hurt me with your vindictiveness."

"H-Hurt you...?"

No. Not hurt. Never meant to hurt. Never -

Phoenix immediately withdrew into himself, eyes wide and unseeing. No… Not again. Not Kristoph. He did it again. Why did he keep bringing this onto himself? Why did it take scoldings and punishments to make him see his own faults and deficient thinking? Why couldn't he do anything right?

"Did you even consider who would be implicated in Daryan's place if Apollo proves him innocent? Do you realize where that leaves you as a suspect? This may not be my case, but Apollo is still my understudy and after 5 months under my mentorship, you can trust him to deliver." Kristoph adjusted his glasses with a proud scoff. "My record is perfect and my principles dictate me to exhaust all methods for a successful defense. Apollo knows this. I don't think I need to explicate my point further."

Throughout Kristoph's speech, Phoenix remained silent as his brain automatically clung onto and internalized every word. He never thought of that; had been so confident in Apollo's abilities to single out the real culprit that he never considered his own alibi. He had forgotten about the kid's relation to Kristoph, and took his relationship with the famed attorney for granted. Justice is blind; evidence was everything; and when it came to courtroom proceedings, Kristoph was as professional as he was ruthless. No doubt Apollo wouldn't be any different and even if he was, his mentor would be there to set him straight. Kristoph was right: he hadn't thought about that; he hadn't thought about anything. What if the kid turned things around onto him? What would become of him? What would happen to Trucy? How would Kristoph feel? Phoenix finally understood his lover's rage.

"Perhaps there's a need to knock some sense into you," said Kristoph coolly, expression unreadable, and Phoenix watched with growing trepidation as he lifted the piano's fall and removed the velvet cloth.

Phoenix watched all of it closely and couldn't help but flinch when he felt his lover lean in and whisper into his ear with such tender affection, it couldn't be true.

"You know I hate to do this, but you need to learn. Close your eyes."

And despite every fiber in his being screaming at him to flee, to plead for mercy, to resist; Phoenix remained where he was and did as he was told.

Then, it happened.

Kristoph's hand shot out to grab a fistful of his spiky hair, yanked him down and slammed his face repeatedly against the piano keys. It was violent, merciless; but no matter how much his lover wailed and protested against the jarring chords and banging keys, Kristoph showed no signs of stopping. Phoenix's agony echoed about Gavin manor; the twisted song persisted; before everything finally stopped and all fell deathly silent. Crumpled at the foot of the piano, on his knees, Phoenix's breaths came out in sharp, shallow wheezes. There was blood on the ivory, all over his face, staining his robes, and on Kristoph's hand. The latter gazed critically at his ruined manicure, before wiping them on his lover's bathrobe without a second thought.
Disgusting.

"Why do I even stay?"

However, he wasn't expecting an answer,

"... Exactly."

Kristoph paused and watched with a frown as Phoenix supported himself on the piano and struggled to his feet. Despite the ugly bruises, cuts under his eye, and blood and tears across his cheeks, an uncharacteristic defiance shone in his eyes – one Kristoph hadn't seen for over six years, and before he saw it coming, Phoenix screamed. He screamed over and over; loud, long and piercing; screamed until his throat hurt and he thought it would very well bleed. All his pain, his confusion; all the hurt, bitterness, and self-loathing he kept bottled up inside for so long, finally had an outlet and he let the blonde have it.

"I can't do this anymore... I can't, I can't! You say you care about me, but you never once told me you love me! You never – you lie! You always lie! I know you don't love me. You hate me! You must hate me..." There were fresh tears in his eyes and it was clear that Phoenix was growing more emotionally unstable by the minute. "If you hate me so much, if I'm so fucking stupid, then leave! Get out! Leave and don't ever come back!"

Phoenix collapsed onto his knees in a broken, sobbing heap. Kristoph meanwhile, felt inclined to point out that this was technically his house, but decided it wouldn't help matters. So, with a resigned sigh, he closed the distance between them in three quick strides and stared down at the man he had cared for for the past seven years.

"... You want that?" he finally asked.

Phoenix hesitated and felt his chest constrict; confused, frightened, insecure. Did he mean all he just said? Did he want that? A life without Kristoph, all alone in the darkness? His hand quickly flew to his chest, clenching at the area over his heart in panic. His vision turned blurry. The beginnings of cold sweat gathered on his brow. He felt like he was experiencing his world through a narrow tunnel. It was difficult to breathe.

"Do you really want that, Phoenix?" Kristoph repeated the question. "Do you want me gone? Do you want me to abandon you and walk out of your life like Edgeworth?"

PANG.

"Miss Maya?"

PANG.

"Little Pearl, Miss Franziska, Gumshoe..." He dropped his voice into a cruel whisper. "Like Ema?"

"No!"

Phoenix flung himself at Kristoph, who smiled and caught him in his waiting arms. As Phoenix clung on desperately and sobbed into his lover's chest; mumbling, "I'm sorry" and "Please don't leave me" over and over again; Kristoph shushed him affectionately and ran his fingers through soft, black hair; stroked tender, bruised cheeks marred with cuts, dried blood and tears. Phoenix looked even more beautiful like this and unable to resist, he leaned in to lap up the red trail with his tongue, the sudden pleasurable contact causing the older male to shudder in want.
"Kristoph…” he moaned against him, both needy and self-conscious over his appearance. His body, his face was ruined. Would Kristoph still want him like this?

And then said man claimed his lips in a slow, sensual, yet incredibly tender kiss. His eyes slid shut; his toes curled; and Phoenix immediately knew how much Kristoph loved him and how wrong he was for thinking otherwise.

"I found you," Kristoph murmured against Phoenix's soft, needy lips, "a beautiful bird with clipped wings and I wanted to hear you sing again, to sing for me. Not any of your so-called friends – but me."

He plunged his tongue into Phoenix's wet cavern, devoured and claimed every inch of him, and he heard the smaller man moan in bliss.

"Kristoph…”

"I'll never let you go, Phoenix," he said, pulling away to stare into said man's big blue eyes which shone with so much adoration and love for him. "And if I go to hell for this, you can be sure I'll drag you down with me."

Kristoph reached down to tug the belt of Phoenix's bathrobe lose. The garment slid off to expose every last inch of him and Phoenix gasped at the sudden cold and his vulnerability. Flustered, he tried to cover himself, but his lover wasn't having any of his modesty.

"Hands down, let me look at you," Kristoph commanded with a smirk, mischief and lust dancing in his cerulean eyes. "Mm… Perfect."

His gaze raked Phoenix's body languidly, appreciatively. Phoenix blushed under the scrutiny and lowered his eyes to the floor. Kristoph was looking at him. All of him. His eyes everywhere. Penetrating. It was embarrassing, humiliating, yet exciting; incredibly sexy; and Phoenix yearned for more of Kristoph's attention, but in other ways…

He let out a sudden gasp when he felt a pair of hands snake under his naked ass before being lifted off the ground and into Kristoph's protective hold. Instinctively, Phoenix wrapped his legs around his lover's waist and arms around his neck. Kristoph left a trail of bites from his neck down to his chest, pausing only to clamp down hard on a rosy pink nipple, alternating between pinching it with his teeth and swirling it with his tongue. Phoenix gasped and squirmed in his boyfriend's hold. It stung, but at the same time, he loved the attention. Then, to his embarrassment, he felt long, slender fingers reach between his butt cheeks and tease his entrance.

"W-Wait!"

"What is it?"

"I should clean up before Klavier gets back," Phoenix realised, looking over his shoulder at the blood on the piano. Leave it on any longer and it would stain the ivory permanently. "Don't want to scare your brother when he already has a murder case on his hands."

Kristoph chuckled. "That would be wise. I'll wait for you in the bedroom."

He lowered Phoenix onto the ground and redressed him. Phoenix gazed at him fondly, all previous ire forgotten, and leaned in to give his boyfriend a sweet Eskimo kiss, giggling as he did so.

"I love you," he whispered without a trace of doubt as he touched Kristoph gently on the shoulder, warm and assuring. "And don't be so negative; I'm in good hands. As long as Klavier and Apollo
work together to bring the truth to light, everything's going to be fine!"

Phoenix's grin was wide and bright, innocent and carefree, like there was nothing in this world that could get him down and shake his faith – not even the burning cuts, yellowing bruises and ugly bloodstains on his face. They would heal in time. They always did. Kristoph was just a little extreme in expressing his concern sometimes, that's all. Besides, Kristoph stayed by his side for seven long years and loved him, and that was all that mattered.

"Besides, you're going to be there with me – well, sort of," Phoenix continued with a little laugh. "I'll be fine. You and the kid will turn things around, I'm sure of it!"

Kristoph chuckled at his optimism. "Yes… I suppose anything can happen."

And with a mysterious smirk that Phoenix failed to perceive, he turned and left the music room in calm, measured steps.

"Get back here, you brat!"

Olga tackled a pajama clad Trucy onto the couch, who squealed and tried to wrestle out of her hold.

"It's midnight and you're supposed to be-"

However, before she could complete her sentence, she found herself eating a face full of cotton. Trucy giggled and smacked her with her pillow again. Urgh. She didn't get paid enough for this shit. Actually, come to think of it, she didn't get paid at all.

"But the trial's tomorrow and I'm all hyper!" Trucy exclaimed, bouncing on the sofa, never mind that her actions were steadily giving her blonde companion a migraine. "There's no way I can sleep now!"

God forbid.

"If you break your leg again, I'm not taking you to Hickfield Clinic."

"Aw, it's just a sprained ankle…"

"A healing sprained ankle," Olga grumbled. "And if you don't sleep, you'll miss the whole trial, and I'll spend all day laughing at your face."

That earned her an indignant pout from the teenager. "Humph! Auntie Olga's a sourpuss."

"Would you quit with the 'Auntie Olga' already?! You're not 8 anymore and I'm only 6 years older than you!"

"Old's still old, Auntie O!"

Trucy dodged a cushion and laughed. Olga massaged her forehead with an exasperated sigh. Seriously, why did she even bother? Dealing with rowdy, drunk customers at the Borsch Bowl Club was a lot less maddening than this excitable handful of a 15-year-old. She wondered how Wright managed it for seven whole years, until she remembered that the lazy ass started making her babysit for majority of that period anyway, and mentally cursed him to the ends of the earth and back.
"I don't get why daddy keeps calling you over anyway," Trucy continued to pout as she crossed her arms. "I mean, I'm 15 years old – I don't need a babysitter, especially not an evil one!"

Olga shot her a nasty smirk. "Hah! Well, this 'evil' babysitter's got an appetite and she loves to eat children – especially little magicians!" She grabbed Trucy and playfully blew her tummy, causing the girl to giggle uncontrollably while begging the blonde woman to stop. Olga released her and ruffled her hair.

"Come on, sweetheart. Off to bed."

Taking Trucy by the hand, she led them to the young girl's bedroom. Trucy disappeared into the dark room with a loud yawn and when Olga turned around to switch off the office's main lights, she jumped and nearly screamed when she came face-to-face with a tall, silent cloaked figure with long brown hair and a black veil over her mouth. Needless to say, in the middle of the night, something like that was majorly uncalled for. Olga's hand flew to her chest in a desperate attempt to calm her racing heart.

"Geez, Lamiroir! You nearly gave me a heart attack!" she hissed. "I know you can't see and shit, but would it kill you to make some noise next time?"

"Ah! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, Miss Olga," said the songstress sadly, honestly apologetic as she clasped her hands together in a beseeching gesture. "I just wanted to thank you for your kindness these past three days, especially at such short notice."

"Nah, don't worry about it," Olga replied, waving her off. "Wright's the person you should really be thanking though. This is his place after all. And his food we're eating. Plus all his money… Hey, if he asks why we ordered 17 pizzas, can I say that you wanted to try every flavor?"

"Miss Olga?"

Said woman paused to regard Lamiroir curiously.

"Could…" She gnawed on her bottom lip. "Could you please take me along to Mr. Crescend's trial tomorrow?"

Olga shook her head in response to that innocent request, only to voice out her disapproval when she remembered the older woman couldn't see.

"No can do, Lamiroir. Wright told me to make sure you stayed here where it's safe."

"I know, but this involves Machi's death and I want to know the truth just as much as Mr. Klavier does," she pleaded, voice trembling with emotion. "Please… Machi was like my son; I need closure. Something. I promise I won't give you or Trucy any trouble. Please."

There was a moment's hesitation, the conflicts of guilt and responsibility clashing in Olga's head, before she gave into her weakness with a dramatic roll of her eyes. She had watched Phoenix raise Trucy and experienced her fair share of parental attention from him herself (though she would rather choke on expired borsch than readily admit her joy) to understand what Lamiroir was going through.

"Argh, alright already," she muttered, wagging a finger at the woman's face. "But if Wright flips out, you're going to have to answer to him yourself, got that?"

Lamiroir smiled in relief. "Thank you, Miss Olga!"

"My harley can't take more than two people though," she said, scratching the back of her head in
annoyance. "Trucy's used to riding with me, so I'll call a cab for you first thing. Don't want you ending up as roadkill."

Then she took Lamiroir by the hand and slowly guided her to Phoenix's bedroom at the other end of the office. Carefully, she placed the blind singer's hand on the doorknob so that she knew they had arrived.

"I'll wake you when it's about time to go. You get Wright's room – he's got the bigger bed and a toilet inside. Should be more convenient for you. If you need anything, just holler. I'll be in Trucy's room."

"Would Pheonix mind?" she asked hesitantly. "I could sleep on the sofa. I don't want to impose…"

"Geez, don't worry about it!" Olga waved off her concern. "He's the nicest idiot in the world; he wouldn't mind at all. Anyway, goodnight, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite yada yada..."

"Wait!"

Lamiroir lingered by the bedroom door, jiggling the knob in her uncertainty. Although the direction of her gaze missed the young dealer's, Olga could make out the slightest traces of fear and suspicion swimming in the brunette's clear blue eyes.

"I've been thinking," she trailed off in an airy voice, a noticeable frown on her lovely face. "Phoenix said he doesn't want me involved with the investigation because he wants me safe… What do you think he means by that?"

Olga shrugged, unconcerned. "Beats me. Maybe, hypothetically speaking, he thinks you're the most suspicious and he wants to prevent the cops from hounding you. He had a bad experience with false evidence once – I'm sure he's just trying to protect you."

"But is it legal?"

"Hey, who said anything about legalities?" said the blonde with a knowing smirk. "Wright's not a lawyer anymore; he ain't above tricks and a little cunning. Types like us – we know our way around the system."

"I see," Lamiroir commented with a troubled frown. She couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to Phoenix's intentions than Olga herself knew.

With a final wave and bidding each other goodnight, Olga entered Trucy's room and shut the door behind her. But Lamiroir didn't enter Phoenix's bedroom. Instead, she remained where she was, as still and silent as a shadow, until she felt certain the girls were asleep before she relinquished her hold on the doorknob and quietly crept across the dark office.

Finally. Alone and no more pretending.

Navigating the narrow spaces and past all of Trucy's clutter, with nothing but the pale moonlight streaming in from the window as her guide, Lamiroir stopped in front of the piano and lifted her gaze. There, displayed inconspicuously on the piano top, were a pair of photographs – a stern-looking gentleman with a mustache, and a kindly lady with gentle eyes. They were both donned in similar costumes resembling the kind Trucy wore.

Lamiroir reached out and plucked the woman's photograph from the mantle; studied the image thoughtfully; traced the outline of the lady's smile with her fingertips. She took in her long, wavy tresses that framed her delicate face; bright blue eyes; confident, enigmatic demeanor; and a pair of
eerily familiar gold bracelets around her wrists. At that same moment, Lamiroir felt her own bangle tighten, which further heightened her distress and confusion. Who was this young maiden in the photograph? Why did it feel like she was looking in a mirror? She sifted through the darkness of her lost past, but it only made her head hurt.

Returning the photo frame to its rightful place, she averted her attention to the picture next to it: it was of a younger Phoenix and an 8-year-old Trucy; all smiles and flashing peace signs at the camera. Lamiroir's gaze honed in on Phoenix’s carefree expression, her own face that of unshakable trepidation. Why did this man wish to protect her so badly? Was all this mere chance or a fantastic coincidence? What more did Phoenix Wright know?

"Who… Who am I?"

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick reprieve before the drama picks up again starting next chapter. Tying in some loose ends before everything (hopefully) falls in place in the trial to come.

I'm actually pretty satisfied how this chapter turned out, especially regarding the relationship between Klavier and Daryan. I love these two and I love them even more when they're together. I've also made some progress with Phoenix and Klavier's relationship, which I'm really excited about. I would like to think the whole AA gang is one big, albeit dysfunctional family anyway, so this chapter (minus the physical/sexual/emotional abuse) was more family/friendship-oriented. There's still drama of course, and some angst, because who would darkinterval be without angst and drama? Lol.

Apart from all that, I managed to relocate some threads of setup I left hanging since the start of this arc (or even the previous arc!). Some will get their knots settled by the conclusion of this arc, some won't. Either way, I hope you guys would stick around to see this elaborate web come together.

I believe the trial should be interesting. There's really so much at stake! Would Klavier take up Phoenix's advise? Would Apollo take up Kristoph's? Are the Gavinners to be trusted? Is Lamiroir to be trusted? What's going to happen to Daryan? And will Klavier and Apollo put their differences aside, work together, and bring the truth to light? Or would their pride and weakness lead to their downfall?

If you like what you've read, please don't hesitate to leave a comment and/or kudos. I enjoy reading your responses and any form of support goes a long way. Please click 'subscribe' at the top of the chapter if you wish to receive updates as well. Phew, that was long. Until next time!
Turnabout Serenade - Trial Day 1, Part 1

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank letteredheart, Vaiin1997, theDisinherited, and PierceTheVeils for leaving your comments in the previous chapter. Your support is greatly appreciated and I took all your enthusiasm and feedback with an open heart. Your comments put a smile on my face and left me hungry for more! Thank you!

As for my fellow readers, whoever your guys are (and those who are still here 11 chapters in), thanks for sticking around and leaving me your lovely kudos and for subscribing. "House of Cards" has reached a marvelous 670 hits! Yay!

Now, the moment you've all been waiting for: let the trial commence!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a god up there that didn’t like him and knowing how gods worked, this one needed no reason behind his actions whatsoever. It was ‘The Book of Job’ happening then and there: do something right, get punished for it later. Clay wasn’t big on religion; he was an atheist himself, but even he understood perfectly that a morning as turbulent as this one had to be the elaborately orchestrated workings of sentient lifeforms beyond the cosmos and couldn't simply be passed off as bad luck.

First, his alarm went off an hour late; then, he realised he had forgotten to pay the electricity bills and only found out the painful way when he was forced to take a cold shower during a 14°C springtime morning. Come to think of it, that probably explained why the heater wasn’t working as well. So, without electricity, he couldn't get his toaster up, which meant no toast to eat on-the-go, which meant him running out of the house and zipping down the street in his motorbike while pouring a box of Lucky Charms down his throat. Without milk. After that, he realised he'd forgotten to lock the door in his haste and smashed his head repeatedly on the dashboard because he knew that meant the creepy old lady opposite would go in and snoop through his things again.

But he couldn't be late for Apollo’s trial. It was his best friend’s big debut; he’d promised – and now, he found himself grumpily stuck in the morning rush hour traffic, staring at the traffic light so hard like he could magically turn the light from red to green if he looked hard enough.

Come on, come on...

Suddenly, someone horned behind him and he looked over his shoulder in annoyance. It was the same motorist who had been aggressively tailgating him for the past 15 minutes. The rider had their face obscured by their black-and-red helmet, but judging by their blouse and feminine cut of their black vest, Clay knew that she was definitely a woman. The rider revved up her engine and rammed against his rear tire. Clay nearly fell off his bike. A very rude woman.

He flipped up his helmet’s visor and snarled, “Lady, what is your problem?!”

To his surprise, a second helmet and its wearer donned in an all-too-familiar blue magician’s cape, popped out behind the woman and waved at him enthusiastically.
“Morning, Clay! How ya doin’?”

It went a bit muffled behind the hard plastic, but he heard her.

“Trucy!”

“Teehee! Cya at the trial, slowpoke!”

And before he could say anymore, the rider revved up her engine again and expertly eased around him, expelled a ton of black carbon in his face, before speeding off, Trucy’s cape fluttering behind them in the wind. That was when Clay realised the light had turned green during his moment of distraction.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Furious, he kicked off and went faster than before; until he passed 6th Avenue of Cornerstone Crescent; until he finally caught up to Trucy and her very mysterious, very aggravating – yet darkly attractive – chauffeur. Clay spared a quick glance at her, knowing she could sense his challenge. With a hand, she lifted her visor just enough to reveal a set of Russian Red lips curved upwards in a playful smirk.

That was all Clay needed.

Together, in perfect sync, they pushed the speed limit, weaving expertly between traffic like a pair of figure skaters through ice, squeezing past yellow lights while Trucy happily held on for dear life. Clay felt adrenaline course through his veins, his heart pounding away like a jackhammer, mind completely freed off all inhibition. He had forgotten the last time he rode like this – reckless, exciting, burning rubber and pushing the limit. He knew it was dangerous, but the sensation of speed was profound, and a morbid thought, which beckoned him forward, beckoned him to go faster, seized him. But it didn't matter how fast he went; the woman had no problems keeping up; they were neck-and-neck; equal; neither willing to give in; and Clay had met his match.

District Court was only two junctions ahead. It was a quarter to 10 am. They were making good time.

At that moment, the woman cocked her head in his direction. She acknowledged him. Clay did the same – and suddenly accelerated and cut into her lane right in front of her. The move was unexpected.

With a loud curse, she jammed her breaks and stuck her foot out in the nick of time. The red Harley skidded to a halt. Trucy screamed and crashed against her back. The traffic light turned red. And Clay managed to slip past at the last second, leaving her in his dust.

Slighted, the young woman ripped off her helmet, freeing her soft, blonde curls. Trucy tentatively asked if she was ok, but Olga was too mad to acknowledge her. Argh, that cheat! She cursed something in Russian and flipped Clay’s disappearing figure the bird.

“Мудак! Next time I see you, I’ll run you over!”

Meanwhile, the blue Kawasaki raced off into the distance, but not without its owner lifting his visor and throwing a victorious smirk over his shoulder.

He was in love.
“I'm Apollo Justice and I'm fine!”

He took a deep, calming breath, then opened his eyes. “Alright, now your turn.”

“... Do I have to?”

“Whenever I'm feeling down or life gets tough, I always shout ‘I'm fine’ as loud as I can,” he replied with a wide grin and gave his client a reassuring nudge. “It'll make you feel better, trust me.”

“I don't know man... Are you sure yelling in the middle of the court lobby at the top of my voice is going to help my case?”

“Come on. What've you got to lose anyway?”

Daryan made a face; was just about to point out that only about a few hundred of his fans and a bunch of reporters were pushing against the court doors outside and he couldn't afford anymore bad (if not incredibly embarrassing) press; but gave in with a sigh. He was starting to regret his decision on sticking with the rookie instead of going with a district lawyer.

“Fine, fine...” He balled his hands into fists, scrunched his eyes shut, and took a deep breath.

“I'm Daryan Crescend and I'm fine!”

Silence.

Apollo sought his gaze eagerly.

“So? How do you feel?”

“... Like an idiot.”

“That's 'cuz you're not saying it loud enough! Come on, Daryan! One more time, like this – I'm Apollo Justice and I'm fine!”

Someone chuckled behind him.

“You shouldn't say you're fine so much, Apollo. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Sir! Mr. Wright!”

Kristoph offered his understudy a pleasant smile; formally dressed in his usual blue suit without a single strand of blonde hair out of place; his collar neatly pressed and neck ribbon tied perfectly symmetrical. Even his attorney’s badge was polished and shone under the light. By his side, sloppily dressed, stood Phoenix in his usual hoodie-sweatpants-beanie combo, a lazy smirk adorning his handsome face. It appeared the pair came together and the blatant juxtaposition of their attires couldn’t make the couple and their attitudes more divergent. Well, at least Phoenix had the decency to shave. Apollo noticed that he had some makeup on as well – not too much; just subtle enough to enhance his cheekbones and bring out the warm glow of his eyes. A shimmering pink blush dusted his fair cheeks; his lips appeared glossy and pinker than usual; and there was even the faintest trace of dark eyeshadow on his upper as well as the corners of his lower eyelids. It was enchanting, yet strange: Apollo never considered his idol to be the vain type – Kristoph perhaps, but not Phoenix – though he wasn't complaining. It just made Phoenix prettier to look at – and then he realised how distracting that would be in court later.
Oblivious to Apollo’s staring (and drooling), Phoenix indulged in his boyfriend’s amusement. He laughed and cupped Kristoph’s ear, whispering into it, “Maybe the kid’s trying to compensate for something?”

“Hey! I heard that!”

He snickered and pulled away the same time Kristoph did with a smirk.

“Morning, Daryan,” Kristoph greeted with a curt nod, “how are you?”

“Is that a trick question?” came Daryan’s cynical reply. “I mean, I’m about to get my ass handed to me by my best friend, who also happens to be the country’s top prosecutor; I’m on the verge of losing my job; my friends won’t talk to me and I heard that they’re even going to testify against me; and my lawyer thinks it’s a great idea to lose my voice before my own trial. What do you think?”

Phoenix laughed. “You sound fine to me.”

“Shut up, Nick. No one asked you.”

“Hey, I called Kristoph, didn’t I?” Phoenix said with an indignant pout.

That was true.

“Apollo’s here too,” he continued. “Both mentor and protégé have your back. You know, not everyone can have their cake and eat it too.”

That was also true.

“Mr. Wright’s right! You’re fine, Daryan!” Apollo all but yelled, his fists clenched, shaking from the intensity of his conviction; hazel eyes burning brighter than the fire of a thousand suns. “We’ll do this – together!”

And despite all reservations, Daryan found his mouth slowly cracking into a hesitant, though sincere smile. Yeah, he had the rookie; Kristoph; Nick... What was there to fear? He clasped Apollo’s hand firmly, never mind the inconvenience posed by his handcuffs, and felt the younger male squeeze his in return; felt the confidence through a single bond of trust. He was in good hands.

“Thanks, rookie. I'm counting on you.”

“10 minutes, people! Get inside or get the hell out!”

Apollo frowned at that crude interruption. Geez, was that the bailiff? What in the world was his problem? He turned to the courtroom doors and nearly tripped over his own feet in shock. No... it couldn’t be – but that long silver hair tied up in a high ponytail; that dangerously deceiving angelic face; those piercing golden eyes narrowed into the scariest death glare he’d ever seen on the face of this earth...

“Amaranth?! You're the bailiff?!”

The beautiful but deadly gentleman approached their little group and Apollo gulped, automatically taking a nervous step back. He had forgotten how tall the guy was; and with Amaranth in that uniform, coupled with his choking aura of intimidation and general hatred for all things human, he looked more like a shinsengumi than a regular court bailiff.

“That's Talvinen to you,” he corrected coldly, “and I told you the Gavinners were full of dark
secrets. Weren't you paying attention?"

‘I don’t think your day job qualifies as a dark secret…’ Apollo thought with a sweatdrop.

“Morning Amaranth,” Phoenix greeted in a manner that was both flirtatious and playfully amused. “Never thought I’d see the day you’d actually wear something conservative. You sure you don’t want me to take a few inches off that top?”

Daryan and Apollo turned pale. Oh no, no, no… This so wasn’t a good time to be messing around, especially not with the Gavanners’ infamous Ice Queen. Calling Amaranth by his first name; teasing him… Apollo would have thrown himself in front of Phoenix to shield him from the bassist’s wrath, if not for said man’s surprisingly calm and civilized response. Amaranth smiled. He actually smiled!

“Nick,” he returned the greeting and stepped closer to look into the older male’s bright blue eyes.

Amaranth stared long and hard, took in every bit of Phoenix’s features as if he were searching for something precious. The atmosphere turned tense; death loomed over their heads; everyone waited with bated breath. But Amaranth’s face remained impassive; and when he was finally done, he took a step back and said, “You look nice.”

Apollo and Daryan fell over. Apparently, Amaranth did posses the rare capacity to be nice, though his social skills could use some serious work.

Kristoph cleared his throat politely and shot the bailiff a pleasant smile. But Apollo knew better: that smile was the only thing concealing his boss’ true impatience and protecting Amaranth from his inherent jealousy.

“Mr. Talvinen, I believe you’re due to take the defendant into court?” he began helpfully, discreetly taking Phoenix’s hand and holding it possessively behind his back.

Amaranth responded with a contemptuous sneer, “Don’t tell me what to do, hot-shot. Arrogant pricks like you… thinking you’re above the law… getting chummy with the judge… ordering people around…”

But Kristoph and continued to smile against Amaranth’s grumbling and the latter had no choice but to grab Daryan by the chain of his handcuffs and tug him along. Whatever. He knew when to give up. Daryan meanwhile, gazed at his friend and fellow band mate sadly, but followed him without complaint.

“Am, you’re testifying later, aren't you?” No answer. Daryan pushed on, desperate. “Am, c’mon! We’ve been friends for 7 years; we’re brothers! Don’t you believe me? I didn't –”

“As a suspect for murder, whatever you say can and will be held against you,” Amaranth interrupted, the guilt in his golden eyes betrayed by the stone-cold callousness of his voice. “Tell it to the judge, Crescend.”

Apollo watched them pass through the doors with a heavy heart.

The trial was about to start; people were already streaming into the courtroom; but there were still at least hundreds more screaming outside while security did their best to barricade the entrance and hold them back. It was a madhouse. Apollo had never seen anything like this before. Heck, the only reason Clay had been lucky enough to obtain a ticket was because personal affiliation guaranteed it.

“Hey kid, you don't look so good,” said Phoenix, and Apollo barely registered the concern in his idol’s voice or the fact that his crush was helping him straighten his tie, which he’d been
unconsciously tugging and wringing for the past few minutes. Phoenix slapped him gently on the cheek. “Oi, if you faint now, it's all over.”

“B-But… Why are there so many people?”

Sure, he had dreamed of his big courtroom debut since law school, but this was crazy!

“The Gavinners are international celebrities. The outcome of this trial would impact their careers and our local music industry significantly,” Kristoph explained simply, staring out at the entrance and the chaos ensuing outside. “It’s not just fans alone. This incident has placed great strain on cultural and economic ties between Borgia and this country. Their judicial system demands justice and retribution.”

“Kristoph, shut up. The kid’s hyperventilating.”

Suddenly, the overwhelming screams of fangirls penetrated the air and Kristoph diverted his gaze, a fond, bemused smile tugging at his lips.

“That must be Klavier. Fashionably late as always.” He reached down and ran his thumb affectionately over the back of Phoenix’s hand. “I need to speak with him for a minute. I'll see you inside.”

And with that, Phoenix and Apollo found themselves alone in the lobby, the younger still hyperventilating.

“Come on, kid – focus!” Phoenix held the brunette’s trembling hands in his and pressed their foreheads together. He held Apollo’s gaze and spoke in low, even tones. “You'll be fine. You’re ready. Just walk through those doors, and I'll see you in court.”

Something buried deep inside Apollo’s unconscious sparked to life and a flicker of light danced in his eyes.

‘You’ll be fine! Pass that bar exam and I’ll see you in court.’

Nine years ago; in this very courthouse lobby.

‘Phoenix Wright, what do you have to say for your first loss?’

‘Were you really part of Mr. Engarde’s conspiracy?’

‘How significant are the loopholes in our judicial system?’

‘Wright!’

‘Wright!’

‘Wright!’

Reporters. Cameras flashing everywhere. So many people. He could barely see, barely get through, barely get his words out, barely be heard.

‘E-Excuse me… Mr. Wright, sir? Could you p-please sign… m… m… my…’

He was 13 years old.

‘Do you want to be a lawyer, kid?’
‘Yes, sir! I’m studying really hard!’

‘Haha, is that so? I believe in you then.’

He was in love.

“M-Mr. Wright…”

He couldn’t do this.

“Shh…” Phoenix soothed, getting Apollo to stay focused on him and regulate his breathing.

“Relax… No, don’t think of the people. Don’t think of anything. Just focus on me… Breathe, breathe… that’s it. There you go.”

‘You’ll be fine.’

Apollo felt himself returning to the present. He blinked slowly, disoriented; stared deep into his idol’s eyes; moved, completely at ease, spell-bound. Phoenix smiled – radiant and beautiful. He gulped; they were so close: intimate, touching, closer than they had ever been, and he could hear the rhythmic pounding of Phoenix’s own heartbeat; taste his breath on his lips. At the same moment, a sudden nervousness overtook Phoenix and he made to pull away, but Apollo quickly held him in place, cupping the tender cheeks of a man who pretended to resist him. He could see every lovely detail, every wonderful truth behind the shimmer of blush and coverage of powder, every – Apollo frowned sadly and touched a small bruise – painful flaw that could never truly go unconcealed.

So it's true.

“These aren’t from your clients,” he whispered, his observation a penetrating statement against Phoenix’s denial and years of excuses. “Sir, please–”

“Don’t.”

Phoenix pulled away; hiding his gaze beneath his beanie; shoved his hands into his baggy pockets. He stood a mere arm’s length away, but Apollo couldn't reach him. And then, after what felt like eternity, Phoenix lifted his eyes, a cynical smirk on his lips, and the past few seconds of quiet desperation faded like a dream.

“You should worry about yourself, Apollo,” he said with a soft chuckle, but Apollo noticed he was afraid of looking him directly in the eye. “I said this before: your faith needs to be in Daryan and as his lawyer, you need to believe–”

“I know that!”

And faster than Phoenix could react, Apollo surged forward and trapped him against the wall, hands slamming on either side of his head with a loud, resounding bang. Phoenix stared at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. The kid was panting, holding him prisoner with his passionate gaze and desire to be acknowledged, and at the back of his mind, Phoenix knew that he was the one to blame. He had encouraged Apollo to be swayed by his heart, while he continued to feed the kid spoonfuls of hackneyed phrases and false hope.

“I know that,” Apollo repeated, “but I believe in you too. I've always done so and I'll never stop. You said what matters is the truth – well, I live in order to protect you so that I can stay true to myself.” He pushed up against Phoenix, voice dipping into a husky whisper, lips grazing the shell of his idol’s ear. “Do you believe in my conviction, Mr. Wright?”
And against his better judgment, Phoenix blushed and replied with a shy and tentative, “Yes.”

“Then if we believe in each other, there's one thing I want to tell you.”

“What is it?”

Apollo caressed the older male’s cheek and never took his eyes off him as he leaned in, slowly, sensually, lips drawing closer and ever closer. Phoenix felt his breath catch in his throat, stuttered, but found himself unable to resist, drawn to Apollo by some invisible thread of fate – perhaps the very same one that pulled them together that one Monday morning on April 19th.

“What is it?” he repeated, quieter than a whisper. He longed to know, longed for contact, longed for more.

“I...”

Phoenix felt fingers reach under his beanie to entangle in his hair and allowed his eyes to drift shut with a soft moan of completion. Safe. Frightened. Warm. Frozen.

“Will...”

Apollo’s lips were but a breath from his – searing, impassioned – and he realized that the more attracted he was, the more agonizing living this lie became.

“Love...”

The courtroom doors slammed open. Phoenix and Apollo immediately jumped away from each other. Amaranth stuck his head out and glared at them with the promise of murder.

“Five minutes,” he growled dangerously and slammed the doors shut.

Apollo never hated anyone more in his entire life. Oh, Amaranth was definitely guilty; and even if he wasn't, he vowed to kidnap him, kill him on Clay's next trip to the moon, and burn all the evidence. After all, in space, nobody could hear you scream.

Clay plopped down on the bench with a loud sigh of relief. Made it. His eyes scanned the entirety of Courtroom 3.

It was the first time he had ever stepped foot into a courthouse and the experience – with the high ceilings and the proud statue of Lady Justice and her scales – proved exceptionally humbling. He took in the black-and-white floor tiles; the gallery he sat in seemingly filled to the brim with colorful characters from all different walks of life; the witness bench and stand just beyond it; the prosecution and defense tables on opposite ends of the room; and at the center of the divide preceding the whole trial: a towering podium; a bearded judge; and his gavel. Clay dropped his gaze to Klavier on the left: he could recognize that purple jacket, black leather ensemble, and devil-may-care disposition from a mile away. Admittedly, it was rather disorienting to witness firsthand the leader of a platinum winning rock band prosecuting in a serious courtroom environment; plus it didn't help that most people in the gallery were fans (himself included), which made this feel like a weird, awkward combination of a trial-concert, or concert-trial, or a really hardcore “Guilty Love” music video.
Waving. Someone was waving from the corner of his eye.

At the defense table stood the Kristoph Gavin, arms folded; poised; dignified. He and his brother seemed to be engaged in a stare off, or they were simply regarding each other, or secretly analyzing the other's tactics; perhaps they already knew how the other played and were devising elaborate strategies in their heads like a game of chess. But that wasn't important – what was, was Apollo standing next to his mentor, mouthing the words ‘Clay’ and ‘You made it’ as he waved enthusiastically. He mouthed ‘Good luck’ and waved back.

“Ehhhh! But I want to sit in the front near daddy and the Gaviners!”

“It’s full, brat! Don't be picky!”

The bickering came from his left. Irritated, he turned his head to the source of the commotion, only to have his frown fall away to be replaced with a cheeky leer. He should've known: it was about time Trucy and her entourage showed up; but Wright’s daughter and her mysterious cloaked friend weren’t the ones who captured his interest. Instead, he was too busy eyeing a set of tight blonde curls held in place by a bright red bandana; petite and delicate curves clothed in white and black; a pair of rose-red lips that had curved upwards in a playful smirk as they raced through the streets earlier on; and had the perfect plan.

“You girls can sit here if you want,” he offered kindly, gesturing at the vacant space next to him.

“You’re not taken.”

Olga turned around. “Huh? Oh, thank– YOU!” she screeched, pointing at Clay accusingly. Gods, that infuriating, smug grin. She swore she would remember that look till the day she died.

“Cheat!”

“It's nice to see you too,” he returned, unfazed by her outburst. “And I have a name, you know – it’s Clay Terran.”

“Whatever! I refuse to sit next to you, so you can kiss my–”

“But Auntie Olga, didn't you say not to be picky?” Trucy chimed in, tongue-in-cheek.

She waggled her eyebrows; Lamiroir hid her laughter behind a hand; Clay didn't bother suppressing his. Without a choice, Olga quietly took her seat next to him, too humiliated to speak. As Trucy settled next to her and began chatting animatedly to Lamiroir on her right, Olga kept her gaze trained ahead, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the very existence of the man on her left. Clay didn't mind though; he found her kind of cute – and it wasn't just because she was small.

“So, Olga,” he began, testing the name on his tongue, “do you have a last name?”

She continued to ignore him.


Olga dug her fingernails into the bench so hard, she threatened to break the wood. So what if this man seemed nice; had a bike; could cut through tar just as fast as she could, if not faster; handsome; charming; with a perfect 100-watt smile that made her heart skip a beat and her stomach do little nervous flips whenever he – Bah! He was still annoying. And a bloody cheat. And she refused to forgive him because she had pride–

“How about B?”
… But there was only so much her pride (and patience) could take. She released a miserable sigh. Apparently, persistence *does* pay off.

“It’s Orly,” she relented, turning to face him. “Olga Orly.”

“Oh really?”

“I will *hit* you.”

But she never got to follow up on that threat because Trucy suddenly stood up, cupped her hands around her mouth, and cheered *really loudly.*

“WOO! Go Mr. Gavin! Go Uncle Klavier!”

“Trucy!” Olga hissed and yanked her back down. “Do that again and the judge might have you arrested for contempt of court.” Pause. “And you can’t cheer for both of them! They’re on different sides; they can’t both win.”

“Oh…” Trucy trailed off with a thoughtful frown, before she made up her mind and stood up again. “Sorry, Uncle Klavier!”

Olga smacked herself on the forehead. Why did she even bother?

“What about you, Olga?” asked Clay, laughing off Trucy’s antics. “Whose side are you on?”

“Hah! My money’s on Horns,” she said with a toss of her head. “It’s his case, he's new, and everyone says he's going to lose – and in the world of gambling, that's the perfect combination for the highest payout.”

“Well, that's one way of seeing it,” he commented, his gaze landing on the very subject of their discussion. “My bet’s on Apollo too. He's been dreaming of this day all his life! I'm happy for him.”

“So… you believe in him because he's your friend? That's it?”

Clay smiled. “What else is there?”

“FOREHEAD?!”

All heads turned to the source of that one yell that effectively overpowered all the chatter in the courtroom. At the defense table, Kristoph held Apollo back, the latter looking as if he was about to pounce on a smirking Klavier and claw his pretty little eyes out.

“Call me Herr Forehead one more time!”

“Mr. Justice! The defense will refrain from threatening the prosecution before–”

“And if you air guitar again, I swear I'll take a *real* guitar and shove it up your–”

“Oh my! Order! Order!”

The Judge slammed his gavel repeatedly on the stand. Clay groaned and covered his face in embarrassment. Was it too late to take back whatever he just said?
“All rise.”

Great movement sounded about the courtroom as each individual present – witness, prosecution, defense, and audience – showed their respect before the nation’s legal system. The Judge acknowledged them; members of the gallery resumed their seats; and he brought his gavel down in a single strike to open the morning’s trial.

“Court is now in session for the accused, Daryan Crescend. Are the prosecution and defense ready?”

Suddenly, the piercing wail of an electric guitar cut through the solemn atmosphere, followed by the screams and giddy swooning of fangirls. The Judge blinked stupidly. Klavier had opened with his signature air guitar and looked up as soon as the final note died.

“Ready to rock ‘n’ roll, Herr Judge.” He struck a cool pose. More fangirls screamed. Apollo stared at him incredulously. What the… Ok, where the heck did that guitar soundtrack come from?

“And the defense?” continued the Judge with a shake of his head. Years in this line of work and never a day went by without encountering some eccentricities. Parrots, whips, flying cups of hot coffee, ghosts, and now a rockstar prosecutor… could nothing surprise him anymore–

“APOLLO JUSTICE IS FINE AND READY TO GO!”

His eyes flew open and he could’ve sworn the young lawyer had just cured him of his deafness.

“Mr. Justice, no need to shout! I can hear you just fine!”

Apollo gave a sheepish laugh. “S-Sorry, your honor!”

So the judge wasn’t a fan of ‘Chords of Steel’. Point taken.

Kristoph shook his head with a smile. “You have to excuse him, your honor. This is his first trial and my understudy is rather… excited.”

“Ah, yes – the spirit of youth,” said the Judge with a nostalgic sigh. “Why, when I was 20, my professor often told me I couldn't hit my gavel any harder – but I did and here I am now! He must've have been pushing my potential.”

‘Apparently, the judge doesn't understand sarcasm very well,’ thought Apollo.

“It's a pity you’re not heading up this case, Mr. Gavin. I do not exaggerate when I say that you're the best defense attorney in town – the defendant would have greatly benefited from your experience.”

“I'm humbled, your honor,” replied Kristoph, hand over his heart. “But this is my brother’s case; today, I'm merely a guide.”

“And you're fine with this – uh, Mr. Gavin?” said the Judge, stumbling over his question as he addressed the younger Gavin brother.

“Ja, it is only professional.”

But one close look at Klavier told Apollo otherwise: the man was nervous; terribly uneased by the prospect of this arrangement, but did well to hide his insecurities from even himself. And anyone
who knew Kristoph for as long as he did would know why: Klavier wasn't facing off against the nation’s top defense attorney; he was confronting his big brother – the very man he owed his success and life to. He had to perform; couldn't screw up; and Apollo felt insult burn in his chest because Klavier wasn't looking at him. He was looking at Kristoph. The Judge was looking at Kristoph. And everyone watching this trial only had faith in him due to affiliation. Look at me, his heart screamed. Your opponent is me; your verdict falls on my abilities; Daryan’s fate rests in my hands – look at me! But someone did, Apollo realised, and when his eyes caught the proud, knowing, twinkling gaze of Phoenix at the witness box, he felt he wasn't alone. Prove them wrong, those blue eyes seemed to say, and Apollo resolved to do just that.

“Mr. Gavin, your opening statement.”

“Mit Freuden, Herr Judge,” Klavier replied with a snap of his fingers. “But before we get to that, do you not find the air in this courtroom a bit – how should I say – serious?”

“Well,” said the Judge, perplexed, “this is a court of law…”

“And I’m heading a Gavinners case,” he continued smoothly with a flip of his fringe. “That's no way to get the crowd jumping.”

“B-But they're not supposed to jump!”

“Achtung, baby!” Klavier exclaimed, pointing his finger at the old man. “Today, we play it my way! In the spirit of youth!”

“Oh! In that case, I wouldn't mind changing things up a bit.”

‘This is crazy,’ Apollo thought, growing more skeptical by the minute. Start of the trial and Klavier already had the judge under his thumb. Next to him, he heard Kristoph give a small chuckle, though the man’s posture remained dignified.

“The victim: Machi Tobaye, 14, pianist and partner of Lamiroir – Borginia’s music and cultural icon,” Klavier began his opening statement with complete ease, clearly accustomed to the courtroom setting and unfazed by the dozens of eyes watching him and the live cameras rolling. “The scene: inside a piano during The Gavinners’ concert at Gatewater Stadium.”

The Judge gave a start. “Inside a piano? What in the world was a pianist doing inside a piano? Or is that some newfangled way you youngsters play it these days?”

And what sort of youngsters are those? Apollo was tempted to retort, but Kristoph smiled at him and he thought it better to keep his tongue in check.

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“Herr Judge, the victim was stuffed into the piano after he was set on fire,” he patiently explained.

“Set on fire! Isn’t that a little extreme, even for an Interpol agent?”

A sudden moment of hesitation gripped Klavier. Guilt, dread, and an inexplicable anger clung to his heart. This was it.

Daryan, forgive me.

“Ja, I believe that's something you should ask the defendant… because it's an undeniable truth that he killed the victim!”

“OBJECTION!”
At that moment, all heads turned to the source of that cry: the Judge, Klavier (who frowned at the disturbing familiarity of that yell), and even Kristoph looked mildly disconcerted – all except a certain ex-lawyer, who watched on with a smile of pleasant surprise. There Apollo was: fists slammed on the defense table; posture resolute; an irresistible ferocity burning in his hazel eyes that were narrowed in determination. He probably didn't realize what he just did, but everyone watching, everyone who knew, felt the ghost of a legend descend upon this very courtroom and take the shape of one Apollo Justice.

“What do you mean ‘undeniable’? That's mere conjecture,” he argued, his pointer finger raised threateningly as he glared at a speechless Klavier who was still struggling with his shock; attacked by a vision of seven years past. “This truth of yours… I object!”

The beginnings of sweat gathered on Klavier’s brow. He could see it: a faint shadow of the Turnabout King hovering over Apollo’s shoulder. But as soon as he acknowledged his fear, he mentally kicked himself and admonished his stupidity. What foolishness. Phoenix Wright was sitting on the witness bench. The stress was getting to his brain; his fear unfounded. He had beaten the legend before. He could do it again.

“Tch! No need to glare – your obscenely large forehead is doing plenty of that already. And if there's anything in dire need of objection, it’s your hair, Herr Justice,” he countered with spite. “But, I will let the motive speak for itself.”

“Hey! Leave my hair out of this!”

“Order! Mr. Justice, another word out of you irrelevant to this case, and I’ll see to it that you get a haircut.”

‘Eep! B-But isn't violence against hair a crime?’ Apollo wondered to himself miserably. Dammit. Why wasn't the judge on his side?

Klavier sifted through his records, found the evidence he was looking for, and threw it on-screen for all to see.

“What you're looking at is an Interpol mission report made on April 30th. A cocoon was smuggled out of Borginia on the same day the victim departed for this country. For those who are unfamiliar with Borginian law, theft of these cocoons are punishable by death. The defendant, being an Interpol agent, was tasked to apprehend the suspect for transfer, but he made a bad call and murdered the victim on international soil in the line of duty.” He snapped his fingers and the projection disappeared. “The motive: simple: he was just doing his job. The consequence: he stepped out of line. Das Ende.”

The Judge furrowed his brows and hummed in consideration. He seemed about 98% convinced about his verdict already. Apollo felt panic kick in overtime. Damn… that was a really solid opening statement. While he had struggled to come up with a plausible motive for the past 24 hours, Klavier was already two steps ahead of him. The guy wasn't a genius for nothing. If he didn't come up with something soon, Daryan would get convicted before he even had the chance to speak!

“Well, that is convincing,” said the Judge. “And perhaps the fastest trial in history, though I expected no less from a Gavin. If the defense has no objections, I'm inclined to hand down my verdict–”

“Hold it!” Apollo yelled, seething. Not yet.

“Prosecutor Gavin presents a strong argument, but one that glaringly lacks proof,” he threw the taunt back at the blonde. “The defendant suspected the victim of a crime. In no way was there direct
evidence he committed murder. You can’t base your conclusions on coincidences. This trial will go on.”

While Kristoph’s face failed to betray his thoughts, Klavier laughed at the absurdity of it all. Listening to the rookie struggle to argue his way around his truth was just painful. As much as he wanted to believe in Daryan, there was no denying how ridiculously compromised his position was. But there was something to be admired about the kid’s persistence, so he decided to throw Apollo a bone.

“Fein. If it's proof you want…” He straightened up and resumed a professional aura. “The prosecution would like to call its first witness – Fräulein Detective!”

“What?” Ema snapped rudely as she assumed her place on the witness stand with great reluctance, boring holes in her partner’s head with her glare. “You said this trial wouldn't take more than 5 minutes!”

“Blame Herr Forehead.”

She directed her death glare at Apollo, who jerked back in alarm.

“Stay calm, Apollo,” Kristoph interrupted his thoughts, before flashing his understudy a look of pride. “That was good insight back there. You’re doing fine.”

“T-Thank you, sir!”

He chuckled and spared a glance at his brother, a dark look entering his eyes. “Now, Klavier knows his place.”

The Judge slammed his gavel on the stand. “Name and occupation,” he demanded.

“Ema Skye, 25, Homicide Detective.”

“Miss Skye, the court will now hear of this proof that establishes the defendant’s guilt – and no snacking in the court of law!”

Deprived of her snacks, Ema looked even more grumpy than before and avoided Apollo’s eyes throughout her entire testimony mainly out of petulance than spite.

“Fine, whatever. You want proof, dumb lawyer? Here's your proof: shark-boy was the only one who could've committed the crime. The murder took place during the concert’s intermission. The victim’s burnt body was found wrapped in Lamiroir’s costume inside the grand piano. A lighter and a container of kerosene bearing shark-boy’s fingerprints were found in Lamiroir and the victim’s dressing room. Shark-boy committed the deed there, then stuffed Machi in the piano. As for Lamiroir, I believe she wasn't in her room at that time,” she concluded her account with a sour expression. “There. Can I go now?”

“Alright, Apollo,” began Kristoph in all seriousness, “you've watched me perform cross-examinations before. Don't disappoint me.”

“Don’t worry, sir! I think I know what to do!”

But Kristoph wasn't impressed by his student’s enthusiasm.
“I think you’d better do more than think. You either know it, or you don’t,” he stated without the slightest shred of sympathy. “Pinpoint the inconsistencies, expose the lies, reveal them to the court. That is the art of a perfect cross-examination. Learn it. Know it. Do it.”

Apollo gulped and pulled out his records which he had so painstakingly compiled the night before (after constant revision under his mentor’s instruction). Somehow, Kristoph’s ‘friendly reminder’ left him feeling more apprehensive than ever. He spared a furtive glance around the room: Klavier shot him a smug albeit nasty smirk; Daryan looked apprehensive; Clay maintained his faith; and Phoenix… Phoenix was looking at him like how every person wanted to be looked at – like he was the only person in the world that mattered; like he was the only one worthy; and whether or not it was true or his mind was simply giving him a reason for his conviction, Apollo took comfort in that thought and found confidence in his hero’s trust. And so, he braved his doubt and attacked Ema’s testimony one statement at a time.

“Exactly what time did the murder occur, Miss Skye?”

“Actually…” She trailed off uncomfortably, “seeing as the victim was burned, forensics had a tough time determining the exact moment of death.”

‘Tough is right,’ Apollo thought as he consulted the autopsy report with a frown. The time range specified was a large one, practically anytime within the span of two hours. Apart from a rupture caused by fire at the victim’s left side, the body was burned through and through – no signs of struggle, no impaction or external injury, no trace of chemical substances or any chemical sign to determine the exact moment of rigor mortis…

“However,” Ema interrupted, “we have reason to believe it occurred at approximately 9.20 pm – at the start of intermission. The defendant had disappeared claiming to look for the victim and we now have a dead body on our hands. I don't think you're that dumb to not draw your own conclusions, aye?”

You don't know that, he told himself. Everyone had been unaccounted for during the break and it was his job to tear not only Ema’s testimony apart, but her own reliability as a witness as well. If he could get the court to distrust the very detective in charge of the whole case, Daryan would have more breathing room to fight for his innocence.

“Objection! Anyone who looks at this autopsy report can immediately tell that it tells – well, pretty much nothing. You're merely going about the time via human deduction!”

“Objection!” Klavier slammed a fist against the wall behind him. He had enough of the rookie’s excuses. “Intermission was the only time all crew had free reign of the place, und that was when das piano was moved. Deshalb, concluding the murder took place during break is reasonable.”

“Yeah, and let's not forget the victim was wrapped in Lamiroir’s costume and stuffed into a piano,” Ema added smugly. “You got to have time to do all that. Besides, I think the audience would notice if their guitarist went missing in the middle of the performance.”

‘They're really pushing for that intermission window,’ Apollo worried as he looked at the first crime photograph depicting the corpse half wrapped in Lamiroir’s trademark navy cloak with its numerous constellations. ‘Got to find an inconsistency soon…’

“Was Lamiroir wearing her costume when the body was found?”

“She had on a different costume. Nick sewed her a new one without stars because as you can see, the original was stolen by the defendant,” Ema replied with a careless shrug.
“That's conjecture!”

“Nein!” Klavier interrupted, his patience towards Apollo growing thin. “It is reasonable, Herr Forehead. Recall: the victim was burned and then wrapped. Only the defendant would have to have the costume beforehand because he was the one who set Herr Tobaye on fire with his lighter… the very lighter found next to the kerosene, both covered with his fingerprints.”

Despite his calm and reasonable logic, the young prosecutor was struggling. His deductions appeared flawless, but that was also what was killing him inside. The more Klavier spoke, the harder he was pushing his best friend into a corner. But Apollo had already gotten all he needed and he decided it was now time to end Klavier’s misery.

“Hold it, Prosecutor Gavin,” he said in a level of calm that startled his rival. “What you said may be true: the defendant murdered the victim that's why his lighter has his fingerprints. But, the inverse is also true: the defendant didn't murder the victim and his lighter has his fingerprints because that lighter belongs to him. Also, my client told me that he’d touched that kerosene container the week before the concert itself.”

Klavier and Ema were speechless. A small smile of approval tugged at Kristoph’s lips. Low murmurs transpired through the gallery. The Judge raised his gavel and brought it down in two swift strikes in his demand for silence.

“Mr. Justice, what are you insinuating?”

“The possibility that Mr. Crescend was framed, your honor,” Apollo replied, reading off his notes. “There are a total of three dressing rooms backstage: The Gavinners, Lamiroir’s, and Trucy Wright’s. However, there were originally only two. Miss Wright’s room was the venue’s original storage room and my client was tasked to clear it out upon her arrival – by none other than you, Prosecutor Gavin.” Apollo looked up and met Klavier’s stare head-on. “Isn't that right?”

Klavier faltered. “Ja…”

“And what can you find in a large storage room, Miss Skye?”

“Em… Junk and stuff?” she answered warily.

“Precisely,” said Apollo with a nod. “Stuff… like a kerosene container perhaps?”

“But no one else knew about that storage room,” Klavier argued.

“They didn’t have to,” Apollo replied. “Daryan ended up throwing everything in that room under the stage. Anyone involved in the concert and who walked past the stage would’ve not only seen, but also been able to easily access that container. The real killer’s motive was to frame Daryan with the lighter, but got lucky with the kerosene container too.”

Klavier ran his fingers through his hair in disbelief. *Was this true?*

“Herr Forehead, have you considered a career in writing?”

Apollo shot him a curious frown. “No…”

“Ah, that's too bad… Because your imagination is far better than your defending.”

“What?!”
“Achtung, baby!” He pointed at the fuming brunette. “Let me ask you this: how could the defendant be framed if he tried to hide the body in the piano? – Deshalb establishing his undeniable guilt!”

“Then let me ask you this,” Apollo countered, matching Klavier’s ferocity, “if Daryan is as guilty as you claim, why doesn't the piano have any of his fingerprints?”

“Whaaaat?!”

An off key wail of a guitar chord pierced the tension. Again, Apollo wondered where the hell that noise was coming from.

It seemed Klavier wasn't the only one reeling from shock. The entire courtroom was a buzz with scandalized chatter – what did the defense mean? What was going on? Had Daryan Crescend really been framed? Why, how, when, what, who? The media took notes furiously; all eyes were on the new kid. What was his name again? Apollo Justice? How old was he? 22? – A prodigy! As expected from the understudy of Kristoph Gavin.

“Neatly done, Apollo,” said Kristoph as he took in the sight of Ema struggling on the witness stand against Klavier’s death glare. “Robbing the detective on site off all credibility – a commendable technique. The court has no need for unreliable witnesses. Finish her off.”

Apollo’s chest constricted; but there was no room for guilt. Not now when he was so close. He was thankful for her assistance with those fingerprints, he really was, but he believed in his client and right now, Ema was in his way. Sorry, Miss Skye.

“Miss Skye, in your testimony earlier, you said that Lamiroir –”

“W-Wait!” Ema yelled, holding her hand out in a last ditch effort to defend herself. If she couldn’t stand her ground, if she couldn't prove her worth in front of Klavier, then that recommendation he'd promised…

“I know what I said, dumb lawyer, and I'm sticking to it,” she stubbornly held her ground. “Lamiroir wasn't in her room, nor was she in the hallway; no one was. The defendant took advantage of the situation and committed the entire deed, burning, wrapping and all – no framing required.”

Apollo sighed and shook his head. “Miss Skye, I really didn't want to do this, but I won't let you slander Mr. Crescend any longer.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“You were slacking during the entire intermission – in fact, you weren't even in the building when the crime occurred.”

Klavier was so mad, his face turned blue. “Fraulein…”

“ No! I mean, that's sort of true… But-”

“You weren't even at your post: buying 'two of everything' from the vending machine outside the stadium, if I recall your words correctly,” Apollo went on before pointing at her accusingly. “How do you know if Lamiroir was in her room or not? How do you know the hallway was empty? How do you know the defendant moved the body at that time? The answer is simple: you don't! You don't know what really happened, so the prosecution has no right to deny the possibility of framing. The detective is an unreliable witness. This cross-examination is over.”

The courtroom fell deathly silent; even Klavier didn't have anything witty to retort. Instead, all he did
was bid Ema to return to the bench with a quiet and ominous, “Danke, Fräulein Detective.” Ema did as she was told without complaint. She was going to get a nasty cut in her salary for this, she just knew it – and that was only if Klavier was in a forgiving mood. ‘This is all that dumb lawyer’s fault,’ she thought spitefully and vowed to make the kid pay somehow for this humiliation.

“Mr. Gavin, are you alright?” asked the Judge with wide eyes. “You're not usually this… careless.”

If anything, that observation stung Klavier deeper than Apollo’s defense. But the blonde chose to remain silent in a bid to uphold his dignity and recover his damaged pride. He supposed he ought to be grateful to the rookie – Apollo did buy Daryan more time and brought up an alternate possibility – but what was this dark emotion building in his chest? Anxious, he spared a quick glance across the room, only to drop it as soon as Kristoph’s laughing, knowing eyes met his. The knowledge of that stare horrified him and turned his heart bitter. His brother still saw him as a baby. With Kristoph hovering over Apollo’s shoulder like a specter, how the hell was he ever going to amount to anything more in his brother’s eyes?

Meanwhile, the Judge turned his attention to the defense and regarded the young lawyer in a new light. They all did.

“Mr. Justice, if what you say is true, who is the person who framed the defendant?” he implored in obvious interest.

‘Ok, Justice. This is it,’ Apollo told himself, clenching his fists on the table. Honestly, he never imagined he'd get this far and admittedly, had never thought beyond this next point.

“I can't say for sure yet, your honor,” he replied regretfully. “But what I do know is that the person who moved the piano is most likely the same person who murdered the victim – and that somebody isn't Daryan Crescend.” He opened the court records to the fingerprint profiles and threw both a 3D diagram of the piano and a particular fingerprint analysis on-screen, for comparison. The diagram rotated and automatically marked out the print placements as he talked.

“Two sets of fingerprints were found on the piano, but one of them stood out more than the other – namely because of its frequency at about 3:1. Fingerprint analysis revealed that they belong to…”

He tapped an image in the records and it projected itself before the entire court. It was a picture of a young, handsome man with effeminate features; quiet and good-natured; short, neatly styled brown hair; and kind emerald eyes that loved more than deceived. The reaction was instantaneous: fangirls gasped; some burst into uncontrollable tears; Klavier cursed; and Apollo could've sworn he heard Daryan shout something along the lines of, “Duuuuude… that's messed up!”

Apollo mentally took a step back and hoped for the best. “Your honor, the defense would like to question Mr. Valerian Keyes’ reason for moving the piano from the stage to the hallway.”

“Hm… Does the prosecution have any objections?”

“... Nein.”


“Herr Judge,” Klavier interrupted patiently. “Amaranth is a suspect in today’s trial. He's on the witness bench.”

“Whaaaat?! So I don't have a bailiff?” exclaimed the Judge helplessly. “Why wasn't I informed of this?”
“... Your honor, his name was already listed in the information packet,” Apollo added with a sweatdrop. “We thought you’d make the connection.”

“Oh.”

Seated quietly at his spot next to Phoenix, Amaranth shot the Judge a nasty grin, stuck out his pierced tongue and flipped him the bird. Fortunately, the old man was far too near-sighted to notice his bailiff’s blatant display of rebellion and disrespect in the court of law.

“It’s ok, your honor. I can see myself to the witness stand,” said a new voice – cheery, charming, and exceptionally polite.

Sadness entered Klavier’s eyes. “Valerian…”

First Daryan and now his keyboardist. Would this nightmare ever cease? How long would the rookie keep picking at him until he was satisfied? Until there was nothing left but an empty stage and the deafening cries of his own tortured ego.

“Why, how nice of you, Mr. Keyes,” remarked the Judge in honest surprise. For someone being accused of a crime, the brunette was taking it very well. Apollo however, wasn't buying that good-boy act for one second. A grudge against Daryan; lying; possible sabotage… Valerian wasn't an easy book to read, and Apollo was determined to tear him down to his last page if only to get to the truth.

‘It is your job to separate the truth from the lies’ – that had been Kristoph's advice. It was time to get his hands dirty.

“Name and occupation.”

“Valerian Keyes, 26, police officer and keyboardist,” came the pleasant, upbeat reply. He paused for a moment with a thoughtful pout, playing with his cross earring as he flicked it with a finger. “Your honor, pardon my curiosity, but why am I here? I think Klav made his case perfectly clear in his opening statement.”

“If you've been listening, you'd know that the defendant was framed!” said Apollo accusingly. “Also, your fingerprints were all over that piano – explain that!”

Valerian chuckled and flashed the young lawyer a bemused smile, the kind that grownups gave young children when they saw them perform something ridiculous yet endearing in their childish naïveté; a mixture of amusement, understanding, and playful condescension. Oh, he’d been paying attention to the trial alright; long enough to find Apollo’s efforts a farce and the defense’s desperation palpable. And now the rookie was accusing him of murder? He was grasping at straws. The Judge would see it soon enough.

“Do you seriously think I killed Machi?” he addressed Apollo, a cross between insult and disbelief. “I'm telling you, man, you'll find nothing here.”

“I don't know yet,” Apollo answered, determined. “But I'm here to question your guilt.”

Valerian’s bright green eyes lit up in challenge. “Question away.”

“The witness will now explain to the court why he moved the piano,” proclaimed the Judge, oblivious to the growing hostility between the two men.

“I'll do my best, your honor.” And with a playful wink and flip of his side bangs that made the fangirls swoon, Valerian launched into his testimony.
“I didn't kill Machi; Daryan did. He'd be the only one with reason to. Why would I want to frame Daryan anyway? What good would it do me?” He stopped playing with his earring and folded his arms. “As for the piano, just because my fingerprints were all over it, doesn't mean I moved it at that time and it definitely doesn't mean I killed Machi. If you're forgetting, I'm the band’s keyboardist and that piano wasn't used by the kid alone – I practiced on it too. Besides, I believe I already told the defense that I spent the entire intermission in The Gavinners’ dressing room.” He flashed Apollo a knowing smirk. “Isn't that right, A-pol-lo?”

“He's lying!” Apollo thought, inwardly fuming, but had nothing to refute Valerian’s claim, especially the one about the piano. The keyboardist raised a good point, one he had carelessly overlooked. This wasn't good. His cross-examination was approaching a dead end before he even begun, and there was nothing in his arsenal to go up against any of Valerian’s statements. What's worse, his arm started acting up again and the pain throbbed like crazy. Apollo's breathing turned shallow. It was hard to stay focused. He felt his head pulse and his vision turn dim like he was looking at everything through a tunnel with only the light at the end in vivid clarity. Overwhelming. Painful. Everything was in hyperfocus. His own breathing sounded like someone had the volume maxed out. He could hear the tiniest noises; notice the tiniest of movements; a finger twitch; a pin drop. Apollo gripped his head and scrunched his eyes shut, suppressing the urge to scream.

What's happening? No… too much. Make it stop… Make it stop!

“Apollo, are you alright?”

“Mr. Justice?”

“Haha! Hey, Klav! I think Apollo’s finally lost it.”

Klavier tsked and shook his head. “Tch, Herr Forehead probably couldn't take the pressure of his own fictitious theory and it’s biting him in der Hintern. Still, for a rookie, he’s lasted this long…”

Phoenix jumped to his feet and leaned over the witness box. What in the world? Was the kid having a panic attack? But it certainly didn't look like one. Kristoph had his hand on Apollo’s shoulder, a frown on his face and lips moving frantically; the kid doubled over the table, one hand grasping his left wrist at the area just below his bracelet–

Phoenix’s eyes widened. That bracelet.

He averted his gaze to the gallery and sought out his daughter amidst the crowd, only to do a double take when he noticed a familiar cloaked figure sitting next to her. What? Lamiroir’s here? No! But there was time to worry about the singer’s rebellion and Olga’s blunder later. Right now, all that mattered was one startling correlation: while Trucy appeared exceptionally uncomfortable and jittery (the same look she had whenever she sensed a lie), Lamiroir too grasped her wrist and was fiddling with her bracelet the same way Apollo was.

‘When someone lies or feels nervous about something, I'm able to sense it. My bracelet just… tightens up – rather strange, don't you think?’

A special ability.

‘I suppose you could say that this bracelet is my most prized possession.’
'I've always had it for as long as I can remember.'

A common thread of fate.

'All I remember is waking up to darkness – that was my life and all I ever knew.'

'Honestly, I don't remember her. She died shortly after I was born.'

'Yeah, I'm an orphan.'

And the connection was here.

“Apollo!” Phoenix called out to him, never mind the dozens of curious stares aimed his way or the fact that he could be held in contempt of court for his outburst. Nothing in the world could have prepared him for this staggering truth. “Kid, your bracelet just tightened, didn't it? You sensed something off about Valerian’s testimony, didn't you?”

Klavier’s eyes narrowed. What in the world was Phoenix up to?

The slamming of the gavel never sounded more piercing.

“Order! The witness will refrain from interrupting the cross-examination!”

“Kid, can you hear me? Listen–”

“Mr. Wright, I will have order!”

“Kid!”

Mr. Wright?

Apollo fought his way out of the murky darkness and the amalgamation of noise. He heard a voice – clearer and pure amidst the swirl of chaos and jarring colour; saw a light that, the longer he stared at it and reached for it, started to take the shape of a man he so desperately loved and staked his absolute faith and devotion in. He felt scared, hopelessly confused – why couldn't he control himself? – but Phoenix was right here with him; a sudden lightness and peace filled him, and he knew that he was going to be fine.

“Hey, kid,” came Phoenix’s coaxing voice with a smile. “Don't worry, I got you. You're fine.”

“I–” but a flood of visual stimuli attacked him once more and he whimpered, shutting his eyes. Too clear. Everything was way too clear.

“Apollo, listen: this might not make sense; maybe sound crazy, but you have to trust me. I know Kristoph’s there, I know he taught you all you know – but forget everything. Forget everything you learned. Focus. What do you see?”

What do I see?

“Bailiff!”

Amaranth seized Phoenix by the shoulders and with a soft, “Come on, Nick. That's enough”, guided him back to his seat. Klavier watched the whole thing with a troubled grimace. What the hell was going on with his witnesses today? Did the has-been want to be detained before he got the chance to speak?
At the defense table, Kristoph watched Phoenix go with an unpleasant sneer. ‘What do you see?’ – preposterous! In court, evidence is everything. He would correct his lover’s behavior tonight.

“Ignore him, Apollo,” he instructed. “Proceed with the cross-examination proper.”

“But…”

“Proceed.”

‘But with what? What proof do I have?’ Apollo thought in panic, sweating bullets. Valerian’s testimony was foolproof, and pressing any of his statements seemed redundant. But Kristoph was watching him, so he had to try.

“I-In your final statement, you said that you spent the whole break in the dressing room. But Crow, who claimed to have done the same thing, says otherwi-”

“Objection!”

Klavier launched into his air guitar solo once again. Apollo looked on with a grimace. He really didn't like this guy. And seriously, where the heck was that noise coming from?!

“Memory kann sometimes be an unreliable thing, this truth more so for Crow than anyone else,” Klavier began his explanation, pointing at his rival in a condescending manner. “Herr Forehead, would you ask someone with daily amnesia to testify an event they don't even remember they don't remember happening?”

“Hey! Uncool, leader!” Someone (Crow) yelled in the background, but neither attorney paid him any heed.

“Klavier has a point, Apollo,” Kristoph reprimanded. “A defense like that is poor, if not lacking. I suggest you adopt a different approach, namely conclusive evidence.”

“But I don't have any!” Apollo thought, panicking, grasping straws. None of his boss’ methods were working for him. What would Mr. Wright do? – well, he'd bluff; but he wasn't Phoenix and he seriously doubted that would fly well with the Judge. He was out of options, out of cryptic advice, save one:

‘What do you see?’

It was worth a gamble.

“Valerian.”

“Hey… You alright, dude?” said the keyboardist uneasily. “You're looking at me all funny…”

“About your testimony,” Apollo pressed on, undaunted, scrutinizing him with an intensity that heightened the man’s self-consciousness. “Whenever you talk about Daryan, I notice you keep playing with your earring, especially when you said he's the only one with a reason for murder. Why?”

Valerian visibly faltered and appeared to suddenly find his bracelets very interesting. What the hell – was this some new defense tactic or something? A quick glance at the Gavin brothers revealed he wasn't the only one confused. Well, whatever it was, he wasn't falling for it.

“Haha, I think you need to get your eyes checked…”.
“And I think you need to get your story straightened out,” Apollo countered with a confident smirk. “After all, what ‘reason’ could you possibly know that the entire court only just found out a few minutes ago?”

“Ack!”

The keyboardist was cracking, steadily dropping his guard with every nervous stutter. Apollo could see it; could see every involuntary twitch with vivid clarity and startling precision than ever before.

“Daryan’s mission was top secret and the only person he confided in was Prosecutor Gavin. Furthermore, his task was to secure the smuggler for transfer, not kill him. Plus, he only suspected Machi: it would be unreasonable to kill otherwise,” he concluded and folded his arms in triumph. “You were pretty confident in this ‘reason’ and constructed a convenient testimony around it. But Valerian, my question to you is this: how did you know about this mission beforehand?”

Shaking from the force of Apollo’s accusations and having been found out, Valerian dug his fingers into his hair and moaned, “Stop… Enough. Please…”

“How are your actions not an act of intentional framing? What are you hiding about Daryan? What were you really doing during the break?”

The guilt was eating him. All eyes in court gazed upon him expectantly; skeptically; confused; disappointed; betrayed. Valerian looked like he was close to tears. It was then Apollo found the capacity to be sympathetic.

“Will you tell us the truth now, Valerian?” he asked in a low voice void of menace; only a calm understanding. When said man nodded miserably, Apollo repeated his question, “How did you know about Daryan’s mission?”

“He… He told me,” Valerian replied.

“Why?”

Daryan’s infectious grin flashed through his mind; the memory of their one-sided rivalry and Daryan’s subsequent forgiveness; the secrets they breathed and all the laughter they shared – they entered Valerian’s mind in flashes, each layer building upon another in a montage of friendship. The strain, the guilt was too much to bear and he finally broke.

“Because… he trusts me.”

Warm tears flowed freely down Valerian’s cheeks, but no matter how much he wiped them, they wouldn’t stop. Daryan trusted him and he had abused that trust out of fear and cowardice. He had abandoned Daryan – worse still, betrayed him – when he needed him most. He was the worst kind of friend; unforgivable; unfit to be human.

“Valerian, did you move the piano?”

“… Yes, I moved it during intermission,” he finally confessed. “I tried to play a few chords, but some of the keys weren’t working, so I thought I’d do the band a favor by getting rid of it. It was an old piano. But that’s all I did! I didn’t kill Machi, I swear! I just moved it, I didn’t kill anyone! I didn’t…”

He buried his face in his hands, his subsequent words coming out in tortured sobs as a fresh wave of tears seized him.

“I lied ‘cuz I was scared. I knew the police would take one look at those fingerprints and I’d be a
dead man. Then that detective found the lighter and kerosene and I thought… Oh God, Daryan, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Apollo’s heart clenched. “Valerian…”

At the witness bench, Daryan watched his friend breakdown before the entire court; sorrowful, torn, and felt his own tears build up behind his eyes. When Apollo had warned him that he’d get hurt today, he hadn't been kidding. Crow and Amaranth meanwhile bowed their heads and couldn't bring themselves to look at the brunette, ashamed not by his actions, but the burden of their own guilt. How were they better off than Valerian? Klavier turned his cheek away, conflict and disappointment radiating off him in waves. What had started off as ripples of conflict, turned into destructive waves. The Gavinners were no longer brothers. It was too painful to watch.

“That concludes the cross-examination of Mr. Keyes,” said the Judge solemnly. “The fact that the defendant had been framed can no longer be ruled out. This trial will continue.”

Apollo watched Valerian return to his seat a broken man. Him and Daryan sat side-by-side, but the distance between them never seemed greater. Distantly, Apollo heard Kristoph commend him on his swift yet unorthodox execution, but his mentor’s approval didn't fill him with the same satisfaction as it used to. He was one step closer to establishing Daryan’s innocence, but why did it feel like he had taken two steps back in defending the man's faith and pride?

>To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it: the first part of the trial (day 1). I'm remaining cautiously optimistic on how long each trial day would last, especially since I realised, during the writing process, how many suspects there are and the amount of information to go over. Apollo and Klavier are working hard to solve this convoluted puzzle, and hopefully, you guys are too!

Final word in: I love the Judge. And perhaps I enjoyed writing him a bit too much. He's too innocent and adorable. You'll definitely read more of him in the chapters to come.
Bitte verzeih mir. It's a trying period for me now, but I'm happy to announce a new chapter for "House of Cards". The courtroom drama continues. Hab Spaß!

Also, this update is dedicated to my love (who got me into AA in the first place). Happy Anniversary, baby!

There was a brief interlude for both the defense and prosecution to revise their statements following Valerian's confession. Klavier made quick amends to his witness accounts to reflect the truth of the piano; Apollo went over the updated evidence list and profiles in his court record. Everything was a mess: his facts; preconceived notions; and his initial self-confidence thrown off kilter. Valerian’s tearful breakdown effectively erased all prior suspicion of rivalry, and consequently heightened Apollo’s doubt. If the keyboardist didn't do it, then who? If Daryan was framed, then who did it and why? What was the motive? What wasn't he seeing?

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Piano: Was moved from stage to hallway by Valerian during intermission as some keys were spoiled. Bears Valerian and Mr. Wright’s fingerprints.

[Type: Evidence]
Kerosene Container: Was moved by the defendant from Miss Wright’s room to under the stage a week before the concert. Found at the crime scene. Bears defendant’s fingerprints.

[Type: Evidence]
Cocoon: A single cocoon that was smuggled from Borginia into the country last weekend. It’s small enough to fit into the palm of a child’s hand. The cocoon has medicinal properties capable of curing Incuritis, a deadly disease. It's still missing.

[Type: Profiles]
Machi Tobaye
Age: 12
Gender: Male
The victim, previously known as the Pixie of Arpeggio, was Lamiroir’s music partner and pianist. He disappeared at the start of the concert and was found dead during intermission. He often argued with Lamiroir and wasn't well liked by Mr. Wright and The Gavinners. He was suspected of smuggling a single cocoon from Borginia.

[Type: Profiles]
Ema Skye
Age: 25
Gender: Female
A grumpy homicide detective who snacks more than works. She was placed on security duty on concert night, but abandoned her post during intermission to get food for Lamiroir (and mostly for herself). Her love for science is paramount. She doesn't seem to like Prosecutor Gavin or me very much.
Daryan Crescend  
Age: 24  
Gender: Male  
The defendant, an Interpol agent, and The Gavinners’ second guitarist. He claims to have spent the break looking for the victim and reportedly saw him outside Trucy Wright’s dressing room. He was on an undercover mission to apprehend the smuggler and had suspected Machi. He disclosed the details of his mission to only Prosecutor Gavin and Valerian.

Valerian Keyes  
Age: 26  
Gender: Male  
A police officer and The Gavinners’ keyboardist. He has confessed to moving the piano as some keys were spoilt, but did not commit murder. He is generally on good terms with everyone in the band. Like the other Gavinners and Mr. Wright, he doesn’t seem to like the victim very much. He is the only other person apart from Prosecutor Gavin who knew the details of Daryan’s mission.

Diverting suspicion onto another party produced little to no results. They were back to square one.

“Was anyone in the hallway at all?” demanded the Judge, very much perplexed. “Without a proper witness, it'll be difficult to – well, judge anything!”

“Your honor, if I might suggest something?” said Kristoph, finally speaking up when the tension and his impatience toward both brother and understudy proved palpable.

His unexpected interruption caught both Apollo and Klavier by surprise, though it was Klavier who awaited his brother’s words with a dawning sense of dread. Kristoph was disappointed in him; it was an open display of malcontent than generosity, and unbeknownst to him, Apollo felt the exact same way under his mentor’s oppression.

“By all means, Mr. Gavin! Any advice at this point would prove most invaluable to the court.”

Apollo wondered if the Judge was speaking for the benefit of the general public, or himself.

In response, Kristoph adjusted his glasses and gracefully plucked a single profile from Apollo’s open court record.

“My understudy has been meaning to speak with this person prior to the trial, but as a key witness, the law and prosecution has denied him this right,” he explained with impeccable calmness that very well earned him the title as the coolest defense in the west. “Seeing as this man was the only person whose presence in the hallway can be fully affirmed, and that our interests coincide with the prosecution’s at this point, I believe the defense has the right to perform a cross-examination… Am I correct, Klavier?” He ended by flashing his brother a meaningful smile.

Klavier nervously tugged at his shirt collar, but tried to hide his inadequacy. “Ja, I was going to suggest the same thing…”

Apollo glanced between the two brothers, feeling more lost than ever. What on earth was his mentor up to?

“And who is this person, Mr. Gavin?” asked the Judge.

“The key witness,” Kristoph and Klavier answered simultaneously as each refused to drop their stare
from one another.

“Phoenix Wright. / Has-been.”

The gavel slammed twice in quick succession, the boom as loud and penetrating as Apollo’s own heartbeat pounding in his ears. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face and he felt his throat go dry. *This is it, Justice. You're going to question Mr. Wright. Don't screw this up.*

Phoenix stuffed his hands into his pockets and slowly shuffled to the witness stand; tipped his beanie and flashed the Judge a lazy smile. There wasn't the slightest indication of nerves; the man completely at ease as if he had done this over a thousand times. He sought Kristoph’s gaze hopefully, but the man’s expression remained cold; he turned to smirk at Klavier, but the younger brother refused to look at him; then he directed his full attention to the Judge who gazed down at him regretfully, almost forlorn; a strange place in the middle of pity, surprise, and disappointment.

“Well, I must say this is certainly a surprise,” said the Judge with a frown, breaking the tense silence. “To think I saw you come in a fresh lawyer, to getting disbarred, and now a witness to murder.”

Phoenix laughed in that same carefree manner he always did – the one that was almost impossible to tell if it was sincere or forced out of habit.

“You haven't changed a bit, Judge.”

The old man’s tone softened to a sentimental one. “I wish I could say the same for you, Mr. Wright.”

“Woo! Go daddy! Knock ‘em dead!” came Trucy’s yell from the audience.

His eyes flew open, scandalized. “What? Mr. Wright! I would have you know that I won't tolerate you knocking anyone in this court of law dead… And you have a daughter?!”

“It's just a figure of speech, your honor,” Phoenix replied, amused. “And yes, many things can happen in seven years. One day, I lost my badge; the next day, I became a dad.”

“Indeed. One day, I had a head full of hair; the next day, I lost all of it.”

‘One day, I thought being a lawyer was serious business; now, I have my doubts,’ Apollo thought in exasperation, his hair spikes drooping.

“... Herr Judge, I'm afraid I'll have to cut this conversation short,” interrupted Klavier with an impatient snap of his fingers, “because the prosecution would like the witness to recount the very moment he found das body.” He flashed Apollo a playful smirk. “Perhaps it would shed some licht on this wenig mystery, and put an end to the defense’s mad fantasie.”

Fantasy!? Apollo fumed from Klavier’s goading and mentally counted to five to stop himself from climbing over the table and smacking that pretty little grin off that smug bastard’s face. He wasn't making this up! His theory of sabotage was real; he'd prove it; and then it would be the rockstar’s turn to eat his own words, swallow it, digest it, and expel it.

Klavier’s eyes were laughing. “This is mein case, Herr Justice.”

But Apollo refused to back down and returned Klavier’s mocking leer with a determined scowl of his own.

“We’ll see about that.”
“The witness will now tell the court exactly what happened when he found the body.”

‘Please, Mr. Wright… Don’t say anything that’ll put you on the spot,’ Apollo prayed fervently as he stared hard at his idol who had that same, unassuming smile curled around his lips and an unshakable darkness looming behind a pair of blue eyes that no longer sparkled, that were hollow and longed for a past as distant and impossible as a dream. The image of Phoenix’s fingerprints floated through Apollo’s mind and a lump formed in his throat.

Don’t make me implicate you. Please…

“Ahaha… I’ll do my best, Judge. It’s been 12 years since I stood here and testified to anything,” Phoenix chuckled in an attempt to disperse the tension. “Although I must say…” He trailed off and winked at Klavier, who shot him a warning stare, “the prosecution has been rather patient tearing my statement apart for the past few days.”

Klavier was about to retort, but Judge slammed his gavel down and put an end to their chatter. Goodness, there were far too many distractions and undercurrents of hostility today.

“Name and occupation?”

“Phoenix Wright, 33, and… that depends,” he replied mysteriously with a cheeky smirk. “Do you want the legal one on paper, or the not-so-legal one?”

“What? Mr. Wright, you’re involved in illegal enterprise?”

He giggled at the poor judge’s shock. “I’m joking, your honor – he straightened up – The Gavinners’ dresser. For now.”

But Apollo knew better and could see past his laughter; had felt and experienced the man’s brokenness first hand buried deep beneath seven dark years of bitterness, ridicule, and sexual subjugation. There were some things better left unsaid.

“Pay close attention, Apollo,” said Kristoph, oblivious to the emotional conflict raging in the young attorney’s heart. “No one’s testimony can be fully trusted. As I taught you: find the inconsistencies, present the relevant evidence, and watch the witness fall apart.”

There was a telltale smugness to the blonde’s biting speech that made Apollo hesitate. He knew his mentor could be ruthless in court, but this was Phoenix they were talking about. Wasn’t he his boyfriend? Oh Apollo understood pride, dignity, and reputation, especially when it came to his boss; but was Kristoph actually ok – scratch that – was he really encouraging him to break Phoenix for the sake of personal victory? Where should they draw the line between love and integrity?

“It’s pretty straight-forward,” began Phoenix with a nonchalant shrug, eyes darting about distractedly. “During intermission, everyone had a 10-minute break, so I spent it looking for Machi. Apart from the grand finale, him and Lamiroir were supposed to perform two songs into the second half of the concert. When I entered the dressing room hallway, I saw the piano and smelled this foul odor. I didn’t know what it was or where it was coming from, but that piano definitely wasn’t supposed to be there and it wasn’t there when I last checked. When I opened the lid, I first saw Lamiroir’s costume before I found the body wrapped inside. After that, I went to get Ema and informed the rest of the band.”
“Ja, as the defense has just heard…” Klavier snapped his fingers with a smug smirk. “Straight-forward. Valerian moved the piano, fein. But the defendant hid the body inside and closed the lid. There’s no need to over complicate things.”

“Objection!” Apollo pointed at his rival. “I'm just getting started, Prosecutor Gavin. The defense still has the right to cross-examine the witness.”

Klavier’s laugh was patronizing. “Let's see how many excuses Herr Forehead kann come up with before it’s all over.”

“It's never over until I say so, Mr. Rockstar Prosecutor.”

Apollo whipped out the court record, while mentally going over Phoenix’s statements. Alright, what did he have so far?

[Type: Evidence]
Autopsy report: Victim was burned from head to toe with a rupture at his right side. No traces of chemical residue were found on the epidermis. Estimated time of death is between 7pm and 9pm.

[Type: Evidence]
Crime Scene Photo 1: Victim wrapped in Lamiroir’s costume inside the piano. Traces of dried blood and small scraps of metal found on the cloak’s inner side and victim’s body.

[Type: Evidence]
Crime Scene Photo 2: A kerosene spill on the floor next to the dresser in Lamiroir’s room. The victim was murdered at that spot. The defendant’s lighter was found on the dresser next to the spill. Nothing else in the room was disturbed.

[Type: Evidence]
Daryan’s lighter: The defendant’s lighter bearing his and Mr. Wright’s fingerprints. It was supposed to be in The Gavinners’ dressing room, but was found at the crime scene at the end of the break.

[Type: Profiles]
Kusanagi Karasu (Crow)
Age: 22
Gender: Male
A traffic warden who dreams of becoming a policeman, and also The Gavinners’ drummer. He's known for his terrible memory and unreliable testimonies. Claims that the only thing he remembers is staying in The Gavinners’ dressing room for the entire break. He injured his back two days before the concert when he broke Trucy’s fall, leaving her with only a sprained ankle (?!?!).

[Type: Profiles]
Amaranth Talvinen
Age: 27
Gender: Male
An androgynous bailiff, and The Gavinners’ bassist and resident ‘Ice Queen’. He's also the oldest and first member (after Prosecutor Gavin) to join the band. Mostly grumpy, vain, arrogant, and extremely secretive. He seems to have a low opinion of almost everyone, save Mr. Wright. Not much is known about him except for his keen dislike towards me.

[Type: Evidence]
Amaranth’s letter: A mysterious letter depicting events that parallel the murder. It's addressed to
‘Pikku lintu’. Apparently, more than one variation of these types of letters exists.

[Type: Evidence]
Cocoon: A single cocoon that was smuggled from Borginia into the country last weekend. It’s small enough to fit into the palm of a child’s hand. The cocoon has medicinal properties capable of curing Incuritis, a deadly disease. It’s still missing.

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Piano: Was moved from stage to hallway by Valerian during intermission as some keys were spoiled. Bears Valerian and Mr. Wright’s fingerprints. It emitted a foul odor during intermission.

That was the second time Apollo found himself zeroing in on the details of the piano. Call it a hunch, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that there was something not quite right about this mysterious piano; something everyone – witnesses, police, prosecution, and defense alike – had missed; something he still couldn't quite place. Overcomplicating things? – Perhaps. The crime scene, its conditions and evidence were too convenient, too neat; someone had framed Daryan, but why? Was it intentional or out of convenience? Why did Machi Tobaye have to die? Why was it so hard to pinpoint the culprit and motive?

There has to be a point of entry into this mess, he thought. A point of connection he was overlooking. He went through everything that had happened so far, his memory of all the interviews and investigation as carefully and clearly as he could, but despite all effort, the facts remained as muddled and obscure as before and he was no closer to securing Daryan’s complete innocence.

*What am I not seeing?*

Perhaps there was something Phoenix knew that he wasn’t telling. Apollo both hoped so and not at the same time.

“Mr. Wright, you’re the only person so far who mentioned Lamiroir and Machi’s second song. Were you the only one aware of this?”

Phoenix shot him a pleasant smile, one that eerily reminded him of Kristoph. “Of course not, it was part of the concert program. And I’m the dresser – I have to know these things by heart.” His expression darkened. “You should’ve done more research on this case prior to the trial, kid.”

Kristoph looked thoroughly unimpressed. “Phoenix is right, Apollo. I don’t see how your question is relevant to the case.”

“Bruder, ihr apprentice’s defense seems to be lacking. Herr Judge, what do you think?”

“I think the defense deserves a penalty!” the Judge proclaimed with a frown. “Fair warning, Mr. Justice: slip up two more times, and I’ll declare your client guilty.”

*Gah!* Apollo gulped. Harsh. Even from his hero. Kristoph didn’t appear at all pleased by his first penalty (and he probably ruined his boss’ perfect record by extension). Panicking, he reached up to wipe the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. Ok… that question didn’t do him any good. Was this the consequence of pressing every single statement indiscriminately?

Suddenly, something occurred to him, and he went over Phoenix’s testimony again and compared it to the crime report. There was something vital Phoenix left out in his entire account, too significant and purposeful for it to be passed off as mere negligence.

“Mr. Wright, I noticed that you never once mentioned Lamiroir in your testimony, even when she
was clearly with you when you found the body.”

Phoenix chuckled and found the young attorney’s naivety adorable. “Of course she was with me – that fact hasn’t changed. But she hardly counts as a witness because she’s blind. I just didn't think it necessary.”

But Apollo felt his bracelet tighten and his vision go into hyper focus once more. Phoenix appeared uneasy; the confidence and carefree attitude was still there, sure, but he seemed distracted. His eyes had momentarily darted to someone in the audience and there was slight movement in his pockets, like his hands had clenched the inner lining a little too tightly.

“Sir… Why is it that when you talk about Lamiroir, you fumble with-”

“Let's have none of that, Apollo,” Kristoph interrupted briskly as soon as he caught on to the brunette's intentions. “Phoenix’s claim makes perfect sense. There is no need to harp on unnecessary details. I suggest you press his other statements.”

‘But there's something there,’ Apollo felt like telling his mentor, but thought better of it when he sensed Kristoph’s growing impatience and disapproval.

“How did you feel when you saw the piano?” he asked, adopting an open-ended approach this time.

Phoenix frowned and thought hard. “Mm… a little surprised, I think? Not so much that I’d lose my marbles over it.”

“Hold it!” Apollo interjected, heart racing. There it was: the inconsistency. “Everyone reacted very strongly to the sight of the piano, except you. Why is that? Were you… informed about the change in finale?”

Phoenix gulped. “Uh…”

“Objection!” Klavier intervened a little too abruptly. “Whether das witness knew about the finale has nothing to do with the case.”

“Objection! I think it does, Prosecutor Gavin,” Apollo countered without missing a beat. “It means Mr. Wright would know that the piano wouldn't be needed and—” He stopped himself immediately when he realised, quite horrifically, where his line of reasoning was headed. What the hell am I doing?

Klavier and the Judge regarded him expectantly. Phoenix looked confused. The audience and reporters gazed at him in rapt fascination. A twinge of irritation entered Kristoph’s stoic expression, the corner of his lip twitching every so often the longer his understudy delayed his accusation. “Did you think it appropriate to stop? Continue,” he commanded.

“But sir…” Apollo gazed at Phoenix desperately before lowering his eyes to the fingerprint analysis laid out on the table.

I can’t.

“I think I need to be clearer about that,” interrupted Phoenix with a little laugh, the kind that came out in muffled giggles through his nose. “Yes, I was surprised that the piano was in the hallway, but it wasn't from the change in finale – like everyone else, I didn't know about it. What dulled my shock was that the piano had been in the exact same spot before the start of the concert. I just thought someone moved it back to its original place. The thought of a finale change never occurred to me,” he concluded with a careless shrug as he stuffed both hands into his hoodie pockets. “Inconsistency
resolved.”

[Concert piano details added to the court record: was in the hallway before the start of the concert]

Klavier observed the ex-lawyer’s cool demeanor and sighed in relief.

Well played, has-been.

Meanwhile, Apollo started to feel faint. ‘Inconsistency resolved’? – Far from it. Phoenix still had no idea he had his fingerprints… so what was he waiting for? His fingers gripped the report so hard he threatened to tear the paper. You have your proof – use it! Present it!

“Perhaps I was wrong for ever thinking you were ready,” commented Kristoph after some time as he refused to meet Apollo’s questioning stare. “If you’re unable to substantiate your argument, you’re unfit to represent your client and stand behind this table.”

Apollo felt his heart plummet. “But sir…”

Kristoph snatched the report from him and stared him down. “You have the evidence. Have you lost sight of what’s really important?”

“Yes, Mr. Gavin?” asked the Judge, honestly concerned. This was the first time he witnessed a disagreement between the defense itself.

“No… Please…”

Phoenix gazed at his boyfriend, anxious and terribly confused, his prior confidence melting away to reveal a sudden helplessness. Why aren’t you defending me? But Kristoph wasn’t looking at him and he couldn’t gain any assurance from the man he loved. Contradiction? Him? Whose side was Kristoph on? Last night, his lover had reassured him, promised him… Was Kristoph suspecting him now? Phoenix felt his heart leap to his throat; trepidation seized him and before he knew it, he started to shake.

Why?

It hurt so much. He didn’t understand.

“Mr. Gavin, please,” Apollo begged his mentor. “He didn't do it. I know he didn't…”

“What was the advice Phoenix gave you on the first day I introduced you, Apollo?” Kristoph swiftly interrupted as he inspected his nails. The cold ruthlessness was back in place; at this moment, the Phoenix at the stand was a witness, nothing more.

Apollo bowed his head. “T-To always believe in my client… and pursue the truth.”

“And didn't you say yourself that you're only interested in this truth? Then pursue it – question Mr. Wright.”

Apollo gulped and closed his eyes to Phoenix’s pain. Kristoph was watching him; there was a limit to what he could do. Again, he reminded himself that Daryan came first, so he took a deep breath.

“Sorry, Mr. Wright.” His voice trembled. “I have evidence that casts doubt on your rather unnatural reaction… Your fingerprints were on the piano as well.”

“Huh, huh, huh?”

The blow was as swift as it was crippling. Phoenix’s beanie slipped over his eyes and he desperately
fought to pull it back up; Klavier’s guitar soundtrack died and he looked like he was suffering from a
nasty stomach ache; the courtroom erupted into scandalized exclamations; and in the center of it all,
Trucy was fuming up a storm. How dare that polliwog – argh! Accusing her daddy of a crime… this
man was the worst! Not only was he a home wrecker, but an incompetent lawyer too. If they weren’t
in court right now, she swore she’d perform her chainsaw act and make the brunette disappear.
Permanently.

Trucy took in her father’s despair, his confusion and fear, and was immediately reminded of seven
years ago when she caught him spending his nights crying over the injustice done unto him and his
loneliness. It was happening all over again, and the cause of it was one Apollo Justice. His guilt and
sympathy was as false as his hair spikes. Trucy balled her hands into fists. She would never forgive
him. Never.

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sympathy was as false as his hair spikes. Trucy balled her hands into fists. She would never forgive
him. Never.

“Objection! The witness found das body. It is only natural for his fingerprints to be on the lid,”
Klavier clung on desperately, the beginnings of nervous sweat gathering on his brow.

How the hell did Justice get those fingerprints? How had Fräulein Detective missed them? Evidence
that points to the has-been’s guilt – that was what he’d been hoping for since the start of his
investigation. He didn't like Phoenix, a bloody torn at his side; would do anything to see Daryan
walk free after all this; but…

He fixed his cerulean eyes on Phoenix’s scared, trembling form, and his gaze softened. Something
had changed.

“There is nothing odd about his reaction. You kann nicht frame mein dresser for murder with a
farfetched theory like that.”

Phoenix gasped. “Klavier…”

“Objection! If that was the case, then why were his prints not only
on the lid, but all over the piano
as well?” Apollo countered, slamming the analysis report on the table, but everything in him was
screaming to take back his words. “Well, Mr. Wright?”

“I… I…”

“Ungh! Has-been…” Klavier’s fingers clenched. This was bad; he couldn't help him.

“I know what you're thinking: I killed Machi, stuffed him in the piano, and pretended to find the
body,” Phoenix tried to defend himself, but his nervousness was palpable and his self-confidence not
entirely convincing. He looked to Kristoph again, pleading him with his eyes for help, but he was
alone. “Kid, you have to believe me: I didn't kill him! All I did was find the body-”

“Can you attest to that?” Kristoph interrupted and his coldness made Phoenix’s heart sink. “Unless
you have a solid alibi, or someone had witnessed your actions during the break, the defense’s
accusation still stands.”

“Mr. Gavin’s right, sir,” said Apollo regretfully. “As you stated, Lamiroir is blind. Even if she was
with you, her account cannot be deemed reliable.”

Shit, Phoenix mentally cursed himself for his blunder. Who would’ve thought his decision to protect
Lamiroir would come back to bite him in the butt? There was no way he’d let the songstress take the
fall for him, but his resolve left him painfully compromised. All around him, he could hear murmurs
from the crowd, of how he couldn’t be trusted even after seven years; how it wouldn’t be surprising
if he had stooped to murder and fabrication following his disbarment; after all, it wasn’t unchartered
territory. Opinions started to shift in Daryan’s favor; it was a good thing; but at his own expense. This was the nightmare that Kristoph had predicted last night, and Phoenix was desperate for a way out.

“Was the prosecution aware of this?” the Judge directed the question to Klavier, who had remained unnaturally silent for the past few minutes.

“Nein. This is mein first time hearing about this,” he confessed. “The has-been never once mentioned the piano apart from finding the body in it.”

“Which begs the question as to why,” continued Kristoph in a professional voice, looking Phoenix in the eye for the first time since the latter took the stand. “For the sake of true justice, I sincerely wonder what this witness is hiding.” He placed a hand on Apollo’s shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Apollo?”

“Ye-yes, sir.” Apollo never felt more terrible in his life.

At that moment, Phoenix felt his world go dark. No… he couldn’t say more about the piano. He had to protect Lamiroir. He had to protect Daryan. He had to protect himself. He had no alibi. He had to come up with something. But Apollo would see through his lies immediately; Kristoph had his perfect record to think about; and Klavier didn’t like him. The trial involving Doug Swallow and Dahlia Hawthorne flashed through his mind, and like 21 years ago, on this very witness stand, he felt victimized, trapped, frightened, and alone. The accusing whispers grew louder, surrounded him and reminded him of his failure; shadows mocked him; phantoms everywhere; and he withdrew into himself.

The poison locket.

The forged diary page.

Seven years of darkness.

A lawyer can only cry when it's all over.

But he wasn't a lawyer anymore, and Mia was dead.

Someone, please... help me...

“ENOUGH!”

The court fell silent; the defense and prosecution doubled over their tables from shock; even the Judge was too stunned to demand for order. Amaranth forced himself on the witness stand, his golden eyes flashing dangerously, and if looks could kill, they would all be sent to the depths of hell.

“That’s enough,” he repeated lowly, allowing his threat to linger in the air. “Nick’s telling the truth: he didn’t kill the brat… and I alone am his alibi.”

“Amaranth…”

Phoenix stared at the silver haired male in awe, moved by his courage, yet puzzled by his claim. My alibi? What does he mean? The beautiful bassist met his gaze; a sliver of light danced in his eyes, and a ghost of a smile upon his lips filled Phoenix with a sudden hope. ‘I'll take it from here,’ Amaranth’s body language seemed to imply and Phoenix gratefully took a step back to let the younger male handle the rest.
The Judge gaped. “Bailiff, what’s the meaning of this?”

“It’s as I said: you wanted an alibi for Nick, you got it,” he answered coolly, but Apollo caught him shaking slightly on the stand despite his stoic disposition. He covered it well with his chilling death glare though.

The Judge meeped and seemed to lack the courage to stand up against his bailiff. So, rather helplessly, he turned to the prosecution instead. “M-Mr. Gavin, did you…?”

“Don’t look at me, Herr Judge,” Klavier defended as he slammed his fist against the wall in his frustration. Never in his seven years had he headed such a disordered trial. What the hell was going on?

“Amaranth, what the hell?! You told me no such thing! Your testimony is about Daryan; I refuse to have you cover for has-been!”

“Fuck off, Klavier.”

“You-!”

“Hold it!” Apollo slammed his fists on the table to get their attention. “This is still part of Mr. Wright’s cross-examination, Prosecutor Gavin, new witness or not. Previously, everyone linked to this case claimed to have not seen each other during intermission, but according to Mr. Talvinen now, that doesn't seem to be the case. This changes everything!”

“Objection!”

The Judge slammed his gavel and effectively cut Klavier off.

“Overruled.” Then, he turned his attention to Apollo and Kristoph. “The defense will continue with the cross-examination of Mr. Talvinen.”

‘Yes! Score one for Justice! In your face, glimmerous fop,’ Apollo cheered inwardly, while his rival looked like he could break the edge of the table with his bare hands. He scanned the court record and soon found what he was looking for. It stood out like a sore thumb before, but now was his chance. Time to put this particular piece of evidence to good use.

“Name and occupation?”

“Amaranth Talvinen, 27, court bailiff and The Gavinners’ bassist.”

The Judge nodded. Only God knew who was really keeping up with the events of this convoluted trial. “Mr. Talvinen will now tell the court of this mysterious alibi.”

Amaranth rolled his eyes. “How many times do I need to repeat myself, old man? Nick didn't do it. I saw everything. The end.”

“But-but that hardly counts as a testimo-” Amaranth glared at him again and the Judge hid under his table with a quiet “Eep!”

“Mr. Talvinen, are you... confessing to your guilt?” Apollo ventured unsurely, to which Amaranth responded with a mocking bark of laughter.

“You'd like that, wouldn't you?” He sneered, folding his arms. “And what am I supposed to be guilty about?”
“This.” Apollo pulled up Amaranth’s letter and threw it on screen for the entire court to see. And for the final icing on the cake, he read it out loud:

*Fire, fire... My little bird of flame*
*Burnning on in my heart*
*Burn away my sin*

*These hands*
*They tremble*

*Pure is your sleep*
*Amidst the flames*

*I speak, but*
*You do not hear me*
*You do not see*

*The plan foiled by cowardice*
*But with love*

*Fire, fire...*
*My little bird burned away*
*My sin*

*Rakastan sinua,*
*Amaranth*

Something in Amaranth snapped and a few strands of hair sprung loose from his ponytail. The Ice Queen lost his cool completely and collapsed across the witness stand.

“How the fuck did you get that!!?”

“In your letter, you alluded to the crime itself,” Apollo proceeded effortlessly, ignoring the man’s vehement protests, treating it as a personal payback to the way Amaranth had treated him during his investigation and their every subsequent interaction. “The fire, the burning, a death-like slumber – is this a narration of the events that happened? What is this ‘plan foiled by cowardice’? Is the bird in your letter the victim, and did you murder Machi?” He indicated at the letter’s addressee. “Who is ‘Pikku lintu’? It’s a confessional, isn't it?”

“Shut up! I don't have to fucking tell you shit!”

“Mr. Talvinen, please answer Mr. Justice’s ques-”

“I SAID, SHUT UP!”

“... Amaranth,” Klavier interrupted gently, coaxing him as one fellow band mate to another. His eyes shone with understanding; he finally understood the beautiful man’s dilemma hidden beneath all that hatred and spite. Being friends with Amaranth for seven years; it wasn't at all difficult to figure out the truth.

“If you don't speak for him now, you'll lose him forever.”

“... Shit you, Klavier.”
It was times like this that reminded Apollo how he always seemed to be late to the party. What the hell was going on? He felt like he was intruding on a deep, dark secret between two bros and he was the bloody light bulb. However, before he could ask again, Amaranth heaved a loud, heavy, reluctant sigh; seemed to fight against himself for a brief moment as he took in the sight of his fans, all the reporters and cameras rolling, before giving into the probable rejection, ridicule, and inevitable shame.

“... Hey, Justice.”

“Yeah?”

“You were right about one thing: it’s a confession... but not of a crime.”

The bassist’s tone made Apollo hesitate. Was it him or did Amaranth seem oddly cordial?

“What do you mean?”

“You never miss a beat, do you?” he drawled sarcastically with a roll of his eyes. “It’s a love letter.”

Oh... OH.

Apollo blushed and his response came out in awkward stutters. “Um... But... Ah... Wasn't Machi like, 12? That's illegal...”

“Illegal?” The Judge emerged from beneath the table at the mention of that very term. “Mr. Justice, be reasonable! I can only handle one trial at a time.”

Amaranth nearly lost his footing. “I'm not a fucking pedophile, you idiot! And I'll never date Machi, not even if he was the last man on earth!”

Collecting himself and brushing back his ponytail with an annoyed huff, he began explaining his letter, “Pikku lintu means ‘my little bird’, my personal term of endearment. The fire motif illustrates my passion. This whole letter simply expresses my angst and fear of rejection, thus the trembling hands.”

Klavier’s tone remained gentle; he knew how difficult this was for the usually private and silent man. “Da, the pure sleep you were referring to...”

“My love being oblivious to my feelings.”

Ah. Trust Amaranth to be so cryptically poetic.

“B-But who was the letter meant for? Who's your... your love?” Apollo blushed while scrambling for answers, practically leaning over the defense table in his excitement. Part of it was his eagerness to solve this mystery; the other part, like every other person tempted by gossip and scandal, was to satisfy his own curiosity.

“Are you seriously making me come out and say it?” Amaranth snarled, but even his dangerous ferocity wasn't enough to suppress his embarrassment and the heat rushing to his cheeks.

Gods, the rookie was as dense as... the mere thought of that particular individual caused his face to crimson like a rose. The press would have a field day after this. He never wanted to make his feelings public. And now, things would surely be awkward between them.

'If you don't speak for him now, you'll lose him forever.'
Fuck this shit.

“Fine! If you want me to say it, I'll fucking say it. His name is already in the letter: ‘My little bird of flame’ – it’s Phoenix. I… *I like Nick, ok?!’”

“WHAAAAAT?!”

Although no response could overpower Apollo’s *Chords of Steel*, Amaranth’s confession drew quite an emotional uproar in the courtroom. Gender conservatives whispered heatedly amongst themselves; fangirls and fanboys screamed in outrage; some sobbed, mourning the tragic death of their romantic fantasies with The Gavinners’ handsome bassist, while damning Phoenix Wright to the burning depths of hell. Reporters and paparazzi alternated between furiously taking down notes and phoning their editors with the latest scoop; and a huge disturbance broke out outside the courtroom. The trial was being broadcasted live; people had breached security and were banging on the doors; and broken-hearted fans raged and demanded for Phoenix Wright’s blood. It was madness.

On the witness bench meanwhile, blushing scarlet, Phoenix pulled his beanie as far as it could go over his face in an attempt to hide his mortification and shut out the voices of Daryan, Crow, Valerian, and even Ema as they teased and interrogated him for answers. Behind the defense table, both mentor and protégé looked far from amused; but while the former simmered in silence and entertained the idea of mentally bashing Amaranth’s skull in with a hammer, the latter’s face had gone from red to purple to blue in a span of a few seconds. *The nerve of that guy!* Unfortunately, Apollo was in no position to publicly act on his jealousy, so he pretended his pencil was Amaranth’s neck instead and broke it in half with his thumb.

“Order, order!” The Judge boomed, abusing his gavel against the stand. A murder, a conspiracy, and a possible romance? Intriguing. “Mr. Talvinen and Mr. Wright were romantically involved? Oho! This is just like those tv dramas my grandchild and wife like to watch.”

“Nein, Herr Judge. Amaranth never told the has-been his feelings; it was purely one-sided,” Klavier corrected with a casual snap of his fingers, before diverting his attention to his friend struggling on the witness stand. “Da, all those letters you wrote: they were für has-been?”

“Yeah,” Amaranth replied, tasting bitterness on his tongue and too embarrassed to look up. “I sent a total of six letters, but Nick never replied to a single one. I thought maybe he didn't get my feelings, so I planned to confess on the day of the concert itself – that's why I went to look for him as soon as intermission started. But I fucking chickened out and ended up shadowing him for the whole 10 minutes.”

“The plan foiled by cowardice, but with love,” Klavier recited.

“I saw him with Lamiroir and I saw him discover the brat’s corpse. I was too far to hear anything, but Nick’s reactions were sincere and his horror, true.”

[Phoenix’s alibi added to the court record]

So, *that's* Mr. Wright’s alibi, Apollo realized. Who would’ve thought that Amaranth’s stalking and crush on Phoenix would be the very miracle that left the latter clean off suspicion. On one hand, he was grateful for the diversion and could breathe a sigh of relief; on the other hand, it didn't change the fact that he *still* wanted to kill Amaranth and that he still was, rather blatantly, jealous. Apollo knew he ought to be concentrating on the trial, but his thoughts raced and all he could think about was why Phoenix didn't reply to any of those love letters. Did he really catch no ball? Maybe he didn't feel the same way? Or was he being loyal to Kristoph? That last one was the toughest pill to
swallow and it broke his heart. He realized Amaranth and him weren’t that different.

“As the court kann see, mein key witness was just a witness,” said Klavier with a knowing smirk and patronizing shake of his head. “It seems Herr Forehead’s imagination is rubbing off on mein bruder. Valerian is innocent; Has-been is innocent. Das defense has failed to prove their theory of sabotage.”

“Indeed,” said the Judge. “Penalty!”

Kristoph and Apollo flinched. Klavier felt his confidence returning. The old man struck the stand with his gavel.

“This concludes the cross-examination of Mr. Wright and Mr. Talvinen.”

Apollo scowled at the evidence so hard, he could burn a hole in his papers. Well, that lead had been a total bust. He took this time to tidy up the court record, revising existing data as well as removing unwanted pieces of evidence.

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Piano: Was moved from stage to hallway by Valerian during intermission as some keys were spoiled. Bears Phoenix’s fingerprints, supposedly from the moment he found the victim’s body. The piano was in the hallway before the start of the concert as well as during intermission. It emitted a foul odor during intermission.

[Type: Profiles]
Amaranth Talvinen
Age: 27
Gender: Male
An androgynous bailiff, and The Gavinners’ bassist and resident ‘Ice Queen’. He's also the oldest and first member (after Prosecutor Gavin) to join the band. He seems to have a low opinion of almost everyone, and has a crush on Mr. Wright (!!) whom he stalked during intermission.

[Valerian’s fingerprints removed]

[Amaranth’s letter removed]

But whatever remained still left him dry and two penalties into his first trial. Perhaps he had been wrong about the sabotage, but if so, where did that leave him? Where did that leave Daryan? The true culprit was no ordinary killer: he or she was meticulous, executed the crime perfectly, and was a professional who left no evidence behind. The whole operation had been premeditated and they were purposely leading the defense and prosecution in circles. But something still failed to make any sense: the motive. Again, Apollo found himself wondering: why did Machi have to die? Assuming the ultimate goal was to smuggle the cocoon, then where was it now? Was it necessary for the culprit to resort to murder? Why choose Daryan? Nothing seemed to fit.

“Achtung, baby!” Klavier suddenly exclaimed, interrupting Apollo’s thoughts. “Ruling out das sabotage, I think it is necessary for the court to hear what the defendant has to say about all this, ja?”

“Ja- uh, I mean, yes,” the Judge conceded, still struggling to keep up. “Does the defense have any objections?”
“None, your honor.”

“Hm… Very well. Will the defendant please come up to the witness stand? Oh, and can we make this quick? I'm supposed to visit the Chief Justice's son in hospital after this.” He shook his head with a tragic sigh. “The poor boy has Incuritis, and at such a young age too…”

Daryan shuffled to the stand miserably, weighed down by his friends' betrayal and the strength of Klavier's prosecution, but did his best to look professional and dignified about himself. Apollo had told him that he would continue to fight for his innocence no matter what, and although his previous defense failed, Daryan wanted to believe in the rookie. He wanted to… but as the hours dragged on and the cross-examinations yielded little to no results, it became much too hard. And then there was Klavier: part of him felt relieved his friend took his advice and prosecuted honorably; but another part – a selfish part – felt bitter and betrayed by the blonde's seeming apathy. Yes, Klavier was doing the right thing; he trusted him completely; but where had that hesitation gone? Why wasn't he going easy on the defense? Did Klavier think him guilty like everyone else? Weren't they brothers?

“Name and occupation?”

“Daryan Crescend, 24, Interpol agent and The Gavinners’ second guitarist.”

The Judge did a double take at that name. “Wait a minute… Crescend? As in Justice Crescend? You're his son? I didn't know he had two!”

Daryan gave a wry chuckle. “Yeah, the old man doesn't talk about me much. Y’know, stepson and all… And because of this mess, I won't be surprised he'd never talk about me again.” The bite of humor in his voice sounded forced and painful. “Anyway, how's Damian? I haven't seen him since I got thrown into prison.”

“I'm assuming he's your little brother,” replied the Judge, his expression sympathetic and tone sorrowful. “It's truly unfortunate he contracted Incuritis, and at only 16 years old at that. My condolences.”

“With all due respect, your honor,” he replied. “You're in a better position than me to offer them.”

“Oh, I shall, Mr. Crescend. I'll even bring back a pillow mint for you.” And with a strike of his gavel, he declared to the court, “The defendant will now testify to the events that happened during intermission as he remembers them. Please be aware, Mr. Crescend, that Interpol prohibits full transparency and as such, only information related to this case is legal for disclosure. Can't have state secrets leaking out to the press now, can we?”

Daryan gulped and felt like he had a double noose hanging dangerously around his neck. Oh boy, how did he get mixed up in all this? And the trial was live, right? Great, just great: now the whole bloody world knew his face. He could kiss his future undercover missions goodbye if he hadn't already done so. Nervously, he looked to the defense table for support, specifically at Kristoph, but Apollo was mouthing the words, “You're fine!” and gave him a thumbs up, to which he returned the gesture and flashed the brunette a hesitant smile. He needed to get out of these handcuffs. His brother was dying and he didn't want Damian to go with the final thought of his big brother as a criminal. Damian looked up to him; it would break his heart.

'I believe you’re innocent and I’m willing to stake my faith in that. What about you?'

Daryan closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Show time.
“As soon as intermission started, I quickly left the stage to the dressing area to look for Machi. Everyone had combed the venue over a dozen times before, but I wanted to make sure; y’know, like, if the kid happened to suddenly turn up in his dressing room during the break or something. Anyway, that’s where I went first: Lamiroir’s room. Nobody was inside, but I had this funny feeling that somebody had been in there recently, like…” Daryan bit his lip as he struggled to convey his feelings in words. “It’s not like a lived-in feeling; more of…”

“A passing visitor, perhaps?” Kristoph added helpfully and Daryan snapped his fingers.

“Bingo!”

[Crime scene details added to the court record: an unknown visitor entered the room during intermission]

Apollo and Klavier frowned simultaneously. So, a stranger had visited Lamiroir’s room before Daryan arrived. Two questions immediately arose from that implication: who was it? And where had Lamiroir herself been?

“Anyway, I didn't think much about it; Machi wasn’t there, so I decided to look elsewhere. When I left the room, I saw the piano in the hallway and I… I just freaked! I mean, Klav told us we needed the piano for the finale, so…” He ran his fingers across his pompadour in distress. “Oh yeah, and that funky smell Nick mentioned? I smelt it too. Just didn’t know it was from a rotting corpse though. After that, I ran back to the stage to find Klav to clarify – you know what? Screw it.” He interrupted himself and got the Judge’s attention. “Yo, Judge! I'm going to retract my previous statement.”

The Judge sputtered and stared at him with wide eyes. Can you do that? Things like this didn’t normally happen. And he had just managed to keep up with the case’s facts too…

Kristoph was quick to catch on. “I take it that statement you said back at the detention centre was a lie? The one about looking for Klavier.”

“What!? A lie!?”

The mere suggestion almost gave Apollo a cardiac arrest. No, no, no – Daryan, what the hell are you doing? As if the guitarist’s position wasn’t precarious enough – he just hoped he wasn't going to say something that would screw up his chances forever. Daryan had lied about his own alibi? But why? Wouldn't that sabotage his own defense and lose favor in the eyes of the court?

“This is most unusual, Mr. Crescend,” remarked the Judge. “Normally, the defendant and witness always revise their statements with their respective attorneys before speaking in court.”

“Oh… Well, there’s kind of a reasonable explanation for that,” he answered sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “The thing is, my position as an Interpol agent left me compromised: there were things I couldn’t say to even my lawyer, or rather, things I didn't know whether I was allowed to say. But now that the cat’s out of the bag, here’s the truth: I didn't go looking for Klav; I contacted Interpol to report Machi’s disappearance. We suspected he was the smuggler and there was this fear that he made a break for it. I couldn't afford to let him slip past my radar. Machi’s whereabouts took precedence.”

“Is this in Interpol records?” Kristoph clarified.

“Yeah, you can call them and check.” He tossed Apollo his cell phone. “Every conversation is recorded.”

[Daryan’s phone conversation added to the court record]
“Then the defendant’s alibi checks out,” Apollo concluded. “If he had been busy making that report, he wouldn’t have time to commit murder and hide the body in the piano.”

A drastic diversion from the previous testimony, but Apollo supposed he couldn’t fault Daryan for that. Unfortunately, this left him with a new problem, one he hoped Klavier wouldn’t notice –

“Achtung, Herr Forehead! Did you not think I’d know about this? The prosecution receives its information directly from Interpol. Furthermore, das conversation was clocked in at the end of intermission, leaving the defendant enough time beforehand to commit the crime. A phone call confirms nothing; unless someone witnessed the defendant’s actions, his alibi remains open to question.”

… Aaaaaand he did. Goddammit.

“The prosecution has made a compelling argument, Mr. Justice,” commented the Judge, fully taken in by Klavier’s logic. “Once, I made a phone call to my wife telling her I made dinner, and I forgot I left the chicken in the oven and ended up setting the kitchen on fire.” He sniffled at the memory. “Suffice to say, I didn’t manage to cook dinner after all and we ended up ordering takeout.”

'Please don't compare this case to your dinner, your honor,' Apollo mentally pleaded. 'Please.'

“Can the defense prove Mr. Crescend’s activities before the phone call?” said the Judge.

Apollo hesitated and looked to his mentor for guidance. Kristoph appeared deep in thought as he scrutinized the evidence; then he shook his head.

“No, I can't, your honor,” he answered honestly.

“I see… Then please continue with the cross-examination.”

“Ask Daryan about the room,” was Kristoph’s immediate advice. “Don't be discouraged by that last setback; in fact, you would’ve gotten a penalty if you claimed you could prove something without proper evidence. It's all about playing your cards right. Remember that.” He paused to flash Apollo an encouraging smile. “Phoenix gave me the same advice seven years ago.”

Apollo’s heart skipped a beat. Playing your cards right – Mr. Wright would know all about that, wouldn't he? He recalled their little deal made back at the Borscht Bowl Club and felt a sudden pang of guilt towards his unassuming mentor. “Think you can keep a secret from your boss?” had been Phoenix’s challenge; Apollo could still remember that teasing smirk full of dark secrets; and until this day, still wondered what drove him to respond in kind. But he was in it too deep, drawn by the temptation of truth, and charmed by his idol’s cunning.

“You mentioned that you checked Lamiroir’s room first.” He treaded with caution. “Are you absolutely sure no one was inside? And what clued you in on someone visiting her room?”

“Definitely empty. As for that strange feeling I had…” Daryan trailed off with a thoughtful frown. “Actually, now that I think about it, something really stood out for me.”

“What?”

“It was too messy.”

“You mean it looked arranged,” Kristoph corrected and Daryan nodded.

“There were some perfume bottles on the dresser and every single one of them was knocked over. I
don't exactly know where I'm going with this, but I think someone tried to make the place look like a struggle had occurred. Sure, Lamiroir’s blind, I get that, but I don’t think it’s possible to knock an entire table’s length worth of cosmetics down by accident. It had to have been done on purpose.”

The courtroom fell silent as every individual present mulled over Daryan’s words. “Another thing that was strange was this can of hairspray lying on the ground next to the sofa.”

Apollo pulled up “Crime Scene Photo 2” which depicted Lamiroir’s dressing room. True enough, a single can of hairspray lay inconspicuously at the foot of the sofa in the room’s center. At first, he didn’t understand how this observation constituted as strange, until he realised its unrealistic angle and distance from the dresser.

[Crime scene details added to the court record: signs of struggle fabricated]

Apollo hummed as he continued to carefully analyze the picture. He was starting to get a clearer understanding about the setup. “I get it: if the items on the dresser had really been knocked over by the force of some struggle and fell to the floor, they would have ended up at the area around the dresser. But that can of hairspray is much too far – in the middle of the room to be precise.”

So, his original theory on sabotage was true: the knocked over perfume bottles surrounding Daryan’s lighter; he hadn’t been imagining things. Even Klavier had nothing witty to retort. In fact, the blonde’s face said it all: Verdammt! He would really hate to be in Ema’s shoes right now.

“And you only popped by the room for a short while?”

Daryan nodded. “Yeah. After that I saw the piano and contacted HQ. Most of my break was spent talking to my boss.”

Apollo had heard enough.

“Your honor,” he began confidently, “as I suspected, the defendant has been framed. The lighter, the kerosene container, the unknown visitor, and the false signs of struggle – all these point to the possibility of a third party.”

“Precisely,” chimed Kristoph by his side. “I believe a more thorough investigation is needed to pinpoint the real culprit behind this premeditated homicide. As the defense has posed over and over again, Mr. Crescend was clearly framed for a crime he did not commit.”

The Judge hummed and considered the famed attorney’s request. It made perfect sense. As of now, nothing could be clearly ruled out and/or established. While the prosecution denied claims on the involvement of any of its witnesses, the defense simultaneously managed to prove the existence of a mysterious third party involved.

“A reasonable request, Mr. Gavin.” He turned to the younger Gavin brother. “Does the prosecution have any objections?”

Conflict showed clear across Klavier’s face as he grappled with his principles. Something wasn’t right. Obviously, this was good news: there had been sabotage and his best friend was really innocent after all. But a nagging voice in his head told him Justice was wrong; his brother was wrong; only that he couldn’t explain why. Unconsciously, he found his gaze traveling to the witness bench to land on Phoenix. Their eyes met; the ex-lawyer looked confused at first, until realization kicked in and he understood what Klavier was silently asking for. So, like the previous evening in the prosecutor’s office, Phoenix offered him a gentle, encouraging smile, and Klavier could practically hear his voice in his head:
‘If you truly believe Daryan's innocent, clear your doubt; prosecute him; pursue the truth – don't be afraid.’

His jaw clenched and his fist shook.

“I…”

“WAIT!”

Daryan’s pompadour flopped; the Judge’s eyes flew open; Apollo jerked back in alarm; and Kristoph’s glasses gleamed dangerously from the unwanted interruption. All eyes turned to a certain orange-haired drummer who all but shoved his way onto the witness stand. His expression was anxious, his dark eyes wild.

“Leader! Don't believe him, he's lying!”

Klavier looked like he was severely close to popping a blood vessel. *Mein Gott, these witnesses!*

“Crow?!” Apollo stood apprehensive, sweating bullets at the thought of disproving yet another testimony. All his hard work – turned to dust.

“What are you talking about? I thought you didn't know anything!”

“Shut up, lawyer dude, I just remembered something.” Crow gripped the stand’s rail so hard his hands trembled. “I saw Daryan leave Lamiroir’s dressing room holding a pair of half-melted sunglasses – the same one the brat used to wear.”

Crow pointed an accusing finger at a flabbergasted Daryan.

“I saw him! He killed Machi Tobaye!”

*To be continued...*
“WHAAAAAT??!”

This was a joke. It had to be, right? Apollo felt his whole world crumble, his beautiful, painstaking defense, gone. A tearful breakdown, a dramatic love confession, Interpol secrets revealed, four cross examinations later; and Crow of all people (maybe he should have seen this coming) decided to throw a bloody monkey wrench into the works. Brilliant. Fantastic.

“Dude, what the hell!” Daryan demanded and jabbed the tip of his outrageous pompadour at his friend; hurt and frustrated. “I carried you for seven years, man! Back when you still had that stupid stage fright. First Val; now you… Why would you… why won’t any of you idiots believe me?”

“Chill out, D,” Crow replied discomfited, “no need to be so dramatic...”

“Dramatic? I’m the one in handcuffs with a life sentence hanging over my head – and you just accused me of murder! How else am I supposed to react?!”

“Honestly, dude, you should’ve thought of that before you pulled an Adele and set fire to the–”

“Are you seriously throwing me a fucking pop reference?!” Daryan looked three seconds close to punching Crow square in the face. “And it’s setting fire to the rain, you idiot. This is a person we’re talking about.”

“Aha! So you admit you did set the brat on fi–”

“I DIDN’T SET ANYONE ON FIRE!”

“Mr. Crescend, Mr. Kusanagi! This is a court of law; can we please focus?” The Judge looked like he was severely close to being done with this case.

At that moment, muffled whispers transpired through the audience. Some fangirls pointed at Crow and giggled amongst themselves; others blushed; and said target of their amusement began making strange gurgling noises at the back of his throat. Crow was cringing so hard, he looked like he was fighting against a bad case of diarrhea.

“Eeeeeeéëëhhhh! Uncool, judge dude! It’s Crow! Not Kusanagi, not Karasu – Crow! Aw maaaaan… why’d you have to kill it, gramps?”

“I’m sorry for, uh… killing it?” the old man replied, confused and blinking rapidly. “Wait, what exactly did I kill, Mr. Kusanagi?”

Crow cringed again.

“Argh! Forget it. Why’d you have to be so… so old?”

The Judge looked like he was about to cry.

“Hast du remember some important fact, Crow?” Klavier reminded the younger man impatiently. Normally, he would have brushed off his drummer’s less-than-helpful, entirely skeptical opinions; after all, it was Crow: the guy tended to sprout rubbish most of the time. But something told him that
there was a gem hidden somewhere in his earlier statement. He didn't know what good it would do driving Daryan into a corner like that, didn't know what compelled him to go against his best friend’s cries for help; but the seed of doubt this case had planted was still there, insecurities sprouted, and it kept growing with every passing minute.

“You’re damn right I did! D’s been lying through his teeth. He’s fooled us all – but not me!” He folded his arms with a wide smirk. “Bet you didn't count on my awesome memory saving the day, aye, leader?”

“Du hast terrible memory, Crow,” was what Klavier wanted to say, but decided against it and went with a neutral, “Ah” instead. For the sake of eliminating his doubt once and for all, he needed to confront his fears and see this whole thing through. Phoenix’s words continued to play in his head: ‘This is something only a best friend can do.’ He just hoped he wouldn't live to regret this.

“Herr Judge, das prosecution would like its new witness to attest to das defendant’s guilt.”

“Hold it!” Apollo yelled, banging the table so hard the force of it caused Kristoph’s necktie to give a slight shudder. “Weren't you the one who said that Crow has ‘daily amnesia’? Why should we trust his testimony now and not before?”

“Nein!” Klavier refuted, abusing the poor wall behind him with his first. “I implied he has poor memory, not a wild imagination. That doesn't make him a liar!”

“W-Well, what if he remembers things indiscriminately?” Apollo protested, raising his voice. “The melted sunglasses could very well be unrelated to this case. The witness’ memory is unreliable and so is his testimony!”

“Well, that memory came from somewhere, Herr Justice. I’m going to find out where, and not even your glaring forehead kann stop me,” Klavier countered, matching his rival in intensity. “Sunglasses kann only melt from high heat – in other words, fire. I will piece together Crow’s testimony, even if it kills me!”

BANG.

“Objection! An unreliable witness shouldn't be allowed to testify!”

BANG.

“Objection! Not unreliable, just confused!”

BANG.

“Objection!”

SLAM.

“Objection!”

SLAM.

“EINSPRUCH!”
“Order!” The Judge boomed, slamming his gavel repeatedly against the stand until he was completely sure both men weren't going to bite each other's heads off. Goodness, these two were as bad as Wright and Edgeworth back in the day, if not worse.

“It appears a new fact has just been revealed to the court that I simply cannot ignore…”

While Kristoph patiently awaited the Judge’s decision, unfazed by the trial’s sudden turn, Apollo struggled behind the defense table, desperately leafing through his papers. No, no, no... He wasn't prepared for this. Crow told him no such thing when he questioned him yesterday, not even a peep. If those sunglasses meant something, Daryan was a dead man; the drummer would ruin everything. Was Klavier so desperate for victory that he would place his trust in a man who – to quote him – ‘can't remember if he remembers anything’? The Judge too couldn't seriously be entertaining this blind lead, could he?

“B-But your honor... an unreliable witness... he shouldn't...!”

“Overruled, Mr. Justice. As the defense, your cross-examination would eventually reveal if the witness is as unreliable as you claim,” was the Judge’s response before turning to face Klavier who appeared more nervous than smug. “You have my permission, Mr. Gavin. The witness will now tell the court about these mysterious sunglasses and its connection to the crime.”

“Aw yeah! In your face, lawyer dude!”

Apollo honestly doubted Crow had any idea how serious his current position was, much less understood what was going on.

“So, like, after I prove D did it and he goes to jail and stuff, does that mean we get to chill until he comes back out? Leader, I want to go to Hawaii!”

“Nein, Crow. It would mean The Gavinners are over.”

“Oh... But what about Hawaii?”

Klavier suppressed a loud, painful sigh. It's just like handling a child, he told himself. A very dense, highly distracted, retarded child. With pampers. But pooped everywhere except on the pampers. And then rolled around in it.

“Ach! Just tell das court what happened during intermission – he quickly interrupted himself when Crow looked like he wanted to say something – then we will discuss Hawaii.”

“Cool!”

“Stay focused, Apollo,” Kristoph reminded as he scrutinized his brother’s new witness. It was obvious he was skeptical of both the Judge and Klavier’s decision. “Klavier has regrettably and hilariously chosen to wield his short end of the stick. Nonetheless, it is still a stick and you shouldn't be complacent. A rudimentary cross-examination should reveal this poor insight in time.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and they gleamed under the light. “Make it quick.”

Apollo gulped and hurriedly passed his gaze over the updated court record.

[Type: Profiles]
Daryan Crescend
Age: 24
Gender: Male
The defendant, an Interpol agent, and The Gavinners’ second guitarist. He claims to have spent the
break looking for the victim and reportedly saw him outside Trucy Wright’s dressing room. He was on an undercover mission to apprehend the smuggler and had suspected Machi. During intermission, he noticed signs of struggle fabricated in Lamiroir’s dressing room.

[Type: Profiles]
Kusanagi Karasu (Crow)
Age: 22
Gender: Male
A traffic warden who dreams of becoming a policeman, and is also The Gaviners’ drummer. He’s known for his terrible memory and unreliable testimonies. Claims that the only thing he remembers is staying in The Gaviners’ dressing room for the entire break. He injured his back two days before the concert when he broke Trucy’s fall, leaving her with only a sprained ankle (?!?). During intermission, he claims to have spotted Daryan in the hallway holding the victim’s sunglasses.

[Type: Evidence]
Daryan’s Cell Phone: contains recorded conversations between himself and Interpol at approximately 7 p.m. every day over the last seven days. Only the call on concert night was made at 9.30 p.m.

[Type: Evidence]
Machi’s Sunglasses: a pair of small, half-melted sunglasses that supposedly came into the defendant’s possession during intermission. They belonged to the victim.

‘Make it quick? But how?’ Apollo worried his lower lip. ‘If Crow’s memory turns out to be true, Prosecutor Gavin would make quick work of me instead!’

“Name and occupation?” said the Judge.

“Crow, 22, traffic warden and The Gaviners’ drummer,” he answered.

“But it says here that your name’s Kusanagi-”

“Argh! Judge dude, it’s Crow, ok? Say it with me: C-R-O-W.”

“But-But-”

“Abuhbuh- Do you wanna be cool or not?”

“Yes, yes! I want to be cool!”

Suddenly, Apollo felt rather bad for the Judge. The poor man was being bullied left, right and center.

“Ok dudes, here’s what really went down that night,” said Crow as if he was gossiping around a campfire instead of delivering a witness account in court. “My memory’s pretty fuzzy, but I’m totally sure I heard this outrageous ‘BANG!’ and I was like, ‘Woah!’ and sprang to my feet. The noise was super loud, dudes; I wasn’t sure where it came from, so I opened the door a crack and stuck my head out to check. That freaky piano was in the hallway and so was D – holding a pair of busted sunglasses for whatever reason, and with the dumbest expression on his face haha!”

“First, you accuse me; now, you insult me,” Daryan muttered to the side, positively miffed.
"You know, like, when a camera suddenly flashes at you and your face goes all durrrr…"

"Crow, your testimony’s a crime!"

"Like this." He demonstrated and even topped his hair with a random baguette he snuck into court earlier. "Look, look! It’s like D’s hair – he took a bite out of it – only tastier."

"Are you even listening?!

Apollo collapsed across the table in agony. That was the worst testimony he ever heard. As soon as Crow started talking, he could already pick out a ton of things wrong with it, namely the fact that every statement was devastatingly disjointed, full of gaping holes, and the guy kept rubbing his arm; his neck; nervously darting his eyes everywhere... God, his wrist hurt; his eyes hurt; all his senses were screaming at him to point out all the bloody inconsistencies. The only time Crow seemed relatively normal was when he talked about the piano and sunglasses. At first, Apollo felt sorry for Klavier – this was his witness after all – until he remembered he was the defense attorney here and the burden of this cross-examination fell on him. “Have fun, Herr Justice,” Klavier’s taunting smirk seemed to say and Apollo mentally cursed the flamboyant blonde to hell and back.

“Sir, what do I…” But he sweatdropped when he noticed Kristoph was busy taking some aspirin.

The gavel struck the stand; the cross-examination was underway. Apollo spared a quick glance at his idol on the witness bench and saw that Phoenix had inclined in his seat and pulled his beanie over his eyes, but the light smirk playing across his lips indicated that he wasn't asleep. Had the ex-lawyer figured out something? What would his idol do in his situation? How would Phoenix Wright navigate through this sea of chaos and flash out the truth?

He looked at Crow’s expectant face, down at his papers, back up at his face, raised a finger in a bid to point out something, only to drop it and released a long, despairing sigh. This could take a while.

“Before I get to your... uh... testimony,” he began, scratching the back of his head awkwardly, “let's start with something simple: where were you that whole time? Specifically.”

“Gee... Good question, lawyer dude,” the drummer answered with a nervous chuckle. “Wait, wait... it's coming back to me... Uhhhhhh...”

That was the longest “uh” Apollo heard in his life. His head scratching intensified. Was it that hard to remember something so simple? And why did Crow seem so disoriented about this particular incident, more so than usual standards went?

“You were in The Gavinners’ dressing room, ja?” Klavier reminded Crow helpfully with the patience of Buddha. “According to das police report, mein drummer spent all 10 minutes in there and never saw another soul. Perhaps that loud bang startled him and he saw das defendant outside as a result; but it doesn’t change the main facts.”

“You were in The Gavinners’ dressing room, ja?” Klavier reminded Crow helpfully with the patience of Buddha. “According to das police report, mein drummer spent all 10 minutes in there and never saw another soul. Perhaps that loud bang startled him and he saw das defendant outside as a result; but it doesn’t change the main facts.”

“You were in The Gavinners’ dressing room, ja?” Klavier reminded Crow helpfully with the patience of Buddha. “According to das police report, mein drummer spent all 10 minutes in there and never saw another soul. Perhaps that loud bang startled him and he saw das defendant outside as a result; but it doesn’t change the main facts.”

“Niemand entered das dressing room, and Ihr defendant still has no solid alibi.”

“Yeah! No one entered the room, lawyer dude. I'm sure of that. As sure as I was when you first asked me yesterday.”

“In that case,” said the Judge solemnly, “please add that statement to your testimony, Mr. Crow.”

“Sure thing, judge dude! When I heard the loud bang, I jumped to my feet. There was no one else in
Apollo’s head pulsed and he felt his bracelet tighten. Crow was rubbing his arm again. *He’s not sure about something.*

Klavier chuckled and flipped his hair. “Ihr move, Herr Justice.”

Apollo bit his lower lip so hard he nearly split the skin. It was obvious what Klavier was trying to get at: if no one had entered the dressing room to steal the lighter, the last person who had it – Phoenix – must’ve kept it on him and found a window somewhere in-between songs to pass it back to Daryan. Also, without any proper witness to Daryan’s precise actions during intermission, they could not completely deny the possibility of murder. Anything could have happened; the only person who knew the whole truth was Daryan himself; but those incriminating sunglasses changed everything for the worse. He had only two options at this point: discredit Crow’s reliability as a witness like he did with Ema, or find out if Daryan secretly had a guardian angel watching over him during those 10 minutes.

He decided to go with the first.

“Crow, I noticed you were fidgeting a lot when you talked about that loud noise. On top of that, it took you an unnaturally long time to recall where you were when it happened. Why?”

Said man nervously drummed on the railing with his drumsticks, but there was no distinct beat and his playing sounded incredibly disordered. “Uh… Uh…” His gaze flew everywhere.

“Objection!” Klavier interrupted with a wary scowl. “Did Herr Forehead forget what he said about das witness’ poor memory? Or is Ihr memory lacking too?”

“Objection! My memory’s perfectly fine and here’s why,” Apollo growled, presenting Crow’s profile. “When I questioned Crow yesterday about his activities during the break, he confidently told me he spent it in The Gavinners’ dressing room, alone – this fact isn’t new. However, it was left out of his statement and only after prolonged coaxing was it then added into his testimony. As I said, and as the prosecution is surely aware of, these facts aren’t new. So, why the dodgy recollections? Crow claimed he ‘just remembered something’ when he brought up Machi’s sunglasses; I’m wondering if he ‘just remembered’ something else too that he’s not telling us, which brings me to my next question…”

He pointed an accusing finger at the young drummer. “When you told me yesterday that no one else was in the room with you, you were sure; now, you’re consumed with doubt. You’re nervous; sweating; and can barely keep your voice from wavering. What *else* did you just remember, Crow? *What* are you unsure of?”

Throughout the brunette’s speech, Crow kept tugging at one of his lip piercings, rolling the stop-ball occasionally with his tongue. “Heh… y-you’re just trying to trick me like those lawyer dudes on TV. Well, you ain’t getting nothing else from me. I saw what I said: no one else came into the room – and D’s a criminal!” He rubbed his nose and flashed Apollo a smug grin. “Trying to discredit me, aye? Think again!”

Apollo fought down his anger and mentally took a step back. Ok, what did he know so far? Crow had spent the entire intermission in The Gavinners’ dressing room, but seemed to have an extremely fuzzy recollection of the whole experience. The only thing that left a solid impression on him, despite his poor memory, was a loud “BANG”. So, what could have distracted his consciousness so much that he failed to register where he was at the time he heard the loud noise? Apollo thought back to his and Clay’s visit to The Gavinners’ dressing room and constructed a quick cognitive map of the place.
It was a terribly cluttered space without any tall, obscuring structures/objects around – impossible for any person, big or small, to stay hidden. It was also soundproof, as were all the dressing rooms, which meant that the loud noise Crow had heard…

His eyes widened; all the bits and pieces were coming together. I know what happened.

“Crow?”

“Yeah?”

Apollo resisted facepalming.

“Were you asleep?”

“.....”

It was terribly anticlimactic. A great, impenetrable silence descended upon the court. All eyes gazed expectantly at Crow, save a certain ex-lawyer whose knowing smirk remained curled across soft, pink lips. He had to hand it to the kid; he was pretty sharp. If he had still been a lawyer himself, the rookie could very well give him a run for his money.

_Not bad, kid. Not bad at all._

Crow released a nervous chuckle. “Eheheh… Heh… Umm… My bad?”

Apollo heard the distinct sound of something slamming repeatedly against a wall; but instead of Klavier’s fist, it was his head. Kristoph meanwhile, had run out of aspirin. That last observation left Apollo feeling rather disappointed because he had wanted to ask his boss if he could have some too.

[Crow’s profile updated: asleep during intermission, but awoke from a loud bang]

“The witness was asleep during intermission when a loud “BANG!” woke him up,” Apollo reiterated the facts. “Considering how each dressing room is soundproof, the loud noise couldn’t have originated from outside the room, but inside. That's weird, isn't it? Especially when the witness claimed he opened the door to check where the sound was coming from. Why did he head to the door instead of searching the room?”

“Because the sound he heard was from das door slamming,” Klavier concluded effortlessly, only to double over the table and break into a nervous sweat when he realised what his rival was getting at. “Nein… You don't mean…!”

Apollo nodded solemnly. “Exactly, Prosecutor Gavin.” He struck out and pointed at him. “Someone entered The Gavinners’ dressing room and stole Daryan’s lighter. And this mysterious visitor could very well be the true killer!”

[Daryan’s lighter details added to the court record: stolen from The Gavinners’ dressing room during intermission by an unknown visitor]

Yes! Got you now! But Apollo’s triumph was short-lived. Klavier recovered quickly and his shoulders were shaking, his cerulean eyes carrying a mocking leer. He was laughing.

“Ah Herr Justice, you make mein job so simple…” He pointed at his rival in return. “And who do you think stole that lighter? Das defendant was the only one in the hallway, and with das victim’s sunglasses no less! There's your true killer: your own client!”
“Urk!” Apollo visibly flinched and a bead of sweat rolled down his face. *Shit, walked right into that one.*

“T-That’s not necessarily the case! The killer might have run down the hallway while Daryan was still in Lamiroir’s room, thereby missing each other.” He quickly returned his attention to Crow. “When you saw Daryan, did he just come out of Lamiroir’s room? About to go in?”

“Eh… Actually, no, I think,” Crow replied, sticking his tongue out as he struggled through the murky fog of his memory. “He was outside her room, sure, but his back wasn't turned to it like he'd just come out the door. D was standing right smack in the middle of the hallway with his back to me.”

‘In other words, his back to the corridor outside The Gavinners’ dressing room,’ Apollo concluded, but it really wasn't much to go by. The prosecution could still easily argue that Daryan had killed Machi in Lamiroir’s room and then walked out with the evidence clutched in his hand. It was time to hear from the man himself.

“Your honor, since my client neglected to mention the victim’s sunglasses before, the defense requests to continue Daryan’s cross-examination with this new information.”

“Hm… A reasonable request, Mr. Justice,” said the Judge with a nod of his head. “Does the prosecution have any objections?”

“Nein. Let das defendant validate Crow’s claims.”

Apparently, there was still an undeniable part of Klavier that hoped for the truth to favor Daryan as well.

“This is the first time I've seen anything like this,” Kristoph marveled in slight surprise, though his expression remained impossibly serene. “Normally, when a cross-examination reaches its conclusion, there's no opportunity for amendment. Lady Justice must favor you, Apollo.”

‘Or the Judge is as confused as I am,’ Apollo added as an afterthought.

Crow happily skipped back to his seat while Daryan resumed his place on the witness stand, the deep scowl across his brow especially telling of his resentment. “What now? So I have to defend myself against that idiot too?”

“Sorry, Daryan,” said Kristoph with an apologetic smile, right eye twitching involuntarily from repressed frustration, “but we are doing the best we can under these… hapless conditions.” Then, he dropped his voice to a whisper and breathed into his understudy’s ear, “As a professional attorney, our client’s best interests come first. If a wall comes between your defense and Daryan, break it. If you can’t find an exit, make one. I never fail my clients, Apollo.” There was a dangerous glint in his eyes beyond that smile. “Neither should you.”

Apollo visibly shook and grasped the court record a bit too tightly in his hand until it crumpled. *What do I do? This case was impossible.*

“The defendant will now tell the court about the victim’s sunglasses.”

“Alright.” Daryan ran his fingers through his pompadour in annoyance before continuing. “It happened after I left Lamiroir’s dressing room. I was about to find somewhere private to contact Interpol, when I stumbled upon a pair of sunglasses in the middle of the hallway. I picked them up and saw they were ruined, so I planned to just toss them out. That’s all that happened – I didn’t kill anyone! Why do these things keep happening to me?!”
No inconsistency there, Apollo thought, only a series of unfortunate coincidences. Unfortunately, coincidences weren’t enough to prove anything in the court of law.

“Kann you prove that was ‘all that happened’, Daryan?” asked Klavier solemnly, not wanting to question his best friend, but having no choice. “Out of everyone involved in this mess, you’re the only one with a real motive. Ihr bruder has Incuritis; Herr Tobaye had das cocoon; I don’t think I need to elaborate any further.”

Daryan turned desperate eyes to his lawyer, but Apollo remained silent and refused to lift his head. He felt his heart plummet and knew what that meant: the rookie, for all his show and confidence, had given up on him too. Fear began to eat at his heart and Daryan scrambled for purchase on the railing, gripping the wood so tight his knuckles turned white.

“Bro, please! We’ve known each other since we were kids! I know this looks bad, but I wouldn’t kill for that – I’m no murderer! Klav, please!” Tears filled his eyes and his voice dropped to a helpless whisper. He felt so alone. “Please… Why won’t anyone believe me?”

The air in the courtroom turned oppressively solemn. Reporters ceased writing and the sound of camera shutters faded into nothingness. In the audience, Lamiroir clasped her hands in apprehension; Trucy fought back a sob; Olga’s jaw clenched in disappointment; and Clay stared blankly at his best friend in disbelief. Apollo… lost?

Behind the prosecutor’s table, Klavier stood silently, guiltily, his silken bangs shielding his eyes from the world. The Judge closed his eyes in silent deliberation, before opening them once more when it became apparent no one else had anything to add. The defense had been tamed. There was no need to prolong this trial any further.

“The prosecution has presented a compelling argument against the defendant, while the defense has failed to present any evidence to substantiate Mr. Crescend’s claims. I’m ready to deliver my final verdict.” He slowly raised his gavel. “The court finds the defendant –”

“OBJECTION!”

The Judge’s eyes widened and he stopped himself before the gavel hit the stand. The gallery was abuzz with confused and excited chatter. Daryan’s heart skipped a beat and he released a shaky gasp. Klavier frowned and slowly lifted his gaze. Kristoph smirked and adjusted his glasses. And Phoenix finally pulled back his beanie to allow his proud smile to reach his eyes as he gazed at the man that burned with so much passion and conviction, it reminded him so much of his younger self. Way to go, kid. Now, turn this trial around.

“If that’s the motive the prosecution insists on, then I just have one question for you, Prosecutor Gavin!” Apollo shouted, the confrontational tone of his voice effectively driving the blonde rock star into a corner. “Where is the cocoon now?”

That question took Klavier by surprise and he struggled to answer him, “W-What…? I… Well, that’s… Das police are still looking into it…” He snuck Ema a panicked stare and said woman tried to deny all responsibility by frantically waving her hands. “Fräulein Detective… Ah…”

As the pair desperately tried to coordinate between themselves, Apollo shook his head and flipped through the court record until he found what he was looking for.

[Type: Evidence]
Cocoon: A single cocoon that was smuggled from Borginia into the country last weekend. It’s small enough to fit into the palm of a child’s hand. The cocoon has medicinal properties capable of curing Incuritis, a deadly disease. It is still missing.
“Let me ask the prosecution again: where is the cocoon now?” When Klavier still couldn’t answer, Apollo saw it fit to question him. “If Daryan really murdered Machi to steal the cocoon in order to save his brother, then why is it still missing? Why hasn’t it appeared before the authorities yet? Daryan was in the detention centre for four days and no such cocoon was found on his person. It’s not in his house; it’s not at the concert venue; the Chief Justice himself doesn’t have it and his son is still in the hospital dying. Despite these facts, Daryan’s supposed to be guilty? Doesn’t this sound funny to any of you?”

Daryan gazed at his attorney in awe and hope filled his eyes. “Apollo…”

When none spoke up against the brunette, many stumped themselves, his confidence flared and he delivered the final punch. “Someone else murdered Machi. Someone else stole the cocoon. And while we sit here convicting an innocent man, the real killer is out there laughing at our foolishness.” He slammed his fists on the table. “Daryan Crescend is innocent! You’re making a big mistake!”

The silence persisted, but the one to eventually break it was Klavier.

“… Das prosecution concedes to Herr Forehead’s argument. It looks like that wide forehead of yours actually houses quite a brain.”

His uncharacteristic geniality took the Judge by surprise. “Mr. Gavin, are you saying that you were wrong?” But what he got for an answer was a mere chuckle.

“I said das defense’s argument makes sense. I never said I’m taking back mein words.” Klavier snapped his fingers and pointed at the rookie. “Achtung, Herr Forehead! If Daryan’s as innocent as you say, and someone else – für whatever reason – murdered Herr Tobaye, then prove das defendant’s actions were checked during intermission. Prove that Daryan didn’t kill anybody!”

It was clear to Apollo what his rival was really asking for. Klavier was in pain; this trial was hurting him and putting great strain on his relationship with Daryan. There was only one way to free him of all doubt and that was to end this trial in the only way Apollo saw fit: his client’s complete innocence.

“I understand, Prosecutor Gavin,” he said with a determined nod, “and I plan to do so.” He then directed his full attention to Daryan on the witness stand. “Daryan, I need you to think very carefully: was there anything you left out? Anything that works as an alibi? A feeling like you were being watched?”

“There’s only one thing, dude, but you already know this.” Daryan shook his head in despair, he too knowing how ridiculous his story sounded. “During intermission, as soon as I came out of Lamiroir’s room and picked up those sunglasses… I saw Machi. And Machi saw me.”

The courtroom erupted into protest and outrage. Many yelled and accused the guitarist of being a shameless liar; some even went so far as to criticize Interpol on their choice of candidates. How far would Crescend stoop to deny his guilt? Headlines exploded everywhere: “Can We Trust Interpol with our Secrets?”, “Corruption Begins in the Blood”, “Trial Calls for New Chief Justice”, “Interpol: Agents of Truth or House of Liars?” And at the center of it all, Daryan remained completely still, alone in the darkness and forced to bear the burden of the world’s cruelty.

Apollo was at a loss. Like before at the detention centre, he didn’t sense anything off about Daryan’s statement; the man must be speaking the truth; but how could this be? Everyone thought Machi was missing; the truth was he was dead. So, how could Daryan have seen him? Was it possible for a body to be at two places at once? Was it a ghost? What did Daryan actually see?
“Apollo, remember the advice I gave you at the start of this case?” said Kristoph all of a sudden as he flashed him a mysterious smile. “Not everything is what it seems. It’s your job to separate the truth from the lies. Just like magic.”

“Magic?”

He stopped short, eyes widening to the size of saucers.

*Magic… That’s it!*

He remembered the photographs Clay took of Trucy’s dressing room; all the costumes stored there because Phoenix had needed a place to work on them; Trucy’s own magic props scattered about. He remembered everyone saying how close Trucy and Machi had been, always playing; remembered the fall and her sprained ankle; remembered how Daryan told him the Machi he saw during intermission walked with a limp. There had been plans for a new finale; Klavier only talked to Trucy about it. Machi was 12; Trucy was 15. Their heights weren’t that different. Trucy had only been backstage for less than five minutes – she wasn’t lying, not exactly; because during the break she had performed one of the greatest tricks in the book and had managed to fool them all.

“Daryan… I think you’re telling the truth.”

The court sounded their displeasure once again. The Judge demanded for order. The gallery fell silent, each and every one of its audience members awaiting the young attorney’s explanation with wild eyes and bated breath. Even Klavier resisted interrupting his rival in favor of hearing what he had to say.

“I think,” Apollo continued, swallowing nervously, “I know who you saw. And I think… this person is the missing link that can help clear your name once and for all.”

Daryan frowned and approached the subject in trepidation. “W-Who?”

“This person sprained their ankle a few days before the concert, which explains why the Machi you saw seemed to walk with a limp. This person had access to the real Machi’s costume and was close to his physical size and height in order to be able to fit into it. Both Machi and Lamiroir were needed for the finale, but the former was presumed missing. By consequence, this person was the only one other than Prosecutor Gavin who knew about the change in finale, which might then explain the need to dress up as the victim at all.”

“But what reason would they have to do so?” asked the Judge, perplexed and wholly intrigued.

“To pass off as Herr Tobaye’s double,” Klavier answered on Apollo’s behalf as realization finally hit him. “Niemand would notice the difference – the perfect magic trick.”

“Exactly. And for some reason, this very person decided to keep quiet about their involvement in this case from the very beginning,” Apollo finished and with a determined gleam in his eyes, turned and pointed at a certain costumed individual in the audience. “Trucy Wright! As Daryan’s sole alibi, the defense would like you to tell the court what you witnessed during the break.”

In the center of the crowd and subject to the world’s scrutiny, Trucy’s mouth fell open in shock, her big blue eyes blinking rapidly, and all she could manage was a soft and confused, “Huh?”
The sea of bodies parted as Trucy Wright tentatively, apprehensively made her way down the steps and onto the main floor. Her hands shook; the cape around her neck suddenly felt a little too tight; and her palms inside her gloves started to feel clammy. As she walked, she could feel hundreds of eyes on her – both physical and imaginary – and quickened her pace. Olga and Clay had been kind when they offered to accompany her, but rules were rules; she didn’t require any physical or lingual assistance, and the defense had singled her out. Amaranth got out a crate and placed it on the witness stand, and she climbed on top of it. This was the first time she stood before the Judge in front of the whole court. In the past, she had only been an audience member when she was eight years old: the day her old life ended and her new one begun. Everything looked, everything felt so different from where she stood, and it was terrifying. She was so frightened, she even forgot about her hatred towards the very lawyer who dragged her out here in the first place.

Her eyes desperately sought out a familiar face. “M-Mr. Gavin…”

“It’s alright, Trucy. Just speak truthfully, and we’ll take care of everything,” Kristoph assured her in the same comforting voice he used whenever she got upset, and she felt herself calm down. “You want to help Daryan, don’t you?”

“O-Of course!”

His smile of approval quelled the butterflies in her stomach; she trusted Kristoph with her life. But why didn’t her daddy look too happy about this?

“Don’t worry, my dear. I swear on my gavel I won’t let these evil lawyers bully you,” said the Judge in a kind, grandfatherly manner, oblivious to the nasty looks Klavier and Apollo were shooting him. ‘Who you calling evil?’ they thought, insulted; but the sight of Trucy’s miserable face made Klavier’s heart soften and he spoke up.

“Fräulein, why didn’t you tell me about this?” he asked gently, like a concerned older brother reproaching his little sister’s mistake. “This is a serious matter that concerns people’s lives.”

“Sorry, Uncle Klavier…” Trucy trailed off guiltily, lowering her gaze to the side. “But daddy told me not to say anything, since I didn’t do anything wrong anyway.” She turned to face Phoenix at the witness bench. “Sorry, daddy…”

“It’s ok, sweetie. Apollo’s just really sharp. It’s not your fault.”

“What?! Mr. Wright!” The Judge frowned at him disapprovingly. “Intentionally withholding information from the police is a serious offense! I thought you knew this.”

Phoenix laughed the matter off. “My bad, Judge; it’s been seven long years.” He flashed the old man an innocent smile. “Just let me off with a warning this time?”

“Hm… I suppose. But don’t let me hear of this again.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, your honor.”

Apollo however, wasn’t buying any of his idol’s ignorance. Phoenix knew about his daughter’s involvement the whole time and chose to play with fire. Since he met the ex-lawyer, he got the impression that the man was dangerous. Phoenix was smoldered with mystery from top to toe; and the way he handled his relationships like the way he played poker ought to have cued Apollo in on his guile and propensity for seduction. But this Phoenix was a broken man; he believed the old Phoenix was still in there somewhere, and he wanted to help him. He understood how his idol’s disbarment must have traumatized him, caused him to doubt and perhaps resent the law as a result,
and drove him to keep his daughter safe and close. You can’t make a suspect out of someone who wasn’t even there. No one understood the system better than Phoenix Wright. He had lost far too much already. But this was wrong.

Mr. Wright really is cunning.

“Mr. Gavin?” Both brothers turned to face the Judge curiously. “Erm, the younger Mr. Gavin…” Klavier raised his eyebrow in question. “Why does Miss Wright call you ‘Uncle’? Are you two related?”

“Ah… Something like that… Ach! Kann we please continue, Herr Judge?” said Klavier with an impatient blush across his cheeks, not at all comfortable discussing his brother’s private matters in public.

“Oh, yes – ahem,” the Judge cleared his throat and directed his attention to Trucy. “Name and occupation?”

She hesitated. “Occupation?”

“Just answer the question, my dear. We have to ask these things. It’s all part of the formalities.”

“Oh, ok!” She visibly perked up and bounced on the spot. “Morning, everyone! My name’s Trucy Wright, I’m 15 years old, and I’m a professional magician. I do parties, private gigs, and I perform at the Wonder Bar on weekends. I take cash, cheque, and pasta-”

Kristoph coughed and she immediately stopped herself, flushing pink. Right, this wasn’t the best time or place to promote herself. She didn’t want to end up embarrassing her guardian, especially since he was quite the prominent figure in society. And if she made Kristoph look bad, she would make her daddy look bad too.

“Oho! Magic shows? My grandchild loves those!”

Well, at least she didn't have to worry about leaving a bad impression on the judge. She kind of liked him actually; he was funny.

“Miss Wright, I'm sorry to have to push you, but whatever you saw during intermission might be extremely important. I don't know what Mr. Wright told you, but keeping quiet and running away isn’t going to help anyone.”

This guy on the other hand…

“Look, Polly-Wog,” she sneered at the young attorney and the way her innocent enthusiasm quickly shifted to open disdain took him by surprise. “I'm only doing this for Mr. Daryan. And don't talk about daddy like you know him. He loves me! You don't know anything!”

Apollo gulped and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his palm. Urgh… Who gave him these witnesses? And why the heck did this girl dislike him so much? What did he do?

“A friendly reminder,” said Kristoph all of a sudden as he turned to smile at his understudy, a dark foreboding aura lurking just beneath the surface. “You might want to restrain those Chords of Steel of yours. If you frighten Trucy, I will be quite cross.”

Apollo felt his knees go weak. Frighten Trucy? But what about me? Was there no love for the rookie?
“Miss Wright will now testify to her activities during the break.” The Judge’s tone softened when he looked at the child. “No need to be nervous. Just tell the court what you witnessed, be it of Mr. Crescend or not. Take as much time as you need.”

“Teehee! I'll do my best, Mr. Judge!” Trucy winked and tipped her hat.

Apollo leaned over the table in anticipation. Alright, Justice. This is yours and Daryan’s last shot. Make it count.

“As soon as The Gavinners finished their last song – it was My Boyfriend Is The Prosecution’s Witness, my favorite! – Uncle Klavier sent me a text. He wanted to meet in my dressing room to discuss something important. He asked if there was any way I could use my magic to cover up Machi’s disappearance – there wasn't enough time to come up with something totally new for the finale.” She giggled and stuck out her tongue innocently. “Daddy always said I'm a fast learner, and I've heard Uncle Klavier practice The Guitar’s Serenade many, many times, so I decided to pretend to be Machi. I used a wig from my own props and borrowed one of his spare costumes that daddy kept in my room. But when I entered the hallway, I felt something in one of the pockets…”

That was when Trucy paused, an apprehensive frown creeping across her pretty little features. It was as if she was starting to see those past, seemingly insignificant actions of hers in a different light.

“And? What was it?” Apollo was leaning forward so much, Kristoph had to grab him by the collar and yank him back before he fell off the table.

“I'm getting to that, stupid pointy-head attorney!” she snapped and Apollo cowered from her rage.

Maybe I shouldn't say anything...

“Anyway, it was Machi’s sunglasses, but I couldn't use them because they were so badly damaged. I was in a hurry, so I just tossed them aside… That’s when I saw Mr. Daryan come out of Lamiroir’s room. He looked really stressed out and his face was all pale... Honestly, I think he looked even worse after he saw the piano in the hallway. I don't think he noticed me at first, until he picked up the sunglasses I dropped. After that, I rushed out the staff door leading to the concert floor.”

Suddenly, Trucy stopped talking. Memories of the previous week lived out in carefree bliss flashed through her mind; and in a blink of an eye, it was all gone and here she was in a cold and silent courtroom, straight out from a nightmarish past. First her papa disappeared; now Machi… and they always ended here. She gazed at the judge tearfully, hiccuping as she willed herself not to cry.

Behind the defense table, Apollo watched the telltale signs of an emotional breakdown. Perhaps this was what Phoenix had feared and was trying to prevent. Trucy was too young to cope with the pressure.

“I… I really had no idea how important… those sunglasses were at that time. I just… I thought they were trash and… and now, M-Machi’s d-dead…”

The severity of the situation finally hit her after four days. Machi was dead; she lost a friend. The thought made her sad and she found that she couldn't go on anymore. The guilt was too much. She hated to admit it, but Apollo was right: she shouldn't have kept silent about her involvement in this case. What if her testimony could have helped the police catch the culprit sooner? She hated how the homewrecker was giving her second thoughts about her daddy’s integrity.

‘That’s… one damn comprehensive testimony,’ Apollo marveled inwardly; the best he heard all day
in fact. There was a ton of information in there, something the prosecution would no doubt have benefited from if they had gotten ahold of it sooner. But more for him. It was his turn now, and if Trucy wanted to save Daryan as much as he did, then he trusted her sincerity and conviction.

“Miss Wright, I'm going to cross-examine you now,” he spoke patiently, considering her emotionally fragile state. “If I say anything that makes you uncomfortable, I apologize in advance. But I'm doing all I can to help Daryan and you're my last hope.”

“I… I understand.” She sniffed, collecting herself, and flashed him a sweet smile. “Don't worry, I'm a Wright! I can handle anything!”

Her sudden amenity took him by surprise, but he wasn't complaining.

[Trucy Wright’s profile added to the court record]

[Type: Profiles]  
Trucy Wright  
Age: 15  
Gender: Female  
Mr. Wright’s daughter, a self-proclaimed magician, and was close friends with the victim. She was put in-charge of the concert’s magic tricks and pyrotechnics. Her task was to stage Lamiroir’s disappearing act at the concert’s opening, as well as design the finale. During intermission, she posed as Machi’s double and witnessed Daryan’s actions in the hallway. For whatever reason, she hates my guts.

[Machi’s sunglasses details added to the court record: already damaged before intermission]

[Trucy’s dressing room photograph added to the court record]

[Type: Evidence]  
Trucy’s Dressing Room Photo: a room shared by the Wrights. It is filled with stage costumes and magic props. The floor of a section of the room is badly charred from a fireworks explosion, which occurred before the start of the concert. A few crates and props were damaged from the accident.

“Ok, first question: how long did you and Prosecutor Gavin spend in your room discussing, and how long did you take to change into Machi’s spare costume?”

“Mm… Less than five minutes. It was really quick,” she replied. “Uncle Klavier left at 9.23 p.m. and I finished changing by 9.27 p.m.”

Apollo blinked. “How are you so sure of the time?”

“There was a clock on the wall,” she answered, giggling and bouncing on the spot. “As a magician, show times and the exact timing for magic tricks are veeeeery important! I gotta know these things!”

‘Why can't we have more witnesses like you?’ Apollo’s inner self sobbed grateful tears.

“That means everything you witnessed – from the moment Daryan left Lamiroir’s room, to him picking up Machi’s sunglasses and noticing the piano – happened in the span of three minutes.” He did the math in his head. “That wouldn’t give him much time – actually, that wouldn't give him any time after that to do anything else.”

“Yup! 9.30 p.m. He'd have to rush back to the stage for the second half of the concert.”

Klavier hadn’t said anything until this point and Apollo hoped to keep things that way. So far so
good. Trucy’s attention to time really helped ground them. God bless her.

“In your testimony, you mentioned that Daryan looked really stressed and pale when he came out of Lamiroir’s room. Why's that? Did something happen to him?”

Trucy frowned and thought hard, lips pursed in concentration as she tapped her chin with a finger. “I think… it had something to do with a phone call. I couldn't really make out what he was saying, but he was on the phone with someone.”

‘Must be Interpol,’ Apollo thought as he went through the information in the court record. So far, everything checked out.

[Type: Evidence]
Daryan’s Cell Phone: contains recorded conversations between himself and Interpol at approximately 7 p.m. every day over the last seven days prior to the homicide. Only the call on concert night was made at 9.30 p.m.

“And you said he looked even more stressed when he saw the piano?” Kristoph followed up on Apollo’s question.

“Yeah, probably because it wasn't supposed to be there – even I was shocked!” Trucy answered with wide, excitable eyes. “I mean, I was supposed to pretend to be Machi, right? So, I needed that piano. That's why I ran off by the way. I went to inform Uncle Klavier.”

“And inform me you did, Fräulein,” Klavier interrupted the cross-examination, finally speaking up after what felt like hours and twirling his finger in the air. “Round and round, and we’re back at the beginning. I suppose Herr Forehead would like to claim das defendant didn't kill anyone during intermission and thus, implicate a third party?”

Klavier flashed him a beguiling smile. Apollo gazed at him warily. Was the blonde prosecutor finally convinced? He waited. Klavier didn't say anything. He waited some more, but Klavier kept smiling at him. So, he opened his mouth.

“Ye–”

“Objection!”

Apollo nearly lost his shit. Damn bastard was waiting for it! God, he hated this guy so much.

Klavier tsked, “You're forgetting those unaccounted seven minutes. I was with Fräulein in her room; she changed after I left. Niemand saw das defendant or witnessed his actions then. Herr Tobaye died in Lamiroir’s room; Daryan was only witnessed leaving it at 9.27 p.m.”

“But he didn't open the piano; he didn't even touch it!” Trucy protested, holding on for what it was worth. “Mr. Daryan didn't kill anyone – I saw him! Please, Uncle Klavier, you have to believe him! Why are you doing this? You're his best friend!”

“That’s right,” Apollo chimed in after her. “Machi was murdered and the killer moved the body into the piano. But Daryan never even went close enough to touch it!”

“Nein, again you're forgetting those unaccounted seven minutes. What das defendant did then, we will never know.” Klavier straightened up and casually hooked his thumbs in his pants pockets. “A wonderful performance, Herr Justice; der Bravoruf! But it has failed to fully convince me. Daryan is still guilty until proven innocent.”
But the sorrow in his eyes betrayed the stern indifference of his words.

“Goddammit!”

Apollo fell forward and held his head in his hands; tortured, miserable and close to tears. He couldn't do this anymore. Nothing worked. Who the hell was this criminal mastermind? Why was this so hard? He had exhausted his last lead; failure left a bitter taste on his tongue. He couldn't save Daryan. He couldn't save anybody.

“Raise your head, Apollo. Where's your pride?”

But Kristoph’s displeasure and the underlying threat behind his words didn't move him. If he lifted his head, he would see Daryan’s sorrow and disappointment. He didn't know if he could handle that.

*Is this... the end?*

He felt himself slip further into the darkness.

*I... lost.*

*It's over.*

“*Get up, you idiot!*”

His eyes flew open at the sound of that familiar voice. *Clay?* Slowly, he raised his head and true enough, there Clay was: standing out from the crowd, fists balled in determination and eyes set ablaze. The young astronaut didn't care if the scary bailiff decided to toss him out or if the whole world was watching. What mattered was that his friend needed him, and he was the only one who could kick that self-absorbed bastard in the ass and back on his feet.

“Remember those old courtroom videos we used to stay up and watch when we were kids? Remember what Wright’s mentor used to say? The only time a lawyer can cry is when it's all over!”

Apollo’s breath hitched. “When it's all over…”

Meanwhile, on the witness bench, Phoenix stiffened and a pang went through his heart. The faces of his old mentor and Diego Armando flashed through his mind; people from his past who had inspired him and whose presence he thought he’d buried away for good. They came back to haunt him, criticized him for the way he was living his life, and he felt ashamed for letting them down. What would they think if they saw him now?

*Mia... Prosecutor Godot... Maya...*

“It's not over yet!” Clay yelled, shaking from his emotions. “It doesn't matter if you win or lose. I didn't come here to see you give up!”

*Clay...*

“Don't give up!”

*But I...*
“You're fine!”

That final yell did it, and Apollo remembered his propose. *The only time a lawyer can cry is when it's all over.* A fresh wave of determination seized him, more powerful and consuming than ever before. *Always believe in your client; always seek out the truth.* Apollo’s eyes shone bright and resolute, his aura choking, and Klavier couldn't help but take a nervous step back when the air got hard to breathe. *All this burning passion…* His heart hammered in excitement and he felt the flames of hope rekindle in his breast.

“Herr Justice…”

“It's not over yet!” Apollo echoed Clay’s words as he slammed the table so hard it shuddered from the force of his strength and conviction. “Not until I say so!”

Klavier shut his eyes momentarily, a relieved smirk making its way across his lips. He's not giving up on Daryan. And he too felt the fire return.

“Achtung, baby! Let's rock!” He struck his signature pose and his guitar soundtrack was back in full force. “Herr Judge, how many chances does das defense have left?”

“One,” said the Judge gravely. He raised his gavel and brought it down in a final, resounding strike that shook the courtroom and penetrated bone. “Mr. Justice, I'm giving you one last chance to prove Mr. Crescend had no part in this homicide. If you fail to present adequate and relevant evidence, I will declare your client guilty immediately.”

“Yes, your honor.”

‘Good luck, Herr Justice,’ Klavier silently wished him and watched as his brother helped lay all the evidence from the court record onto the table.

“I want you to consider every piece of evidence carefully. Anything could prove vital, even something insignificant or ordinary,” Kristoph explained in calm, even tones as he made a sweeping indication at all the papers. “Time, faces, object placements; look for inconsistencies; what's missing; what should be there but isn't. If no one’s lying, where's the source of the confusion? There is no such thing as a perfect criminal, only imperfect investigations – what did the killer leave behind?”

Apollo felt like he was racing against an invisible clock, the seconds, minutes ticking away, growing louder, rattling his skull. Images flittered through his mind, replaying what could have been: Machi going up in flames; the lighter and kerosene container; Trucy in Machi’s costume running down the hallway; Daryan bending down to pick up the sunglasses; a door opened and Crow saw everything; Valerian leaves the piano in the hallway and sneaks away; Daryan just missing him after coming out of Lamiroir’s room; he leaves to call Interpol just as Phoenix enters the hallway from the other side; Amaranth watching him as he discovers the body; the arranged crime scene; photographs of Trucy’s room; an unforeseen explosion; Ema turning her back to an ordinary scene that would quickly become the center of one of the biggest mysteries to date. He pulled up evidence after evidence, desperately trying to reconstruct the night’s events in his mind’s eye.

*The source of the confusion…*

[Type: Evidence]

Concert Piano: Was moved from stage to hallway by Valerian during intermission as some keys were spoiled. Bears Phoenix’s fingerprints, supposedly from the moment he found the victim’s body. The piano was in the hallway before the start of the concert as well as during intermission. It emitted a foul odor during intermission.
What did the killer leave behind?

[Type: Evidence]
Machi’s Sunglasses: a pair of small, half-melted sunglasses that came into the defendant’s possession during intermission. They belonged to the victim. According to Miss Wright, they were in the pocket of the victim’s spare costume and were already damaged before intermission.

[Type: Evidence]
Daryan’s lighter: The defendant’s lighter bearing his and Mr. Wright’s fingerprints. It was stolen from The Gavanners’ dressing room during intermission and found at the crime scene.

[Type: Evidence]
Kerosene container: Was moved by the defendant from Miss Wright’s room to under the stage a week before the concert. Found at the crime scene. Victim was believed to have been doused in kerosene. Bears defendant’s fingerprints.

What’s missing?

[Type: Evidence]
Autopsy report: Victim was burned from head to toe with a rupture at his right side. No traces of chemical residue were found on the epidermis. Estimated time of death is between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m.

[Type: Evidence]
Trucy’s Dressing Room Photo: a room shared by the Wrights. It is filled with stage costumes and magic props. The floor of a section of the room is badly charred from a fireworks explosion, which occurred before the start of the concert. A few crates and props were damaged from the accident.

What should be there but isn’t...

[Type: Evidence]
Crime Scene Photo 2: There is a kerosene spill on the floor next to the dresser in Lamiroir’s room. The victim was believed to have been murdered at that spot. The defendants’s lighter was found on the dresser next to the spill. Signs of struggle in the room were fabricated by an unknown visitor.

He paused all of a sudden and did a double take. Over and over, he compared the findings of his investigation against each other, against what they all knew until this point; and the more he went over his annotations and the pictures, a glaring inconsistency began to take shape – one that dramatically turned this case in on its head and changed everything. No wonder it was so hard to pinpoint the true culprit; no wonder every lead brought him to a dead end; no wonder he couldn't stop thinking about that piano; no wonder the motive didn't make any sense. Something insignificant or ordinary… Of course! It was so obvious. How on earth had they missed that?

I know how the killer threw us off, Apollo realised with a dawning sense of horror. I can prove that Daryan’s innocent.

“Your honor, we’ve been going about this case all wrong. Everything we know about the crime is nothing but an elaborately constructed lie.”

“How do you mean, Mr. Justice?”

Apollo was shaking so much, he had to take a deep breath in order to steel himself. This accusation was huge and the knowledge of it terrified him (to think Daryan would end up in jail for life if he hadn't noticed this tiny, seemingly insignificant detail), but he was never more sure about anything else in his entire life.
“Machi Tobaye wasn't murdered during intermission,” he answered confidently, presenting the victim’s autopsy report. “He was murdered before the start of the concert – at 7 p.m. to be precise!”

“WHAAAAAT?!!”

The entire courtroom seemed to tremble from the impact of Apollo’s statement. The reporters were in a frenzy; The Gavinners were having a massive freak out session; and both Phoenix and Trucy had twin expressions of complete and utter shock across their faces. Ema’s jaw dropped and a piece of snackoo fell out from her mouth; then she dug out her cell phone and proceeded to yell at her team of police officers for their incompetence; called the forensic department for further clarification. Kristoph didn't appear at all fazed and was as sure and reserved as he was when he had first stepped foot into this very courtroom; Klavier however, looked like he had just survived a serious heart attack and was struggling to remain standing.

“Mr. Justice, this is a serious accusation! You're accusing the prosecution for oversight.”

“I get that, your honor. But anyone could've easily made this mistake. It was all part of the killer’s plan to confuse the police.” He turned to Klavier and leveled him with his stare, silently seeking his cooperation. “I know this sounds crazy, but I have proof – irrefutable proof that Daryan couldn't possibly have murdered Machi, motive or no.”

“And what is this proof, Mr. Justice?” The Judge implored.

Apollo indicated at the autopsy report in his hand. “First, let’s look at the time of death: the range given by forensics was approximately 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Everyone was so focused on the time of intermission, which was at 9 p.m.; but why didn't anyone consider the time before that?”

“Simple,” Klavier interrupted with a smirk, “because das konzert started at 8 p.m. Niemand would have time to kill, much less do so without drawing attention.”

“But what about before the concert?” Apollo arrived at his point with a smirk, folding his arms. “7-8 p.m.: that's an hour long window. If I were a killer as careful and meticulous as this one, I would give myself more time to cover up my tracks. Rather than rushing everything in 10 minutes, why not one hour?”

Klavier paused to consider the brunette’s theory. There was no denying how extremely plausible it sounded, but there was still one thing – or rather, two things that still bothered him.

“Das lighter and kerosene: they were found at das crime scene during intermission, or did Herr Forehead forget?”

“Then let me offer a second theory on top of my first, Prosecutor Gavin,” Apollo countered by presenting the second crime scene photo, the one of Lamiroir’s room. “Let me ask the court this: if the victim burned to death in this room, why are there no burn marks where he supposedly stood? Why wasn't anything else affected by the fire? If the mess in the room was arranged, what makes you think that the kerosene spill on the floor wasn't all part of the arrangement as well?”

“Ach!” Klavier flinched as if wounded.

“Let me see that!” The Judge scrambled for the photo, scrutinizing said spot long and hard. His eyes bulged. “My word, you’re right! There really are no burn or charred marks… but, uh, Mr. Justice, what does this mean?”

“What my understudy is trying to assert, your honor, is that the crime scene was fabricated through and through,” Kristoph explained simply. “Lamiroir’s room is a sham. The victim was murdered
“Objection!” Klavier yelled, pounding the table with a fist. “Somewhere else? I hardly think it necessary, bruder. Why would das killer go through all that trouble to change das location? If their intention was sabotage, why not frame das defendant in that room instead?”

Tension in the courtroom spiked and by this point, everyone was restless, including the judge. All eyes were on the defense, eager for an explanation. It was Apollo who broke the silence with a calm severity he didn’t even know he possessed.

“Because the killer was trying to hide the time of death.” Everything was beginning to make perfect sense to him now. “Because the original location the victim died would have immediately established the exact moment the crime took place. I would like the court to take a look at this.”

He replaced the crime scene photo with the one of Trucy’s dressing room and drew everyone’s attention to the damaged crates and charred flooring to one side.

“At approximately 7 p.m. last Friday, an hour before the concert, an accident occurred: Miss Wright’s fireworks went off in her room. This eventually led to the discussion of a change in the concert’s finale.” He turned his gaze to his rival, who appeared to have already grasped the basis of his argument. “Am I right, Prosecutor Gavin?”

“Ja,” the blonde relented. “Fräulein Detective rushed over as soon as she could to access das damage, but we couldn’t find das culprit. In the end, Fräulein Trucy guessed some switches must have short-circuited.”

“But what if Miss Wright was wrong?” said Apollo in a rhetorical manner as he recounted the facts carefully. “Machi was declared missing before the start of the concert. The defense would like to argue that he was already dead and that he died in Miss Wright’s dressing room at the time of the explosion. Those fireworks – that was no accident.”

He presented Machi’s sunglasses.

“Miss Wright found the victim’s sunglasses in his spare costume during intermission. Note that both her and Prosecutor Gavin were in that room for most of the break, and Miss Skye was patrolling the hallway throughout the first half of the concert. This means that the murder could have only taken place before the concert when that room and hallway were empty. Furthermore…”

He presented the autopsy report again.

“No traces of chemical residue were found on the victim’s body; yet, the prosecution argues that he was doused in kerosene. This contradicts the findings of the forensics department!” Apollo slammed the report on the table. “In other words, the kerosene container and lighter were meant to throw us off from the real murder weapon – Miss Wright’s very own fireworks, which I’d like to remind the court again, went off at 7 p.m.!”

On the witness bench next to her father, Trucy shuddered and buried her face in his chest, taking comfort in his protective embrace. Machi… died in her room? She whimpered and Phoenix held on tighter, shushed and soothed her as the trial went on.

“Achtung, Herr Forehead! Das victim’s body was found in das piano during intermission. If Herr Tobaye died at 7 p.m., how does a dead body go missing für two hours?”

“It wasn’t missing, and it didn’t need to be moved either! In fact, it was right where the killer left it: in plain sight.”
Apollo presented the information about the piano in question.

“Mr. Wright’s cross-examination revealed that the piano was already in the hallway before the start of the concert, and was then moved onto the stage for the opening number. The killer wrapped the body in Lamiroir’s cloak and hid it in there because…” He felt bile rise up his throat and suppressed a shudder. “What better way to prevent a detective backstage from finding it than having it on stage?”

Klavier thought he was going to be sick. “You mean… das whole time The Gavinners were performing… in front of all those people…”

“Exactly. A dead body was rotting in there for two whole hours.”

The Judge looked queasy and had gone exceptionally pale; audience members gasped in horror and many appeared uncomfortable in their seats. Trucy cried; Phoenix tried to soothe her despite how disturbed he himself was; while Ema had a strange glint in her eyes, a mixture between disgust and morbid fascination. However, none could rival the reactions of Crow, Daryan, Valerian and Amaranth who had all gone deathly silent and were shaking from top to toe. A corpse on stage the whole time as they played… a mangled body next to them and no one knew…

“No way, dude! That's sick! That’s sick!”

“Jumalauta… That's fucking messed up. Fuck!”

“Holy shit… This sure beats CSI!”

“For fucks sake, Crow!”

The one most traumatised was Valerian. The poor keyboardist was trembling so much, murmuring gibberish, that Daryan had to lightly slap his cheek a few times to check if he was alright. But Valerian was far from ok. If he had chosen to use that piano instead of his keyboard… and then he touched it during the break… Oh gods! He clung onto Daryan and screamed.

“M-Mr. Justice! You’re aware that what you’re saying is… is… incredibly disturbing,” the poor Judge stuttered.

“I’m aware, your honor,” he replied, “but what I care about is the truth, and the truth has led me this far.”

“Do you have evidence to further substantiate your claim?”

Apollo and Kristoph shared a meaningful stare, before the latter highlighted a particular statement in the concert piano data and threw it on-screen for the entire court to see.

“Valerian mentioned in his cross-examination that he had moved the piano backstage because some of its keys weren’t working,” Apollo read off the projection before turning to the prosecution.

“Prosecutor Gavin, as a musician, I’m sure you know how a piano works. If the keys are spoilt, what could be the reason?”

Klavier hesitated, his reply wary and unsure. “Well... each key is connected to a chord inside das piano, and each chord is connected to a hammer that strikes the chord when a key is pressed, which produces a note. There kann be many reasons: hammers could be broken… or das tuning pin is loose… or –” He stopped abruptly and his hand flew to his mouth in a horrified gasp. “Nein… Nein! Ach mein Gott…”
“Or,” Apollo concluded for him gravely, “something heavy was lying on the strings… something like a body.”

“E-Einspruch!” Anyone could see that the blonde prosecutor was struggling to cope with these disturbing facts, especially the one frightful thought that it happened during *his* concert.

“Has-been talked about das displeasing odor. If Herr Tobaye really died before das konzert, and his body was in das piano that whole time, then why didn't any of us smell anything on stage?”

*That’s… a really good question.* Apollo had nothing. If he couldn't prove the body was inside the piano from the very beginning, his entire defense would crumble and he could kiss this case and his courtroom debut goodbye. So, deciding to slow down a bit, Apollo mentally took a step back and considered Klavier’s words.

**What happened to the smell? How to resolve this inconsistency?**

He remembered there was something in his conversation with Valerian during his investigation, but for the life of him he couldn't quite remember what it was. Whenever he tried to think back, it fell past his fingers like sand. It was something small and insignificant; mentioned in passing perhaps; and *that* made it that much harder to recall. What did they talk about? His bracelet being too tight; Trucy’s fall; Phoenix and Machi’s fight. No, back up. Rewind. He had just climbed onto the stage and slipped on a puddle of water.

*Water…*

‘*Careful. The smoke machine tends to leak.*’

*Got it!*

“Smoke machine.”

Klavier blinked at him quizzically. “*Wie bitte?*”

“The concert’s smoke machine,” Apollo repeated in excitement as all the pieces finally came together and clicked into place. “All that smoke would’ve easily masked any odor – and I bet it was switched on throughout the entire first half of the concert!”

An off-key wail of a guitar. Klavier gripped the sides of his head and shook it in hopeless denial. “*Nein… Nein! I refuse to believe this… Herr Tobaye… Ausgeschlossen… Mein konzert! *”

“It's the truth, Prosecutor Gavin, and you know it!” Apollo waved his finger at him in an accusatory gesture. “Machi Tobaye died at approximately 7 p.m. and the killer used the time between his death and the concert's opening to steal the cocoon and hide the body. The only thing they didn't count on was for Valerian to move the piano backstage during intermission. Whoever this person was, must’ve known that Machi was the smuggler as well as Daryan’s identity as an Interpol agent. The person panicked; the piano was backstage; there was a bad smell and someone would discover the body. So, in order to conceal the true place and time of death, the killer used the 10 minutes provided by intermission to change the scene of the crime and frame my client.”

“But why was das killer so determined to cover up the original time of murder? *Who* would frame Daryan?” Klavier demanded as he slammed his fist against the table.

“Someone whom the victim knew and trusted,” Apollo replied, his eyes making quick work of all the profiles in the court record. “Someone… who doesn't have an alibi an hour before the concert.”
“Impossible. The Gavinners and I were rehearsing.”

“Then you see my point how it’s impossible for Daryan to commit murder,” Apollo concluded with his own jaw set in determination. “Machi Tobaye was murdered before the concert. All five Gavinners were accounted for and have solid alibis. Witnesses were identified and chosen based on the assumption that the crime was committed during intermission. The real killer is therefore someone who isn’t on the witness bench, but should be.”

He straightened up and delivered his final statement to the court, “There’s your proof: someone else killed Machi Tobaye! Daryan Crescend is innocent and has been innocent all along!”

The court was abuzz with excitable chatter as audience members gushed about the ‘cool young rookie’ who managed to turn this whole trial around. A few reporters felt gutsy and attempted to cross the courtroom with their cameras and notepads, but were stopped by Amaranth who only needed shoot them a cold, hard death glare to strike fear into their hearts and earn their obedience. The prosecution meanwhile, was silent with Klavier slowly coming to terms with the truth and the miraculous outcome of this trial. Herr Justice did it. He really did it. He felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted off his chest. Daryan’s name was as good as cleared; the doubt was gone; and he could believe in his best friend again. Never mind if Daryan hated him for everything he'd put him through during the trial; never mind if he failed to earn the man’s forgiveness. As long as Daryan was safe and could throw down his chains and walk out those doors a free man, that was all that mattered.

“Order, order!” The Judge struck the stand repeatedly with his gavel in his excitement. This was like reading a crime novel with a missing last page. “Mr. Justice, don't leave us hanging! If I don't know who the real killer is, I just know I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

Apollo balked and his tie suddenly felt way too tight. “I… I… Ah…” Honestly, he hadn't thought this far.

“That’s an impossibility at this point, your honor,” Kristoph intervened smoothly as he stepped in to defend the brunette. “Unfortunately, your sleep would have to wait. As my understudy has pointed out, the situation has changed: the witnesses present today do not accurately reflect the truth of the crime. Neither the prosecution nor the defense have the necessary evidence as a result of this fabrication. I would thus like to request for another day to carry out our investigations proper,” he paused to smirk at his brother across the room, “as I'm sure the prosecution desperately requires as well.”

Klavier bit his lower lip and grimaced. That was an insult, he knew it. But any assault to the ego would have to wait. This case came first; Daryan was off the hook so long as they caught this mysterious third party; the clock was ticking and they were wasting precious time.

“Mr. Gavin’s right, your honor!” Apollo chimed in with urgency. “The cocoon is still missing and the killer is out there! If anything, this very trial might’ve spurred their movements forward. Four days have already passed; we need to act quickly before it’s too late.”

“Indeed,” the Judge agreed, urgency swimming in his own eyes. “But I should remind the prosecution and defense that each trial only lasts for a maximum of three days. If the suspect isn’t apprehended and the defense presents insufficient evidence by the end of the third day, the defendant will be declared guilty.” He turned to address the prosecution, “How many days does the prosecution need?”

Klavier narrowed his eyes in determination. “One.”
“Very well.” He slammed his gavel on the stand with a resounding boom. “The police and defense have 24 hours to conduct their investigation. It is clear at this point that a great injustice has been done onto Mr. Crescend, but until the real killer is caught, I'm inclined to reserve all judgment. Mr. Crescend?”

Daryan stood upon the witness stand. “Yes, your honor?”

“I confess: I had my doubts as much as your father did. But you're lucky to have Mr. Justice as your lawyer.”

Apollo blushed from the Judge’s praise.

“Yeah,” Daryan replied and flashed the brunette a grateful smile, “I know.”

“Court adjourned.”

As soon as the gavel struck the podium for the final time that day, Apollo closed his eyes and released a great sigh of relief. *I did it.* All around him, he could hear the excitable chatter of the audience as they rose to their feet; sounds of applause; the media rushing to report the latest results of the case; heard his name uttered repeatedly on people’s lips – *Apollo Justice, Apollo Justice* – and was overwhelmed by the attention. Just then he heard shouting, the cheering increasingly loud; and when he finally looked up, he couldn't help but crack a wide grin. There, in the center of the gallery stood Clay and Olga, the pair punching their fists into the air and screaming their lungs out.

“'Atta boy, Horns! My bet was on you the whole time!’”

“I knew you could do it, Apollo! I knew you had it in you! Yes! YES!!”

They hugged each other in their joy, only for Olga to shove him away after realising what she just did. Clay crashed into the benches; she blushed and walked away with a huff; Apollo suppressed a laugh and shot his friend a knowing smirk, the kind that said he wanted the full deets later. But Kristoph’s hand on his shoulder reminded him that it was too early to celebrate just yet.

“You and Terran better hurry to Sunshine Colosseum. Leave Daryan to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

By that time, Klavier was already at the stairs. *24 hours. I have 24 hours.* But what surprised him was that Ema moved faster and she was already out the door by the time he started up the steps. Never had he seen her so on-the-ball before. He pushed past the crowd and media that had gathered in the lobby and called out to her.

“Fräulein Detective! I want all eyes on this city and all manpower looking für that cocoon.”

“Way ahead of you.”

He caught up to his partner and matched her stride as she phoned the station.

“This is Detective Skye. The killer is still out there and they have the cocoon. I want all units dispatched to Sunshine Colosseum and throughout the city; call reinforcements if you have to. Get the undercover ops on standby; I want an insider eye on the Black Market. No one leaves this country in the next 24 hours. Borginian law’s riding on this one and I have Interpol breathing down my neck – let’s move, move, move!”

Amidst the chaos and seated quietly on the witness bench, Phoenix remained where he was, a
worried frown on his face. This wasn't part of the plan. He looked to the spot where Lamiroir had sat, but it was empty, the siren having vanished without a trace.

It was 10 May, 12.30 p.m.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

And thus marks the conclusion of Trial Day 1 (phew, that was long).

I hope this case has been keeping you on your toes and at the edge of your seats. But it's not over yet. Who is the real killer? What could their motive possibly be? The clock's ticking. Daryan's still in chains. Will Apollo and Klavier be able to solve this mystery before it's too late?

Stay tuned for "Turnabout Serenade - Investigation Day 2"!
Turnabout Serenade - Investigation Day 2, Part 1

Chapter Notes

Sorry, guys. I realised my blunder on the concert venue - it's supposed to be Sunshine Colosseum, not Gatewater Stadium. Already made the necessary edits in the previous chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**May 10, 1.30 p.m. – Sunshine Colosseum**

Nothing much had changed really. It was still the same place; there was that obnoxious concert banner hanging over the side of the colosseum wall; the stage and its instruments remained untouched; and three inconspicuous dressing rooms continued to line an empty backstage hallway. But The Gaviners weren’t here – no Crow, Amaranth, Valerian and Klavier to annoy him – and with their absence, the venue felt different, abandoned, cold. He never thought he'd be back here so soon; then again, he never thought he’d make it this far on his first case. As miraculous as it sounded, he had managed to buy Daryan some time; but 24 hours was a hilarious compromise and the police really weren't helping.

“Geez, this place is swarming with cops!” Clay complained as they descended the backstage steps. “You’d think Klavier and Ema called the whole force down for a party.”

“What I think,” came a mutter of concern, “is that their paranoia might work to our disadvantage. All this red tape’s going to interfere with our investigation and scare the killer into hiding.”

“Well, at least no one realised we snuck in here yet. And let's be honest, Apollo, nothing’s scarier than Detective Skye. After what you did to her during her cross-examination? – boy, I'd really hate to be in your shoes.”

“Shh! Not so loud, or someone might hear us.”

"What? Speak up!"

"I said–"

“You two! What are you doing here?”

Clay screamed. Apollo hurled his torchlight straight at the source of that voice. There was a resounding 'thud', followed quickly by a string of bewildered curses, before the lights came on – not that the stranger needed it to see who exactly the intruders were. Ema had her eyes narrowed into a petrifying death glare that could rival that of Amaranth's. She was rubbing her head and a bump was starting to form. Apollo gave a nervous chuckle and mentally counted the few precious seconds he had left to live. He noticed she wasn’t even snacking. He didn't know which was worse.

"D-Detective Skye! Wha... What a surprise – Ow!"

Ema had thrown the torch directly back at his head.

“Trust me: you boys haven't seen scary yet.” She relaxed and allowed her curiosity to show, but the
irritation was still there. “How did you get in anyway? This area’s restricted to the public – and that includes nosy, bigmouth attorneys and their annoying space monkey.”

“Hey! Coming from a slack-!”

Apollo quickly nudged Clay before he could make the situation worse. They were treading on delicate ground now, especially after he humiliated Ema in court earlier that morning. Even if they were Daryan’s defense, this was still the police’s turf; Ema called the shots, and like it or not, they had to play their cards right or risk getting tossed in prison for obstructing the law. And with him so close to proving Daryan innocent, he wasn't going to take any chances.

“Well, there was this guy with a loud hailer who wouldn’t stop yelling,” he answered, wincing at the memory. He could still hear the shrill screech of that feedback in his ears. “Then, he started reciting some stuff from the police rule book, so we kinda snuck in when he wasn't looking…”

Ema facepalmed and fought down the urge to march back out and seriously hurt said police officer for his incompetence. *Goddammit, Meekins…*

“Anyway, since we’re both trying to catch the same guy… or woman, I was wondering if we could look-” But Apollo was interrupted by a hard jab to the chest.

“Hah! I'm done playing good cop with you and your pet monkey, so get lost, dumb lawyer! I'm tired, I'm hungry, and the food at that snack stand outside smells *so good*… Not like I'd know how it tastes because thanks to *someone* and their big mouth, my salary got cut and I’ll be living on instant noodles all summer!”

Apollo winced. Ok, looks like Ema wasn't going to forgive him any time soon. Or stop complaining for that matter.

“*Kuuuuuhh!* This is the worst day of my *life!*” she squealed and pulled her hair. “And I heard that glimmerous fop wants to replace me... How am I going to get that recommendation now?”

Apollo frowned and regarded her quizzically. “Recommendation?”

Ema stiffened at her slip up before releasing a nervous laugh. “Ahahaha… D-Did I say recommendation? I meant, uh… accommodation! Yeah, that's it. Accommodation.”

Clay blinked. “Klavier’s going to buy you a house?”

“He cuts your pay *and* buys you a house?!”

*Now* Apollo was convinced he was in the wrong occupation.

“Yes! I mean, no! I mean… Argh! Point is, you’re not allowed back here – and no snooping around Lamiroir’s room either! There’s nothing there and I’m not telling you guys anything!”

‘So, the prosecution suspects Lamiroir,’ Apollo thought and made a mental note of that.

“I take it Prosecutor Gavin’s very thorough with his witnesses,” he casually commented. “I mean, Lamiroir’s blind, isn’t she? What good would that do?”

“I know right! That’s what I told him, but *noooo* – that glimmerous fop still wants me to find her and bring her in. And I haven’t even had lunch yet!”

*Lamiroir is still missing and no one knows where she is.*
“It’s his guest! How should I know if she was the only one with Machi before the concert?”

So, she was the last person with the victim before he died.

“Oh yeah, Detective Skye – Here.” Apollo took out a tub of fresh popcorn and a paper bag with a bit of turkey leg sticking out. Ema’s pupils dilated and she couldn’t stop the drool from flowing past her lips.

“Is that turkey leg? And… and popcorn?” She could already feel the buttery caramel crunch between her teeth; picture all that munching she could do.

“Funny you should mention that snack stand, cuz Clay and I ended up buying a bit too much earlier,” said Apollo with a wide smile. “We’re all working round the clock, so this is for you.”

Ema was beyond touched. “For… me?”

He chuckled. “Do you see any other detectives in this room?”

Her eyes lit up like stadium spotlights and faster than Apollo could blink, she snatched the food right off his hands and all but buried her face in the popcorn container, munching and moaning in bliss. The poor detective behaved like she hadn’t eaten in days. Talk about overworked. Clay pulled a face. Apollo forced himself to keep up that placating smile and hoped his lips weren’t twitching too badly when he spoke.

“Miss Skye, I know you’re just doing your job, but we came all this way and… well, could we at least take a look at Trucy Wright’s dressing room? It’s the real crime scene after all.”

“Oh, alright,” she conceded in between munching noisily on her popcorn. “We already finished our investigation there anyway. Knock yourselves out.”

“Thanks!”

“But if I find you two snooping around elsewhere, I'm hauling your asses straight to prison! Got that, dumb lawyer?!”

“Ack! Ok, ok! Just stop throwing popcorn at me!”

Again, Apollo wondered if he was in the right occupation. Law school never once prepared him to face off against glitzy rockstar prosecutors or crazy homicide detectives armed with snacks, not to mention an unpredictable temper to go along with that default 24/7 grumpiness. Absently, he wondered if Phoenix had his own impossible detective to deal with back in the day too.

“Ah! You’re right! This is the last batch of quality snacks before I’m doomed to a lifetime of instant noodles! Must. Protect.”

One whose pay didn't get cut by their superiors as well.

“No wonder you bought so many snacks. But how’d you know we’d bump into Detective Skye?”

Clay wondered out loud as he fixed his friend with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Apollo shrugged noncommittally. “Be a lawyer long enough and you'd learn to anticipate these
things.”

“But it's only been two days…”

“Trust me, that’s long enough.”

Trucy’s dressing room was just as the girl had left it, but seeing as it was Apollo’s first time in here and inspecting the place with his own two eyes, Clay casually perched himself on a large crate of unused fireworks and kept out of the brunette’s way as he worked. Apollo took in every single detail of the room – its colourful array of magic props, boxes upon boxes of pyrotechnics and racks of glitzy costumes – and compared it with the photograph taken during yesterday’s investigation. Ema was right; the police had been quite thorough with the place: the charred area with its damaged props was cordoned off with police tape, and white string outlined the area where the victim’s body had supposedly lain. It was the darkest area affected by the explosion and there were vibrant blue spots mingled with the carbon. Apollo couldn't help but feel smug about that; his defense had given the police a solid lead after all, but the death of a 12-year-old boy was hardly anything to gloat about.

“Hey, what's that?” Clay asked, leaning over and pointing at the blue spots. “They weren't there yesterday.”

“That's luminol.”

“Speak English.”

“Lumi- blood detection spray,” Apollo explained, breaking it down for the young astronaut as basic and literal as possible. “When it reacts with blood, it glows a bright blue.”

“Ohh… How'd you know that?”

“I saw this before in a few of Mr. Gavin’s past cases. Also, the forensic department made a note of it in the latest crime scene photograph.”

Clay snickered. “Wanna bet Detective Skye begged them to let her spray it?”

“She probably didn't even ask,” Apollo deadpanned.

He consulted his records for the updated crime scene photograph – “Trucy’s Dressing Room Photo” was now the new “Crime Scene Photo 2” – and made the comparison. The blood stains were circled in red and would have been difficult to spot without the aid of the bright blue luminol. The stains appeared at two locations: one on the charred ground, and the other against a damaged blackened wall. The last observation made him pause and he moved to stand by the corpse’s outline to better orientate himself. He looked at the photo again, up at the crime scene, back down at the luminol markings in the picture; but it still didn't make sense.

“That's strange… I get that there's blood on the floor where the victim lay, but how did it get all the way here on the wall too?”

“Maybe he was kickin’ and screamin’ when he caught fire and some blood splattered on the wall?” Clay replied distractedly.

“Maybe.” Then Apollo looked up and almost lost his footing when he saw his friend lazily scrolling through and typing something on his cell phone screen.

“You could help, you know?!” he snapped.
“Wait, just let... me... login...”

“Anytime now.”

“Hey, Apollo. Do you think Olga has Facebook?”

Aaaaand he's gone.

Apollo sighed and with a dramatic roll of his eyes, went back to his investigation. Granted, this was his case and Clay wasn’t obliged to help him or anything, but a salty part of him wondered whatever happened to the ‘bros before hoes’ code. Also, not to add to the pressure, but the killer was still out there, they would lose one trial day because of it, and they were still no closer to pinpointing the true culprit. The only lead he had, judging by the victim’s apparent lack of struggle, was that the murderer was someone Machi knew and trusted, and had no alibi from 7-8 p.m.

And then there was Lamiroir, the mysterious and elusive ‘Diva Divine’. He wondered what reason Klavier had for basing his suspicions on the blind songstress herself. Whether Lamiroir fitted the suspect’s description remained contentious; even if she could've committed those deeds, she was blind and therefore she couldn't. Why his rival wanted to shoot himself in the foot, Apollo had no idea.

He groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose from fatigue. Maybe Klavier was tired. Maybe they all were. Perhaps Clay had the right idea after all – there was no harm in taking a quick break and catching up on the simple things in life. Besides, when was the last time they actually talked about each other’s lives, their hopes and dreams, love? Clay was always there to listen to his problems; his one-sided romantic affliction with Phoenix; dealt with all the creepy bullshit he'd put him through and remained understanding till the very end. Now, as a friend, he wished to do the same, if not offer his support. Even if it involved an infuriating munchkin with a fake Russian accent.

“So, what's the deal between you and Miss Orly?” Apollo asked, his sudden interest catching Clay off guard and the latter nearly dropped his cell phone.

“Huh? Olga?” He blushed in embarrassment. “N-Nothing’s going on between us! We just met on our way to court and-”

“Oh, on first names already?” Apollo teased and shot the flustered male a cheeky leer. “Someone’s fast.”

“S-Shut up, Pollo!”

Clay’s face was as red as the brunette’s vest. Apollo didn't even bother holding back his amusement. He was having way too much fun. No wonder Clay liked to tease him about all things Wright. There was joy in another’s amorous angst, especially if that person happened to be a best friend of eleven years and counting.

“Come on, Clay, I've known you since we were 11. She checks off most everything on your dream girl list: small, blonde hair, big black eyes, hourglass figure, short-”

“Petite,” Clay corrected as he stressed the appropriate description.

“Short – Apollo stubbornly emphasized – fair skin, tough girl with a tough attitude, pretty-”

“Gorgeous.”

“Gods, you're biased, you know that?”
Clay stuck out his tongue childishly. “So… Ah… How do you know her anyway?”

Apollo knew that look. The guy was probably hoping to get more info about Olga so he could start wooing her proper. Clay was always the ladies man between the two of them, whereas he was – as Clay had so eloquently put it before – exclusively ‘Wrightsexual’. But this time it was different: unlike usual standards, his friend was actually shy; nervous; embarrassed; fumbling; like a teenage boy in love and maybe, just maybe, Olga was the one. Unfortunately, their negative first meeting would forever be ingrained in his memory and Apollo had trouble accepting this latest romantic development in Clay’s life. He was pretty sure it would give him nightmares, at least for a few days.

“The fake Russian?” At Clay’s confusion, he decided to elaborate, “She works as a waitress in the Borscht Bowl Club, the same place Mr. Wright does his… business dealings,” he replied uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t recommend you going there, unless gambling’s your thing. It’s a notoriously shady joint. Miss Orly doubles up as a dealer and she and Mr. Wright used to be some renown poker duo of the underworld, until he recently quit. Now, she's just some pseudo little sister and is deathly loyal to him and his daughter.”


Apollo shrugged as he skimmed through the latest documents in his case file. “Sometimes I can’t help but feel like Mr. Wright’s adopting strange children and raising them to be even stranger people.” He looked up from his reading. “What do you really see in Miss Orly, anyway?”

“Well, she's…” Clay recalled the sight of her lips curled upwards with the promise of adventure. “Dangerous,” he trailed off with a blissful sigh.

“She's a dealer.”

“And Wright’s a poker-playing rentboy. What's your point?”

Touché.

It appeared they were both attracted to dangerous people; scrambling and fumbling around in a dark, elaborately spun web of deceit and trickery, a game of wits in which neither of them knew the rules to.

They looked away, ashamed by their judgmental insinuations. But it was the moment Apollo lowered his gaze when he noticed something wedged between the charred floor and large crate Clay was sitting on. Normally, no one would bother about something as insignificant as that, but there was something wrong with the overall picture: if the floor and edges of the crate were charred, why did this particular object appear unaffected by the effects of the fire?

“Clay, get off for a minute and help me out.”

Together, they moved the heavy crate aside and Apollo pulled on a pair of rubber gloves. Stepping over the police tape and taking care not to mess up the crime scene, he bent down and picked up the small object. It was a scrap of dark blue fabric torn around the edges, like it had been snagged and forcefully ripped off something larger. The design was plain and as he had earlier observed, was completely clean and contained no trace of carbon.

“Looks like rubbish to me,” Clay commented, but Apollo wasn’t so sure about that.

Why was this piece of fabric unaffected by the fire? Just like the piano in the hallway, he couldn't stop thinking about it. And why did he have this feeling he’d seen this dark blue cloth before?
“Hand me the folder,” he instructed; Clay did so and he hurriedly flipped through the evidence.

Pulling out “Crime Scene Photo 1”, the one of the victim stuffed in the piano, Apollo studied the image carefully, specifically the cloak used to wrap the body. He took in the constellation prints on the dark blue fabric, compared it to the scrap of cloth held between his own fingers and gave a sharp intake of breath.

*Why? This doesn't make any sense!*

“Hey, what's up? You look like you just popped a blood vessel,” said Clay over his shoulder, snapping his fingers impatiently before Apollo’s eyes. “Hello? Earth to Apollo, do you read me?”

“The fabrics don't match...”

“Well, excuse me! Not all of us can afford more than 10 outfits a year. Besides, I happen to like Hawaiian prints and this shirt was a steal.”

Apollo smacked Clay upside his visor. “Not you, you idiot. *This.*” He shoved the crime scene photograph in the latter’s face. “Pop quiz: what’s the pattern on Lamiroir’s robes?”

“Constellations… So what? You found a piece of the cloak – congratulations.”

“Except that this didn't come from the cloak. Look.” He placed the scrap of fabric against the photo for comparison. “The colour matches, but this one’s plain. Plus, it was lying on top of the stained floor, completely unaffected by the fire.”

When Clay began to catch on to his logic, Apollo continued, “If this fabric came from the cloak, it tells us nothing. But because it's different, it hints at one strong possibility: whoever wrapped Machi’s body in Lamiroir’s costume was wearing something that matches this fabric, and whoever they were, came into this room *after* the fire. Their clothes must've snagged onto the crate when they were busy wrapping the body.”

“So we got our killer.”

He nodded. “Most likely.”

It was a mutual understanding. The duo shared a look before rushing to the costume racks on the other side of the room. They went through each garment carefully, scrutinized every detail, turned it inside out and checked the lining. For five whole minutes, the only sounds that echoed around the dressing room were hangers sliding over steel and the rustling of fabric.

“Urgh, there's not a single costume here that matches,” Clay grumbled, pulling away in frustration. “Unless there's more kept somewhere else... Wait, what if it's a regular outfit worn by a member of the backstage crew? The murder happened an hour before the concert, right?”

*Backstage crew…*

Apollo secured the cloth to the case file with a paperclip and dug out his cell phone.

“Then let's ask him if he remembers seeing our mysterious killer,” he said, already having his contact on speed dial. “Besides, he's not the prosecution’s key witness anymore. I dare Klavier Gavin to stop me.”

“Who?” Clay asked with a tilt of his head.
“The one in-charge of the costumes and part of the backstage crew, of course,” Apollo answered as he listened to the phone ring. “Mr. Wright.”

No answer.

That was odd.

He called a fourth time and just like the previous three attempts, was immediately cut off mid-ring. Strange, it’s not like him to ignore my calls. He remembered the days following Phoenix’s employment when said man would hurriedly answer his phone for a quick chat, sometimes even before the second ring – heck, Phoenix was often the one who called to disturb him (though Apollo never once considered those precious moments as inconveniences… even if they did tend to happen during ungodly hours in the night and/or morning). But determination (or sheer stubbornness) defined his principles and he called his idol a fifth time, but this time, it only rang once before it immediately cut to a dial tone.

Now, Apollo was really worried. Did something happen to him? It took everything in his will power not to burst out of the building and haul his and Clay’s asses onto the latter’s motorbike.

Suddenly, his phone rang and without thinking, he scrambled to answer it.

“Mr. Wright! Are you ok?! I-”

“I had no idea you and Phoenix were on such intimate terms, Apollo. Tell me, do you two chat often? I don’t recall giving you his contact.”

Apollo stiffened and felt his blood run cold. Phoenix’s bruises concealed beneath sweet makeup flashed through his mind and he immediately felt the fear return. He didn’t know where that thought came from; suspicions unresolved; but Kristoph’s voice sent chills down his spine and therein contained a distinct undercurrent of possessiveness despite its seeming calm and cheer. He has Mr. Wright’s phone, he thought in panic, he can see all our conversations.

“M-Mr. Gavin,” he stuttered, like a suspect having been found out for his crimes. “Erm… W-Why do you have… that is… Mr. Wright-”

“Is unavailable right now.”

The interruption was too swift. It was just like that time in Gavin Law Offices when he got the sense Kristoph didn’t want him around.

“Hm, what’s this? Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday… A lunch appointment yesterday even. Why, you two certainly have quite the chemistry; I’m almost jealous.”

He was going through the entire call history. Apollo was only thankful he didn’t leave any text messages behind. Kristoph’s mirth was a decoy, and the more Apollo held onto this conversation, the more he started to feel that there was something seriously wrong with his boss and Phoenix’s relationship. Was it normal for a lover to be so intrusive? Was Phoenix alright? He was pretty sure it wasn't just his jealousy talking.
“Sir, I've been going to him for advice, just like you recommended – that's all.”

A chuckle. “I merely jest. We are having lunch.” And the way Kristoph emphasized on the word ‘we’ sounded more like an implicit “back off”.

“Instead of phoning Phoenix so much, shouldn't you be focusing on your investigation?”

“Well, that's the thing – I need to speak to Mr. Wright about the case. There's some questions I want to ask him.”

“Oh? What sort of questions? You can be sure that I will pass the message accordingly.”

He's not letting me talk to him on purpose, Apollo realised. Whether it was the man’s protectiveness stemmed from his concern over Phoenix or something else, he didn't know; but a nagging feeling in his gut told him that he couldn't trust Kristoph. Not after he had ruthlessly implicated his own lover this morning in court and pushed Phoenix into a corner for the sake of a perfect victory. If Amaranth hadn't stepped in… Apollo shuddered at the thought, from the shame of his own weakness when he gave into the pressure. He had promised to protect Phoenix; he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

“Ahaha… N-Nothing specific actually,” he feigned a sheepish laugh, unconsciously gripping the torn piece of cloth tighter between his fingers. “I'm out of leads, so I was hoping Mr. Wright might know something about the case. You know, since he's no longer the prosecution’s key witness.”

“I see… And what's your strategy?”

“Um… point-blank and fire?”

Kristoph sighed and Apollo could picture him shaking his head in resignation.

“Funny you should mention the prosecution. Klavier came by earlier to interrogate Phoenix as well, but his questions were lacking, his focus poor. In fact, they remind me of someone.”

“Someone, sir?”

“You.”

Ouch.

“If his ignorance in court and him keeping Trucy from testifying wasn't indicative enough, Phoenix doesn’t know anything. You will do well to pursue other concrete sources of evidence that can be properly and physically validated, or visit your client in the detention center again. I believe your argument was that the murder occurred at 7 p.m. Solidify Daryan’s alibi – that's your job as a defense attorney. I believe you should already know this.”

But then who would the blame fall on as consequence? It was a question of fair trade.

“I know Phoenix better than anyone. If he truly knows something, don't you think I would have told you?”

“Well..."

“Always remember, Apollo: evidence is everything. Witness accounts shore credibility, but the strength of a defense relies on concrete, irrefutable proof. Have that, and even the wisest judge will concede. Am I clear?”
“... Crystal.”

"Good. Should you ever need guidance, I'm always available. I'll look forward to your report tonight."

There was a click, followed quickly by a dial tone, and Apollo immediately knew that the one private connection Phoenix owned had been forcibly taken from him. Mr. Wright... His mind raced; that little scrap of cloth weighed heavily in the palm of his hand. How do I get to him? And who was stopping whom from talking? Was it really Kristoph, or did Phoenix himself have a much deeper secret to hide in which he pleaded for his boyfriend's cooperation and silence? Apollo didn't know. It was hard to stay impartial. Too many secrets.

So, what did he know?

A single thought entered his mind: Klavier Gavin. That's right; the guy had tried to question Phoenix too. First, Lamiroir; now, Phoenix. Apollo was starting to notice a pattern: Klavier was targeting the two people who were the least likely to have committed murder – at least, Lamiroir couldn't; Phoenix could, but the motive was still up in the air. So, what did Klavier know that he didn't? Apollo couldn't help but feel like he was always one step behind his rival in this investigation.

A light rapping on the dressing room door startled his thoughts. Clay turned the knob and stuck his head into the room curiously. Earlier, he had stepped outside to give his friend some privacy.

“So, what did Wright say?” he asked, but failed to get a response because Apollo stormed past him and tugged him along by the wrist.

“H-Hey! Where are we going?”

“To get some answers,” Apollo replied, his jaw set in determination.

If he couldn't fully trust Kristoph, there was only one person now he could trust: his brother.

It wasn't that hard to get past security.

The crazy old lady in a spacesuit and rattling toy gun (what sort of guard uniform was that?) had given him an earful when he presented his attorney’s badge – and launched into a seemingly endless tirade of childhood resentment, unrequited crushes and general aggravation towards “young whippersnapper lawyers” – but when she took one look at Clay, she blushed like a schoolgirl and her heart melted in seconds. “Come by and see me anytime, Clay-kins,” she cooed after the young astronaut and a violent shudder ran down his spine. Between the way she looked at him and called his name, Clay didn't know which was worse.

“She seems nice,” Apollo teased with a suggestive grin.

“Oh hell no.”

The elevator reached the 24th floor with a resounding “Ding!” and they stepped out onto the carpeted hallway as soon as the doors parted.

“#24-09… #24-09… Ah.”
They paused before a set of double doors with a massive, obnoxious letter ‘G’ hanging off an equally obnoxious metal chain. With an electric guitar as the backdrop. And flames. And a pair of handcuffs against the flames. And when Apollo pressed the intercom bell, it played a certain someone’s Guilty Love theme music. Wow, who would have ever thought that this was Klavier Gavin’s office? He totally had no idea it belonged to the prodigious rockstar prosecutor. How unbelievably subtle.

He pressed the bell again and waited. Still no answer. Then he reached up and pounded on the polished mahogany.

“Prosecutor Gavin!”

“Maybe he's not back yet?” said Clay helpfully.

“Open the door!”

“Oi, are you listening?”

But it was too late because Apollo had already banged the door down with his fist and Chords of Steel… Or more like the door wasn't actually closed and the poor lawyer lost his footing, tumbled into the office and crashed face first into a giant amplifier. Clay winced – and it wasn't just from the feedback. He rushed over and helped his friend to his feet.

“Apollo! Are you ok?”

“Urgh, define ok,” Apollo muttered with a groan, temporarily seeing stars. Who the heck puts a giant amplifier in an office? But upon looking up, he realised (he should have expected this really) this wasn't an ordinary office – and no, it wasn't just because of the grandeur, high walls and the needlessly large window spanning from one end of the room to the other, overlooking the city.

Talk about disgustingly wealthy. Avant-garde would be the closest term to describe the office’s decor; and despite the mess and obvious lack of organization (Klavier seriously needed a secretary), the place managed to retain its class. Absently, Apollo couldn't help but note how different the two Gavin brothers were, both in organization and aesthetics. While Kristoph preferred to keep things simple, Klavier remained true to his flamboyant and indulgent nature.

His eyes did a quick sweep of his rival’s office: a grand showcase filled with an extensive variety of electric and acoustic guitars took up an entire wall; a single slim file cabinet wedged between the showcase and window, it's drawers bursting from papers and case files; a comfy, expensive-looking recliner seat strategically placed before a flat screen television hanging from the ceiling; an elaborate computer setup on the opposite end of the room supported by a– wait, was that another amplifier doubling up as a table?! There was an obvious theme going on here...

‘Talk about rocking while you work,’ Apollo thought skeptically as he approached the work station and inclined his gaze at the large computer screen. It was so futuristic with a touchscreen keyboard and 3D projection features, it looked like it came straight out of a modern sci-fi movie. Klavier seemed to have been working on something; he was still logged in, so Apollo took the liberty of perusing the content. After all, it was a bit hard to ignore a giant computer screen and it was even harder to resist a high resolution photograph detailing numerous pieces of broken metal bits with peculiar sounding labels. None of the names made sense to him, but this photo came straight from the police and Apollo didn't need to be a genius to figure out that red exclamation mark tagged to the image meant urgent.

What is this? He entered a few commands into the computer and a new image popped up, one that
they had all grown extremely accustomed to since the beginning of this investigation.

“The victim’s body? Wait a sec – these bits of junk metal…”

He pulled out the case file and frantically flipped to the section on the crime scene, specifically the image of the body found wrapped in Lamiroir’s costume – the same image on Klavier’s computer screen. He squinted at a particular spot on the dark blue fabric, recalled how this little detail had appeared so out of place before and raised his gaze to make the comparison. *Ah, here it is* – “Crime Scene Photo 1: Victim wrapped in Lamiroir’s costume inside the piano. Traces of dried blood and small scraps of metal found on the cloak’s inner side and victim’s body.” The computer’s zoom function worked like a dream; the bits of scrap metal in the photograph matched the bits photographed in the latest police report. Fireworks, a missing cocoon, a scrap of plain blue fabric and bits of metal.

*But what did this all mean?*

“It’s not ‘junk metal’ – at least not to me,” Clay pointed out as he read each label carefully. “Most of them are basic structural assembly parts; some have more specific functions like signal processing and insulation, though I can’t quite name them off the top of my head now.”

“Wait, you know this stuff?” Apollo indicated at the image, his hair spikes standing on end.

“Pfft, duh! Bachelor in Science and Engineering, remember?” Clay folded his arms and flashed him a proud smirk. “I work with stuff like this in the space center all the time.”

“Do you think they could have some relation to that strange switch you told me about? The one Miss Wright claimed was really important to Machi?”

“Hm… I can’t say for sure. I’m still running some tests on a prototype like you asked me to, but it’s only been 24 hours and I had to construct everything from scratch.”

“And these metal parts?” Apollo asked hopefully.

“They’re barely a concept,” Clay answered with a shake of his head. “It’ll take some time to work backwards and figure out its original structure and function.”

“How long?”

He paused and consulted his watch. “Aura should still be in her lab. If I leave now, I should have a full working demo ready by morning.”

Apollo’s eyes shone in recognition. “Aura Blackquill, the robotics engineer?”

Him and Clay often visited the space center after school when they were kids. It wasn’t exactly easy to forget a sadistic woman who carried along a ray gun like a purse and abused her own robots.

“Yup, the one who told you that your head would explode in space and your brain would leak out through your ears.”

“That image traumatized me for years…”

Clay shrugged and fished out his keys; a miniature thumb drive dangled from the ring. “I thought it was a cool way to die. Made me want to be an astronaut more.”

He shoved the device into the system and after a few quick clicks of the mouse, imported the files for
Apollo watched on with trepidation as Clay pocketed the thumb drive easily, as if they hadn't just stolen precious and confidential information from the police and could thereby get arrested if the prosecution found out. But then Klavier was the one who left his computer on and his office door unlocked in the first place. If there was anyone to blame for the success of their clandestine operation, it was the rockstar and his negligence.

“Will you be ok by yourself?” asked Clay, one foot already out the door. Apollo waved his concern off.

“I’m fine. Leave Prosecutor Gavin to me. You just focus on those two pieces of evidence, so we can figure out how they might tie into the murder-”

“Oh,” Clay finished.

Apollo nodded. “Or not.” Then he took one sweeping glance around the office. “I’ll hang back for a while. His door’s unlocked, so he couldn’t have gone far.”

“Alright. Eight hours or it’s a dead lead.”

And with a parting salute, Clay raced off and Apollo was left alone to his own devices.

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It was weird not having Clay around to banter with. It even felt a little lonely.

Aimlessly, Apollo wandered about the room; observed Klavier’s guitar collection, the fake cocoon model in a bell jar atop case files, the city streets down below; and released a bored sigh. Precious minutes ticked by; he was wasting his time, but whatever Klavier knew could prove exceedingly important. A piece of paper stuck out of the steel file cabinet and his months of filing Kristoph’s paperwork at Gavin Law Offices sensitized his OCD enough to want to do something about it.

‘I'm so bored, I'm cleaning the fop’s office,’ he thought miserably as he opened the drawer to put the piece of document back in, but paused as soon as he noticed the words printed on the front page.

“This isn't an old case report. He read through it carefully.

“In accordance to the agreed sum and terms by The Gaviners and Borginia’s Ministry of Arts and Culture… Huh? It's a contract.”

The legal document contained an extensive list of clauses, mainly pertaining to issues of copyright as well as annotating the finer details of musical collaboration. It had information about salary, royalty fees, miscellaneous expenses for the Borgian duo Lamiroir – What?! 50% cut in ticket sales?!

Well, sure, Klavier had invited Lamiroir and Machi to perform at his concert as special guests, that he understood, but – Woah, Lamiroir was expensive! And Machi wrote original songs specially for the concert too? – Just how rich was Klavier? From what he could gather, a substantial amount went to Lamiroir’s agent and music production company, but Lamiroir herself wasn't lacking in wealth and….

Apollo stopped at Machi’s salary details when he noticed a frightfully alarming discrepancy.

He's being paid peanuts!

It was then he recalled Amaranth’s words from yesterday: “The brat and the Siren fought a lot. He might be talented with the piano, but their music contract favors her and his cut in salary is pretty
And this contract proved it. But Crow had also said something about the duo’s partnership that bothered him: “Popularity. Fame. Money. Especially if fans love you more as a group, then more money. Machi always talked about going solo, but he’s smart – he knows his fame rides on Lamiroir’s blindness…”

But even this was too far-fetched to believe. A gifted musician, song writer, lyricist – and the boy had only been 12 years old, hadn’t he? This had child exploitation written all over it! Machi’s salary was much too low; Lamiroir’s was much too high. If Machi really was as smart and talented as Crow said he was, then why didn’t he break away when he had the obvious capacity to? It wasn't hard to imagine he'd get paid more, that's for sure.

‘If there's anyone with a motive for murder, it’s Machi,’ Apollo thought sympathetically, noting down the contract details and filing it away for safekeeping. What was the logic in killing a harmless, underpaid child? The deeper he delved into this mystery, the darker the secrets and all the people involved, seemed to get.

He groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. He needed some air.

“Ausgeschlossen!”

The door slammed open with a violent “Bang!” Apollo lost his footing and scrambled for purchase against the file cabinet. Klavier entered the office yelling into his cellphone, expression dark and irritable.

“Nein! Wie kann der Kokon verloren? … Englisch? You want English? Fein – You aren’t looking hard enough! If it's nicht in das black market, where else kann it be? How kann you lose sight of das most important piece of evidence? Is this your first day at work?!”

Apollo coughed awkwardly. Klavier looked up and finally noticed he had a visitor. Cupping the speaker, he spoke to the caller in quick, hushed tones.

“Fräulein Detective, this is your last chance to impress me, or das deal is off. Verstehen Sie?” Then he hung up and with an effortless flip of his hair and a well-placed smile, the charming and easygoing personality was back in place.

“Guten Tag, Herr Forehead,” he greeted with a chuckle, hands on his hips and eyes twinkling in jest.

“Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise?”

“The door was open,” Apollo explained.

“Ach so…”

Klavier crossed the room in long strides and picked up an acoustic guitar before settling comfortably on a nearby chair; then, he started to tune it. The blonde prosecutor pretty much made himself at home. Apollo watched on with increasing impatience.

“Prosecutor Gavin,” he interrupted brusquely, “I know you're busy and everyone’s working to catch this killer, but I have some questions to ask you about those hours leading up to the concert. As the band’s leader and overall boss, you know the daily programme and your staff better than anyone.”

“Ja, that is correct,” came Klavier’s simple answer as he casually strummed up a tune. “And what does Herr Forehead want to know?” And to Apollo’s great annoyance, started to hum and even sing.
He's not taking me seriously. Apollo suppressed his frustration and forged on undaunted.

“Exactly who was doing what and where at 7 p.m. – at least what they should be doing. I need everyone: backstage crew, The Gavinners, the victim… even Lamiroir.”

Klavier suddenly stopped playing and the atmosphere turned uncomfortable.

“Why Lamiroir? She is blind, ja?”

That smile was forced. Apollo felt his wrist give a slight throb of discomfort and knew he was on the right track.

“Something tells me there's more to that, Prosecutor Gavin,” he answered gravely, “and am I right to say that her association with the victim, a cocoon smuggler, makes her suspicious as well?”

The guitar fell to the ground with a resounding ‘thump’, but its owner made no effort to retrieve it, only sat in place with wide, troubled eyes and trembling fingers intertwined. There was a moment of silent deliberation, conflicting principles, until finally…

“Will this save Daryan?” Klavier asked with a nervous frown and his sudden question took Apollo by surprise.

Klavier never could hide his emotions. There was something odd about the man’s response, like a mixture between suspicion, interest and desperation. Apollo immediately recognized what it was: fear. But it wasn't a general fear or the kind that stemmed from a guilty conscience; no – it was a familiar fear, like Klavier knew this person and was torn between keeping silent or acknowledging its existence and making that painful truth a reality. Could it be the killer’s identity? Had he solved the mystery? Then why didn't he look too happy about it?

He knows something, Apollo realised. He knows something and he's afraid of being right. There was no other explanation.

“Both Mr. Talvinen and Crow mentioned that Lamiroir's music contract favored Lamiroir significantly over Machi – is this true?” he clarified.

“Ja, when I received das document, I was shocked. But Herr Tobaye had already signed it, so I simply processed das contract without question,” Klavier replied, disconcerted by the memory. “I know ‘too little’ when I see it, but I didn't wish to get involved with strange Borginian customs. I hear their society privileges seniority and their laws don't tend to favor minors.”

The contract and the two signatures of Machi and Lamiroir floated through Apollo’s mind. Again the question of motive bothered him. If anything, Machi’s death appeared senseless and contradicted everything. And how did Daryan fit into all this?

Maybe the contract’s unrelated to the case after all.

Deciding to drop the matter for now, Apollo proceeded to grill the blonde rockstar on all he knew about his staff’s movements last Friday evening. Unfortunately, Klavier’s statements weren’t much help; everyone was supposedly at their respective stations testing the equipment – the sound crew in their booth, the lighting team checking the lights, the floor team ensuring the stage was ready – and two intensive interrogation sessions conducted this afternoon revealed that most, if not all of them had alibis that checked off. In other words, no one was where they weren't supposed to be, and whoever had entered Trucy’s dressing room was still a mystery. As for Trucy herself, she was seen at the performance space doing the final checks for the concert's opening magic trick.
“Interrogations are still ongoing,” Klavier explained. “I was about to head down to der precinct myself.”

But Apollo doubted they would yield any results. He couldn’t shut out the nagging feeling that the police were looking at all the wrong places… and the wrong people.

“What about The Gavinners?” he asked, retrieving his notes. “In court this morning, you made the comment that you were all rehearsing. Where was that?”

Klavier snorted. “Herr Forehead asks the silliest of questions. On stage of course.”

“For how long?”

“We were there since 6 p.m.”

‘That’s another five down,’ Apollo thought as he mentally struck off the boys and went over the concert’s floor plan. All five Gavinners on stage meant all five were accounted for during the hours leading up to Machi’s murder and the concert’s opening. Plus, there were crewmembers and Trucy hanging around the performance space; if any band member slipped away for even a minute, someone would notice.

“How about Lamiroir and Machi?” he asked.

“They joined our rehearsal, but finished before 7 p.m.” came Klavier’s swift reply.

“So Lamiroir was the last person with the victim?”

“That information is classified at this point.”

In other words, it’s a ‘yes’.

“But,” Klavier quickly continued, “What I kann tell you is that I didn’t give them a strict schedule. Lamiroir and der Pixie des Arpeggio are mein guests; they were free to move around as they pleased. All they had to do was take their places by 7.50 p.m.”

And of course, Machi didn’t show up because he was already dead.

Apollo almost succumbed to his emotions and threw the case file clear across the room, but his rival was watching so he held his anger in check and forced himself to remain professional about the whole matter. Still, apart from that meager scrap of cloth, he had no solid leads and all this red tape between prosecution and defense was extremely maddening. Initially, he entertained the idea of presenting said cloth itself, but if Klavier was bound by law and keeping secrets himself, he figured it would only work to his disadvantage if he fed his rival too much information. Phoenix once told him that in poker, one should refrain from revealing their trump card to their opponent too early into the game. It was ironic how law worked the same way.

Unbeknownst to Apollo, Klavier was watching him throughout their conversation – his actions, manner of speech, words – and was no fool to the rules of the game. The rookie knew something too, that he more or less inferred from his choice of questions. His rival was trying to get at something specific, something about backstage. Klavier mulled over his options: he could choose to end their conversation here, or he could hang on and try to learn something from the defense’s investigation. Kristoph always told him that in order to understand what your opponent was thinking, you had to give them what they wanted, a taste of victory, before their pattern would start to show. Being upfront about it wouldn't work; he had to employ a more subtle approach, a little give-and-take.
“Actually, I just remembered something,” he spoke up and took care not to sound too eager. If Apollo was holding back, then he would bait the kid with information of his own if only to gain some insight from the other side.

“There was one person unaccounted for during that one hour before the concert – Has-been.”

Apollo’s heart leaped to his throat. No… Not again.

“We couldn't find him and Fräulein Trucy didn't know where he was either,” Klavier continued.

“You mean he was missing from 7-8 p.m.?” Apollo clarified.

“He was supposed to be in The Gaviners’ dressing room preparing our Kostüme, but Fräulein Detective said she never saw him.”

“I assume you questioned Mr. Wright about this?” he asked, but was surprised by Klavier’s sudden silence. The older male ran his fingers through his blonde hair, troubled and irritated all at once.

“Ja… But he claimed he was working on our Kostüme like he was supposed to – that was all he would say. I didn't like his answer.”

‘I don't like it either,’ Apollo silently agreed, concerned and suspicious over the implications. Phoenix kept all the costumes in Trucy’s dressing room because he needed a place to work on them, which also happened to be the very site of murder. Furthermore, the period of his ‘disappearance’ and Machi’s death matched. Klavier must have realised this too.

But all this was mere speculation.

Klavier flashed him a knowing smirk. “Is there something about Has-been that I should know, Herr Justice?”

“Ack! Uh… N-No, not really,” he replied, flustered. Damn, he's perceptive. “It's just… I've been meaning to talk to him too, but he's… tricky.”

“Ah, aren't we all?”

They regarded each other seriously and the air between them was tense once more. Meanwhile, the gears in Klavier’s head started turning. ‘I knew it,’ he thought, ‘The has-been is hiding something from the police again. But what, and most importantly, why?’

“Do you still believe Daryan did it?” Apollo broke the silence after some time.

“I'm inclined to reserve mein judgment,” Klavier answered, but the younger wasn't buying his diplomacy for one second.

“Just now you asked if our discussion could save Daryan,” he said and noticed how his rival visibly faltered. “You suspect him of something and you're afraid of being right.” At Klavier’s hesitance, his voice took on a more patient and sympathetic tone, “Prosecutor Gavin, I know we barely know each other and we’re on different sides, but you have to trust me. I will fight for Daryan’s innocence, but I can't do this alone.”

There was a long pause. Klavier stared deep into a pair of dark hazel eyes set hard into a determined frown; saw true honesty, infallible strength and calm resolution, and knew at once the brunette was a man of his word. Kristoph’s face flashed through his mind – his years of guidance, ruthlessness, a paragon of perfection – and dreaded the disappointment and brutal criticism that would surely follow
as consequence of his inherent weakness. A Gavin is always perfect; he never loses, not even to his own brother. But it wasn't a game of pride anymore when things got personal, and Klavier knew he couldn't be Kristoph when Daryan was involved. His brother's understudy in contrast was an open book: Apollo had no airs about him and was sincere in his intentions; perhaps even earnest to a fault. He would never give up on Daryan, not after he stubbornly held on in court and turned things around. Klavier doubted the rookie knew the meaning of the word 'quit'.

He dropped his gaze, nervously ran his fingers through his hair, before sighing and surrendering to Apollo's conviction.

"Fein. But there's a limit to what I kann disclose." With that, he rose to his feet and gestured Apollo to follow him. "You fought well this morning, Herr Justice, I give you that; but faith alone might not be enough. Especially blind faith."

Sliding open a panel of the wall next to the showcase, Klavier pulled on a pair of rubber gloves, reached into the hidden closet and pulled out an ordinary looking acoustic guitar without strings – wait a minute.

"Isn't that the guitar I found under the floorboards in Lamiroir's room?" Apollo demanded with wide eyes. What the hell was it doing here? He never expected it to reappear so soon, or at all for that matter. And why was Klavier showing him this?

"Some background about this guitar: during mein travels to Borgia, I encountered Lamiroir and Herr Tobaye performing in a wenig restaurant. She was playing this very guitar and I immediately fell in love with its sound and ihre voice," he recounted the story as he fondly stroked the length of the instrument's neck. "After that, I invited them to perform at mein konzert and she gave this to me as a gift of friendship. But shortly after it arrived at das airport, it disappeared. Only Lamiroir, Herr Tobaye, Daryan and myself knew about this guitar."

Klavier placed the precious instrument gently on the amplifier Apollo had crashed into earlier, and moved towards his computer; his back to the latter as he resumed his work. A new set of rubber gloves lay on the amplifier.

"I was never here."

At first, Apollo did nothing save stare blankly at said prosecutor's back, but when it became apparent Klavier meant what his actions implied, he silently thanked the older man and pulled on the gloves. Alright, time to see what's so important about this damn guitar.

He conducted his investigation to the sound of Klavier's typing. Taking out the bottle of fingerprint powder, he lightly dusted some onto the guitar's surface and compared the resulting fingerprints to the suspects list. Machi Tobaye, Klavier Gavin, his own from the time he touched it and… an unknown set of prints unlisted in the case file. The unknown prints appeared the most and seeing as this guitar originally belonged to Lamiroir, he figured it was hers. No contradiction here. Again he wondered what Klavier's intention was for showing him this. Did it have anything to do with the case at all? He was tempted to ask the rockstar just that, but remembered he was supposed to be invisible and it was up to him to piece together this puzzle on his own.

Apollo picked up the guitar and turned it over, examining every last inch of it with meticulous precision. Suddenly, something glistened from the corner of his eye and he angled the guitar again in an attempt to get it back to its previous position. He repeated the process until the light managed to catch the subject in question just right and something within the sound hole glistened like dew under morning light. It looked like a spider's web, only slightly more taut and silky. He didn't dare stick his
fingr in for fear of breaking the delicate thread. It wasn't just one; there were slight traces of them clumped around a certain spot inside the sound hole.

*What the hell is this?* It didn't look like mold and it definitely wasn't dust. Had something been stored inside the guitar? Apollo’s eyes traveled to Klavier once more, but found his gaze veering towards the cocoon model next to the computer instead.

And then it hit him.

*That's why Prosecutor Gavin’s so worried about Daryan.*

It made perfect sense. Everything linked up. How the smuggler managed to sneak past Interpol and airport customs undetected; the missing guitar; the lack of strings; now the missing cocoon. These weren't spider webs; they were remnants of cocoon silk. Only four people knew about the existence of this guitar and Daryan was one of them. Only an Interpol agent would know how to work around the technicalities of international security. And…

‘Hey, the flight and condensation really messes up the wood and sound, you know?’

Only a fellow guitarist and best friend would preempt Klavier’s tendency to utilize an alternate service for transport.

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Apollo’s face. This was bad. He needed to speak to Daryan immediately, especially about that alternate service.

Just then, the shrill ring of the office phone pierced still air and both Apollo and Klavier jumped at the sudden intrusion. The latter rose from his seat, addressed his rival with a quiet “Excuse”, before crossing the room and raising the receiver to his ear.

“Gavin, guten tag! Ah, Has-been…” A look of confusion crossed his features and he turned to face a curious Apollo. “Herr Forehead? Ja, he's here. Wait, how did you – don't you have your own phone? Ach so… Ja, I'll tell him… Nein, no dinner tonight. Danke. Auf Wiederhören!”

He replaced the handset onto the phone and was immediately blown away by a certain attorney’s infamous Chords of Steel.

“Was that Mr. Wright? Is he ok? What did he want? And why were you two talking about dinner?”

*What the hell?* Klavier groaned and stuck his fingers into his ears. They were ringing like crazy.

Did his brother and Phoenix have to deal with this every day?

He shuddered at the thought and decided to ignore Apollo’s last question altogether. If he didn't know any better, he'd say the rookie was jealous. But that was just silly.

“Ja, it was. And why wouldn't he be?” he replied as he leaned against the desk, oblivious to the anxiety swimming in Apollo’s eyes. “Anyway, he wants to see you.”

Apollo blinked. “See me? What for?”

“A complaint against Ihr defense in court today. I’m guessing it has something to do with Fräulein Trucy,” Klavier replied with amusement as he watched his rival’s face turn pale. “If Herr Forehead does not wish to be sued by Papa dearest, I suggest you deal with das matter personally and fast.”

Apollo gulped. “S-Sued?”

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Klavier scribbled an address on the back of his name card and
handed it to his rival.

“Der name needs some work, but are you familiar with die Wright Talent Agency?”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the reviews, bookmarks and subscriptions :) Super stoked you guys are loving this story so much and keep asking for more. I'll do my best to keep the updates constant, especially for this mystery arc. I'm moving on from student life and embarking on my career next week, so updates might be a little sporadic, but I'll do my best. Would like to wrap everything up nicely myself without any long cliff-hangers disrupting the reading experience.

This chapter took a while because I've been rushing with Cosfest preparations. I'll be cosplaying Apollo Justice this weekend and most of my time was dedicated to crafting, styling, sewing and surviving on tea because I don't do coffee. It'll be my first AA cosplay in my 10 years of cosplaying, so I'm pretty excited about it!

As always, thanks for reading and do subscribe to this fanfic if you wish to receive updates :)
Hi guys, it's been a while and I would like to apologise for the epic wait. My new job has really taken it's toll on me and has affected my mood and inspiration significantly. This chapter took really long to write and I did drag myself to complete it, but it's thanks to my fellow readers and reviewers that I can keep going! Unfortunately, updates won't be so quick and consistent anymore because I need to focus on my life and career. All I ask is for your support; please be patient with me, and trust me when I say that your support is the fuel that keeps me inspired.

I hope the wait is worth it. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey squirt, how you doing?”

“Mn... Tired. The ward’s music sucks. I miss your playing – rock’s my kind of lullaby.”

A chuckle.

“Last I checked, electric guitars are banned in hospitals. You’re just trying to get me into trouble, aren’t you?”

A new laugh – sincere, albeit breathless. It died down after some time.

“Bro?”

“What's up?”


“I wish I could be there... at your concert. I never miss a single one.”

“Damian...”

“Did you fulfill my last wish?”

Someone stopped the playback and reclined in their seat with a loud sigh. The black cell phone remained on the table undisturbed. Dark listless eyes stared at it, only to slide shut when the memories became too much to bear.

Cold.

No matter how glaring the white ceiling lights were, the room and its dull concrete walls radiated an inexplicable chill. Slender, calloused fingers touched the cool glass that separated this room from the next; hot breath escaped thin parted lips and white clouds of condensation formed on the clear surface. The jaded man sighed; he much preferred the cold solitude of his cell – at least he didn't feel like some cheap exhibit put on show for a callous audience.
Humiliating. Lonely. Desperate. He needed to get out of here. He couldn't take the silence; his family’s pitying stares and fake smiles; masquerades of broken trust.

“Mr. Crescend, your lawyer’s here to see you.”

He straightened up at the guard’s words. Apollo? Hope resounded in his chest. The detention room door creaked open and he was on his feet in a heartbeat.

“About time, dude! Man, am I glad to see–” But he paused as soon as he noticed the silky smooth gleam of blonde flaxen hair, instead of a certain pair of brown hair spikes. Confusion and apprehension blossomed in his chest. “Kristoph?”

The bespectacled gentleman smiled at him – courteous yet superior in every way – and he felt strangely self-conscious. In his 10 years of knowing the Gavin brothers, this was the first time Kristoph stirred such feelings of dread and insecurity in his heart. But that was silly; the man was a professional, the top defense in the West. The prison food was probably getting to his brain. Now that he thought about it, he realised how ridiculous it all sounded: sure, the kid lucked out in court this morning, but how could he prefer Apollo Justice over the Kristoph Gavin’s years of expertise? Having the latter on his side was a good thing. He could trust the man to not only deliver, but deliver beyond all conceivable expectations.

“What do you think, punk?” was what Daryan almost grouched, but kept his insults to himself. There was nothing to gain from venting his frustrations on his attorney. Attorney’s mentor. Whatever.

“I’m holding on, I guess,” he replied, looking around. “Where’s the rookie? Why are you here?”

Kristoph chuckled. “Is that disappointment I hear?”

Daryan sputtered, indignant. Kristoph laughed again.

“Don’t worry, I jest. Apollo’s busy with the investigation. I’m here on his behalf. He passed on a favor and some questions.”

“Oh,” he answered lamely, dropping his gaze. Kristoph went on as if having never been interrupted.

“Now then – he straightened his neck ribbon – I’m only interested in the facts; anything else would be deemed insignificant, if not irrelevant. You will tell me two things,” he held up two fingers as he checked off his points. “One: how did Lamiroir’s guitar come into your knowledge? Two: your alibi an hour before the concert.”

Daryan cringed. Had Kristoph always been this emotionally unavailable? He was starting to miss Apollo’s enthusiasm already.

“Well…” he began, nervously scratching the back of his neck, “you know how Klav always drags me along for his travels, right?”

“Yes, even during business trips,” came the blonde’s disapproving reply as he wrinkled his nose. “And where does he think the money comes from? Then again, my brother has always been exceedingly fond of you, so I try to understand.”

“Uh… yeah, anyway,” Daryan continued with a blush, increasingly self-conscious. “Borginia was no exception – the place recently opened up to tourists, so I suggested we give it a shot. Something
new and exciting, you know? But their day tours were crap and I never paid so much for a bottle of water in my life! Actually, between you and me, it was kinda boring – did you know everywhere closes at 5 p.m.? We couldn't find a decent bar for days!”

Kristoph interrupted with an impatient cough. “So it was a holiday, then what?”

“That's when we met her – Lamiroir.” Daryan paused as he recalled that one fateful encounter at a rustic restaurant. “She was… singing. Playing her guitar. And I don't know if it was her voice or the guitar that drew Klav to her, but it was like magic. I’d never seen him look at anyone else like that before… After that, he invited her to come back with us and I went to help Machi pack their things. Her agent seemed more than eager to let her go – opportunity and all.”

“And the guitar?”

“Lamiroir only decided to give it to Klav the night before our flight. About three days after we met,” he replied as he thought carefully. “Then Klav started whining about the flight and condensation, so I suggested he make use of his connections.”

Kristoph tutted, “Flight carriers that transport legal evidence shouldn’t be abused for the meager purpose of increasing my little brother’s prolific guitar collection.” There was a knowing twinkle in his eyes. “And an Interpol agent shouldn’t be encouraging him either.”

“Hey, you know how difficult Klav gets when he’s all sulky. You raised him,” Daryan defended to which earned him a chuckle in response. “What's the big deal about this guitar anyway? Klav popped by earlier asking about it too.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“The hell I'd know! We were just tourists on a fucking holiday!”

Kristoph frowned at his outburst. “Don’t get testy with me, Daryan. I'm simply asking what my understudy wills. This is his case, you're his client, and as you know, my heading of this investigation would prove detrimental to your verdict should my involvement extend beyond mentorship.”

Daryan shoved his chair back and it clattered noisily onto the ground. His fists were balled so tightly, his fingernails dug into his palms and created little crescent marks in the skin. Enough was enough; he was sick of being treated so lightly. Kristoph had promised a swift and efficient trial; years of experience and unparalleled expertise lent credibility to his name. But the third and final day drew nearer and the silence brought with it nothing but an irrepressible anxiety, his affiliation with the Gavin brothers no remedy to his despair. Klavier’s hands were tied; what he felt towards his friend now was complicated; and Kristoph continued to radiate the emotionality of a block of ice.

“Bastard! At least pretend to care,” he growled through clenched teeth. “Everyone thinks I not only murdered the brat, but planned the smuggling too! Each day in that bloody courtroom keeps getting worse! Why isn't Apollo doing his job? What's taking so long? How can you be so fucking calm when my life's on the line?!”

A fist shot out and slammed against the glass, and Daryan fell silent from the sudden assault. With wide eyes, he stared in disbelief at the piercing ice-cold eyes that bored deep into his own; saw the corners of thin, graceful lips twitch in repressed abhorrence; a strand of blonde hair falling out of place; a demon pushing beneath the surface, bearing its fangs. Daryan gulped and lowered himself onto his seat obediently. Never had he seen Kristoph slip up before; he was almost a different person. The older Gavin was always patient, always smiling; dependable; perfectly harmless.
“If you're incapable of being rational, don't expect a miracle,” said Kristoph, expression dark and tone severe. “As far as the police are concerned, the ‘real killer’ is a myth. Klavier has enough evidence to link you to the cocoon smuggling. And if you insist on pleading innocent in this country, you'd be issued the death penalty as per Borgenian law.”

Daryan felt his heart sink. “No… Klav… He wouldn't-!”

“He doesn't have a choice.”

This isn't happening.

He buried his face in his hands and longed to wake from this dreadful nightmare. The police thinks I did it. Murder and smuggling. His situation was a precarious one: if he pleaded innocent to both charges despite conclusive evidence that claimed otherwise, he'd be dead; if he pleaded guilty to escape death, he'd be admitting to a crime he never actually committed and his life would be over. Neither option was particularly desirable.

“Alright,” he gave in with a deep sigh, “what do you want to know?”

Kristoph nodded at the slim device on the table. “I see that you brought it.”

“Huh? Oh yeah.” Daryan picked up his cell phone. “I just mentioned your name and the guard let me have it.” He shot the attorney a curious frown. “What did you need it for anyway?”

“During the trial this morning, when your phone came into Apollo’s possession, I noticed something while going through your call records,” said Kristoph, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose; a mysterious gleam across the glass. “A call at exactly 7.10 p.m. on concert night from a private number – was it Interpol?”

“Nah, I don’t have time for their shit when I rock,” his gaze softened and a sentimental smile graced his lips. “Damian called. He missed his big brother.”

“From the hospital?”

“Yeah...” The serene expression on his face however quickly turned dark. “He had just come out of surgery – there was a 98% chance it wouldn't work, but we were willing to try anything. His condition is growing worse and the doctors can't do a damn thing.”

Tears built in Daryan’s eyes and when he couldn't suppress his frustration any longer, he surprised both himself and Kristoph when he slammed his fists hard onto the table. His chest ached, his hands hurt, and when he felt warm liquid trail down his cheeks, he realized he was crying.

“I'm no murderer! The cocoon’s gone; the outcome doesn't match the fucking motive. Why’s Apollo the only person who can see that? Damian’s dying – he's dying and I can't even see him 'cuz I'm too busy being accused for murdering a fucking boy with a fucking cocoon, instead of keeping him alive to save my brother’s life!” He slammed his knee on the underside of the table so hard, it jumped. “The fuck does that make sense?!”

For a brief moment, Kristoph did nothing but stare at the emotional man; watched with impassive eyes as Daryan vented his rage on all things within his grasp, liked a caged animal rebelling against humanity’s flawed perspicacity. When there was nothing left to break, when Daryan finally settled down and all that could be heard was his ragged breathing; that was when Kristoph deemed it appropriate to resume.

“I understand,” he conceded, “that's why Apollo sent me here: to establish your alibi and clear your
Daryan blinked. “My alibi?”

“Apollo has uncovered some... *incriminating* evidence against you. Evidence that I myself am powerless to refute,” Kristoph explained with the slightest bit of annoyance. “To put it simply, Klavier has proof of your involvement in the cocoon smuggling, which leads to the possibility of you murdering Tobaye in order to cover your tracks in said illegal dealings. The victim died between 7-8 p.m.; your brother phoned you around the same time. That conversation could save your life.”

The weight of his words made Daryan’s heart skip a beat.

“So, you're saying that as long as I was busy, I couldn't have killed anyone,” he muttered, more to himself than Kristoph.

“Essentially. All staff have testified that they saw you on stage throughout the rehearsal; the murder happened backstage in Trucy’s dressing room.” Kristoph wagged his finger and fixed the younger male with a confident smirk. “Assuming they were mistaken, the only time you could've slipped away was when you answered this call. Its duration would tell us what we need to know.”

His piercing gaze traveled to the nondescript black cell phone clutched in his client’s hand.

“Let's hear it.”

Unsure where exactly the blonde was going with this, but with nothing left to lose, Daryan retrieved said recording and maxed out the volume. His and Damian’s voice carried clear across the room, echoing off the walls and leaving a cold, gaping hole in his heart. It wasn't that he had been fortunate enough to keep this conversation; he couldn't bear to delete it; after all, every word they shared could be Damian’s last. So, he sat in tense silence as the automated voice read off the date and time.

“Friday, May 6, 7.10 p.m.”

Two voices – an adult and adolescent male – sounded through.

“Hey, squirt. How ya doing?”

“Mn... Tired. The hospital’s music sucks. I miss your playing – rock’s my kind of lullaby.”

“Last I checked, electric guitars are banned in hospitals. You’re just trying to get me into trouble, aren’t you?”

“Haha... Bro?”

“What’s up?”

“I wish I could be there... at your concert. I never miss a single one.”

Daryan bit his lower lip as he did his best to keep his emotions at bay. Hearing his brother’s weak and sorrowful voice... It was terribly uncanny; displacing; like watching oneself on television. He felt like a failure. He was the big brother; he was supposed to protect him. But he felt so helpless. Heck, he didn't even know how Damian’s condition was faring now. Did the squirt know he was in jail? He probably did. Was Damian disappointed in him? Maybe. He wished he could stop thinking.

“Did you fulfill my last wish?”

“Idiot, don't talk like that! You're not dead; there's still hope—”
“Daryan.”

He visibly stiffened and was overcome by a sudden sense of *déjà vu*. This happened last week, but the two days were starting to blend into one. He felt like he was living the nightmare all over again.

Kristoph meanwhile, remained silent and continued to pay close attention. Most of the conversation was about idle things. It became apparent that Daryan had been on the phone for a considerable amount of time. The background was also pretty quiet – he had definitely slipped away from rehearsals. But why hadn't anyone noticed?

“You know… it's going to be a lot harder without you home. You and your fat ass is what's keeping the family together after all.”

“Hey! It’s called growing!”

“Yeah. Growing sideways.”

“Dick head!”

Kristoph frowned while Daryan chuckled. The mood turned sober eventually.

“Maybe… Maybe with me gone, dad might finally accept you as his son–”

“I DON’T WANT THAT!”

The Daryan on the phone was breathing heavily; emotional; obviously fighting back tears. But when he spoke again, his anger had faded into a broken whisper.

“I don't want that… Not like this… I should punch you for saying shit like that.”

A carefree laugh, yet so weak.

“Will I see you soon? It's lonely here at night.”

“Yeah, cross my heart. I'll be right over as soon as concert’s done. Don't you dare die on me before I get there, you hear?”

They talked some more, then said the usual parting words. Damian hung up first. The entire conversation lasted for 17 minutes, 21 seconds.

“7.28 p.m.,” said Kristoph, consulting his watch, “and the piano was brought on stage at 7.50 p.m. That would leave you exactly 22 minutes to commit the crime and hide the body.”

“I'm not a criminal!”

“Theoretically speaking.”

Daryan growled and threw his arms into the air. *Forget it*. He was sick and tired of reinstating his innocence.

“You're missing my point,” Kristoph interrupted impatiently. “You spoke to your brother for almost 20 minutes and there was barely any background noise, if none at all. I find it hard to believe that you could set off a crate of fireworks – which need I remind you, tend to be rather *deafening* – and kill someone. And even if you did do it *after* the call… well, from what I know – he inspected his nails – that's hardly possible.”
Daryan frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The detective,” he answered without missing a beat. “According to Klavier, his partner was alerted to the explosion and arrived at Trucy’s dressing room at 7.45 p.m. The body had already been moved; the fire extinguished. 17 minutes is hardly sufficient to commit murder, tame a fire, hide a corpse and return to stage. No matter how you do the math, it doesn’t add up.”

“So… You’re saying I’m safe? That Klav’s got nothing on me?”

“Precisely. Someone else was in a better position to commit the crime. Apollo and I will ride on this defense tomorrow.”

Daryan bowed his head and stared at his cell phone screen frozen on Damian’s smiling picture. To think a single conversation held so much power – and he had the squirt to thank.

“There’s only one inconsistency,” said Kristoph, calmly flipping open his case file to a recent interview. “According to concert staff, everyone saw you on stage throughout the rehearsal; yet you managed to speak on the phone undisturbed. How is that?”

“Heh, that’s easy,” Daryan smirked as he folded his arms. “The Gavinners weren't playing. Trucy doll wanted to rehearse Lamiroir’s disappearing act one last time, so we stopped for a bit. But that diva ended up taking so long, I managed to answer my phone. Thank God too, because Damian didn't sound so good…”

“And what did the five of you end up doing in the meantime?”

Daryan shrugged. “Mostly waited around… checked our phones… Then when Lamiroir finally came on, everyone watched… Oh yeah!” He snapped his fingers when he remembered something. “Some time after that, around 7.45 p.m., the detective came to tell us about the fire. Klav went to check it out, but since it was almost showtime, there wasn’t any time to investigate.”

‘A solid alibi,’ thought Kristoph as his mind ran through the facts. The victim died backstage; Daryan was on stage the entire time. Unless a person could be at two places at once, he didn’t see a way to resolve this inconsistency.

“Then I see no other explanation apart from the actions of a third party,” he concluded after some time, collapsing the report and pulling up the latest file Apollo uploaded on the server. “The only problem now is the evidence.”

“Evidence?” Daryan repeated curiously, cocking his head to the side. Then his expression turned pale and the beginnings of panic started to show. “You mean there's more apart from that kerosene container and lighter?”

Kristoph chose not to dignify that with a response. Instead, he threw out a 3D diagram of an acoustic guitar and decided to let the picture do the talking for him.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

Daryan gazed at the hologram miserably – Lamiroir’s guitar missing its strings, and some cocoon silk residue inside the sound hole — and felt his confidence and faith wane once more. Now he understood Kristoph’s urgency about his and Klavier’s trip to Borginia and mentally cursed himself for ever suggesting that alternate flight service. Only an Interpol agent would know their way around the system; no doubt Klavier realised this too and pegged him to his suspicions. He bowed his head in defeat.
“Yes.”

“Then you should know what tomorrow’s trial will focus on,” said Kristoph in one final warning as he gathered his things. “Try not to lose sleep over this – you need to be at your 100%.”

Daryan peered at the famed attorney from beneath his hair, eyes uncertain. “Hey… Do you really think we’ll win this?”

Kristoph smiled. “Trust me: I never fail a client.”

And with a curt goodbye, he left as swiftly and silently as he had arrived.

When the detention room doors boomed shut and all was still once more, Daryan held up his cell phone and stared at the screen for the longest time; at the recorded conversation he knew would haunt him beyond these walls and for the rest of his life. His thumb hovered over the play button; hesitated; deliberated; then hit it in a culmination of anger and desperation.

Damian’s voice echoed around the room one last time.

“Did you fulfill my last wish?”

He threw the phone against the wall, buried his face in his arms and cried.

In an old building opposite the famed Gatewater Hotel, along a quiet, undisturbed corridor; a pair of feet stopped in front of a worn blue welcome mat and a door with a window made out of frosted glass. Overcome by a slew of emotions – mostly misplaced nostalgia, pity and remnants of hero worship (he couldn't believe he was standing in front of his idol’s old office) – Apollo observed the premises with a heavy heart. Specks of gold paint remained on the glass and if he looked hard enough, he could make out the faint outline of the words “Wright & Co. Law Offices” from seven years ago. Now, in its place, was a handmade signboard carelessly slapped above the door with the words “Wright Talent Agency” in colorful, childish writing. Apollo felt uncomfortable just looking at it: puns aside, it's intentional lopsided placement was seriously grating on his OCD.

He looked down at the name card between his fingers, then back up at the sign. Klavier was right; whoever came up with the name probably told one cold joke too many. Absently, he wondered what sort of “talent” Phoenix himself was advertising (Trucy’s magic acts aside) and with a shudder, prayed it wasn't what he thought it was.

He rang the doorbell and waited. No answer. He tried again, but was met with the same silence. Then he knocked. Still nothing. Was Phoenix even home? Apollo seriously hoped this wasn't the ex-lawyer’s idea of a joke – and the guy didn't even have his phone on him. With an exasperated sigh, he peeled back the corner of the welcome mat with his foot and bent down to retrieve something. “If niemand answers, there’s a spare key unter die Matte,” Klavier had said and Apollo wondered just how frequently he visited the Wrights to know about such things.

Turning the key and pushing the door open, Apollo tentatively stuck his head into the room and gave the place a once-over before stepping inside. The lock caught with a soft ‘click’ and he greedily took in every little detail of his idol’s humble (though unkempt) abode. The view left him feeling slightly displaced: it wasn't an office anymore; there was little to no trace of the old law firm like the one featured in magazines and old newspaper cut-outs he hid under his bed for safekeeping; rather, a
cosy little flat for two. He gave the place a quick once-over. It was cramped, but it was home.

In the center of the common area was a modest sofa set and glass coffee table covered with a strange variety of knick knacks. One glance was all it took for him to conclude they belonged mostly to Trucy: fake flowers; interlocking metal rings; a miniature guillotine; a pair of oversized blue-and-pink panties with hearts (what the hell was this even for?) and a deck of playing cards messily strewn about. Against the wall was a bookshelf (if you could call it that) chuck-full of even more miscellaneous junk: a trick box; white gloves; more playing cards; a stuffed white rabbit; a birdcage; a small funhouse mirror; a magic wand atop a blue magician’s hat; a peculiar pasta display piece complete with suspended fork – and as you guessed it, no books whatsoever, which made Apollo wonder what the heck was the point of a bookshelf in the first place. Finally, just a few ways next to it, primped and polished with its ivory keys glistening under the light, was a piano. Judging by how new it looked, it probably wasn’t played with much.

Apollo absently ran his fingers over the keys, a sudden sentimental pang going through his heart. A piano… hadn’t Phoenix been a piano-player when they first met? Well, sort of; Phoenix had been many things. 19th April seemed so long ago and already, so much had changed: the man’s job, his life, their relationship…

Huh?

He paused at the mantel; two sheets of white cloth hid something beneath. Strange; why were these the only things hidden from view? Driven by curiosity, he pulled back the first sheet: a photo frame with a picture of a stern, well-built man in a magician’s costume frowned at him through the glass. The photo was in black-and-white, but Apollo immediately recognized it as Zak Gramarye, the accused from seven years ago who disappeared off the face of this earth. The death of his mentor, Magnifi Gramarye, remained a mystery until this day; and all Zak left behind was the result of his own cowardice – an entire legacy unfulfilled; a poor, misled daughter; and a lawyer who had sacrificed everything because he believed and trusted too much.

“Seven years really changes a person,” Apollo found himself reciting Clay’s words.

He still remembered the sight of Phoenix scantily dressed and sexily made up as he headed into a cheap apartment with some man that cold springtime evening. Remembered Phoenix asking for help and offering his body as payment. Remembered the many posters of his hero in his bedroom that he had since taken down after that incident.

It was jarring. Phoenix was like two sides of the same coin. Sometimes when Apollo looked at him, he saw two faces; two postures; heard two distinct voices and didn’t know which was which. It was like experiencing two sets of personalities simultaneously – the selfless angel and the devilish rogue – with the latter set used as a permanent defense mechanism; after all, one couldn't get hurt if one stopped caring. Hardship taught Phoenix depravity and desperation became a permanent fixture in his fractured soul, a wound that had festered over seven tragic years. His hero was a washed up has-been, a vagabond, a whore. There were times he asked himself why didn't he just give up, but he always bounced back more determined than before because his conviction was clear. Despite all his confusion and disappointment, Apollo knew that one thing remained and would always remain constant: his undying devotion.

“God, I’m messed up,” he realised with a shake of his head. But even though he knew he was, a life without Phoenix wasn't a life he wanted to wake up to, and he would gladly do it all over again.

Apollo reached for the other sheet, but just when his fingers made to lift the cloth, a sudden crash sounded from the bedroom next to him, and he let it fall. What the heck was that? He pressed himself against the wall and his hand hovered over the door knob, fingers twitching; a bead of sweat ran
down his temple. *A burglar?* Though he honestly doubted there was much to steal from the Wrights…

“Alright, Justice. On the count of 3. 1… 2…” He braced himself and kicked the door open, “*Stop right there – eh?*”

No one. Just a giant wooden puppet on the floor.

He stared down at the peculiar thing, torn between feeling relieved and exasperated. *All this fuss over a block of wood.* Judging by that blue cape around its neck and matching top hat that had rolled off its head, it could only belong to one Trucy Wright and this was probably her bedroom. Also, why she owned this giant, unwieldy thing was beyond his comprehension. *The Wrights are so weird.* With a great heave, he picked the thing up and placed it back on the desk. Gods, it was *heavy!* No wonder it fell with such an impact. He was just about to walk out when his eyes suddenly caught sight of a single blueprint spread across the desk top. It was labeled, ‘Sunshine Colosseum Floor Plan’ and Apollo studied it with a nervous frown.

“What the… Why would a *teenager* have this?”

The plans detailed the entire concert vicinity from the stage to the backstage area – even the underground pipes and vent system running above. Certain areas were marked and circled in red ink and a particular vent passage leading from backstage to the elevated platform in the performance area, was highlighted in bright blue. A closer look revealed that the vent ran above all three dressing rooms – could this be how the killer got in and out of the crime scene undetected? Could it fit an adult? He would have to find a means to test this theory. Was Trucy the only one familiar with these plans? Why did she even have them to begin with? All these questions made her out to be incredibly suspicious, something her father would no doubt try to hide from the authorities again.

*But what if these belong to Mr. Wright?*

Phoenix and his daughter: was there more to Trucy’s involvement during intermission? More to her secrecy, even towards her beloved Uncle Klavier? What else was Phoenix hiding? Was he protecting his daughter, or was his daughter the one protecting him? And from what exactly? Where or what was the motive?

*What should I do?*

Phoenix’s voice rang through his head: ‘*Always believe in your client… Always seek out the truth.*’

Even if the truth might end up working against him.

“Sorry, Mr. Wright.”

Stepping back, Apollo snapped a photo of the blueprint with his cell phone. At this point, nothing could be ruled out.

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He closed the bedroom door behind him and re-entered the living room. A quick glance at the clock on the wall told him it was almost 5 p.m. and there was still no sign of Phoenix. *Where is he?* Impatience crept in, and plagued by thoughts of that mysterious blueprint, he decided to pay his idol’s room a visit and make the most of his investigation. However, as soon as he stepped into the bedroom, the strong scent of perfume attacked his senses along with the sight of some jewelry neatly
laid out on the dresser. It didn't take long for his brain to make the connection and the realization made his heart ache.

Was Phoenix seeing a woman? But what about his relationship with Kristoph? Neither option left Apollo feeling any less disappointed; after all, where did that leave him in his idol’s life?

That was when he noticed an open suitcase on the floor next to the bed. It was filled with women’s clothes, toiletries, other feminine essentials and some books. He flipped through them and was immediately overcome with a sense of déjà vu. Wait a second, hadn't he done this a few days ago? And these symbols…

_Borginian literature_, he realised, the same ones he had found in Lamiroir’s dressing room. There were some other things too: a rumpled old envelope and a passport. The envelope was unsealed, so he lifted the flap and pulled out a set of documents – it was a hospital bill and the sum was a hefty one. He didn’t really understand all the complicated medical jargon, but from what he could gather, it had been a serious life-and-death operation that involved the world’s top surgeon from Germany. The bill was from a decade ago and from the looks of it, had only been partially fulfilled. Was this woman ill? He flipped open the passport to fit a face to her identity, but the photograph he saw made him gasp.

“Lamiroir?!”

_What the hell!_ Why did Phoenix have Lamiroir’s passport? He could only think of one explanation – he didn't like it, but it all made sense.

Neither the police nor prosecution knew where Lamiroir was since the start of the trial. Had she been staying with the Wrights all this time? Didn't this case involve Machi, the very boy she treated as a son? Then why was she running away? Why was Phoenix helping her? _What_ was he helping her with? What could he possibly gain from keeping her whereabouts a secret? What _more_ did he know?

Apollo quickly ran through the facts in his head: a grudge against the victim; fingerprints on the piano; keeping Trucy from testifying and withholding information from the court; went missing during the time of murder; detailed blueprints found in Trucy’s bedroom; and now, hiding Lamiroir from the police.

_Maybe I got it all wrong._

Perhaps it wasn't Kristoph that he shouldn't trust, but Phoenix himself. Still, none of this answered the most important question: where was the cocoon now?

Just then, the sound of running water jolted him from his thoughts. A _shower_? Now that he realised it, the bedroom did feel a little warm and the dresser’s mirror seemed almost foggy. Had Phoenix been bathing all this time? His _gaze_ traveled to the little sliding door to the room’s side; it was open a crack and hot steam rushed out from within; the sound of the shower spray pelting the tiles like an endless rain of bullets.

“Mr. Wright?” he called out and without really thinking, slid the bathroom door open. “Mr…” His breath caught in his throat.

There, beautiful and vulnerable under the spray of water and coquettishly draped in hot steam, stood Phoenix Wright – naked, blissfully unaware and helpless before Apollo’s hungry _gaze_. Beautiful. Hazel eyes dark with lust raked the fair body appreciatively; over every fine contour and muscle; burned invisible marks of ownership upon unblemished flesh. It beckoned him like a siren and he was powerless to resist its song.
Soft. Velvetine. Impossibly smooth. Every inch of his idol appeared delicate to the touch; yet those
tight muscles that glistened from the water were nothing but exquisite. A perfect balance. Divine.
Michael Angelo couldn't have chiselled a finer specimen. It was amazing: seven years and Phoenix
still managed to look so ridiculously fit, though it could simply be his own bias talking.

Suddenly, Phoenix threw back his head and moaned – loud, long and sensual. The sound went
straight to Apollo’s cock and he desperately fought down a blush along with his excitement. At the
same time, it pissed him off how the ex-lawyer could make a simple activity like bathing look so
fucking sexy. But he couldn't stop looking, couldn’t peel his gaze away from the hands that lathered
soap onto the flawless curve of a pale neck; tease that glorious collarbone; rub those delicious pink
nipples that were straining for attention; trail down the gap between that smooth chest; massage those
washboard abs; and dip past that adorable belly button. Apollo too watched the long fait digits dance
across the fine arch of the man’s lower back; stroke his perky ass; run further down to dip between
his legs and disappear beneath that cute little tuft of black hair to stroke and lather up his sweet cock.

_God, that's hot._

He couldn't get enough of those hands. It was teasing, sensual, a sight for the eyes; and he had to bite
back a moan of his own just thinking about Phoenix and what his skilled hands could do to him. It
took some willpower to resist touching himself. Honest to God, he never considered himself a
voyeur until Phoenix paid Kristoph a visit in office last month; but even that was different from his
situation now and unlike the last time, he didn't have to keep silent while his boss busied himself by
fucking Phoenix’s brains out. No, there was no Kristoph; they were alone together; and Phoenix was
putting on an erotic show exclusively for his eyes.

How many nights had he laid awake desiring Phoenix Wright? Blood pounded a symphony in his
ears; his breathing turned ragged; the heat made it harder to think straight. If he didn't walk out right
now, he feared he might do something he would surely regret.

“Care to join me, lawyer-boy?”

Someone giggled, low, smug and playful. It took great effort for Apollo to lift his gaze from
exploring that sinful body, to the owner’s own smirking face. Twinkling blue eyes met hazel. Apollo
gulped and stuttered. That smirk grew wider and his face turned redder from the embarrassment of
having been caught.

“I… I… Uh…”


“Mm… I'm not sure if I'm _fully_ clean.” Phoenix licked his lips with a suggestive wink. “Would my
attorney like to investigate?”

The blush on Apollo’s face exploded. If that wasn't an open invitation, he didn't know what was. He
was just thankful he still had some sense and self-restraint left.

“N-No! That’s… That’s fine – uh…. I'll just uh… I'll wait outside!”

And with that, he zipped out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut with a violent “BANG!”
Fuck, he didn't even care if he broke the door; it was all Phoenix’s fault. He heard said man laughing
from within and felt a vein in his head throb. _I hope he gets soap in his eye, then we’ll see who’s
laughing._ Apollo contented himself with that thought as he plugged his nose with tissue.

‘Geez, Justice, get ahold of yourself,’ he mentally admonished. ‘If you can't handle Mr. Wright alone
for five minutes, how are you going to question him?’

Tossing the bloodied tissues into a nearby waste paper bin, Apollo sighed and stuffed his hands into his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels. The shower was still running and he really needed something to distract his mind from wandering to dirty thoughts surrounding a certain ex-defense attorney... even if said guy did actually come onto him more than twice.... plus they were alone in his flat... in his bedroom... Argh! Stop it, Justice! Stop it!

He stopped abusing his head repeatedly against the wall however, when he noticed something colorful lying innocently on Phoenix’s bedside table. Its glossy surface gleamed under the late afternoon light. Intrigued, he held it up between his fingers and turned it over: it was a postcard depicting Lamiroir painting a portrait in the center of a beautiful and enchanting forest. The words, “Lamiroir: ‘Sight-Seeing’ Musique” were printed in lovely cursive on the card’s front.

Apollo took his time to study the image, held captive by an unfathomable force. So, this is Lamiroir. The experience was different from looking at her passport. Though the singer’s face and body were mostly covered, her aura was divine, stunning, beautiful in its purity – and it wasn't a stretch to assume her voice was equally so. It was a mystery: he had neither seen nor heard of this woman prior to this trial, but just looking at this picture, he felt drawn to her somehow, like the natural pull from a magnet’s two opposing poles; like he knew her from somewhere, sometime before...

“You can keep it if you want. It was supposed to be your souvenir from the concert,” said a voice and Apollo whirled around to spot Phoenix emerging from the bathroom in a fluffy bathrobe, drying his hair with a towel. It kind of amazed him how it could still be so spikey even when wet.

“Go ahead, I can tell that you like it.”

The way the older male’s voice dipped into a gentle purr was enough to convince Apollo to do just that.

“T-Thanks,” he mumbled, pocketing the postcard carefully, “I... Ah... I'm not really a fan, but I'll give her music a listen one of these days.”

Phoenix smiled. “You really should. It'll change your life.”

The warmth and sincerity of his gaze made Apollo’s heart flutter, but it disappeared quickly and a sparkle of mischief took its place.

“Turn around, would you?”

Apollo blinked, “Why?”

The bathrobe fell to the floor and he immediately turned around with a mortified squawk. Oh God, oh God, oh God. Think pure thoughts. Good. Clean. Pure thoughts. This was a serious investigation. The man had a boyfriend. He had a job to do. Besides, Phoenix had called him here to... to...

He heard the creak of a cupboard door opening, followed by the rustling of clothes. Blushing and unable to resist temptation, he snuck a peek just in time to see Phoenix’s cute ass disappear under a pair of tight-fitting, ripped denim shorts that ended just under his butt. Woah... Those really didn't leave much to the imagination. It was nice to see Phoenix in something other than his usual beanie, baggy hoodie and sweatpants for a change. Not that he was a pervert or anything, but damn those legs really went on forever...

Meanwhile, peering over his shoulder as he changed, Phoenix chuckled at the poor, flustered brunette whose face was so red, he looked like he could pass out any second. As he watched the
kid’s eyes dart distractedly about the room to focus on anything but him, a sudden, inexplicable warmth and sense of contentment wormed its way into Phoenix’s heart the longer he stared. Apollo really was endearing.

“Sorry, old habits die hard,” he said after pulling on a cream colored v-neck sweater. Then, he crossed the room, sat on the bed and patted the spot next to him; kissable pink lips curved upwards into a smile; voice carrying a flirtatious lure as he spoke, “Care to join me? I promise I won’t bite – he winked – unless you want me to.”

Apollo lost count of the number of times his pants felt way too tight in that ten minutes alone.

“So, what’s the hurry, lawyer-boy?” Phoenix stretched languidly across the queen size bed, crossing his ankles and giving his guest a generous view of his legs. “If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you were intentionally sabotaging my lunch date.”

It took everything in Apollo’s resolve to stop drooling and actually get his feet moving.

“So, I just really needed to talk to you.” He sat a comfortable distance from Phoenix and the mattress sank a little from the weight. “So, uh, Prosecutor Gavin said you had something urgent to discuss… Something about me.”

Phoenix blinked and sat up, “About you?”

“About me… About this morning…”

All Apollo got in return however, was a frown and his nervousness quickly ebbed away when it became clear Phoenix had no idea what he was talking about. In fact, the confusion on his face mirrored his own. Had he forgotten?

“You know... about my defense in court.”

“Young defense?”

“How I stepped out of line while handling your daughter.”

“That's very considerate of you, Apollo, but you should be apologizing to Trucy, not me.”

He facepalmed. For a guy who made it his job to play coy, Phoenix wasn't that great with subtlety.

“You wanted to sue me!”

The reaction he got left him feeling lost and extremely inadequate. Phoenix laughed – he actually laughed! And here he was fretting over his finances and career, while the other didn't even take him seriously.

“Aahahah! My bad, my bad,” Phoenix said in between giggles, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, “but how else was I going to get you to come down so quickly?”

“You could've just asked!” Apollo practically exploded.

The ex-lawyer simply stuck out his tongue in a childish act of defiance. Apollo rolled his eyes. *Oh, real mature. Unlike some people,* he actually had work to do, and this godforsaken case was already
majorly stressing him out as it was. And of all things, Phoenix thought it would be funny to joke about suing *him*? Gods, that call earlier nearly gave him a heart attack! It was times like this that reminded Apollo his idol was actually 13 instead of 33 years old.

He massaged his forehead with a sigh, “Why do you have to be so annoying?”

Phoenix held his hands up in defense. “It's a joke, Polly – lighten up! You know, if you don't learn to relax, your frown lines are going to turn permanent and you'll start balding before 30.”

“What?!”

Phoenix hid a chuckle behind his hand, eyes shining with unspoken love. The kid was so easily riled up; he missed that burning spirit, all that raw passion; the freedom to dance amidst the flames Apollo ignited with his gaze. He yearned for that attention, all that warmth and unconditional affection – no clauses, no games, no second guesses. Being with the young attorney brought him tremendous comfort; he didn't have to watch his words or himself; didn't have to pretend; report on his every movement. Risking Kristoph’s wrath and losing his phone was worth it, if that meant he could speak to Apollo for another day. For the first time in seven years, he could spread his wings and envision a life beyond the confines of his cage. He could be free.

Lately, as their interactions grew more frequent and intimate, Phoenix actually found himself wondering how different life would be if he had met Apollo first. Would he treat him the same way as Kristoph? Different? Would Apollo even like him seven years ago when he himself could barely stand the sight of his own pathetic reflection? But then he remembered how much Kristoph had done for him, stayed true during his darkest time, and for that he felt immensely guilty. Now that he thought about it, he realised how selfish he was. He already had Kristoph; the man was good to him; the perfect boyfriend – how could he ask for more? Apollo was still young, handsome, ambitious; he had his whole life ahead of him. It was probably best to spare the kid his brokenness and have things remain as they were.

“There's another reason for my actions though,” he said and met Apollo’s gaze dead on, all previous amusement dissipating, telling the lawyer with his eyes that there was more to this impromptu meeting than he had previously let on. “I didn't want Klavier to be suspicious of our meeting. He's been badgering me for answers and I don't want him to think that I'm exercising favoritism with the defense. Also…” He trailed off with a nervous, almost fearful look in his eyes. “I didn't want to give Klavier a reason to contact Kristoph. If he found out about our meeting, he'd forbid it.”

There was nothing Apollo could say to that, save silence. That last statement alone was enough to confirm his suspicions on Phoenix and Kristoph’s abusive relationship. Honestly, it wasn't difficult to notice the signs. But even a blind person could see that the love Phoenix had for Kristoph was genuine, and all he could do was hold on and hope for a miracle. It was wrong. It was foolish. It was painful. But he swore loyalty to his hero and love never asked for anything in return.

“Anyway, what was it you wanted to ask me?” asked Phoenix with a look of concern. “It doesn’t sound like it can wait.”

“It can,” Apollo interrupted, once again placing Phoenix’s needs before his own. “You look like you have something far more pressing to tell me first – you bite your bottom lip every time you look at me.”

That earned him a smirk from said man. “Can't pull the wool over your perceptive eyes, can I?”

When all Apollo did was stare at him curiously, he decided now was the best time to come clean.
“You… have a gift – a special ability, if you will,” he began slowly, cautiously, gauging the brunette’s reaction as he spoke. So far so good. “Remember how you could tell that Valerian and Crow were lying? And all those times your wrist hurt? – that’s no injury, kid. It's your bracelet.”

Immediately, Apollo’s hand moved to touch said accessory. The skeptical frown on his face indicated his perplexity and suspicion.

“My bracelet? What does my bracelet have to do with anything?”

“Could I see it for a minute?”

Apollo slipped it off his wrist and handed it to Phoenix who studied it carefully; turned it over and traced its exotic markings with his fingertips. No doubt about it; it was a perfect match to Lamiroir’s. But why did these two very different people from two very different parts of the world, have them? What was the connection between these two bracelets? And by extension, what did it all mean?

“If I’m not mistaken, it's made out of a very special alloy that’s able to change shape according to the conditions of its surroundings,” Phoenix explained. “My guess is that it reacts every time your muscles tense up.”

“Tense up?” Apollo repeated, obviously lost.

Phoenix nodded and gently held the back of Apollo’s hand as he slipped the bracelet over his wrist, while ignoring the pleasant tingles that shot through his fingers as their skins touched.

“You see, it's a perfect fit now, right? Now try flexing your arm a bit… There.” He lightly touched the skin just straining from beneath the bracelet with his index finger. “It takes a while for it to accommodate the new size, but notice in that split second there’s some discomfort? That’s from the temporary resistance. Was the feeling like this during this morning’s cross-examination?”

All Apollo could do was nod dumbly in response. How does Mr. Wright know so much? He was still trying to wrap his mind around Phoenix’s ludicrous, yet startlingly reasonable theory; after all, as crazy as it sounded, it did explain why his left wrist in particular seemed to hurt and Valerian did offer a similar suggestion when he first looked at it. But the main reason he was terribly tongue-tied was because of his idol’s touch. All he could focus on was the wonderful, feather-light sensation of Phoenix’s fingers on the back of his wrist. Every touch, every twitch felt like fire and sent little jolts of excitement through his skin. It caused him to shudder in want and anticipation; he couldn't breathe, couldn't think straight. Discretely, he spared a glance up at Phoenix’s face: kind, shining blue eyes; soft features; that sexy stubble; those delectable rose petal lips…

He quickly caught himself from leaning closer and straightened up with a blush. That was close. He was only thankful that Phoenix was too preoccupied to pay attention.

“So, uh,” he cleared his throat awkwardly, “my muscles tensed when I noticed the inconsistencies in their statements?”

“Not exactly,” Phoenix replied. “They tensed because you were stressed from the over-stimulation. Tell me, Apollo – he looked him in the eye – it really hurt to look at someone who was lying, didn’t it?”

His words struck home and Apollo felt his stomach lurch as the unpleasant memories from court resurfaced and attacked his senses. He remembered how deafening the sounds were; every detail and feature of a subject rendered in hyper-focus; couldn't stop himself from noticing the tiniest of twitches and wandering eyes; recalled how everything looked like a blinding white light at the end of a
tunnel; how scared he was; how it hurt to stay conscious; that it was tough to simply breathe.

“You have to control it,” Phoenix warned, “or it'll end up controlling you and the way you perceive the truth.”

“How do you know so much?” Apollo demanded. “How do you have the answers for something even I never knew of?”

“I have a friend with the same gift,” Phoenix replied evasively with a shrug. “I've seen it before. Trucy has a similar ability. Some people have a knack for cracking another person’s secrets; others can perceive the truth from a mountain of lies.” He flashed Apollo a wide grin. “Think of it this way, kid: it'll make lawyering that much more fun!”

Apollo groaned in return. Trust the Turnabout King to turn even the most serious of topics into a jape. He wouldn't use the word fun per se, but at least it was a nifty skill to keep in mind and it hadn't led him wrong yet.

“Speaking of lawyering, I was hoping we could get back to my investigation. I have some questions to ask you.”

“Aww… Already? And here I thought you kept calling because you missed me,” Phoenix said with a pout, but even Apollo could tell that he was only teasing.

“As much as I wish I had the time for idle chatter, this case takes precedence,” he replied with his arms crossed and for a split moment, he reminded Phoenix so much of Kristoph. Of course, Phoenix was well aware that mentor and apprentice were worlds apart in terms of character and appearance, but it didn’t stop his brain from making the association. The resemblance shocked him so much, he actually gave in without a fight.

“A-Alright, what do you want to know?”

“Where were you and what were you doing from 7-8 p.m.?” Apollo decided to skip the preamble and dive right in. “Everyone has testified to your absence, including your daughter.”

The accusation made him angry.

“It'll be convenient for you if I admit I killed the brat, wouldn't it?” he snapped and despite his abrupt coldness, Apollo could sense his defensiveness and fear from a mile away. Even the man’s own boyfriend tried to accuse him in court this morning. He could only imagine the extent of Phoenix’s bitterness.

“I'm not saying anything, Mr. Wright,” he coaxed as he placed a comforting hand on the man’s lap. “I don't know what my boss or Prosecutor Gavin has told you, and I frankly don't care. All I'm interested in is the truth. If you have a solid alibi, if you're as innocent as I believe you are, then prove it. Tell me and I will fight for you.”

Phoenix snorted and avoided his gaze. “You have your priorities all wrong.”

“Do I?”

He presented the scrap of dark blue fabric and watched his idol’s expression change.

“I found this at the crime scene; I'm guessing it came from one of your costumes. It was the only thing that remained untouched by the fire, meaning that whatever it came from was only in the room after the fireworks died.” A flicker of recognition flashed across Phoenix’s eyes and Apollo was
quick to seize that opening. “This piece of cloth is my trump card. Unless you can tell me whose
clothes match this fabric, I’ll have nothing to counter the prosecution’s claims tomorrow. It’s either
you or Daryan at this point. Both are options I refuse to accept. I’m not Mr. Gavin; I can’t do what he
does. There’s a limit to the actions I’d take for a successful defense.”

Phoenix bowed his head. “But I…”

Apollo gently seized his chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted it, so he could look into
those lonely blue eyes he adored so much. He held Phoenix’s gaze, tender and beseeching in its
silence. And when he spoke again, his voice came out hoarse and heavy with emotion. It held
Phoenix fast and he refused to let go.

“Please, I don’t want to see you suffer again. Help me not make the same mistake twice.”

Despite his resolve, he was trembling, and it took a smile from Phoenix and touch of his hand to gain
the assurance he needed. Just by looking at that smile, the barest upward curve of his hero’s lips,
Apollo knew that the man understood and that he was forgiven.

“An attorney needs to be ruthless, Apollo,” commented Phoenix after some time. “You’re not.”

“Sir…”

“But you’re not Kristoph,” he finally acknowledged, both to Apollo and himself. “You have a heart
of gold; you’re different. Stay this way.” And with a grateful smile and pat on Apollo’s shoulder, he
rose to his feet. “Give me a minute.”

Apollo watched as Phoenix rounded the bed to a trunk at its end, and threw it open. Rummaging
around for a bit, he finally pulled out a roll of dark blue fabric, the exact same shade as the piece of
evidence clutched in Apollo’s hand. He unrolled it and held it up for the brunette to see; some of the
edges were frayed and unevenly cut; there was hardly enough left to make a dress.

“About 7 p.m. on Friday, Lamiroir came to me in a state of panic: her costume was missing and it
was an hour to showtime. I bought exactly 5 meters of this fabric here to sew her a replacement,”
Phoenix explained as he folded the cloth and tossed it back into the trunk. “Kudos to the police for
eventually finding it, but I doubt Lamiroir would want it back after it was used to wrap a corpse.”

“So the cloak she wore during the actual concert…” Apollo trailed off.

“Was a replacement, yes,” he finished with a nod. “I had less than an hour after purchasing the
fabric, so I had to sew the cloak on the cab ride back.” He dug around in his wallet and produced
three receipts. “Here’s the receipt from the fabric store with the time stamp. And these two are from
the cab rides – don’t lose them, or I won’t be able to claim money from Klavier.”

“Alright-”

“Don’t lose them! That trip cost me $40! Do you know how much grape juice I could get with $40?
I’m entrusting this to you with my life.”

“Ok, ok! Yeesh!”

Apollo snatched the receipts from Phoenix’s unrelenting hand. Seriously, how cheap was this guy?
And shouldn’t he be saving money for rent and raising his daughter, instead of spending it on grape
juice? Somebody really needed to get their priorities straight. Plus, for someone at risk of being the
new accused, Phoenix didn’t seem very worried about his alibi. In fact, he didn’t seem very worried
at all.
Apollo quickly scanned the three receipts: the first cab ride was clocked in at 7.02 p.m. and out at 7.10 p.m.; the second cab ride at 7.18 p.m. and 7.48 p.m.; and the cloth was purchased from Sewit’s Fabric Depot at exactly 7.15 p.m. It was a solid alibi. No matter how one saw it, it was impossible for Phoenix to be the murderer.

But where did that leave Daryan? He certainly hoped his boss was having better luck than he was at the detention center.

"What about the piano?" he asked. "You told the court that you saw it in the hallway before the concert."

"Yeah, I did," Phoenix replied, "but that's before I left for the cloth shop. I don't recall if I saw it after I came back."

Apollo stiffened; his bracelet just tightened.

"Mr. Wright... are you sure about that?" he ventured with a wary stare. "Because if you really have nothing to hide, you wouldn't be picking at the blanket so much."

For a while, Phoenix did nothing but stare at him, expression unreadable, before he burst out laughing.

"Looks like I brought this on myself. Shouldn't have told you so much about that skill of yours when you're here to question me." He shook his head good-naturedly and appealed to the brunette's good faith. "Kid, cut me some slack. I was rushing to get the costume to Lamiroir; I wouldn't remember the piano, much less have time to even notice it. Besides, it was brought on stage at 7.50 p.m. – 2 minutes doesn't make much of a difference."

"I suppose that makes sense..." Apollo conceded thoughtfully, but he couldn't tell if the discomfort he felt around his wrist was a new one or carried over from the previous reaction.

"You look like you still have a couple of things on your mind," Phoenix pointed out with a knowing smirk, playfully poking at the knots between Apollo’s eyebrows. "What is it, lawyer-boy?"

"I… Well, actually…” Apollo blushed and avoided his stare, but there was no way of running from those blue eyes, hiding from the affliction of his own heart. Phoenix was watching him closely, almost perceptive. He felt the heat from the man’s stare and gulped. It was now or never.

"Mr. Wright, did…” He bit his lip and hesitated. "Did you know that Mr. Talvinen liked you?"

A look of honest surprise crossed Phoenix’s face, before his expression softened into a warm, gentle smile. It was the kind of smile that understood, said they knew, and didn't mind. Phoenix hid a chuckle behind his hand. The kid really was an open book.

"Honestly, has this been bothering you all day?"

When the blush on Apollo’s face deepened and his defiant stuttering intensified, he decided to stop tormenting the poor boy, moved by the younger's sincerity.

"Yes, I knew Amaranth liked me. I knew from the very beginning."

"Then why didn't you respond to his letters?"

"Because,” said Phoenix with a beautiful smile that could melt even the coldest of hearts, “I rather spend my breaks talking to a certain hot-blooded attorney on the phone.”
Apollo could've sworn he felt his heart stop. *He can't mean…* But he did. Phoenix was blushing himself, bashfully avoiding the younger man’s searching stare and covering his mouth as if mortified by what he had just confessed, for giving into his own weakness. Was he betraying Kristoph? Yes, yes he was. Did he regret it? No, he didn't.

He gasped when he felt a sudden warmth against his skin. Their hands touched, souls innocent and hearts a flutter; and Apollo gently lowered Phoenix’s hand so that he could get a better look at his face. ‘Mr. Wright really is cute,’ he thought as he admired his hero; took in his handsome, sultry, yet baby-soft features; allowed his eyes to linger appreciatively at the low v-neck that exposed the skin of Phoenix’s chest just begging to be touched. Sweet, lovable, a little naive and honest – *this* was the Phoenix he loved. This was the Phoenix he saw hiding away in the glazed, lonely blue eyes of a hobo he had the (mis)fortune of bumping into one spring day. Back then, they were mere strangers brought together by a harmless joker card; now, it was difficult to pretend they didn't care.

“I'm sorry,” Apollo whispered, and Phoenix could see it in his eyes that he meant every word and more. “What I did to you during your cross-examination… If Mr. Talvinen hadn't stepped in… *I'm so sorry!*” He bowed and felt too ashamed to raise his head. “I promised to protect you… *I promised you,* you trusted me – and I broke it.”

Phoenix’s smile was appallingly sentimental. “I've already forgiven you, Apollo. In fact, I understood: you were just doing your job, doing what Kristoph told you to.” But his voice betrayed the sorrow and hurt in his eyes.

He gazed off at something in the distance, as if the glow from the setting sun held the answers he sought. When he resumed talking, all confidence was lost and there was nothing left but a small, fragile child who had been wronged far too many times by the world. It broke Apollo’s heart to watch Phoenix struggle alone, to know that he had been struggling alone for seven years.

“It's just… I thought that he'd act differently because it was *me* behind the witness stand. I thought that as his lover, I was more than just another case to be filed away in his perfect record; that I was *special.*” He attempted to hide his tears with laughter, but the result was an exceedingly painful one. “Maybe this old man’s read one too many love stories. Maybe my perception of love is unrealistic and I'm too demanding.”

“But that's what love is!” was what Apollo was dying to profess, but it wasn't his place to comment. He couldn't just take his opinion and generalize it to the entire population, much less Kristoph. However, he couldn't stop the next few words from leaving his mouth.

“And yet, you never ask for anything more – you really are selfless.” He released a chuckle of his own, though his humor was bitter and it hurt so much to speak. “You really love Mr. Gavin, that's why you don't ask for it in return.”

“Apollo…”

“I don't think you're unreasonable, Mr. Wright,” he said honestly. “You just want to be treated the same way you treat him. But love is a two-way street; it gives and it takes, and you can afford to be selfish too.”

“Can I?”

Apollo stared into Phoenix’s wide, desperate eyes filled with longing and felt his world collapse and rebuild itself around them, like a chrysalis that housed the sacred vision of an eternal present – no regrets, no consequences; only the warmth of two souls. Years of repressed pain and loneliness begged for salvation; they called out to him and more than anything he wanted to protect this man,
shield him from the storm and the shadows of his own self-loathing. His heart beat faster and faster as Phoenix’s fair face came up to his own, lips a breath apart, long lashes dusting flushed cheeks, their breaths mingling: hot and shallow in want. Neither made a move to push the other away. Phoenix wanted this and so did he.

This was wrong. A hopeless struggle. Come morning and they’d both regret it. Apollo knew that when he kissed this man, he would forever wed his soul to vice and futility; Phoenix would go back to Kristoph; and his heart will never be free to love again. So he waited, paused for a moment longer as he deliberated his position. He could stop now; turn around and walk away as if the past hour never happened; let it fade like an old dream and go back to how things were; save himself from a future of hurt and rejection. But when he felt a hand tug at his tie and Phoenix climb into his lap, all logic and the final bits of self-restraint fell away like sand.

“Stay, please,” Phoenix whispered.

And so Apollo kissed him, and Phoenix blossomed beneath him like a rose.

The sin was complete.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I intended to conclude "Investigation Day 2” in this chapter, but I had to split it further into 3 parts because there’s really too much to cover. After all, it's the last stretch of evidence-gathering before this arc's conclusion. Thank you for reading and see you in the next chapter!

As always, if you enjoy my fanfic, I'm always happy to read your comments, so don't hesitate to leave your message below. Kudos rock my world too.
Chapter Notes

Just a quick life update: after months of mulling over the pros and cons, I finally made the decision to quit my emotionally and mentally draining job to pursue more favorable interests. Admittedly, it was a well-paying job, but life isn't all about money and material needs, and health and happiness definitely come first. So, in a nutshell, I took the plunge, chased my dreams, and am settling down into a new work environment - one that I can see myself building a fulfilling career on. More importantly, I got my mojo back, so you guys can expect less sporadic updates in the foreseeable future.

Thanks for reading my rambles, leaving your comments and kudos, and just being so supportive. You guys are awesome! I couldn't ask for more avid readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You shouldn't have done that.

Phoenix’s lips – lovely, soft, yet slightly chapped – felt so shy, so completely defenseless against his own and he deepened the kiss, succumbed to his hunger, fell into the flames. Calloused fingers wound into soft midnight hair and with a light shove, they fell onto the bed; Phoenix’s body pressed unrelenting against his own, clinging onto the front of his vest; and he swallowed the man’s desperate moans as he lay claim to his lips over and over, again and again, as though he would swallow Phoenix whole. Gods, his idol tasted divine. Oh how he had dreamed of this.

As the kiss deepened into something more passionate, Apollo shoved his tongue past those plump lips and down Phoenix’s throat, worked his mouth in the rhythm struck by their grinding hips. To his delight, his passion was reciprocated, if not met with fevered intensity. With a low moan, Phoenix parted his legs in open invitation and Apollo immediately shoved his knee between them to massage his idol’s growing erection.

“Ah!” Phoenix threw his head back with a pleased cry. Apollo watched with flushed cheeks, completely mesmerized.

“Mr. Wright…”

This was better than any fantasy. His heart burned and ached for this beautiful man. To stop would be impossible.

Hot. Every touch set his skin ablaze, and like a virgin, Phoenix shuddered from every bit of Apollo’s caress. Amazing. His body felt so uncharacteristically responsive; he had gone completely hard from a mere kiss and his lewd reactions embarrassed him. Apollo was so tender. Never before had he felt this way towards another man, treated this way by another man. Kristoph was callous and demanding; this gentle reverence was unlike anything he had ever experienced and his heart craved for more, for the touch of kind hands. This was all so new; it scared him, but at the same time he relished in his vulnerability. Why did he feel so open, so completely comfortable with this young attorney? Why did his body fit against Apollo’s so nicely, like it was meant to be here, like it was so right? How much did this kid really want him, and would he scare him off if he pushed for things to go any faster? He breathed in Apollo’s masculine scent and shuddered in pleasure. The kid’s smell
was intoxicating. He wanted to bathe in it, drown in it, fall straight through until he didn't know which way was up and down.

“Mm… Polly… m-more, more…”

Suddenly, the seven years didn’t matter and he forgot all about Kristoph.

Phoenix clung onto Apollo tighter, clawed at his clothes, moans indiscernible and body helplessly wanton. A pair of hazel eyes watched the erotic display. Relief welled up and washed over Apollo. At long last, his desire would be satisfied. Hands ran everywhere, touching whatever could be touched. Phoenix writhed beneath him, begged for love with his body; he belonged to another, but Apollo didn’t care.

*You ruined everything.*

His fingers dived under the thin sweater and pushed it up; it bundled at Phoenix’s chest just above those pink rosebud nipples. Apollo reached down to stroke the warm skin, marvelled at its softness akin to velvet petals of a rose in bloom; lavished attention upon Phoenix’s perfect body as if he were a god. But even flowers had its thorns, and he knew he was playing with fire. Still, he wanted it, wanted Phoenix so badly it blinded him to everything else. And so, unable to resist the call of those nipples, he dipped his head to lick and suckle on the sensitive buds. Phoenix moaned and squirmed from the sensation, but Apollo held him down and continued his attack, focusing on his newfound prize. He licked and sucked; flicked his tongue against them rapidly; took each rosy nipple into his mouth and sucked on them so hard, he looked as if he was milking Phoenix for every last drop. The latter whined and tried to direct the brunette away from his chest, but Apollo kept up his torture and it didn't take long for Phoenix to feel wetness pool between his legs.

“N-Nooo… ngh! Sto-op…”

“Are you sure, Mr. Wright?” Apollo pulled away to observe his handiwork. “‘Cuz that's not what your body’s saying.”

Phoenix’s chest was swollen and his nipples appeared bright red against the pale glow of his skin, like a pair of soft breasts. Gently, Apollo brushed his fingertips over the straining, sensitized flesh and was rewarded with a low mewl that went straight to his cock. He gazed at Phoenix affectionately, felt the latter’s tongue lick his cheek in a pleading gesture to continue, shut his eyes when he felt pain and desperation bleed through Phoenix’s lips as they kissed; and Apollo held him, cradled his love like precious cargo, like a babe in need of protection.

*He doesn’t know how you feel about him. His reactions are borne out of habit. He’s lonely. He’s in pain. This is wrong. You’re the better man. He’s with Kristoph. But I loved him first.*

It was the fallacy of the human condition; if it was forbidden, then all the more he would not be denied.

The denim shorts were next. He grasped the zipper and tugged it down as he continued to fight against Phoenix’s lips, the latter desperately struggling to assert some semblance of dominance, only to quickly give in with a quiet groan when Apollo drew his tongue into his mouth to suck on it in a way that made his eyes roll. Damn, for a first timer, the kid wasn’t bad at all. So, instead of applying practiced techniques that would normally have his clients coming back for more, Phoenix simply sat back, relaxed and allowed Apollo to ravage him senseless. In fact, he *welcomed* it. With Apollo’s warmth and the tender way he held and desired him, he could think of nothing better, yearn for nothing more. Love, love, *love* – that was what his heart and mind were telling him, and cocooned in his attorney’s protective embrace, Phoenix believed it.
Strong fingers hooked into the hem of the shorts and slowly tugged them past slender hips. The rough material brushed against his hardness and Phoenix let out a sharp gasp. Apollo smirked into the kiss – he was pleased to note his idol hadn’t bothered with any underwear. Did Phoenix plan this? It didn’t matter. He continued his assault, rubbing their groins together, molding his body against Phoenix’s, completely as one. Sensitive. Feels so good. Phoenix felt like he was drowning in a cloud of euphoria. Apollo dipped his head and placed searing, open mouth kisses down Phoenix’s neck, stopping to nip, lick and suck on the pulse point. It would surely leave an angry bruise. Everyone would know.

Hands flew to Apollo’s chest as Phoenix made to push him away, but the action was reluctant, more for show than actual resistance. The truth was, he wanted to be claimed by Apollo, wanted to feel the younger’s lips and teeth scrape his flesh; look in the mirror and see he belonged to someone who actually cared. Someone, whom he just realised, he cared deeply about in return.

“Apollo…”

“More,” said a voice, licking the shell of his ear. “Say my name more…”

“A-Apollo…”

“Louder.”

“Apollo!”

He lifted his hips and ground them harder against the strong body above him. Wet. His cock dripped with so much precum it stained the red of Apollo’s pants, caused said man’s own hardness to twitch in excitement beneath the fabric. A groan soon followed after, muffled against his cheek.

“Sir,” he felt hot breath tickle his ear, “you’re beautiful.”

He blushed. Beautiful? No one had ever called him that before. It felt… nice. And made butterflies flutter pleasantly in his tummy.

Overcome with love and wanting to feel more of this passionate man, experience every inch of him, Phoenix aimed for the bulge between Apollo’s legs. His fingers trailed down the front of the brunette’s vest, teased the green satin tie, grazed his golden attorney badge...

“You’re mine, Phoenix.”

Kristoph’s smirk flashed through his mind and as if burnt by the cool surfaced that badge, his eyes snapped open, the fog of desire was gone and he all but shoved Apollo away. Said man stumbled and stubbornly tried to move in again, but Phoenix quickly turned his cheek and Apollo’s lips missed his and touched the corner of his mouth instead. Why? He begged him for answers with his hazel gaze, but when Phoenix refused him with a lingering look of trepidation, when his eyes couldn’t stop darting to that glimmering golden badge, the connotations were painfully clear.

Look at me.

Confusion, anger, denial and disappointment. It was too much to bear. Apollo raised his voice and let his fist fly as he demanded an explanation. But it was too late, his mistake irrevocable.

“I… I’m sorry,” he stuttered, eyes wide in horror at what he had just done.

Phoenix’s cheek started to swell; there was a cut at his lip where Apollo had punched him; blood trickled down the corner of his mouth. It took a while, but the shock eventually receded, the love was
gone and painful reality took its place. Seven years taught him nothing but disappointment. In the end, everyone was the same. Honestly, what did he expect? Redemption? With a smirk and bitter chuckle, Phoenix wiped the blood off with the back of his hand and when his gaze lifted to meet Apollo’s, his blue eyes were hauntingly dull.

“Heh… Guess I deserved that.”

Apollo flinched at his words. It hurt to hear Phoenix belittle himself like that, and what was worse, he actually believed and accepted it like it was completely normal, like any form of abuse or punishment done onto him was justified. Apollo felt like a failure. Just when he thought he was making progress with Phoenix, he ended up taking two steps back. He wanted to heal him, but he betrayed his own morals and ended up hurting Phoenix more than ever. After everything he did to distinguish himself from his boss, his temper got the better of him, the damage was done, and he was no better than Kristoph. And so, unable to face the truth, Apollo ran.

Coward.

Now, he felt like he was grappling through the darkness; lost and misled by the voice of his inner compass… Quite literally, because he had forgotten to bring his torchlight and the air vents above the Sunshine Colosseum weren’t exactly a five-star suite.

Apollo sighed and ran his fingers through his hair in. Shit, two hours later and he still couldn’t stop thinking about Phoenix, about what they did, about his blunder. Damn, he really fucked up. And instead of facing up to his mistakes like a man, he hightailed and ran leaving a stark naked Phoenix behind to pick up the pieces.

‘Great going, Justice. Now he’d never trust you again.’

Suddenly, the passageway dipped and his forehead slammed against the ceiling. There was a loud, resounding ‘BOOM!’ and the metal shook from the impact. Apollo cursed and rubbed his throbbing forehead furiously. A bruise was already starting to form. Things were so not going smoothly for him today. This was retribution for earlier, he just knew it.

‘At least I know an adult can fit in here,’ he thought glumly, mentally checking off yet another item in his investigation lineup.

Just then, he spotted light up ahead and a wary frown crossed his features, all thoughts of his guilt and self-pity forgotten. It was coming from between the ventilation grills on the ground up ahead. Odd, was someone in the room below? Wasn’t it 10 at night? How did they manage to avoid the police guarding the premises? Very odd. Maybe it was Ema. He squinted as he tried to peer between the bars.

CRUNCH.

He had stepped on something. Quickly lifting his foot, Apollo bent down and picked up a small plastic device, which lay inconspicuously near the grills. Crouched in an air vent with nothing but the dim light between his feet to aid him, he quietly inspected the peculiar object. It looked like some sort of hook-on earpiece and there was an identification number written on it in white marker. Definitely concert property. It was the number 7, but to whom it had been allocated to Apollo didn’t know. Fortunately, it wasn’t broken, but what the hell was an earpiece even doing here?

Someone’s been through these vents, he realised. Someone who was part of the crew.

But what reason would they have to?
The blueprint in Trucy’s bedroom flashed through his mind and the implications left a sinking feeling in his gut.

‘The Wrights… I hope I’m wrong – Huh?’

There was a sharp creek followed by a low groan, like the sound of something giving way. Apollo paused, looked ahead and over his shoulder, but all he saw was darkness.

“Uh… hello?”

Silence. Suddenly, he felt a slight dip and there was that sound again, only louder this time. Then, the passageway began to sink. He froze.

“… Oh s-”

SNAP.

The ground beneath his feet gave way and he fell through the ceiling screaming, crash landing in the room below. Sprawled unceremoniously across the floor face first and covered by dust and sheets of broken metal, Apollo lamented the plight of his tragic existence. Ok, definitely broke something there. He groaned miserably and struggled to sit up. Last time, he told Clay being a lawyer was a lot safer than launching oneself into the vast unknowns of space. Now, he was seriously starting to eat his words as he made a mental note to ask Kristoph about including health insurance in his employment benefits.

“H-Hello? W-Who’s there?”

Apollo gave a start at the new voice – it was feminine, terrified, barely a whisper. Panic set in. Crap, was it the police? Had he been caught? But it didn’t sound like Ema. A loitering staff or cleaner perhaps? Maybe if he played his cards right, he could bluff his way through and avoid being told on. So, he put on his brightest smile and turned his head to address the speaker, but the vision before him left him unexpectedly tongue-tied.

It’s her.

There, hands clasped in a demure fashion, facing him with eyes unseeing, stood Lamiroir, the elusive songstress that had everyone scrambling for answers. Like the picture in the postcard, she radiated a mysterious aura, more so now in real life than in a static image. But what really captured Apollo’s attention were her eyes: they sparkled like clear spring water from the purest of streams and her cerulean gaze spoke of a quiet strength, thrilling secrets. Save her earlier speech, she was so perfectly still, Apollo would have mistaken her for a mannequin. And then, she moved; the elegant garments she wore sweeping the floor like waves from the sea. The Siren – a fitting title for one whose presence had the power to draw everything to a standstill; suspended in time; like a painting that lured you in, lived through vivid imagination. Despite the long flowing cloak and dark, shimmering veil that shrouded most of her body and mouth, she was without a doubt, a vision of loveliness.

The singer was huddled in a tight corner, cowering yet curious. Apollo thought her body language and reaction peculiar at first, until he remembered that she was blind and therefore, more terrified and wary of strangers than how one normally would be. He could only imagine the poor woman’s immense fright after he had literally crashed through the ceiling in the dead of night.

For the longest time, they simply stared at each other – well, Apollo did; Lamiroir just looked plain confused on where to look at, who she should be addressing, if it was even safe to move from her spot. But her sharp hearing could pick up another person’s breathing and that groan earlier definitely
didn't sound like the wind.

“Phoenix, is that you?” she began tentatively when Apollo failed to respond after some time, and the sound of that name surprised him.

Phoenix? Why would Lamiroir expect Phoenix of all people? Again, very odd.

“Actually, it's Apollo Justice, attorney of law,” he introduced himself and added sheepishly as an afterthought, “sorry about your ceiling, Miss Lamiroir.”

“Ah, Justice…?” Lamiroir trailed off with an apprehensive frown, and then it suddenly clicked. “Oh! That loud voice from court.”

Apollo nearly fell over. Seriously, was that all he was to her? Just a voice? Not even a ‘lawyer’, much less a body… Maybe he ought to heed Kristoph’s advice and tone down on his Chords of Steel. It was quickly earning him a rather sorry reputation than a positive one.

“Miss Lamiroir,” he interrupted, “I’m sorry for intruding, but do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

“I… ah… questions?” she gnawed on her lower lip, lacing and unlacing her fingers out of nervous habit. Questions – she could handle that. Just a few wouldn't hurt, right?

But Phoenix said not to interfere.

Apollo could sense her hesitation from a mile away. If he wasn’t standing between her and the dressing room door, he was certain she would have fled the first chance she got. He took a moment to observe her jittery behavior; harsh breathing, frequent swallowing, shifting her weight from one foot to another and fiddling with her bracelet – wait a minute.

“Your bracelet – where'd you get it?” He demanded and forgetting about propriety for a moment, breached all personal boundaries and grabbed the shocked woman’s wrist, tugging her towards him.

How the hell? Why did Lamiroir, a blind singer all the way from Borginia, have something that he had been wearing all his life?

“Eh?! M-My bracelet?”

She didn't understand; first Phoenix and now this young lawyer from the courtroom. What exactly was so important about her bracelet? Discretely, she shifted her gaze to focus on an identical golden band around the brunette’s wrist, noting with controlled surprise that it matched hers perfectly, right down to its precise, intricate patterns. All this time, she had hoped that this bracelet would be the key to unlock her lost memories; and now, this handsome young man had one too. Could he be tied to her past somehow? Did they know each other? Momentarily, she entertained the idea of speaking with him, obliging his curiosity and fulfilling her own. But Phoenix had warned her to avoid contact with the law at all costs.

“Stay out of this case. Trust me, I’m trying to protect you.”

But she wanted to know the truth.

Biting the bullet, Lamiroir politely removed her wrist from Apollo’s grip and said with a kind smile, “I’d be happy to answer your questions, Mr. Justice. Please, have a seat.”
Apollo shifted awkwardly in his seat. Directly opposite sat Lamiroir, as silent and elusive as ever. She appeared to be staring right at him, but he quickly realised that her gaze missed his and she was staring at his forehead instead, unnaturally focused. Sure, he handled a few interviews before and he didn’t lack confidence in the slightest, but there was just something uncanny about addressing someone who couldn’t see, but still insisted on looking you in the eye – uh, face.

“Right. Miss Lamiroir,” he decided to start with something easy, “how did you… uh… get in?”

Confusion registered across her face, but she giggled once she understood the context of his question.

“You mean past the detective, correct?” She stretched out her hand and gestured at the general direction of the room next door. “I climbed in from Trucy dear’s dressing room. As luck would have it, there was a ladder directly under the vent.”

*Trucy’s dressing room?* Had there been a ladder in there all this time? Perhaps he had missed it amongst the ridiculous layers of clutter; after all, with tons of magic props all over the place, something as ordinary as a ladder would have hardly stood out. But this in turn would suggest the ladder’s purposeful placing: who put it there? When did they do so? And most importantly, *why*? This knowledge further confirmed his suspicions – was this how the killer entered the crime scene and moved Machi’s body undetected?

‘Lamiroir either has some strange nightly routines, or she *really* needed to get into her dressing room,’ he thought with growing anxiety. He seriously doubted it was the earlier, but why tonight of all days? And she was blind, wasn’t she? Was it really worth the risk of sneaking into the building in such an extreme manner? Then again, he did crawl through the freaking air vent.

He was half-tempted to grill the songstress on her reasons for coming here, but realised he had been gifted the rare opportunity of interviewing Lamiroir herself – something neither Klavier nor the police had the privilege of doing. The worst thing that he could do was scare her away by being too aggressive in his approach. Lamiroir was the last piece of the puzzle, and something told him that she knew more than her seemingly oblivious demeanor let on.

“Miss Lamiroir?”

“Please, just Lamiroir is fine,” she answered.

Her voice and personality completely charmed Apollo, but it wasn’t because of her looks or any superficial reason. He couldn’t stop looking at her; there was a strange inclination to listen to her forever; he couldn’t put his finger on it. There was just something so *wonderful* about her; she radiated this comforting warmth, an aura of security he had always yearned for and never had. It was different from what he felt towards Phoenix, a different kind of affection… but it was impossible – they’d only just met.

*I must be out of my mind.*

“Ok Lamiroir,” he continued earnestly as he tried to ignore the strange feeling in his chest, “before I go on, I’d just like to say I’m sorry for your loss. I heard that Machi was like a son to you. I can only imagine how difficult these past few days must’ve been.”

“Oh, thank you,” she replied, honestly gratified despite her obvious grief. “That’s very kind of you, Mr. Justice. You’re the only person who’s ever said that to me...”
Now Apollo felt bad for continuing.

“But that’s weird, isn’t it?” He pulled out his notes and tapped on a specific finding. “Because based on my understanding, the prosecution has had a hard time locating you post-murder.” He lowered his notepad to regard her skeptically. “Why would you avoid a case relating to your son’s death?”

“Because my involvement was immediately ruled out from the start,” she answered without missing a beat. “According to my lawyer, my condition makes it impossible for me to commit murder, much less play any direct role in the crime. The police is of the same opinion, so questioning me was deemed… redundant.”

“That’s not what I’m hearing,” he thought with a frown, but kept his comments to himself. His bracelet never reacted once since they started, so he could only assume that Lamiroir was either being truthful or completely ignorant.

“Were you the last person with the victim before he went missing?”

“My lawyer said I don’t need to answer that. I’m not involved in this case.”

“Who’s your lawyer?”

Lamiroir offered him a mysterious smile. “I don’t think you need to know that, Mr. Justice. It’s not relevant to this investigation.”

Apollo resisted the urge to kick the coffee table. Goddammit, this was so frustrating! Time to regroup and re-engage.

“You were present during today’s hearing. I saw you in the audience.” He paused to gauge Lamiroir’s reaction. “Were you disappointed?”

“With what?”

“That your son was a smuggler.”

It was a tight slap to the face. His question caught her completely off-guard, but her surprise quickly gave way to sorrow at the reminder of the blonde boy’s betrayal. Apollo watched on, impassive. It was a low blow, but he had to do something to chip away at the singer’s resolve.

Suddenly, Lamiroir’s lips moved. Her answer was quieter than a whisper. Apollo had to strain his ears, but he still failed to pick up her words.

“Come again?”

“I knew,” she repeated, louder and assertive this time, but her trembling jaw and shaking hands betrayed her conviction. “That he smuggled the cocoon – I knew.”

“What?”

This was insane! He totally didn't see that one coming.

“Well, I didn't know for sure, but I had my suspicions,” Lamiroir explained. “Machi was being particularly secretive since our departure from Borginia and my intrusiveness led to many arguments between us. He has always been a very private person, but like I said, I had my suspicions. He tried to smuggle out another cocoon before, but I caught him and we let the whole matter slide – this was about a year ago. I never thought he'd do it again, especially after Borginia raised the penalty.”
“Sounds like he really needed the money,” Apollo commented with a deep frown, producing the music contract he found in Klavier’s office as evidence. “Does it have anything to do with this?”

Lamiroir stared at him blankly and Apollo would've kicked himself in the ass if that were humanly possible. Blind. Right.

“Ack! Sorry! Uh… basically, he's being paid peanuts in comparison to you.”

Lamiroir chuckled at his inadequacy. He really reminded her of a small child. “That's fine, Mr. Justice; I get that a lot. And about that contract – well, all I can say is, what you see isn't always as it seems.”

Apollo quirked a curious brow in question. “How do you mean?”

“On paper, that's how our earnings appear. But in actual fact, we share the profits; I provide for Machi.” There was an appallingly sentimental smile across her lips. “Isn't that what a mother would do?”

Hearing Lamiroir talk like that, it was heartbreaking. Her voice was thick with emotion and it was obvious from her trembling shoulders that she was fighting to keep her grief at bay, burdened by inconsolable regret. She really loved Machi; Apollo saw no reason to doubt her. There were no lies, only a mother’s tragic loss.

“I'm really sorry,” Apollo apologized with a heavy heart, and the sympathy in his hazel gaze easily conveyed his sincerity. “I know it hurts to keep bringing up Machi, but he's the one thing that's tying all these mysterious events together. If you help me, we can convict the real killer, you can have your justice, and Machi's soul will finally know peace.”

Lamiroir hesitated. She knew what Apollo was asking of her, but it was something – no matter how badly she wanted to – she couldn't give. The new age of the law was corrupt. Phoenix had warned her about the consequences; he made perfect sense and she trusted his judgment with her life. But if her cooperation could help the defense sniff out the real criminal, Machi would be avenged. It was a 50% probability for failure. Lamiroir wasn't the gambling sort; she didn't particularly fancy risks; but Apollo drove a hard bargain.

“You mean to say that Mr. Crescend isn't the murderer.”

“I mean I'm going to do all it takes to uncover the truth,” he corrected her, puncturing his words with fierce determination. If that meant the outcome wouldn't end up pretty, then so be it. “I've already made my decision.”

His sincerity was too much. Lamiroir closed her eyes and did her best to suppress her guilt. Unfortunately, this wasn't a perfect world and one needed to be selfish in order to protect themselves.

“It's rare,” she said all of a sudden as she reached forward, groping the air until her fingers found the skin of Apollo’s left cheek. She cupped it gently and the latter blushed from her unexpected forwardness.

“What is?”


Completely embarrassed, Apollo stuttered his thanks and with a melodious laugh that could light up darkness, Lamiroir withdrew her hand. There was something special about this young man; she was
positive they had never been acquainted before, yet there was an inexplicable pull between them. Was grief driving her mad? Could it be the stress? Perhaps she should confide in Phoenix her anxieties later tonight.

“Lamiroir?”

She gave a start at Apollo’s voice, realizing with a blush that she had been staring. Oh my… The last person she had looked upon with so much endearment was Trucy. She wondered if she was unconsciously displacing her affections onto other people’s children as a result of her own loss.

“Yes?”

“Did you use to own a guitar?” Apollo asked yet another question that left the songstress stumped. She failed to see how an old acoustic guitar had anything to do with Machi’s death.

“Did Mr. Klavier tell you that?” she countered.

“Please answer my question, Lamiroir,” Apollo refused to let up when he noticed her guard go up again. “According to Prosecutor Gavin and Daryan, it went missing as soon as you arrived at the airport, but I found it hidden in this very dressing room during my investigation.” He crossed his arms and shot her a critical stare. “I don’t think I need to explain any further.”

“No, you don’t,” she answered with just as much bite. “And neither do I. What I know is just as much as Mr. Klavier knows: it was an old, cherished guitar; I gave it to him as a gift; it went missing at the airport—”

“But I found it under your floorboards!”

“I’m blind, Mr. Justice,” she stressed her words, surprising herself with her ability to remain calm under the pressure. I will not break, I will not break. “Do you expect me, do you expect anyone to believe that I could steal the guitar, hide it from view, break the floorboards and cover it up as good as new? That would demand careful monitoring and scrutiny, both of which require sight. Why would I steal my own guitar? Why do you insist on chasing false leads? As far as my lawyer is concerned, I’m not involved in this case.”

‘Oh, I beg to differ,’ Apollo thought as his hand discretely moved to rub at the area under his bracelet. He finally got something, noticed Lamiroir’s eyes dart about during her previous statement, but for the life of him, he couldn’t pinpoint where the inconsistency lay. ‘Press her harder,’ his mind demanded, but his intuition knew that it would only end up scaring her away or she would shut herself off completely. Either way, he’d be stuck and worse still, his questioning would end here. The final day of Daryan’s trial was tomorrow. He couldn’t screw this up. Mentally, he filed their conversation as evidence – what sort exactly, he still wasn’t so sure. But that lie, whatever it was, had to mean something.

So he dropped the subject and apologised for overstepping his boundaries. Fortunately, Lamiroir had an amazing temperament and never took any actual offense. They moved on to talk about idle things. It wasn’t about work anymore, but Apollo found that he was actually ok with it. He found out about her life before she became a singer and Borginian icon, and she enjoyed his stories about his dreams.

“It must’ve been tough for you, not knowing who your parents are and growing up in an orphanage,” she said with great sympathy and admiration. “Do you ever long for them? Parents.”

“I… Honestly, I don’t really know,” Apollo confessed, slightly ashamed. “In the past, definitely; more than anything. Now…” He scratched his head with a frown. “I guess I’ve been fending for
myself for so long, I’ve gotten used to being alone. In fact, if you hadn’t brought up the subject about parents and family, chances are I would’ve gone on never thinking about it.”

His answer made her sad. “Aren’t you lonely?”

“Not really,” he replied and flashed her a wide grin. “I got Clay – he’s my best friend; we grew up together. He lost his parents at a young age too. That idiot’s pretty much my family and the same goes for him. But there are some nights when I do wonder how my mom and dad look like.” He shrugged and moved along quickly. “What about you, Lamiroir? Do you have a family?”

“I really can’t say,” she answered apologetically, almost sorrowfully as she fiddled with her bracelet. “Remember when you asked where I got this bracelet from? The thing is, I don’t know, or rather I don’t remember.”

“Don’t remember?” Apollo echoed with a frown. Lamiroir nodded and took a moment to gather her thoughts and emotions.

“There was an accident,” she recounted with a faraway voice. Images and sounds – voices, so many voices – flashed through her mind, as vivid and frightening as she remembered. “I don’t know what happened, but when I woke up, I was in a hospital in Borginia. It was a very intensive surgery; I survived death, but I lost my memories. I don’t remember what happened, who I was, my own name, who my family were or if I even had one.” Try as she might, she simply couldn’t make the pain go away. It was like living in a void; the displacement felt terrible.

“That when I made the decision to start anew. Everything before the birth of Lamiroir is dead.”

A single tear trickled down her cheek and she begged her companion pardon as she hurriedly wiped it away with the sleeve of her robe. Apollo watched her silently, in awe at her strength. It wasn’t easy living through each and every day without memories, without a solid identity to verify one’s existence. Lamiroir was essentially left with nothing and now with Machi gone, he could only imagine how devastating it must be for her to wake up every morning knowing that days would only get harder, Machi wasn’t coming back, and she was all alone.

“Lamiroir,” he took her small hand gently into his larger one, “I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to bring Machi’s killer to justice. And when all of this is over, if there’s anything you ever need, let me know and I’ll do my best to help.”

The smile that spread across her lips was simply magical. It fully reached her eyes and for the first time since their meeting, Apollo knew her happiness was genuine.

“Thank you, Mr, Justice,” she whispered, relieved as she patted him fondly on the back of his hand. “It’s truly wonderful to know that there are people in this country I can trust.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” he said with a nod of his head. “If you happen to remember something from concert night, do let me know.”

“Of course-” She stopped as soon as she said that however, and her hesitance effectively got Apollo’s attention. He could practically see the gears in her head turning.

“Actually, there is something else,” she narrated with some difficulty. “I’m not sure of the exact time, but the Gaviners were on stage; it was the final rehearsal before we opened the doors to the public. I was passing by the dressing rooms when I heard Machi say, ‘There’s an Interpol agent here. I’m not doing this anymore. You’re on your own.’ I’m not sure how this will help, but it’s all I know…”

It took Apollo a while to process both Lamiroir’s statement and his own shock. That was more than
what he could’ve asked for.

“Did he really say that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure.”

Lamiroir clasped her hands together and bowed her head. “Yes, every last word.”

“What happened next?”

“I really don’t know. I’m sorry.” And she did sound sincerely apologetic. “I had to rush off for my own rehearsal, so I couldn’t stick around.”

Lamiroir’s testimony sounded too good to be true, but Apollo was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, especially since he didn’t sense her lying or any inconsistencies in her words. Her account proved two things: one, it confirmed that Machi was in fact, a criminal; two, he had an accomplice, who was the only other person who knew about the smuggling and most likely the true killer. It wasn’t difficult to connect the dots; Machi chickened out and by consequence, needed to be silenced.

“What sort of rehearsal was it?” he asked.

“Trucy dear and I were rehearsing my disappearing act,” she explained. “I can’t disclose the full details of it because that’ll expose the trick... but I was late.”

“Late?” he wondered with a quirked brow.

“That’s right. I missed my cue,” she then went on to elaborate. “At a certain point of my song, I’m supposed to disappear and then reappear at the final verse. I completely missed that final mark.”

“Some technical magic issues?” He joked and she laughed along with him.

“Haha, maybe!”

But then, his bracelet suddenly tightened and he sat up with a jolt. _What was that? A lie? _But before he could pry any further, his phone rang and without checking the caller ID, he answered it without a second thought.

“Justice speaking.”

‘Pollo, you gotta come down to the space center _right now._’

The caller’s urgency made him pause. _Clay? _He shot Lamiroir an apologetic stare before excusing himself to one corner.

“Are you mad? It's almost midnight and GYAXA’s halfway across the country!” he hissed into the receiver.

‘I don’t care, I worked my ass off on this damn dummy and by God, you’re going to see the fruits of my labour, or I’m tossing your precious evidence down the rubbish chute! How soon can you get here?’

“But—”

‘How. Soon.’
Clay wasn’t in a negotiable mood. Talk about perfect timing; and he’d been on a roll too. Apollo spared one last lingering glance at the mysterious songstress, before doing a quick mental calculation.

“Three hours.”

‘What?! Are you coming on bloody bicycle or something? Screw that, you’re taking a cab. I’m not staying up an extra two hours just so you can save money.’

“Now you're just being unreasonable,” he muttered. “I'm actually in the middle of something really important. Can this wait?”

‘You tell me.’ Clay’s tone dropped to a serious one. ‘Apollo, I’m not kidding about that cab ride. You need to see this – it’s not exactly good news.’

It was late, the roads quiet; the streetlamps were lit and a dog barked somewhere in the distance. The air grew warmer with the coming of summer, but that didn’t deter a certain magician from donning her signature blue cape and white gloves.

Trucy rocked back and forth on her heels, humming the theme song of an old children’s TV series her father loved to watch. Inwardly, she shook her head at his childishness, but damn was it catchy. The sudden thought of Phoenix however, caused her brow to crease in worry and she gazed up at the silent building behind her, specifically at a dark, open window on the fifth storey; its blue curtains fluttering innocently in the wind.

Daddy…

Ever since the start of this case, she saw nothing but worry and sorrow in his eyes with each day getting progressively worse. Although Phoenix often hid his troubles behind his bright, reassuring smiles and laughter, the stress was definitely getting to him – there was no escaping her keen eyes. She stopped asking what was wrong when he gave her nothing but silences and fake smiles that breathed more secrets than lies. And if her daddy blatantly ignoring Kristoph wasn’t strange enough, she had returned home to the sight of her father crying. It hurt because the last time she saw him cry was seven years ago. For seven years, they shared everything with each other, their bond inseparable; now, she didn’t know anything anymore.

With a pout, she stuck out her head and looked both ways across the street for what felt like the 18th time. Geez, what’s taking him so long? They had arranged to meet here on the pavement 10 minutes ago. It wasn’t polite to keep a lady waiting.

Suddenly, a flash of blue whizzed past the corner of her eye. Trucy rubbed her eyes frantically, but when the vision of a girl with blue hair standing at the lobby of her apartment was still there, she readily concluded it wasn’t the side-effects of her father’s cooking. Curiously, she observed her behavior, took in her purple striped top and denim overalls. No doubt about it; it was the same girl she had rescued from those creeps on the bus three days ago – but what on earth was she doing all the way here? Did she live here too? But a moment longer of observing the strange girl cued Trucy in that that wasn’t the case.

I don't even know her name.

The girl was loitering around the mailboxes and didn’t seem to notice that she was being watched.
She dropped an envelope into one of the slots, but it was hard for Trucy to tell which address it was from her angle. And as soon as the deed was done, the girl ran without looking back.

“W-Wait!”

But before Trucy could give chase, a motorbike pulled up along the pavement and a charming, baritone voice that could easily melt butter, stopped her in her tracks.

“Girls normally run to me, Fraulein. Not away from me.”

“Uncle Klavier!”

Said man winked and blew her a flying kiss. She came up to him and punched him playfully on the arm.

“Humph! You’ve gone some nerve you know, making a lady wait.”

“I believe der one with real ‘nerve’ is you, Fraulein,” Klavier answered with a teasing smirk. “Calling mich out this late… You do know I have a case to prosecute first thing. And of course,” he snapped his fingers proudly, “mein argument’s going to bring der Haus down.”

Trucy rolled her eyes at his arrogance. “Urgh, Uncle Klavier, this isn’t about you; it’s about daddy! This is really important and I need your help.”

The desperation in her big blue eyes was enough to make Klavier drop all jokes. Trucy Wright was always happy, so hopelessly carefree. To see her like this effectively shook his resolve.

“Fraulein Trucy, was ist es?”

“Daddy’s been extremely depressed lately,” she replied with a mournful sigh. “Even Mr. Gavin can’t do a thing about it; in fact, they’ve been arguing a lot after he accused daddy in court. Now, daddy’s avoiding him and I’m afraid this might be the end of their relationship… I won’t let that happen!”

Klavier watched her silently, torn between pity and exasperation. Really? He ran red lights for this? On one hand, he never liked the has-been, felt that the guy was a bad influence on his brother and the Gavin name; on the other hand, Trucy’s happiness was dependent on the success of their relationship, and a small part of him had gotten used to having Phoenix around. Sure, the has-been wasn’t exactly choice company, but years alone in that cold, large mansion and all those long nights working overtime in the office, it felt gratifying to know that there was someone who cared. Someone who took all his insults, yet still made sure he always had something to eat. Someone who bothered to call and ask if everything was ok.

“Mr. Gavin’s being an idiot, so it’s up to us to save their relationship!”

He suppressed a snicker. “Did you just call mein bruder an idiot?”

But she carried on talking and he remembered how unstoppable the girl was once she had an idea running through her head.

“The timing’s going to be tight, but it has to happen after Mr. Daryan’s trial tomorrow.” She clasped her hands together pleasingly. “Please, Uncle Klavier? It’ll make daddy the happiest he’s ever been in his whole life, I just know it!”

Klavier gave in with a sigh. Oh, who was he kidding? He had to admit there was some merit to their little dysfunctional family. Even if he still didn't like Phoenix.
“Fein, but shall we discuss this somewhere more private?”

“Ok!” And before he could even come up with a suggestion, Trucy produced her helmet out of nowhere, slipped it on and climbed up behind him. “Let’s go to Eldoon’s Noodles. I’ll tell you all about my amaaaaazing plan over supper – Oh! But I forgot to bring my wallet…”

Klavier shook his head with a fond smile, then revved up the engine and sped off towards the old noodles stand. Trucy would pull the same trick on him a hundred, thousand times, and for all those hundred, thousand times, he would willingly fall for it.

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Even after seven years, the GYAXA space center never failed to inspire. It was past 1 a.m., all employees had already left, save one who was diligently working in the 4th floor robotics lab – the only window lit in the entire building.

The automated doors slid shut with a ‘whoosh’ and Apollo ventured into the main lobby like the place was his home – well, considering he spent most of his adolescence running through these halls, it wasn't that much of a stretch. He paused to give the centre a once-over. Despite the dark and quiet of the giant facility, moonbeams and slivers of starlight streamed in through the glass ceiling dome; they bounced off the reception area’s planetary replicas and historic displays; illuminated and bestowed them souls as they whispered secrets of the universe. There was a giant directory on the wall and he took his time to observe the place’s layout with a sentimental smirk. The floors were the same, but it appeared they added a new launch pad – for the upcoming HAT-2 launch perhaps? To think Clay would be joining his childhood idol in space next year, when it all started as nothing more than a dream seven years ago. How time flies; how much they had grown.

“Mr. Apollo? Yay! It’s Mr. Apollo!”

The cheery, inquisitive voice that penetrated the quiet calm sounded mechanical, inhuman, yet incredibly nostalgic. He turned to face the source just as the elevator doors whooshed shut. A bright green light approached him; it grew more human in shape the closer it got, except that instead of a pair of legs and hands, it had wheels and claws and a computer screen for a face. Apollo observed the odd red contraption with a fond smile. Calling it a robot would hardly seem appropriate given its programmed emotional capacity, yet treating it as human would be an insult to its remarkable intelligence. So, like the past seven years, he decided that calling it by its own name worked best.

“Hi, Ponco. It’s nice to see you too,” he greeted with a tired smile. “Did Clay send you? Is he still in the labs?”

Ponco’s expression switched to something even more excitable as she threw her arms into the air and spun on the spot. “Yes, yes! Mr. Clay has been working hard in Ms. Aura’s lab since this afternoon, but she had to leave so she made ‘Hunk of Junk’ help him.”

Apollo resisted a sigh. Just picturing Ponco’s other half getting kicked, punched and smacked around on a daily basis was enough to make him feel exceedingly bad for the poor, underappreciated green robot.

“She’s still abusing Clonco, isn’t she?”

“Yup! But between you and me, Mr. Apollo? I think my brother likes it.”
Ok, was it him, or did Aura and her partner make the centre’s robots a little too human? Imbuing them with basic human psychological constructs was one thing, but breeding masochism was taking the base programming to whole new heights. That couldn’t be healthy, even for robots. As Ponco guided him to the elevator while happily narrating how Aura recently took to zapping Clonco with a ray gun over usual physically abusive methods, and how said robot seemed to commit the same errors more frequently despite the adaptive features of his programming, Apollo decided that some things were better left unquestioned.

“Would Mr. Apollo like some biscuits and a cup of coffee?” Ponco offered, but he politely declined.

“That’s ok, Ponco. I’m fine.”

Her head swiveled as she doubtfully evaluated his response. “Hmm… but my scanners are picking up low energy readings from you, Mr. Apollo. In fact…” her default happy expression snapped back into place, “you are approximately only 67% ‘fine’!”

He laughed at her naivety. She reminded him of a child who had just gotten a cookie for giving the correct answer to a math question.

“Can't pull the wool over your sensors, huh?”

It didn’t take a lot to convince and assure her of his condition though (her scanners probably picked up on his anxiety), and when the robot was finally satisfied, Apollo soon found himself shooting up the floors at record speed and walking down familiar corridors that his legs and mind had unconsciously committed to memory. The dim glow from the guiding lights along the walkway penetrated the darkness; he couldn’t quite make out the signs on the walls, but didn’t have to wander far once he spotted light up ahead. An office door was left wide open and judging by the number of robotic parts and loose wires all over the floor, not to mention a rather creepy-looking operating table with drills and lasers overhead, he had come to the right –

WHAM.

A wrench flew in and hit him straight in the stomach. He doubled over and let a few choice expletives fly.

“About time, idiot! What the hell could be more important than my evidence?!”

Clay emerged from behind a set of equipment; hair mused, cheeks and t-shirt smeared with grease and his blue jumpsuit unzipped down the middle with the sleeves tied around his waist. His eyes were bloodshot, his mood obviously irritable. He crossed his arms and tapped his foot impatiently.

“And they call you the lawyer. You know, for someone who’s desperate for leads, you're not exactly very… uh – his tired brain paused for lack of description – desperate.”

“How eloquent,” Apollo deadpanned with a roll of his eyes. “And for your information, I have a lead. Guess who showed up at the Sunshine Colosseum.”

Clay snorted, “Your mom.”

“Lamiroir.”

He nearly fell over from shock. “Yo, are you serious?! Why didn’t you say so? Why was she there? What did she say?”

“I’ll fill you in on the details later,” Apollo replied as he hurriedly brushed past his friend and pointed
at a rather complicated set up in the experimental chamber. “Is that what you want to show me?”

“Oh, right. Here, you’re gonna need this.” Clay handed him a pair of goggles. “Just give Clonco a sec to reset the whole thing – he indicated at the busy robot behind the glass – and we can fire this baby up. Literally.” At Apollo’s confusion, he pulled up his laptop to better illustrate his findings.

“Remember those bits of scrap metal near the corpse? Well, I worked backwards and with some of the centre’s spare mechanical parts, I think I finally know what we’re looking at.” He circled the different pieces on the screen with his finger, tapped each of them and that brought up a different window with a 3D diagram. “What you see here is an igniter – a small one, but don’t be fooled by it’s size. I replicated this dummy as close to the original as possible and the first test practically set Clonco’s antenna on fire! Then again, I forgot he was still in the chamber and kinda locked the door...”

Apollo turned his head to study the small thing on the other side of the glass fearfully. Seriously? It was both ludicrous and frightening to know that such an inconspicuous object could be that destructive. But more importantly, why was it even in Lamiroir’s cloak? Who would have a reason to carry around something so dangerous? He honestly doubted it was part of standard backstage equipment.

“Maybe this will shed some light on your doubts. Goggles on.” And Apollo did as instructed while ignoring Clay’s terrible puns.

Clay got behind the controls and keyed in the same commands from the previous test-run. Right on cue, the chamber’s door sealed shut and a metal pedestal with the igniter fixed on it, was raised to eye level. A hatch opened and a robotic arm extended into the room, its fingers gripping a slim device with an antenna and a bright red button on the front. Another hatch opened, this time from the ceiling, and a blue piece of cloth fell through. The robotic arm pressed the button and before the cloth could hit the floor, there was a loud ‘crack’ and a great fire burst from the igniter, singeing it in less than a second.

Clay ended the demo and they rushed inside, Apollo especially, who picked up the burnt cloth to study it with a curious frown. He didn’t understand; hadn’t Clay emphasized how dangerous this device was? Then why was the damage only superficial? He had expected it to burn all the way through the fabric.

“This is where things get technical,” Clay explained. “The danger doesn’t lie in the intensity of the fire, but the impact produced in order to spark the combustion effect. That loud ‘crack’ sound you heard? The only reason the igniter didn’t fly off the pedestal is ‘cuz I bolted it down. That’s why Clonco’s antenna caught fire – the force created was enough to set his processors on fire! And considering he’s more than 80% flammable, the damage was pretty substantial.” He paused as a thought suddenly struck him. “You know, an average adult body has approximately 57% water and since water is 11% hydrogen by mass, the human body is composed of 65% oxygen. Give or take 10% less for a child. Still, imagine what this igniter could do to a human body.”

Apollo considered his theory carefully. That’s right; the pieces of scrap metal (most likely remnants of the igniter) were found on Machi’s body, but he still had his doubts.

“Unfortunately, I’m not completely sold on the possibility of human combustion. Even so, that impact alone isn’t enough to kill,” he concluded, “but paired with a room full of fireworks would be a sure recipe for disaster.”

That’s how the killer did it, he realised as things slowly started to fall into place. All the conditions surrounding Machi’s death – that was no accident, but a perfectly orchestrated plan. And the best
thing about it? The method itself effectively got rid of any incriminating evidence with it literally
going up in flames. So now, all they had was a replica covered in Clay’s fingerprints and an
elaborate guessing game.

“What’s that then?” he asked, pointing at the switch clutched in the robotic arm.

“Oh, that’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about,” Clay replied as he pried the device free and
held it up to Apollo’s eye level. “Say hello to Trigger Happy 375 a.k.a the igniter switch.”

“What’s the 375 for?”

“The number of tries it took to get this piece of shit working,” he deadpanned. “Honestly though,
things got way easier once I finished the igniter. We’re lucky we found that picture in Klavier’s
office. With all the parts down pat, it was easier to accurately calibrate and synch the signal waves to
the receptors.”

Apollo remembered this: they had learned about a strange switch Machi used to carry with him, from
Clay’s interview with Trucy. Its description of an antenna was what gave it away as a sort of a
transmitter, but for what exactly, had been a mystery until this very moment. At least they knew it
was meant to spark off an igniter, but this then produced another set of questions such as, why would
Machi have both the igniter and trigger switch on his person? Was he suicidal? And how did he
manage to get his hands on such sophisticated technology? These weren’t exactly cornerstore goods
available for every Tom, Dick and Harry after all.

Apollo took a step back and went over the events in his head. Machi was found dead by his own
igniter; the switch which almost cost Trucy her life was nowhere to be found; Lamiroir said she
heard Machi talking to a stranger before the concert; he knew there was an Interpol agent around, as
did the stranger; and Daryan was framed during intermission. On the outset, it looked like typical
sabotage: a smuggler conveniently uses the death of his partner and the presence of an Interpol agent
to cover up his/her crimes. However, with this igniter and switch, plus Machi’s last words uttered in
fear (as recounted by Lamiroir), the picture started to shift in a different direction. What if there
wasn’t any killer? What if Machi had committed suicide out of fear of being caught? It seemed
plausible at first, until the ludicrousy of the idea settled in; after all, if the fear was a death sentence
issued by the Borginian government, then why kill oneself at all? Was there something worse than
death? Furthermore, it didn’t explain the great lengths someone took to frame Daryan during
intermission. Unless Machi’s ghost came back to haunt the concert, he seriously doubted anyone else
would’ve known about it considering no one could locate him. Most importantly, what was the
motive of choosing Daryan, or was it all just a huge coincidence?

There was an alternate explanation of course - the two events were completely unrelated. Machi
could have committed suicide and someone had the unfortunate experience to stumble upon the
scene. And as for the motive? He/she could simply have a personal grudge against Daryan.
Considering Valerian knew about Daryan’s mission, there was a chance others knew about it too.
For all they knew, the whole ‘crime’ could have been a ploy to make Daryan look bad. But was there
someone who really wanted the guitarist gone so badly that they would get their own hands
dirty? And what about Phoenix? Wasn’t he the one who hated the victim and wished him dead?
Two completely unrelated events; two different crimes; one common goal – revenge. It wasn’t
difficult to assume a collaborative effort between two parties.

Again, he found himself suspecting Phoenix. Go full-circle and the ex-lawyer still seemed
suspicious. Come to think of it, there had to be a reason why Kristoph kept arrowing him in court.
His boss wasn’t one to base his accusations on insufficient evidence or blind antagonism. But he
remembered the feel of Phoenix’s lips against his own, tasted his loneliness and despair, and found it
hard to believe that someone with so much love to give could be a cold-blooded murderer.

“So, what’s the bad news?” he asked, remembering their conversation over the phone.

“Do you have a map of the Colosseum?” Clay interrupted. “I need a visual.”

Apollo flipped open the case file and handed him Trucy’s blueprint. Clay’s eyes bulged; he had half the mind to ask if Apollo’s file worked like Doraemon’s pocket, but that was a question for another day.

“Anyway, now that we know that Machi had the igniter on his body, it makes perfect sense he was most likely killed by the blast from the fireworks, not the device alone.” He marked an ‘X’ in pencil at the spot where Machi probably stood in Trucy’s dressing room. “That confirms the murder weapon. Now,” he drew a wide circle around the ‘X’ that extended halfway into the stage and the air vents that ran through backstage and the performance area, “both the igniter and switch transmits a signal that can only be received at a maximum distance of 10 meters. That means that whoever pressed that switch…”

“Could be anyone in the venue,” Apollo finished with a grave look on his face.

This was bad. It was impossible to narrow down the suspects and what’s more, he couldn’t prevent the likely accusations from flying at his client. Being on stage and no where near Machi could no longer protect Drayan; his alibi was as good as useless.

“Clay,” he turned to him suddenly, “study all you can about this technology. I want you next to me in court tomorrow.”

“What?! B-But… But I get stage fright!” he squeaked.

“You're fine!”

“I’m not fine!”

“I’m going to push for a suspect,” Apollo continued, his resolve hardening. “If it comes down to it, you’d be the best person to explain my case to his honor and the court. Can I count on you?”

They stared at each other for a long time, neither willing to back down. It was Clay though who broke the agonizing silence with a despairing sigh. The things he did for friendship.

“Fine, but you owe me for this. And I’m talking about a big fat sundae from your next big fat pay cheque.”

>To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the little surprises/references I included in this chapter? ;) Since Clay hasn’t kicked the bucket, it gave me the opportunity to explore life at the space centre and further add to this dynamic world. Clay the Assistant, anyone?
Also, things are starting to tie up - I hope you haven't forgotten the little events that happened prior to this (very long) arc! Like all AA games, everything will come together in due time.

With the investigation at its conclusion, it can only be a fierce battle in court between our two rivals from here on. The stakes are high. Is there a winner, or are there only losers? Will our characters be able to handle the truth? - Will you?

Stay tuned and thanks for reading!
May 11, 9.20 a.m. – Courtroom Lobby 3.

“I… I’d like to present my face, your honor– I mean, case! I'd like to present… my case…”

Apollo stood in the middle of the lobby and went through the court record for the umpteenth time that hour. He was perfectly sure he didn’t overlook anything: profiles; the evidence list; witness accounts; word-for-word transcriptions of every heated exchange between him and his glimmerous courtroom rival; and a video ready to be archived. But the loopholes were far too glaring. None of the possibilities satisfied him.

He bit the nail of his thumb and furiously scanned the trial log of the past 24 hours. Alright, what were the facts? Machi’s body was found inside the piano; he died before the start of the concert; Trucy’s dressing room was the new center; Valerian was innocent; Amaranth was innocent; Crow was innocent; but there was still doubt surrounding Daryan.

“Behold, the lighter – no, igniter ! … Shit, what was I going to say again?”

This was terribly frustrating. Just when he thought he made a breakthrough, a new obstacle stood in his path. Was there no way at all to fully eliminate his client from the equation? What would Kristoph do? He wished he hadn’t traded his mentor’s professionalism for his best friend’s lack of it.

“Hi, I’m Clay Terran and I’m an astronaut. Why’s an astronaut a lawyer’s assistant? I have no idea because the answer… is too out of this world! Ayyyyyy!”

“Clay!”

Said man stumbled and nearly dropped the trigger switch.

“Holy shit, you almost killed me!” He whirled around to point accusingly at the brunette. “In case you forgot, the igniter is in my pocket. How do you expect to win this case if I'm dead?”
“Can't have that now, can we?” said Apollo with a roll of his eyes. Seriously, Clay could be so dramatic; self-important too. “And will you relax? You’re only demonstrating one scenario, not heading the entire case.” His eyes darted to the empty can of coffee clutched in Clay’s hand. “Hey, is that your third can? I thought I told you to get enough sleep!”

“But I'm freaking out!”

“Stop freaking out!”

“... Apollo?”

“Argh!” Apollo jumped and the court record flew out of his hands and smacked Clay in the face. The latter peeled it off, unamused. “Look who's freaking out,” he muttered beneath his breath as he watched Apollo sweat buckets under his boss’ cold, hard gaze.

“M-M-Mr. Gavin! Morning! I was just… uh… going over my… uh…” He scrambled to retrieve his case file, but all the contents spilled onto the floor and he sought to salvage his dignity and cope with the stress the only way his panicking brain knew how: by yelling really loudly.

“I GOT THIS! APOLLO JUSTICE IS FINE AND READY TO GO, SIR!”

In response, Kristoph folded his arms and observed his understudy with an unimpressed stare; or perhaps skepticism was a better way to put it. If anything, he seemed more annoyed than particularly cross. And no, it wasn’t because his ears were threatening to bleed from the force of Apollo’s infamous Chords of Steel – that he could deal with. What he couldn't tolerate were surprises, and as it turned out, Apollo had dumped a massive one on him at 8 a.m. this morning. A last minute change in strategy – and on the last day of Daryan’s trial too. Unorthodox. Reckless. Unacceptable. Apollo was either incredibly naive or very stupid.

“What's this about Terran assisting you in today’s trial?” Kristoph held up his cell phone and indicated at said message. “I don't recall giving you the authority to implement such decisions. Why wasn't this discussed beforehand? My policies are simple: are you still on probation or just plain incompetent?”

Apollo winced. Ouch. His boss really had a way with words. And apparently, he didn't seem to be giving Clay face either.

“But sir,” he rushed to defend himself, “we had a breakthrough and Clay’s the only one with the knowledge to explain our findings to the court. I need him.”

“I'm your mentor, Apollo. This is unheard of.”

“Mr. Wright had assistants too – a spirit channeler and Detective Skye for that matter.”

“Is Phoenix still a lawyer?”

That counter cut sharper than a knife. Apollo fell silent. It was a low blow, even for Kristoph – the last person on earth he expected such snide comments from, especially when talking about his boyfriend.

Was it him, or did Kristoph sound particularly antagonistic today?

Did he find out?

Apollo’s heart rate quickened at the thought of Kristoph uncovering his and Phoenix’s secret meeting, but realised that divulging his infidelity (no matter how guilty the both of them were) would be the last thing Phoenix would do. There was something wrong with Phoenix and Kristoph’s
It was obvious Phoenix depended on him for comfort and solace, but should he really be encouraging such behavior? *Obviously not.* It didn't make him the better man. But Phoenix was hurting and Apollo felt like he was stuck between a rock and a hard place where either way, he was fucked.

*Or* his boss could simply be peeved that he was going to be replaced by a random guy of a completely different job scope, with no prior experience in law, who was also uninvolved in this case to begin with.

Knowing Kristoph’s remarkable ability to separate work from personal life (and therefore not practice any form of bias), it was probably the latter. Superior; unparalleled intellect; his knowledge of the law paramount. Kristoph was the best and he knew it. To be swapped out for somebody else was an insult greater than a thousand verbal lashings. If there was one thing Apollo learned about his boss, it was that the man had *a lot* of pride.

“No,” he answered after some time, “but I know this is the right move. I know what I'm doing. I won't let you down, Mr. Gavin.”

He seemed so sure of himself. The fire in his eyes and the firmness of his voice actually convinced Kristoph to relent with a sigh. Though in all honesty, the trial was starting soon and he didn't have time to deal with this.

“Very well, I'll concede this once,” he said with warning. “But remember this: Daryan is your client. You will do all you can to ensure a not-guilty verdict. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I'll be in the audience with Trucy,” he continued, “Phoenix will be testifying in court, so I'll be looking after her with Orly.”

Again? Apollo furrowed his brow in worry. Phoenix wasn't the prosecution’s main witness anymore; he wondered what Klavier’s strategy was this time. Hopefully not to direct the blame onto again, but given the blonde’s own dedication to the truth, he somehow doubted Klavier would resort to favoritism and utilize unscrupulous tactics for the sake of victory. Sure, he had that impression from Klavier's arrogance at first, but after yesterday’s discussion in his office, he was starting to look at his rival with respect; as equals. Daryan was Klavier’s best friend; he had a lot at stake; but the man valued integrity above all else and Apollo admired his strength.

But push Daryan any harder and the guitarist would surely break.

“Achtung, baby!”

Speak of the devil.

“Prosecutor Gavin,” Apollo greeted curtly and was mildly surprised when Klavier actually looked him in the eye and nodded in acknowledgement.

The devil-may-care personality was still there, but his rival seemed… more withdrawn, fatigue looming in his ice-blue eyes which had shone with confidence as little as two days ago. Apollo discretely pinched himself, but the scene remained the same and he was still standing outside the doors of courtroom 3. And then, the Gavin brothers started speaking to each other in hushed tones – in *German* no less! It was the first time he ever heard Kristoph utter his native language, despite his brother using it so frivolously. Whatever it was, it sounded important; and the fact that they spoke in German made it extremely obvious that the contents of their conversation was private. Apollo and
Clay stood side by side awkwardly, observing a full minute’s silence, communicating through their gaze. Seriously, what was up with everybody today?

“Herr Forehead, I hope you're ready,” said Klavier all of a sudden, fully turning to face his opponent once he was done; expression hard with a hint of competitiveness. “I won't show any mercy. Daryan may be mein freund, but das ist something I need to do. I don't expect you to understand.”

Apollo responded with equal calm and conviction, “I don't try to. I believe in my client and that's why I'm here.”

“I hear you're replacing mein bruder für dein Freund. Bad move choosing a pawn over a queen.”

“Bad move thinking the battle’s won before it's even fought.”

They stared each other down. The tension was suffocating and Clay could've sworn he saw electricity shoot from their eyes and meet in a deadly clash. At that moment, it was hard to tell if they disagreed with each other or if their personalities did.

“Hey, 'Pollo, we should go,” Clay nervously intervened as he attempted to steer Apollo away from his and Klavier’s glaring contest. “Amaranth’s going to close the doors soon and people are filling in fast…”

“… Fine.”

And without looking back at his rival, Apollo turned around and the duo made their way into the courtroom. They had a case to win.

Klavier watched them go, his brother following silently after them and closing the door behind him with a muffled ‘boom’. No final words of encouragement whatsoever. Things were personal now – either he won or Kristoph did, but victory was far from his mind. In front of the press; Trucy; his brother and apprentice; colleagues, he was Klavier Gavin – international pop icon and prodigy; he couldn't be weak. But behind closed doors, alone in this very hall, he was just a 24-year-old man burdened, confused and grappling against his conscience. Help me, he wanted to scream, but no sound came out.

Suddenly, he heard shuffling and a pair of slippers stopped behind him. It wasn't hard to figure out who it was; he was expecting him really. Klavier's lower lip trembled; he turned around to address the newcomer, but instead of the callous greeting rehearsed in his head, his voice came out uncharacteristically broken and weak.

“I can't do this anymore…” He struggled against the urge to cry. “I can't!”

With sympathetic eyes, Phoenix watched him and despite his impassive body language, felt his heart ache from the younger man’s pain.

“You have to, Klavier,” he said in a calm, even voice, “You're almost there. Don't lose faith.”


He was reverting to German again; distraught and borderline inconsolable. But Phoenix’s resolve never once wavered.

“Is that you talking or Kristoph?” At Klavier’s silence, his gaze turned kind and understanding. “I don't think it's wishful thinking when a large part of you prays for a miracle. Evidence proves a
point, but it's not everything. Fight for the truth; fight for Daryan; trust Apollo and believe in
yourself; and you just might be surprised.”

“But what if I lose mein best Freund?”

Phoenix sighed. “Klavier, other prosecutors would’ve signed Daryan’s death sentence from the
outset. You may not realize it, but you’re giving him a chance. You’re fighting and hanging on so
tightly because you believe in him. I’m sure Daryan knows this, so don’t give up on him now.”

He reached out and placed his hand on the blonde’s shoulder; gaze warm, touch comforting. “You’re
not alone.”

Klavier said nothing, simply stared. With that, Phoenix steered them through the doors and into
court. But just before they parted ways, he felt a hand squeeze his for assurance, support, gratitude;
and a small smile tugged at his lips, touched and relieved.

A great hush fell over the crowd when the judge finally took his place at the podium. Everyone rose
in respect, but the mood was undeniably restless, more so than before; the audience impatient for
closure. Cameras were raised and reporters had their pens to paper, ready to pounce on the juiciest
detail. Apollo was nervous; Klavier was nervous. Today was the final day of Daryan Crescend’s trial
and everyone – fans, the local justice system, and general public alike – was watching, awaiting the
fate of a young man and the future of their country’s relationship with Borginia. Apollo was more or
less convinced he had drawn the short end of the stick from the very moment he accepted this case.
Whoever won this would have their name in lights, and whoever lost would be ridiculed for so much
as attempting the impossible. Or get a cut in their salary. Or lose their job. No pressure really.

“Apollo…” Clay whimpered. He was starting to feel the heat.

“We’ll be fine,” Apollo reassured, but his own palms were sweaty. This was his first time behind the
defense table without Kristoph – did he make the right choice? Was this how Phoenix felt when he
had to swim on his own after Mia Fey’s sudden passing?

No, I have Clay; I have faith. I can do this.

But he still didn’t have a suspect.

The Judge opened the session with three quick hits of his gavel.

“We will now resume the trial of Mr. Daryan Crescend. Please bear in mind that this is the final
session and should the defense fail to prove their case, I’m inclined to hand out a guilty verdict,” he
paused to observe the usual formalities. “May I begin with the proceedings?”

“THE DEFENSE IS READY, YOUR HONOUR!” Apollo and Clay yelled simultaneously and the
force of their twin Chords of Steel effectively blew the poor Judge’s beard into his face.

“I can hear you just fine, Mr. Justice! Don’t need to shout!” Then he paused when he noticed Clay
and realised to his dismay that there was now two of them in court. If Apollo’s yelling had cured him
of his deafness before, he was certain the double impact of the two men would have him go deaf
again.

“And who are you, young man? It's highly unusual for Mr. Gavin to sit out of any of his cases.”
“I’m Clay Terran, sir. I’m an astronaut from GYAXA and I’ll be assisting Apollo today.”

“Oh, an astronaut!” The Judge shook his head in fond reminiscence. “I remember when I was a child, I wanted to be an astronaut and go to the moon. But I found out the moon wasn’t made of cheese, so I decided to be a judge instead. Then I found out I was actually lactose intolerant…”

Apollo’s hair spikes drooped. “Why are you telling us this, your honor?”

“No, you don't get it,” Clay defended passionately, manly tears in his eyes. “You don't understand how it feels to grow up living a lie. The moon isn't cheddar, it's not even mozzarella! And everybody knows it's supposed to be Gorgonzola!”

Apollo gave him a weird look and took two steps away. Clearly, Clay was in a whole different league of his own.

The Judge cleared his throat and turned his curious gaze to the prosecution's table. “Mr. Gavin, your opening statement.”

Klavier blinked and looked up with a start. “Was?”

“Your opening statement,” the Judge repeated, eyes wide and unblinking, clearly baffled. Klavier Gavin, prosecuting prodigy of seven years, spacing out in court? Now he'd seen everything.

“Are you ready, Mr. Gavin?”

“... I suppose I can't disappoint mein fans.”

“Your fans should be the last thing on your mind right now! Are you alright?”

Meanwhile, Apollo was having similar thoughts as he observed his rival’s uncharacteristically apathetic behavior. The air was a little lackluster; Klavier seemed distracted today – it wasn't like him, much less standard conduct of someone bearing the proud and renowned Gavin name. Also, the blonde rockstar was usually more upbeat and vocal, his confidence and ego largely uncontrollable to the point it drove Apollo up the wall and made him want throw that air guitar right smack in his face. And speaking of guitar… the memory of Lamiroir’s acoustic guitar made him stiffen. The cocoon residue. Was that it? Was Klavier finally going to let him win in order to save Daryan’s life? Could that be the reason for his preoccupation?

‘But why do I have a feeling that it's all going to go wrong today?’ he thought with an anxious heart. Considering that Daryan’s life was at stake, Klavier couldn't be more unpredictable… and dangerous. Apollo couldn't understand it: why did Klavier insist on prosecuting his best friend and challenging his faith, when there was nothing that awaited him but pain?

“Achtung, Herr Judge! Let’s rock!” Klavier straightened up, a sliver of his old self returning. ‘Don't give up on him now,’ Phoenix had said, and Klavier knew that if he rolled over and let Apollo and his brother win, it was as good as giving up on himself, his capabilities as a prosecutor, and his deep-seated trust in his friendship with Daryan.

“Before I get to mein opening statement, I have but one thing to say to die defense,” he suddenly pointed at Apollo, who frowned and braced himself. “A commendable effort to dissuade die Polizei, Herr Justice. You had mein men and Fraulein Detective running in circles, but you kann nicht buy Daryan and yourself anymore time. Your so-called 3rd party killer is a myth and your glaring forehead has blinded you from your own dumm logik!”

“Objection!” Apollo snarled and would have pounced on Klavier if the latter wasn’t on the opposite
side of the room. “That’s a personal attack and you know it, you arrogant b-!”

“Order, order!” The Judge boomed as he struck the stand twice. Goodness, less than a minute into the trial and these two were already set to kill each other. If there was a prime example for bad chemistry, this would be it. “The prosecution and defense will refrain from hurling insults at each other. And Mr. Justice, you know the rules: no raising objections against the prosecution until the cross-examination.”

Kristoph glared at his apprentice from the audience and Apollo shrunk from his mentor’s cold, hard stare. Right, he was supposed to be representing the both of them. Best not to make his boss look bad in front of the press.

“Now then, your opening statement, Mr. Gavin.”

Klavier spared a lingering glance at a miserable, troubled Daryan in the defendant's chair; felt his heart clench at the sight of the heavy chains and shackles around the man’s wrists, but chose to remain strong. He would see this through to the very end – it was the least and all he could do as a treasured friend. He would save Daryan on his own terms, in the only way his designation would allow it, and rebuild their bond and trust one way or another. But there was a mountain of evidence stacked against his friend and Klavier only hoped that, against his better judgement, he was wrong.

“Gerne,” he snapped his fingers and dived right in. “As I said, there’s no 3rd party killer. Die Polizei has confirmed this with evidence from forensics and simple deduction - something die defense seems to be lacking.”

“Mr. Gavin…” the Judge warned.

“I only state die facts, Herr Judge.”

Apollo dug his fingernails into the table so hard, Clay feared he would break the edges clean off. Otherwise, he said nothing.

“Nicht has changed,” Klavier continued in a solemn voice. “Das crime: smuggling and murder. Das motive: saving his bruder’s life. I will now present mein case. Exhibit A,” he presented the headlines of an international newspaper. “As we alle know, Damien Crescend, the Chief Justice’s youngest son, has Incuritis.”

He swapped the evidence out for Interpol’s report on the cocoon.

“This kokon ist die only cure – something der defendant knew very well and planned to smuggle into this country. Alas, Interpol got wind of die operation and ironically placed der defendant himself in-charge of das case, meaning Herr Crescend was under heavy surveillance; he was cornered. So, to cover up his involvement in die whole operation and avoid die death penalty, he destroyed alle evidence linking him to der smuggling at the expense of his own partner.”

“Partner?” questioned the Judge. “But how did the victim and Mr. Crescend make contact in the first place? Where is the basis of your argument?”

“I'm glad you asked, Herr Judge,” replied Klavier with a wide smirk. “Allow me to present Exhibit B.”

He approached the evidence table at the center of the courtroom and indicated at a seemingly ordinary acoustic guitar. “This belonged to Lamiroir before it came into mein possession. To give das court some kontext, we met in Borgia on holiday. Herr Crescend was der only other person who accompanied me on this trip. This was when die four of us first met: Lamiroir, Herr Tobaye, der
defendant and myself. Die trip was five days long – plenty of time für Herr Tobaye and Herr Crescend to get acquainted.”

Next, he pulled on a pair of rubber gloves, picked up the guitar, and circled the sound hole with a finger.

“Jetzt, notice its missing strings. Forensics have detected traces of kokon silk inside die gitarre. This confirms die methode of smuggling.”

Klavier brought up the full report and corresponding diagram to better illustrate his findings. Apollo grew nervous; he knew where this was going; feared it from the moment he inspected the guitar in the blonde’s office. Daryan didn’t look too good himself. Kristoph was right; the prosecution was going to milk this argument for all it was worth.

“Inside the guitar? Why, this reminds me of a crime series my grandchild likes to watch,” said the Judge in keen interest. “Except that it was the lawyer who was winning.”

Apollo collapsed across the table. ‘Thanks a lot, your honor,’ he thought with a sweatdrop. Seriously, was it so hard to show a little love for the defense? Well, at least he had one quality source of moral support -

“Hey Apollo, on a scale of 1-10, how screwed are we?”

I stand corrected.

“Not helping, Clay,” he muttered.

“I’d give it a 1-2.”

Apollo raised his fist. “How about I give you a good one-two instead?”

“Only der defendant would be familiar with alle security checkpoints,” Klavier continued, oblivious to the duo’s bickering. “Herr Crescend betrayed das justice system he was raised in and used his background as an Interpol agent to his advantage. Wie? Der defendant was well-informed of alle smuggling attempts and possessed the knowledge of an alternate flight service utilised für evidence - information he could only get through our acquaintanceship. Endlich, he assisted das victim in packing die nacht before der flight; a perfekte opportunity für kollaboration. I doubt Herr Tobaye, a 12-year-old foreigner, could mastermind such a plan alone.”

“Objection!”

“Overruled,” said the Judge, his interest piquing. “I want to hear this.”

Apollo cursed, while Klavier paused to access his situation. It was evident the trial was in his favour: the Judge seemed convinced; the audience more or less taken; his rival and assistant sweating bullets. But Daryan’s eyes had turned hollow, devastated, like a man devoid of a soul. Guilt snapped mercilessly at Klavier’s conscience. Do I really want to do this? But when his gaze met Phoenix’s unwavering one, he realised there was merit in the older man’s counsel. If Daryan was really innocent, he would have nothing to hide. His soul would be liberated and the public would have no reason to ever doubt him again.

“I will now address die defense’s concerns about der missing kokon.” He revisited the crime scene photograph and projected it on-screen. “In das last 24 hours, mein team has monitored der Black Market and confirmed null aktivität since last Friday. Deshalb, it’s reasonable to conclude der kokon no longer exists as it was destroyed in das fire. Wie?”
The next thing he presented was the second crime scene photo: the closeup of the victim’s body wrapped in Lamiroir’s cloak.

“Die defendant used Herr Tobaye, but when Interpol put him in-charge of der kokon case, basic self-preservation instinct kicked in and he killed his own accomplice, got rid of der main evidence, and tried to frame Lamiroir, which explains das kostüm and change in der crime scene location to her dressing room.” The crime scene photograph was quickly replaced with the kerosene container and lighter. “But, he messed up with his fingerprints, thereby incriminating himself. There was nicht framing during intermission, only poor coordination.”

Klavier took a deep, calming breath before snapping his fingers in conclusion. “Die prosecution thus accuses der defendant für die following charges: smuggling, murder, abuse of confidential state information, and attempted incrimination on fake evidence.”

The entire courtroom was speechless; even the photographers stopped snapping pictures and killed the shutters as they stood in awe of the prosecuting prodigy’s infallible logic. The silence was so thick, so persistent, that Apollo swore everyone could hear the shrill cries of his panicking thoughts. *Shit, that’s a lot of charges.* Klavier sounded like he got it all figured out, expounded on every last detail and strung together a perfect argument with a clear and convincing cause, behavior and effect. No stone left unturned, no room for doubt. If Apollo didn't know any better, he'd say that the man really wanted his best friend dead.

“Apollo, how the hell are we going to argue our way out of this?” Clay whispered fearfully. “Even *I'm* starting to believe Daryan did it.”

“Rule number one as a lawyer: always believe in your client,” Apollo calmly recited the advice from his idol, but was really a nervous wreck on the inside, equally swayed by the strength of Klavier’s argument. Though he would rather choke on that glimmerous fop’s impossibly large ego than complement him out loud.

*What do I do? What would Mr. Wright do?*

Apollo’s gaze traveled to his client’s miserable form in the defendant’s chair. He was the only thing that stood between Daryan and the Judge’s gavel now… but he had nothing.

“We buy time,” he replied.

“How?”

“We bluff.”

“A remarkably comprehensive statement, Mr. Gavin,” said the Judge as he raised his gavel. “Well, if the police and Interpol’s findings – as you’ve said – tally and have already been confirmed, then I don’t see any room for argument.”

Klavier stuffed a hand in his pocket and gazed at the judge calmly. There was no smug grin on his face or showy display of victory. Though his argument appeared flawless, he wished to be contested. *Herr Justice, say something.* Phoenix had said to trust the rookie; but no matter which side he chose, no matter what he did, he would always end up the biggest loser. If it wasn't his hard-earned reputation, then it was his best friend's life. He knew not how to feel.
“Hold it!”

The shout was loud enough to shatter glass. Of course Apollo Justice had something to say. Inwardly, Klavier breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to know that his rival hadn’t lost his fighting spirit just yet.

The Judge shot the young attorney a bewildered stare. “W-What is it, Mr. Justice?”

“The defense takes issue to the prosecution’s argument!”

“Yeah!” Clay agreed, paused, then turned to address his partner. “What issue do we have exactly?”

“Daryan Crescend planned the cocoon smuggling to save his brother, but he got rid of the evidence to avoid the death penalty,” Apollo reiterated his rival’s statement to the court with palpable skepticism. “Clearly, there’s an inconsistency in this statement. Your honor, didn’t you smell anything fishy?”

“But this is a court of law, not a fish market. It's not supposed to smell fishy!”

“I didn't mean it literally…”

“Then say what you mean, Mr Justice! Did you smell anything fishy, or not?”

Apollo’s left eye twitched sporadically and he held himself back from slamming his head against the table. How the hell did his own question get reverted onto himself?

“No- I mean… Argh!” It was probably best to start from the top.

“Your honor, the defense acknowledges Machi Tobaye’s crime and status as a smuggler – this fact has already been proven a day ago. But I object to the prosecution’s claim on my client’s awareness and actual involvement in the smuggling, and thereby challenge all three charges made against him.”

He then skimmed through all the profiles in the court record until he found the one he was looking for; the one person significantly involved in this entire drama that neither the defense nor prosecution had the privilege to interview:

[Type: Profiles]
Damien Crescend
Age: 16
Gender: Male
The defendant’s younger step-brother and legitimate child of Daryan’s mother and Chief Justice Crescend. He contracted the deadly Incuritis about three months ago and is currently bedridden in Hickfield Clinic. His condition is critical. On concert night, at about 7.10 p.m., he was on the phone with the defendant until 7.28 p.m.

“Prosecutor Gavin, quick question: how close are Daryan and Damien?”

Immediately, hushed whispers transpired through the gallery. Had the rookie run out of moves? Kristoph’s mood was as black as night as he seethed and pondered over the basis of Apollo’s redundant question; vexed and insulted by his apprentice’s poor performance and amateurish thinking. This was their last chance to prove their client innocent; what the hell was Apollo doing? Now wasn’t the time to make stupid decisions and he was doing it. Even Trucy appeared shocked and confused, but when his critical gaze chanced upon his lover at the witness box, he was astonished to see that Phoenix was smiling.
“Herr Forehead asks die silliest things,” commented Klavier as he studied his opponent with a half-bemused, half-wary frown. “Natürlich. They are bruders.”

“I asked if they’re intimate, not if they’re related,” Apollo deadpanned. “Please answer the question.”

“‘Pollo, what are you getting at?’ Clay hissed, but all he received in response was a look that seemed to say, “Trust me.”

“Fein,” said Klavier with a roll of his eyes. Only God knew what the rookie was thinking. “Ja, they are – inseparable to be precise.” He crossed his arms. “Da, are you happy now?” However the triumphant smirk on Apollo’s face made him visibly falter.

“Well,” Apollo replied, before pointing at the blonde accusingly. “As we all know, Damien Crescend is in critical condition. I find it hard to believe that Daryan would go through all that trouble to plan and smuggle the cocoon to save his brother’s life, only to destroy it without a second thought instead of attempting to use it to cure Damien first. Your honor?”

The Judge jumped. “Y-Yes?”

“If your grandchild was dying and you managed to steal the only cure in the world, would you use it and risk a life sentence? Or get rid of it?”

“Why, that’s obvious! I’d risk anything to… ohhh…” The Judge trailed off, blinking slowly in revelation. “A valid point, Mr. Justice.”

“Precisely,” said Apollo with a nod of his head. “If we’re going to talk about human instincts, rather than basal self-preservation, there is also love – to value the lives of loved ones over your own, consequences be damned. In other words, Machi’s real accomplice and murderer is someone who doesn’t care at all.”

His hand traveled to his pants pocket and pulled out a newspaper clipping, unfolded it and then placed it on the evidence table. Who would have thought the article Phoenix had shown him on Monday’s lunch date would come in handy?

[Type: Documents]
Newspaper Article: Received from Phoenix Wright. A news article from The First Daybreak, a local newspaper, about the Chief Justice’s son, who is inflicted with Incuritis. There are similar articles across other local and international publications. This story has made its appearance occasionally in newspapers over the past three months.

Furthermore, news of Damien Crescend’s condition made it into international newspapers. Anyone would seize the chance to extort the Chief of Justice. Unfortunately for the killer, it was a Gaviners concert; the Interpol agent on standby was in-charge of this case; and the amount of legal and media attention these events would garner was unavoidable. The risks of being caught far outweigh the monetary benefits of exchange. It’s thus logical to assume the killer disposed off the cocoon, the main evidence, and conveniently framed my client to cover up their tracks. In this, the defense agrees with the prosecution that the cocoon no longer exists. But...

The Judge waited with baited breath, audience members eagerly leaned forward in their seats, Clay watched his friend closely, and Klavier’s jaw tightened; lips a thin line as he inwardly trembled in anticipation. Here it comes.

“I object to all charges made against my client.” Apollo raised his pointer finger at his rival. “Daryan Crescend is innocent, and I will continue to believe in that truth. Every crime leaves a trail and I will
trace it back to the beginning, no matter what it takes!”

Everyone watched on in awed silence. Never had they seen an attorney so unshakable as this one, and those who were familiar with the legacy of more than seven years ago, regarded the scene in appreciation.

The Judge acknowledged Apollo’s counter-argument and turned to face the brooding rockstar. “Does the prosecution have anything to comment against the defense?”

“I…” Klavier trailed off as he took in his surroundings, his mind a jumbled mess, his face as pale as a sheet.

Apollo wasn’t wrong; everything he said made perfect sense, and what’s more, he found himself believing in his rival’s every word. All this while he had been desperately seeking out an alternative explanation, and here it was right in front of him, waiting for his validation.

Give in.

“I…”

You can save him.

“Hold up!”

A new voice pierced through the silence, feminine yet authoritative. Klavier’s head snapped up; confusion filled his eyes once he saw who was standing at the witness stand. Out of all people, he never expected her to come to his aid, much less appear so enthusiastic.

“Fraulein Detective?”

Ema placed her hands on her hips and tsked, “Humph, giving up so soon? That’s not like you, Gavin.”

Klavier hesitated. “But Herr Forehead - “

“Don’t believe him, he’s bluffing!” she interrupted and shot Apollo a nasty look. “Seven years ago, I worked with someone like that; I know how they spin their words. Trust me, he doesn’t have a suspect, and I’m going to tear his argument down faster than fluoroantimonic acid!”

Apollo started to sweat profusely under Ema’s scrutiny. Looks like someone could really hold a grudge. If looks could kill, he would be dead twice-over and fail to reincarnate.

“Sca-ree,” said Clay with a chuckle. “Girls really don’t like you, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“My investigation has revealed the truth behind the victim’s death and led the police to uncover the most likely suspect for murder,” Ema continued as she turned to eye Daryan accusingly. “From the condition of the body, timing, as well as the murder weapon - or rather, murder weapons - I have clear, irrefutable proof that Shark-boy was the only one in the position to commit the crime.”

Klavier looked doubtful, but if anyone was going to hold their ground, it was one very disgruntled, very bitter Ema Skye.

“Gavin, if you're not going to say something, then I will.” She turned to glare daggers at the defense. “The dumb lawyer and myself have a little score to settle.”
Ema fixed her gaze on Apollo and crushed her entire bag of snackoos with just one hand. Apollo gulped; it wasn't difficult to get the message.

“Your honour, my testimony!”

“But Miss Skye, Mr. Gavin didn't-”

“My testimony!”

The poor Judge squeaked and hid his face behind his gavel. “Y-Yes, of course! Right away, ma'am!”

Apollo and Clay sweatdropped. At the rate the judge was getting pushed around by both the prosecution and police, they seriously questioned the possibility of an objective trial.

The crack of the gavel sounded about the courtroom.

“Miss Skye, the court will now hear about how Shark- I mean, the defendant committed the crime.”

‘Humph, let’s see who’s the unreliable one now,’ she thought, before diving right in.

“Pay attention, boys, because I’m not going to repeat myself. Forensics have narrowed down the time of death to approximately 7.30 p.m. to 8 p.m. The cause itself is a grey area due to the severely burnt state of the corpse, but a deep wound was found at the side of the victim’s body. We believe Shark-boy stabbed him to immobilize him, and then set off the fireworks. Coagulated blood was also found at three spots at the crime scene. Around that same time, Shark-boy had slipped backstage to answer a phone call; everyone else - myself included - was either on stage or on the main floor during the final rehearsal. Who else could it be but him?’ she concluded with a wide smirk of satisfaction. “Try bluffing your way out of this one, dumb lawyer.”

[Updated Autopsy Report added to the court record]

>Type: Documents
Autopsy Report: Victim was burned from head to toe with a deep impaction at his right side. No traces of chemical residue were found on the epidermis. Estimated time of death is between 7.30 p.m to 8 p.m.

[Updated Crime Scene Photo 2 added to the court record]

>Type: Evidence
Crime Scene Photo 2: A large charred area on the floor in Trucy Wright’s dressing room. The victim burned to death at that spot. Luminol spray reveals blood stains on two areas on the floor and one on the wall. All three stains were affected by the fire.

“The defense may begin the cross-examination,” said the Judge.

Apollo and Clay shared a meaningful stare. Everything they worked for culminated to this moment. The tricky thing now was setting up the stage to properly present their trump card. They just needed an opening.

And so, Apollo began with his first question, “Miss Skye, when you said that the victim was stabbed and set on fire, do you mean in that order exactly?”

“What, are you stupid?” Ema grumbled. “Of course in that order! If you look at the photo closely, you'd notice that the blood stains are not only coagulated, but charred as well, which indicates the
fire happened after blood was spilled.”

Apollo studied said photograph carefully. This was the very image Clay and himself had avidly discussed about the previous day, mainly the point pertaining to the odd location of the third blood stain on the wall. At first, it didn't make sense; the victim’s body was found on the floor and if Machi had really been stabbed, the force of gravity would cause blood to drip down to the ground. But now, with Clay’s little discovery in the labs last night, the answer never seemed more clear and the glaring inconsistency in Ema’s testimony never looked more obvious.

“Sorry to break it to you, Miss Skye; but you might want to reconsider your testimony.” Apollo folded his arms and smirked. “You claim that the defendant had been in the room with Machi and then stabbed him. But if he had manually set off the fireworks, wouldn’t he be in the same state as the victim, a.k.a burned to death?”

“Urk!” Ema faltered; her glasses slipped off her head and her bag of snackoos popped open from gripping it too hard. Right, the fireworks – she never thought of that.

“B-But the stab wound-!”

“Isn’t one to begin with,” Apollo finished as he presented the autopsy report and read off it. “A deep impaction was found at the side of the corpse – in no way did forensics so much as imply it was caused by stabbing.” He pointed at her. “Your testimony proves nothing! No bluffing required.”

Ema pulled at her hair and screamed. “No way… that’s impossible! Shark-boy… I saw him! I saw him…”

Klavier watched his partner breakdown with a worried frown, too disturbed to say anything. Why did it feel like there was something wrong with this whole case?

“Then what is it?” asked the Judge as he leaned forward to study the report closely. “This is most mysterious indeed.”

“Not if you consider this,” Apollo paused and turned to address his assistant. “Ok, Clay, time for you to shine. You ready?”

“Um… I-I think so…” Clay bit his lip, hesitated, then finally shook his head. “No, no way man! I’m an astronaut. And do you see the amount of people in–”

“Hey, look! Miss Orly’s looking at you.”

“That worked.

Clay wheeled in a mannequin from the side to the center of the room. Taped to its waist was the dummy igniter. With a flick of his wrist, he signaled Apollo to present the first crime photo of the victim’s body and zoomed in on the evidence.

“Everyone, please focus your attention to these bits of metal around the corpse,” Clay began before diving into his explanation. “I’ll try and make this as simple as possible: all these are actually machine parts that when combined, create a portable device capable of producing an electric arc, otherwise known as an igniter.”

He gestured at said device on the mannequin. “Now, this isn’t the actual igniter found at the crime scene; after all, as you can clearly see from the photo, it’s been completely decimated. What I have
here is a dummy modeled in 90% similarity, which we thoroughly tested yesterday. And this,” he held up the trigger switch. “This trigger switch was in the victim’s possession since he arrived in this country. To give the court some background, Trucy- I mean, Miss Wright said that Machi reportedly kept the switch on him at all times and seemed to value it more than life itself.”

“I think that’s a bit of an overstatement, Mr Terran,” said the Judge dubiously.

“Is it?” Apollo interjected with a raised brow. “Even after Miss Wright nearly fell to her death because of it, with the victim not at all guilty or sympathetic over his actions?”

The audience gasped, Phoenix shook at the horrid memory, Trucy whimpered and buried her face in Kristoph’s chest from the traumatic experience, and the Judge scrambled to catch his gavel when it slipped out of his hands. “W-Well, when you put it that way…”

Klavier frowned at his rival, both unnerved and impressed by how the rookie had so easily won over the court and swayed their emotions in his favor. Not bad, Herr Justice. Not bad at all.

Apollo folded his arms smugly and left it at that, while Clay continued with his explanation.

“Your honour, I present to you the two key components that form the real murder weapon. Allow me to demonstrate.” He faced the mannequin and raised the switch. On cue, Apollo slowly lowered himself so that his body and half his face was hidden beneath the table.

“Klavier, Miss Skye, I suggest you do the same. I can’t predict where it’s going to fly.”

Fly?! The pair paused, shared a questioning look, before bracing themselves in a similar fashion. Clay held up the switch and pressed the trigger button. Immediately, just like at the space center, there was a loud ‘CRACK’, a burst of fire, and the mannequin flew across the room straight towards the defendant’s box. Daryan shrieked and ducked just as the thing crashed into the wooden barrier.

“What the fuck – DUDE! ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL ME?!”

“Mr. Terran! What just happened?”

Clay emerged from his hiding spot and looked about for the voice’s source, only to sweatdrop when he realized that it was coming from behind the podium. “You can come out now, your honor…”

“Oh!” A shiny head popped out from under the table. “Now I can judge impartially.”

‘And what about the last few seconds when I really needed you to see my evidence in action?’ he thought in exasperation (he did not just do a demo for the heck of it) but decided to hold his tongue; after all, they finally got the Judge’s attention and Klavier hadn't thrown out a counter-argument. Yet.

The Judge cleared his throat, “Miss Skye, please inspect the dummy.”

But the science-crazed detective was way ahead of him, hopping around the mannequin and poking the damaged area in morbid fascination.

“Woah! Did you see that combustion effect? It ripped right through the torso! Ok, so the force isn't enough to take out the kidneys or stomach, but…” she giggled to herself as her gloved fingers grazed the ruptured, semi-melted plastic; trailing off with a blissful sigh. “Ah, science – isn't it amazing?”

“Uh… Detective? I think I should point out how this ‘amazing’ demonstration leaves quite a large hole in your testimony,” Clay interrupted with just a hint of sympathy as he held up the trigger switch. “Both these devices emit a signal with a maximum range of 10 meters. That’s how the killer
set off the fireworks and killed Machi Tobaye without needing to step into the room. Isn't that right, Apollo?"

Said attorney nodded his head and decided to take it from here. Apollo presented the first crime scene photo once more and juxtaposed it with the revised autopsy report.

“Recall how the victim had a gaping rapture at his side: that's no stab wound, but damage caused by the impact of the igniter’s crude combustion effect. True, what you see before you is just ruptured plastic, but… well, feel free to use your imagination. Furthermore,” he presented the second crime scene photo, “bloodstains were found at three areas close to where the victim’s body lay, with one in particular standing out from the rest.”

He circled the blood splatters on the wall in the digital image with his finger, and it got transferred onto the projection.

“If Machi had really been stabbed, blood would've dripped onto the ground according to the laws of gravity, not on the wall. Plus, these are more like splatter marks – different from normal bloodstains and most likely caused by the explosive force of the igniter.”

“But–”

“Also,” Apollo stressed as he presented Daryan’s cell phone, “you seem confused, Miss Skye. My client did receive a call at the stipulated time period, but he took it on stage.”

[Type: Evidence]
Daryan’s Cell Phone: Contains a recording of the defendant and Damien Crescend’s conversation before the start of the concert. The call’s duration is from 7.10 p.m. to 7.28 p.m. The defendant took the call while on stage.

“HUH!? But I swear I–”

Apollo pointed at the poor, confused detective who looked like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“This overturns your entire testimony!”

“No, shut up!” Ema snarled, fingernails digging into the wood as she stubbornly held onto her beliefs. “I know what I saw: Shark-boy slipped backstage for quite some time. You can't expect me to mistake a hairdo like that!”

Apollo slammed his fists onto the table in frustration. “Fine, so the facts are wrong; Daryan went backstage – it doesn't make a difference!”

“Yes, it does!”

“Miss Skye, do you even know what you're saying!?”

He didn't get it; if Ema was wrong, why wasn't his bracelet reacting?

“Let's say he really is the killer: Daryan would have no reason to enter the dressing room at all, much less backstage or anywhere remotely close to the crime scene if he had the trigger switch, unless he was crazy or really stupid. After all, what’s the point of having a switch that starts a fire and sets off fireworks if you have to get close to do it? Get it through your thick head: Daryan didn't do it! Are you so blind that you can't see the truth in front of you?”
Ema cursed beneath her breath, more out of disappointment from her own neglect than petty spite. The blood on the wall. That meager observation snowballed into something far greater than she ever anticipated and it cost her dearly. Why hadn't she noticed the contradiction before? Never mind failing the forensic exam; she wasn't even fit to call herself a detective.

She turned to look pleadingly at Klavier. Help me, her gaze screamed, but the blonde prosecutor didn't say a word, never even looked her way. He was so silent… normally he'd have found a loophole by now; object with a witty comment or some mocking rhetoric. He always delivered the final punch to bring the house down, so why wasn't the glimmerous fop doing anything?

Panic. Silence. Quiet desperation. Unconsciously, her gaze trailed off to land on a familiar pair of deep blue eyes she secretly missed and knew so well from her memories. He always knew what to do, always believed in her. Those azure pools gazed at her kindly, consoled her for her mistakes and naivety, and carried with it a sliver of hope amidst the sorrow as well as a breath of nostalgia. Her first case, their first case – and Ema had to look away lest she got consumed by the pain and displacement she felt in her heart. Phoenix was here, yet why did it feel like he was gone forever? She wanted the man from her memories, not this stranger who robbed her off years of trust and adolescent blithe. Never had she felt so alone, and like a rug being pulled out from under her feet, Ema felt herself falling through the abyss with nothing to catch her save a cradle of regrets and broken dreams.

“Order, order! I will have order!” The Judge slammed the gavel repeatedly on the stand in a bid to restore control to his courtroom. “That's enough from you, Miss Skye.” Then he turned to address the prosecution with a look of disapproval. “Mr. Gavin, I would've thought you'd gone through your witness’ accounts beforehand, especially with your own partner.”

Apollo and Clay winced on the blonde’s behalf. Ouch. To be told off by the judge himself, that's gotta be a new kind of embarrassing.

The Judge turned his gaze to the defense table. “A promising theory, Mr. Justice. Can the defense prove where the igniter was?”

Clay paused and blinked slowly as he processed the question. Crap. Honestly, they hadn't thought that far–

“It was on Machi’s own body, your honor.”

Or maybe they did.

“Whaaaat!?” If one thought the Judge’s eyes couldn't possibly grow any wider, they were wrong. “B-But… why would the victim carry both the igniter and trigger switch? That's suicidal! Mr. Justice, I hope you thought your answer though instead of blurting it all out,” he warned with a frown, severely close to giving the defense a penalty for such a brazen explanation.

“Apollo, what are you doing?” Clay demanded beneath his breath. “Please tell me this isn't one of your bluffs.”

Apollo flashed him a mysterious grin. “Just ride with me on this one,” he whispered, before stepping out from behind the defense table. He approached the room’s center where Klavier had previously laid out the evidence and held up Lamiroir’s acoustic guitar for the entire court to see.

“There’s only one reason the igniter would be on Machi’s body and that’s if it’s related to something extremely important – perhaps as serious as life and death itself,” Apollo began solemnly, his free hand moving to present Machi’s profile. “Machi Tobaye was a cocoon smuggler from Borginia –
that has already been established. He managed to smuggle the cocoon into this country by securing it inside this very guitar – that has also been established. But the question now is, where did Machi hide the cocoon during the days leading up to his death and the concert’s opening? The answer is simple,” he replaced the guitar on the table and faced the Judge head-on, “he kept it with him at all times.”

He indicated at the guitar’s bare neck. “I was first cued in by the missing strings. This guitar was reportedly stolen at the airport, but I found it under the floorboards in Lamiroir and Machi’s dressing room – undoubtedly, purposefully concealed. Since it was via this instrument the cocoon was smuggled in, it would make sense that Machi took it out and hid it during an opportune moment, and what better place to avoid detection than on his own body?”

Apollo straightened up for the final punch. “According to various testimonies, Machi always carried the switch with him. It only makes sense that the igniter was originally attached to the cocoon as a fail safe, and that same cocoon happened to be on his person prior to the moment of his death. As for why he had both devices on him, he didn’t; someone must have stolen the trigger switch outside his awareness. This person knew he was carrying the cocoon as well as the existence of the switch, and they can only be the victim’s accomplice.”

Ema recoiled when Apollo pointed at her.

“The victim wasn't stabbed. My client remained on stage throughout the call. The detective’s entire testimony is a sham!”

There was a moment’s pause as the Judge passed the defeated detective a sympathetic stare. Poor girl; she really did try her best. He slammed his gavel on the stand.

“That concludes the cross-examination of Miss Skye. Based on the defense’s claims, I see no reason to persecute Mr. Crescend any further. Clearly, we've made a grave mistake.” He raised his gavel. “We will conclude the trial of Mr. Daryan Crescend so the police and prosecution can focus all efforts on the investigation and apprehend the real culprit. Are the any objections?”

No one stirred. Apollo clenched his jaw in anticipation.

Did I do it? Did we win?

“Well then...”

Amaranth, Crow and Valerian were at the edge of their seats. Reporters had their fingers poised over the triggers of their cameras. Pride snaked its way across Kristoph’s lips. Phoenix’s expression remained impassive. Daryan’s eyes shone hopefully.

“I declare the defendant...”

“Einspruch!”

The Judge jumped in his seat, Clay did a double-take, Ema’s posture relaxed in relief and Apollo visibly stiffened, his throat suddenly going dry in anticipation and dread. All eyes were on the source of that yell. Finally, after what felt like forever, Klavier Gavin had spoken up.

“Korrekt mich if I'm wrong, Herr Forehead,” he casually stuffed his hands in the pockets of his pants, “Daryan couldn't have been der Mörder because he was on stage throughout – das ist what you're saying?”

“And the motive,” Clay quickly added. “It doesn't fit the motive Apollo mentioned earlier. About
love and brotherly sacri–"

“I believe I was asking Herr Forehead, not you, Herr Terran,” Klavier interrupted with a patronizing smile and Clay immediately gulped and backed down when he sensed the dark, ominous aura oozing through the mask of gentility.

Apollo shot his rival a wary stare. Klavier continued smiling at him, nonplused. Apollo gave it 10 seconds. Neither said anything. So, unable to stand the silence any longer, Apollo opened his mouth.

“Ye–”

“Objection!”

He nearly lost his shit for the second time. Gods, this guy was doing it on purpose!

Klavier chuckled and applauded him mockingly. “Bravo, Herr Forehead! Truly a poet… but das court of law isn't a place to wax lyrical.” With a smirk, he turned to face the audience. “I'm afraid Herr Justice has spun you all a tale with rhymes so pretty und twists so tangled, you have become deaf to his krass contradictions.” And then by openly questioning Apollo’s logic, he retrieved a blueprint from his evidence folder and presented it to the court.

[Sunshine Colosseum Blueprints added to the court record]

[Type: Documents]
Sunshine Colosseum Blueprints 1: Prosecutor Gavin’s copy of the concert venue’s blueprints showing the performance and audience area, backstage and the ceiling vents. Staff and performers’ positions are clearly indicated during the final rehearsal. This blueprint was used by the police for reference during their investigation.

Klavier took a pen and drew a circle with its midpoint at Trucy’s dressing room, of an estimated 10m radius. Then, he marked a certain part of the stage with an ‘X’ that overlapped with the circle. Across the room, Apollo started to sweat: he knew what Klavier was thinking and silently cursed the latter’s quick perceptiveness. Truth be told, he had counted on the blonde’s previous lackluster disposition to slip away unnoticed. Alas, there was a limit to how much he could smoke with evidence so deficient and ambiguous.

“Achtung, Herr Forehead! If das signal has a maximum range of 10 meters, Daryan could still be der Mörder.” He tapped the ‘X’ with the back of his pen. “During our final rehearsal, der defendant was standing at dies very spot – a spot which happens to be in das signal range. As für das motiv, it's mere speculation. Love is arbitrary, not concrete – I refuse to accept this as truth.”

He spared a lingering glance at his desolate friend and hardened his heart. He was tired of all the guilt, of asking for forgiveness. If Apollo could continue this hopeless fight, then so could he.

“Evidence ist everything. Until die defense can prove what they say is true, I won't accept claims of love as the basis of our argument.”

Apollo buried his head in his hands and suppressed a scream. Goddammit! He had been so close! Literally a second sooner and Daryan would've been scottfree. Seriously, he didn't know how much more of this mental torture he could take.
“Can the defense prove that the defendant had absolutely no part in the killing?” came the Judge’s question, but to Apollo, those words seemed so far away; muffled discordance in the distance, mere sounds without a shred of meaning.

“Apollo…” Clay looked to his friend, fear and hopelessness swimming in his eyes. “I’m sorry. Even after all that, we still don’t have a suspect.”

But Apollo didn’t answer him because acknowledging Clay’s statement was akin to accepting the harsh reality of their despairing circumstance. Instead, he shut himself off and focused his attention on Klavier’s blueprint and compared it with his own – the very one he uncovered in Trucy’s bedroom. He didn't know why he chose to do this or what he was looking for exactly, but there was a spark – a thrill that surged through his mind and cut through the mental fog like a laser, and he was hungry to seek out whatever it was his subconscious had picked out.

[Type: Documents]
Sunshine Colosseum Blueprints 2: Miss Wright’s copy of the concert venue’s blueprints showing the performance and audience area, back stage and the ceiling vents. A particular vent pathway is marked out in blue highlighter. It runs between the stage and backstage area, connecting the two sections.

‘There's gotta be something here… But what?’ His mind raced; eyes darting frantically between the two similar blueprints. Suddenly, the highlighted portion of Trucy’s blueprint drew his thoughts to a screeching halt.

The vents... that's it!

“...You look like you got a plan,” Clay commented as he watched his friend all but throw open the court record and scour through its contents.

“You could say that,” Apollo replied when he finally found what he was looking for. Since the start of today’s procession, he felt like he was employing nothing but distractions and simply buying himself time. He could only pray that this was the very lead he was waiting for and not an unfortunate case of unintentional self-sabotage.

“I can do more than just that, your honor,” his eyes shone with conviction, "I can prove who did it.”

“Objection!”

Klavier slammed his fist against the wall behind him and scoffed. “Another bluff, Herr Forehead? Even Has-been does it better than you.”

“Objection!” Apollo lashed out in return. He would not take that shot lying down. “I’m not bluffing and here’s my proof!”

He held out his hand and parted his fingers to reveal the little piece of evidence inside. The look on Klavier’s face was absolutely priceless.

“W-Why is her… Woher did you get that?!”

Apollo frowned as he slowly processed Klavier’s statement. Her? Who on earth could Klavier be referring to? To be extremely honest, he was already throwing out his last card and going purely by instinct. Klavier’s little slip-up could be his ticket to victory.

“What’s that, Mr. Justice?” said the Judge, who was leaning over the stand in an attempt to get a better look. “Don't leave us hanging!”
“It's an earpiece, specifically one which belonged to our real killer,” he answered, placing said device on the evidence table for the court to inspect. “Look familiar to you, Prosecutor Gavin?”

Klavier gulped. “Ja… Alle performers had one. 1 to 7.”

[Concert Earpiece added to the court record]

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Earpiece: A black earpiece used on concert night to facilitate communication between staff and performers. There is a number 7 indicated at its side. According to Prosecutor Gavin, performers received earpieces labeled from number 1 to 7.

“I found this in the air vents last night; this particular passage to be precise,” he presented the second set of blueprints and pointed at the section highlighted in blue.

The Judge blinked slowly. “Mr. Justice, you were crawling through the air vents? That's considered breaking and entering and punishable by law!”

Apollo gave a sheepish laugh, “Ahaha… uh… all with good intent…?”

“I'll let it slide this once,” said the Judge with a sigh and shake of his head. “My dear boy, whatever were you even doing there?”

Klavier shot his rival a nasty smirk. “Probably trying to locate his dignity.”

“Hey!”

Clay snickered and was promptly smacked upside the head.

“Excuse you!”

“Excuse you, Mr. Justice,” the Judge interrupted with an impatient frown. “If I see no point other than the tip of your hair, you'll lose more than just your dignity.”

“Uh, r-right,” Apollo nervously cleared his throat. “A-As I was saying, this earpiece was in the vent passage which passes over all three backstage dressing rooms – exactly by the grills overlooking Miss Wright’s room. Now, I’d like to direct the court’s attention to this next image.”

He swapped out Trucy’s blueprint for Klavier’s set and marked the spot he found the earpiece with a small square. Then, with a finger, he traced over the huge circle Klavier drew earlier that represented the signal’s range.

“If you notice, there's another area where the signal’s radius hits.” He traced his finger from the stage to the air vents. It was Klavier’s turn to sweat.

“Y-You mean–!”

“That’s right,” he pointed at the rockstar. “Apart from Daryan, there was one other person who was in the perfect position to trigger the igniter and set off the fireworks! And she's the only one who would have any reason to be at that very place, at that very time.”

“Oho, the plot thickens! No wonder my grandchild likes courtroom dramas so much,” the Judge gushed. “But Mr. Justice, who is it? Who is our mysterious killer?”

I have no bloody idea.
Apollo scanned the various profiles before him while marveling at his ability to keep a straight face despite how totally fucked he felt on the inside. How Phoenix used to do this for four straight years was beyond him, but seeing as Klavier hadn't called him out on his bluff yet, in addition to his panicked reaction, it could only confirm that his line of reasoning was a right one.

‘Her… her… Who could it be?’ He pulled out three profiles and set them side by side. There were only three women involved in the concert: Trucy Wright, Ema Skye and Lamiroir. The killer had been lurking in the air vents; Trucy was in the audience area overseeing the rehearsal as was Ema on security duty. Besides, neither of them were performers, which left him with…

No, impossible. Even the police denounced the feasibility of her involvement. She was blind, totally innocent. Going forward with this accusation was as good as digging his own grave. He made her a promise, but…

“I climbed in from Trucy dear’s dressing room. As luck would have it, there was a ladder directly under the vent.”

She was someone who knew her way around the vents.

“I knew… That he smuggled the cocoon - I knew.”

She wasn’t ignorant of the victim’s actions.

“Trucy dear and I were rehearsing my disappearing act… I can’t disclose the full details of it because that will expose the trick… but I was late.”

She had been unaccounted for during the time of death. She was blind; she loved Machi with all her heart. But she was the only suspect Apollo had left and he came to realize that being innocent was the worst crime of all.

“Lamiroir,” Apollo whispered and turned to accuse the songstress in the audience. "Miss Lamiroir," he repeated, this time louder and more firmly, and said woman sat there stunned and horrified by the drastic turn of events. That pointer finger aimed her way never looked more threatening. “The defense accuses you for the murder of Machi Tobaye and for framing my client!”

“WHAAAAATT?!?”

The entire court was in outrage. Lamiroir? Borginia’s darling and the victim’s own legal guardian? Surely Apollo Justice had reached his wit’s end. Behind the prosecutor’s table, Klavier had completely lost it and was vigorously slapping the table in a show of amusement.

“Ahh… Herr Forehead, even bluffs have their limit.” He wiped a tear from his eye with a sigh. “I don’t know what’s sadder: your desperation or mein bruder’s sorry affiliation to you.”

“There are seven earpieces and seven performers in total,” Apollo continued calmly against the ridicule. “The Gavinners make five and Lamiroir make two. Lamiroir herself was #7, wasn’t she?”

“I won’t say this again: Lamiroir ist blind!”

“Is she really?” Apollo argued. “Is there any official medical document that states so? And you’re avoiding the question!”

“Mr. Justice, continue down this path and I’m inclined to give you a penalty!” said the Judge with a nasty glare.
“No, hear me out!” he defended and returned his attention to Klavier. “If the prosecution can answer these next three questions, we can conclude this trial and I’ll gladly admit defeat.”

“Tsk, Herr Forehead—”

“Come on, Prosecutor Gavin,” he goaded, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. “The ace is in your hands. What have you got to lose?”

Klavier’s smile disappeared and he studied his opponent suspiciously. That was one hell of a gamble. Apollo was either extremely confident or exceptionally foolish.

“... I’m listening.”

“That guitar originally belonged to Lamiroir. Is there any evidence that denies the possibility of her placing the cocoon inside herself before gifting it to you?”

The first question already had him faltering.

“W-Well...”

“Machi’s body was stuffed into the piano before the opening number. Where was Lamiroir throughout the final rehearsal?”

“I...”

“If she was truly guiltless, why did she try so hard to evade the police’s radar post-murder and therefore, not given a proper interrogation?”

“What’s that? Mr. Gavin!” The Judge regarded said man with astonished eyes. “You failed to question all suspects before deciding on your witnesses?”

Klavier bit the inside of his cheek and said nothing. Apollo continued to stare at him with growing intensity, almost as if he was speaking to the blonde through his eyes. You had your suspicions, didn’t you? You knew something was amiss. However, before either attorney could speak, a new voice sliced through the tension and denied them that right.

“OBJECTION!”

Phoenix shoved past a stunned Ema and forced himself on the witness stand, desperate urgency clear across his face.

“Kid, you got the wrong suspect. Diva Divine’s not who you really want.”

In the audience, Trucy struggled out of Kristoph’s hold and raced to the front of the gallery to gaze at her father in a mixture of concern and confusion. No, no, no... He wasn’t doing what she thought he was doing, was he? Meanwhile, Crow, Valerian and Amaranth’s reactions weren’t that far off either. And down at the main floor, from his seat in the defendant’s chair, Daryan gazed at the ex-lawyer with a sense of betrayal.

“Nick...?” he couldn’t help but whisper, his voice puncturing the stillness; the tentative disbelief inevitably driving a wedge between them and their recent friendship. All this time, he thought Phoenix wanted to help him; he trusted the ex-lawyer, believed in him. So why was Phoenix turning his back on him now?

“It’s just as the prosecution said: Lamiroir is blind and her disability makes it challenging to
mastermind any form of crime, if not impossible,” Phoenix defended passionately, hand over his heart. “The defense is wrong! There was another person unaccounted for during the rehearsal: me.”

Klavier stumbled and collapsed across the table as if struck by that very statement. *Has-been? But why?* Sure, he would’ve gladly offered up Phoenix in exchange for Daryan’s freedom at the beginning, but not anymore, not when all the older male ever did was faithfully support him through his darkest time. This wasn’t part of the plan.

Behind the defense table, Apollo and Clay took in the dramatic display with wide eyes, though it was Apollo who failed to process this unexpected turn of events. He didn’t understand; why was his idol incriminating himself now after escaping suspicion by a whisker, the first time? The memory of Lamiroir’s belongings in Phoenix’s apartment flashed through his mind. Why was Phoenix trying so hard to protect Lamiroir? Didn’t he already have his tarnished reputation to worry about? Trucy? His family? What about the repercussions?

Apollo was at a complete and utter loss. Since the start of this case, he swore loyalty to the man who changed his life, would go to the ends of the earth for him if he so wished. But how was he going to protect Phoenix from himself?

*Mr. Wright, what the hell are you doing?*

*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear... Phoenix, whatever are you getting yourself into now?

On one hand, I’m starting to feel bad for most characters; on the other hand, I enjoy the drama and this little guessing game. Is the culprit obvious? Maybe. Is the conclusion all it seems? No way in hell lol.

Stay tuned for this trial and arc’s grand finale! And as always, thanks for reading.
First of all, I would like to thank all my readers and subscribers for your patience. I've been away in Europe for about a month touring Germany and France, so whatever I could write I churned out in between train rides. Thank you to those who have left comments and recently subscribed to HoC asking when the next update would be! It's so flattering to know that I have quite the following for this story and my writing!

Before I begin, I would like to address a common question I've received: why is this the last trial day when it's only the second day? Now, this is not me being AU; I'm well aware of AA's 3-day rule. Recall that the Judge gave Apollo and Klavier 24 hours to find the 'real killer' after Apollo proved Daryan was framed in day one. That extended investigation eats into the three days, therefore this second trial day technically counts as the 3rd day. I did this to raise the urgency and stakes because I'm cruel that way.

Well, with that cleared up, here's part 2 of Daryan's final trial day! Merry Christmas, folks!

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!??”

That was the longest, most dramatic, earth shattering ‘what’ to grace the walls of the court; even the room seemed to give a slight tremble from the force. For an old man way past his prime, the Judge could really produce quite a reaction – and for good reason too; after all, it wasn't exactly typical for a disbarred lawyer found guilty of a crime seven years ago, to randomly plead guilty again.

“Mr. Wright, are you… confessing to your guilt!?” He leaned over the podium to study the once Turnabout King with great disbelief. Goodness knows what their legal system was turning into. “B-But didn't we rule out your involvement in the previous episode?”

Phoenix chuckled and casually stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Oh, I wouldn't say that, your honor,” he shot Apollo a sideways smirk, “Besides, isn’t it up to the defense to prove it?”

He's baiting me, Apollo realised with a creeping sense of dread. He couldn't help but get the feeling that Phoenix still possessed the propensity for bluffing and was throwing that tactic back in his face. 

But why? Why cast doubt on your own innocence? What benefit could Phoenix possibly get for protecting Lamiroir? And if Lamiroir herself turned out to be the true killer, then what would that make him for intentionally covering for her crimes? Either way, Apollo didn't like the direction this trial was taking.

“Nein! Der prosecution objects to this!” Klavier shouted and his vehement protest surprised the entire court. “Excuse him, Herr Judge. Has-been is confused; he knows not what he's saying.”

“Uh… I think he does, Mr. Gavin,” came the Judge’s hesitant reply. “Wait, do you, Mr. Wright?”

Phoenix smiled a mysterious smile. “Let me testify, your honor, and I’ll let you be the judge of that.”
Apprehension brewed behind the defense table. It was never a good sign when both the prosecution and judge were in doubt.

‘Mr. Wright really is cunning,’ Apollo thought. Poker or the law, it didn't make a difference – if the ace wasn’t in his hand, he’d make you believe it was. Apollo felt he knew his idol long enough to be sure of that, but he still couldn't figure out Phoenix’s intentions.


“Neither do I,” he replied, “but we’ll handle Mr. Wright the same way we did with the others: call him out on his inconsistencies and turn this case around.”

And hopefully find out the truth.

The judge raised his gavel and struck the stand twice.

“The witness claims the defense’s accusation to be false. Mr. Wright, please testify your actions during the victim’s time of murder,” he paused to spare the ex-lawyer a worried stare, but continued with a sigh when the determined expression on the latter’s face remained. “The court will now hear of this connection between the crime and the witness’ absence.”

“Hey, kid.”

Apollo stiffened, “What?”

Phoenix smiled, but his eyes were twinkling in challenge. “Go easy on this old man, would you? He's a little rusty with the rules.” And with a playful wink, he launched into his testimony.

“The final rehearsal began promptly at 7 p.m. All performers and staff were either on stage or on the main floor. I was… preoccupied with Lamiroir.” He spared Klavier a sideways glance (never had he seen him this hopelessly confused), before returning his attention to the front. “As the police’s investigation has revealed, I was absent for most part of the rehearsal. The only person I bumped into was Lamiroir in the backstage hallway; she was on her way to her station. The last person to see me was Daryan, who was on his way out for a smoke. That was around 7.50 p.m. All in all, no one saw me for a total of 50 minutes.” He finished with a smirk that seemed almost like a grimace, “Doesn't that sound suspicious to you?”

‘Too suspicious,’ Apollo thought with a deep frown, not to mention idealistic. It seemed as though Phoenix was being vague on purpose to conceal something important, almost like a distraction.

“Apollo, Wright’s suffering,” said Clay, he too seeing through the older man’s facade. “Call it a hunch, but his testimony… I don't think he has a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

Clay pondered his question. “It's like the last two bunches of bananas at the grocer’s that nobody wants because they look like shit and you wonder how the fuck they got past quality control in the first place. They're both bad, but one’s worse, so you choose the battered one over the rotten one.”

“... Then why even buy it?”

“Because you really love bananas.”

Strange analogy aside, there was some merit to Clay’s observation. In other words, there’s something much deeper motivating Mr. Wright, Apollo realised. But what?
“The defense may now cross-examine the witness,” the Judge interrupted his thoughts and Apollo was reluctant – wary even – to bring his idol down. A nagging feeling in his gut told him that he would only stray further from the truth if he did this. Daryan was his priority, but he felt compelled to know what was driving Phoenix to throw his honor and dignity aside so recklessly. He didn’t know where that compulsion came from, but Phoenix was a complex soul, and there was no telling if the older man’s words and intentions could or couldn’t be trusted.

“You said you met Lamiroir backstage,” he began, “around what time was that?”

“Maybe just after 7 p.m.,” Phoenix replied.

“But she can’t testify to that since she’s blind?”

“That’s true,” he raised his head smugly, “I guess that makes me even more suspicious, doesn’t it?”

Shit. Dug his own grave back there. On one hand, Phoenix was helping him prove his own case – that Daryan was innocent; on the other hand, he couldn’t allow his idol to take the fall for another. A quick glance at Ema reinforced his confidence: the detective herself seemed unconvinced, perhaps even confused over Phoenix’s abstruse motive and dodgy statements. Whatever personal resentment she had towards Phoenix seemed to be gone now and only tentative curiosity remained.

“You said that Lamiroir was on her way to her station. What do you mean by that exactly?”

“Her starting point,” Phoenix answered bluntly. “Stage front, center. It’s part of her disappearing act during the opening number.”

“So the both of you bumped into each other just a little after 7 p.m. as she was on her way to the stage.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Well, Mr. Justice?” said the Judge. “Is that information important?”

Is it? Apollo considered his options and concluded there was no harm in knowing more, so he nodded. “Very important, your honor.”

“Very well,” he looked to Phoenix. “Witness, please add that to your testimony.”

Said man simply raised an eyebrow in question. “First, you accuse Lamiroir of a crime; next, you consent she is blind; now, you’re interested in her again?” Then he chuckled and shook his head. “You think too much, kid. I don’t have to spell it out any further; it’s not that hard to make a point.”

At Apollo’s indifference however, he gave in with a disappointed frown, “Fine. I bumped into Lamiroir backstage just after 7 p.m. as she was on her way to the main stage. This means she was nowhere near the vents and would have no reason to be there.”

Apollo stiffened when he felt the familiar clench around his wrist, and his discomfort must have shown because Phoenix immediately turned nervous.

He’s lying through his teeth. But the strange thing was, Phoenix consciously did it despite the knowledge of his abilities. His desperation was palpable.

“I don’t get Wright,” said Clay, scratching his head, utterly perplexed. “If he’s trying to say he did it, then why doesn’t he just say so? Why make you speak for him?”

“Because he didn’t,” Apollo said with a long, suffering sigh, “and no matter how hard he tries to convince himself, I have evidence that proves otherwise.”
He fiddled with the court record. Time to show his hand. Reaching into the folder, he pulled out Trucy’s blueprint again and asked, “If the stage is Lamiroir’s starting point, then there’s an ending point – where is it?”

“Das elevated stage in die audience area,” Klavier suddenly answered on the man’s behalf, producing a disc and tossing it to the defense with an effortless flick of his wrist. “Das ist ein recording from das konzert itself, but die arrangement ist das same. Lamiroir and I begin das song, then she disappears after der first chorus.”

[Concert video added to the court record]

[Type: Video]
Concert video: a recording of the Gavinners’ and Lamiroir’s opening number during the live concert. It's total duration is about four minutes long. The only Gavinners playing on stage were Prosecutor Gavin and Valerian.

Apollo played the video and true enough, Lamiroir disappeared into thin air as soon as Klavier tugged down her cloak, only to reappear by the final refrain on the second stage in a glorious burst of fireworks.

Clay whistled, “Woah, now that's what I call an explosive entrance…”

But Apollo wasn’t looking at the fireworks, rather he was focusing on something that wasn't there.

“How did she get from the main stage to the elevated platform?” he asked.

Phoenix chuckled, “Can't tell you that, I'm afraid. A magician never reveals her secrets. How else would Trucy secure her iron rice bowl?”

He'd be lying if he said he didn't see that one coming. Apollo replayed the video, alternating between it and all his evidence. How did Trucy do it? It was definitely a trick, a question of distraction and misdirection. He had seen magic exposés on television before; there was always a tunnel under the stage; people didn't just disappear into thin air. So, where was his tunnel now? The two blueprints were laid out in front of him; he studied them closely for clues and released a quiet gasp when his eyes landed on Trucy’s copy, specifically at the highlighted portion that assisted him in his argument to begin with. No wonder this particular piece of evidence was in Trucy’s bedroom. Things were quickly coming together.

“She used the vents,” Apollo presented Trucy’s blueprints to a startled Phoenix. “Lamiroir’s ‘disappearance’ was nothing but an escape down a trap door. She used the vents connecting the stage, backstage and platform to get to her final position!”

“Hey, how dare you!” Trucy yelled from her seat in the audience, but was quickly silenced by Kristoph with a hand to her shoulder.

“Behave, Trucy,” he admonished. “You’re in a court of law.”

“But Mr. Gavin, he exposed my trick!” she replied with a pout.

“A minor setback,” he smiled down at his protégé through narrowed eyes. “To obtain a not-guilty verdict for the benefit of your client, one must be prepared to utilise all means.”

He missed the unsure look on the young magician’s face.

“Humph, Herr Forehead likes to speak in circles,” Klavier interrupted with a chuckle before
straightening up with a frown. “And how does revealing Fräulein Trucy’s trick have anything to do with this case?”

“Didn't you pay attention to your own witness, Klavier?” interrupted Clay, eyes shining; he was finally catching onto Apollo’s convoluted yet simple logic. “Wright said that Lamiroir would have absolutely no reason to be in the vents during the rehearsal. But if you consider that trick, it would definitely be impossible for her to perform her act without accessing the vent passage!”

‘Actually, I didn't think that far,’ Apollo thought with a nervous sweat, but at the same time, wasn't complaining.

“Therefore, there's a… uh…” Clay stopped short to meet Apollo’s gaze pleadingly. “A con… con… uh…”

“Contradiction?” Apollo added helpfully.

“Where?” said Clay.

“Mr. Wright’s statement, you idiot!”

“Oh right.”

Klavier conceded, but shook his head. “Fair enough, Herr Justice. But directing suspicion onto Lamiroir doesn’t help ihr argument. You still kann nicht prove Has-been isn’t involved.”

“Oh really?” He presented Phoenix’s two cab receipts. “Then I suppose Mr. Wright failed to mention that he had an alibi?”

[Type: Evidence]

Cab receipts: Received from Mr. Wright. The first receipt covers his first trip to Sewit’s Fabric Depot from Sunshine Coliseum, with the time stamps 7.02 p.m. and 7.10 p.m. The second receipt covers his return trip with the time stamps 7.18 p.m. and 7.48 p.m.

Phoenix began to sweat under the court’s scrutiny, while Klavier’s expression grew darker.

“Was ist das?”

“You’ll find out soon enough when claims come knocking,” replied Apollo, before turning his attention to the witness stand. “Mr. Wright, you said you were unaccounted for during the first 50 minutes of the rehearsal. Although that may be true, you were also nowhere near the concert venue itself!”

“Then where was he?” asked the Judge.

“At a fabric store buying cloth for our blind singer,” Apollo paused to look a nervous Phoenix in the eye. “That meeting backstage, it was her asking you to make her a new robe, wasn’t it? Which explains why its design in the concert video is different from the one wrapped around the corpse.” He presented the second crime scene photograph again and juxtaposed it against the video frozen at the scene just before Lamiroir’s disappearance.

“… Has-been, ist dies true?” Klavier was looking at him now, really looking; a painful mixture of confusion and betrayal in his eyes. For someone he had begun to trust and seek advice from, Phoenix’s odd and untruthful behavior was painfully disappointing.

“Hm…” The Judge stroked his beard in deep thought, before coming to a decision. “I suppose it
doesn’t make sense for Mr. Wright to kill anybody if he wasn’t even there…”

Suddenly, Phoenix let out a dark chuckle, the kind that left everyone on edge and filled the courtroom with irrepressible tension. It was unsettling, foreboding, a little creepy; and Apollo found himself unconsciously wringing his tie in growing trepidation. Phoenix never looked so serious, so driven; and judging by the intermingling of confidence and desperation swimming in his piercing blue eyes, now was probably a good time to worry.

“Mr. Wright, what’s so funny? Did I say something wrong?” the Judge implored, obviously taken aback by the man’s strange behavior.

“Gullible as always, your honor.” Phoenix tipped his beanie with a smirk, a sly look in his eyes that filled both the prosecution and defense with unease. “Kid, check the timestamp on the return trip receipt. What does it say?”

“Huh? Uh,” Apollo scrambled to read off said paper, “7.48 p.m.?”

“And was the rehearsal still going on?”

“Yes, because doors only opened at 8–” Apollo cut himself off when he realized what he had just unwittingly walked right into. There was still 12 minutes left. Crap.

Phoenix grinned and straightened up the moment he had the brunette cornered and fumbling. “That’s right, I came back with 12 minutes to spare. I was in the venue and well within the signal range. Machi died sometime between 7.30-8 p.m. And let’s not forget about that piano.”

“Piano?” Apollo, Clay and Klavier echoed, equally lost.

“Check the court record, kid,” said Phoenix as he folded his arms smugly. “Or did you forget that there were two sets of fingerprints on the piano – a fact which you brought up two days ago and conveniently dropped?”

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Piano: Was moved from the stage to the hallway by Valerian during intermission as some keys were spoiled. Bears Valerian and Mr. Wright’s fingerprints. It emitted a foul odor during intermission.

Apollo swore beneath his breath and dug out the evidence about the piano. Shit, shit, shit. Weren’t they already past this?

In his seat in the audience, Valerian trembled. He knew his fingerprints had been on the thing when he helped move it during intermission, but Phoenix had touched it too? Now that he thought about it, he did find it weird at first for Phoenix’s fingerprints to appear alongside his, especially when the guy had no business with the musical instrument whatsoever. But while he had previously dodged all responsibility and tried to pin the blame on Daryan (a cowardly act he was still ashamed about), Phoenix was unabashedly hogging all the blame onto himself. It wasn’t even selfless. It was downright insane.

“Pst! Bro!” he reached over the divide and tapped Daryan on the shoulder. “You gotta say something.”
Daryan turned around and gave him the stink eye. “You’re the last person who should be asking for favors, Val…”

“Dude, I know what I did was wrong, I’m sorry,” he pleaded, “but this isn’t about me, it’s about Nick. This is wrong; he didn’t do it. You have to help him.”

Daryan tsked and returned his attention to the front. His jaw clenched and his fists shook at his sides. Only an idiot would think that Phoenix was really as guilty as he claimed. Valerian had a point.

“I know,” he whispered, burdened by his conscience, hating how helpless he felt.

But how?

“When I returned, I passed Daryan backstage as he was on his way out for a smoke,” Phoenix continued, casually stuffing his hands into his pockets. “He asked me to help move the piano on stage. Daryan always gets nervous before a show, so I took pity on him and agreed.” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Maybe that’s when I took the opportunity to stuff the brat into the piano.”

“Objection!” Apollo yelled and presented the scrap of cloth he found at the crime scene. “This came from the killer’s clothes. The fact that it’s in pristine condition indicates that they entered the room only after the fire was put out. Unless you and Lamiroir decided to wear matching costumes that day, I doubt it could’ve been you!”

“You’re forgetting I’m her dresser,” Phoenix countered fiercely. “She asked for a new robe; I finished it on my way back. In other words, I had it on my person. Why couldn’t it have been me?”

“Urk! Mr. Wright-”

“Prove it!”

“Has-been, that’s enough!” Klavier suddenly slammed his fist against the table when he reached his limit. His outburst was so violent, so uncharacteristic of his normally cool and confident self, that it stunned the arguing pair to silence.

“Herr Forehead needs to prove nothing. There's more holes in ihr argument than Swiss cheese!” He flashed Ema’s old testimony for the benefit of the court. “Fräulein Detective received a report that a fire broke out in Fräulein Trucy’s room at 7.45 p.m. Has-been, you weren’t even back until 7.48 p.m. Deshalb, you committing murder ist an impossibility.”

The Judge was blinking his eyes so rapidly, he felt like he had just woken up in an impossible, crazily distorted, alternate dimension. The prosecution objecting to its own witness and siding the defense? Did no one care for rules anymore?

“Klavier… you…” There was no other way to describe Phoenix’s expression except hurt.

“You told me to pursue das truth,” the blonde prosecutor replied solemnly, sadly. “This isn't it, Has-been. This isn't you.”

Klavier’s words sent a pang through his heart. Phoenix bowed his head with nothing more to say. The Judge cleared his throat awkwardly, “Well, the evidence doesn’t lie… The defense has
confirmed Mr. Wright’s alibi and proven the possibility of Lamiroir’s involvement. Since the prosecution has failed to deny this claim, Mr. Justice’s argument stands.”

Apollo felt his spirits soar as he and Clay gave each other a high five. Yes, score one for Justice! He missed the way Klavier’s shoulders relaxed with the same relief he felt from that announcement.

In the audience, Trucy breathed a loud sigh she didn't know she had been holding. Thank goodness… She didn't have to like pointy-head, but she supposed she had him to thank for protecting her daddy –

“WAIT!”

The yell was so piercing, so sudden, that it made the entire court jump and the Judge almost fall out of his seat.

“W-What is it, Mr. Wright?”

Klavier frowned and so did Clay, who leaned in to whisper into Apollo’s ear, “Wright’s not giving up, is he?”

“Stubborn to the core,” Apollo replied as he braced himself against the old turnabout king. He didn't get it; what could be driving Phoenix to protect Lamiroir to this extent? This was crazy! Out of all witnesses, he didn't expect to pit his wits against his idol, especially since he was supposed to be on his side.

“Fine, I'm clean as a whistle,” Phoenix admitted bitterly, “but who's to say Diva Divine was in the vents at the very moment the crime was committed?” He challenged with a wide smirk. “If the kid can't prove that, the defense doesn't have a case.”

“Don't be too sure of that, Nick.”

Phoenix gasped and whirled around, coming face to face with the last person he expected to interfere. He took in that outrageous hair; the thin lips pursed in rueful disappointment; and dark eyes as hard as steel. The fear was gone and Phoenix realized that the doubt reflected in the guitarist’s gaze was actually his own.

“Daryan…?”

The younger man had asked for protection, for help – so why? Why defy chance and deny an opportunity for an easy way out?

“Thanks, man. You're a great friend, I appreciate the support… but this is wrong. I won't stand by and watch you take the fall for someone else,” Daryan whispered into his ear, before pulling away to bravely face the judge and take his place upon the witness stand. “Your honor, the detective wasn't lying: I did take the call with my brother on stage, but I also did go backstage during the rehearsal.”

What!? Apollo, Clay and Klavier recoiled at the confession. What the hell just happened? The Judge seemed to reflect their shock.

“M-M-Mr. Crescend, what’s the meaning of this!?”

Daryan shrugged. “You guys want proof the diva was in the vents at that time, right? Then let Apollo cross-examine me,” he formed a gun with his fingers and pretended to aim at the brunette, “and maybe our shot won't miss this time.”
With a wink and a mysterious smile, he flicked his wrist and fired with a quiet, “Pow!”

“Ok, what's the plan?”

Apollo simply passed the court record to Clay and readied his notes.

“I need you to dig up Daryan’s phone conversation with his brother,” he instructed as his gaze quickly scanned the messy scrawl that was his writing, running through Daryan’s interview with Kristoph as well as his own interview with Lamiroir the previous night. There's gotta be something that could hint at the singer’s involvement somehow; a way to track her movements that evening – timing, self-reported events, anything.

“What do you need?”

“Try and pick out anything that can help our case.”

“Such as?”

“I'm flexible.”

Clay sighed. “In other words, we’re going in blind.” Then he slipped on a pair of headphones and did as he was told.

Meanwhile, Apollo rapped his fingers on the table impatiently, studying his client with a deep scowl. Although he was thankful that Daryan stood up for Phoenix, the guitarist inevitably brought the attention back to himself and the suspicion that came with it. Honestly, he had no idea what good it did Daryan admitting he had indeed slipped backstage (and thereby closer to the crime scene and well within the igniter’s signal range), but if his client believed they could solve this mystery once and for all, believed in him, then Apollo had nothing else to do but trust in his own abilities and leave the rest to fate.

“This is most unusual indeed,” said the Judge in a grave voice as he mentally ran through the turbulent, albeit dramatic proceedings thus far. He shouldn't be surprised really; after all, he'd seen quite a number of turnabouts in his time, all of which seemed to always follow Wright around like an inescapable bog. “But since the defendant has the right to speak, you may proceed, Mr. Crescend. Please tell the court about your actions during the final rehearsal.”

“Gotta.”

Behind the prosecution table, Klavier felt his body go numb. It appeared increasingly unlikely Daryan was as guilty as the media made him out to be, yet he was unable to completely abandon his prior suspicions. If it wasn't any of the other Gavinners, Has-been, Lamiroir, then who? Klavier didn't want to delegate the blame to Daryan via the meager process of elimination, but he still had the impression that the Interpol agent knew a little too much. The only reason he didn't carry forth that idea was because his nagging suspicions were unfounded, insubstantial, and made him feel like a horrible friend.

“The rehearsal began promptly at 7 p.m.,” began Daryan. “The Gavinners spent the first 10 or so minutes practicing the harder songs, but we were pretty much trying to kill time until the diva showed up. Around that time, Damian called to update me on his condition: he’d just recovered from
a recent operation. He said something that got me real pissed and shit, but I had a show to do so I forced myself to get over it. Then Lamiroir showed up and we rehearsed the opening number, but she missed her cue and we were going to go at it again… but I couldn't."

He released a shuddering breath, lower lip trembling, on the verge of tears as he recalled the phone conversation that was still painfully, hauntingly fresh in his mind. Apollo and the Gavinners gazed at him in concern; Klavier offered him a sympathetic stare; and Clay removed the headphones slowly, solemnly, finally comprehending the extent of Daryan’s sorrow, unfairness and tragic affliction.

“No doctor could save him. Damien was dying. My brother was dying and I couldn't even be there because I had a fucking concert to perform and that little fucker wouldn't let me go to him because he doesn't care enough about himself or give two fucks about how I'd feel!”

Daryan paused to run his fingers through his disheveled hair; took a deep, calming breath and exhaled slowly; wiped away the tears with the back of his sleeve. Shit. So much for being strong for his lawyer.

“Sorry, your honor.”

“That's alright, Mr. Crescend,” came the Judge’s sympathetic reply. “Mind your language though.”

Apollo clenched his fist so hard, his knuckles turned white.

Daryan… The poor guy had already been through so much and he still couldn't see his brother. It made Apollo even more determined to set Daryan free and grant him closure.

“I… I needed to freshen up… So when the fireworks went off and Lamiroir finally reappeared, I slipped backstage. That's when I smelled smoke,” he paused and turned to meet Ema’s knowing eyes at the witness bench. “I was the one who alerted the detective, though she was already on her way over. After that, I retreated outside for a smoke. There were too many people backstage after that fiasco and I needed to be alone. I bumped into Nick on my way out and you guys know the rest.”

“Aha! So I was right: you did go backstage!” Ema jumped up and pointed at the guitarist accusingly.

“But I swear I didn't kill anyone!”

“Oh yeah? What've you got to show for it, shark boy?”

‘Urgh…’

‘Not a lot, unfortunately,’ Apollo thought as he worried his lower lip. There wasn't anything concrete that could justify Daryan’s actions during that period, so the only option he had was to uncover as much evidence as possible to implicate someone else. Except that there wasn't anyone else more likely than Daryan. Talk about a double-edged sword: while Daryan had info that could potentially help their case, he also ended up putting himself under the prosecution’s radar all over again.

“The defense may now cross-examine the defendant,” the Judge’s voice interrupted Apollo’s thoughts like a hammer to the head. A sense of doom filled him; his bracelet failed to react to anything; he had no idea what questions to ask and he was going in dry.

“You mentioned the Gavinners were ‘killing time’. Why was that?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“The main purpose of that final rehearsal was to practice the opening number, Trucy doll’s orders,” Daryan answered. “So obviously, we needed Lamiroir to make things happen, but she didn't show until about 7.20 p.m.”
“How are you so sure of the time?”

“I ended my call with Damien then.”

Apollo briefly consulted his evidence list and sure enough, Daryan’s phone conversation ended at 7.19 p.m.

But still no clue on Lamiroir’s whereabouts.

Clay frowned to himself, “Hey, wait a minute… didn't Wright say that he bumped into her backstage at 7 p.m. as she was on her way to the stage? That’s like, 20 whole minutes! What the heck do you do for 20 minutes?”

“Good ear, Clay,” Apollo praised before narrowing his eyes at the nervous blind singer in question. “What do you do for 20 minutes indeed…” But that was a question to be addressed later. He turned to face the guitarist once more.

“So, I’m assuming she came on stage after that and you guys began rehearsals proper?”

“Pretty much,” Daryan shrugged, but decided to be more specific when he noticed the exasperated expression on the young attorney’s face. “Ok, not all of us. We only needed Klav, Lamiroir and Machi for the opening number, but since the kid was missing, Val covered for him. The rest of us hung by the exits.”

“And that’s how you ‘slipped’ backstage and found out about the fire.”

“Yup.”

Ok, if everyone had been watching Lamiroir perform, that’ll explain why no one particularly noticed, Apollo pondered this latest detail as he drew up various scenarios in his head. Phoenix saw Daryan heading out for a smoke at 7.50 p.m., 5 minutes after the fire was reported. So what was the state of the fire at 7.45 p.m.?

“You said you smelled smoke,” he reiterated. “Was the fire still burning or already dying down by the time you discovered it?”

“Uh… Dying down – no, burning… no, it was already… put… out?”

Apollo’s bracelet tightened and his head hurt like crazy. However, it didn't feel like a lie; more like Daryan seemed confused. It was strange though; why would he mix up something as simple as that?

“Ok, there were like, still some embers… it wasn't blazing or anything. That's why I couldn't tell if it was dying down or someone tried to put it out before I arrived.”

“That makes sense,” said the Judge before looking to Apollo. “Well, Mr. Justice? Was that information important?"

‘Could that have been the killer?’ Apollo thought to himself in growing alarm, but there wasn't enough evidence to go by to fight for that claim. His bracelet gave a slight twinge; there was either something not quite right about Daryan’s answer or his nerves could simply be imagining it, but he was at the point of desperation. What he needed to do was clear: pick out clues from Daryan’s testimony – no matter how few there may be – that would reveal Lamiroir’s actions during her extended delay. But it wasn’t easy; he felt like he was playing a guessing game, one that he could either successfully bluff his way through, or get Klavier suspicious of his intentions. Apollo knew it wasn't ethically right; he felt horrible, but he couldn't betray his client, he couldn't betray the man he
loved, and out of all three options in his basket, targeting Lamiroir seemed the lesser of the three evils. ‘A lawyer needs to be ruthless,’ Kristoph had said. His boss would surely understand.

“Yes, your honor,” he nodded, looking to Daryan. “Please add that to your testimony.”

“Uh… whatever you say, dude.” Daryan scratched his head, but didn't comment any further. “I slipped backstage to freshen up and discovered the fire. It looked like someone had tried to put it out.”

Apollo stiffened. There it was again.

“Daryan, I need you to be honest with me,” he treaded carefully. “You touch your hair every time you talk about the fire… there's something you're not telling us.”

“Uh!” Daryan flinched and the beginnings of cold sweat gathered on his brow. “W-Well… it's nothing…” He sighed when Apollo shot him a warning glare. “It's a suspicion, ok?”

“Suspicion?” He and Klavier echoed dumbly.

Daryan folded his arms with a thoughtful pout. “Yeah… Look, I'm not trying to say anything or cause trouble for anyone, alright? But… I'm just saying, Lamiroir was the last person with Machi; she showed up late; she even missed her cue…” He started to look uncomfortable. “I don't know, maybe… maybe she did go in there and…”

“Einspruch!” Klavier yelled and regarded his friend with disappointment. “You are not one to point fingers, Daryan.”

“Bro, that's why I didn't want to say anything!” he yelled back, close to tears. “I don't have proof; I'm grasping at straws; but this is all I saw and all that I have! I don't want to go to jail… I can't!”

The blonde flinched at his outburst, the guilt gnawing painfully at his heart. He had forgotten who the defendant was and stepped out of line.

“All that he saw…” Apollo repeated Daryan’s words beneath his breath, while Clay continued listening for clues over the recorded phone conversation. Suddenly, the later paused and quickly tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey, Apollo… I think I hear something,” he whispered.

“Where?”

“Here,” he handed the brunette the headphones. “I don't know how this would help us, but… I just find it strange somehow. Listen. Towards the end of the conversation.”

Frowning, Apollo maxed the volume and played back the recording. He rewound and listened. Rewound and listened. Rewound it again. And when things started to click, he felt a shudder run up his spine.

Oh my god…

“Daryan,” he began so gravely, he scared both his own client and rival, “when you said Lamiroir finally appeared at 7.20 p.m. you didn't mean on stage, did you?”

Confused at first, Daryan processed his lawyer’s question before a flicker of realization danced across his eyes, and his face soon took on a serious expression at the weight of Apollo’s
perceptiveness.

“No, I didn't. You're right, rookie. Lamiroir didn't show up on stage like the rest of us... she appeared on the elevated platform instead.”

It took a while for both men’s statements to sink in, but when it did, Klavier collapsed across the table when said memory hit him like a ton of bricks. “Was?! Then that means…”

Confused murmurs transpired through the crowd. The audience and media went crazy. What on earth was going on?

“Mr. Justice, would you care to shed some light on this little discovery of yours?” said the Judge impatiently. “How am I supposed to judge fairly if I don't understand what's going on?”

‘Do you ever?’ Apollo thought in exasperation, before straightening up. Alright, be prepared for the shock of your lives.

“First, I’d like the court to recall that Lamiroir was 20 minutes late for her rehearsal. Mr. Wright brought up a good point that we lacked evidence to establish her exact whereabouts during the estimated period of murder... but he was wrong.” Apollo presented Daryan’s phone conversation and maxed out the volume. “The conversation isn't the main point. I want everyone to listen closely to the background noise.”

He played the recording and the court listened in silence to the bittersweet exchange between the Crescend brothers. Try as Daryan might, he couldn't stop shaking. The white noise was exceptionally obvious due to the volume level, almost unbearable with the buzz of static. Suddenly, there was a series of muffled bangs and then singing, an unexpected interruption from the silence before the call went dead.

“What was that?” asked the Judge, baffled.

“That, your honor, was Lamiroir screwing up,” Apollo replied with a smug grin. “Not only did she not appear at her correct starting point, but she also took 20 minutes to show up.” He presented the Sunshine Colosseum blueprint. “Recall that the platform is only accessible through the vents. The fact that she appeared there proves one thing alone: she was in the vents and in perfect range of the signal during the period of Machi’s murder!”

“Objection!” Klavier was quick to interrupt with the autopsy report. “Herr Tobaye died between 7.30 - 8 p.m., or ist Herr Justice’s forehead too large für his eyes to read?”

“I think you're the one who has problems reading, Prosecutor Gavin,” countered Apollo with a smirk. “In no way did the report state that Machi died immediately. Besides, no one dies the instant they're burnt! It takes time. The skin goes, followed by the organs. The brain takes a while to shut down. And let’s not forget that Lamiroir missed her cue the second time, which also happens to involve her climbing through the vents again – that pass over the dressing rooms – which was also around the same time Daryan discovered the ‘dying fire’ with no corpse in sight.”

Klavier gaped dumbly. “I… I… Ungh…”

“How does a corpse disappear and end up in a piano along the hallway? How does a fire put itself out? Why would Lamiroir be missing her cues for a performance she should already be familiar with?” Apollo slammed his fists on the table for the finishing blow. “I have established her whereabouts and proven the possibility of her committing the crime. My client’s suspicions are valid!” He presented the blue cloth from the singer’s robe. “The defense has the legal right to
question Miss Lamiroir!"

Phoenix gasped and felt his heart stop, “No…”

Meanwhile, Klavier gazed at the brunette in awe and fear, backed into a corner. With that confidence, infallible logic, and ability to press his opponent and witnesses in a way so reminiscent to that of Kristoph, Apollo looked terrifying.

Just then, someone screamed and a commotion spread through the audience like wild fire. It was Lamiroir. The singer had shoved her way through the crowd and was making a mad dash towards the exit. However, the Judge was quick to react.

“Bailiff, restrain her!”

And just before Lamiroir’s hand could grasp the brass handle of the door, a pale hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, tugging her backwards and into a hard chest. She fought and cried, resisted with every fiber of her being, but Amaranth was as rigid as a rock and his strength eventually subdued her spirit. Weary, helpless and heartbroken, Lamiroir allowed herself to be led away, past the eyes that looked upon her in disgust, fury and suspicion – all except a certain hazel gaze that refused to lift out of his own guilt.

“Granted, Mr. Justice,” came the Judge’s consent with a swift strike of his gavel. “The prosecution will prepare the witness for questioning. We will now take a 10 minute break…”

But the old man’s voice seemed so far away, and Lamiroir, devastated by fear and the fault of her fragility, finally allowed her tears to fall.

May 11, 10.50 a.m. – Courtroom Lobby 3

“Rookie, you did it! You did it, you did it, you did it!” Daryan cheered and grabbed Apollo in a headlock, swinging him around in circles. “Heh, heh! You know, when I first met you, I was like, ‘God, you fucking with me or something?’ But now, I'm a believer!”

After his face turned about four different shades of blue, the poor attorney finally managed to shove the guitarist away as he desperately fought for air. Honestly, he didn't know whether to feel proud or insulted.

“Uh… thanks. But we’re not out of the clear yet,” he warned. “All eyes are on Lamiroir now, but you're still guilty until proven innocent.”

“Geez, would you relax? At least we made it till this point,” said Clay with a laugh as he clapped his friend on the back. “Always so serious, aye, Polly?”

“And when did you start calling me that?!” Apollo blushed and bristled at the affectionate nickname Phoenix used on him. Gods, he seriously hoped it wasn't catching on.

Speaking of Phoenix, he hadn't seen the ex-lawyer since the start of the break. He had assumed that the guy would join his daughter, but Trucy and Olga were chatting by the water cooler with no Phoenix in sight. If he had to put it simply, his idol had been acting weird all morning, first with his interference and now with his elusiveness. He quickly looked away when Trucy gave him the evil
eye though. And that bright red hand print on Clay’s cheek explained why the young astronaut was here rather than chatting up a certain blonde dealer there.

“I'm afraid Apollo’s right, Daryan. The die hasn't been cast yet.”

Immediately, three pairs of eyes turned to the source of that rich, baritone voice.

“Mr. Gavin!”

Kristoph’s eyes were smiling. “Excellent work out there, Apollo, Terran. You two make a far more decent team than I initially expected, but I must ask to relieve you, Terran. This final stretch isn’t a game and Daryan can’t afford any mistakes.”

“Sir?” Apollo looked to his boss hesitantly. Did Kristoph have a plan? That telltale smile and confident gleam in his ice-cool eyes said as much, in which case he would be more than delighted to have his mentor by his side again, all thoughts of their strained relationship aside.

“By all means, the position’s all yours!” Clay gestured wildly at the courtroom door. “Standing behind that table’s like trying to breathe in space! I like my spot in the audience better, thank you very much.”

‘More like your seat next to Orly,’ Apollo thought exasperatedly with a roll of his eyes.

Kristoph hid his mouth with the back of his hand as he chuckled, “We are of very different standings after all.” Then he turned to address his apprentice, “I apologize I can’t participate further in this discussion, but I have some urgent matters to take care of. Oh, and by the way,” his eyes narrowed, “if you see Phoenix, tell him I wish to speak with him privately tonight. And I won't take no for an answer.” The dark look was quickly replaced with a small smile. “I'll see you inside, Apollo.”

With a dismissive wave, the blonde walked off as silently and gracefully as he had arrived. While Daryan pointed and teased Clay about his glowing cheek, Apollo watched his boss go with a wary frown. What on earth was that all about?

11 May, 10.58 a.m. – Waiting Room 3

Lamiroir sat motionless on the bench, too terrified to speak, too distraught to think. Klavier had come in earlier to brief her on the procedure and run over her testimony, but that was all a mad blur to her and all her mind could formulate was the single word, “why?”

Tears built up in her eyes. Machi… Oh how she missed him. She missed him so much. He had always been her comfort, her shelter from the storm and the dark shadows that plagued her world; she could count on him. But now, he was gone and out of the two people she learned to trust in this terrifying foreign land, one of them had sold her out.

Phoenix, where are you? Please… I need you… Help me.

“Madam?”

She gasped and jumped at that sudden intrusion. Who? She hadn't even heard them approach.

Kristoph offered the blind singer a sympathetic stare and what he couldn't convey through his face he offered with his voice. “I apologize for startling you,” he began with a curt bow. “I'm Kristoph Gavin, Klavier’s brother and Apollo Justice’s mentor. Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“Mr. Justice…” Her lips trembled at the sound of that name. Kristoph was quick to catch on.

“Please don't take my apprentice’s actions to heart,” he continued gently, kindly, in a bid to quell her unease. “In no way is this a definite accusation. We'll simply cross-examine you and if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. I trust that my brother ran over your testimony with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you're in good hands.”

With a charming smile and genteel grace that would make any lady swoon, Kristoph took her hands and gently lifted her to her feet. And in a voice that could soothe even the most savage of beasts, he spoke, “It’s almost time. Shall I escort you inside?”

A quiet gasp, a racing heart. Suddenly, a bout of weakness overtook Lamiroir and she lost her footing, only to find herself wrapped protectively in Kristoph’s strong embrace.

“I-I’m so sorry!” she stuttered, embarrassed.

Kristoph’s gaze softened in concern. “The stress must be getting to you. Are you alright?”

Lamiroir blushed. All she could do was nod her head like a small child and he released her out of respect.

“I’m glad. Should I get Klavier?”

“Thank you, Mr. Gavin, for your concern, but I’m fine,” she said sweetly after she found her voice, touching her bracelet nervously. “I must sound so silly to you, worrying over nothing.”

That earned her a laugh from the blonde gentleman. “Not at all, madam. And if you can call my brother Klavier, you can certainly call me Kristoph.” He leaned down to kiss the back of her hand and she giggled coyly, eyes affectionate.

“Phoenix is so lucky to have someone like you, Kristoph.”

A dark, knowing look flashed across the blonde’s eyes at her words, but it was gone before Lamiroir even noticed.

“I can only hope he shares your sentiments,” he replied with a smile. “Are you sure you’ll be fine by yourself?”

“Positive.”

“Then I wish you all the best.”

Politely excusing himself, Kristoph took his leave. It was only after he disappeared from sight when Lamiroir dropped her gaze to her hand where the blonde’s lips had touched, and smiled softly to herself.

To be continued...
EVERYONE IS SUSPICIOUS.

Brace yourselves for the conclusion in the next chapter! Can't believe I'm almost done with Turnabout Serenade.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for taking so long, but I've had Chinese New Year preparations and lesson plans to attend to. As a sort of reward for your patience, this chapter is exceptionally long (probably my longest yet!) as it concludes this arc and determines the direction HoC, as well as its characters, will take from here on end.

As a side note, I would like to give a big shout out to my readers, subscribers and reviewers. Thank you so much for your continuous support and it always brings me great joy whenever I receive email notifications from new bookmarks, kudos and comments. It shows you're enjoying the read and that's perfect!

A little disclaimer, don't get too affected by the way I chose to end this chapter. This arc still has an epilogue I've yet to submit, so leave your comments for now and look forward to the next update! ;)

The moment Apollo walked through those doors found him shrinking from the sheer intensity of the crowd’s heated chatter and bracing himself against their critical stares and barefaced animosity. The voices were deafening, their criticism a crescendo within the four walls of Courtroom 3. He walked down the aisle and a Borginian reporter spat on him. He didn't know which surprised him more: his lack of reaction, or the old man’s befuddled unease. Apollo passed him like he was nothing more than a ghost. Quiescence granted power. Fear and respect were two sides of the same coin meant to be manipulated. Kristoph was especially skilled at that.

He kept his head high and passed the witness bench, inwardly taking solace from what he saw, yet troubled by the repercussions of that which he sowed. The Siren no longer sang; Lamiroir too was having it hard from the local media: her deathly silence spoke of her terror and shame. They were in the same boat receiving frack from the opposing sides. It was funny how the human mind felt less alone during mutual suffering.

Their eyes met, but both quickly looked away. One hurt and mad for the other’s betrayal, another guilty yet resolute on the justice needed to be dealt. Too late to turn back now. Apollo joined his boss behind the defense table and Kristoph acknowledged him without once averting his gaze from his brother.

“I trust you know who your client is.”

“... Yes, sir.”

It was an unspoken warning, a cold reminder from superior to subordinate. And Apollo fought to forget the faces and lives behind the individuals on the witness bench.

“No one should matter save Daryan.”

“I understand.”
Two strikes of the gavel was enough to bring about silence. Lamiroir gave herself a moment before rising to her feet, but her eyes were in a daze, her mind unable to process the reality she unwillingly found herself apart of. Suddenly, a hand grabbed hers and she froze at the sight of Phoenix’s eyes boring intently into hers.

“No matter what, don’t let them know you can see,” he whispered fiercely. “Don’t.”

They were the same words from the concert. She nodded and he released her. As she stood upon the witness stand, she shot the young defense attorney a discrete stare and at the golden bracelet around his wrist. Unconsciously, her fingers moved under the sleeve of her robe to touch her own. So, it has come down to this.

“Mr. Gavin, is your new witness prepared?” asked the Judge. “This did come about from such short notice…”

“Ja, she is,” replied Klavier in all seriousness. “Und she has something to say to die defense, specifically Herr Justice.”

Apollo raised his eyebrows, but his curiosity remained cautious. “What’s that?”

“You're stubborn, impulsive and naive,” Lamiroir interrupted in a calm, matter-of-fact manner that left little to no room for argument. “You've been misguided, Mr. Justice. Someone in this room isn't telling the whole truth. I beg you to reconsider your argument.”

Apollo’s eyes narrowed; he did not appreciate that comment from the blind singer. He didn't particular like how uncomfortable she made him feel either, like she could see right through him and read his every intention. But before he could open his mouth with a snarky comeback of his own, Kristoph beat him to it.

“How intriguing,” he chuckled. “And does that someone include you, madam? Or were you just hypothetically speaking?”

Lamiroir flinched, causing her veil to fly up momentarily. “Ah… I…” Perhaps she should have chosen her words more carefully.

Kristoph simply brushed her aside, “No matter, we’ll let the evidence and logic decide for us.”

“Quite right,” said the Judge solemnly as he resumed the trial proper. “Name and occupation, M'am?”

“Lamiroir, 40, I’m a singer from Borginia.”

The Judge paused, “Hm? Don't you have a full name?”

“She was involved in a fatal accident sieben years ago, Herr Judge,” Klavier explained on her behalf. “It left her blind with amnesia und she created a new identity für herself. Das name ‘Lamiroir’ was alle that mattered when she became a star.”

“I see…” the Judge had new sympathetic eyes for said singer, and Apollo inwardly cursed his rival’s ability to play with the old man’s emotions using his own witness. “Miss Lamiroir, I promise to judge fairly and deliver a verdict most impartial. You have nothing to fear so long as you tell the truth. Could you please tell the court what happened during the final rehearsal?”

“A… Alright,” Lamiroir took a deep breath and resolved to get it over with as soon as possible. She couldn't stand this terrible place, at the center of the world’s scrutiny, where every second longer
meant another chance at possibly screwing up. Just like you rehearsed, she told herself. Klavier believed her. Phoenix was behind her every step of the way. Even Kristoph had mentioned that this was all part of protocol; nothing to hide, nothing to fear; and this whole mess would finally be sorted.

But her obstacle was Apollo Justice.

“Why was I late for the rehearsal? I was looking for my cloak,” she recounted the events carefully, calmly. “That’s when I bumped into my dresser, Phoenix. I asked if there was anything he could do to help. That constellation cloak was my signature costume, so he offered to purchase some cloth from the nearest fabric store and sew me a new one. Relieved, I returned to my room to get Machi for our rehearsal; we were already running late; but he wasn’t there. So I tried to look for him. I was so worried… He would never run off like that and leave me alone.” She paused and released a shuddering breath. “… That’s when I heard him.”

Apollo stiffened; he remembered this part of her tale. Here it comes. Kristoph however, never even batted an eyelid.

“Who, my dear?” said the Judge curiously.

“Machi,” she replied, clasping her hands together. “He was talking to someone in Trucy dear’s dressing room. It sounded one-sided, so it must’ve been over the phone. I tried to enter, but the door was locked and Machi didn’t seem to have heard me. I don’t think there was anybody else nearby to guide me, so I didn’t know where or who I could go to for help. That’s when I remembered the vents; I practiced walking through them so many times with Trucy dear’s help; so I thought I could get to him through there to check if everything was all right. It was the only way I knew.

“I reached the area where Trucy’s room roughly was. Sound travels in the vents; I called out to him, but he never answered. In fact, I couldn't hear his voice anymore, so I thought I missed him and he already left the room. I decided to head back in case he was waiting for me on stage, but I took a wrong turn and ended up on the platform by accident. I had no idea and started singing, but when I heard the fireworks, I stopped. Trucy dear set them to ignite when I access the platform’s trapdoor, so that’s how I realized I was at the wrong starting point.”

Klavier chuckled and shot Apollo a mocking smirk as soon as Lamiroir finished her testimony. “Give it up, Herr Forehead, she's clean. Mein witness ist blind, what kann she do? You're crazy!”

“Oh really?” Apollo folded his arms with a smug grin. “Want to know what's crazier, Prosecutor Gavin? Your blind witness’ entire testimony is a big, fat lie! There's more contradictions in there than the Bible!”

“A religious reference?!” exclaimed the Judge with a frown. “Mr. Justice! There will be no persecuting God in the court of law!”

“S-Sorry, your honor,” he replied sheepishly. “But it's true! And she keeps adjusting her veil every time she talks about Machi – she's nervous about something!”

Lamiroir gasped at Apollo’s words and noticed he was fiddling with his bracelet as he spoke. A flicker of recognition flashed through her eyes. So it’s true...

“Insufficient accusations without much evidence,” Kristoph admonished his understudy with a dark scowl. “Apollo, we’ve been through this; if you have something to prove, look at the court record; if there’s something to debate, do it during the cross-examination. Embarrass me again and that's 20% out of your next pay cheque.”
“Y-Yes, Mr. Gavin! I'm so sorry, Mr. Gavin!”

Klavier and the Judge blinked at the pair. Now where have they heard that one before?

The Judge cleared his throat to get their attention. “The defense may cross-examine the witness.”

The command worked like a trigger. Apollo quickly forgot all about his mentor’s overbearing presence and jumped straight in. His pay could wait. Sort of. He was so close to nailing Lamiroir, he could feel it in his excessively gelled hair spikes.

“How long would you say you took to look for your cloak and where–” But he was abruptly stopped by Kristoph’s hand to his shoulder.

“Ask her what she heard the victim say,” he commanded. It made Apollo frown a bit in question, but then he remembered Kristoph hadn’t been there when he interviewed Lamiroir the previous night, nor did he have the chance to update his boss about it. Perhaps Kristoph had a purpose in mind when he jumped straight to this statement. The way he asked it though sounded a little intrusive and demanding, but then again his boss was a professional; he could be overthinking things; so Apollo decided to just roll with it.

Ok, let's try this again.

“Sorry about that. Lamiroir, you overheard the victim talking – what did he say?” He decided to add as an afterthought, “And how were you so sure it was Machi?”

“Um…” Lamiroir bit her lower lip. “He said, ‘Hey, there’s an Interpol agent here. I don't care, I’m not doing this anymore. You're on your own,’” she quoted. “And it was definitely Machi – his voice was as clear as day.”

“What’s this?” the Judge’s eyes bulged. “Then… that confirms everything Mr. Justice has said until this point! The victim had an accomplice and Mr. Crescend was uninvolved! Was he really framed all this time?”

“Ugh!” Klavier recoiled and sweat matted his brow. *Verdammt!* Just one question and the rookie managed to fully convince the judge on three of the defense’s claims. Nervously, he met his brother’s knowing gaze. There was no use denying it: Kristoph was in a league well above his own, and he was in trouble.

‘Wow,’ Apollo mentally marveled at the effect Kristoph’s prompting had on the judge and prosecution’s reactions. Talk about hitting hard and fast. *No wonder he's good.*

“W-Well, you heard it,” Klavier interrupted as he struggled to regain his cool. “So what if der defendant wasn't Herr Tobaye’s accomplice? Lamiroir wasn't in das vents at die Zeit of murder. There’s no contradiction!”

Apollo’s brain worked on overdrive as he went over Lamiroir’s statements. He knew the singer was lying, she had to be, but he didn't have any evidence to show for it. There had to be *something* in her testimony he could use – an inaccurate memory, a false explanation, *anything*. She said she heard Machi clearly on the other side of the door during the rehearsal – was there anything wrong with that? Suddenly, he remembered Daryan’s previous testimony and his cross-examination with Crow two days ago, and stopped.

"We spent the first 10 minutes rehearsing the harder songs…"

"I heard this outrageous ‘BANG!’ and I was like, “Woah!” and sprang to my feet. The noise was
“super loud, dudes…”

“Got it!”

The Judge jumped from the outburst. That Chords of Steel, his poor heart.

“What did you get, Mr. Justice?”

“It’s just like Crow and the dressing room,” Apollo explained, barely able to contain his excitement.

“According to the defendant’s testimony, the Gavinners were already on stage rehearsing and recall that all the dressing rooms are soundproof.” He pointed at Klavier in triumph. “I find it hard to believe the witness could hear Machi’s voice so clearly under those circumstances, don’t you?”

Klavier grabbed his chest as if he was suffering from a heart attack; the Judge’s mouth had formed a wide ‘O’; and Kristoph raised his head with pride. To the side, Phoenix clung onto the railing so hard his knuckles turned white; Lamiroir gasped and her veil flew up to smack her in the face.

“Oh… um…” she wrung her fingers nervously. “I… I’m sorry. I must be mistaken. I heard him through the earpiece, that’s why he sounded so clear…”

“Objection!”

Apollo presented the concert earpiece from his evidence list.

[Type: Evidence]
Concert Earpiece: A black earpiece used on concert night to facilitate communication between staff and performers. There is a number 7 indicated at its side. According to Prosecutor Gavin, performers received earpieces labeled from number 1 to 7.

“All performers communicated via the same channel. If you really heard Machi through the earpiece, so would’ve the Gavinners and sound crew!”

“N-No…”

Lamiroir’s calm facade had started to crack and Apollo pushed on, pointing a finger at her as she shook from the force of his argument.

“Tell the truth, Lamiroir! You heard Machi from somewhere else and I think I know where. You said so yourself: sound travels in the vents.” He all but shoved the concert earpiece in her face.

“That’s why this was above Trucy’s dressing room. You were in the vents the whole time! Your entire testimony is one lie after another!”

“Stop!”

She trembled and hid her face behind her hands, breaths harsh and ragged. Under the scrutiny of the court, she fought to compose herself. Phoenix had told her this could happen; it was only round one; a little game of give-and-take. She would not break, she couldn’t. Let him win this one. Calm down, or it’s all over. It wasn’t long before she managed to straighten up and regard Apollo with the most serene expression on her face that surprised both attorneys.

“Alright, Mr. Justice, I was in the vents… so what?”

Apollo blinked, confused. “Huh?”

“So what?” she repeated with an amused smile across her lips, like a mother laughing at her child’s
innocence. “Just because I happened to be in the vents at that time, doesn’t mean I killed Machi. All I did was eavesdrop. Where is your proof?”

“But… But why were you even in there in the first place?!”

“It’s nicht about location, Herr Justice,” Klavier snapped his fingers and threw his rival a death glare. “It’s about sense. Dies argument ist pointless. Mein witness’ testimony may be full of holes, but your argument ist a sinking ship! Why would Lamiroir kill her own son?”

Apollo opened his mouth in a bid to counter the blonde, but realized he had nothing. Huh. That was something he hadn’t quite figured out yet. Kristoph gave him an expectant stare. Either his boss already knew the answer, or was waiting for some sort of plausible explanation himself.

“I… I don’t know,” he replied honestly.

“Mr. Justice!”

“Herr Forehead!”

“But I know she’s bluffing,” he insisted, slamming his hands on the table. “I know she’s not blind!”

Suddenly, someone laughed and all heads turned to gape at the giggling songstress behind the witness stand.

“I’m bluffing, Mr. Justice?” she stopped and touched her bracelet. “I believe you’re the one that’s bluffing. You’re not sure of me. You falter every time you mention my name.”

“I’m sure it’s not anyone else,” he growled.

“Humph, you’re relying on elimination.”

“And you’re not being honest.”

“Well, I’m starting to question your integrity, Herr Forehead,” Klavier cut in to point accusingly at his rival. “Where do you get the gall to accuse an innocent woman?”

“Oh yeah?!” Apollo pointed back. “If she's so innocent, then why didn't she say anything when she knew Machi was the smuggler all along?”

That big reveal triggered the whole court, even the Borginian media and ambassador felt both embarrassed and outraged by the news.

“What!? Mr. Justice, is this true?” The Judge had turned disbelieving eyes to the flustered singer, who shrank away from his stare and seemed to be trying to disappear into herself. “Then… then that means…! Wait, what does that mean?”

“It means she's more than just a suspect; she's directly involved,” Kristoph stepped in to elaborate while keeping his critical gaze on Klavier. “Prior to this, the defendant was under heavy suspicion for murder due to the nature of his job: he was the only one with intel about the smuggling and thus, the most likely candidate as Mr. Tobaye’s accomplice. But the tides have turned; not only did the witness know about the smuggling and chose to keep silent, she’s also someone whom the victim trusted like a mother. So much in fact, that he would perhaps believe and follow every instruction without question?”

Kristoph was looking at Lamiroir with a suggestive leer and the latter gasped, “What?” There was a
wary frown upon her face. What in the world was Kristoph talking about? Meanwhile, Phoenix slowly rose to his feet and gazed at his lover in horror. No... he was doing it again. Anything it took for a not-guilty verdict. Anything to win, to be perfect.

“Sir...?” Apollo stared at his mentor curiously. Did he already have it all figured it out?

“Apollo, Lamiroir’s profile.”

“Yes, sir.”

He handed it to his boss and Kristoph played the interview Apollo had secretly recorded between him and Lamiroir, for the benefit of the court. The thing was as good as a confession. Lamiroir and Phoenix’s heart sank faster with every word they heard and the ex-lawyer discretely regarded her with a creeping sense of doubt. All this time, he stood fast to the belief that the singer was innocent – why would anyone wish to harm someone they loved? – But was this all a futile struggle? Had he been wrong?

Klavier gulped, “Bruder, you...”

“It's exceedingly simple, Klavier,” Kristoph’s tone was condescending and the younger unconsciously shrunk from it. “The witness and victim were more than just stage partners; they were business associates, specifically cocoon smuggling. Think about it: instead of going through all that trouble befriending an Interpol agent, a foreigner who could have you thrown in jail and executed, it'll be much easier to trust the adult that's raised and fed you for seven years; not to mention she was given a free ticket to a country with a potential client and established rapport with a certain prosecutor, who sought to bring her over in the first place.”

Kristoph was scrutinizing Klavier now and the latter turned paler the more he heard.

“You said you found it hard to believe a 12-year-old foreigner unversed in English could mastermind such an operation. Well, Lamiroir is very much an adult, she speaks perfect English, and she was already on her way to this country as an invited guest.” Kristoph adjusted his glasses with a smirk. “Tell me, Klavier, she fought tooth and nail for an extra ticket for Mr. Tobaye, didn't she?”

When he was met with nothing but silence, Kristoph elaborated, “As my understudy has proven, the killer murdered Tobaye and burned the cocoon in order to cover up their crime of smuggling. Lamiroir had heard the victim’s every word clearly, a feat only made possible if she was near Tobaye to begin with. Think about their level of trust and intimacy; the autopsy report didn't indicate any signs of struggle; rather than eavesdropping, those words could've very well been for her.” He paused to address his apprentice, “Apollo, you uncovered something interesting about our duo’s past, didn't you?”

“Yes, sir,” Apollo replied obediently and presented Machi’s updated profile. “About a year ago, the victim tried to smuggle a cocoon out of Borginian, but was caught by Lamiroir,” he explained. “No report was made to the authorities.”

“Ergo,” Kristoph continued with a snap of his fingers, “we believe there was very strong potential for blackmail regarding this – one which our witness here might've used to get him to attempt smuggling a second time, while at the same time; guaranteeing herself a convenient scapegoat should things go south. After all, if Tobaye was caught, he'd be dead; if he refused to comply, she could report him and he'd also be dead.”

The crowd gasped at the controversial explanation. It was deeply distressing, but none could deny the likely possibility forged from the blonde lawyer’s thread of logic and deductive reasoning.
Klavier stuttered, at a complete loss on how and what to feel, what to say, and Kristoph scoffed at his brother’s inadequacy. “I rest my case.”

Apollo’s jaw dropped as he looked at his boss in a whole new, awestruck light. The coolest defense in the West, and he was his mentor. A perfect record. Not even his brother was spared. Although Apollo found it strange at first that Kristoph seemed more pressed to conclude this trial than usual, he chalked it up to his personal lack of experience and didn’t question his boss’ need to interfere and hurry things along. It was a tough pill to swallow – he honestly thought he was handling his first trial pretty well – but maybe he wasn't quite ready yet to fully head his own case–

“Objection!”

Apollo looked up with a start; even Kristoph twitched and his eyes narrowed into an annoyed glare. Klavier was leaning over the table, gripping the edges like a vice; a strange quality about him. Apollo could see it clearly; there was only Kristoph’s reflection in his eyes and Klavier’s own determination to beat him.

“An interesting story, bruder, but like Herr Justice, you forget das motive,” he returned Kristoph’s smirk with one of his own. It was pleasing to see his brother’s confidence falter if only the slightest. “Smuggling partners mean nichts. I ask again: why should Lamiroir want to kill Herr Tobaye? If trust was an issue, why take die trouble to involve him at all? And instead of blackmail, she could've just remained silent to protect him out of love.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back confidently. “If die defense can't establish a motive, mein witness ist innocent.”

Apollo flipped through his evidence list to the sound of the crowd’s increasing restlessness. A boy found dead in his surrogate mother’s robes. Could the truth be as obvious and unlikely as it seemed? Although Kristoph made a lot of sense, it was a theory many would be more than hesitant to accept. It certainly explained a lot though, such as Lamiroir’s chronic lying and why her costume (claimed lost) was at the crime scene in the first place. But Klavier, as much as he wished to deny it, had a point: no conclusion could be drawn; no responsibility could be claimed without a proper motive established. Why would Lamiroir kill Machi? Why did she smuggle the cocoon? These were the questions he himself had trouble understanding.


‘Why me?’ Apollo thought miserably, his panic mounting; the words on his paper turning into an indiscernible jumble of black squiggles and scrawls. After Lamiroir’s accusation earlier, even he was starting to doubt himself. Always believe in your client. Always believe in the truth. But Phoenix never said anything about believing in yourself.

Looking at Lamiroir made him more nervous than looking at Klavier; he didn't know why, but she seemed to have this effect on him despite her blindness. Actually, he was starting to reconsider his previous accusation about that. Maybe she really was blind. Maybe he was chasing the wrong lead. But if it wasn't her, if it wasn't Phoenix, if it wasn't his client or the Gavinners, then who else could it be?

“This concludes the cross-examination of--”
“Hold it!”

The Judge paused and Apollo took a deep breath.

*Whatever the case, establish the motive for murder,* he decided with a nod to himself.

“The motive is simple; I've mentioned this before: the killer murdered Machi to cover up their own tracks. Why?” He pointed at Lamiroir whose posture turned wary. “Recall the witness’ testimony: she heard the victim say that he refused to go forth with the plan anymore because he found out about Daryan’s true identity. Well, what if this reason didn't please the killer? After all, it's *a lot of* money being forfeited, and there's always a chance of being ratted out. And when things go sour, it's always convenient to have a scapegoat.”

“So, you're suggesting that the witness used the victim from the very beginning?” said the Judge.

Apollo nodded. “That's right, your honor.”

“Objection!” Klavier interrupted vehemently. “Absurd! Lamiroir considered Herr Tobaye as her *son!* Does die defense have anything that shows otherwise?”

Apollo slowed down and bit his lip in deliberation. Did he? Did he have anything amongst his evidence that could shove a wedge between the pair’s bond and apparent trust? Although everything in his heart told him that the grief and loss Lamiroir experienced was genuine, the evidence would decide whether the singer was truly honest or not. How did that saying go again? Nothing to hide, nothing to fear… But Lamiroir was hiding something, wasn't she? In fact, if he recalled their little nighttime chat correctly, she had been hiding this secret for over *seven years.*

“As a matter of fact… I do.”

Klavier recoiled in shock. “Y-You can't be serious!”

“Oh, contraire,” he brandished a certain music contract with a smug grin, “I'm *deadly* serious. And you really shouldn't leave your office door unlocked when you have important stuff like this lying around, Prosecutor Gavin.”

[Type: Documents]
Music contract: a licensing agreement between *Lamiroir* and *The Gavinners*’ managers for the use of both parties’ music as well as artists for an international collaboration in concert. Contains details of both bands, including the unequal distribution of royalties and salaries between Lamiroir and Machi Tobaye of 75% and 15%, respectively (remaining 10% absorbed by company).

“That… That's extortion! Child labor!” exclaimed the Judge before turning furious eyes to the Borginian ambassador in the audience. “Even with Borginia’s culture of seniority, this is too much!”

“But Herr Tobaye signed it!” Klavier countered. “Extortion or not, he agreed to alle clauses.”

“Are you sure about that?” said Apollo, indicating at the two signatures at the bottom of the contract. “Don't forget: Machi Tobaye was a minor and therefore, was unable to make decisions on his own according to Borginian law, even for *his own rights.* In other words, all consent, including the unfair distribution of wealth, was made by *her,*” he pointed at Lamiroir’s signature, “Machi’s partner and legal guardian!”

The crowd gasped and it didn’t take long for ill feelings to stir within the court. A conspiracy! Was this true? Taking advantage of a poor, defenseless boy ripe with talent. If so, Borginia’s little darling was no darling at all, but a money-faced wolf in sheep’s clothing!
Behind the witness stand, Lamiroir’s breathing turned harsh as she felt herself go faint. This young lawyer was dragging her name and honor through the mud. Phoenix had already done all he could. If she didn't speak for herself soon, Klavier would lose the case and all hope for avenging Machi would be lost.

“Unfair distribution? I think not, Mr. Justice,” she scoffed. “It may look like that on paper, but I’m his mother. Whatever we earn is shared between us-”

“Yet it wasn't enough.”

Lamiroir’s eyes widened and her voice came out in a breathy whisper, “What… What did you say?”

All eyes were on Apollo now, whose hands shook as he clutched the court record in his grip. A particular set of documents peeked out from the side. I think I get it now… The contract, the cocoon, Lamiroir and Machi’s frequent arguments – they were all starting to make sense. This woman… Daryan, Machi, Mr. Wright… she made so many people suffer. But no more. He slammed the evidence on the table without a shred of mercy.

“You needed the money to repay a seven-year debt,” he fixed her with critical eyes. “A burden that lightened significantly after consistently extorting the musical and lyrical talents of your supposed son and manipulating him with threats of blackmail!”

[Type: Documents]
Medical papers from a hospital in Germany: an old envelope that contains medical papers detailing the course of Lamiroir’s operation. It was a serious, life-or-death procedure with a less than 5% chance of survival. Dates back to seven years from now. There is also a bill inside with the amount of 17 million dollars.

“Seven years ago, the witness was involved in a fatal accident that resulted in a loss of her memories,” Apollo explained to the court. “However, after being operated on and saved by the best doctors in Germany, she soon found herself in serious debt of a whooping 17 million dollars. Being a part of the musical duo Lamiroir certainly helped a few years later, but Borginia is a small nation that never opened up until recently; fame was hard to come by; salaries were inadequate, so a quick way to earn big bucks in the shortest possible time would definitely be tempting. And what's the most valuable resource in all of Borginia?”

Klavier gulped. “Herr Forehead, you're not suggesting…”

“No, Prosecutor Gavin, I'm not suggesting anything,” Apollo replied with determined eyes. “I'm saying that Lamiroir planned the whole cocoon smuggling and made full use of her partner until the bitter end.”

The noise level of the crowd started to increase with every heated discussion and the judge had to slam his gavel down a good few times to regain some attention.

“Order, order!” Then he turned disapproving eyes to the blind singer. “Miss Lamiroir, is this true?”

“No!” she cried, but what more could she say to get the audience to believe her? Apollo’s accusations were mere coincidences built on conveniences; there was more to the story than that; more to her than that…

“Objection! Mein witness doesn’t have to answer that,” Klavier growled as he slammed his first against the wall. “You are very clever, Herr Forehead, to cast doubt on Fräulein Lamiroir. But I ask: where is your proof?”
Suddenly, someone chuckled, “Klavier, did you seriously think I would allow my apprentice to charge in headfirst like that without proper validation?"

“B-Bruder…”

The rockstar shrunk from Kristoph’s smile and the sight made Lamiroir’s heart sink. Was Klavier really giving in without a fight? And why was Kristoph behaving like this? Hadn't he said that this wasn’t a definitive accusation? Then why did he sound so prepared? It was almost as if…

She caught his smile and her bracelet tightened.

**He knows.**

“Based on Apollo’s findings, I took the liberty of inquiring into the latest transactions made by Madam Lamiroir from the National Bank of Borginia, only to make a shocking discovery,” Kristoph paused for dramatic effect as he pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “... an impressive five million dollars gone out to *Schlossplatz Hospital* last Tuesday, the biggest in the last seven years.” He threw said bank statement onto the evidence table.

“My question is, how does a small town singer, who barely earns $2k a month, come by that much money in such a short amount of time? The answer is simple: by smuggling in the cocoon, which is worth approximately $3 million in the Black Market, by deposit alone.”

The crowd’s murmurs grew louder and Lamiroir felt herself sweat under the pressure. No point lying. Apollo would surely sense it and pull the truth out of her. But no matter how one looked at it, this was bad. She chanced a glance at Klavier, only to feel her disappointment mount at the young man’s distress and unmistakable curiosity. Klavier didn’t seriously believe all that… did he?

*Phoenix, say something.*

But the ex-lawyer didn’t so much asudge.

“But why didn’t Mr. Tobaye say anything?” asked the Judge.

“Because he couldn’t,” Apollo replied gravely. “Because he would die if he so much as breathed a careless word about his legal guardian.”

“That’s not true!”

“Objection!” He pointed accusingly at said singer. “You mentioned in our interview that you knew Machi was a smuggler because he tried to do it before! About a year ago to be precise. Every Borginian knows that the penalty for that is death. What better way to keep him under your thumb than use this information to your advantage? He’d have no choice but to do everything you say, talented or no. You humiliated him; swindled him; coerced him and then, when he finally refused you and your threats had no power over him anymore, you killed him to keep him silent forever and protect yourself!”

“Please, stop!”

**“Herr Forehead!”**

The yell (more like growl) was so piercing, so incredibly furious, that Apollo felt his mouth snap close instantly and his earlier confidence shrink into the size of a pea. The blonde rockstar never looked this menacing; his face black with inconceivable rage, insulted by the audacity of his rival’s grotesque constitution.
“Never in mein life did I feel so appalled by a lawyer's argument,” said Klavier with an ugly sneer across his lips. “That ist alle mere conjecture; what evidence do you have to show für it?”

“But… but she knew all this time! She was in the vents at the right moment; she was there when he said his last words! The crime scene, the framing of my client, the use of her dressing room, her own robe… everything fits!”

“Alle except one,” he interrupted in a way that made Apollo’s blood boil. “Lamiroir ist blind. Everything you just mentioned – spying in das vents, triggering das fireworks, moving das body, avoiding Fräulein Detective, falsely restaging der crime scene during intermission – alle these require sight.” Klavier crossed his arms and glared at his rival in a final struggle for victory and truth. “That ist why, until der defense kann prove Lamiroir’s fraudulence, I won't tolerate anymore bad mouthing of mein witness.”

The courtroom fell unnaturally silent; tension in the air weighed heavily like a fortified chainmail – thick, impenetrable and suffocating. The trial was about Daryan Crescend; the fate of two lives dangled by a thread; the truth pushed and stretched to the limit; but it appeared to be more of a battle of egos. At this point, nothing else mattered; both attorneys refused to budge from their principle beliefs; each had a valid argument in their claims – and that was the frustrating part. Seated at the podium, the Judge's eyes darted nervously between the two prodigious courtroom rivals. Judging by the current circumstances, if he could be incredibly honest, Gavin and Justice could probably argue all day.

“Uh… Mr. Justice?” Apollo turned towards him sharply and he tensed. “I'm afraid- well, actually not that I'm afraid- that is, it's not a bad thing but…” he cleared his throat. “Mr. Gavin is right. Although the witness does prove suspicious and you have indeed established your argument with sufficient evidence, I can't ignore the blinding fact that Lamiroir's disability leaves her incapable of performing such an organized level of crime.”

‘In other words, you don't believe me,’ Apollo thought with a grimace, biting the tip of his thumb with a troubled frown. This was extremely vexing: as long as Lamiroir was blind, he couldn't touch her – no one could – and the prosecution was milking that fact for all it was worth. Ironic that the prosecution had resorted to defense, while he himself had relentlessly been on the offense. But he was starting to understand what his rival was trying to do, why he was pushing his buttons so hard even until now when victory seemed almost bleak. Klavier wasn't about winning; he wasn't trying to get his best friend convicted; he wasn't protecting Lamiroir; and he wasn't instigating him on purpose-- ok, no, he was. Point is, Klavier had his doubts; strip the case off its complexities and you'd have a mystery with two equally likely suspects; and Klavier needed to make the right call. If Apollo were him, even if it hurt and made him feel absolutely terrible inside, he would question his friend dry if only to prove and protect their innocence. And if they turned out to be a criminal in the end, at least his conscience would rest easy from doing the right (if not the most painful) thing.

“… A medical examination.”

“What?”

“A medical examination,” Kristoph repeated, as he smiled down at his apprentice with barely
concealed impatience. “That should prove once and for all if Lamiroir is as genuine as she says.”

“Oh, then…” Apollo turned to the front and opened his mouth, but snapped it shut when he heard Kristoph snort in exasperation.

“Don’t be absurd, Apollo,” he mocked. “If you want permission from the judge, convince him that she’s capable of seeing. With evidence.”

“Sir… but how?” He struggled against his own capabilities. As far as he knew, he had nothing concrete to work with. “No offense, Mr. Gavin, but the very thing I need is what I’m supposed to be asking for…”

“Reconsider Lamiroir’s testimony and cross-reference it to the others. Remember all the timings of key events. Re-examine the evidence – what did you overlook?” Kristoph checked off with his fingers. “By now, it should be clear to you that the truth is never explicit. Gather the contradictions; think carefully: what would a blind person do in a given situation that a normal person wouldn’t, and vice versa? If your aim is to prove that she can see, what did she do wrong as a woman without sight?”

Despite their (one-sided) strained relationship, Apollo absorbed Kristoph’s words like a sponge in the desert. *What did she do wrong…* Was there anything Lamiroir said in her testimony that contradicted what he knew about her? Mentally, he went over the last few statements, precisely where he caught her for lying.

“That’s when I remembered the vents; I practiced walking through them so many times with Trucy dear’s help…”

“I decided to head back in case he was waiting for me on stage, but I took a wrong turn and ended up on the platform by accident.”

Apollo’s breathed hitched. *Wait a minute.*

“Lamiroir,” he began, “you said that you’re extremely familiar with the vents, but you also said that you made a wrong turn. There’s clearly a contradiction between those two statements!

“Hah! Einspruch!” Klavier scoffed with a shake of his head. “Herr Justice ist grasping at straws. Das vents are pitch black; anyone kann get lost. No contradiction there.”

Apollo folded his arms with a wide smirk. “Even for someone who’s lived in darkness her whole life?”

“Ah!” Klavier flinched at his error. Crap, he had assumed that position from a normal person’s perspective. But even he was starting to feel that things were getting a little… interesting.

“Oho, that's enlightening!” The Judge’s eyes shone in excitement. “I would’ve never noticed that subtle inconsistency if you didn’t bring it up, Mr. Justice. And I notice everything!”

Apollo had to resist an eye roll as he continued, “So, the question is, why was she really late? What was she doing? And if she really made ‘a wrong turn’, what does that in turn say about her spatial orientation and sense of judgment?”

Lamiroir remained gravely silent, but even a vision of total calm and control like herself couldn't cease from fidgeting. So, it really came to this. True, Phoenix had warned her about the possibility, but she never thought the rookie lawyer would get this far. Discretely, Lamiroir’s gaze moved upward to Kristoph’s proud, smirking face, her speculations confirmed. *It’s because of him. Apollo*
Justice seemed to get his confidence from that man; he only managed to gain all this ground so quickly with his mentor by his side; and she felt like such a fool for placing her trust in yet another person who would betray her. She was on her own, like the very first day she opened her eyes and found herself sucked into this strange, frightening new world. She still had Phoenix, but he had done all he could, so she had to try.

“No matter what, don't let them know you can see. Don't.”

Lamiroir took a deep, calming breath. She had pretended for seven years. She could definitely do it again.

“You're getting ahead of yourself, Mr. Justice,” she forced a smile. “Mistakes happen, even for those who are blind. Besides, Machi’s body was nowhere in Trucy dear’s dressing room when the detective inspected the fire. How do you suppose it got from there to inside the piano? Unless you have proof of how I could possibly manage such a feat, I don't have to listen to these fantasies of yours any further.”

“They're not fantasies and I can prove it!” Apollo yelled and furiously went through his evidence.

How did she do it? There had to be something that gave away her position; something in the crime scene, a passing comment, personal possessions, anything. He took a step back and went through their interview once more in his head, until he recalled something that shook his soul and made his breath hitch.

“You mean past the detective, correct? I climbed in from Trucy dear’s dressing room. As luck would have it, there was a ladder directly under the vent.”

And just like when he had first heard it, Apollo knew there was something incredibly fishy about this statement. He just never figured out why until now. Immediately, he pulled out the very piece of evidence that would help establish his point in photo. A picture spoke a thousand words, and one was all he needed.

“Your honor, please take another look at this photo,” he presented the crime scene photo of Trucy’s dressing room and the Judge frowned, impatient and confused.

“We've seen this picture before, Mr. Justice. What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“Try your best to ignore the damage and clutter,” Apollo replied. “I know it’s hard, but do you see a ladder in the middle of the room?”

The Judge squinted at the image, only to have them widen in astonishment. “Why, yes I do see a ladder… but what does this have to do with the witness’ sense of sight, or lack thereof?”

“No ‘lack’, but definite,” he moved on to explain. “That ladder was placed directly under the vent opening. During my interview with Lamiroir last evening, she revealed that she had broken into the venue by accessing Miss Wright’s dressing room via the vents – specifically using that ladder, which she had conveniently noticed beneath the grills.” He struck the table and pointed at the prosecution in challenge. “How does a blind person notice something that even an ordinary person would end up missing? There’s no way Lamiroir would’ve known about it, if not for two reasons: she knew about it because she used it before, and she knew of it because she saw it, both of which indicate without a doubt that our witness can in fact see!”

The seed of doubt had been planted. A new wave of distrust descended upon the crowd and their biting murmurs against Borginia’s Siren only served to increase the tension within the courtroom’s
four walls. The choir of voices chattered noisily beyond any range of comprehension. They spoke consistently and all at once, rendering the content unintelligible; but what couldn't be conveyed in words definitely succeeded through emotion. Slowly, in unison, the voices grew louder. They rose in volume to a cacophonous pitch and filled the air with their harsh tone. It took an alarming number of hits with his gavel for the Judge to quell the animosity and scandal caused by one Apollo Justice.

“Order! I will have order!” He struggled over the noise, finally speaking after the voices died down to a minimum. “Mr. Justice, I'll be honest and tell you that I'm losing my patience with you. This is a serious accusation that can very well strip you off all credibility! Are you sure you're on the right track?”

“With all due respect, your honor, I've already said my piece,” Apollo answered evenly. “If you don't believe me, ask Lamiroir yourself.”

He was feeling pretty confident about this one. Every witness, even the defendant, swore an oath of honesty before the trial had commenced. If Lamiroir dared lie out of this one again, it would do a number on her conscience and credibility, not to mention he would easily be able to call her out on her bluffs. This is it, he eyed her eagerly, eyes shining, like a predator ready to pounce on its prey the moment it so much as twitched. The songstress was in a jam; under the scrutiny of the judge, the public and her own people, she wouldn't resort to cunning tactics again. There was only so much she could do to avoid a simple medical examination without drawing suspicion onto herself; after all, it was just like Kristoph always said: “You have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide.” And Apollo was willing to bet his entire collection of Phoenix Wright posters that Lamiroir was hiding a lot of things.

The Judge raised his eyebrow at her. “Well, Miss Lamiroir? Is Justice speaking the truth?”

“I… I… um…”

Lamiroir wrung her fingers and twiddled her thumbs nervously, repetitively. This was bad. Apollo was getting insanely close, he was on fire. If she lied, he would know. If she told the truth, she'd be doing herself no favors. What should I do? She looked in Klavier’s direction pleadingly and the latter was quick to step in.

“You call that irrefutable proof, Herr Justice? I think nicht,” the blonde prosecutor scoffed loudly. “Anyone could’ve told her about das ladder; Lamiroir didn't necessarily have to see anything—”

“That's not all,” Apollo interrupted smugly and produced another photograph, this time of the old, previously mistakened crime scene in Lamiroir’s dressing room. Klavier saw that and with narrowed eyes, gave a mocking bark.

“Hah! Herr Forehead ist really pulling out alle das stops. Because of you, we’ve already ruled out this room completely, or did you forget?”

“I didn't forget, Prosecutor Gavin – and that's not the point,” he projected the image for all the court to see and Klavier noticed that he had circled a certain small stack of items in a corner with a red marker. They were on Lamiroir’s side of the room and appeared to be… books?

Apollo stepped out from behind the table and began to pace up and down as he talked. “Borginian literature,” he paused for dramatic effect as he explained. “Truth be told, this particular group of items has been bugging me from the moment I saw them, but I couldn't put a finger on it as to why… Now I know.”

He turned sharply to face the Judge. “None of the books were written in braille! They were all
“What!?”

While the implications sunk in for both prosecution and judge (more cruelly so for Klavier), Apollo continued talking, “That’s not all; I found more books in her personal luggage and they also didn’t contain braille. Unless the prosecution can explain why the witness, who supposedly can’t see, reads normal books, I’m not buying Lamiroir’s disability and alibi for a second. Your honor,” he pointed at the mortified singer frozen in fear. “Please grant my request for a medical check on Miss Lamiroir!”

“No!”

The scream was borderline hysterical. Lamiroir had snapped out of her trance and was resisting with all her might against an invisible captor, swatting and struggling. Her actions were disconcerting. The audience loomed over her, frowning down, disapproving; their suspicions rising in correspondence to the singer’s increasing distressful behavior. Meanwhile, Phoenix felt bile rise up in his throat. No… the kid’s got it all wrong. This was worse than he feared.

I have to do something.

And without thinking twice, the old Turnabout King made a beeline towards the witness stand (ignoring Amaranth’s protests and warnings to remain seated) and all but shoved Lamiroir aside.

“Objection! Those books could’ve very well belonged to Tobaye and you have no proof that guarantees otherwise!” He slammed his palms on the stand and gripped the wood so tight his knuckles turned white, all the while desperately trying to ignore the pang that went through his chest. Going against the kid hurt, it hurt so much, but he didn’t have time to reflect on why. “It’s not just Lamiroir’s eyesight. Prove to me everything you’ve said – the framing, the motive, the body, how she did it – with hard evidence!”

“No, Mr. Wright! Another word out of you and I’ll hold you in contempt of court!” the Judge hollered, turning displeased eyes to Klavier. “Mr. Gavin, this is my last warning: please control your witnesses.”

Klavier’s face burned with humiliation, but he forced himself to remain calm. Although he wanted nothing more than to throw a good punch at Phoenix for publicly embarrassing him again, he acknowledged that there was truth to the man’s words. He couldn’t shake it off; there was still something that unsettled him, picked at his nerves, wasn’t quite right; but the explanation escaped him like sand between his fingers and something told him that Phoenix was trying to point him in the right direction.

“Entschuldigung, Herr Judge,” he apologized, “but I was about to bring up a similar argument. Has-been knows die rules as good as I do: evidence ist everything. Tell me Lamiroir did it with more than just pretty little words. If Herr Forehead kann nicht show proof more concrete than mere books, he has nichts to show at alle.”

Apollo worried his bottom lip. Damn! Phoenix and Klavier made a pretty solid team – who would’ve thought? But he had already exhausted all his resources. Lamiroir was just playing the innocent lamb – why couldn’t they just see it?

“The trigger switch,” Kristoph brought up smoothly, exuding the same level of calm as a tranquil stream on a windless day. His eyes twinkled knowingly the moment he turned to face his apprentice. “If all you’ve said is true, Apollo, then it still exists.”
'It still... exists?' Apollo mentally went over the blonde’s words in shock. But there was no such switch in the vicinity (thus Clay’s dummy); he had assumed the killer disposed of it as soon as the crime was committed. Was Kristoph giving him a hint? If it still existed, how? And if so, where?

Suddenly, his mental train of logic screeched to a halt and he almost cried out in a mixture of jubilance and mortification. He couldn’t believe it; every single, convoluted piece fit perfectly. All this time, he had the answer, they all did – and she was standing right in front of him motionless, like a statue wrapped in cloth waiting to be unveiled.

*Time for my grand finale.*

“Machi’s killer used his own trigger switch against him,” he recapped slowly, cautiously; eyes drifting across the courtroom like a predator accessing the faces of its potential prey. “That switch itself is proof. And whoever pushed it, whoever still carries it, cannot escape their guilt.”

It was like Apollo was coming closer and closer to realization the further he talked. Silence met his statement. It was as if everyone was hanging onto the brunette’s every word, eager, desperate for closure from this maddening mystery.

“This is how the killer did it: at approximately 7 p.m. during the final rehearsal, they lured Machi to Miss Wright’s dressing room where the fireworks were stored. Our killer waited in the vents above and spoke to the victim through it – the very conversation that upset the plan and ended Machi Tobaye’s life. One would have a clear view of the room through the vent grills. When the killer saw that Machi was close enough to the crates, they flipped the switch, triggering the igniter on Machi and setting off the fireworks that killed him. They then used the ladder to climb down, tame the fire, and wrap and hide the body in the hallway’s piano.

“All this was possible because Miss Skye wasn’t at her usual post and was monitoring the rehearsal front stage. After that, in order not to appear too suspicious by hanging around the backstage area at the time the crime occurred, the killer climbed back up the ladder and made it appear they had simply made a mistake and appeared at the wrong starting point.”

Apollo felt his heart rate race. It was like running a cross-country marathon. He was so close he could taste victory on his tongue.

“But the very costume used to wrap the body was evidence itself; they needed to draw attention away from the real crime scene and pin the blame on someone else. So they chose my client – the very man who ruined their plans and conveniently fitted the bill better than anyone else at the venue. This brings us to the events during intermission.

“The killer used the short break to move the crime scene, as well as placed the lighter and kerosene container to frame Daryan Crescend. Unfortunately, Crow was sleeping in the Gavinners’ dressing room, which left only Lamiroir’s room available. Recall that Miss Skye was also not at her usual post in the backstage hallway at this time, making all of this moving around possible.”

He paused and swallowed the lump in his throat. “But something unexpected happened: Mr. Wright found the body in the piano during intermission and the police placed the venue on lock down; the killer was trapped; they couldn’t dispose off the trigger switch for fear of it being found. So what did they do with it?”

By now, the Judge was leaning precariously over his podium.

“What?” the old man almost screamed in agony. “What did they do?”
“Nothing,” Apollo answered with a shrug. “That is, they didn’t get rid of it… they kept it on their person all the way, just like what Machi did when he was alive – “

“Objection!” Klavier interrupted. “Alle staff and performers were searched by die Polizei and no trigger switch was found!”

“Objection!” Apollo countered, expecting this. “All staff except one. The one person who was immediately deemed irrelevant to this case by the police because of her glaring disability. The one who disappeared throughout the entire investigation. The one who got away… until now.”

He was looking at the culprit now, and she cowered under his glare.

“The costume used to wrap Machi Tobaye; his relationship with its owner; the original owner of the very guitar used to transport the cocoon from the start… It’s so obvious! The only reason anyone has failed to see it before is because we all believed she was blind.” Finally, he raised his finger and pointed at Borginia’s celebrated icon. “The trigger switch still exists – and it’s with none other than Miss Lamiroir herself!”

The crowd erupted into a chorus of shock and disbelief, but a single voice interrupted their vulgar critique and judging tones.

“P-Preposterous!” Lamiroir’s voice hitched in both shame and outrage. “I loved Machi as if he were my own son! Using him… murdering him… I don’t believe a word about this trigger switch of yours – “

“Madam,” Kristoph’s silky smooth voice had the ridiculous ability of slicing through tension, and the singer was powerless to the authority he commanded. “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear,” he recited his words to her earlier. “Check your pockets.”

“My pockets?” She hesitated; feeling cornered like a caged animal, wondering if this was some sort of trick. Why would she need to check them? There was nothing there and there never was.

“Lamiroir, please check them,” Apollo insisted, a hint of urgency in his voice despite its soft tone. “If they’re empty, then I’m wrong, Daryan goes to jail and I lose the case. If I’m telling the truth, then… it’s time to come clean.”

“It’s like my understudy said, Madam,” Kristoph continued with a smile. “If you believe them to be empty, what have you got to lose?”

A gamble, Phoenix realised in horror from his place on the witness bench. Apollo was luring her into a false sense of security and Kristoph wasn’t doing anything to stop him – in fact, he was encouraging him. This was when Phoenix really regretted teaching the kid poker.

The Judge gazed down at the singer expectantly with a quirked brow. “Witness?”

Pressured by the judge and desperate for this nightmare to end, Lamiroir gave in with a reluctant sigh. This was ludicrous, a complete and utter waste of time. She loved Machi; her conscience was clear; but if doing this would satisfy these foreign men then… She shoved her hand into the pocket of her robe, expecting the familiar feel of cool satin, but froze. What in the… She pulled out her hand, parted her fingers, and at that moment, it felt like the whole world had stopped. Because instead of nothing but air in the center of her palm, a biting chill spread across her skin from a slim, seemingly innocent metal device. Her eyes widened in horror and she threw the trigger switch onto the ground as if it had burned her. Why?! Why was this here?! What –

That was when her eyes met a flash of ice-blue. Kristoph’s eyes gleamed with something mysterious,
cunning; and it suddenly reminded Lamiroir so much of a cat that had cornered an injured bird after toying with it for too long – and she realized with a dawning sense of trepidation that she was that bird, and somehow the famed defense attorney had whiled and beguiled her with nothing but a honeyed smile and a voice wrapped in silk.

Whispers and scathing comments grew in their intensity and Lamiroir snapped her head up to find herself subject to the world’s disappointment and scorn. No… NO! But no matter where she looked, wherever she turned, she saw eyes glaring down at her; saw the corners of hundreds of mouths curl upwards in cruel sneers; felt the bite of their words pierce her soul and bear down upon her like a mountain of displeasure. The voices grew louder, deafening; the faces and bodies around her blending into one seamless canvas of pure black. She brought her hands up to cover her ears, but she couldn’t stop the pain that rammed mercilessly at her heart.

“N-No… it wasn’t me…”

Camera lights flashed.

“No… please… please listen…”

Murmurs turned into shouts.

“No! It wasn’t me…!”

Faces of disgust.

“It wasn’t me!”

And with that final scream, Lamiroir fell onto her knees and covered her face as sobs wrecked her fragile body. The courtroom fell so silent that one could hear another’s breathing clear across the room. Klavier stared at his witness pityingly, troubled, unable to decide how he felt about the big reveal; this situation; her. Daryan went numb from shock, his eyes staring blankly at the supposedly harmless singer. Apollo’s eyes were sad, while Kristoph’s face remained as impassive as his disposition. Finally, the Judge closed his eyes solemnly and said:

“Bailiff, please prepare the witness for her medical examination.”

The strike of the gavel reverberated off the walls of courtroom 3. Apollo knew he should be cheering – he’d won! – but he couldn’t bring himself to let out even the softest of laughs. His bracelet never reacted. And as Amaranth and a guard led the tired and defeated Lamiroir away, Apollo bowed his head and chose to remain silent as they walked past.

The results were in. Klavier held the papers in his hand, seeing but not quite reading. His soul had retreated to a dark place, not because the news devastated him, but a small, nagging part of him had known it all along. Quickly, he snuck a glance at Daryan on the defendant’s chair and felt something in his chest flutter in relief. It was so surreal. If Justice hadn’t fought to this extent… He shuddered just thinking about the irreversible consequences that would have befallen his dearest friend if Apollo’s spirit wasn’t as enduring as his infamous Chords of Steel.
“Well, Mr. Gavin?” the Judge implored with an impatient frown. Goodness knows how much more he could take before he was ready to pop!

“She’s been tested positive,” Klavier read off the doctor’s medical report in a hollow voice, “Lamiroir has perfect 20/20 vision. Herr Forehead was right.”

‘I knew it!’ Apollo inwardly cheered, but took care not to let his eagerness show on his face. A part of him still felt bad pinning the crime on – no, not pinning; Lamiroir did commit the crime and all he did was bring the whole dark truth to light. At long last, Daryan was free and could find closure with his brother; true justice was served; and a young boy had been avenged after years of painful extortion.

But Lamiroir was still screaming that she didn't do it and her obvious disturbance was having a negative effect on all those present.

“Come now, surely you know the limit, Madam,” Kristoph interjected with the slightest frown of disapproval and impatience. “No matter how you cry, the law will never bend. In this country’s court, evidence is everything – and every single one points to you.”

Lamiroir had trouble understanding how someone so genteel and warm could be this frightfully cold. Klavier and Kristoph looked so much alike; she had bought into the latter’s charm, assumed he worked like his brother, but realised her foolishness too late. She heard no protest from the prosecution and a lone tear trickled down her cheek. She felt so many things at once: fear, anger, panic, regret… but most of all, Lamiroir felt like a failure, for being unable to protect Machi while he was still alive and failing to avenge him in death.

Apollo watched her sorrowfully, his sympathies going out to her despite the severity of her crimes. Blackmail, extortion, smuggling and then murder were inexcusable, but there was just something about the singer that made him feel bad about his actions no matter how justifiable they were. Every time he looked at her, he felt a peculiar sense of tentative curiosity grip him and that only made him look longer. It was just like that night when he first laid eyes on her. For some reason, he was attracted to her, but not in the way he was attracted to Phoenix. It was a protective compulsion borne out of emotions he himself did not understand and right now, he was feeling immensely guilty.

“… There is a way,” his eyes met her desperate ones as he delivered his ultimatum. “Plead guilty.”

Lamiroir felt her heart stop and plummet fifty feet under. Plead... guilty? But that would be admitting she did it, which to her, seemed like a fate worse than death.

“The death penalty only applies on Borginian soil. You’re receiving sentence here in our local court,” Apollo walked her through his reasoning slowly. He didn’t understand why he wanted to help her so badly, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to live it down if he was indirectly responsible for her death. “If… If you refuse to accept your sentence here, which is a 10-year jail term, you’d have to return to Borginia and get executed.” His eyes gazed at her pleadingly. “Miss Lamiroir, while you’re still here, you have the freedom to plead guilty. It’s not the end for you–”

“Apollo, stop!”

It was like a slap to the face and he sputtered, “M-Mr. Wright?!”

Phoenix had shoved his way onto the witness stand and was begging Apollo with his eyes. Never had he seen the ex-lawyer look so painfully desperate before, not even when Phoenix had begged him about a month ago in the darkness of Kristoph’s office to help him clear his name. It made him hesitate.
“Don’t do this, kid!”

“But sir, she’s a criminal!”

“Apollo, you don’t understand! She’s your m– “

“MR. WRIGHT!” the Judge boomed and struck the podium so hard, the whole room seemed to vibrate from the force. “I’m holding you in contempt of court! Bailiff, send him out!”

“No! A-Amaranth, wait – Hey!”

When Amaranth made to grab him, Phoenix elbowed the bassist in the face – he didn’t mean to – and struggled to get his words out as he fought against the younger man’s restraining hands.

“Apo-LLO!” he winced and tugged at his wrist that had suddenly found its way into Amaranth’s vice-like grip. “Lamiroir’s innocent! What’re you doing!?”

“You told me to always believe in my client, Mr. Wright,” Apollo replied with a grin, unfazed; eyes shining in excitement and oblivious to the distress swimming in his idol’s deep blue pools. “So that’s what I did!”

“What?” Phoenix whispered, mortified; all colour drained from his face. Apollo’s face radiated nothing but pride and eagerness, like a child silently begging to be recognized and complimented by his parent for a job well done, for listening, for following the rules, for making them proud. But Phoenix wasn’t proud – he felt horrible, shattered, devastated; regretted his advice and all that he taught the kid; wished he could take it all back and kept his big mouth shut. Apollo was only a kid: inexperienced, naive, impressionable, eager to please – and it was obvious the only person he actually cared about pleasing was… him.

For a moment, Phoenix stood in silence, completely still, like the whole world had frozen over and he was the only one who existed, like the darkness which slowly circled him had grown darker, like the infectious smile on Apollo’s face caused him great pain. This was all his fault. Daryan was innocent, but Lamiroir was going to die; he had failed to protect her; she was counting on him with her life and he had failed her. The shock was too much to bear. He felt so numb he didn’t even put up a fight as Amaranth led him away.

When the doors boomed shut, taking away Phoenix Wright and all the drama along with him, the Judge rubbed his forehead and finally lowered his gaze to address the accused. “Mr. Justice has a valid point,” he resumed from where they left off. “Witness, there is no denying that your actions are inexcusable. Should you plead guilty in this court, you take on the charges borne out of this country’s law. The crime was committed here; legally, you belong to us.”

A pregnant pause.

“Do you plead guilty, Miss Lamiroir?”

Klavier looked at her regretfully. Kristoph’s face and posture remained impassive. Daryan shot her an apprehensive stare. Apollo awaited the singer’s response with bated breath, eyes hard, fists clenched. He didn’t know where his sudden apprehension came from, a day ago he hadn’t even known who the heck Lamiroir was, but he didn’t want her fate to end up the same as Machi’s. Despite all the things she had done, the punishment she deserved, Apollo didn’t like the idea of execution. Maybe he was soft, maybe he wasn’t exactly cut out for the harsh realities of the legal world, but he prayed the beautiful songstress would just accept her sentence and live to see another day.
'Please… say something,’ he thought, only to pause abruptly when he heard something. It was soft at first, nothing more than a mere whisper, but it was quickly gaining confidence and by the looks of everyone else’s baffled faces, he knew they heard it too. Was that… singing?

Sugar, sugar...
Oh that night, in your embrace.
When you stole away the keys
My heart held onto so tight.

Klavier blinked in recognition, the frown on his face reflecting the confusion and insecurity that gripped the court. He knew that song… But unlike the passion that seized the siren before, there was a deep sorrow embedded in her tragic soliloquy. It made the fine hairs at the back of his and Apollo’s neck, stand.

Pleasure, pleasure...
But a fleeting melody.
It wraps itself around me,
And now through the air I fly.

“Witness, do you plead guilty or not?” the Judge insisted, impatient and confused. But Lamiroir gave no answer, save the tears that spilled from her eyes and trickled down her pale cheeks. And still, she continued to sing.

Burning on in my heart.
Fire.
Burn my love away. All away.
Like a bullet of love.
Fire.
Take my life away.
All away.

The Judge sighed and shook his head. “Miss Lamiroir refuses to plead guilty. As such, her sentence is now under the jurisdiction of the Borginia government. She will be placed in a holding cell until Borginian authorities claim her for her execution.” He turned to address a pair of guards, “Take her away.”

The tears flowed faster as Lamiroir felt herself seized and led away like a pathetic animal to a slaughterhouse. In less than a day, she felt herself stripped off her dignity, pride, and all hope. But none of that mattered anymore. Machi was dead, and there was nothing else left for her. Nothing but her music and the last song left behind by a young boy who had brought light into her world of darkness. And with that, she walked out through those doors, never to be seen or heard from again.

Guitar, guitar...
Up together to the sky...

Daryan Crescend, Not Guilty.

That was the headlines plastered all over the news – and the guy wasn’t even released from the courtroom yet. Apollo could barely believe his ears (his head was still ringing when the judge had
slammed down his gavel earlier and declared his client free of all charges); he had fought tooth and
nail for this victory and the whole experience felt incredibly surreal, but he did it. He threw
everything he had (nearly driving himself insane countless of times) and cleared Daryan’s name; he
believed in the guitarist all the way – and he was only grateful that Daryan held on and believed in
him too.

“There’s my man!”

Apollo could hardly suppress his smirk. Speak of the devil. The Gavinner’s guitarist practically flew
over and clung onto the brunette, sobbing into his chest and soaking the fabric of his suit in seconds.

“Apollo… Apollo, thank you!”

Said lawyer patted his back awkwardly.

“Oh… don’t mention it…” But whatever he wanted to say next was cut short when Daryan grabbed
him by the lapels of his vest and shook him violently. Apollo swore he heard something snap. Maybe
his neck.

“No way, dude! I’m a free man. You did me a solid,” he grinned and smacked the younger man on
the back, and Apollo was definitely sure something had broken. “If there’s anything I can do for you,
just say the word and it’s yours.”

“Well, you can pay me…”

“Hmm… but what?

“You can pay me…” he tried again. “Just make the cheque out to ‘Gavin Law Offices’ – “

“I know! I’ll buy you dinner at Eldoon’s Noodles!”

What the hell, was Daryan even listening?! Apollo resisted strangling the happy-go-lucky guitarist
with his bare hands.

“Haha, any chance your offer allows for one more?” Clay chuckled and joined the pair, flashing the
guitarist a wide grin. “Congrats, Daryan. You really came through. I’m sure Damien can’t wait to see
you.”

The sound of his brother’s name caused Daryan’s eyes to sadden, the smile on his lips bittersweet.

“Thanks, dude. I just hope I’m not too late…”

Suddenly, someone coughed and they turned to face three very regretful, very shamefaced Gavinner
members. None dared to lift their gazes at first, but it was Crow who eventually broke the awkward
silence with a loud sigh.

“Dude… we’re sorry.” Three simple words and he meant it. “N-None of that should’ve happened.
You needed us and we should’ve been there for you, not drag your name through the dirt,” he
bowed his head in embarrassment, face red at the realization of their combined cowardice. “And… D,
we’re friends. We shouldn’t have doubted you. Sure, you were suspicious as heck. And your
bro’s gonna kick the bucket soon. Not to mention your old man – Ack!”

Amaranth punched Crow upside his head and released a suffering sigh. “What the moron’s trying to
say is, we fucked up,” he went straight to the point.
“Instead of helping you, we only thought about ourselves,” Valerian continued, stepping forward. “We let fear blind and turn us against each other. We forgot what it meant to be a band. And…” the keyboardist bit his lip, shoulders trembling, “I forgot what it meant to be a good friend.”

“Val…”

The keyboardist stepped up, an unreadable expression on his face and before Daryan knew it, Valerian surged forward and wrapped his arms around the latter in a passionate embrace. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled into Daryan’s shoulder and he was soon joined by Crow and Amaranth, until the innocent, heartfelt action turned into one big group hug. When they finally pulled away from each other, Daryan sniffed and fought back the tears that threatened to spill from his eyes. All the stress and heartache from the past week felt nothing more than a distant dream; he had no idea how much he needed this until now; there was so many things to be grateful for, and being part of The Gavinners never felt better –

“… Daryan?”

Said man started at that familiar voice and before he could peer over his shoulder to address the speaker, a large, tanned hand grabbed his wrist, spun him around and pulled him into a desperate embrace. Blonde hair tickled his cheek and a pair of lips grazed his ear.

“Danke Gott… I thought I was going to lose you forever.”

Daryan blushed, but instead of pulling away, he leaned into the warmth with a soft, rare smile he reserved for only his best friend.

“I’m not going anywhere, Klav…”

Triggered. The floodgates opened and Klavier came completely undone. All his pent up frustration, fears, insecurities and pleas for forgiveness spilled out of his mouth in torrents. The order of his sentences were a jumbled mess – it was like the blonde was running on pure emotion and saying whatever his heart prioritized, rather than what his brain deemed chronologically and rationally appropriate. He talked about the trial. He talked about his motives. He talked about the doubts that plagued him and tried to make his friend understand. He talked about Phoenix. He talked about Kristoph. He talked about Apollo and his bitterness and confusion. He talked about jail and crying and responsibility, and when self-loathe took over and he began babbling about how the guitarist surely hated him, Daryan decided that he had heard enough.

“Klav, shut up! It’ll take more than that to break us up.”

“But what I did – “

“Deserves my thanks,” Daryan finished for him with a genuine smile. He had to keep himself from laughing at Klavier’s hopelessly baffled face. “I understand, Klav. This is something only a best friend can do and you did. So, thank you.”

It took a while for Klavier to process Daryan’s statement – his friend wasn’t mad at him! – before he felt the corners of his lips twitch into a smile of his own, Bless Daryan for being so forgiving. But when his gaze fell upon the hesitant ones of Valerian, Crow and Amaranth, his smile fell and a sudden purpose seized him. This trial had affected them all; brought out their worst; exposed their flaws and opened his eyes to a present he did not wish to see repeat itself and perpetuate in the future. As it turned out, Klavier discovered a problem in The Gavinners; no band was ever perfect; but as Daryan’s trial stretched on and he’d witnessed another side to his bandmates – a spiteful, callous and selfish side – Klavier noticed a familiar pattern to their personalities and realised that the
problem... was him.

“Guys, I think I owe you an apology.”

Four pairs of eyes bulged at his uncharacteristic display of humility. No way – was Klavier Gavin apologizing? Crow had even convinced himself that he was dreaming and tried to get Amaranth to punch him in the gut, to which the latter would've gladly obliged if Klavier hadn't gone on to explain himself.

“I... haven't been the best leader and I'm sorry.” He closed his eyes momentarily and took a deep breath. Admitting his personal drawbacks, especially in the presence of his rival, wasn't easy after all. “Daryan suffered a lot during dies trial, and it's alles meine fault. If I had looked after your welfare better, if I had given each of you the chance to shine and das recognition you deserved, instead of focusing solely on mich, none of dies unnecessary competition would have existed; we wouldn't go alle out to ruin each other's lives.” He lowered his voice to a quiet, defeated murmur, “We're a band, we're bruders... And it is I who forgot why we formed The Gavinners in the first place.”

His words were met with nothing but silence. The guys probably hated him anyway. But before he could give up on his group and himself, a low, baritone voice broke the silence.

“... No, Klavier,” Amaranth pushed past Valerian and Crow and they quickly moved aside to gape at the usually stoic bassist in shock. “It's not just The Gavinners. We all forgot how we became friends in the first place: a prosecutor, an Interpol agent, a bailiff, a policeman, a traffic warden – brought together through our love for music.” He cracked a rare smile. “You're not a bad leader, Klavier. We just needed a little reminder, that's all.”

Klavier hid his eyes behind a hand and covered up his sobs with a low chuckle, moved by his friend’s words and sincerity. Seriously, he had the best bandmates anyone could ever ask for. How he had failed to see this before was beyond him.

“Danke,” he murmured with a bashful smirk, “you guys are the best.”

Daryan, Valerian, Amaranth and Crow shared knowing looks, before they moved towards their leader in a big group hug, cheering and laughing loudly, beaming grins all around. Fist pumps and choruses of “Gavinners rock!” filled the courtroom lobby, and the scene couldn't be more heartwarming, more perfect. Nothing could interrupt–

“So... leader? Does this mean I don't get a raise?”

“Crow!”

The drummer blew them a raspberry. “Geez, just joking!”

Valerian shook his head with a fond chuckle. “Anyway, let this be a lesson for us.”

“Yeah! Never let a woman get between us!”

“CROW!”

“What?”

Apollo gave an exasperated sigh, but even he was unable to stop the small smile that tugged incessantly at the corners of his lips. It was things like this that made all the stress and mental torture worth it, his victory all the more sweeter. But then again, it really wasn't about winning. True, Daryan still hadn't paid him a single cent for his efforts, but there was something inexplicably
satisfying about witnessing his client’s joy and relief, an experience which money could not buy for him. Even Klavier’s happiness proved infectious and in his heart, Apollo laughed along with him. He wondered if this was what it meant to be a lawyer.

“Herr Justice.”

Apollo blinked and found a hand extended before him in a shake. For a moment, he had no idea what he was supposed to do save stare dumbly, until Klavier cleared his throat impatiently with an awkward blush across his cheeks.

“Danke,” he said, voice sincere and heavy with emotion. That one word spoke so much and with a grin, Apollo accepted his rival’s hand in a firm shake.

“Just doing my job,” he replied, to which the blonde snorted, but the cheeky smirk on Klavier’s face indicated that he meant no spite.

“Don’t misunderstand. This doesn’t change anything between us. Das next time I see you in court, I won’t go easy on you.”

Apollo chuckled, “That makes two of us.”

The small smile on Klavier’s face was nothing short of genuine. Apollo watched as his rival returned his attention to his bandmates, suddenly feeling rather awkward and inadequate, like he was interrupting something sacred and intimate. But just before he could take his leave to find his boss, he noticed a flash of grey and turquoise from the corner of his eye and immediately turned his head to spy a familiar silhouette disappear around the corner.

It’s him.

A surge of determination seized the young lawyer; the urgency he felt during the trial came rushing back; and he quietly slipped away from The Gavinners (and Clay who was busy taking selfies with them) to pursue his target down the hallway and out the court’s main doors. Descending the stairs, Apollo stood on the pavement and looked up and down the street with a curious frown.

Weird, where did he... ?

Suddenly, a pair of arms shot out and tugged him into a narrow alleyway at the building’s side. Then, he felt those same hands grab him by the shoulders, turn him around and slam him against a wall. Apollo stood there, winded, and found himself staring straight into a pair of very familiar, very enchanting deep blue eyes that were now narrowed into a suspicious glare.

“Why’re you following me? What do you want?” Phoenix hissed and Apollo felt anger and frustration bubble in his chest at the older man’s forwardness and misplaced paranoia.

Time for a little distraction.

“Oh, Mr. Gavin!”

That name had the desired reaction. Phoenix actually jumped to look over his shoulder and Apollo wasted no time in swapping their positions as he pinned the ex-lawyer against the same sport the other had him but a second ago. He pressed his body against Phoenix’s when the latter started to struggle and the sudden contact made Phoenix stop, a slight flush sneaking its way across his cheeks. Apollo either didn't notice or didn't seem to care.

“I should be the one asking the questions,” he had to keep himself from shouting, “why in the bloody
are you trying to get yourself convicted when – you asked me to help clear your name in the first place?! What are you – no, are you even thinking?! You tried claiming responsibility for a crime you obviously didn't commit, sacrificed yourself for a woman you hardly know, and here I am wondering what the hell I’m supposed to do!”

Phoenix avoided his eyes and muttered like a petulant child, “I have my reasons.”

“And what might they be?” Apollo demanded with a quirked brow. “Mr. Wright, you have a daughter. Haven’t you thought about what would happen to her if you –”

“Shut up, kid, you don't know anything,” Phoenix snapped, surprising the brunette with his sudden aggression, but it was too late to take it back. He was grateful for the temporary silence; after all, Apollo didn't need to know that one of those ‘reasons’ included him.

“Besides, what I choose to do with my life or Trucy’s is none of your business. Why do you care?”

Apollo was so mad, he trembled. If Phoenix hadn't figured it out by now, he really was an idiot.

“... Why do I care?” he echoed quietly.

And before Phoenix knew it, he felt a pair of lips press against his in a tender, loving kiss. Unlike their passionate exchange in the bedroom yesterday, this one was gentle, warm, sincere – as if Apollo treated him like precious porcelain and was afraid of breaking him – and Phoenix found himself melting under the brunette’s tenderness, taking comfort from his kind hands, relishing in his taste. The kiss wasn't demanding or needy, but it made Phoenix’s toes curl and he immediately forgot about everything save this single moment suspended in time. Apollo poured everything into that kiss, hoping his idol could feel all these confusing, wonderful emotions he was feeling, hoping he would understand. And fortunately and unfortunately, Phoenix did; perhaps a little too much.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Apollo pulled away, his warm hazel eyes gazing intently into Phoenix’s wide blues, as he whispered but a breath from the man’s soft lips, “Does that answer your question?”

Phoenix stood there helpless, in shock, his hand shakily going up to cover his mouth, both mortified and giddy over what Apollo just did; unable to think, unable to feel. He’d be a fool if he didn't realize what that kiss meant, what Apollo was asking for. No words could convey the dilemma of his predicament, the raging emotions hammering at his heart. He wanted this, wanted this young, passionate lawyer as much as the latter wanted him; but at the same time, he didn't because he was already in love. Kristoph’s face flashed in and out of his vision, overlapping with Apollo’s chiseled features like a translucent mask. He was so confused. Why was this so difficult? It shouldn't be. The two were so different, yet alike in many ways that it made Phoenix sick with desire and guilt. So, unable to give the kid an answer, Phoenix wretched himself out of his hold and fled; and with a sad, heartbroken smile, Apollo let him go.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hold that thought.
Epilogue for Turnabout Serenade will be up soon.
The night was as still and silent as the confines of Gavin manor, save the occasional rustling of paper from the dimly lit drawing room. A small, antique table lamp cast a soft, warm glow on the pages of Daryan Crescend’s trial log and the edges of a teacup half full. Long, manicured fingers reached out to lift the delicate porcelain from its saucer and brought it to a pair of thin, pink lips set in a relaxed smile. Lovely. It was moments like this that Kristoph Gavin looked forward to after a long day’s work – cozy, peaceful, elegant in its simplicity – except that Apollo Justice’s crudely written reports post-trial were starting to give him a headache. He threw the papers down with a resigned sigh; perhaps he would have a word with his understudy first thing on Monday.

He was just about to get up and refill his tea when something in his pocket buzzed. Pulling out his cell phone, Kristoph read the message with a knowing smile. “Show time,” it read and no sooner than that, he heard the front door slam shut and the sound of frantic footsteps growing louder as they got closer to his location. The blonde set the fine porcelain back onto the desk; it looked like his tea would have to wait. He fiddled with something in his pocket and mentally braced himself for the inevitable; no doubt his lover was pissed.

“3… 2…”

“Kristoph!”

The door slammed open and struck the wall behind it as soon as Kristoph mentally counted one. Resisting a playful smirk (despite his worry about possible damages to his wallpaper), he lifted his gaze to meet the fuming eyes of Phoenix Wright narrowed into a cold, hard glare. Never had Phoenix looked so chillingly dangerous before; if Kristoph wasn't the coolest defense in the West, he would've been worried. But then, considering the ex-lawyer's motive had undeniably clashed with his in court earlier, he had anticipated his anger.

“Good evening, Phoenix,” he greeted calmly as if said man hadn’t just brutally barged into his home five minutes to midnight. He offered the other a clean cup. “Tea?”

Phoenix crossed the room in a flash and snatched the innocent teacup out of his lover’s hand. Kristoph was just thankful that he slammed it back onto the table instead of smashing it on the floor; after all, the entire set had been a gift from the German Chancellor.

“Cut the bullshit, Kristoph. You know why I’m here,” Phoenix snapped, jabbing the blonde in the chest with his finger. “What the hell was that just now in court? And don’t even think of putting it on Apollo because I know it’s you!”

He was rewarded with a raised eyebrow from his boyfriend, characteristic sardonicism written all over his face.

“I think it’s called ‘saving your life’,” Kristoph replied, clearly unamused by the memory of Phoenix’s recklessness. “And I believe the correct response, Phoenix, is ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you? Thank you? You just sentenced an innocent woman to death and you expect me to say thank you?!”

Kristoph suppressed the urge to raise his hand against the older man. Phoenix had overstepped his
boundaries and tempted his wrath more than twice today with his insolence. Normally, he would never allow such instances of disobedience go unpunished, but tonight was special; he had planned this for two months; and he wasn't going to let a petty disagreement about some woman ruin it for him.

“Innocent woman?” he repeated skeptically, arms crossed. “She had the trigger switch – pray tell, which part of that sounds innocent to you?”

“I-I don't know! Someone could've given it to her or something…” Phoenix shook his head frantically. “Whatever. You should've steered the kid in the right direction, instead of going for what's convenient to help secure your perfect record .”

That last bit was spat out so bitterly, more hurt than intentionally spiteful, that fear and resentment bled through Phoenix’s paper-thin rage and made Kristoph’s hard gaze soften in understanding.

“You're thinking about seven years ago, when that journal page ended up in your hands,” he said softly.

It wasn't even a question. The blonde hit the nail dead on the head. Phoenix had gone completely silent and Kristoph, both sympathetic and apologetic for bringing up the past, placed a hand on his cheek in a soothing caress.

“Phoenix…”

“S-She said... she loved him,” Phoenix interrupted in a defeated whisper, voice as shaky as his conviction. It was so pitifully naive, Kristoph sighed and almost pulled his poor, confused lover into his arms. Almost.

“Just because she loved him, it doesn't make her a saint,” he said gently, patiently, as if he were reasoning with a sweet child. “Sometimes, circumstances can drive a person to commit heinous crimes that you can hardly imagine. You can't trust everybody who uses love as their defense, Phoenix,” he cupped his boyfriend’s cheeks and ducked his head to playfully bump their noses together with a smile, “But you can trust me; I won't abandon you. I've been nothing but loyal for seven years.”

Phoenix sighed and despite his initial anger, found himself leaning into Kristoph’s touch. It was no use; he couldn't stay mad at the younger man, not when Kristoph’s gaze was so kind and gentle that it made Phoenix’s heart swell with so much love he felt it may spill from his chest. He realized he must have been staring because he saw concerned ice-blue eyes boring into his own, only for them to warm at the sight of his innocent curiosity. Just like that, their previous argument was forgotten and with a chuckle, Kristoph pushed back the old beanie and pressed a kiss to Phoenix’s forehead with a fond murmur of, “My little bird”. That had really gotten to Phoenix. It touched something deep within his chest and set him aflame with love and adoration, but also lust, which was stupid – it was barely a kiss, just a little nickname. Phoenix wondered if he turned into some depraved pervert after abstaining from Kristoph’s touches for so long. It would also most certainly explain his confusion and the mood swings.

“Loyal, huh? Alright Mr. Evidence-is-everything – where's your proof?” Phoenix mocked playfully, eyes shining, pulling his boyfriend close with a sexy smirk and a promise for a good time. In response, Kristoph followed his lead, chuckling as he went along, his next words spoken but a breath from Phoenix's lips.

“Be careful what you wish for.” And with that, he reached around Phoenix to switch off the lamp.
Nervously, Phoenix’s gaze swept across the dark drawing room, specifically at the numerous scented candles planted strategically at the corners and on table tops. Now that he thought about it, it did seem quite suspicious that his boyfriend would do his work in the dark with nothing but a single table lamp to light his way, surrounded by suspiciously romantic candlelight. The strange scene only made him hold onto Kristoph tighter.

“Kristoph… what's—”

But he was interrupted by the tunes of fine acoustic. The melody of a guitar’s duet sailed through the air and the duo’s song coiled around each other in a teasing, loving caress – it reminded Phoenix of winter’s innocence; the spark and novelty of teenage love; a blissful waltz under the stars and pale gaze of the moon. But most of all, it reminded him of the night Kristoph asked him out and they shared their first kiss, as the DJ over the radio announced “Merry Christmas” at the stroke of midnight. The memory made his chest constrict with emotion – had it really been seven years?

Phoenix sought out the source of the music and had to keep himself from crying out in surprise at the sight of the two figures seated by the bay window.

“K-Klavier? Daryan?”

The pair smiled but never once ceased in their playing. Klavier continued singing, the rich quality of his vocals flowing past his lips like sacred nectar from the gods. Phoenix was enthralled, allowing his brain to shut down and enjoy the moment without question. The press of Kristoph’s chest against his back was warm, reassuring, and he couldn't help but fall further into his lover's embrace with a blissful, content sigh. Perfect. Everything felt simply marvelous.

As the song reached its climax, Phoenix caught a whiff of the distinct smell of roses, before something soft grazed his cheek. Curious, he inclined his head towards the high ceilings and his jaw dropped from the magical display that assaulted his eyes, which had gone impossibly wide in rapture and disbelief. A thousand rose petals drifted down and danced around them like magic. Reaching out, Phoenix parted his fingers and caught a single blood-red petal in his palm, marveling at its softness and fragility. With a fond smile, he turned his wrist and allowed the crimson bloom to fall and join the rest at his feet. Flowers appearing seemingly out of nowhere. Something told him he knew the child responsible.

As if on cue, Trucy emerged from behind the bay window curtain with a soft giggle. Phoenix shot her a knowing grin, but before he could ask what on earth her brilliant little devious mind was up to, he felt Kristoph’s warmth leave him and he immediately turned around to face… nothing. The spot Kristoph had previously stood was draped in shadows and his lover’s absence left a sudden emptiness in his heart–

“Phoenix.”

His eyes immediately snapped downwards at the call of his name and to his shock, he found his boyfriend at his feet, kneeling before him on one knee. A large tanned hand reached out and held his fairer one and Phoenix gasped, unable to keep himself from trembling in anticipation, his throat having gone as dry as sandpaper when the blonde raised it to his lips. Kristoph pressed a tender kiss to the back of his palm and Phoenix smiled shyly, feeling butterflies swell in his stomach. He twined their fingers together when Kristoph’s lips released him to speak.

“I’ve thought about this for a long time – seven years in fact – and I think it's time to make my intentions known…”

Kristoph looked up at him with eyes he had never seen before – large, shining with sincerity, full of
love and adoration – it made his knees go weak. Phoenix’s trembling intensified and his free hand unconsciously went up to his mouth to muffle his sobs. No way. He's not...

“Phoenix Wright?”

“Y-Yeah?”

He held up a small velvet box and pulled back the lid to reveal a beautifully crafted red diamond set snugly in the center of a silver ring. Phoenix looked down at him with almost comically huge eyes and Kristoph chuckled in an uncharacteristic show of bashfulness. “Red diamonds. They're incredibly rare – only 30 in the world, and this one’s yours,” he said with a proud smile, noticing how his boyfriend’s face was as red as said precious stone itself.

“Will you marry me?”

The music stopped. Four pairs of eyes watched and awaited what would happen next. Phoenix remained unnaturally silent and Kristoph felt his saliva knot uncomfortably in his throat. The only sounds one could hear in the drawing room were the tickings of a grandfather clock and the soft rustling of curtains from the cool nighttime breeze. Phoenix stared helplessly at the ring, gripped with a sudden wave of emotions. Kristoph was here baring his heart and soul to him, but all he could think about was how the red diamond reminded him so much of Apollo. He could still feel the pleasant tingle on his lips from when the kid had last kissed him and had to resist touching a finger to his mouth if only to reassure himself he hadn’t imagined it. However, catching himself only sought to reinforce thoughts of his infidelity. This wasn’t fair to Kristoph; the guy had sacrificed so much to support him and Trucy through all these years, even became a sort of second father to her; loved them unconditionally – and how did he repay him? By romping with his understudy while he was away.

The guilt was too much. Phoenix had half the mind to turn the blonde down out of shame and self-loathing, but a quick glance at his daughter from the corner of his eye made him hesitate. Trucy looked so desperate, so hopeful. She loved Kristoph completely like a father and Phoenix knew she would be totally crushed if her dream of a perfect, loving family remained nothing but one. It was obvious how much effort she put into this whole thing, and getting Klavier involved? Now he was convinced she could work some real magic. He looked at Klavier and Daryan, impressed and touched at them for coming all the way down at such short notice, especially after the latter’s eventful trial, and for the first time ever, Phoenix failed to see any traces of irritation or disgust in the younger Gavin brother’s eyes. Instead, they were soft and sentimental, and conveyed the man’s full acceptance. And then, his gaze finally landed on Kristoph. Just looking at the beautiful, successful gentleman filled Phoenix with a flurry of emotions: guilt, pride, fear, panic, happiness, security, frustration, admiration, jealousy, nervousness, peace, adoration and most of all, love. That single realisation made him blush pleasantly with a smile. That’s right, love. He loved Kristoph with all his heart, and no matter the blonde’s shortcomings or the disagreements they had, Kristoph always pulled through in the end and sought his forgiveness in his own way. The guy wasn’t nearly as romantic as his brother, but he was learning. He lost his temper at times, but he was improving. He was barely home most times, but when he was, he made it count. He had a perpetual stick up his ass, but he made effort to let loose when it mattered. He could be an insufferable perfectionist, but it wasn’t without heart. But most importantly, Kristoph never once gave up on Phoenix – and that, the latter realised, should have been his sole indicator all along. Whatever mistakes they had committed, that was all in the past. Kristoph wanted to start a whole new life together, and out of all the people in the whole world he could possibly choose, all the rich, sexy and successful women desperately clawing at a chance to be with him, the blonde had chosen him.

He really loves me, Phoenix realised; perhaps regrettfully a little too late. I’ve made up my mind.
It felt like both seconds and an excruciating eternity before Phoenix actually threw himself on
Kristoph with a loud squeal and the latter struggled to support the both of them without falling over.

“Yes, you dense idiot! Yes!”

The huge grin plastered on the ex-lawyer’s face was so infectious, Kristoph could overlook
Phoenix’s playful chiding with a smile of his own. He didn't hear it wrong; Phoenix said yes and
though he didn’t look it, Kristoph was on cloud nine giddy with relief. So, without further ado, he
carefully plucked the ring from the box and lovingly slipped it on his new fiancé’s ring finger. The
red diamond sparkled beautifully under the warm light, but nothing could match up to his lover’s
radiant glow accentuated by his tender, tear-filled blue eyes, which swam with pure, unbridled joy
and overflowing love for him.

“Finally!” someone shouted, and Daryan and Trucy let the party poppers fly. Phoenix giggled under
the shower of gold confetti, before he felt himself being dipped and a pair of soft, demanding lips
claim his in a passionate toe-curling, star-seeing kiss. He moaned against his fiancé’s lips, but just as
he felt Kristoph’s tongue prod teasingly between his lips, Daryan groaned with a joking, “Get a
room, guys”. Laughing, the couple pulled away and Trucy immediately seized that opportunity to
wrap her arms around the two most important men in her life.

“Daddy – she paused – and Daddy! I'm so happy for you both! Now, we can be a proper family!
And Kristoph can come to school on career day – my friends will be so jealous!”

Kristoph tutted, but there was no mistaking the amusement in his voice. “Now Trucy, we’ve talked
about this: you're still to call me ‘Mr. Gavin’ until Phoenix and I are properly married.”

She pouted, “Fine…”

Phoenix laughed at how easily Kristoph could subdue his excitable daughter. At least he knew who
would be the one doing the disciplining between them.

While Kristoph helped Trucy and Daryan clean up the mess of petals and confetti, Phoenix found
himself distracted by a hand to his shoulder.

“Has-been.” He turned to face the sheepish rockstar curiously, expectantly and Klavier automatically
avoided his eyes. “Glückwunsch. You and mein bruder had it a long time coming.” He flashed the
ex-lawyer an awkward smile. “Look after him für me, ja? He's all the family that I got.”

“I will,” Phoenix replied, “Thank you, Klavier.”

“No,” Klavier surprised him with his forcefulness, but a fond smile quickly replaced the frown on
his face. “Thank you… Herr Wright.”

Phoenix’s jaw dropped for the second time that evening. Did Klavier just…? He couldn't stop the
wide grin that spread across his lips from the implications.

“You know,” Phoenix began teasingly, “your family just got bigger. Technically, I'm your brother
now.”

“God forbid.”

They laughed and their happiness carried clear through the night. Gavin manor never seemed so
bright.
A pair of feet tiptoed quietly across the hall, making extreme efforts to ensure their presence remained undetected – a vase crashed onto the floor and they winced – or as undetectable as they could manage. Suddenly, a door creaked open; light pierced through the darkness and a human shadow fell onto the floor. The figure froze in place, barely having an opportunity to duck into a hiding spot as they prayed feverently they wouldn't be noticed in the shadows. Trucy Wright padded out into the hallway in her pink nightgown, eyes closed and arms outstretched; mumbling something beneath her breath that sounded suspiciously like “pancakes on waffles”. Then, she made a clumsy turn and disappeared down the stairs. The figure sweatdropped as they watched her go. Boy, who would've thought Nick's daughter sleepwalked? Also, she was probably going to get a stomachache.

The figure continued down the wide corridor lined with priceless portraits and artifacts obtained from various auction houses around the world, tall candle stands with their wicks long snuffed out, and a grand mirror with its frame forged out of pure gold. Moonlight shone through the large windows nearby and offered the figure a temporary reprieve from the darkness. The man gazed at his reflection, at his long limp black hair no longer in its usual pompadour, pale and sallow complexion, and a haunted look in his dark eyes. He barely recognized himself and with an involuntary shudder, he figured neither would Damien.

A few steps more and he reached the end of the hallway. A pair of white double doors fashioned out of mahogany and accentuated with pure gold decor, towered over him. Despite its grandeur, he rolled his eyes at its excessiveness. Trust the head of this house to be such a prick with his cash. And bless the new husband who could actually stand him.

Taking a deep breath to compose himself, he reached up and gave the solid wood three hard knocks. It didn't take long for a muffled, “Come in” to sound from inside and he pushed open one of the doors to tentatively stick his head into the private study. Contrary to the rest of the mansion, this room was well-lit, with law books and case folders lining the walls as far as the eye could see. A blonde gentleman sat at a desk at the far end, never once lifting his gaze from a particular case file he was reading while he greeted his clandestine guest.

“You're late,” Kristoph commented, and it was hard to tell if he was annoyed or being intentionally annoying. “Don't tell me you got lost in your childhood home.”

“Piss off, man,” Daryan locked the door with a grimace. “Klav took much longer to fall asleep. Probably from all the excitement after you popped the question.”

Kristoph swiveled around in his chair and took in the guitarist’s disheveled hair, striped boxers, hurriedly strewn on black tank top and a certain telltale mark on his neck with a suggestive smirk.

“Are you sure it wasn't because my brother was happy to see you?”

Daryan’s face immediately flared hot red.

“Piss. Off.”

That only earned him a chuckle from the blonde and made him feel incredibly sour.

“What about your husband, huh?” Daryan placed his hands on his hips and grinned. “You two just tied the knot. You're not exactly Shakespeare’s Romeo by leaving him alone in the bedroom on your first night.”

“Humph, you needn't concern yourself with Phoenix. I assure you, he's thoroughly satisfied. But I
didn’t pull you out of bed to discuss the fallacies of holy matrimony.” Kristoph crossed the room and shoved the case folder he had been reading into Daryan’s hands. “I’m here to talk about your incompetency and how you almost screwed up the plan.”

There was a dangerous glint in his eyes as he spoke and it made Daryan openly nervous. So, without much to contribute, he opened the file and peered at its contents. It was the recent case about him.

“Because of your carelessness with those fingerprints on that kerosene and lighter, Apollo had to go one big, unnecessarily complicated round to get you out of your own mess you created. Luckily for you, that foolish singer really could see, and my apprentice has a talent for conjuring creative yet stunningly convincing scenarios.”

Daryan had an insane urge to throw a book at the cocky bastard.

“Look, I panicked, ok?! That wasn't supposed to happen!”

“You mean killing Tobaye?”

“Fuck you, it was an accident!”

Daryan bowed his head and shut his eyes from the awful memory, trembling from the images and voices that assaulted his subconscious, wallowing in despair brought about by his own guilt.

“It was an accident…”

He didn't mean to.

“Mr. Daryan…”

“Yo, kid, wassup?”

“There's an Interpol agent here. I'm not doing this anymore. You're on your own.”

“Wait, Machi –”

It wasn't his fault. The kid didn't know.

“Bro... I know what you did. I'm grateful, but this is wrong. I'd rather die seeing you an honest man, than live knowing you became a criminal for me.”

“But Damien–”

“Destroy the cocoon – that's my last wish.”

How was he supposed to know that the kid carried it with him at all times? And even worse, how the bloody hell could he have predicted Machi would be in a room full of fireworks when he triggered the igniter? The plan was simple; he helped pack it in that stupid guitar; he would easily destroy it along with its vessel; things would go back to normal and no one would be the wiser. So how did it all go so wrong?

“Hey, I think I'm in trouble.”

“An unfortunate accident?”

“You could say that.”
He hadn't been lying.

“Anyway, there isn't much time and there's a detective here on security duty. I'm in your hands should it come to it.”

He was no murderer.

“I didn't kill anyone!”

He wasn't.

“Did you fulfill my last wish?”

It was an accident.

Kristoph watched as Daryan had a mental war against himself, noting the subtle changes of his facial expressions from sorrow to anger to grief and finally, defeat. It was like watching a wild animal gradually coming into terms with its humiliating and unexpected domestication, tragic yet perversely satisfying.

“Regardless, you're a very good actor,” he said, notably impressed, and Daryan would have acknowledged his praise if he wasn't feeling so shitty about himself. “Considering my apprentice’s new bothersome ability, I never would've expected you to handle yourself so well in court – and against Klavier and your so-called friends at that! Then again, my brother always had a soft spot for you and Phoenix made himself out to be too easy an alternative.”

That last remark actually made Darian's blood boil and he didn't care if the whole house was sleeping. He let the insufferable bastard have it.

“Nick’s a better lawyer than you'd ever be! And how can you say shit like that? He's your husband. Were you seriously ok with him going to jail in my place if Apollo had made the wrong call?”

“He already made 'the wrong call' with Lamiroir, or is that different to you somehow?” Kristoph raised his voice slightly in counter argument, effectively silencing the guitarist into submission with his infallible logic. He did not appreciate being compared to the old Turnabout King and his infamous bluffing technique, even if Phoenix was his fiancé.

With a derisive snort, he snatched the case file from Daryan, turned his back to him and proceeded to properly organize its contents.

“You needed a lawyer and you came to me because I was, as you had so eloquently put it, the best in the business. Your case was a hopeless cause; no person in the right mind would defend you and you knew it. I on the other hand, would do everything and anything in my power to help my client obtain a not-guilty verdict.” He paused to shoot the guitarist a wry smirk, eyes glinting mysteriously under the shadow of his bangs. “Honestly, Daryan, you have a funny way of showing gratitude.”

Said man bit his lip so hard he drew blood, but chose to remain silent instead of lashing out again. As much as he loathed to admit it, Kristoph was right; he was right about everything. If not for the blonde’s ingenious thinking of hiding the body while framing Lamiroir in the process (her costume), as well as his cunning with that trigger switch (Kristoph really cleaned it good after he'd told the blonde where he hid it in the concert venue), he'd be a dead man. And that wasn't all: Machi’s busted cell phone he'd told him to quickly dispose off; deleting all memory of his last conversation with the kid from his own cell phone; ripping a piece of plain blue fabric from Lamiroir’s original costume and planting it in the crime scene to make it look like it came from her new costume...

While it had been impressive how Apollo managed to remain one step ahead of ‘the killer’ during the
trial, Kristoph was five steps further and that was truly frightening. The blonde thought of everything, even considered the possibility of slip-ups and worked failsafes into his plan from the outset. There was no denying it: Kristoph Gavin was a genius. Not even Apollo could hold a candle to his mentor’s name.

“So, when is Damien’s funeral?"

“Fuck you.”

“Hm… When you're done feeling sorry for yourself, I want you to take a look at this,” Kristoph moved along easily as he handed him another case file, but Daryan wasn't about to be brushed aside like a fly.

“I get it, I fucked up. I let an innocent woman take the burn for me and I'm a despicable liar.” He fought back the tears that threatened to spill. “But it's over now. Damien’s dead, Apollo won and your record’s clean. I want out.”

Kristoph hummed as he pretended to think about Daryan’s request. “Then I suppose you wouldn’t mind me telling Klavier first thing in the morning that his best friend lied to him.”

Daryan instantly stiffened. That threat affected him more than he cared to admit.

“Furthermore, considering the nature of your crimes, you could very well be subject to the Borginian death penal–”

“Alright!” Daryan yelled, before bowing his head in defeat. “Alright,” he whispered, subdued. “... So, what’s this 'huge favor' you talked about?”

Kristoph frowned at the younger man’s skepticism. “Please, you say it as if I’m asking you to commit murder.”

“You're not?”

Kristoph snorted, obviously insulted. “I'm cold, but I'm not cruel. Don't worry, consider this a personal responsibility from a concerned parent.”

At Daryan’s bare faced confusion, Kristoph sighed and pushed the new case file into his hands. The guitarist accepted it tentatively, warily, and immediately noticed the slight wrinkles and creases on its cover. No doubt the file was old despite its well-kept condition. Unable to stem his curiosity, he opened it and the profile of a vaguely familiar magician donned in red with a stern face, made him gasp.

“Wait a sec, isn't this--”

“Zak Gramarye,” Kristoph finished for him, plucking said man’s photograph from the file and handing it to Daryan for closer inspection. “Seven years ago, this man was accused for murdering his master, Magnifi Gramarye, and disappeared, leaving his only child and daughter behind.”

Daryan nodded. “Yeah, I know about this case. It was Klav’s first time prosecuting.” He shook his head pitifully. “Was Nick’s last case too.”

“Well, did you also know that our Trucy Wright is actually Zak Gramarye’s biological child?”

“No way!” Daryan practically jumped and narrowly avoided popping a blood vessel. “I always thought she was Nick’s own flesh and blood!”
“I don’t blame you,” said Kristoph reasonably. “Not many people know about this, save Phoenix, myself, Trucy’s current employer, and now you. And I would prefer to keep it that way.”

“Huh, well that explains their small age difference… Damn, always knew those numbers didn't make sense.”

“That's where you come in,” Kristoph continued with a mysterious smile. “Interpol has eyes everywhere. I need your help to locate Zak Gramarye and trail his every move.”

“Why?”

He sighed at Daryan’s misplaced suspicion. “Trucy may not be my daughter, but I care for her deeply, as does Phoenix. We’re no fools; we see the sorrow and longing in her eyes whenever she looks upon her real father’s picture. Now, even as her new family, we can't replace him.” The smile on Kristoph’s face was both kind and pleading. “I just want to reunite a little girl with her long-lost father. Is that so wrong?”

Oh. Daryan rubbed the back of his neck, flushing in embarrassment at his initial paranoia and unfounded antagonism. Now he felt bad. Kristoph had risked everything to get him out of jail, and all the blonde wanted in return was for Trucy to be happy. Turns out the arrogant bastard was a really nice guy after all – who'da thought? It was an odd request, sure, but it wasn't that bad a trade and he wasn’t complaining. Although Zak had pretty much disappeared off the face of this earth, it was nothing Interpol tech couldn't handle. Still, abusing Interpol resources for personal needs had its risks if he got caught; but then again, Kristoph could easily argue that helping him had had its fair share of risks as well.

“I'm guessing you wanna keep this under wraps?” he said, despite already knowing the answer.

“Is there a problem?”

“Nah, it’s cool.”

They shook on it and Daryan took the photograph with him, scrutinizing the image as he left Kristoph’s study and headed back to Klavier’s bedroom. His heart felt significantly lighter at the unexpected turn of events. Locate Zak Gramarye, huh? He scratched his head, messing up his hair further. Guess he could do that.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

And now you finally know who did it.

The plot thickens ~ As you can see, I've given Daryan a bigger role here than in the original game, namely because his background as an Interpol agent proves too good (and useful) to pass up. That and he's one of my personal favorite characters in the AA-verse, and I was rather disappointed he only appeared in one case and that was the end of him. His character had so much potential - and that's exactly what I did with him. Granted, what he did was wrong; but he's still a good guy at heart and I hoped this arc
and its epilogue showed it (along with the situational complexities). At the end of the
day, he still suffers with Damien's passing - for being a good brother and at the same
time, indirectly responsible for his death. And he still gives Kristoph the benefit of the
doubt when he agreed to help him track Zak down. Oh Daryan, if only you knew the
truth and how dark Kristoph's mind really works. Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed the
creative direction I chose to take with Daryan's character, as this is essentially how I
have always seen him to be in the original game as well. Sure, money talks, but I would
like to believe he helped smuggle the cocoon to save a person's life, which is exactly
what inspired me to adapt this arc in the first place.

Well, that's the end of arc Turnabout Serenade. Thanks to everyone who has read till
this point and supported me so enthusiastically! I would have never found the
motivation and courage to make it this far without your kind praise and feedback, so for
all of those who left their comments, you guys deserve an extra special pat on the back.
We will get back to the main plot of HoC in the next arc (and where we previously left
off before Turnabout Serenade); I haven't forgotten about that; just consider this arc an
element to Apollo's growth and journey as an attorney of law. Of course, many other
characters went through their own development through the course of this arc, which all
form the foundation of their characterization for the rest of this story.

Thank you for reading my long ass ramblings. Please look forward to the next arc, and
if you happen to have title suggestions for it (I consider this the MAIN and longest HoC
arc), feel free to leave them in your comments. Preferably with the word "Turnabout" in
it for AA's sake lol.
Turnabout Corner - Prologue

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, I'm back with a new arc and new chapter!

"Turnabout Turbulent" is this story's main and longest arc, so strap yourselves in for a bumpy (and hopefully pleasurable) ride. More characters will be added into the mix, namely Wocky Kitaki because I love that underrated boy and I have big plans for him - kind of like Daryan, but different.

We return to the main story and where we left off before "Turnabout Serenade", so hopefully you guys remember the stuff that was covered back then. This doesn't mean that the events of the previous arc can be totally disregarded though; things do get carried forward, such as Daryan's involvement and Lamiroir's suspended death sentence. Right now, things have more or less returned to the original flow, but with certain impactful changes, namely Kristoph and Phoenix's engagement, Apollo's graduation from junior attorney to an official attorney of law, and Vera finally enters the picture as a main character!

So please sit back, un-knot those panties, and enjoy the first chapter of "Turnabout Turbulent"!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Spring’s end, barely dawn.

An airplane peeked from beneath the clouds and slowly made its descent, its silhouette an ink blot against the splash of blood-orange and yellow on a deep, summertime canvas. The chill of April winds was nothing but a distant dream, the days grew longer, the nights a passing sigh; 5 a.m. looked like seven, and the trickling heat brought with it a new kind of longing.

A blue sports convertible pulled up quietly along an empty drop-off of International Airport. The door of the passenger side opened and a blonde gentleman stepped out, his blue suit neatly pressed onto his slender frame, molded, and breathed like a second skin. With purpose and typic grace, he straightened his attorney's badge before consulting his flight pass – two hours to boarding; right on schedule. He gathered his things and gave his suitcase a light tug, but a fair hand shot out and grabbed his wrist before he could so much as venture through the glass doors. Knuckles nudged at his palm and long, slender fingers coiled delicately, desperately around his own.

“Must you go? It’s been barely a week...”

The voice was soft, hesitant; as gentle as the owner’s touch. It made Kristoph smile as he lifted his gaze from their interlocked fingers to stare into eyes of gorgeous blue – wide, pleading, and a touch hopeful.

“Phoenix, we've been through this,” he sighed and planted a soft kiss on the man’s forehead. “It'll only be for about a month. I'll return as soon as I've settled all outstanding issues on my late mother’s property. You have my word.”
Phoenix pouted when his husband pulled away. Goddammit, they had only been engaged for three days and the blonde decided it was highly reasonable to up and leave for Europe for a month. Perhaps if he threw a hissy fit, Kristoph would have reservations on leaving. Well, probably not. Not in a million years. But that didn't stop him from exploiting Kristoph's only known newly acquired weakness: him.

“Fine, go to Germany and don't take me with you,” Phoenix said petulantly, rapping his fingers against his crossed arms, the pout on his lips even more pronounced than before. “Guess Trucy and I’ll spend some quality time with the neighbors.”

He had to hide his smirk at Kristoph’s disapproving frown.

“I would hardly think it wise to fraternize with a bunch of lowlife gangsters—”

“Ex-gangsters,” Phoenix corrected, pointedly ignoring the part about their perceived social status. “The Kitakis aren't bad folk – extreme and unorthodox, maybe – but they're a respectable lot. You really should get to know them when you're not too busy being a precocious prissy.”

“I don't exactly consider them your neighbors, my dear.”

“Well, they live across the street. We're sort of neighbors…”

Kristoph rolled his eyes with an indignant snort. “I still fail to comprehend your reasoning, Phoenix. Why not sell your place and permanently move into my estate? Why continue looking for work when I can more than provide for you and our Trucy? You'd earn less sweeping up dead leaves for the missus than half the allowance I give you every month!”

Phoenix grimaced at the audacity of Kristoph’s suggestion. Sell the Wright Anything Agency? He couldn't. Mia had bought the place with her own life savings and they set it up together. The Hawthorne case, The Thinker incident, DL-6… it was where everything first started. The place housed too many memories, seen too many people and besides, Charlie loved it there. Phoenix knew he could never part with the old office and live it down. He had disappointed his mentor and himself far enough.

“It's not about the money,” Phoenix replied wearily, sick of his partner’s materialism and narrow thinking. When was it ever? Definitely not when he had fallen in love with Kristoph seven years ago, and not when he said 'yes'.

“I want to feel useful, capable, live an honest life with a purpose and not depend on you guys for every little thing.” His eyes trailed sadly to the slumbering figure of his daughter curled against the backseat of the car. I want to make her proud, was what he intended to say, but what came out instead was a pitiful, “I don't want to be a burden.” It made Kristoph hesitate.

“You're not.”

The storm raging in Phoenix’s eyes melted away into a soft, sentimental smile. He leaned up to place a kiss on his husband’s lips.

“Then try to understand.”

The pleading tone in his voice eventually made Kristoph give in, albeit reluctantly. Though to be entirely honest, he would rather Phoenix return to his old job down at the Borsch Bowl Club than to get mixed up in the Kitakis’ affairs. Whether or not Winfred Kitaki had long retired from his duties as head, the idea still didn't sit well with him.
“You really do have a knack for trouble,” he commented sarcastically and received a low chuckle from Phoenix in return.

“And you think too much,” he gave Kristoph’s lapel a light pat. “It'll only be for a month. Their old caretaker’s ill and Little Plum needs help with the estate. And let’s not forget her son…”

Kristoph pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance at the mention of that cantankerous teen. “Let me guess: no one else was willing to play babysitter.”

Phoenix gave a nervous laugh, “Well … Wocky can be a… handful.”

“You're too kind.”

With a shake of his head, Kristoph grabbed his luggage with one hand and pulled his lover against him with the other. Their lips met in a final parting kiss, only for Phoenix to pull him closer and deepen it almost desperately. Somehow, being engaged changed everything. A month without Kristoph. He didn't know if he could deal with it.

Suddenly, someone honked at them and they jumped apart.

“Ach, you two are giving mich diabetes!” Klavier pulled a face behind the wheel. He lowered his sunglasses to eye his so-called brother-in-law critically. “Any day now, Herr Wright.”

The couple stepped back sheepishly - well, Phoenix did; Kristoph just looked as aloof and unfazed as he always managed to. Perhaps a tad bit troubled if that furrowed brow had anything to say about it.

“Well, this is it,” said Phoenix awkwardly, gesturing at the airport with a nod of his head. “Have a safe flight. And don't you worry, Klavier and I got things covered down here.”

“I've no doubt about your capabilities,” Kristoph interrupted, but that frown remained along with his tight upper lip. “My only concern is how you managed to not only convince me to let you work for the Kitakis, but also to leave the office under Apollo's direct supervision. Handling one case doesn't make him a professional, and should a client come waltzing in, his PR skills are hardly what I'd deem satisfactory.”

Phoenix’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the spirited lawyer, but quickly forced that warm feeling down in favor of his devotion. He was a married man now - well, sort of - and he had to separate personal feelings from an acquaintanceship forged in the name of pure business. Sure, Apollo was attractive. Yes, the kid was incredibly forward with his intentions and feelings. Indeed, he had anticipated a little give and take on his part with this clandestine deal of theirs. But at the end of the day, no matter the promises exchanged, no matter the secrets whispered in the dark, no matter the feather-light touches or searing kisses between rumpled sheets, he still belonged to Kristoph. He just wasn't so sure if Apollo understood that; after all, the kid wasn't exactly used to making deals with the underworld’s Poker King.

“Oh have faith in the kid, he'll be fine.” He shoved his hands in his hoodie pockets and gave his husband a little nudge. “Who knows? Maybe with his recent popularity, he'd be raking in quite a profit for Gavin Law Offices while you're away.”

Kristoph hummed, “At least he's not the sort that would let power get to his head.”

Phoenix had to stifle a laugh at the extent of the blonde’s pride. Was Kristoph actually worried he'd be usurped by his own understudy?
“Nah, Apollo’s a good kid.” He flashed his husband a bright, reassuring smile and helped adjust the man’s neck ribbon. “Anyway, like you said, it’s only for a month. What could possibly happen?”

“I'm screwed!”

Once again, like every typical Monday morning, Apollo found himself racing to work, a slice of toast in his mouth and zipping through traffic like he had a death wish. Except that there was one thing that made this Monday morning different from previous Mondays and a whole lot worse: he misplaced his keys. Specifically the set of keys needed to unlock the doors of Gavin Law Offices, as well as access certain case archives. The same set of keys his boss had so graciously entrusted to him to keep safe until he returned from his visit to Germany. The very set of keys that ‘mysteriously’ went missing after Clay brought over a pack of beer last night as a belated celebration on successfully completing his first legal case and convinced him that it was totally ok to get wasted the evening before a work day. Suffice to say, the astronaut was out like a light back at his place and was most definitely calling in sick today. Himself on the other hand… well, Apollo had a feeling if he so much as thought of playing hooky, he’d be fired before Kristoph’s plane touched down on Munich soil.

And that was why he was running in the exact opposite direction of the office and towards the residence of a certain ex-poker playing rentboy. He hadn’t seen Phoenix since the conclusion of Daryan’s trial and quite frankly, he could never give himself reason to. Although he promised to help the ex-lawyer solve that 7-year long mystery and clear his name, Apollo kept himself distracted with minute tasks which warranted little to no meaningful accomplishment than simply killing time and providing the illusion that he was actually doing something important to add value to his pathetic existence. Alright, perhaps that was a bit too dramatic, but how else was a pining admirer of seven years supposed to feel after his idol’s blatant rejection? He would have considered Phoenix cold, ruthless, manipulative and fickle; but he only had himself to blame for agreeing to a relationship that he knew was doomed to fail.

Nevertheless, it didn’t change the fact that Phoenix was the only person who probably owned a spare key, so personal feelings be damned, he was going to have to face the bastard, look him in the eye and…

“Blargh!”

Apollo tripped and crashed face first into a pile of withered cherry blossoms. Immediately, he picked himself up, spat out a mouthful of the infernal pink petals, and tried his best to salvage as much as he had left of his dignity. Geez, as if he wasn’t already having a bad enough day as it was…

Suddenly, someone giggled, and Apollo looked up just as a familiar face leaned in intimately close, they could have kissed. Sapphire eyes narrowed into a flirtatious smile in acknowledgement of their prey; lips – slightly parted from speech – glossy and as pink as the blossoms overhead. A fair hand reached out to gently pluck a cherry blossom caught between the brunette’s twin hair spikes. The man flicked his wrist and let the pale bloom fall to join the others now scattered messily about the ground.

“What's the rush, lawyer-boy?” said a voice and Apollo felt hot breath caress his ear. “Do I at least get a good morning kiss?”
Another teasing laugh and he blushed at the man’s forwardness and their proximity. There was no mistaking that jet black spiky hair and flirtatious drawl of a practiced tongue. *Just the guy I wanted to see,* he thought ironically with a creeping sense of dread – or was it nervousness? There was definitely that sinking feeling in his chest normally accompanied by dread, but then there was also that light flutter in his stomach when he gazed at his idol’s face; those laughing eyes; that delicate smile; and Apollo knew he was gone the moment Phoenix’s hand touched his.

*Mr. Wright…*

Feelings he had tried so desperately to suppress came rushing back. Apollo couldn't take his eyes off him: Phoenix carried himself differently somehow; more poised and delicate, serene and reserved, no longer burdened by shadows of grief, his bitterness quelled under the forgiving May glow. His movements were graceful, and his dressing seemed to have changed to match his disposition: Phoenix was well groomed, his usual stubble gone as was the old beanie that kept his hair concealed; his eyes seemed brighter, bestowing his face a more youthful, supple glow; a traditional Japanese hair accessory was pinned to a lock of hair; and he wore a simple yet elegant sky blue *yukata.* Lovely – there was no other way to describe how Phoenix looked. He was still very much male, but the effeminate garbs provided a tasteful balance; a pretty boy in pretty clothing. It made Apollo forget the crux of his affliction if only for a fleeting moment.

“Kid, you alright? I was only joking about that kiss,” Phoenix said worriedly, waving a hand in front of the brunette’s eyes. “Apollo? Apollo?”

“Um, uh…” He quickly shook his head to clear some *distracting* thoughts as well as the blush off his face. “I-I’m fine! Uh…” His eyes darted about distractedly and landed on the broom grasped in Phoenix’s hands. “What’re you doing?”

He could have smacked himself. *Rude.* Way to sound totally accusatory when *he* was the one who had bumped into Phoenix in the first place. Thankfully, only mild surprise registered across Phoenix’s face and he brushed Apollo’s brusque manners aside with a carefree smile.

“Oh, this?” He indicated at the broom in his hands and the pile of cherry blossoms at his feet. “Just tending to the estate garden. With The Gavinners’ concert over, I’m out of the job. So, I’ll be helping the Kitakis until their old caretaker comes back.”

Apollo raised a curious brow. “More odd jobs?”

“Yes. Though I wouldn't exactly consider this a job… more like a favor between us neighbors.”

Phoenix’s eyes trailed distractedly to the side and Apollo followed his gaze, only for his own eyes to widen in shock at the estate’s stunning oriental landscape and outlandish decor. It amazed him how he hadn't noticed the place until now; the Kitaki residence really stuck out like a rose in winter: high walls topped with grey sloping tiles surrounded the extravagant compound like a fortress reminiscent of the old Japanese tradition; beautifully tended bonsai lined the estate; and the main gate towered intimidatingly over any passerby, its grand *torii* erected out of solid wood cast a deep, long shadow across the otherwise plain sidewalk. A single wooden signboard with the word 'KITAKI' etched on it in bold letters, hung over the arch; and on either side of the gate’s mainframe, a pair of paper lanterns with a fox’s head printed on their front, greeted their guests with playful coquetry. Granted, the wooden doors were left only slightly ajar, but over Phoenix’s shoulder, Apollo could make out the beautiful garden which lay within, with its forest of pink cherry blossom trees and elegant zen landscape – and that was only the front garden. He could only imagine how the main house looked like, how obnoxiously huge the whole estate was and how far it stretched. The *Kitaki* house was like a world of its own: an exotic eutopia, a home out of its time.
“How exactly are you guys neighbors again?”

“We, uh, live across the street from each other?” replied Phoenix in a manner that implied he was unconvinced himself.

_No, you live around the street corner. In a single unit in a low rise building. Approximately 8 minutes away. No where near,_ was what Apollo wanted to retort, but instead deadpanned with a, “Sure.”

“What about Prosecutor Gavin?” he continued.

“No shows, no dresser,” Phoenix replied with a shrug. “Though working for ex-gangsters isn't actually as bad as everyone thinks.”

“Wait— WHAT?” Apollo almost had a cardiac arrest. “You're working for the _yakuza_ ?!”

“Ex -gangsters,” Phoenix stressed, inwardly annoyed by both Apollo and Kristoph’s misconceptions. “They've turned over a new leaf some years back. Mr. Kitaki started a bakery and the family’s thinking of expanding into a cafe.”

“So what you're saying is, our local pastries are being produced by the head of the _biggest crime syndicate_ of this country?!”

“Oh sure, everything sounds awful when you say it like _that_.”

Apollo facepalmed and resisted yelling at the oblivious man. Instead, he collected himself and decided to give Phoenix and his judgment the benefit of the doubt.

“How long will you be working here?” he casually changed the subject.

“About a month or so,” Phoenix replied with a carefree smile. “I'm just helping Mrs. Kitaki manage the estate; perform some chores here and there; babysit the kid.”

Apollo perked up in attention. “Kid? You mean like change its diapers, feed it and stuff?”

Phoenix laughed but even Apollo could tell it was forced. “Heh, right… if your kid isn't a hormonal, gun-crazed teenager bent on converting the family to the old ways _and_ attempts to elope with his girlfriend at least 4-5 times a week.” He folded his arms, an annoyed scowl across his face as he added as an afterthought, “Thank god Trucy turned out normal.”

Apollo was tempted to point out that in no way was Trucy normal – not by regular standards – but figured aspiring magicians were a lot less harmful than aspiring gangsters. Aspiring gangsters with a lot of cash and social influence. However, before he could get another word out, a brash, obnoxious voice punctuated with an obvious devil-may-care attitude and unmistakable Japanese accent, sliced through their conversation like a blade through ricepaper. And what rattled Apollo’s composure more, was that the speaker was clear _across_ the entire compound. Boy, could they give his Chords of Steel a run for its money.

“Yo, O.G! I'm not paying ya ta chitchat all summer! Wrap up and head in, mom wants ta talk ta ya!”

“Your _mom’s_ the one paying,” Phoenix hollered back with surprisingly good humor. “And use that tone of voice with me again, Wocky, and I'll clean out the weapons room!”

“Yer whack, old man! Ain't nobody touches my babies!”
“I have the master key!”

“Che! Yer cramping my style…”

The voice faded, it's owner no doubt sulking away, defeated. Meanwhile, Apollo couldn't help but raise his eyebrows perplexingly throughout the entire exchange. Was that Wocky Kitaki? Only son and child of the notorious yakuza head, Winfred Kitaki? He never saw how the kid looked like, but he already got the impression the boy was more than a handful – and he had his own weapons vault? No matter how Apollo thought about it, this arrangement sounded insane. A poker player was one thing; a dresser seemed harmless enough; but a temporary caretaker-cum-attendant of a yakuza estate? Just what exactly had Phoenix signed up for?!

“Does he always… talk like that?” Apollo broke the awkward silence.

Phoenix sighed, “You get used to it.” Then he turned around fully to face his companion, a sudden demure disposition overtaking him. “I should go. It was nice catching up. I… I really missed you.”

The sight of Phoenix’s embarrassment caused Apollo to blush as well. The latter stuttered and cleared his throat in a bid to appear unmoved.

“Actually sir, since you're here, I need a favor,” he decided to cut to the chase. “The thing is, I, uh, misplaced my office keys and I was wondering if you'd happen to own a spare set?” All he received was a low chuckle as his answer, much to his mortification.

“Oh dear, Kristoph isn't going to be too pleased if he hears about this,” Phoenix commented, biting on his lower lip to stifle a giggle. But he took pity on the brunette and set his broom aside. “Unfortunately, I don't have one. Kristoph would never entrust me with something so important.”

His eyes twinkled mysteriously under the morning light. “But I do have this–”

And with a grand flourish, he retrieved an innocent playing card from within his yukata sleeve. Apollo eyed the insignificant prop with a dubious frown.

“The ace of spades? How’s that going to help me?”

Phoenix tsked, teasingly wagging a finger in front of Apollo’s eyes. “So serious,” he mocked, his tongue darting out to playfully lick his lips. “Let me open your eyes to the truth that you fail to see.”

“That sounds like a corny pickup line.”

“Shush.”

In a series of fluid, graceful movements of a practiced dealer, Phoenix skillfully turned the card between his fingers then flicked his wrist, and faster than the eye could blink, the ace of spades disappeared to be replaced by the very set of keys Apollo had been so desperately searching for all morning. With a proud smirk, Phoenix turned his wrist. Apollo quickly stumbled forward to catch the keys before they hit the ground, speechless.

“What the– how?”

“You pick up a few tricks when you've made a career out of poker and have a daughter who's a magician,” Phoenix answered before disrespecting all personal boundaries when he leaned in to whisper sensually into Apollo’s ear. “Silly lawyer-boy, they were in your front pocket the whole time…” His fingers dipped playfully past the hem of the brunette’s vest pocket and Apollo blushed, not out of embarrassment from his own carelessness, but from the excitement of Phoenix’s intimate touch.
As if sensing the lawyer’s willingness (Apollo didn’t seem anywhere close to resisting his advances), Phoenix’s eyes darkened in lust and he placed his hands gently against Apollo’s firm and broad chest, not quite demanding, but enough to feel the slight ripple of muscle beneath the fabric as the younger breathed. Apollo gulped and Phoenix found his gaze honing in on that adorable adam’s apple bobbing nervously in the kid’s throat. The temptation to duck his head and give it a quick lick proved increasingly satisfying. Just the thought of engaging in any form of foreplay in public with Apollo sent a shiver of pleasure down his spine. He enjoyed pushing the kid’s buttons, wanted to see how far he could take him before that fire he adored ignited in Apollo’s eyes once again. There was just something addictive about the kid’s passionate sincerity, his stumbling and fumbling, and most of all, his courageous heart. Phoenix had never known anyone as pure as him; and perhaps, he harbored a perverse glee in slowly tainting that naivety and watching it sin for him. He knew he owned Apollo’s heart – that right would never be contested – but in some twisted way, didn’t the kid also own his? There were things Apollo made him do, things like pushing the limits to his own infidelity: what would Kristoph say if he knew he was initiating affair with his employee/understudy? Was his repugnant personal opinion on himself simply an excuse to justify his immoral actions? Did guilt mean nothing to him? But the moment he felt Apollo’s hands snake possessively around his waist, he stopped thinking.

“Mr. Wright,” Apollo whispered, feeling himself lose to his own inhibitions. Phoenix felt so soft, so small and wonderful under his fingers. Their lips were so close, they breathed each other’s air.

“I-Listen, let’s both do ourselves a favor and… stop this… before… we…”

A blinding glint caught his eye and Apollo stumbled back before he could claim Phoenix’s plump lips in a kiss. He swore beneath his breath, but his irritation died down as soon as his gaze dropped to the source of their unfavorable interruption. There, nestled snugly and a little too perfectly around Phoenix’s left ring finger, was an elegantly set blood-red diamond on a delicate silver band. Apollo had no idea how he had missed that at first, but now as it sparkled and gleamed obnoxiously under the sunlight, he kind of wished he never noticed it forever.

“What’s that?” he said in an empty whisper, already knowing the answer before Phoenix could speak.

Said man instinctively covered the ring with his free hand, almost as if he was embarrassed – not by its discovery, but for getting caught.

“Um… it’s… a gift. F-From Kristoph,” Phoenix dropped his gaze nervously and fretted with his fingers.

“Mr. Gavin spontaneously buys red diamond rings as gifts,” Apollo retorted with a little more bite than he intended. Clearly, he wasn’t convinced with his boss’ generosity and Phoenix’s pathetic coverup.

The ex-lawyer bit his lip and mentally admonished himself. Why not just tell the truth? It was a simple task: tell the kid he’s engaged to Kristoph and this was the ring to prove it. Unfortunately, Phoenix couldn't bring himself to be completely honest. It was complicated; at least he didn't think it was four days ago when he accepted Kristoph’s proposal, but now with Apollo standing here as a physical reminder of his inconsistent heart, Phoenix felt his dilemma grow. Why was the kid making this so hard?

“H-He gave it to me…”

“When?”
“The night you won the case,” he answered quickly, lamely, suddenly realizing the irony of it all. “Kristoph had it all planned. We’re… engaged.”

Apollo’s shoulders sagged. *So that's why Mr. Gavin wanted to see him so urgently after the trial.*

“You said yes.”

It was more of a final statement than a question. Phoenix bowed his head.

“Yes.”

He didn't understand; he was so confused. He loved Kristoph, didn't he? He was *sure* he did. Apollo was only a fling; a means to an end. Then what was this dark, sinking feeling in his chest? Why did his heart feel so choked up that it hurt to breathe? Why did he feel so immeasurably guilty?

The silence stretched on between them. Not even the kind rustling of the wind through their hair brought them any comfort. The cold finality of Phoenix’s statement caused a rift in their relationship, and the older felt the gap widen the longer they conversed in silence. Apollo seemed to have retreated somewhere deep within himself – somewhere so dark and impenetrable that Phoenix himself could not reach him. And just when he decided to take it all back, Apollo stopped him in a voice as cold and unforgiving as ice.

“You don't have to say anything,” he said and turned his back to Phoenix. “I got to go.”

The distance grew between them with every step Apollo took. With sad, helpless eyes, Phoenix watched him go, burdened by his conscience; the diamond ring weighing heavily on him like his slowly breaking heart. He felt so trapped.

*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

They always say marriage gives people second thoughts ;)

Anyway, things will progress a little slow at first, until the first turning point (you'll know when it happens). Right now, I'll be focusing on developing the Kitaki's background, as well as how the Wrights fit into the picture. As you can already see, I've tweaked a few things from the original "Turnabout Street Corner".

Thanks for reading!
Turnabout Corner – Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

A big, heartfelt thanks to those who have left such encouraging comments in the previous chapter! You guys have given me the confidence to continue this story as planned and take a bold step into the crux of this AU’s plot. HoC wouldn’t be where it is or how it is now without everyone of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phoenix walked through the silent compound; maneuvered snaking corridors and hidden passageways with expert ease, one would hardly believe him to be a guest. Armed with nothing but a paper lantern and a switchblade he kept inside his *yukata* for self-defense purposes, he fulfilled his rounds for the night as per agreement. Twice a week, every week, for one month, he would patrol the main and guest houses and spend those nights over at the Kitaki’s – that was the deal, and he made the necessary arrangements with Klavier to look after Trucy on those nights. Considering the family had been influential gangsters in their time and still had *some* ties with the *yakuza*, the Kitakis had a lot of enemies. Phoenix was just thankful that the guard handled the outer premises; the traditional Japanese estate at night was downright creepy.

It was 11.30 p.m. and he had just emerged from the main house stairway when a loud crash and muffled scream jolted him from his thoughts. Heart pumping and senses raised, Phoenix dashed down the dimly lit hallway and made a sharp right round the corner, before he was sprinting off again up another flight of stairs. Then, he reached a three-way cross junction and paused, contemplating his next move. Wocky’s bedroom, the master room, or Winfred’s study.

Another crash, followed by even more screaming. His ears perked.

*Neither.*

Phoenix felt along the walls for a hidden panel and slid open the *fusurama* that led to Plum’s secret writing room. Softly, he padded along the narrow corridor on sock-clad feet – and stopped. In front, he could make out a pair of arguing silhouettes on the other side of the *shoji*. But just as he touched the panel to slide it open, the thin, deadly blade of a *katana* sliced through the rice paper, narrowly missing his ear – and just as swiftly, it retreated back into the room, its owner no doubt changing their target. Phoenix stood there, miraculously unfazed. If it had been him seven years ago, he would have fainted from shock. Meanwhile, the pair in the room continued their heated exchange.

*“Fear and violence isn’t power! Respect is!”*

*“Woman, fear gets you respect!”*

On normal circumstances, something like a sword through a wall would warrant a great deal of concern and attention from the police; but these were the Kitakis and the use of weapons weren't uncommon in settling disagreements. Even family ones.

As Phoenix deliberated making his presence known, the *shoji* slid open with a swift and violent ‘bang!’ A sour-faced teen in a pink-and-gold jacket and two-tone hair styled like a fox, emerged from the room. There was a sluggishness to his posture; his hands were stuffed into his deep pockets;
shoulders squared; and had a permanent scowl on his lips as if he had a personal vendetta against the
world. Wocky Kitaki resembled a ticking time bomb set to go off a second time: emotionally
unstable, livid and positively murderous. Phoenix noticed he had a gun sticking out of his jeans
pocket and kept a special eye on that hand over said gun just in case somebody decided to get all
trigger-happy.

“Bah! Ya call yerselves gangsters? You’n ‘Big Wins’ got nothing on me – I’m blowing this joint!”

He stopped when he noticed Phoenix staring at him. A flurry of complicated emotions swam through
his eyes – shock, anxiousness, embarrassment – before his face settled on anger.

“Whatchu lookin’ at, O.G?” he spat, then roughly brushed past a stunned Phoenix. The latter
watched the boy storm off with silence as his only comment. At the same time, another head popped
out of the room to yell after the presumptuous youth.

“Fine! Go ahead and leave, you ungrateful brat! Don’t come looking for us when you and your
girlfriend go broke!” And with a final scoff, the figure retreated into the room to simmer in silence.

Phoenix gave it a few seconds, before he approached the entrance and gave the open door a light,
courteous rap.

“Plum?” he inquired in a manner that indicated both curiosity and concern. A soft, “come in”
answered and he dared to raise his gaze to the mistress of the house.

Plum Kitaki was a large, voluptuous woman of strong character, with the ferocity and resilience as
expected of any gangster’s wife. The elegant black kimono she donned trailed behind her like a
shadow as she walked; her large, elaborately styled hair was filled with gigantic gold ornaments each
artfully placed, reminiscent of the Oiran traditions of old. She blew out a thin, snaking tendril of
smoke from a long brass pipe grasped loosely in her right hand, while a katana hung a little too
naturally from her left hand. Phoenix took a moment to observe her poise and dignity. Although age
and decadence had caught up with her, there was no doubt Plum Kitaki had been a proud beauty
during her prime.

He gauged her temperament and deliberated if it was appropriate to speak. The Kitaki mistress was a
friend, but she was still an unpredictable force to be reckoned with.

“Are you alright?”

For a second, the woman said nothing, didn’t even budge from her spot. Then, she sheathed her
katana and set it aside with a weary sigh. “Come here, Phoenix."

She lowered herself gracefully onto her knees behind her writing desk and picked up a brush.
Phoenix approached her and settled himself on the tatami before her. Silently, he watched the skilled
strokes of her calligraphy on parchment – an attempt at normalcy after a brutal disruption to an
evening of calm. Plum was fond of Japanese poetry and her work decorated the walls of both the
main and guest houses. Whether they were quality literature however, Phoenix had no idea.

“It’s Wocky again, isn’t it? He wants to leave Kitaki estate,” he broke the tense silence.

Plum set her brush down and rubbed her forehead tiredly. “I don’t know what to do with him,
Phoenix,” she paused to stare at their family portrait on the wall opposite, troubled. “Ever since that
girl came into his life, all he’s been asking for is money. This is the 5th time he’s demanded for his
inheritance. I just don’t understand it!” Tears welled up in her eyes. “Are we so terrible as parents
that he’d want to leave so badly?”
Phoenix chose not to address that last question. As much as he sympathised with Winfred and Plum, he could not speak for Wockey and it would not be fair to the boy. Now he understood the drawbacks of a neutral position.

“You know Wockey’s more talk than walk,” Phoenix consoled with a little laugh. ‘He’s probably going to stay at Alita’s house again. He’d be back in the morning demanding pancakes.”

But Plum didn’t share his amusement.

“Don’t you ever mention that wench’s name in my presence again!” She gripped her pipe so hard it threatened to break under her fingers. “Just because that presumptuous, insipid nurse is dating my son, it doesn’t make her part of the family!”

“But he’s serious about this girl,” Phoenix interrupted boldly. “And like it or not, you need to address this issue instead of pretending it doesn’t exist.” Plum flinched at his criticism and he softened his tone, “Wockey’s growing up, Plum. I know you disapprove of Miss Tiala, but maybe it’s time you started to trust his choices and learn to let go.”

She sucked on her pipe irritably and exhaled a long trail of smoke.

“Humph, that doesn’t give him the right to disrespect his parents,” she returned with a bitter scoff. “Besides, all my husband and I’ve ever done was raise him and give him everything he’s ever wanted. Exotic foods, branded clothes and shoes, expensive toys, extravagant holidays – you name it. Everything we’ve done, all the sacrifices we’ve made, we did it for him – and that useless brat can’t even support his father in the family business! All he cares about are guns, gangs and looking cool.”

“Wockey’s disappointed–”

“He doesn’t understand!” she snapped and Phoenix had to mentally count to 10 to keep his own anger and frustration in check.

“Neither do you, Plum,” he said in a calm, even voice that would have gotten his throat slit if he wasn’t on good terms with the woman. “Try to put yourself in Wockey’s shoes and walk around for a bit, no matter how simplistic and naive you believe his world to be. It’s not about being ‘cool’ or teenage rebellion or even Alita. Wooky is hurt, disappointed, betrayed, confused – and he’s channeling this complex ball of emotions into anger and resentment.”

Plum frowned at his words, amazed and skeptical, trying her hardest to understand. “Betrayed?” she said to herself in a small voice that she barely recognized, “Why would he feel that way?”

“Why would a boy despise his own father?” Phoenix answered her question with a question of his own. “As a gangster, your husband made the Kitaki name into something and Wooky looked up to him. He had his way with everything because of that name; he could be anyone and do anything because he’s a Kitaki. But now with the old ways abandoned, the name means nothing and he’s ashamed, disillusioned and mad over a lost legacy. Wockey is a romantic and he probably romanticized the gangster life,” Phoenix chuckled and shot Plum a wry smirk. “And let’s admit it: being a son of a baker is hardly as exciting.”

She smirked at that, but quickly caught herself when she remembered whose side she was supposed to be on. It didn't change the fact that Phoenix made perfect sense though, and she felt both humbled and ashamed that an outsider seemed to understand her own son better than either her or her husband ever could. Phoenix Wright. With a thoughtful hum, she dipped her brush onto the ink pad and resumed writing.
“Do you ever think back to how we first met?”

Her question startled Phoenix, but he suppressed his suspicions in favor of his curiosity.

“It was about 6 years ago,” he replied. “Sometime after I started playing poker and – he hesitated – gained some clients.”

Thankfully, Plum wasn't one to judge. She didn't have the right to.

“We were still gangsters. Wocky was 13 years old,” she picked up after him, before her face turned black. “And he got kidnapped by a rival gang to threaten my husband’s position.”

Phoenix recalled that period with a troubled frown: ominous telephone calls; endless ransom notes demanding more than just the Kitaki fortune; sleepless nights; and an overwhelming cloud of helplessness. Wocky’s life hung by a thread and the command of a single man. No one in the family was in any position to help. Going to the police wasn't an option – the whole matter had illegal dealings to begin with. The Kitakis were alone in a foreign land, feared by citizens who preferred to stay out of the affairs of gangsters, and circumvented by the classic conventions of their own trade. They had no one else to turn to. Those were dark days for the Kitakis.

“But then, you came along,” Plum went on with a fond smile, “you gave us hope; you helped us when nobody else would. And you did our family a great deal, Phoenix.”

Said man cleared his throat with an awkward cough, cheeks pink, unused to such affection. “I just happened to know the guy responsible, that's all. He was my highest paying client… and there were photos in his phone.” Phoenix shrugged nonchalantly. “He was easy and I knew all the right buttons.”

Plum chuckled darkly, “Indeed. But didn't it bother you what we were going to do to him and his gang when you gave us that information?”

“What you chose to do, doesn't concern me. I try to keep all personal involvement to a minimum – it helps me sleep better at night,” he replied evasively.

She chuckled in a manner that indicated she didn't believe him one bit. “Humph, you say that, but let's not forget last year when you and your daughter came by to visit and care for Wocky after that bullet incident. It really… touched Winfred and I. Wocky might not have expressed himself very well, but he really appreciated it.”

Phoenix smirked. “What, did you expect us to forget about you guys? I don't care for your ways, but Trucy and I aren't heartless.”

Plum tossed her head with an obnoxious laugh. “You Wrights really are odd.” A thought suddenly occurred to her and she shook her head with a wistful smile. “Pity Wocky fell for that Tiala girl though. I was hoping he'd take an interest in Trucy instead; the two of them have such adorable chemistry.”

Phoenix laughed along, albeit nervously. He wasn't so sure how he felt about the idea of his daughter dating the son of a gangster. He also didn't know what disturbed him more: that Trucy could’ve had her first boyfriend at 14, or that Plum secretly paired their children together. Perhaps it was fortunate how things turned out in the end.

“Anyway, none of this solves the mystery that's been plaguing me for 6 years,” she returned to the subject at hand as she chewed thoughtfully on the mouthpiece of her pipe; then took it out to wag it at Phoenix’s face. “Why did you go out of your way to help a bunch of gangsters, when there was
nothing in it for you?”

A ghost of a smile graced Phoenix’s lips at her honest question.

“Because I didn’t see a bunch of gangsters,” he answered, gaze sentimental as he spoke from the heart. “What I saw was a grieving couple, worried and desperate for their child to come home.”

His words touched something deep within her. Plum felt tears gather in her eyes, but bowed her head to conceal any sign of weakness. Phoenix was a friend, she knew, but she still had her pride and she had vowed to keep her tears to herself when she married into the Kitaki family all those years ago.

“You really are strange, Phoenix”, she whispered as her hand reached out to give the back of his palm a light pat. “A Kitaki never forgets. You have our thanks.”

They sat around in comfortable silence, with Plum returning to her work and Phoenix simply content to watch her. Although the Kitaki mistress was most definitely not a woman of few words, she could be tacit in her needs and he recognized this to be one of the few nights she wanted company. And considering the strained three-way relationship between herself, Wocky and her husband, Phoenix figured she just needed someone who cared enough to listen.

When it was well past 1 a.m., Plum kept her things and politely excused herself – but not without seeing her companion to the door. As they lingered there, Phoenix asked if she needed an escort to her bedroom; she declined and said the writing room had a hidden passage that led straight inside. She thanked him for his time; he insisted it was no trouble at all. And somehow, they ended up talking about the Wocky issue again.

“Have you tried getting Winfred to talk to him?” asked Phoenix.

Plum had to resist a derisive snort. “You and I both know they're not on good terms with each other,” she said, before sudden inspiration struck her like a lightning bolt. “You know, Phoenix… Wocky doesn't have many friends. And you're a sort of quasi-father figure to him...”

Phoenix mentally facepalmed. He had a bad feeling about this…

“Maybe you could talk to Wocky.”

And by maybe, she meant ‘I'm not giving you a choice’.

“Plum, I...”

“Please, Phoenix,” she gripped the edge of the *shoji* urgently, “talk to him. He listens to you.”

And with a final goodnight, she slid the door shut in Phoenix’s face. For a moment, the ex-lawyer stood there, stunned over the night’s unexpected proceedings. It was only after Plum blew out the candle on the other side and plunged the room into total darkness, did Phoenix turn to walk away with a sarcastic murmur, “Humph, sure he does.”

‘Kristoph had it all planned. We’re… engaged.’
Apollo threw his pen across the room and it hit the wall with a loud ‘snap!’ It rolled under the bed somewhere, but he didn’t care to retrieve it; the work on his desk abandoned; too caught up in his rage and bitter stupor. Outside, the moon hung high above the clouds, its light streaming through the open window, illuminating his form and pooling at his feet. It was just like that night before he met Phoenix; when he was still obsessing over a man whom he didn’t know (but believed) was still alive; when his bedroom walls used to be covered with posters of said Turnabout King. They had been hurriedly removed and stored away though, and there were still remnants of blutack on the paint, almost as if the posters had been ripped off in an act of blind fury and heartache… Well, considering the devastation caused by the news of Phoenix’s engagement, it wasn’t that far off from the truth.

Apollo laid his head on his papers with a shallow groan. ‘Get over yourself,’ his inner voice admonished with a spiteful bark, ‘you knew there was no place for you in his heart. You knew it. What were you expecting, a fucking happily ever after?’ But even that tight slap wasn’t enough to kill the pain – in fact, it made his self-loathing worse. God help him if he still masturbated to his idol – even more so after seeing him in that gorgeous yukata – only for his desire to extinguish at the memory of that cold cut diamond ring. He had tried to turn his rejection into hate, but the more he thought about Phoenix, the more he remembered his kind smiles and thrilling laughter, the less he could let go and the deeper he fell.

“As of 12 May 2026, under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, Daryan Crescend has been acquitted of all charges…”

It was no use. He had been reading the same shit over and over again for the past 15 minutes and still nothing registered in both his head and laptop screen. So much for editing those reports by Tuesday; it was Wednesday now and Kristoph would be arriving in Germany any moment. He could already hear the lecture he'd surely be getting from his boss for his tardiness.

“... solitary confinement. Borginia to review transportation and execution date in the next two months.”

Lamiroir’s status made him pause. As much as he didn't regret his choice, there was still something pitiful about the woman’s fate. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but the more he went over the trial log, that nagging feeling of suspicion increased. It was like staring at a completed jigsaw puzzle with a defected piece; the corners matched and the colour looked about right, but it left a tiny gap and didn’t quite snap into place so easily, even though it sort of fit. If Apollo had to be honest, that trial was a huge mess, a patchwork of close shaves and non-stop distractions; but Lamiroir had the switch, so it had to be her. And what was it that Phoenix had wanted to tell him back in court again? Something about Lamiroir?

‘Maybe I'm overthinking things,’ Apollo thought with a tired sigh and buried his face in his arms. But it didn't change the fact that Lamiroir’s motherly touch left a lasting impression on his skin.

‘Maybe... I'm losing my focus.’

Despondently, he glanced down at his planner. It was open to last April and the relentless scrawl of his handwriting gazed at him mockingly. Three weeks ago seemed so far away, he barely recognized anything: directions to the Borsch Bowl Club in bullet point; Olga Orly’s profile; a general breakdown of the current legal system; a list of suspects related to the old forgery case; a memo to look into Klavier Gavin’s background; a memo to follow up on that key to Kristoph’s personal office drawer – ‘Mr. Wright’s contact’ it read next to it. Apollo stared blankly at the latter; both actions had been unfulfilled and left hanging for some time thanks to Machi Tobaye's murder, and judging by their current predicament, Apollo wondered if they would ever see a conclusion.

He couldn't bring himself to face Phoenix, not even hypothetically. The ex-lawyer was like a drug he
was trying desperately to wane off, only for the need to rise the longer he abstained from it. One
taste, one touch had been enough to get him thoroughly hooked – and he wondered if it had been a
mistake when he agreed to help the man clear his name that night at the club. Even now, Apollo had
his doubts. Not only did the task seem daunting and near impossible (considering 7 years had passed
without any breakthrough), he also had to confront certain feelings he rather not deal with, especially
at this point. It wasn’t simply Phoenix’s rejection that crippled him; it was the cruel act of making him
fall in love and then taking it all away.

A sudden ‘ping’ interrupted his thoughts and he glanced down at his cell phone. 1 new message. He
managed a fond smile. Only one idiot would have the brains (or arguably lack thereof) to text him
this late.

‘Hey, we still on tomorrow?’

Apollo’s face immediately turned black at its implications and he replied with a single, ‘No.’

The response was swift.

‘What? Why?! I thought you wanted to go down to the prosecutor’s office to get access to the old
Gramarye case evidence? Something about the head guy being Wright’s old friend?’

‘I know what I said. I’m sorry.’

‘But you promised Wright!’

‘No, Clay. I’m done.’

And not bothering to wait for a reply, he switched off his phone and dispassionately tossed it aside.
Then, he tugged off his T-shirt and threw himself onto the bed in nothing but his boxers to wallow in
his self-pity. The last thing he needed was to entertain thoughts of Phoenix Wright.

Apollo shifted on the bedspread to get comfortable, only to wince when he felt something sharp
prick his skin. Annoyed, he stuck a hand under his neck and pulled out… a Joker card? He turned it
over between his fingers; there were tiny creases on its surface from wear; definitely well-seasoned.

‘Do you know what’s the Joker’s role in poker?’

Phoenix’s voice played in his head and he had to shake it to silence that beckoning murmur. But the
sight of the red playing card roused memories that filled him with sentimental affection and
inescapable sadness. Why did he have to go and fall in love with a man who still didn’t know he
existed, and probably never will.

‘Well, in some games, it has no role or function at all – it does nothing; changes nothing; doesn’t
exist; it's as good as useless. But... in other games, it's a trump card. It's wild. It has the ability to
change a player's fate, tip the scales in their favor, turn things around.’

Apollo flicked the card into the trash bin and turned the other way.

A Tuesday afternoon saw Trucy Wright turn the keys and push open the door of the Wright
Clad in her school uniform with classes having ended just under an hour ago, she stumbled into the office/living room; hands full of mail, her brand new copy of “Magician’s Monthly” tucked securely under her arm. She had no intention of staying long; it was just a small errand on her part: Phoenix had asked her to collect the week-old post and leave them on the table for him when he got back. Considering Daryan’s trial had taken up a significant amount of time on her daddy’s part, he hadn't the opportunity to carry out simple daily tasks, such as doing the laundry, watering Charlie, checking the mail… which would explain why she was carrying a magazine that was published back in April.

Trucy blew a strand of hair out of her face in irritation. Honestly, why did her daddy have to be so difficult? He was pretty much ‘married’ now and she herself had moved into Gavin manor last week, so why did he insist on staying here, let alone keep this washed up old place?

‘He's too attached,’ she mentally reasoned with a disappointed scowl. The old law office meant a lot to Phoenix, and she herself had spent a good half of her childhood growing up within these four walls; but it was also a painful reminder of those seemingly endless days of darkness, of a legacy lost, and warm, loving faces that would never come back. They haunted her as much as her father’s tears. Trucy’s eyes fell upon the empty spaces that used to house her magic tools and trinkets, knowing they were much happier in her new magic parlor in Kristoph’s estate. She was a Gavin now (almost). It was time to move on.

“Puh! If only daddy would quit being so stubborn,” she muttered with a pout as she sorted through his mail. Then again, it did clarify where she inherited her persistence from.

Bills… promotional flyers – trash those… more bills… a letter – wait. Trucy stared at the harmless yellow envelope with a dubious look of surprise. In all her seven years in this household, no one sent personal letters to her daddy, not even a postcard. Phoenix had lost everything since that one case, burnt all bridges from his past, so who in the world…?

Trucy turned the envelope over in her hands, scrutinizing the crisp yellow paper for clues on its sender, only to feel disappointed and confused over an obvious lack of any. How odd – it wasn't even addressed. How did it end up their mailbox without a return address, let alone a receiver’s one? All it had glued on its front was the name, “phOeniX wRiGhT” with letters from what appeared to be magazine cut-outs. Aesthetics aside, Trucy couldn't help but find it incredibly suspicious: whoever sent this probably didn't want their identity disclosed. It was a modern mystery, a crafty trick, a challenge – and Trucy loved challenges.

She felt around the envelope with her fingertips, pressed and prodded the entire surface area for clues of its hidden contents. It was most definitely a parcel and she could make out little bumps and grooves of the strange item inside. It seemed small, slim yet sturdy… maybe a keychain? Had someone bought her daddy a present? Maybe it was Kristoph and this was one of his many vain attempts at being romantic. But then again, now that she thought about it, that diamond ring was the only thing Kristoph had ever given her daddy throughout their seven years of dating.

Just then, a particular memory flashed through her mind: a girl with long, wavy blue hair slipping something into one of the building’s mailboxes about a week ago; that same mysterious girl from the bus. Could it be? Quickly, Trucy pulled open the desk drawer and retrieved a small glue stick. She set it on the table and proceeded to do the one thing she never thought she would ever do: snoop through her father’s mail. But she had to know: who was this girl? And if the sender really was her, then what was her relation to Phoenix? Were they friends, family? Why hadn't she seen her before?

She pinched the edge of the flap between her fingernails and was just about to peel it back, when someone snatched the envelope out of her hands. The move was so swift, she didn't even realize the
thing was gone until the newcomer started speaking. Or yelling.

“What do you think you're doing?” Olga demanded with a fierce scowl. “That's not yours, and I was waiting downstairs for over 10 minutes! Do you have any idea how much fuel costs these days?!”

Trucy rolled her eyes and blew the blonde dealer a raspberry. “Aw, don't be such a grump, Aunty O… and I was just leaving – ow!” She winced when Olga smacked her on the face with the envelope.

“That's for the ‘aunty’ comment,” Olga said grumpily, before a knowing smirk wormed its way across her lips. “And sure you were... if this little letter didn’t say otherwise.” She turned to study the yellow packet curiously. “What's this anyway?”

“Well, I was going to find out, until somebody interrupted me!”

“And good thing I did too, otherwise daddy dearest might get quite cross with his little girl,” Olga countered, but relaxed her stance and gave the girl a kind yet warning smile. “That's not very nice, Trucy.”

Trucy averted her gaze with an indignant pout. “I was going to reseal it…”

“Right. I'm sure no one would notice the obvious wrinkles along the flap, typically caused by the grip of one having opened said letter before.”

Trucy blushed and bowed her head in defeat. “You're not going to tell daddy, are you?”

“Not if you get your keester out that door in the next 5 seconds,” Olga nudged her with a laugh. “C’mon, I gotta drop you off at your uncle’s office before he thinks I kidnapped you again.”

“Humph, I can take care of myself, thank you very much!”

Olga rolled her eyes. “Yeah well, tell that to goldilocks… Anyway, I'll see you at my hog. Nature calls.”

Trucy giggled an affirmative and skipped out the front door. It was only after Olga heard the lock catch when her carefree smile faded and she quickly ripped open the yellow envelope to peer inside. A shadow of recognition flashed through her chestnut eyes at what she found. As expected, no indication of the sender whatsoever. But that meant this thing had been sitting in the mailbox for over a week! Did anyone else know? She shuddered to think of the barrage of questions and amount of explaining to do if she had entered the house a second later than she did. God help her how inquisitive Wright’s daughter was.

First thing’s first.

She hurriedly stuffed the packet under her vest and grabbed the telephone on the table, fingers moving over the number pad fluidly. She held the receiver at her ear; it rang and she waited. Fortunately, it didn't take long for someone to answer.

“Hi, I'd like to speak with the head of household, please… Olga Orly… Dammit, I'm a friend and it's urgent!”

A maid put her on hold as she transferred her call. Olga rapped her fingers on the receiver impatiently and was relieved when a familiar male voice sounded through mere moments later.

“Wright, it’s here,” she interrupted and patiently awaited his instruction. It didn't take long for the
man to drop the casual act and turn serious.

“No… No, I don't think Trucy knows.”

Relief. He talked some more, updated her on the latest and she listened carefully, albeit with a heavy heart. Horns had abandoned him – somehow that thought made her more disappointed than angry, but life went on she supposed, even if it meant the possibility of their efforts spiraling into a complete flop. But what choice did a depraved man have? How far would desperation drive you when you already had nothing more to lose? Phoenix was a determined man; he begged for her help; and Olga found herself nodding her head despite her better judgment, only to stop when she realized he couldn't actually see her.

“Ok, I'll swing by before my shift.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the pace, but I promise it'll be picking up soon. Thanks for reading! Comments go a long way.
A keyboard clacked noisily in the large office, its user smashing their fingers repeatedly over the keys in what could only be described as pure frustration and indignation against the world. Daryan Crescend played his work keyboard like a wrecking machine at a demolition site; his co-workers stared at him, but they were used to his... dramatic opinions on office property. The IT staff glared disapprovingly at him from their room across, but they knew better than to provoke the young field agent when he was so obviously riled up.

“Item 582-5FAC0 of case SL-9 terminated on scene... insert footnote riiiiigggght... here. Ok, good, next. Refer to video log #720-08... Wait. 08’s the old file and 010’s the – *Fuck! I’ve been typing the wrong shit this whole time?! You stupid, fucking piece of–”

A few keys flew out.

Jesus Christ, why did everything have to be in bloody code? He was tempted to just submit everything to his boss in good old, straight-forward English and be done with it. He was a field agent, not a bloody secretary; and he was pretty sure paperwork was high up in his hate-list right next to bad hair days.

“Come on, D. This report’s not gonna write itself you know,” he tried to motivate himself, but knew he wasn’t getting anywhere when nothing new appeared on the LCD screen after minutes of staring unforgivingly at it.

‘Might as well work on that thing...’

With a loud despairing sigh that sounded closer to a groan, Daryan minimized the document and keyed in his password to access Interpol’s database. On his desk, tucked discretely under his latest mission brief, was an old photograph of Zak Gramarye taken during the renowned Troupe Gramarye days. The general rule of thumb was that people tended to retain their core facial features from cradle to grave, so tracking a middle age man down shouldn't prove too difficult– well, unless they were dead or went through extensive plastic surgery. He could only hope it was neither of the two options; after all, considering how much effort he already put in – the anxiety, ethics and policies he had broken – Gramarye better damn well be alive to justify the risks to his position and job in Interpol. He was only lucky he happened to be tracking down a criminal at this time, so his current activity proved relatively inconspicuous. But only God knew how long he could keep this up before he got caught.

To be honest, he didn't exactly consider himself the right guy, much less in the right state of mind to handle this new errand Kristoph had so graciously dumped on him. Machi Tobaye’s death and the events following after still bothered him on a daily basis, and as much as he tried not to dwell on the
guilt of his flawed moral conscience, he sometimes found himself tormented by the haunted, accusing eyes of Lamiroir that stared back at him in place of his own reflection. But he told himself that he had an important job to do – who else had the necessary resources and experience to track an old illusionist down? He couldn't reunite a young girl with her long lost father if he was busy rotting behind bars now could he? Well, at least that's how he consoled himself when the stress got too much to handle. Kristoph had saved his skin; Nick was a pal; and Trucy was like a little sister who filled the void in his heart caused by Damien’s passing. He was more than happy to help.

“Ok, I'm pretty sure he left this country on April 20 2019 midnight. That looks like him on airport CCTV … 80% facial match – not bad, not bad,” Daryan muttered to himself as he reviewed the camera footage and statistics. Everything else was like clockwork.

“More than a dozens flights. Switching to system mainframe. Dude last seen at gate 21. Could be a transfer. Gotta contact immigration for detai–”

“Looks like someone’s being a professional stalker again, ja?”

“Son of a–”

Daryan punched the power button so hard, he almost broke the computer.

“Dude! Don't fucking do that, man! You almost gave me a heart attack,”’ he yelled and whirled around in his chair to glare at the infuriating grin on the speaker’s cocky face. Inwardly, he worried if he had been found out, if he had switched off the computer screen fast enough from those wandering cerulean eyes. Lucky for him, a certain handsome prosecuting rockstar seemed more interested in him than his work.

“Ich bitte Sie. I couldn't resist,” Klavier said with a wink and casually hoisted himself atop the desk. At Daryan’s expectant stare, he tossed him a set of documents. “Das case files you requested – his eyes trailed knowingly to the screen – though you don't appear to be in a hurry…”

“Damn smuggling report can wait,” Daryan growled, wanting nothing more to do with this case and sweep it under the rug for good. Two people dead and one awaiting execution over a stupid cocoon. It was utterly ridiculous. A guy could only take so much guilt and heartache.

“Ah, a new mission?” Klavier peered inquisitively at the mission brief, but Daryan quickly slammed his palm on the pile and swept it into an open drawer in a bid to obscure the Gramarye case file beneath.

“Uh, yeah. I just got out of the slammer and my boss already wants me back on the filed – crazy, huh?”

If Klavier was surprised by his friend’s odd behavior, he didn't comment on it.

“Hm, sounds tough.”

“Sorta. I guess you could say my hands are tied,” Daryan replied with an uncomfortable smirk, praying hard his friend hadn't noticed the awkward twitch of his lips as he spoke. Thankfully, Klavier had chosen to preoccupy himself by browsing the many awards and commendations on his table.

“Well, paperwork aside, you're the best,” Klavier commented, before his gaze landed on a photo
frame that hadn't been there before. Damien’s picture was inside; the kid was holding up a peace sign and grinning. Klavier's expression melted into a sympathetic one, his tone turning solemn at the sight.

“How’s the family holding up?”

All he got was a broken sigh. “My brother’s dead, Klav, what do you expect? He was the only reason I ever went home,” said Daryan in a pitiful whisper, struggling against the pain. “Damien said I could get closer to dad this way,” he shook his head with a regretful chuckle, “But family relations are worse. They don’t blame me for what's happened, but I know they do.”

“You didn't give into die temptation of das kokon,” Klavier countered passionately. “I'm sure Damien is proud of you.”

“Yeah, well, I can't step into my house without feeling like a thorn in their side. It's… tough.”

Klavier touched Daryan's hand and sought his gaze. “You know you're always welcome in mein haus.”

That offer however, made the latter’s eyes narrow. “Bro, my life sucks, but I'm no charity case.”

“Das habe ich nicht gemeint-”

“Google translate, please.”

The blonde rockstar gritted his teeth in frustration. “I didn't mean it like that. You know I didn't.”

And before Daryan could protest, Klavier wrapped his arms around the younger’s neck and tugged him forward to press their foreheads together. The sudden contact made Daryan’s stomach knot pleasantly and caused his heart to flutter. They held each other’s gaze – soft, warm and intimate.

“Ich möchte nicht, dass du leidest,” Klavier whispered, and Daryan smiled a shy smile, a faint blush on his cheeks. He didn't need a translator for that.

“We’re in public, Klav.”

“So? Let them look.”

Daryan gave a deliberate snort. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He pushed his friend away (not like Klavier had bothered putting up a fight) to casually snack on a box of strawberry pocky. Klavier watched him with a fond smile and noticed the telltale signs of embarrassment – Daryan’s red ears, that adorable frown, how he was trying so hard to distract himself by nibbling on his pocky stick. Daryan was still so shy about them. He decided to cut the guy some slack; after all, there was always time to tease him further over lunch.

There really wasn't much to do at the prosecutor’s office. Crime rates were a comforting low this week with the exception of petty misdemeanors, so Klavier didn't think it any harm to over-extend his lunch break and bother the hell out of his friend. Daryan didn't mind though; he enjoyed hearing Klavier talk – and talk he did. He shared the recent changes in his life, namely the latest two members of his small, dysfunctional family; how he decided to remain in Gavin manor (instead of moving out like he often talked about) because of them; and how it was nice but still felt kind of weird that Phoenix Wright was actually going to be his brother-in-law. He fell increasingly in love with Trucy’s quirks everyday; could sense the changes in his personality because of both father and
daughter’s patience and sincerity; and found relief from Phoenix’s steadfast devotion to Kristoph. His brother needed warmth and affection; Phoenix could heal him.

As Daryan listened to his friend speak with a passion and innocent enthusiasm he hadn’t heard in a long time, it brought an affectionate smile to his face. Ever since Klavier’s mother died, the Gavin brothers found themselves waist deep in a big, scary world that forced them to grow up way too fast. While Kristoph turned cold, calculative and ruthless to handle the changes and added responsibility of supporting his only family member, Klavier hadn’t and that led to his isolation and loneliness. As far as Daryan understood, Klavier had spent most of his life chasing down affection – his brother’s acknowledgment, attention, love and respect from his fans and subordinates – so it was truly heartening to hear that the blonde had finally traded superficial gratification for an authentic reality.

“By the way, where’s that crazy science freak?” Daryan asked over a cup of coffee. It wasn't like Klavier to wander around during the workweek without Ema Skye too far behind. As much as the two annoyed each other, they were still partners and Klavier was practically her boss.

“Out on a case with Valerian,” Klavier replied with an evil grin. “Das ist an interesting one: there's been a rash of robberies lately.”

“Robberies, huh?”

“Ja, panties to be precise.”

Daryan choked on his drink. “P-Panties?!”

“A pervert most likely, one who doesn't discriminate against his targets,” Klavier continued while trying to hide a snicker behind his hand. “Long story short, der chief’s got Fräulein Detective running das case from lack of manpower.”

Daryan smirked. “Bet she's ecstatic.”

“I've seen worse.”

He shook his head and returned his attention to his research with a perturbed sigh, the kind that strongly implied his loss of faith in mankind. He chewed on a pocky stick thoughtfully

“A panty snatcher. Seriously,” he muttered. “The police of this country are pumping resources into nabbing an old lecher. Whatever happened to bank robberies and lost puppies?”

“Achtung, baby! Das ist ernst,” Klavier feigned offense, before his smile twisted into something dark and mischievous as he wrapped his arms around Daryan’s shoulders from behind. The move was forward, aggravatingly confident; and with hot breath teasing a path along Daryan’s ear, he breathed low and sexy, “If I let mein guard down, who's going to protect you and your panties?”

Daryan blushed bright red and sputtered indignantly.

“I don’t wear panties!”

‘Have a great day. I… I love you.’
Goodnight, Phoenix.’

The line went dead and a fair hand reached up to gently replace the phone onto the receiver. The graceful movements were slow, deliberate, filled with disappointment made beautiful from loneliness; the kind that Phoenix had grown far too accustomed to for him to despair. His fiancé has always left him feeling needy, questioning his self-worth and capacity for affection; but now that they were engaged, the distance seemed greater, the touches less frequent, and he felt even lonelier than before. Nevertheless, he sought to remain true; it was just Kristoph’s personality and he had learned to accept the man’s shortcomings as well as the consequence of his personal choice. That’s right, he had chosen Kristoph, no matter how cold the blonde attorney treated him at times. Out of everyone, he knew the Gavin brothers’ backstory best: their loss, the hardships that made them strong, their ambition and thirst for superiority – but still, he wondered if it would kill his fiancé to be a little more… compassionate.

Phoenix dried off his hair with a towel as he made his way to his bedroom in slow, casual steps. It was his second night patrolling the Kitaki compound this week; he had about 30 minutes to himself before 10 p.m., and had phoned Germany like he always did since Kristoph left. It was a fast-growing routine: he would wish his fiancé a good day, the latter would bid him goodnight, and his affections remained sincere as they spilled from his lips without a second thought. Alas, Kristoph always seemed to be in a hurry to hang up, and Phoenix couldn’t help but feel like he was steadily becoming a nuisance in the man’s life.

However, Kristoph’s constant unavailability was only half the problem: he couldn’t stop thinking about Apollo. He knew it was wrong, but the kid’s disappointment and bitterness towards his recent engagement had affected him more than it should. He was promised to Kristoph, something he had hoped for throughout the course of their seven-year-long relationship, but this very fact clashed with the delicate novelty Apollo’s assurance brought him and left him feeling profusely confused. It had hurt to see Apollo walk out on him. It was a pain that ripped through his chest and left him gasping – and he never wanted to experience that excruciating sensation again. He could bear the years of loneliness Kristoph’s (lack of) reciprocity brought, but he could not bear Apollo’s silence. Even now, he had put off his personal investigation in hopes the kid would come running back and things would resume their normalcy. But with every ignored voicemail and Apollo hanging up on him the moment he called (even via office line), Phoenix began to lose hope and acknowledged that he only had himself to blame for selfishly toying with a young man’s heart for far too long.

He stopped in front of his bedroom and slid open the shoji, but the sudden draft made him hesitate and pull his robe tighter against himself. The window was wide open; curtains fluttered in the chilly breeze – but he was extremely sure he shut them before he left for his shower. The room was dark; the dim glow from the main house windows opposite were his only source of light. A burglar? But as far as he could make out, there didn’t appear to be anything out of place. Still, how long had the window been open? And wasn’t this the fourth floor?

Slowly, silently, he eased the door shut behind him and brandished his switch blade. If there really was a break-in, he couldn’t risk the perpetrator escaping to the rest of the guest house, or worse, the main house. He took two cautious steps forward, but a hand suddenly reached out from the darkness and clamped firmly over his mouth from behind. Another wrenched the blade out of his grasp, before twisting his wrist firmly behind his back. The weapon fell to the tatami with a muffled ‘thump’. Phoenix screamed under the hand and fought to free himself, but his struggles ceased as soon as he felt a warm, hard chest press against the curve of his back. Then, he heard the deep, passionate croon of a painfully familiar voice that made his chest tighten in anticipation and blood rush to his cheeks.

“Mr. Wright, it's me. Please don't scream.”
He turned to face his unlikely nighttime visitor just as the man released him and switched on the light. The sudden brightness made Phoenix wince, yet there was no mistaking the handsome boyish profile and signature hairstyle that swam into view. *It really is him,* he thought, too surprised to speak. For the longest time, the two men simply stared at each other, an ambivalent blend of awkward and shy surprise, as if each was equally mesmerized by the presence of the other and the startling fact that they were actually *here* – in the same room, enduring the same frozen moment, infiltrating personal boundaries and confronting unspeakable desires. It was Phoenix who chose to speak first. His eyes darted to the wide open window and nervously licked his lips.

“Y-You climbed in?” he whispered.

“No, I flew,” Apollo returned and the sarcasm in his voice made Phoenix feel stupid.

“You've been ignoring my calls,” he changed the subject.

“Sorry,” Apollo gazed at him apologetically beneath long lashes, “but I wanted to speak to you in person. I… I had to see you!”

The sudden intensity took Phoenix by surprise, but he refused to get his hopes up.

“You shouldn't be here,” he said urgently and shoved the kid towards the open window, looking over his shoulder every now and then in case a servant entered the room. “Quickly. Before someone sees you and–”

“Wait!”

Apollo dug his heels into the ground and used Phoenix’s momentum against him as he spun around and pulled the older man against his chest. Shocked and mortified by his unexpected predicament, Phoenix’s heart raced; his body nestled in the tender warmth of strong arms. As Apollo’s fingers moved to thread lovingly through his damp hair, absently styling the spikes this way and that, Phoenix felt himself relax under the brunette’s touch, all previous resolve and fear crumbling at his feet like sand. With his face pressed snugly against Apollo’s chest, Phoenix could hear the steady beat of the kid’s heart, smell his comforting scent which he missed so much, feel his own cheeks heat up in tentative pleasure. He was like a lost puppy at the end of a leash: if Apollo so much as willed it, he would roll over and bear his stomach to the world.

“I came all this way to see you,” Apollo said in a gentle murmur against his hair, “and I’m not leaving until we sort out this misunderstanding.”

“There's no misunderstanding,” said Phoenix, looking away bitterly. “I've upset you, and you want nothing more to do with me.” He paused to study his reflection from the dresser across; a sad, resentful expression on his face. “It's for the best. I'm a selfish, dishonest whore — I'd tell you anything to get what I want. Don't get involved in my affairs, kid; you're better than this. Forget everything I’ve taught you. Go home.”

“But Mr. Wright, the forgery—”

“Go home.”

“I won't abandon you!” Apollo yelled and Phoenix looked about in panic for other signs of life, but the former didn't care.

Apollo placed his thumb and forefinger beneath Phoenix’s chin and lifted it so he could stare deep
into those big, beautiful blue eyes he adored so much. His free hand released Phoenix’s waist to slowly run up the man’s body and map out his cheek, marveling at the softness and smooth texture. Phoenix shuddered from the intimacy and shut his eyes, leaning into the touch. He had no idea how much he craved this until now and released a blissful sigh. Then, that hand slowly descended to stroke the skin of his left hand, ghosting over long, shapely fingers forged out of years of piano playing, before finally stopping at –

“You're not wearing it,” Apollo observed in slight surprise.

“I couldn't,” replied Phoenix, opening his eyes to look atop his dresser at the diamond ring in question. The red gem glinted mysteriously under the moonlight. “Ever since you found out that day, I couldn't bring myself to wear it… I couldn't stop thinking about you. About that look in your eyes before you turned away. It was… I couldn't just... But I'm supposed to be en-engaged to... Oh, what's wrong with me?”

This conversation was starting to make him feel self-conscious. Phoenix made an attempt towards the dresser, but Apollo’s grip around his wrist remained firm if not more determined to keep him close after that indirect confession. His heart raced. Phoenix was having second thoughts.

“Mr. Wright, I'm sorry if I ever made you feel like I abandoned you,” Apollo said, clenching his jaw at the memory. “It’s just… I was mad. Jealous.”

“Jealous?”

Phoenix watched as Apollo raised his gaze to meet his, held captive by the flames of conflict shining in his auburn eyes. They appeared more red than brown under the dim light, and as Apollo moved to close the space between them, Phoenix felt himself surrender to its hypnotic glow.

“You know you mean everything to me,” Apollo breathed passionately against his lips. “I want to save you.”

Phoenix closed his eyes, knowing very well the next words he would utter would doom them both to an inescapable hell.

“Prove it.”

Hot lips crashed upon his with a searing desperation and Phoenix parted his mouth under the forceful intrusion, a hungry moan escaping the confines of his own throat. Oh God, how he had missed this. It was just like that time in his bedroom at the agency, only better after the weeks of accumulated desire and abstinence. Their tongues battled fiercely, interchanging between stroking and sucking. Saliva dripped hot trails down Phoenix’s chin as he tried desperately to keep up with Apollo’s ministrations, only to fail with each purposeful caress of that skilled muscle and his own resulting moan. The heat made his head spin with desire. There was a thrill to their forbidden midnight rendezvous, a gluttonous act of betrayal against his dearly devoted; yet Phoenix could think of no other save Apollo’s pleasure and his own desperate relief.

Apollo’s hands moved everywhere, dipping past and pushing away fabric, mapping out Phoenix’s body greedily, while swallowing his every gasp and lustful keen. His hands travelled under the other’s bathrobe, touching sacred places forbidden to another man, uncovering all the weak spots. Phoenix swore his knees would have given way if not for the kid’s firm grip around his butcheeks. Apollo squeezed and kneaded the tender flesh. Phoenix jerked and the robe fell past his shoulders, splaying open, the chill of the night air kissing his burning flesh. His head fell back with a throaty moan when he felt Apollo’s lips kiss a trail down his neck to his heaving chest, playfully circling and avoiding his pert nipples that had gone hard from the expert teasing of his tongue and fingers.
Slowly, Apollo lowered him onto the floor without once removing his lips, and the whole time Phoenix watched him, mesmerized and embarrassed; lips trembling; a deep blush on his face at the things the rookie was doing to his body.

“P-Polly, don’t – yah!”

He bit down on his bottom lip the moment Apollo’s teeth clamped around a nipple. The younger bit and rolled it between his teeth and tongue unforgivingly, as he pinched and pulled the other pink nub with an equally pleasing brutality. Apollo focused all his attention and lust on his idol’s beautiful nipples, determined to devour them if he could. They were so pink and perfect, they begged to be ravished. Phoenix choked on his sobs, but the torture went on – the abuse on his sensitive buds and the crude slurping noises of wet lips on swollen flesh filled his ears. Dirty, it made him feel so dirty. But vibrations from Apollo’s moans sent pleasant jolts of electricity through his chest, and – Oh God… too much, it was just too much. His chest felt as though it was going to explode. Amazing. Apollo’s mouth was amazing. All this time, he was conditioned to derive pleasure from Kristoph’s callous manhandling. He never knew pain could actually feel so good...

Suddenly, Apollo twisted his nipples harshly and Phoenix’s mouth fell open in a silent scream as he struggled to keep his cries down. It left him panting and that earned him a cruel chuckle from the brunette.

“You're really sensitive here, aren't you, Mr. Wright?”

Apollo took his time to massage the man’s chest, purposely applying more pressure at the twitching, swollen pink buds. They relaxed under his touch and he gazed at the inverted mounds with rapt fascination. They looked so soft, so inviting. He traced them eagerly with his index fingers.

“Hm, I wonder what happens if I do… this!”

He plunged the tips of his fingers past the rings and Phoenix really did scream as he came from the unexpected penetration of his nipples. With a mocking laugh, Apollo withdrew his fingers, dragging the nipples back out along with them. Phoenix collapsed onto the ground, a quivering mess and bundle of nerves raw from overstimulation. He remained there panting heavily, the front of his robe soaked through with cum, and his weeping cock straining against the white fabric. That last realization made him groan. Oh gods, how was he still hard after all that? This was crazy.

Suddenly, Apollo pressed a finger down on the dripping tip and Phoenix whined pitifully. Despite how over sensitive it was, his cock gave an excited twitch at the demeaning treatment.

“Wow, Mr. Wright, you really are a pervert. I barely did anything.”

Then, Phoenix felt a pair of slick fingers stroke and nudge at his entrance, and before his poor brain could register what was happening, Apollo shoved his fingers past the tight ring and swallowed his idol’s screams with his mouth. He pumped Phoenix’s ass with his fingers, alternating between twisting and scissoring, stretching him out and working a good pace, knuckles deep. He felt Phoenix grow wetter with every thrust as he hit his love’s sweet spot with dead accuracy. Unable to take the pleasure and desperate for release; Phoenix threw his arms around Apollo’s neck, gasping, moaning and begging in-between kisses.

“Not enough… it's not enough… more… want… ungh! More f-fingers… inside… yes, yesssss!”

Wetness pooled at Apollo’s fingers and dribbled down his wrist from Phoenix’s heightening pleasure. It was getting increasingly difficult for him to hold himself back. He gritted his teeth in a bid to restrain himself. But good God, Phoenix’s body responded like a girl’s and the way he moved
Apollo increased his pace, watching in satisfaction as he reduced his idol and old Turnabout King into nothing more than a delirious, wanton slut at his disposal. His slut. His to love and use. His to claim. And with the way those dirty words flowed from Phoenix’s lips like water, it went straight to his groin and turned Apollo on even more.

“You… Inside… want you– ah! Please…”

“Want what inside, Mr. Wright?” Apollo said cruelly, removing his fingers from the inviting wetness and drawing forth a miserable protest from the man beneath him. “A lawyer is always clear in his delivery to prevent misunderstandings. You gotta be more specific than that.”

Phoenix flushed in embarrassment. Was Apollo asking him to…? Did he really want…? Then the rookie suddenly kissed him again, circled his puckered entrance teasingly with a finger, and Phoenix spread his legs wider in submission. Screw it, he was really going to say it. So, swallowing his pride and all inhibitions, he placed his hands between his thighs and spread his asshole with his fingers before Apollo’s greedy gaze.

“In my ass… I want you to put your p-penis inside and f… fuck me in the ass. Please stick your cock in my hole and cum inside. Hurry – I want you to cum inside…”

Phoenix thought he was surely going to die from embarrassment. Apollo meanwhile, simply smirked at his handiwork. He leaned in to place a chaste kiss on the ex-lawyer’s lips.

“Careful, Mr. Wright, or you might alert the household,” he said huskily and gently lowered Phoenix onto the futon. His words however, had an unexpected effect on the latter, whose leaking cock twitched in excitement. Apollo’s eyes shone knowingly, but otherwise said nothing.

“Mm… Polly? Why aren’t you–”

“So impatient,” Apollo chided, shoving two fingers back up Phoenix’s ass and making him keen in bliss. “But I don’t think you’ve earned it yet.”

And without warning, he wrapped his lips around Phoenix’s hardness and engulfed him whole. The dual stimulation was too much. Phoenix’s back arched beautifully off the futon and it took everything in him not to cry out to the heavens and back. Apollo was sucking him off mercilessly; he could feel the kid’s fingers prod and rub at his inner walls with each solid thrust; and between the wet slurping sounds of Apollo’s mouth around his dick and the sucking noises from his own traitorous hole as the kid pumped, Phoenix didn't know which one drove him even more insane with desire. All he knew at this point was that he wanted Apollo – and he would do anything to get him.

“Ah… hah… s-stop–!”

No… Fingers ramming in and out. His juices everywhere. Apollo’s tongue doing sinful things to his cock. He couldn't scream, couldn't think. So good… so good… oh yesssss–! He couldn't stop his hips from twitching, from spilling him precum into the rookie’s mouth in endless rivulets – and still Apollo kept going. Phoenix thought he was going to die from the pleasure. Those fingers increased in their pumping, wetting the sheets beneath him he swore he was cumming from his ass. No-oo… ah, ah – cumming… I’m–! That's when he felt it. His toes curled and his fingers scrambled for purchase in Apollo’s hair.

“P-Polly, stop! Please…”

Confused, said man paused to speak, but his garbled words had the unintended effect of sending
pleasurable vibrations up Phoenix’s cock and making the poor man’s head spin. Realizing his blunder, Apollo released him with an audible ‘pop’.

“What's wrong? I thought you enjoyed it?”

“I do,” Phoenix sobbed helplessly against the fog of desire, his face never so red in his entire life. “But if you keep this up, I’m going to c-cum…”

His words caused Apollo to straighten up so that he was kneeling between Phoenix’s legs. As he languidly caressed the smooth, creamy thighs of his idol, a wide devious smirk snaked its way across his lips.

“Oh, but the night’s still young,” he said in a sexy leer, before leaning back to unzip his fly. His cock sprang out and the cool air against hot flesh made him groan softly in relief.

Phoenix stared at the throbbing organ, mouth agape and paralyzed by its impressive size. Apollo was bigger than he had imagined; his cock was thick and wide in girth that Phoenix’s fingers could barely wrap completely around its base; and the red head leaking precum looked like a mouthful. The sight of the kid’s hardness caused his own to twitch in anticipation. He licked his lips as he imagined how wonderful it must feel to have that solid cock stretch him out and ram into his ass over and over, until he begged Apollo to stop. Unconsciously, his fingers traveled to his entrance, but they were quickly slapped away.

“What do you think you're doing, Mr. Wright?”

“Polly, please,” Phoenix begged in a broken sob, “I can't… I need… I'll do whatever you say, please fuck me!”

Apollo smirked at the shameless request. It was music to his ears.

“Well, since you asked so nicely…”

Suddenly, Apollo got behind him, hooked his arms under each of Phoenix’s knees and effortlessly lifted the man into the air. Phoenix gave a startled squeak, only for his cheeks to crimson when he felt Apollo spread his legs wide apart and turned him, so that he was brought to face the open window and the estate that lay beyond. He could see the main house from here – it's corridors and some of the rooms’ lights were still lit – and to his horror, considering his bedroom light was on, he realized anyone across would be able to see him too. He struggled in Apollo’s hold, tried to bring his knees together, but the brunette’s grip stayed firm and Phoenix found himself powerless against his newfound humiliation. His bathrobe splayed open and exposed whatever it once hid. If a servant or worse, Wocky, happened to walk past and turn to look, they would see everything.

“W-What are you doing?!” he panicked, but his struggling only made the bathrobe slide open further. “The Kitakis are still awake! They could see…”

“Then let them look,” came Apollo’s gruff reply, before he lowered a trembling Phoenix onto his hard cock.

He entered Phoenix in one smooth thrust, balls deep and tip brushing his prostate. The shock of the sudden penetration caused Phoenix to clamp down around him and Apollo groaned from his idol’s tight wetness, ignoring the man’s protests as he raised him up and brought him down hard on his cock over and over. With every vertical thrust, he managed to strike the ex-lawyer’s prostate dead-on at a merciless pace. Soon, Phoenix’s muffled shouts turned into wanton moans, and those moans eventually turned into helpless begging – for more, for Apollo to go deeper, harder; for his desire to
cum every time that wonderful cock made him see stars. His ass felt so full and this angle was fantastic. Bless the laws of gravity.

“Yes, yes! Ugh… Your cock… more cock… feels so good –! Polly… Polly, no-ooo… don't stop… hah… hah… more… more!”

“Heh, you’re such a pervert, sir,” Apollo paused to lick along the shell of his ear, “Who would’ve thought you got off on exhibitionism?”

“I don’t—”

“Liar.”

And Phoenix shut his eyes in both pleasure and shame when Apollo thrust his naked lower half towards the window for emphasis.

“You get hard from the thought of others watching. You're dripping wet – and by God I hope someone walks by that window and stares just to prove how much of a pervert you are.”

“Nooo…”

But it was no use. As much as Phoenix refused to admit it, he was steadily being turned on by Apollo’s words. Another light switched on from the main house. Apollo spread Phoenix’s already cock-filled hole further with his fingers as he continued to drill the man senseless. A shadow from a window directly across stopped and seemed to turn. Phoenix almost came then and there if Apollo hadn't stopped moving. This was pure torture. He longed for his release, his ass craved to be filled. He wanted to come so bad that was all he could think about, dignity be damned.

“Say it,” the younger whispered into his ear as he began fucking him in a slow, agonizing pace.

“No…”

“Hey, I think someone’s looking this way.”

Phoenix felt himself being moved until his crotch was sticking completely out the window. The imaginary eyes on his naked body provided him more stimulation than any physical touch did and when he looked up, he realized someone really was watching him from the room opposite.

“Oh gods…”

Apollo buried himself deep within Phoenix’s warmth, the latter desperately rocking his hips in time to his thrusts. The older man’s hands had flown to his mouth in an attempt to muffle his screams and judging by the mad twitching of his painfully weeping cock, Apollo knew his love was close. But watching Phoenix lose himself like this excited him too, so he increased the speed and power of his thrusts, abusing the man’s ass in his desperate need to fill it up and watch it overflow with his seed. He growled and bit into Phoenix’s neck, hard enough to draw blood and claim the man for his own.

“Say it.”

“I'm a pervert!” Phoenix finally cried out, the tip of his cock bobbing against his abdomen as Apollo took him hard like an animal. “I like it when others see me fuck. I like it when they stare up my ass… I like them staring when your fingers and cock are up my ass– Oh! Right there, Polly– yes, oh God, yesssss…”
Apollo growled, “What else?”

Phoenix’s mind swam.

“I like it when you play with my nipples… when you suck my cock… hah… I want them to see… I want everyone to see you cum inside me—” Suddenly, Apollo struck a bundle of nerves inside him and he stiffened with a cry. “Cumming… I’m cumming—!”

“Shit, Mr. Wright…”

Apollo’s release was the final trigger that sent him over the edge. A burst of warm wetness filled him and with a pained sob, Phoenix came all over his abdomen and chest; some spurted out the window and onto the estate grounds below; but none of that mattered. It felt good, too good. His spent dick still tingled pleasantly from the overstimulation, and just looking down between his legs at all that cum leaking out his ass made him happier than it should. His mind was a blank slate; he couldn't think, couldn't wrap his head around the consequences. All he knew at that moment, was that he had fucked Apollo Justice and he liked it.

Suddenly, he felt himself being lifted by a pair of strong arms and carried to his futon. It was strangely difficult to stay awake. His brain had already started going fuzzy from exhaustion and he barely even registered what Apollo was saying as he tucked him in. The kid’s warmth was still there, but at the back of his mind, Phoenix knew Apollo would have to leave and he didn't want that. He didn't want to be left alone at his most vulnerable, like what Kristoph always did. He must have voiced his thoughts out loud though, because the next thing he heard was Apollo’s soothing laughter and the feel of lips against his forehead.

“Wake up, sir. You’ll be late for your patrol.”

He didn't want to. His eyelids felt like lead and it was way too much effort to keep them open.

“Wake up…”

The bedroom around him began to fade, as did Apollo. The rookie’s voice became a distant murmur between the sheets; and so, Phoenix finally allowed the beckoning darkness to claim him along with his heart’s deepest, darkest secret.

Wake up…

---

“Yo, O.G – WAKE UP!”

The tight slap to the face did the trick. Phoenix shot straight out of bed and turned to glare irritably at his unwanted visitor – and though his mind still drifted between the realms of dreaming and waking, his subconscious had no issue identifying who exactly was responsible for his very rude, very loud awakening. There was only one other person who had the natural talent of being unnecessarily noisy after all. Unfortunately, this person happened to be his employee’s son and therefore, he was unable to smolder the brat to death with a pillow.

“What?”
His snappiness took one Wocky Kitaki by surprise, but the egoistic teen was quick to brush him off and resumed his usual cocky smirk.

“I got me a situation that needs sorting. A lil’ man-to-man, ya get my drift?”

Phoenix raised an eyebrow skeptically. Translation: Wocky needed advice. Why the kid came all this way to the guest house past midnight for a chat though, he had no bloody idea. Perhaps it was important – no, it was Wocky; the boy could get worked up over Diet Coke in his stupid fridge of all things. He was probably here to ask which hair product worked better: ‘Super Hard’ or ‘Super Strong’. It was times like these that Phoenix wished Wocky had more friends than just him and Trucy.

“Can't this wait until morning?” he groaned.

“You wish. A gangster waits fer nobody.”

Phoenix was highly tempted to point out that he wasn't a gangster–

“Besides, when mom finds out ya played hooky on patrol night, she's gonna cut ya! And I ain't referring to just yer pay.”

Touché.

He glared at the teen irritably and Wocky knew he had won in that instant. Man, was that smug grin infuriating. Phoenix tossed the blankets aside with an indignant huff – well, if he wasn't too happy about this inconvenience, he might as well show it. Maybe it would make the kid feel bad; then again, knowing how headstrong Wocky was, he highly doubted it.

Now that he was fully awake though, Phoenix noticed two things: Apollo wasn't here; and there were no calls, no messages, and no secret meetings under the moonlight to grant his troubled soul closure. Tonight marked the second week of Apollo’s silence. The kid wasn't coming back. He couldn't help but feel disappointed.

“Alright, I'm all ears.”

“Cool!”

Wocky’s eyes lit up like fireworks and much to Phoenix’s dismay, the former decided to get comfy next to him on the futon – with his sneakers on. He gazed at him expectantly and Phoenix returned that look with a dubious, patronizing quirk of an eyebrow. There was one main reason Wocky could never make it as a gangster and it wasn't because he lacked independence: the Kitaki heir always wore his heart on his sleeve. If he had a tail, it would definitely be wagging right now. Still, it was rather flattering. It was no secret how much Wocky appreciated his attention, and this wasn't the first time the rambunctious teen came to him for help, even for petty issues. Wocky didn't trust his father, but for some strange, twisted reason, he trusted him (and considering his shady past, Phoenix didn't exactly consider himself particularly trustworthy).

“Ok, O.G, it's like this,” he leaned in excitedly, “ya see, my fallen angel and I– Holy Crackerjack!”

He recoiled and pointed at the area between Phoenix's legs. “Do I even want to know?”

Phoenix looked down and felt his entire face go hot from embarrassment. Talk about leaving behind some very incriminating evidence; but to his defense, it was a very erotic, shockingly graphic wet dream. Nothing a little cold shower couldn't fix though.

“Sorry, give me 10 minutes.”
He rose to his feet and Wocky whistled after him.

“Woooo! Homeboy’s still got it past 30. Now *that’s* what I call keeping it real. Fo’ shizzle!”

Phoenix just wished he would shut up.

When he came back, Wocky looked right at home in his bed; 3DS in hand and regrettably still with his shoes on. However, the moment he noticed Phoenix at the doorway, he quickly stashed away the device *without* saving his game – and that was how Phoenix knew that whatever Wocky wanted to talk about held a significant amount of weight. The last time they had a talk like this was after the boy’s near death experience with that bullet. Phoenix remembered that night clearly: there was a lot of screaming, Wocky was rushed to the ICU, and a whole lot of family drama followed after. So of course, the first question he asked was:

“Are you sure you’d rather not talk to your dad about it?”

Predictably, Wocky gave him the stink eye at the mention of said man. Nevertheless, Phoenix couldn't fault himself for trying.

“I’m sure,” the teen replied stubbornly. “If I wasn't, I wouldn't be barging into yer crib in the middle of the night, ya dig?”

“Unfortunately, I do,” said Phoenix with a sigh, the reluctance in his voice palpable. Then again, Plum did say that she wanted him to talk to Wocky; perhaps this was his chance.

“Alright, what’s this ‘man-to-man’ chat you talked about? Did something happen?”

“Not yet it ain’t,” answered Wocky mysteriously, which only served to confuse Phoenix more. “Ya see, it’s a secret, and the beauty about secrets is nobody has to know about’em ‘crept me… and maybe you now. Ya see, O.G,” he took out a small velvet box from his pocket and pulled back the lid to reveal a gorgeous, sparkling 2-carat diamond ring within, “I’m gonna ask Alita to marry me.”

What? That was all Phoenix’s brain could muster as soon as those words left the teen’s mouth. Really, what could he say? He certainly hadn’t expected such a formal discussion, let alone the physical diamond ring to go with it. Since it was Wocky, he half-expected the kid to suddenly turn around and shout, “Psych!”; but *because* it was Wocky (and knowing how extreme and reckless he was by default), he had every inclination to believe the boy was dead serious with his (most times questionable) priorities. By right, Plum’s son wasn't his responsibility; he wasn't in charge of raising him and his ‘contract’ only listed duties pertaining to household matters. But by left, the responsible side of him couldn't allow this decision to go by without some validation.

“Where did you get that ring?” he asked warily.

“Picked the old man’s safe,” Wocky replied with a shrug. “That was gonna be my allowance anyway. I figured he ain't gonna miss it.”

‘At least he didn't steal it,’ thought Phoenix in relief, but he still didn't like the boy’s answer. Respect or not, Winfred was still his father. Wocky really did have major self-entitlement issues, not to mention zero understanding in the value of money.
“Hey… don't tell mom, ya hear? She'd beat me into a coma.”

Of course she would.

“That depends on your excuse,” said Phoenix as he folded his arms. “Why even tell me about this?”

“Cuz my homeboy just got hitched! So that makes you, what – the girl or dude in the relationship?”

Wocky went on excitedly with a wide, beaming smile. “Not judging, mind ya. I'm totes cool with the whole homo shindig. ‘Sides, Christmas sounds like a cool, guy–”

“Kristoph.”

“Whatever,” Wocky waved him off, but was quick to resume topic. “Anyway, if you're the dude, then I figure you could deal me some solid advice; give me the goods to how ya did it, ya know what I'm saying? If you're the chick then that's even better: would ya prefer yer man to go down on one knee with a dagger or an AK-47?”

“Neither,” Phoenix deadpanned, but the blush on his cheeks gave away his inherent modesty. Two weeks and he was admittedly still a little giddy over Kristoph’s proposal. It wasn't completely new that they were engaged, yet it made his heart flutter in excitement and do little flips whenever someone else talked about it, like he was hearing it for the very first time. But Wocky comparing his tasteless engagement plans to Kristoph’s artistry was nothing short of an insult.

“And before you get ahead of yourself, you're only 19, Wocky... It's too soon.”

The thrill in the teen’s eyes died and a dark, dangerous look crept across his features. “Ya wanna run that by me again?”

Phoenix however, wasn't one to be deterred by threats.

“You're still in college and Ms Tiala’s barely older than you. You have no income, your parents cut you off from all your splurging, and she's hardly earning enough to support her own lifestyle, much less even a fraction of yours. You can't even look Winfred in the eye, you don't respect Plum, yet you expect them to agree to all this?”

“What's it to them? I'll just take my inheritance and I'll be out of their hair,” he pouted.

“*Wealth runs out*, Wocky,” Phoenix stressed. “You and your girlfriend lead very expensive lives. You’d end up spending faster than what either of you can earn.”

Wocky clenched his fists so hard, they started to shake.

“I thought ya had my back, O.G. I thought ya were different from my folks...” he trailed off, before anger flashed dangerously through his eyes. “But turns out you're trying ta find fault in my fallen angel just like them!”

His outburst startled Phoenix, who softened his tone in a bid to coax the boy and help him see reason.

“Wocky, I don't hate Ms Tiala and I respect your choice. She's *your* girlfriend; not mine, not anyone else’s. All I'm asking you to do is rethink your plan for marriage.”

“Phft! Like *you* had to do any ‘rethinking’.”

“I dated my fiancé for seven years!”
“Sounds like someone had their doubts.”

Wocky’s callous comments made Phoenix angry.

“Who's rushing this? You or her?” he demanded.

“Who the hell said anything 'bout rushing?!” the younger retaliated fiercely, hackles rising.

“You've only dated each other for hardly a year!” Phoenix countered.

“We’re an exception!”

“You think you're an exception.”

“Yeah, well, I love her! Ya got a problem with that?!”

Phoenix had never wanted to beat some sense into anyone as much as he did now. Wocky’s ignorance was appalling. Enough was enough.

“Just because you love someone, doesn't mean you can trust them!”

The room seemed to shake and plunge into a grave silence from the force of his statement. It didn't hit him at first, but when it did, the implications of his own cynicism and bitterness pelted him with self-doubt. Was that true? Did he really feel that way? He thought back to all the relationships he ever had, in particular the one with Dahlia Hawthorne. It left a scar in his heart, one that he fought to forget but would always come back to haunt him. The fear never left him alone and no matter how many good people he had met along the way, or how swiftly the years went by, there was always this voice from the shadows whispering that it could happen again. On one hand, he wished to take it all back; on the other hand, a small, damaged part of his soul clung onto that painful honesty.

Meanwhile, Wocky continued to glare at Phoenix from his end of the futon; angry, hurt and betrayed by the man he had the highest regard for, admired; someone who would never judge and whom he could always count on. He thought Phoenix was cool, different, someone who could speak his language... but all these stupid, pig-headed adults were the same and he felt like a bloody loser following a prostituting poker player around for six years like a naive, insufferable puppy. The rage he felt in his heart was so dark, so thick that he shot Phoenix where he knew it would hurt the most.

“So that's how it is between you and Gavin.”

That remark was like a powerful blow to the face. The urge to flinch was almost irrepressible, but Phoenix maintained his composure in order to drive home his point. If Wocky wasn't getting proper values drilled into his head from his own parents, then he was going to get some right now.

“Wocky,” he patiently continued, “you need to give the both of you more time. It's not just a test of compatibility; it's a journey of acceptance and integrity. People tend to be someone they're not when in a relationship. Time tells.”

“Why do I hafta wait if I know she's the one?” Wocky interrupted in exasperation. “My fallen angel’s kind, caring, gentle and sweeter than fiction with a hot cup of cocoa on a cold winter’s morn. Why the heck do ya think she's a nurse? She’s– dammit, O.G, she's an angel!”

“Wocky, you're in love–”

“Ya told me I was smart enough ta make my own decisions. Ya said ta give both of us a shot at love. Ya stood up fer me in front of my folks and now you're gonna bend the other way?! Fuck you!”
“Listen–”

“No, you listen!” he shouted, angry tears glistening in his eyes. “I was there that night. I was there when ya told mom ta trust me, ta fucking sympathize with me and quit her judging – and now you sound just like her!”

“I'm not–”

“Don't ya start all that fancy talk with me, ya hear? That's right, I know ya were a lawyer; best in the biz. But if ya think ya can B.S yer way ta change my thinking, then you've got another thing coming.”

Phoenix struggled to get his words out. “I didn't forbid your marriage. I just asked you to think it through! Why won’t you listen?!”

“Cuz ya stopped listening ta me a long time ago, dad!”

The next 10 seconds following Wocky’s outburst was the hardest, most uncomfortable 10 seconds of their lives. While it was hard to tell what Wocky was feeling apart from rage, a series of emotions assaulted Phoenix’s face: from shock to horror, to confusion then sadness, before finally settling on pity.

“I'm not your dad, Wocky,” said Phoenix sadly, perceptively.

Wocky didn't like that look.

“Yeah, I know,” he answered in a hollow whisper as he rose to his feet. “Though I kinda wish ya were.”

Wiping away his tears with the back of his arm, Wocky turned around and left, feeling shittier than ever before.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, just to update you, I'll be slowing down my updates from this point on. I'll be working by day and doing my diploma conversion course by night, and any free time in-between would be prioritized for assignments and/or work deadlines. This doesn't mean that I'm giving up on HoC, but just slowing down for a bit.

Regardless, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and look forward to the rest of the story!
“Hey daddy, do you think Uncle Klavier will ever make lead prosecutor?”

The brushing stopped and Phoenix released his daughter’s hair to stare at her in honest surprise. Well, that was certainly unexpected.

They were in Trucy’s bedroom getting ready for her evening show at the "Wonder Bar" and as reputations go, his little genius was a sell out. At the rate his little girl was going, she would not only earn enough to support the both of them into early retirement, but also surpass her late grandfather before the age of 20. As for himself? He was just content to be her assistant, hair and makeup artist all rolled into one, no payment required. At times, he couldn't help but feel inferior to his own daughter's ingenuity, but her happiness chased away his contempt and only a father’s love remained.

“Well, maybe in 5 years, if he works hard enough. He's still young,” he answered with a smile, not to mention reckless, dramatic and inappropriate, but held back his criticism. “Why do you ask?”

“Cuz he works so hard,” she replied, a slight frustration to her tone. “When I'm there everyday waiting for him, I always see him running up and down for his boss. The lead prosecutor – this tall, handsome, broody guy with glasses; wears a funny frilly thing around his neck. I bump into him sometimes in the hallway. The way he puts him down all the time, makes Uncle Klavier seem so small…”

Phoenix hesitated at the description, but nevertheless replied slowly, patiently.

“Your uncle has a lot to live up to, Trucy,” he spoke in a manner that preceded his years. “It's not just Kristoph or the Gavin name; it's his own pride and ambition, how he was raised. As a child, Klavier’s been drilled to be the best, but if he wanted to escape his brother’s shadow, he had to be perfect in something else. Naturally, he chose to be a prosecutor; emerged a prodigy; and he climbed up the ranks faster than any 17-year-old could manage. But there's only so far you can run from family; Kristoph's still his brother, he's all he has; and that motivation is a double-edged sword. He's still searching for his place and himself. You just have to give him time.”

“But you didn't see how he just… just… let his boss walk all over him,” said Trucy with a pout. “I don't get it: if that guy’s already going to be chief, why can't Uncle Klavier take over as lead? Since you said he's got so much to prove, why not give him the chance?”

Phoenix gave her a blank stare. “Chief?” he echoed emptily.Already? Had it really been that long?

“Uh huh! Uncle Klavier says he's a true genius, that he only ever lost to one man in his entire 13 years as a prosecutor, and all the big cases are reserved for him. He made veteran prosecutor almost as soon as he entered the field, and is already on his way to becoming chief.”

Trucy looked up when she noticed her father had gone strangely silent. Her eyes shone perceptively.

“Daddy… is he your friend?”

Phoenix casually avoided her stare by turning to retrieve his daughter’s favorite hair clasp from her dresser. His movements were mechanical, voice painfully strained.
“He was,” he said, eyes downcast, “but we’re beyond that now.”

Far beyond.

He thought to leave it at that, return to the present and resume brushing down that stubborn “hair antennae” on his daughter’s head, but Trucy could be quite persistent.

“Was the man who defeated him, you?”

“Sweetie—”

“Do you miss being a lawyer?”

He stopped again, the shock affecting him so much he nearly dropped the hairbrush. Why? Why did she have to go and open up old wounds? Why now of all years after he had tried so hard to forget? The people he had rescued from the darkness didn’t matter now. Loyalty counted for naught. Status was an illusion. He was a survivor. There was nothing left in his past to look back on except humiliation and despair. He was married and had a daughter to care and provide for. This was his life now.

Phoenix tied her hair a little too tight and Trucy yelped, but he ignored her and moved towards her closet. Trucy gazed after him sadly, knowing she had messed up and gone and upset him. Her daddy always kept his problems to himself and smiled through the pain to convince her all was well, that everything was under control, that he could handle it because he was her father. But as she grew every year, so did her perception, and his vulnerability became as clear as a speck of dirt on a whitewashed wall. He was just trying to protect her, he always was. She just wished he would open up and let her do the same for him.

“Let’s get you dressed,” said Phoenix in a hollow voice. “You have a show to do.”

“But daddy if you would just—”

He ignored her and threw open the closet doors in a grand flourish. Locating Trucy’s costume wasn’t difficult; there was more than one set hanging within reach; but something else caught his eye and the discovery of this particular garment made his throat tighten and his blood run cold. It was another magician’s costume, it’s design bearing a striking resemble to Trucy’s default blue one, only it was red and ran at least four sizes too small. The silk cape was wrinkled and the tail bells were a little rusted from lack of use, but Phoenix recognized the child’s outfit and remembered the broken, innocent little girl who had worn it seven years ago. He reached out and held the cloth between his fingers, heart numb and movements sluggish.

“Why do you still have this?” he asked in a broken whisper, lower lip trembling in a bid to control his emotions.

Trucy hesitated, but nevertheless approached her father on slow feet. The cat was out of the bag. She knew this was a sensitive subject for the both of them, but they were bound to confront it sooner or later.

“I’ve always kept it, but never had space to hang it up until now,” she explained, indicating at her new, very generous walk-in wardrobe. “Papa made it for me when I joined him on stage for the very first time. I couldn’t just throw it out. It’s… it’s important to me…”

A sad yet thoughtful expression crossed Phoenix’s face as he listened.

“Do you miss your dad?” he dared to ask.
“Of course I do,” said Trucy, the beginnings of tears welling up in her eyes, but she fought to keep them at bay. “He's my papa… I still have so many questions to ask him, like w-why he disappeared… why h-he l-l-left me behind… Why he didn’t want me-”

“He *does* want you, sweetie–"

“Then he’s coming back?”

Silence.

Phoenix bowed his head and avoided his daughter’s hopeful gaze, unable to look her in the eye for fear of what he would see after his next words.

“Let’s say he does come back,” he licked his lips nervously, “would you go with him?”

Trucy snapped her mouth shut and regarded him in surprise, eyes looking but not quite seeing. It was obvious what her father was getting at: he was asking her to choose. But it wasn’t a fair question; in fact, the implications were downright damaging. While she knew who her real father was, she could not totally disregard the years of unconditional love Phoenix had given her. While Zak had given her a wonderful childhood with opportunities to explore, Phoenix had been there during her critical moments - her ups and downs, her insecurities and fears, and her joys and despair. Both men raised her and despite her insecurities, she knew they both loved her. They were both her daddies. She didn’t understand why if she chose one, the other would have to go.

“I don’t know,” she finally confessed, both relieved and unsatisfied with her own answer, “but I miss him, and… and I wish he could see me perform – just once.”

Phoenix gazed at her sadly. “Trucy…”

A sudden knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. There was a brief pause before the door opened a crack. Klavier poked his head into the room and shot them a furtive smile.

“Am I interrupting anything?”

It was Phoenix who recovered first. He acknowledged the blonde with a small smile and casually plucked Trucy’s top hat from a nearby mannequin.

“Not at all,” he placed it on her head and winked, “she’s good to go.”

But Trucy could immediately tell how forced the whole act was.

“Lass uns gehen, Fräulein! Links du!” Klavier snapped his fingers and steered the young magician out the door before she so much as could utter a single word of protest. Then he turned and tugged along a cart with a vanishing screen on it, as well as other peculiar knick knacks and stage props.

“Herr Wright, you coming? I'm taking das Auto,” he offered, waving Kristoph’s set of car keys in said man’s face.

Phoenix paused to stare at his reflection in Trucy’s full length mirror. There he was, decked out in a black-and-red slim-fit dress suit, oxfords and a deck of cards sticking out coquettishly from his front pocket. The whole outfit was made from glitter fabric – not too flashy, yet dazzling enough to loan an air of enchantment. A black vest posed as a handsome contrast to the dark red inner shirt, and Phoenix didn’t even bother with a blazer because Trucy had said that he looked 10 years younger without it. His beanie was off and no matter how much styling products he used on his hair, he still couldn't stop a single, annoying lock from falling forward. Trucy had joked that it was his hair of
wisdom, though he seriously doubted it. He knew his opening act by heart and looked the part of a magician’s handsome assistant, but his conversation with Trucy had sparked discord in his heart.

“Maybe tomorrow night,” said Phoenix with an apologetic smile. “I was called up for a last minute interview and they want my documents consolidated by tomorrow morning. It’s an audition. Decided to go back to my acting roots ahaaha…”

Klavier raised an eyebrow. “I didn't know you applied for a job,” he commented disbelievingly, scrutinizing Phoenix with his arms crossed. “You're working für Kitaki, ja?”

“Just for a month,” Phoenix replied. “I was thinking of something more… sustainable.”

Klavier gave him a look that seemed to say, “you're joking”, but eventually decided to let it go.

“You should’ve just told me, Herr Wright. I could always use a secretary. Mein old one left after two weeks, though that’s better than the previous one who left after two days.”

Phoenix sweatdropped. “Thanks, but I got this.”

“Ganz wie du willst.”

Klavier turned and shut the door behind him. Muffled noises of him and Trucy shouting, as well as the banging of the cart as Klavier dragged it down the stairs, could be heard from the hallway outside. It took a while for the sounds to fully dissipate. Phoenix gave it an extra five minutes, watching from the window as the blue sports car pulled out from the garage; then he punched in a set of numbers on a number pad and brought the phone to his ears. It rang a few times before the other party picked up.

“Not interested.”

“I'm not insurance, Olga,” answered Phoenix with a chuckle.

“Oh. This better be important, I've got cash burners here.”

“Sorry, but I gotta kill your winning streak. I need a lift to Gavin Law Offices.” Phoenix lowered his gaze to a strange black key nestled snugly in his palm. “We’re doing it tonight.”

Earlier that day…

Ema balanced a pen between her nose and upper lip while glaring a hole into the latest case report on her desk. This was absolutely humiliating. A homicide detective with seven years experience and a background in forensic science, and she was put in-charge of a stupid, petty, panty-snatching case. Of all the monumental bullshit she had to endure over the course of her despairing career, this definitely won the nobel prize for the worst yet.

To make matters worse, she was paired up with officer Keyes – Heck, she would rather work with Meekins! She didn't even have to look at him; the very idea of being partners was enough to leave a bad taste in her mouth. It wasn't that she had anything against Valerian personally – he was a commendable and experienced police officer – rather what the guy represented. Everytime she looked at him, she was reminded of the Machi murder trial or more specifically, the judge’s final
verdict that implicated Lamiroir a backstabbing murderer and crowned Justice the new Turnabout Prince. That case was supposed to be her big break, her ticket to the forensics team, but then that dumb lawyer had to go stick his spikes into her business and ruined everything. Argh, just thinking about him made her blood boil! She tore open a bag of snackoos and snacked on them angrily.

Still, something about that trial smelled fishy – and it had Shark boy written all over it. It wasn't just a baseless accusation: Daryan’s location at all the critical moments seemed too convenient to pass off as mere coincidence; he knew too much, yet conveniently didn't know the most time critical ones, though still enough to remain relevant, like a kid who had snuck a glimpse at an exam answer sheet and strategically filled some questions incorrectly to escape suspicion. She knew what she saw: Daryan went backstage around the same time Machi died and that piano had been right there in the hallway wide open the last time she checked. His fingerprints were on all the stuff! Was it really as complicated as Justice “proved”, or was it far simpler than any of them could have ever imagined? Her gut feeling told her something was missing. She didn't believe Lamiroir did it, not for a second; but pinning it all on Daryan also didn't seem to fit the bill.

'The defense is wrong! There was one other person unaccounted for during the rehearsal: me.'

And then there was Phoenix. Frankly, she didn't know what that guy was playing at, but the very fact he had tried so desperately to implicate himself signaled that something was really very wrong with that case. Disbarred or not, Phoenix was an extremely observant individual; he used his wits and deductive reasoning to uncover any contradictions, and although he had tried to shoulder all the blame (for some inconceivable reason), it wasn't without purpose. He knew Lamiroir was innocent – and that was more than enough reason for her to hold onto her suspicions post-trial. Ema recognized that look in his eyes when he defended Lamiroir in court: it was the same blazing determination he had when he fought to acquit her off all charges 8 years ago surrounding the old SL-9 incident.

She found herself reassessing her opinions on the ex-lawyer. Maybe… maybe the old Phoenix she grew to admire and respect was still in there somewhere. But there was also a doubtful, conflicting part of her soul that remained skeptical; after all, if he could forge evidence for his client, who's to say he couldn't have done the same for her own trial against Chief Prosecutor Gant, or even throughout his entire law career?

But I want to believe...

The fingerprint powder in Apollo’s possession floated into her consciousness. She couldn't believe Phoenix still kept it with him after all these years. He valued it and his sentimentality touched her greatly. She wanted to help if only to believe again.

Unfortunately, her current position in local law enforcement prevented her from acting so recklessly. Too many red tapes and there were certain lines she should never cross. But was sitting down, following orders and upholding protocol really the right thing to do? She was never one to linger in her comfort zone as a child, so what would 16-year-old Ema have done? What did she choose to believe?

What would Lana do?

‘... Detective Skye?’

‘Gah!’

Ema jumped and threw a snackoo at the newcomer’s face on reflex. It bounced off the man’s forehead with an audible ‘tonk!’
“Ow! What gives?!” Clay winced and rubbed his forehead irritably. Less than a minute and he already regretted coming here.

“That’s for scaring the crap outta me, space monkey!” Ema retaliated with a fierce glare, her defenses on red alert. “What do you want?”

“Well I—” She threw another snackoo at him. “What the hell!”

“And that’s for inviting yourself in here without an appointment.”

Clay blinked slowly. “I’m supposed to make an appointment?”

“Nah, I just needed an excuse to throw stuff at you.”

He resisted throwing some stuff at her himself.

“So, why are you here?” she eyed him critically. “If you’re here then that means that dumb lawyer’s involved and that can’t be good.”

“Actually… I need a favor from you,” Clay lowered his voice and looked the detective straight in the eye. “As Wright’s friend.”

That last statement shocked her so much she almost forgot how to breathe. Nick needs help? Her chest constricted painfully and a hand went up to alleviate the stress. Questions bubbled in her mind and threatened to leave her lips, but when she opened her mouth, all that came out was a pathetic, incoherent gurgle. So, her brain automatically left the talking to Clay.

“Seven years ago, your chief headed the investigation of Magnifi Gramarye’s murder,” he continued gravely, urgently. “Those files – I need them.”

“Mr. Gumshoe’s on vacation.”

“Which leaves you as the next person in-charge.”

“Do you seriously think I’d just hand them over to a dumb space monkey?” Ema crossed her arms, clearly exasperated. “Besides, you would need to produce some official documentation to—”

“Already taken care of,” Clay interrupted and handed her a letter with the police’s crest printed on its front, a wide shit-eating grin on his face. “It wasn’t difficult to convince your chief, and my friend can be pretty persuasive when it comes to things that matter.”

Ema wanted to smack that cocky look off his face with a hammer. She snatched the papers from the astronaut and scrutinized every single word, eyes growing wider after each line she read.

“What?! I can't believe– How did he…?”

It wasn't just Gumshoe’s signature at the bottom of the page that shocked her; it was the implicit approval of the granting authority above. Everyone knew that detectives and the appointed investigative team worked under the direct supervision of a state prosecutor – and Klavier Gavin had been the one in-charge of this case. Had that glimmerous fop actually approved of this?

“In case you’re wondering, no, Klavier doesn’t know,” said Clay intuitively. “Besides, he would have to approach another level of authority for clearance. Apollo figured it would save time and his blood pressure to ask Mr. Big Shot directly.”

Ema turned pale at the mention of that name. “Wait a minute, that means you… that dumb lawyer
did what?! And that guy actually…” She was sputtering so hard, even her own words failed to make sense to her. This was… unheard of. The audacity of Justice.

“He was asked as a friend,” Clay replied and handed a telltale bottle of fingerprint powder to the bewildered homicide detective. “Now, I'm asking the same for you.”

She didn't need to look to know what that one offering meant. Ema accepted the bottle and shakily turned it over in her hand. This was Nick’s, and the last person who had it was Justice. Damn that pointy-haired rookie! He really knew how to mess with a woman’s psychology. But this placed her in a challenging position: as Klavier’s partner, she had the responsibility of taking his side and informing him of the latest, yet…

*This is the reason I need.*

Ema clutched the bottle protectively against her chest.

“The file you want is the DH-12 incident,” she headed for the door, but not without looking over her shoulder at the smiling astronaut, “Oh, and tell Justice he's got some serious balls.”

It was as easy as the last time. Phoenix picked the lock of *Gavin Law Offices* and slipped inside with the fluid dexterity of a cat burglar. Thankfully for him, Kristoph remained oblivious to his previous transgression and hadn't changed the locks.

Inevitably, he had battled with his guilt: it was one thing to go behind your lover’s back, break into his office and snoop through confidential information; but it was another thing to claim unconditional love and trust, yet keep a mountain of secrets from your new husband, *including* everything mentioned above. He had contemplated going back many times and give up this wild goose chase once and for all, but Trucy’s sadness remained a constant in his mind’s eye and if she wished to see her real father again, solving this old case was the only way. It didn't matter what happened to him after everything; as long as Trucy was happy, he couldn't care less about his fractured reputation.

He crept past the work station he knew belonged to Apollo; the water dispenser; the bookshelves; before arriving at Kristoph’s desk. Now that his fiancé was away, the general area looked neater and more compact than usual – so tidy in fact, there wasn’t even a shred of paperwork or loose pen lying around to indicate any signs of life. He tried all the drawers: locked. Then again, he had already searched those, along with every other bookshelf or storage cupboard, which only left…

‘Don't let me down, Misham,’ he thought, and rummaged through his pockets. His fingers touched something smooth and hard, and slowly, he pulled it out...

“You know, if you don't want somebody to walk in on you, you need to learn to lock the door.”

Phoenix jumped and the black key slipped from his grasp. It bounced and slid across the dark floor to stop at a pair of brown, shoe clad feet. There was a pause, before a hand reached down to retrieve the slight object. The figure straightened up and stared at the strange-looking key in the palm of their hand; a flash of recognition and understanding darted across their hazel eyes before they raised to meet Phoenix’s, cool and unwavering.

The clouds outside parted and moonlight streamed in through the window, illuminating the speaker’s profile, defining masculine features. Phoenix couldn't help but stare, helplessly entranced. The man
standing before him was just as handsome as he was in his dream – but this wasn't a dream, and Phoenix didn't need the light to know whom he was addressing.

“What’re you doing here?” he whispered, almost afraid to speak lest it was his imagination playing tricks on him. “I thought… I thought...”

“I abandoned you?”

They stared at each other – one baffled, the other nonplussed – and Phoenix was immediately overcome with a creeping sense of deja vu. They had been here before; a chance meeting in this office, last April, alone together in the dark of the night scrambling for answers and against each other. The only difference now was the uncertainty: the kid had disappeared for two weeks and suddenly decided to show up a changed man. The slight awkward, conservative gait was gone; his personality seemed to have matured and graduated from its adolescent naivety; and Phoenix hardly recognized him. Apollo was an elusive tome; he couldn't read him.

“Miss Orly really wouldn't give up. My phone bill this month can vouch for that,” said Apollo with a slight grimace to his speech. He held up his cell phone and showed his text history with said dealer to illustrate his point. “You have more people who care about you than you think, sir.”

Phoenix’s mouth opened in a silent ‘Oh’, but Apollo’s words made him feel somewhat conflicted. On one hand, he was touched by Olga’s actions (she really did care despite her apparent nonchalance); on the other hand, he felt a little disappointed that Apollo’s main reason for being here wasn't because of him.

“You've been ignoring my calls,” he felt inclined to point out, but instead of an apology or rousing any signs of guilt, the brunet’s flippant attitude disappointed him once again.

“Well,” was all Apollo said with an explanatory shrug, which didn't actually explain anything at all. He was behaving so detached and serious, it not only unsettled Phoenix, but also ignited a deep apprehension within him. The mood wasn't just awkward between them; it was downright agonizing.

What if Apollo hates me? That thought haunted his mind like a ghost. But then he wouldn't come all this way if he did, right?

“So serious,” Phoenix chuckled in an attempt to lighten the mood, and with a coy smile, sidled up against the young attorney. He hooked his fingers behind Apollo’s neck and played with the little ducktail at the end of his hair. “Keep this up and I just might think that you'd rather not be here–”

“I promised I would help you,” Apollo interrupted sharply and reached around his neck to pry those long fingers away. “And I'm a man of my word.”

He sidestepped the stunned man and made his way towards his desk to start up his laptop. Phoenix meanwhile, wallowed in the shadows of Apollo’s biting-cold rejection, hurt and mostly confused. It wasn't explicit, but he felt the difference in their relationship and the pang that shot through his chest was no different than that time he had watched the kid walk out on him. Apollo was making it distinctively clear he wanted to maintain a professional relationship, no frills in-between; and Phoenix found himself blindly giving in to his unspoken request. It seemed he had unwittingly unearthed an unhealthy desire for the kid, but like a flower withering away in winter, Apollo had gone and buried it.

Maybe it's for the best.
Humbled, Phoenix followed him and peered over his shoulder to see what the kid was doing. Apollo was deeply engaged in the court archives, pulling up folder after folder of old trial logs and video transcripts, knowing exactly which ones he wanted, all with their relevant timestamps. He then whipped out his cell phone, typed some stuff on an application and two new files appeared on his laptop screen, both of which contained extensive notes based on key events, contradictions and questionable observations. Phoenix noticed that the word ‘DH-12’ kept popping up and the realization shook him. All this time, the kid had remained devoted to his case when he could have easily thrown it all away. Phoenix suddenly felt more like a small child than an attorney mentor. Apollo had definitely done his homework; he never should have doubted him.

“You did all this? Even after…” Phoenix trailed off disbelievingly. He leaned forward and placed his left hand on the desk for support as he read off the screen. Meanwhile, Apollo found his gaze wandering to land on said hand, his own fingers itching to reach out and grasp it in a tender hold, but resisted the impulse. That diamond ring around Phoenix’s ring finger was a strong deterrent. His idol belonged to Kristoph and he didn’t want to come between their happiness and ruin things for everyone. Sure, Phoenix was complicated and indecisive, but he shouldn’t be encouraging the behavior. It was a tough call; he loved the man for all he was and what he stood for; but Phoenix wasn’t his and he had to deal with that. Their passionate interactions were easy to remember, but it was harder to move on.

“I went through the old DH-12 case files and evidence list,” he began, retrieving them from his bag and throwing them on the table. “You did a good job linking the framing attempt to Valant Gramarye, but I’m afraid it still doesn’t explain how Magnifi died.”

Phoenix picked the items up and went through them carefully, recalling the nature of his defense seven years ago and the cloud of suspicion he cast on Valant’s credibility. Last he heard, the guy had taken to performing at parking lots and public spaces to build up his reputation again. It was pitiful, but what he did to Zak was inexcusable. Either way, too many people suffered after that trial, himself included.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Try and answer that question for yourself, Mr. Wright,” Apollo answered mysteriously. “You might eliminate certain possibilities that way.”

Phoenix frowned, confused. “Isn’t it by gunshot? Valant Gramarye shot him and then framed Zak for the crime. I thought I already established this in my defense?”

“Not quite.” Apollo took his eyes off his work and swiveled around in his chair to face him. “You only believe that because of that fake journal page,” he admonished lightly, taking pity on the older man who flinched at the memory. “The truth is, you don’t know what was written on that page, or if it had been torn out as a means of framing you to begin with. You don’t even know if its existence is a fabrication in itself. So, forget about it.”

He produced the evidence list and flipped to the section on the pistol. The diagram couldn’t replace the real thing, but the data was substantial enough to make his point.

“I want you to consider this gun. What does it tell you?”

“That it’s as clean as a white sock in bleach,” Phoenix retorted impatiently. “Valant wiped it clean off prints. I already know—”

Apollo snapped his fingers and the sudden noise made Phoenix jump. He shot the younger an annoyed stare. Goodness, he sincerely hoped Klavier’s habits weren’t rubbing off on the kid.
“There’s your contradiction right there!” Apollo smirked, however at Phoenix’s confusion, he quickly continued. “You said so yourself, Mr. Wright: the gun was wiped clean. But why would Valant need to do that? Him and Zak both wore gloves, so it doesn’t make sense that any prints would be on it. That gun belonged to Magnifi Gramarye and since he was hospitalized, no gloves. Now,” he paused to give Phoenix a meaningful stare when he saw the other quickly catching on to his logic, “the perpetrator wanted to get rid of one glaring, painfully obvious possibility - what is it?”

“Suicide,” Phoenix realised in a horrified whisper. Magnifi Gramarye had killed himself? Then that means…

“It’s only a theory though,” Apollo said with a shrug. “Anyway, I didn’t come here to discuss that.”

He retrieved another file from his bag, this one with a label that read ‘FOR AUTHORISED USE’, and handed it to Phoenix. It was the investigation files of all things pertaining to the unsolved DH-12 case. Everything was in there: detailed investigation reports, crime scene photographs, serial numbers of all stored evidence, official documents from the prosecutor’s office, profiles of the appointed attorney(s), the preceding judge’s closing report, and a billion other stuff Phoenix hadn't even seen before.

“How did you get this?” he demanded, waving the packet in Apollo’s half-amused face. This was something only the highest authority could grant access to – and Apollo was just a rookie lawyer, almost invisible in state’s eye. How was he able to take, let alone look at confidential data he himself hadn’t the privilege of even smelling during his relatively short years as a veteran lawyer?

“I spoke to the chief.”

“You did what?”

“Asked for clearance.”

“Yes, but... but how?”

“Prosecutor’s office,” Apollo answered simply as if it were only logical. “I made my case as... convincing as possible. But something tells me he was already toeing the possibility before I finished my request. After that, it was just a matter or liaising with the lead detective of that time, and here we are.” His gaze softened as did his tone. “As I said, you have more people who care about you than you think.”

Phoenix snapped his mouth shut and stared at the thick file, for once a complete loss of words. The new chief of police and a prosecutor of the highest authority… he could only think of two people who matched that description based on portfolio and dedicated years of service. So, Kristoph had been wrong; they hadn't forgotten about him. The realization impacted him so much, he raised the file and hid his tears behind a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Apollo.”

“Don’t mention it.” He stood next to Phoenix and reached over to flip through the file’s contents as they both looked the information over. “Anyway, we were going through the reports when he pointed out something strange.” He indicated at the set of numbers printed at the top of the case report. “This is the defending attorney’s copy – your copy, I presume.”

Phoenix nodded, “Yeah, they make us return all case documents post-trial for security reasons. It’s standard regulation...”

“Then did you notice the nature of the serial number?” Apollo pressed on, tapping the last two digits
with a finger. “02 – this indicates that this is the second copy. It's standard issue that prosecutors get the master copy, 00. So, what happened to 01? Why the need to make a duplicate?”

Phoenix’s eyes widened. He hadn't noticed that little detail before; then again, he never knew about this particular system and always assumed the numbers were completely irrelevant.

“Maybe it got lost,” he suggested.

“Maybe.” Apollo’s eyebrows knotted into a deep frown. “Or it was never returned.”

“But that's violation against the state court!”

“Then that person must've had a really good reason.”

Apollo took the papers from him and scrutinized the report. *Veteran defense attorney Phoenix Wright deemed unfit to pursue case... witness who wishes not to be named testified fraudulent misconduct... allegations of possessing and presenting false evidence verified by appointed prosecutor at the time of...* Wait a minute.

He all but tossed the papers into the air and rapidly flipped through the police’s investigation report as Phoenix scrambled to catch them all.

“Ahah! Got it!” His eyes lit up as he pointed at a certain section in triumph. “All documentation point to you as the likely forger due to the circumstances: you were the only person outside state authority given access to Zak’s case before the trial. But–

He turned to point at the case papers clutched in Phoenix’s arms.

“That missing 01 copy implies that there was someone who also knew the details of the case. And I'm guessing they didn't return their copy to hide this fact.”

The ex-lawyer’s eyes gleamed in awe and most importantly, renewed hope. If things weren't so awkward between them, he would have grabbed Apollo and kissed him senseless.

‘So, if we find those papers, we find our guy,’ he thought. But who? Where do they even start?

“Here's another interesting tidbit,” Apollo went on, “the prosecutor originally assigned to this case is someone you've known for years and also the very person I spoke to: Mr. Miles Gregory Edgeworth.”

*Edgeworth?*

He hadn't heard, much less breathed that name in years. How was he? What was he up to now? Was he still the same stoic, uptight snob with a severe lack of social skills and tact? Or had he changed like how he himself did? But Kristoph said Edgeworth abandoned him like all the others. So then how was it that Apollo managed to achieve what Kristoph couldn’t? Then again, considering the things he had seen and been through over these jading years, Phoenix couldn't help but remain skeptical and continued to guard his heart from disappointments.

“If that's the case, why the sudden swap? As you know, my prosecutor turned out to be Klavier,” said Phoenix rather bitterly.

Somehow, just knowing Edgeworth could have been his opponent that day made him feel all the more anxious. It wasn't like he distrusted Klavier – they were practically family – but Edgeworth was experienced; he wouldn't have allowed forged evidence to slip under his nose so easily. Things could
“I can't say,” said Apollo with an apologetic shake of his head. “It's classified information, though I believe it has something to do with a last minute case that pulled him out of the country. Still, I agree the switch is suspicious.” He extended his arm and offered Phoenix the key he had dropped.

“A counterfeit?” he asked.

“Yup. Pretty impressive, huh?” said Phoenix.

“You do it. This goes against so many of my morals and employment terms.”

Phoenix chuckled. “Don't worry, I won't tell your boss.”

He accepted the key and their fingers brushed, lingering a little longer than originally intended. That very moment seemed to stand still. Apollo paused to look at their interlaced fingers, before raising his eyes. Phoenix could sense the young attorney’s gaze on him, whether in surprise or anger, he did not know. His heart thudded loudly against his chest, he could hear his own blood in his ears. The skin of his hand tingled with a pleasant warmth where Apollo was touching, and Phoenix felt that warmth spread throughout his body, touching and igniting something he had kept repressed in his soul. He could almost fool himself into thinking Apollo would take this a step further, but no such reciprocation came and all that Phoenix was left with was his pride and embarrassment. How could he get the kid to see him again, love him again? Apollo was behaving so cool and professional, it made their past exchanges seem like a pleasant, ideal fantasy. It took him a while to gather his courage to make his request.

“I… Can I hold your hand? Just for a bit.”

Apollo raised an eyebrow curiously. “Why?” he asked, his voice soft and warm, and Phoenix knew that he wasn't mad.

“I…” Phoenix swallowed, suddenly feeling very shy. “I want to feel you. I… miss you.” Apollo had not touched him since outside Kitaki estate two weeks ago, and after that wet dream he had, he had found himself longing for more and more of those firm yet kind, affectionate hands.

Hazel eyes blinked once before the young lawyer smiled slowly, almost triumphantly. “You desire me.”

Instantly, Phoenix blushed. “I-I… uh, that's n-not…”

“But we’re losing focus,” Apollo interrupted and brushed past him to stand by Kristoph’s desk before peering over his shoulder with an expectant expression. “Well?” he indicated at the desk with a nod of his head. “I was under the impression this case was important to you.”

A sharp pang went through Phoenix’s heart. Apollo was tossing his feelings around like a rag doll.

“I-It is!” he rushed to defend himself, struggling with the pain of Apollo’s rejection.

He lowered his eyes as he moved past the brunette to get behind the desk, worried over what he would see in those telling hazel eyes – disgust, pity, impatience, or worse, complete indifference. Though Apollo Justice was that one unexpected visitor in his life, whom he only spent several hours a week with in secret, already Phoenix’s life and self-worth was ruled by him. He dreamt of him when he slept, and woke up with the inexplicable need to see his intoxicating hazel eyes, to hear his voice no matter how loud it may be. It shouldn't be the case when he had Kristoph. Never had his loyalty and devotion swayed in the course of their love, so what made Apollo so special? Special
enough to commit adultery and feel little to no shred of guilt or remorse. He had a good feeling about
the kid, but was that enough to justify his lust for his fiancé’s apprentice? No way in hell; if anything,
he was only proving to the both of them how much of a shameless whore he really was. It was
inconceivable; he had intended to use the kid to achieve his own means, but now, he was the one
trailing obediently behind at the end of a leash.

*And now he hates me,* Phoenix resolved with a heavy heart, knowing for sure Apollo was only
fulfilling his role out of personal obligation. The kid had more self-respect than him, that was for
sure. Anyway, it was as he told himself: he was doing this for Trucy. How he felt or the shit he went
through was secondary.

“So, what are you hoping to find?” Apollo interrupted his thoughts, intrigued himself.

“Maybe some clues? Kristoph said he tried to conduct his own search, though I never actually saw
any proof,” Phoenix explained with a shrug. “I figured he stored his work in the office. He’s an OCD
maniac that way.”

And without wasting another second, he inserted the key into the hole and the drawer unlocked with
a soft ‘click’. Pulling it open, Phoenix peered eagerly inside only to find himself feeling greatly
disappointed. For a big and deep drawer, it was surprisingly empty save a few empty case folders
and a tiny box of paper clips. He gathered a few files and placed them on the desk. It wasn’t anything
to go by really, but Apollo went through them regardless, albeit unimpressed.

The more Phoenix cleared, the emptier the drawer became, and the greater the anxiety he
experienced. Seriously, was there *nothing* in this office at all? Then where the hell did Kristoph
keep–

Suddenly, something white caught his eye and he reached deep into the shadows to pull out a bunch
of papers carefully stapled together. ‘A job application form?’ he wondered, and turned the page.
*Apollo’s form.* It was dated January this year and contained the kid’s extensive portfolio: a cover
letter, resume, proofs of education and academic achievements, photographs and personal particulars,
including his papers from the orphanage. Phoenix didn’t understand any of this: why would Kristoph
keep Apollo’s documents specially locked up with a bunch of useless, empty case files? And why
were all the parts related to his birth and time at the orphanage, highlighted? The information was
unnecessarily excessive, it felt almost voyeuristic. There were *so many photos*; it was borderline
creepy.

There was also something scribbled at the side, but it was so hurried, Phoenix had trouble
deciphering it. That was when he realized Kristoph had written it the other way and turned the paper.
*Gramarye Secret.*

“Mr. Wright?”

Phoenix’s body snapped to attention and he quickly hid the documents where he found them. “W-
What is it?”

“You need to look at this.” Apollo handed him a specific folder, voice unnaturally disturbed and a
grave look in his eyes. “Look at the serial number.”

He did as he was told and instantly felt his heart stop. S-DH-12-00486001. It was the DH-12 case
file, *his* case file, but at the same time it wasn’t. The one he had used was currently in Apollo’s
possession; this one had its contents emptied out. Only the skeleton remained, along with its haunting
implications. Why did Kristoph even *have* this file? How long had it been sitting in this drawer? And
the most important question of all, why hadn't his fiancé said a word?

He had no idea he was shaking, until he felt Apollo’s hands cup his cheeks, thumbs rubbing soothing circles on the skin. His hazel eyes were sad, sympathetic; sharing the conflict he saw in the other’s broken-hearted gaze.

“Sir…”

“Why?” Phoenix felt his heart crack from the truth. “Why didn't he tell me he was Zak’s ex-lawyer?”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hm... I wonder where things are going to go from here ;) Thanks for reading, everyone. As always, feel free to leave a comment and kudos if you like my work. I value your responses and even a little encouragement goes a long way. See you in the next update!
Chapter Notes

I decided to change the title of this arc to "Turnabout Corner" because it's more suitable and I want to keep to the original case titles as much as possible. If you're confused, don't worry; it's not a new/different arc lol.

The roads were empty, dimly lit by a row of street lamps on either side of the asphalt. A few lights flickered occasionally; flies flitted beneath the glare; and the once busy pavements were now void of passerbys in the hours following Monday night rush hour. Two figures stood outside the gates of Kitaki estate under the blood-red glow of lanterns: a large woman in a kimono sweeping up dead leaves, and a slender man in a hakama taking out the trash. The atmosphere was calm, routine and ultimately uneventful. Once the man was done, she would dismiss him and he would wait along this very street for his ride to show up and head home. Then, early next morning, that same blonde prosecutor would drop him off and the cycle would repeat.

Discretely, Plum chanced a worried glance at him. Normally, Phoenix was a chatty, upbeat, albeit eccentric kind of guy, and they would gossip (well, she did; Phoenix tended to just laugh and listen) about anything under the sun until it was time to pack up and go. Tonight however, the ex-lawyer was disturbingly quiet, and whatever was bothering him affected the quality of his work as well. Not only had he forgotten to arrange the schedule of duties for the maids this week, he also almost poisoned Winfred by serving him a tall glass of yellow dish washing liquid, instead of the usual lemonade. Now, mistakes like these would have gotten an ordinary person sacked, but it only made Plum worry more. It wasn't like Phoenix to be so withdrawn and broody. What on earth happened last weekend? She wanted so badly to ask, but being intrusive was disrespectful, especially when he didn't appear inclined to share. She also noticed he hadn't phoned his fiancé at all this evening like he always did. Had something happened between them?

She deliberated, then made up her mind when she could no longer bear the weight of his melancholy.

“Phoenix, what's –”

“Look out!”

Everything went by in a blur of light and sound. Tires screeched, a blinding glare, a sudden force of being thrown to the side, and then a loud “Thump!”. 

Plum winced and struggled upright, the skin of her forearms split to reveal shallow wounds inflicted from the rough pavement, which she had landed on. Her vision swam and she blinked rapidly to clear it, only to turn pale at the sight of an unconscious Phoenix no more than an arm's length away. Blood trickled down the side of his head and split lip. One of his ankles looked funny. An arm was still wrapped around her shoulders as if to shield her from the impact.

The car raced away, its headlights fading into the distance, and that was when Plum screamed.

“No! Phoenix! Oh God…”
She scrambled to his side and fussed over him, tearing open his hakama with shaky hands to assess his body for further injuries. A fucking hit-and-run. They were standing on the pavement for God’s sake and that crazy driver just… If Phoenix hadn't jumped in and saved her…

Oh God, oh God, oh God…

She placed a hand over his mouth and watched his chest intently. Thank God he was still breathing, but he was losing blood fast. Without thinking twice, she tore off the sleeve of his hakama and used it to apply pressure on his head as she cradled his upper body against her chest. It didn't take long for the frantic pitter patter of footsteps to make their way across the garden walkway towards the gates.

“Madam, are you alright?! I heard you scream and–”

“Call an ambulance!” Plum turned and commanded the young maid in a shrill voice, fear and panic swimming in her eyes. “Don’t just stand there – hurry!”

“Y-Yes, Madam!”

The maid dashed off and Plum held onto Phoenix tighter. Her heart pounded relentlessly against her chest. It could have been me. That same thought replayed in her head like a broken record. Goddammit, why did he have to be so reckless? She couldn't even think; her brain still desperately working to process the recent events.

“Ugh… P-Plum…?”

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice, weak as it may be. The ex-lawyer made no movement or other signs of consciousness, but it was better than nothing.

“Stay awake, Phoenix. Talk to me.”

He struggled to get his words out.

“T-Tru… cy…”

Suddenly, she heard a gunshot; it pierced the stillness and something whistled through the air. Acting on instinct, Plum moved her body protectively around Phoenix and unsheathed her katana to deflect the oncoming projectile. She reacted at a speed unimaginable to the human mind; years as a gangster’s wife and rubbing arms with underground drug lords conditioned her as such; and thank heavens she did too, because whatever that was, hadn't been meant for her. It left a crack in her blade and with careful fingers, she plucked the tiny object from the ground and held it up to the light.

A bullet?

But when she looked at the direction it had come from, there was only darkness.

Plum gazed down at the injured man in her arms with a deeply troubled frown. She didn't like this. Phoenix’s breathing had gone ragged.

A siren wailed in the distance.
“You've been coming here a lot lately. But you still suck at poker.”

Apollo threw down his hand and lay across the table with a heavy sigh. He knew he was screwed the very moment he looked at his cards, so why bother fighting and accumulating his debt?

“I come here to think I suppose,” he said.

Olga eyed him perceptively as she retrieved the cards and organized them back into their deck.

“About how screwed you are?” she asked.

“More or less,” he replied, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I don't understand it. Why would Mr. Gavin keep this a secret from Mr. Wright? You would think he’d mention something big like being Zak’s ex-lawyer at some point in their seven-year long relationship.”

“You suspect your own boss,” Olga observed.

“He had the file in his drawer the whole time,” Apollo countered dryly. “Even if I don't want to, what else am I supposed to think?”

“So, he's a liar.”

“He didn't lie … he just never said anything about this before.”

“Same difference.”

The blonde dealer snuffed out her cigarette in a nearby ashtray and turned to fix him with a cool, hard stare; her dark eyes flashing.

“I know you care about Wright, but consider your position. The deeper you dig, the more fragile the ground is beneath your feet, and the trickier the rules get. Don't play a game you're not good at.”

Apollo frowned at her ambiguity. “But Mr. Wright said there aren't any rules.”

“Horns, he created the game. We’re all part of it.”

“No.”

They held each other’s gaze stubbornly, but it was Olga who eventually relented with a disappointed shake of her head.

“The old ‘Phoenix Wright’ is gone, Horns. You're a good man. I don't want you to get hurt.”

Apollo suddenly stood up and tossed a few dollar bills on the table. He knew Olga meant well, probably, but this conversation was beginning to piss him off.

“Thanks for the game,” he muttered and stalked towards the stairs. He supposed he should be thankful Olga placed a maximum cap of $10 least he went overboard and made himself broke.

“You might as well take the shortcut,” she interrupted without looking up, indicating at a dilapidated cupboard behind her. “You've been here long enough, so I might as well let you in on a trade secret.”

Apollo raised an eyebrow, intrigued, and backtracked. Now that he thought about it, he remembered Olga did mention something about the Borscht Bowl Club being an old criminal’s hideout. He followed her to the other end of the room and watched as she slid the door of said cupboard aside to
reveal a dark, narrow passageway. There were no lights inside, but Apollo could hear the telltale echoes of city nightlife and feel the warm summer breeze against his face. Still, it took a person with balls (or at least an established familiarity with the place) to walk through a pitch black passageway without any assistance.

“This cellar connects directly to the alleyway opposite the road,” Olga explained. “If I’m not wrong, that’s also the direction your bus home heads. It's accessible both ends, so feel free to use this passage when you drop by next time.”

Apollo nodded his head in thanks. “Does anyone else know about this entrance?”

“Just us staff, Wright, some regulars, and now you,” she answered.

“Regulars?” Apollo repeated, cocking his head to the side. He assumed the term ‘trade secret’ existed for a reason. That, and he never knew this place with its crappy food and even crappier service even had regulars.

“Basically, people us staff are close to, like pimps and drug lords.”

He choked on that last part, but otherwise chose to keep his comments to himself. It really wasn't his place to, much less his world.

“Alright, take care and all that,” Olga bid him goodbye in her usual flippant manner as she turned and made a move towards her station, only to stop when she remembered something. “Oh, and work on yourself, would you? I don't need a mirror and I can already see all the cards in your hand–”

“Miss Orly.”

She paused and turned to study the young attorney with a curious frown.

“What?”

Apollo was looking at her so seriously, so intently, his burning hazel gaze made her feel both flustered and self-conscious, it actually made her take an unconscious step back. She didn't like that stare. It reminded her of all those security guards and police officers who used to stare her down as a little girl whenever they tried to make her fess up to her crimes. She knew she led a dishonest life, but it was always harder and more painful to have it staring you in the face, along with the world’s scrutiny.

“The person who needs to work on herself, is you,” said Apollo in the most sympathetic and delicate manner he could muster; almost disappointed. “One moment you're begging me to help him, the next you're telling me not to trust him. So, which is it?”

She kept her mouth shut and that heightened his frustration.

“Mr. Wright saved your life. You really have a funny way of showing gratitude...”

Olga snorted and turned the other cheek. “It's called having an agenda, Horns. When it all comes down to it, everyone’s selfish. Why do you think he got me a job as a dealer at the very place he played poker? Why do you think he's engaged to the most powerful lawyer in this country?” She steeled herself and delivered the final punch. “Why do you think you're even here? He's using you, and you don't feel a thing because he's so damn good at it!”

The silence that followed was deafening. So uncomfortably tense in fact, she felt as though she was hearing her own breathing through a tunnel. But she had done her part and said her piece. She didn't
need to face the brunette to know how he took to the news: heartbroken, mad, and probably in denial. However, Apollo’s subsequent reaction surprised her.

“You're right, Miss Orly. There is an agenda,” he said in a soft voice, the knowing smile on his lips speaking of a wisdom and understanding that betrayed his years. “It's called love.”

With that, he took his leave and left the stunned woman to reflect on herself and his words.

Apollo slid the cupboard door shut behind him and proceeded down the dark passageway with renewed confidence. Sure, it was disorienting and scary at first when he was as good as blind and couldn't even see his own hands in front of his face, but the passage was narrow enough to limit his options and kept him focused on walking straight. The further he walked, the clearer the sounds of passing cars and blinking pedestrian crossing lights became, and it didn't take him long to emerge into an alleyway from behind a hidden trap door.

As he walked, he dusted his clothes off, which was surprisingly cleaner than he expected after his trip through the tunnels. Perhaps it was frequented enough by staff and ‘VIPs’ alike for any significant amount of dust and cobwebs to settle – not saying that there weren't any; a minor few did end up in his face or mouth at some point or other. When he looked up, he could see the Borsch Bowl Club across the street and just as Olga said, a bus stop not too far from where he stood on the pavement. The hidden passage was a convenient escape route. Apollo wondered what other interesting secrets the club and its staff were hiding.

That thought however, reminded him of his and Olga’s prior conversation over the poker table, and as he made his way towards the bus stop, he couldn't help but reflect on hers and Phoenix’s complicated relationship. He knew that look, that conflict and hesitation in her eyes: Olga was afraid. With a dark and battered past like hers, it had taken years for her to trust – and that was only restricted to Phoenix. But with the latest reveal and the new cloud of doubt cast on Kristoph, now that she had seen how trust could be so easily shattered despite a seven-year bond between two loving people, she had retreated into her protective shell more and more and viewed her own relationship with Phoenix with trepidation. In a way, Apollo understood what Olga was going through; but he had witnessed the care and concern in Phoenix’s eyes when he had deliberated leaving her behind in the club, experienced the complete respect and adoration Phoenix had for Kristoph, seen the self-hatred and guilt on his face when they had kissed behind closed doors, and knew that no matter how broken and bitter Phoenix might be, he would never betray anyone. Apollo was willing to stake his life on that.

But that was the least of his concerns right now: Kristoph was a suspect in one of the biggest murder mysteries of their time. Phoenix had broken down in said man’s office two nights ago. Was Olga right to call him a liar? Apollo didn't know what to do, much less think about his boss now.

’I know you care about Wright, but consider your position. The deeper you dig, the more fragile the ground is beneath your feet, and the trickier the rules get. Don't play a game you're not good at.’

He sat down at the bus stop with a deep sigh. When did things get so complicated?

Suddenly, his phone rang and he retrieved it from his pocket. The unfamiliar number on the screen however, made him stop and stare – and at this hour?

“Hello?”

“Is this Mr. Apollo Justice?”

He stopped short and stared at the screen again, this time in shock. It was a girl’s voice, and judging
from its high pitch and respectful manner, it belonged to a child. Apollo could have sworn he heard this voice somewhere before, but the mere idea of her treating him even remotely civil, let alone bother to find his number and voluntarily call him, made him question his own sanity. His hesitation showed in his voice as he answered.

“Yes…”

“This is Trucy Wright, Phoenix Wright’s daughter.”

Apollo felt like he had just been hit in the chest with a ton of bricks. So, it is her. But why would she call him? The only exchanges he remembered between them involved either a door to his face or tons of name calling. He didn't even need to evaluate the underlying apprehension of her tone; her uncharacteristic formality was enough to send alarm bells blaring in his head.

“What's wrong?” he dared to ask.

There was a pause and he held his breath.

“It's daddy.” She stumbled and choked on a sob. “I think… I think he's in danger.”

‘Doctor, how is he?’

Voices. He could hear voices; muffled like whispers between thick sheets that smelled too pristine and perfect to be home. Like a sailor thrown off his ship and clawing his way to the surface, Phoenix struggled through the murky darkness, forcing eyes open that could not be opened; flailing limbs that refused to respond; and speaking in a voice that could not be heard.

‘He's more or less stabilized. Nothing serious. You're lucky he's got a hard head to go with that hard landing.’

‘Is that a joke? He was hit by a bloody car and you think that's lucky? Fick dich!’

Eventually, the murmurs died down from several to silence. He had no idea how long he had been out for, drifting in limbo for seemingly centuries; each second like an hour and each recall like a torturous eternity. Until finally, his fingers moved according to the commands of his brain, and he opened his eyes and took his first breath of life.

As much as he was incapacitated, he wasn't completely in the dark and could more or less piece together his situation through the senatorial cues of his environment and the dull pain he felt throughout his body. He was no stranger to hospitals, having fallen off and survived a 12m drop from a burning bridge seven years ago; but he disliked the disorientation during the recovery stage and did not want to make this a habit.

“Hm? He’s waking up!”

A face of a pretty young girl with brown hair swam into view. Phoenix blinked back the sleep from his eyes and managed a weak smile.
“T… Trucy…” he winced. Good lord, his voice sounded like sandpaper and his throat felt disgustingly sticky, like he had drowned himself with alcohol the previous night and fell asleep without washing it down. Seriously, how long had he been unconscious? He moved his head to the side and gave a frown at the slight glare streaming in from his bedside window. Was it morning already? He was unprepared though when Trucy all but threw herself on him and buried her face in his chest.

“D-Daddy… I was so w-worried…” she pounded his chest repeatedly with a fist. “Don't you ever do that to me again! I swear I won't forgive you the next time!”

His hospital gown was steadily getting wet and he laughed, pulling his daughter tighter against him so that she could feel his warmth and every fibre of his love. Phoenix soothed her gently and placed a kiss on her forehead, allowing his lips to linger there a little longer to show how grateful and truly blessed he was to have her in his life.

“I'm sorry,” he murmured against her hair.

“You should be,” said a new voice with the barest hint of sarcasm, “the way that gangster lady put it, we all thought you were going to die–”

“Daryan!”

“Ok fine, so it was only me.”

Klavier facepalmed and shook his head. “Don't mind him, Herr Wright. He's not yet potty trained.”

“Excuse!”

Phoenix hid his snickers behind his hand, but immediately adopted a serious expression when Klavier took a seat on the other side of the mattress. He was staring intently into his eyes, almost as if Phoenix had committed an atrocious crime and his guilt was being measured at the witness stand. The ex-lawyer stiffened and leaned away on instinct; a bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face. Now he knew how his past witnesses felt when he cross-examined them. But just as quickly, the tense atmosphere was shattered when the blonde prosecutor raised his hand and playfully flicked him on the forehead.

“Ach, you really have der Devil’s luck,” he said with an exasperated sigh. “Erste, a fire extinguisher to the head; nächste, falling off a burning bridge. Only you of all people can jump in front of a speeding car and end up with nothing but a sprained ankle to show für your troubles.”

“What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?” said Phoenix with a sheepish chuckle.

Klavier rolled his eyes and retrieved his phone from his pocket. “I'll tell the guys you're fine then.”

Phoenix blinked slowly at the implications. “The Gavinners came?”

Now it was Klavier’s turn to look surprised and maybe even slightly offended.

“Offensichtlich. Why do you think Daryan’s here? I called everyone as soon as I heard about das accident,” he paused, suddenly uncertain about himself and started to stumble over his words. “It… well… you consider them friends, ja? I just thought these things would matter to you.”

“Your ears are red,” Phoenix pointed out with a knowing smile.

“Schnauze!”
He laughed again in triumph, but was nevertheless touched by Klavier’s concern. It was sweet what the younger Gavin did for him, even though he was trying so hard to remain cool and aloof about it. Phoenix valued company more than any advanced medication or healthcare procedure on this planet; but he never considered he had any friends left, not after the public backlash following his disbarment, until now. Despite having Trucy to love unconditionally and vice versa, he was a lonely man – and Klavier saw that. But most of all, Phoenix realized, was that he was surrounded by people who cared and valued him enough to worry and make a ton of calls; visit and stay even when he himself had not fully awakened. On top of that, they all came; every single one of the band’s five members: Valerian, Amaranth, Crow, and Daryan and Klavier were still here. It warmed his heart to see how much effort Klavier, someone whom he couldn't see eye to eye with for the past few years, had put in to ensure his comfort and happiness, no matter how little the gesture seemed. He could appreciate that.

“Anyway, about my medical costs…”

“What about it?” interrupted the blonde rockstar with his eyebrow raised, looking as if Phoenix had asked the dumbest question in the universe. “Did you think I wouldn't tell Kristoph about this? Mein bruder paid for everything as an apology für not being here. He said since you're fine, there's no reason to rush back.”

His words made Phoenix feel more upset than relieved. Again, Kristoph used money to make up for his absence. Phoenix didn't need money, he wanted his fiancé! But the way Kristoph treated their relationship now was honestly no different prior to their engagement. He still felt like a dirty little secret, like a fucking mistress hiding away in her summer house until the wife disappeared to her family’s for the weekend, and it was finally convenient for the husband to pay a visit. Of course, there was no wife, though that sense of unattainability and emotional distance remained a haunting constant. He thought marriage would change things for the better; but the truth of the matter was, it made him realize how lonely and miserable he really felt. It was contradictory: he couldn't stand his fiancé, yet he missed him terribly and longed for his love. He wanted Kristoph to look at him like how he first did when they started seeing each other, before the problems started, and before the beatings became a norm. Then again, he remembered what he found in his fiancé’s office, so maybe it was a good thing Kristoph wasn't here to personally witness his devastation.

“Yo, Nick. Are you ok?” said Daryan with a frown when he noticed the man’s eyes start to glisten with tears. “... Nick?”

“Herr Wright?”

Phoenix turned his head to look out the window. There was a tense silence; it made the other three occupants of the room uneasy. Trucy peered up at him from where she lay against his chest, trying to seek out his stare and get a glimpse into his troubled soul. She had experienced his closed door sorrows before; she knew he was crying.

“Daddy…”

“How long?”

The sudden question caught them off guard. At their hesitance and confusion, Phoenix sighed and returned his attention to the group. His eyes were slightly red, but apart from that, no other evidence of his previous breakdown remained. Forcing a carefree smile, he rephrased his query.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Oh. Uh…” Klavier, Daryan and Trucy glanced at each other awkwardly.
“Actually, you were admitted last night,” said Trucy. “The doctor said he expected trauma to the head, but you were fine so…” she paused and went right up to his face, eyes wide and critical. “You are fine, right daddy? No light headedness, nausea... a sudden urge to clean toilets?”

Phoenix threw back his head with a laugh. “No, sweetie… but now that you mention it, we really should head back and clean-”

“NO!” Three voices yelled in unison; hands thrust out as if to ward off an evil spirit; fear and alarm evident on their faces. Phoenix blinked at them confusedly, but otherwise shrugged the whole matter off. It was then he remembered something important from the previous night, and his expression turned grave.

“How’s Plum? Is she alright?” he asked, worry and apprehension palpable across his features. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen or heard anything about the Kitaki mistress since the accident.

Trucy hesitated and snapped her mouth shut, Daryan suddenly seemed to find Phoenix’s bandaged ankle rather fascinating, and Klavier meanwhile, had no idea where or how to begin.

“Fräulein Kitaki, ah, wie sage ich das…” the blonde prosecutor trailed off unsurely before he shook his head with a sigh. “Nein. Let's just say you wouldn't need to go to work for a while…”

“Why? What's wrong? Is it from the-”

“It's not about the accident,” Klavier interrupted bluntly, a tad bit annoyed at the older man’s selflessness. Confined in a hospital after miraculously escaping death, and he could still find the capacity to worry about someone else’s well-being. “Physically, she's fine; mentally, not so much,” and he lowered his voice for privacy sake, “Her Sohn was arrested last night für the murder of Pal Meraktis, das Familie Doktor.”

What?! Talk about a major plot twist.

“... Have the police investigated yet?” said Phoenix with a surprising level of calm that impressed even himself, especially since the news involved someone he knew and had grown on him over the past few years.

Klavier shook his head. “Nein, but we’re working on it.”

“An edict before an investigation? That's a presumptuous statement, even for you,” he remarked with a critical frown.

“Aber nein! Though evidence aside, Herr Wocky did waltz right into die Polizeistation and claimed full responsibility für das crime. Quite proudly too.”

“He did what?! ”

A sudden knock on the door startled the room’s four occupants and temporarily placed their conversation on hold. The doorknob jiggled and turned; a foot stepped through into the clean white space, and the body that emerged after unsettled the group and left each person speechless. Honestly, they expected a doctor or nurse, maybe one of the Gavinners or even a Kitaki representative, so none knew exactly how to deal with this unexpected new arrival clad in red and smelling of too much hairspray.

Trucy looked like a cross between unsure and wary as she dug her fingers into the sheets; Klavier shot the visitor a suspicious glare; Daryan felt and appeared extremely lost; and Phoenix… Well, Phoenix was just as stumped as they were, but relief and joy quickly took over, his gaze softened
considerably along with his thrumming heart, and he couldn't stop the tender smile that graced his lips from the sight of the one person he had longed to see upon waking, but never knew it until now.

“Polly…” he whispered with a gentle intimacy that did not go unnoticed, “what are you doing here? How did you find me?”

The kid shifted his weight between two feet, eyes downcast and body language awkward. A hand reached up to rub the back of his neck, a nervous habit when he sensed other people's full attention on him. Their expectant scrutiny just made him feel more insecure about himself, even about the subtle way his golden attorney’s badge gleamed under the morning light. *Great job, Justice. You’ve done it again.* They must be wondering what the hell he was doing here in the first place, and he hoped he wasn't coming across as some creepy stalker… if he wasn't one already.

“Believe it or not, your daughter called me.” And as soon as those words left his mouth, all eyes turned to gawk at Trucy. She blushed and bowed her head, inwardly annoyed at Apollo’s lack of tact. Talk about getting cold feet and putting her on the spot. Fortunately, Phoenix was quick to take advantage of this chance reunion.

“Just as well,” he said to Apollo with an easy going smile before dropping it completely when he turned to address Klavier, Daryan and Trucy. “I’d like to speak with Apollo alone, please.”

The request was so unexpected, it made even said lawyer twitch in surprise. There was a tense silence, a poignant hesitation and mild discontent, but Trucy kissed her father on the cheek, easily slid off the bed and slipped out the door without a word of protest. Her uncharacteristic behavior unsettled the men; Klavier and Daryan shared a look, but when the guitarist indicated at the door with a nod of his head, the pair made a move to leave as well. It was only when Klavier passed Apollo on his way out, did he stop and drop his voice to a low murmur.

“Don’t think I’m stupid, Herr Forehead. I know why you're here,” he warned, the venom in his speech biting and distinct. “Interfere with mein bruder’s happiness, and you'll be sorry.”

With that, he walked off without so much as a parting wave. Daryan gave Apollo an apologetic stare before jogging after his friend. The door shut with a soft ‘click’, leaving Phoenix and Apollo to gaze at each other in growing anticipation. It was a mutual uncertainty: ‘What do you have to say?’ was the question that haunted their minds and kept each of them on edge. Apollo was the one who made the first move; Phoenix braced himself for the questions, but was stunned when the younger suddenly wrapped his arms around him and pulled him into a desperate embrace. He dropped the act completely and had momentarily forgotten about his personal stand on professionalism. He was relieved. He was relieved and scared and thankful all at once.

“I thought I'd lost you,” he mumbled against Phoenix’s neck and said man smiled despite his shock, returning the embrace with the tenderness of a mother.

“Sorry for worrying you, kid.” He pulled away gently and indicated at his bandaged ankle. “See? It's just a sprain. No harm done.”

Apollo snorted and readjusted himself on the mattress, careful to avoid the wires and said injured foot. He didn’t know whether to feel comforted that Phoenix was doing fine, or frustrated. His heart had almost stopped when he received the call from Trucy last evening, and he had spent the ungodly hours between midnight and 5 a.m. pacing the lobby of *Hickfield Clinic* because he wasn't allowed into the examination room. Somewhere around that time, he had fallen asleep from intense worry and exhaustion, and the next thing he knew when he woke up, it was already 9 a.m. and Phoenix was entertaining visitors in his ward. It went without saying that he had rushed right in without much consideration to their clandestine relationship and current standing in the eyes of others. But the idea
of almost losing Phoenix really terrified him and he had to see the ex-lawyer up and well with his own two eyes, repercussions be damned. He didn't regret it though; Klavier could hate on him and think all he wanted, but Phoenix’s safety came first and if the man ended up dying before he could clear his name, he wouldn't be able to live it down.

“Getting only a sprained ankle after a hit and run isn't exactly normal,” Apollo commented with a look of mild irritation, but decided to shut up and be grateful for this miraculous turn of events. “Anyway, why did you need to see me privately? What's wrong?”

“Why do you immediately assume something’s wrong?”

“Uh… cuz it normally is ?”

Phoenix shook his head with a chuckle. “So pessimistic. I would call this an… urgent matter, instead – and I'll need your help to address it, Polly.”

Apollo cocked his head curiously. “What is it?” Maybe Phoenix had a cat in the office that needed feeding.

“Actually, it's quite sudden. I only heard this before you arrived,” he explained slowly, dragging it out on purpose; perhaps inwardly knowing how adversely Apollo would react to such a bold request. “I'm not sure if you've seen the news, but Wocky Kitaki was accused of murder. Ok, actually he confessed to his crime. But something smells fishy and I was hoping you could de–”

“No.”

Phoenix faltered at his answer.

“But I haven't even finished!”

“You don’t have to,” Apollo deadpanned with a roll of his eyes. Phoenix’s loyalty really was as admirable as it was predictable. And at times stupid, which was mainly now. “Sir, I'm not defending someone who insists they're guilty. Do you have any idea how brutally Mr. Gavin would kill me if he finds out how much resources we’d be wasting on a client like that?”

“He didn't do it,” Phoenix insisted, desperate for Apollo to hear him out. “I know it sounds crazy and I don't have any proof, but I know Wocky. I knew him since he was a kid and he would never kill anyone, even if he often talked big about it. He can’t even hold a gun to your head without shaking, much less aim and fire.”

“Mr. Wright, please, your heart rate–”

“He was about to propose to his girlfriend! Why the heck would he get himself thrown in jail when he’s planning to get married?! Just go to the station and hear him out!”

“Sir–”

“You're a lawyer, help him–”

“I know I'm a lawyer!”

Apollo’s outburst startled Phoenix so badly, he jerked back from the shock. Hazel eyes burned fiercely; fists clenched and shook from rage; and Phoenix’s heart raced, anxious over the repercussions. Memories of that punch to his cheek immediately surfaced, along with the pain and sense of betrayal. But the brunette made no such move, only took deep, calming breaths to keep his
temper and emotions at bay. He would not strike out at Phoenix again, no matter how much that stubborn guy deserved it sometimes for his insensitivity.

“I know I'm a lawyer,” Apollo repeated, this time in a more quiet and calm manner, “but I only help those who need my help, and Wacky isn't one of them.” He reached out and held Phoenix’s hand between his own, heart clenching when he felt the heart wires and IV cord beneath his fingers. “You are my priority, my client. You need to stop worrying about others and care more for yourself. I can't help you if you can't even do something as basic and simple as that.”

“But—”

“There are other lawyers who can help him, Mr. Wright,” he said patiently and gazed at his idol with kind eyes. “I'm flattered, but we need to stay focused. I'm going to continue our investigation. Promise me you'll get enough rest and stay out of trouble, ok?”

Phoenix bowed his head with a pout. “Ok…”

Pleased with his answer, Apollo got off the bed and made his way out the ward. Just as he grabbed the doorknob, he spared one last lingering glance at the brooding man by the window before slipping out and closing the door behind him.

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**Hickfield Clinic, Vending Area - Tuesday, 10.15 a.m.**

Apollo placed a cold can of coffee against his forehead with a contented sigh. The headache was slowly ebbing away, but not his troubles and growing anxiety. He was sleep deprived and physically exhausted, yes; but there were so many responsibilities and ethical considerations to juggle, he felt like he was going to pop a blood vessel. The worst thing about this was that he felt alone. Sure, he had Clay and Phoenix was obviously in on his own case, but there was no middle ground for validation between the two. While Clay was helpful yet 100% clueless most of the time, Phoenix had no morals and therefore zero limitations. The best would be to have someone in the middle, someone who knew enough about the law to share the burden, had a decent moral compass and an inherent drive to help Phoe–

“Mr. Apollo Justice?”

He resisted a sigh, lowered the can, and looked up. A pair of hazel eyes blinked at him, pretty much like his own, only bigger and very much sparkling with nervous intent and innocent curiosity. The girl bounced on her feet and Apollo braced himself for the inevitable.

“Miss Wright, you don't have to be so formal,” he began with an awkward smirk. “Feels kind of weird.”

“Oh,” Trucy paused with a thoughtful expression, before breaking out into a wide grin. “Then I'll just call you Polly like daddy does!”

Apollo nearly fell out of his seat. Well, at least it was better than his full name read out like roll call. He could only imagine how awkward that would be if she made that a habit in public.

“You called, I came,” he gave her a leveled stare, “So, what's this about Mr. Wright being in danger?”
“Ah, yes,” she took a seat next to him and shut her eyes momentarily, figuring out how to go about this; then, she opened them and they were dark and serious. “Sorry about the suspense, I just didn't want to say this in front of daddy. You know, in case his assassin’s lurking nearby.”

“Assassin?” said Apollo with a patronizing smirk. “Don't you think you're being a little too dramatic?”

Trucy turned sharply to glare at him and held up a clear ziplock bag with a single bullet inside. “Am I?”

The tiny gold bullet glinted under the light. Apollo gaped at it, his previous skepticism on Trucy’s claims gone in an instant. At that moment, their conversation last night felt as real as the evidence she clutched in her hand. Someone tried to kill Mr. Wright? Did it have anything to do with their investigation? Instinctively, he reached out for it, but Trucy tugged the bag away before his fingers could so much as graze the surface.

“Uh, uh!” she tutted and hid the evidence behind her back. “Let's get one thing straight, pointy-head: I still don't like you. But if you help me, I'll help you, and we’ll both be happy.”

Apollo folded his arms and regarded her with interest. “Ok, I'm listening.”

“If you want the bullet, I’ve got two conditions.” She held up two fingers, indicating at each of them with her free hand as she spoke. “One, let me be your assistant. Someone tried to kill daddy, and I want to find out why and who. Two,” determination flashed in her eyes, “I want you to defend Wocky.”

Apollo growled beneath his breath. Not this again.

“No,” he observed Trucy’s expectant stare, “and no. I don't want to answer to your dad should anything happen to you, and I can't accept any new clients right now.”

Her smile fell and shifted into an indignant pout. “Why not? We don't have to tell daddy, and I promise I won't give any trouble…” Apollo turned away and she appeared crestfallen. “Please… I don't want to lose daddy and Wocky’s a friend. Mr. Gavin’s not here, so you’re better than nothing.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome!”

Unfortunately, Trucy didn’t get sarcasm.

“Why not go to Prosecutor Gavin?” he asked, honestly curious. “He's your, uh, uncle, isn't he?”

“He's with the police,” she answered quickly, obviously having thought this through. “I don't want to draw too much attention and scare the killer away. Plus, it could be really bad for daddy if the killer gets wind we somehow alerted the police. They'll try again and something tells me they're not going to miss the next time.”

“... Good point.”

Huh, not bad thinking for a little girl. Phoenix’s daughter was more aware and perceptive than he originally gave her credit for.

“If you want this bullet, you'll have to take me with you. And if we’re going to investigate the crime scene, you’re going to have to be Wocky’s lawyer,” Trucy went on to break it down for Apollo.
“The incident happened outside Kitaki estate. The police and forensic department have the entire place on lock-down. If you’re going there, you’ll need a permit – and it’s yours as long as you’re there on official business, a.k.a defending your client. We’ll have more leeway to find daddy’s killer under that pretense.”

Apollo felt his resolve crumbling. *This can’t be happening.* He was losing to a 15-year-old magician-in-training!

“All,“ Trucy grinned and in a burst of smoke, pulled out a peculiar, oversized pair of pink-and-blue panties, “my magic panties can hold a ton of evidence! Pretty useful, huh? And did I mention that I’m on good terms with the Kitakis? I can grant you clearance to certain ‘restricted’ parts of the house you would otherwise fail and cry over.” She folded her arms triumphantly. “So, what would it be?”

Apollo hesitated. Involve Trucy Wright in his affairs and keep secrets from Phoenix? Was that ethical? Not to mention the panties were really strange. He really didn’t–

“Hey, you care about daddy, don’t you?”

Oh, that was low.

“Fine,” he muttered and snatched the clear bag from her fingers. “You’re a real haggler, you know that?” Trucy smirked and he rolled his eyes. “Right, where’s Wocky Kitaki?”

“At the detention centre,” she replied with a giggle and mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “I’ll call and let him know his new lawyer’s coming to pay him a visit.”

To be continued...
Sorry for the extensive wait! I've been extremely busy juggling work and night classes, but I should be able to resume updating more consistently around end March when my course ends around end March. I would like to thank my lovely reviewers for leaving such inspiring and wonderful comments for this story. You're the reason I slogged to complete and post this chapter, despite what little time I could afford to do so. Thank you for your support, I'm humbled. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Detention Centre, Visitor's Room 1 – Tuesday, 11.10 a.m.

“Bizzoy! I already said I did it, means I did it. How much cash do ya need to get out of my face?”

“But you just killed someone! Do you know what that means for you?!”

“I gotta do time?”

“Uh... yes?!”

“Better to live fast and die young. Fo’shizzle!”

Apollo slammed his head against the counter and wished the impact would just kill him. Forget it, the boy was hopeless and he was majorly screwed. Why the heck did he agree to this again? Oh right, he was coerced by a friggin’ 15-year-old high school girl, who carried around giant panties as if it were bloody normal and completely not weird at all. He hadn't had much experience as an attorney, but it didn’t change the fact that Wocky Kitaki was the worst client to work with by far. The guy’s head was thicker than a brick wall slapped with five layers of cement and soundproof glass. If defending a potential killer affiliated with the mafia didn't kill him, his rising blood pressure will.

Suddenly, the door to the room opened and Apollo didn't need to look up to know who had oh so graciously decided to join them. The young magician skipped over to the glass divide and looked between the two angry men – Apollo kissing the table with a dark cloud hanging over his head, and Wocky with his arms crossed and burning a hole through the glass with his eyes. Trucy regarded them with an oblivious smile and cocked her head.

“Why are you both screaming? I could hear you from the toilet.”

That comment seemed to get their attention and they rushed to defend themselves.

“I'm not screaming! / I ain’t screaming!”

“Are too! / Are too!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”
“Not!”
“Not!”
“Too!”
“Hah! Loser!”

Apollo threw his hands in the air with a strangled yell and turned to glare daggers at his new ‘assistant’. He didn't have time for childish crap like this and he wouldn't even have to deal with it too if not for her emotional blackmailing – and no, he didn't care what the dictionary called it; coercion using subject matter that personally mattered was still blackmail. It was unfortunate, but Apollo was starting to develop a keen dislike for people in general the more he worked in this field. Why were humans so difficult? Why did everyone he made eye contact with seem to somehow hate him? Seriously, where did he get these clients? If he suddenly suffered an aneurysm or a cardiac arrest, he was blaming it all on the girl.

“So, why did he do it? Why did he kill his doctor?” asked Trucy beneath her breath as she took a seat beside the grumpy lawyer.

“You ask him,” Apollo growled between clenched teeth, indicating at the difficult teen with his thumb. “That's what I've been trying to get at for the past 10 minutes! You're his friend; maybe you can reason with him.”

Trucy bit her lip and nervously glanced at Wocky from the corner of her eye. “Ok, I'll try,” she conceded, then put on her best smile as she turned to face their new client. “Morning, Wockey! How's prison?”

Apollo facepalmed. Oh yeah, real smooth. You don't ask someone how's prison when they're in prison. That was just plain rude. Although he seriously doubted Trucy meant any offense to that, her wide-eyed innocence was kind of inappropriate right now. Fortunately, Wocky didn't seem to mind her forwardness; in fact, he seemed downright smug about it.

“Hey, Shawty! Fancy seeing you here,” he greeted with a bright, charming grin. Apollo noted it's sincerity and how his face seemed to light up at the mere sight of the younger girl.

Apollo suddenly felt invisible; Wocky had eyes only for Trucy. It was a complete 180 degrees change from his previous attitude, much to Apollo’s chagrin. If he’d known about this earlier, he would have skipped all the needless introductions and get Trucy to do all the talking in the first place.

“Prison’s cool. Ya know, I’ve always wanted to do time behind bars,” Wocky continued with an almost demented look in his eyes. “This is kinda a gangster’s home turf. My true calling, ya feel me? Think of all the street cred I'll get! No one’s gonna push this homeboy around anymore. Fo’shizzle!”

Trucy’s eyes dimmed in disappointment at his words. “But Wocky, Mother’s worried about you; daddy's worried,” she placed a gloved hand upon the viewing window, “I'm worried. That's why I brought him here – she indicated at Apollo next to her – Polly’s a lawyer, he’s been trained by the best. Let him– let us help you.”

Wocky’s gaze softened at her sincerity. “I appreciate the love, Shawty, but I did it. What's more to say?”

“So you decided to confess,” interrupted Apollo as he tried to put himself in the gangster’s shoes, as boggling as his thinking may be. “That's pretty noble of you.”
“I was brought up in an honor-shame culture. It’s how we Japanese are,” he explained with a shrug. “I’m just keeping it real, bro. A Kitaki owns up to his mistakes and we take responsibility for our actions. I killed a man, I pay the price. Ya dig?”

“I, uh, dig,” Apollo struggled with his words and what Wocky was telling him, “but you talk about it like you don’t regret it, not even a little. You took someone else’s life like it was nothing. I’m just trying to wrap my mind around your logic.”

“A life for a life; that bastard had it coming.”

Apollo and Trucy paused to share a look. What the heck was that? Were Wocky’s defenses finally slipping? Well, whatever it was, they knew a motive when they saw one. At least they were getting somewhere. Discretely, Apollo nudged Trucy and she got the hint.

“Why would you say that? Did that doctor try to hurt you?” she asked, concern showing in her voice and on her face.

“You could say that,” Wocky replied with narrowed eyes, fuming on the inside at the memory of that night. “My old man wanted me and the fam to go for a health check. It was real sudden and not at our usual clinic. My fallen angel was totally against it, said I was as fit as a fiddle and Big Wins was whack.”

“Fallen angel?” Apollo leaned down to whisper into Trucy’s ear, confused.

“Alita Tiala, his girlfriend,” she whispered back.

“Ah.”

“Anyway, I’ve plans to settle down, start a family of my own, ya know? So I thought, why not? Get myself checked good and I wouldn’t have to worry about a thing.” Then his eyes darkened and his voice turned grave. “That’s when I saw it – that damn bullet near my heart.”

Trucy’s hand flew to her mouth in a horrified gasp, body trembling slightly from the shock of the news. No way… they’ve already been pass that! She remembered hers and Phoenix’s anxiety that dreadful night; Wocky being wheeled in and out of surgery; the lack of sleep and perpetual waiting; and having to deal with emotional parents. Then morning came; the worst was presumed over; and Meraktis had discharged his patient as a miracle and surgical success. The bullet was removed from being lodged narrowly close to his heart, Wocky found love in the form of the very nurse that had treated him, and they all lived happily ever after. At least, that’s what everyone thought. All this was narrated to Apollo, who hung on and listened patiently to every word, taking notes where necessary.

“You were involved in a gang fight,” he clarified slowly, tapping his notepad with a pen. “I assume you’re a sharpshooter?”

“You trippin’? ‘Course I am! What kind of gangster can’t shoot? That jackass just got lucky, is all,” answered Wocky with a flush and indignant huff.

“Hmm…”

It wasn’t hard to catch onto Apollo’s skepticism.

“Anyway, that doctor lied to me. Probably was too chicken to fess up. He sewed me back up and sent me home telling my folks I’m gonna be a’ok.” Wocky shrugged in a careless manner. “So I shot him. Ain’t nobody lies to a Kitaki and gets away with it!”
There's the motive. Unfortunately, it worked against the defense. Apollo paused in his writing with a thoughtful frown. “Malpractice, huh…”

“I think you mean Pal Meraktis,” said Trucy.

“Please don’t.”

“It was right easy too. Dude was in the park pulling along a fucking noodles stand. He had nowhere to run and ‘Boom!’” Wocky smirked and pretended to shoot with his fingers. “Headshot.”

“A noodles stand?!” exclaimed the pair, baffled. Where the heck did that noodles stand come from? This case was getting more bizarre the more they listened.

“Hey, don't ask me. I'm just repeating the facts. Maybe the stress cracked him like an egg; probably fer the best I shot him. Fucking weirdo.”

It was frustrating. Wocky’s indifference was more troubling than he had initially anticipated. There really wasn't anything he could do in a situation like this, except have his client plead guilty and get a lighter sentence as a result. Then again, if that were the case, Wocky didn't really need him and he would have to reject the case in favor of upholding his boss’ philosophy. Kristoph would never tolerate a slight to his perfect record; he never lost a single case for 15 years. Trucy must have sensed his reservations because she was quick to jump in with questions of her own. There had to be an opening, a loophole, a gap in memory, something. To her it was simple: acquit her friend at all costs and protect those who mattered to her most.

“Are you sure you shot Pal Meraktis?” she insisted. “Your gun? You?”

“Fo’sure, Shawty. Dead as a door nail.”

Apollo stiffened as did Trucy; his hand automatically moved to his bracelet, which had tightened that split second ago. He felt it, sensed it, saw it – the way the corners of Wocky’s lips twitched from his carefree smirk; how his eyes briefly darted to the side when he said, ‘Fo’sure’; and that tiny bead of sweat trickling down his temple you would have missed if you weren't looking for it. He chanced a glance at his new assistant from the corner of his eye and noted her sudden, rigid posture.

Trucy’s gaze was intense and her hands were clenched into tight fists, studying Wocky like a test paper at a final exam. Apollo remembered Phoenix mention something about his daughter’s ability before, how she could sense if someone was lying (thereby justifying the ex-lawyer’s reasoning for bringing her to work as his ‘lucky charm’). Whether or not he believed that was one thing, but he sensed it too, which meant that Wocky was hiding something about his encounter with the victim last evening. And after everything their conversation revealed, he had a sneaking suspicion it had something to do with that gun.

‘I knew him since he was a kid and he would never kill anyone, even if he often talked big about it. He can't even hold a gun to your head without shaking, much less aim and fire.’

It was time to test Phoenix’s testimony. Apollo rose to his feet and gave a curt bow, which prompted Trucy to do the same, albeit rushed and confused.

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Kitaki,” he made his way to the door and opened it for Trucy, “Try and get some rest. I'll see you in court tomorrow.”

“Bye, Wocky!”

“Ey, yo! I said I din need no lawyer! Hey!”
Apollo closed the door behind him and turned to face his assistant with an annoyed scowl. “There, I talked to your boyfriend. Happy now?”

“Yep!” Trucy grinned, bouncing on the spot. “And he already has Alita; he’s not my boyfriend.”

Apollo raised an eyebrow at her unorthodox phrasing. She was smiling as she spoke, but that grin did not seem to match her words and there was an inconceivable twinge of regret in the air. It immediately reminded him of Phoenix’s fake, carefree smiles, the kind that masked his pain; and Apollo realized how similar father and daughter really were. It saddened him because he knew where that feeling was coming from and he could sympathize.

“Miss Wright, you…”

But the darkness disappeared from her eyes as quickly as it came.

“Anyway,” she interrupted a little too hastily, “I saw your reaction back there. So, you sensed it too? Do you think Wocky’s lying?”

“… I doubt so,” he replied, carefully thinking over the gangster’s descriptions. Wocky didn't have a reason or much motive to lie about killing someone, unless to plead innocent, which was the exact opposite of what he was doing. It had to be something else.

“Maybe… maybe he's not sure about something.”

“Like what?”

Apollo considered the question, turning the scenario around in his head. Phoenix once told him that should he hit a roadblock, it helped to turn the case around and consider it from a different angle. Instead of asking if Wocky shot Pal Meraktis, they should be asking what made him so sure he committed the crime. From what Apollo could gather of the teen’s state of mind that night, Wocky had been an emotional tornado – shocked, frightened, panicked, betrayed, devastated and most of all, angry – and his testimony technically couldn't be deemed 100% reliable. He was upset. His proficiency on handling a gun was questionable. There was a friggin’ noodles stand. It was a dark and cloudy night. Anything could have happened in that park.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” he said as he marched out of the detention center with Trucy in tow.

“Ooh! Are we going to investigate the crime scene?” she squealed and clapped her hands, eyes shining. She often heard stories of her daddy conducting exciting investigations during his time as a lawyer, and now it was her turn to experience it. “Are we going to look for clues? I want to grab people by the collar and ask questions!”

“Let’s avoid that last one… I’ll get my bike,” Apollo grumbled. He really wasn’t looking forward to this.

“You have a bike like Uncle Klavier?!“ Trucy gushed.

“Bicycle. I have a bicycle.”
They arrived at the crime scene a little earlier than scheduled, but their urgency and enthusiasm didn’t do much for the scene that awaited them. Police cars were parked along the pavement; yellow barrier tape cordoned off all possible entrances to the park; and a few officers stood guard around the premises, ushering away any passerby or stubborn media representative that made valiant attempts to access the area. There was a particularly persistent and animated photographer with a huge afro and an even bigger mouth to go along with that southern accent, but she too gave up when the bush she dived in to sneak past security ended up tossed into the nearest trash bin along with herself and her camera. Apollo sweatdropped as he watched the scene with growing concern.

“Looks like the police are still investigating the crime scene,” he said to his partner with a wry smirk. “Any chance you can make us disappear and reappear inside the park?”

Trucy hummed thoughtfully. “Well, first I'll need a big box, and then I'll need to saw you in half!”

“... I was being sarcastic,” he deadpanned, mentally horrified and concerned by how literally she took his words, and how serious she took herself and her craft. Note to self: girl doesn't get sarcasm, stop trying. He quickly diverted her attention before she got any funny ideas.

“I guess we can come back later. What should we do now?”

Trucy tapped her chin as she pondered their options. “Hmm… we could–” Suddenly, her gaze landed on a very prominent, very familiar red *Honda Shadow* parked along the curb, and she panicked.

“Eep! Uncle Klavier’s here!”

And before Apollo even saw it coming, Trucy dived headfirst into the nearest trash bin.

What the– Apollo sweatdropped and inched close to peer down at the strange girl huddled a little too comfortably inside. That was when he started to question his faith and the cruel irony that was his life. Good help really was hard to come by these days; after all, how many people would actually think that jumping into a trash bin was a good idea? Chances were, none. Then again, as Apollo was quickly learning about Phoenix’s daughter, Trucy was anything but normal. The Wrights really were a handful.

“Miss Wright…”

“I'm not here!” said the trash bin.

“Come out, please,” Apollo droned, rapping on the surface with his knuckles. “You don't know what's been in there. And for how long.”

“No! If Uncle Klavier sees me, it's over. He'll tell daddy, and there goes our investigation.”

“You're going to have to tell your dad at some point… I can't lie to him forever.”

“But if I tell him, his assassin will kill me too – and you’ll be next! We know too much. Come, there's room for two.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“... I think der one who’s being ridiculous is you, Herr Justice.”
Apollo stifled a yell and whirled around to come face to face with his courtroom rival. Speak of the devil. Klavier Gavin had his hands on his hips and was looking at Apollo with a half-taunting, half-amused smirk on his lips; almost as if he had walked in on something good and had absolutely no plans on ever letting it go. The smirk grew wider and ten times more smug.

"Why are you talking to das trash bin, Herr Forehead? Does being in ihr company stink that much?"

"I… I wasn't talking to it," he defended himself, while mentally cursing Trucy for making him look like an idiot in public, in front of the last person he wanted to embarrass himself before no less. "I was just talking to myself."

Ok, that didn't sound any better.

Klavier cocked his head and studied his rival perceptively. "You're here to investigate das crime scene. Herr Kitaki ist ihr client, isn't he?" he asked, though it sounded more like a statement than to seek clarification. When the brunette nodded his head, he pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. "Why am I not surprised…"

Apollo blinked slowly, not really following the blonde. "Excuse me?"

"Cruel irony aside," said Klavier with a dramatic toss of his head, "This was what Herr Wright spoke to you about, ja? In der Klinik. He cares about that boy a great deal; would've begged mein bruder to defend him if Kristoph were here. Alas, alle evidence reinforces Herr Kitaki's confession. You're defending a real murderer, Herr Justice. You might want to reconsider."

The blonde's words, despite his good faith, only served to make Apollo more angry than damper his confidence. He disliked the way Klavier was so quick to judge, as well as the nature of his priorities. Self-absorbed, proud and arrogant, Klavier took the easy way out for the benefit of his reputation. The blonde lacked tact and heart; just because Wocky appeared like a lost cause, he was supposed to just drop him? To be honest, he had almost made that mistake himself, but then he remembered an old interview about Phoenix and his motivation on becoming a lawyer: it was to defend those who the world had turned its back on, those who screamed for help in the darkness; and like his idol, he was interested in the truth. Was he fighting a losing battle? Perhaps. Was it for a lost cause? No, definitely not. Guilty or not, win or lose, everyone was entitled to be heard and worthy of a fight. Who was Klavier to decide what Wocky did or didn't deserve?

"Thanks, but no thanks, Prosecutor Gavin," said Apollo firmly as he held his ground. "You have your way of doing things, I have mine. And I'll do whatever it takes to uncover the truth."

Klavier scoffed at his bravado. "Hä? Even if it's staring you in das face?" he bit out sardonically.

Apollo said nothing to that so he turned, waving his rival off. "Whatever, Bis nächstes Mal – Ah," he paused and mentioned as an afterthought, "und before you even think of asking Fräulein Detective any questions, know that I've had a serious talk with her about those loose lips of hers. Ciao!"

Apollo watched as the red bike revved up and sped off down the street. Gods, he really couldn't stand that guy. It was baffling how someone who was apparently on the side of justice, could be so obnoxiously antagonistic, he almost felt like the bad guy. Prosecutors and attorneys were two sides of the same coin; they should be helping each other arrive at the truth, right? Well apparently, Klavier didn't get the memo. One would have thought he'd mellow down after being served a slice of humble pie from the previous trial. If anything, the blonde's general intolerance towards him felt more personal than meager workplace politics.

Just then, a finger tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, dumb lawyer. Is he gone?"
Apollo jumped and a hand flew to his chest to calm his racing heart. Considering how much more stressed he felt in these last two weeks than he ever had in his four years at law school, He swore his current job and the people part of it would be the death of him.

“Don't tell me you're the only lawyer in this country,” Ema remarked dubiously.

“I could say the same for you detectives,” Apollo quipped in return.

The woman smirked, but it looked more like a grimace with the way her lips fought to stay up and the sallow hue of her normally pink cheeks. Apollo also noticed that she had dark circles forming under her eyes. Was the detective not getting enough sleep?

“You look terrible,” he commented before he could stop himself. Immediately, he snapped his mouth shut. Shit, she's going to be so mad. And Apollo braced himself for the onslaught of snackoo projectiles to the face. But they never came.

Ema squatted by the pavement and exhaled a tired sigh. “Really? I couldn't tell,” she drawled sarcastically, fishing out a snackoo from her pocket and stuffing it into her mouth like a cigarette. “I need a break,” and the snackoo bobbed as she talked, “If I go on anymore, I'll collapse.”

“Detective Skye?” Apollo studied her with the slightest bit of concern, his voice soft and tentative. It was so weird to see her vulnerable, especially in front of him.

Ema must have sensed his sincerity, because she inclined her head and acknowledged him with a tired smirk. “It's work,” she explained. “I spent the past two weeks chasing after a stupid panty snatcher, and then I'm pulled to head this homicide case simultaneously. That pervert is still out there somewhere; and that glimmerous fop won't shut up until I've found enough evidence for him to win this case with his eyes closed. I'm overworked, underpaid – and I'm not that bastard's circus monkey, goddammit!”

Apollo recoiled from the force of her outburst. Wow, someone was definitely downright miserable and vindictive. And he thought he had it bad. No wonder Ema was so grumpy all the time.

“No one said you were,” he ventured with caution. “And everyone deserves a break once in awhile… you're your own boss!”

“Damn straight!”

“So… I have some questions that–”

Ema snorted at his pathetic attempt at persuasion, but it wasn't without mirth.

“Nice try, rookie, but my lips are sealed,” she made a zipping motion with her fingers for emphasis. “You're not getting anything out of me except that Kitaki did it – he's the only one with reason to.”

Apollo stopped short and honed in on the detective’s last words. ‘He's the only one with reason to?’ he pondered that statement and replayed it in his head. Why did that conclusion sound odd to him? Wocky had said that the victim lied to him about that heart procedure, and it was common knowledge that the legal consequences for clinical malpractice were severe. If Wocky hadn't threatened Meraktis with his life, his family could have sued and demanded the authorities to open a case for further investigation. News of it would have been big. Was there anyone else who would want the doctor dead to prevent all of this?
In actual fact, he had gotten more out of Ema than he initially bargained for. Of course, he wasn't going to tell her that.

“Fine,” he feigned disappointment, “but I need to ask you something else. Something unrelated to this case.”

“What's that?”

“This,” and from within his vest pocket, he pulled out a small ziplock bag and unfolded it before Ema’s curious gaze. “I found this yesterday during my investigation. I'm hoping you can help me run an analysis on this; find out where it came from.”

Ema rose to her feet and accepted the bullet from him. A knowing look flashed through her eyes. “Is this connected to the DH-12 incident?”

“Maybe,” Apollo kept his replies vague. “I can't reveal too much yet, but it's my strongest lead so far and I need to milk it for all it's worth. I understand you've got a lot on your plate now, but–”

“It's fine,” she answered quickly and observed her fellow officers before discretely pocketing the bag. Apollo noticed with a smile that she did it carefully as if it was something extremely precious. As much as the grumpy detective tried to hide it, it was obvious (at least to him) how much Phoenix meant to her and how deeply she cared. Maybe a little too deep that she was often rather difficult.

“I'll find out as much as I can,” she said, before that typical annoyed expression was back on her face. “You know, I'm risking my position and abusing resources 'cuz of you. This better work, Justice.”

He gave a sheepish laugh. “Thanks, detective.”

“Humph.”

They parted ways as if nothing had happened. Ema returned to the crime scene inside the park, and Apollo remained by the entrance wondering what he was supposed to do now. Suddenly, the trash bin next to him gave a violent shudder and out popped Trucy, who greedily took in a great gasp of precious, wonderful, sweet air.

“Finally! I thought they'd never leave!”

There was a look of utter exasperation on the young attorney’s face. Honestly, he had forgotten about her.

“Nobody asked you to hide in there…” he trailed off, hoping she would get the hint and stop acting so ridiculous. Unfortunately, his speech fell on deaf ears.

“Anyway, you wouldn't believe what I found in here,” said Trucy as she pulled out a pair of what looked to be indoor slippers. They appeared to be fairly new and in great condition, save for some mud stains and an imprint of a leaf at the bottom.

“No, stupid! Look at the label,” Trucy pouted and all but shoved the slippers at Apollo’s face.
“Meraktis… clinic…” he read out slowly, only to stop to fully process the implications.

*What the hell?*

“Funny how a pair of slippers all the way from the victim’s clinic ended up near the scene of the crime, huh?” Trucy said with a knowing smirk. “Wocky came from home and Pal Meraktis was shot dead. I wonder who else had the time to come by and throw away a good pair of slippers?”

“Trash collectors clear bins around 8 p.m. daily,” Apollo added in his two cents. “These slippers have been here since last night. Someone must’ve followed the victim from the clinic.” He met Trucy’s gaze and the latter’s eyes shone in excitement. “Hold onto them,” he commanded. “I think it’s time we pay Meraktis Clinic a visit.”

“Woo! Now we’re getting somewhere!” She pumped a fist into the air. “I’ll put them in my panties!”

Apollo groaned into his hands. “Please don’t say panties…”

The door opened a crack and a single blue eye peered into the room beyond. Certain that none would interfere with their business, the eye retreated and the door opened wider to accommodate a pair of crutches that dragged along a single bandaged foot.

Phoenix hobbled into Kristoph’s private study, having rushed here – or as quick as his twisted ankle allowed him – with a purpose as soon as he was discharged from Hickfield Clinic. Just as well neither Trucy nor Klavier had been around during his time of release; he couldn’t have them hovering over him when he had something important to check; a personal investigation of the sorts. Perhaps he was getting sidetracked; he should be focusing on locating the original case documents, as well as the identity of Klavier’s source the night before Zak’s trial, not scouring for intel on a certain noisy, pointy hair rookie attorney. But that extensive (not to mention, intrusive) document of Apollo he found in Kristoph’s office haunted him like a cryptic riddle, and he had to find out what the ‘Gramarye Secret’ was.

Kristoph’s study made up part of the mansion’s library; no one was home to bother him, but Phoenix wanted to make this quick. Although the room was accessible to all who lived here, he still felt anxious whenever it came to Kristoph’s stuff. Invading his fiance’s privacy was one thing, but Kristoph’s likely involvement in the Gramarye case made things all the more worse. As much as he tried to deny the truth, even breaking down and putting up a fight against Apollo in the office last weekend on said possibility, a dark part of his soul suspected the man he loved – and that part was steadily growing the more he reflected on Kristoph’s lack of results. The man was a genius, wasn’t he? A veteran of his craft. Then how was it possible that Apollo managed to achieve so much in two weeks, while Kristoph had seven years, yet produced nothing at all to show for his efforts?

‘Maybe he was Zak’s lawyer, but he had to give it up. Maybe he already returned the papers and someone else took up the case – and the papers were now with them.’

As far fetched as that sounded, he couldn’t fully disregard that possibility. And even if – for whatever inconceivable reason – Kristoph happened to retain those papers, what reason would he have to sabotage him? They never even knew each other before the events of that trial! Call it denial if you will, but Phoenix really didn't see Kristoph of all people capable of acting so… illogically. It just
Phoenix slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and thumbed through the rows on files on the first shelf. Call it a habit cultivated from years of investigation, but he rather not leave any fingerprints behind, just in case Kristoph were to ever get an inkling someone had snooped through his stuff. The man could get paranoid… and he supposed he was behaving a little paranoid himself.

Guilt chewed through him, but Phoenix did his best to suppress it even though it left him feeling inexplicably sick. Kristoph was his partner. They really shouldn’t have to hide anything from each other, but here they were.

Gramarye Secret. What’s the Gramarye Secret?

That question haunted him as he frantically peeled back file covers and checked through their contents. Curiosity killed the cat, but not knowing would kill him faster. Whether or not Kristoph had his hand in the DH-12 incident had yet to be clarified, but he was definitely hiding something. The question is, what did Apollo Justice have to do with anything? The blonde’s obsession with the boy was chillingly unhealthy. Did he know about Apollo before said understudy came into his office seeking his first job? What was Kristoph so terrified of that he would have to dig up dirt on the kid’s past and keep it locked away in a dark, musty drawer like a great sin? Why was Apollo so important?

But Phoenix never found his answer.

Kristoph was clean, just like the state of his study and his impeccable record. The longer Phoenix searched, the more relieved he felt, yet the anxiety never went away. Was he hoping to find something incriminating against his own fiancé? The very man who accepted, took him in and loved him over the past seven years? What did that make him?

“Screw this,” and with that, Phoenix shoved the last file back into place and turned to leave. He knew this had been a bad idea from the start. Perhaps he had misjudged Kristoph after all; it was ridiculous to suspect him. Nothing but a coincidence. He was probably getting desperate.

In his haste to leave, Phoenix failed to see the corner of the study desk, until his bandaged foot slammed painfully against it. Swearing beneath his breath and cursing his foul luck, Phoenix had to restrain himself from dropping his crutches to clutch at his sore ankle, least he found himself on the floor and sustaining potentially more injuries. His nostrils flared as he breathed in deeply. Of all the rotten luck—

That was when he noticed it.

The impact had shaken the top drawer loose and it slid open to reveal a rather curious item inside. Phoenix took pause to study it. Conceivable confusion and horror swam in his eyes and he rounded the desk clumsily to pluck the small card from within and brought it close. It was a poker card yellowed slightly from age with a joker grinning maliciously at him, as if it knew a deep, dark secret that he didn’t. And dark it was, because on the flip side of the card, embezzled in red glitter were the cursive words that read, ‘Troupe Gramarye’.

Phoenix stared at the card silently, his world growing darker with every passing second, for the last time he had seen this particular deck of cards was when he played against Zak Gramarye seven years ago for the right to defend him, and won.

To be continued...
I'll be taking a break from writing until further notice. In the meantime, feel free to leave comments and let me know what you think! Reading them gives me great pleasure. They make for interesting banter.
Meraktis Clinic, Reception – Tuesday, 11.35 a.m.

“Hello, anyone in here?”

Apollo toed off his shoes and ducked under the entrance arc way, his twin hair spikes just barely missing the flickering LED sign board hanging overhead, which read ‘MERAKTIS CLINIC by Pal Meraktis’. Despite the elegant, upstanding decor that made up the clinic’s exterior, the reception area left much to be desired: old dusty tarps covered most of the surrounding furniture; the shutters of the medicine counter were down; the receptionist desk was mostly bare, save an uncapped ballpoint pen and an artificial potted plant; and the air smelled slightly musty, like no one had bothered to ventilate the place for months. Despite the welcome sign that hung innocently at the entrance, the clinic was dark and uninviting, curtains drawn, except for the few dim lights along a narrow corridor that presumably led to the operation theatre. A light bulb buzzed and flickered sporadically, before it blew out with a quiet fizz. It made the place look darker still. The whole scene kind of reminded him of those survival horror movies – and this being a clinic-cum-hospital certainly didn’t do wonders for the imagination.

“Hello? We tried ringing the bell, but nobody answered…”

Again, he was met with silence.

“Huh, guess we’re the first ones here.” He scratched the back of his head idly, surprised for the first time in days. Normally, defense attorneys didn’t get dibs on crime scenes or investigation sites. This was a major first. He couldn’t believe his luck!

“Looks like the police haven’t shown up yet. Let’s search the place!”

Trucy nervously tailed after him, her gloved fingers a death grip around his now very wrinkled right arm sleeve. “I don’t know P-Polly… M-M-Maybe we should go before the g-g-ghost grabs us and starts k-killing us one by one…”

Apollo closed his eyes with a long suffering sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. Again, why had he agreed to her coming along? Oh right, because the little she-devil had used emotional blackmail and he had no friggin’ choice.

“We’re burning daylight, Miss Wright…”

“I don’t care if it’s daytime!”

“That’s not what I meant–“

“This place gives me the creeps… and do you have any idea how many people die in hospitals?!”
“Uh, I don’t think anyone’s died here—“

“A ghost could pop out any moment! Haven’t you watched ‘The Shining’? Nooooo… I don’t want to play with anyone!”

Apollo turned around to address her. The unimpressed expression on his face said it all.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Everyone knows there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Shh!” She smacked her hands over his mouth rather painfully. “Don’t say that! The ghost might hear you and get mad…”

Apollo pried her hands away from his mouth and leveled her with an irritatated stare. “For the last time, Miss Wright. There’s no such thing as—“

Suddenly, a cold hand fell upon his shoulder and someone hissed into his ear.

“Leave.”

“GHOST!”

The pair screamed and ran into each other, before landing unceremoniously on their asses. A cloud of dust flew up and they coughed. Apollo groaned, rubbing his sore behind as he struggled to stand. When the world finally stopped spinning, he found himself staring at a pretty little lady with an irritated scowl on her pretty little face. She was a petite thing with fair skin, soft eyes and an even softer disposition; her sandy-brown hair was done up in a perfect pixie bun with the ends of her side bangs curled delicately behind her ears; a yellow summer frock adorned her slender body; and a green scarf tied stylishly around her neck completed the sweet yet simple look. The woman’s hands moved to her hips, as she studied the strange pair with an unimpressed quirk of an eyebrow.

“You, ah… you’re not a ghost,” Apollo observed lamely. “... Why are your hands so cold though?”

“Urgh, obviously,” scoffed the young woman, rolling her eyes. “And the AC is busted, so you either get ‘very cold’ or ‘frigid winter’ down here.” She looked like she was about to comment further, but paused at the sight of Trucy, recognition shining in her dark brown eyes. And then, almost as quickly, they narrowed into a pleased smile, the tiniest of giggles bubbled from her glossy pink lips. She clapped her hands together excitedly.

“Hey, well fancy that! We haven’t caught up in like, forever! How’ve you been, Trudy?”

Apollo blinked rapidly, confused. Trudy? Who the heck was Trudy? Was he missing something here? Maybe that bump on the head really did a number on his brain cells.

Trucy meanwhile, looked significantly less excited. Really, of all people? Honestly, she would have picked a ghost over this.

“It’s Trucy,” she corrected through thinly veiled impatience, the wide smile on her lips twitching at the corners. “And nothing much… just working on my magic and performing sellout shows at ‘The Wonder Bar’. Y’know, earning my own keep and not relying on others’ money? Stuff like that.”

“Right…” said the young woman with a wink and snap of her fingers, like they were privy to some inside joke that didn’t even exist. “Not like your daddy, correct?”

“Actually, I was thinking more like you,” Trucy deadpanned.
An obnoxious giggle. “Oh, Trixie, you always know how to make me laugh.”

“And you’re a riot yourself.”

Apollo gulped and tugged uncomfortably at his collar from the sudden tension in the air. Ok… *sensing some hostility here. Was it him, or did these two really not like each very much, more so than Trucy’s open disdain towards him? He could’ve sworn he saw electricity shooting between their eyes – and he hypothesized the amount of static produced could actually power up the lights in this clinic; yet, they were smiling sweetly at each other like old friends. *Yup, Apollo concluded to himself, *girls really are scary. He would rather handle a ghost any day.*

“Um, sorry, not to be rude but…” He ducked down to whisper into Trucy’s ear, while nodding none too discreetly at the newcomer. “Who’s that?”

Trucy sighed like Apollo had just asked her if it was the end of the world, instead of a simple, innocent question. Nevertheless, she gestured at the older girl none too enthusiastically.

“Polly, this is Alita Tiala, Wocky’s girlfriend,” she introduced and vice versa. “Alita, this is Apollo Justice, Wocky’s lawyer.”

The last two words worked like a trigger. Alita gasped and when her gaze turned to said attorney of law, her expression changed completely and it was like the arrogant woman two seconds prior never existed. *He took the case,* she thought in awe as she looked upon the handsome brunette with newfound respect, overwhelmed by sudden emotion. *Someone’s actually going to defend my Wocky.*

Flustered and embarrassed over her earlier actions, Alita clasped her hands in front of her and bowed deeply. “I—I’m so sorry! Ooh… Tracy, why didn’t you say so?” she squeaked in mortification. “Earlier… what I said… that was rude of me. I had no idea…” Suddenly, she grasped Apollo’s hands, making said man jump. “Thank you! Thank you for helping my Wocky-Pocky! Please don’t listen to a word he or the media says. I know my fiancé – he’s kind and gentle; he would never hurt a fly!”

“H-Hey, Miss Tiala, it’s ok,,” said Apollo awkwardly, as he struggled to pull away. “Really, I—“ And then he paused and together with Trucy, did a double-take.

“Wait, fiancé?!”

Alita blinked at them, hopelessly confused. “Um… yes? Wocky-Pocky proposed to me the night before the murder.” She blushed from the sweet memory, cupping her cheeks with a blissful sigh. “We were going to officialise it the next day, tell the family and all, but then that health report came and it really upset my Wocky-Pocky. And well…” She looked away, crestfallen. “You know the rest.”

“Oh.” Trucy had the same disappointment, the sadness in her eyes palpable, but for a whole different reason. And Apollo, ever the observant one, figured he knew what it was.

But now wasn’t the time or place.

“Miss Tiala, since you’re here, I would like to ask you some questions,” Apollo cut to the chase, fishing out his notebook and pen from his pocket. At Alita’s hesitance, he flashed her an encouraging smile. “No worries, just something to help with our investigation to acquit Wocky, you know?”

“Of course!” A sudden passion seized her and sparked in her eyes. “Anything to help my Wocky-Pocky!”
The smile on Apollo’s face started to twitch. Seriously, that pet name had to stop. He decided to start off easy.

“Alright, I understand you are Wocky’s fiancée, but what about the victim? Are you related to Pal Maraktis in any way?”

“Mm… yeah, I guess?” She played with the ends of her scarf with a thoughtful frown. “Meraktis was my boss. I worked here for about 3 years as a nurse, but I quit a year ago and now I work at Hickfield Clinic.”

“Why’s that?” He pressed. “Didn’t get along with your boss?”

Alita gave a nonchalant shrug. “No, not really. They just paid more.”

“Oh.”

The young nurse giggled and clapped her hands as she bounced on the heels of her feet. “Tee hee! This is fun! Ask another question, Mr Justice.”

Apollo sweatdropped. Did this woman seriously think this was some sort of game? Had she no sense of urgency or consequence at all? Her fiancé was in jail awaiting trial for murder, the information she knew could literally spell life and death for Wocky, and all she had to say about it was that it was ‘fun’? Hadn’t she expressed concern and despair towards Wocky’s plight and allowed her desperation to show when she thanked him for his help, but two minutes ago? What the heck was wrong with this woman? There was no pinning down her strange character.

“Well, I have a question,” Trucy interrupted to glare suspiciously at an oblivious Alita, pointing at her for emphasis. “If you’re working at Hickfield Clinic like you said, what are you even doing here?”

Either Alita didn’t notice the young magician’s glaring animosity or simply chose to ignore it, because all she offered Trucy in return for her troubles was an innocent, wide-eyed stare.

“Who, me?” She indicated at herself in mild confusion. “It’s really no big deal… When I quit last year, I left a lot of personal belongings behind. And as you know, nurses’ shifts are crazy hectic and most times, unpredictable. Meraktis allowed me to come back as and when my schedule permitted to collect my things. That box over there – she nodded at a sealed cardboard box next to the rack of clinic slippers – just happens to be the last of them. After that, it’s good riddance to this… urgh, filthy place!”

Then, she all but shoved Trucy aside to regard Apollo with a blindingly sweet smile. The poor girl crashed straight into the slippers rack, but Alita paid her no heed. “So, what else would you like to know, Mr Justice? I’ll be happy to answer any of your questions.”

Apollo nervously glanced down at his notes. “Well…”

“Hey! You did that on purpose!”

“What do you know about last evening...“

“Polly, throw her in jail!”

“... when the incident happened,” he struggled to wrap up his interview with Alita, before either girl completely snapped and tried to kill the other with teeth, verbal insults and their bare hands. He did not need another murder case on his portfolio so soon – or better yet, not ever – especially since he
hardly begun prying open this one. Also, he desperately wanted to know what sort of courtroom dramas Trucy had been watching in her free time, because her warped concept of defense lawyers were utter rubbish.

“Where were you? Did Wocky mention anything about a health checkup or about Pal Meraktis at all? Even prior to last evening?”

With a drawn out “Hmm”, Alita pondered the set of questions long and hard, all the while ignoring a fuming Trucy dancing around her. Prior to last evening... Was there anything in their usual conversations that could even be considered crucial evidence, let alone meaningful at all? Her fiancé always did most of the talking for them, she had learned to tune some of it out and nod appropriately for others. Perhaps she shouldn’t have taken Wocky’s company for granted.

“Actually, I believe I can answer all your questions within a single event,” she began with an expression so serious, it even got Trucy’s attention, as the younger girl loosened up on the threatening pouts (What, they were very persuasive, ok?). Apollo meanwhile, couldn’t believe his luck. All my questions? Things were finally going his way, and he quickly swapped his notepad for a cellphone recording instead.

“On Sunday evening after my shift, I returned home to find my Wocky-Pocky pacing my apartment living room in a downright foul mood. Oh, and in case you’re wondering, we gave each other a set of spare keys to our places - you know, in case there was ever an emergency and we needed to find each other,” Alita explained, only to mutter sheepishly beneath her breath. “I guess you could count that night an emergency. Our year-long relationship was in jeopardy after all.” She missed the quiet and sarcastic murmur of “Hardly” delivered by none other than Trucy Wright herself. Apollo simply swatted her away from his phone’s microphone.

“Anyway, he had brought up his intention to propose to me to his parents, but things didn’t go so well... So we came up with a plan to elope!”

“You did what?!” Trucy really did shriek this time, and the only reason Apollo didn’t shush Wright’s daughter was because he had joined in as well.

“Alita, how could you?” Trucy demanded, hurt and furious all at once at the older girl’s recklessness, chronic irresponsibility and appalling lack of common sense. “Wocky’s their only child and son! 7 years ago, they almost lost him to kidnappers, and just last year they almost lost him again to death. How do you think I would – no, how do you think Mother would feel?”

“Miss Wright...” Apollo regarded the young girl sadly, sympathetically. She really does care about Wocky, he realised with growing clarity. It wasn’t difficult to see how much Alita’s confession had affected her. He wasn’t used to seeing the usually spunky and upbeat Trucy Wright this emotionally distraught.

Alita herself was taken aback by her outburst, but was quick to calm down, gazing at Trucy with soft eyes and a small rueful smile. She took a step closer to the girl and gently held her hands. “I know, Trucy,” she said with an understanding smile. “That’s why I told Wocky-Pocky not to be so hasty, that we would speak to his parents the following day as a couple and work something out... And only if that fails, then we elope!”

Apollo and Trucy crashed onto the floor simultaneously. What the hell – What was even the point of that conversation then? So much for getting their hopes up. Alita really was one of a kind. And speaking of unique, the nurse continued with her account in the same dreamy voice as though she hadn’t been interrupted in the first place.
“So the next day, we went over to his place, but his parents beat us to it with a grave announcement: Wocky-Pocky’s medical report came back and the doctors revealed that the bullet from an old bullet wound was still lodged precariously close to his heart. Of course, my Wocky-Pocky didn’t take too well to the news; he was inconsolable and all thoughts of marriage flew out the window,” she recounted with a disappointed sigh and pout across her lips. “I followed after him as he stormed through the estate, raving on and on about how ‘that cheatin’ Meraktis will be sorry he lied ta this Kitaki’. Before I could stop him, he grabbed the nearest gun and bolted out the house.” Suddenly, her expression turned from troubled to angry. “Oooh… it’s all that new clinic’s fault! I told him not to go, but he didn’t listen!”

A jolt went through Apollo, who frowned deeply as he processed the implications of that last statement. *Huh, that’s odd…* Normally, wasn’t it a good thing that you discovered traces of something in your body that could kill you, *before* it killed you? Come to think of it, Wocky had mentioned something similar at the detention centre earlier. Something along the lines of Alita insisting that he was healthy enough to skip out on a standard medical checkup, which begged the question as to *why*.

“You seem to have something against the new family doctor,” observed Apollo with a meaningful stare.

“Urk, it’s not that!” said Alita defensively. “It’s the stress – can you imagine how stressful it must’ve been for my fiancé once he found out? If that bullet really was that close to his heart, then something as shocking as that would obviously make things worse. It’s how the body works.”

Suddenly, his bracelet tightened, and Apollo immediately knew that his earlier suspicions on Wocky’s new fiancée were not unfounded. *What a strange thing to say*, he thought as he turned Alita’s words in his head; after all, any loved one’s natural reaction would be immediate vehemence against clinical malpractice. While he wouldn’t go so far as to completely distrust her like how Trucy obviously did, there was no denying that this seemingly ordinary nurse was no simple woman. There were so many contradictions surrounding Alita – and he wasn’t just referring to her personality.

He stopped the recording and pocketed his cellphone. “Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Tiala. Do you mind if we take a look around?”

She clamped her hands behind her back with a smile, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Apollo stopped to stare, momentarily reminded of Trucy’s own mannerisms. As much as the two girls failed to see eye-to-eye, they were uncannily similar. One of life’s greatest ironies he supposed.

“Not at all! It’s not like Meraktis is going to stop you – he’s dead,” she ended with a carefree laugh, a tasteless attempt at a joke, which only left the duo feeling uneasy. “And well, I don’t care; I have no loyalty to this place anymore.” She beckoned them over with a finger. “Come on, I’ll even give you guys a tour!”

Alita gave them a quick rundown of the place as they walked: the different rooms, whose offices belonged to whom, a brief history of the clinic, and certain ethical practices medical staff were required to uphold within and outside the clinics and hospitals. This pertained to practical procedures and shared information, which Apollo was beginning to find more inconvenient than enlightening by the minute.
“Most importantly, you’re not allowed to enter Meraktis’ old office,” Alita warned in all seriousness. “That’s where all the medical records are kept and by doing so, it’ll be a breach in patient confidentiality, which is punishable by law.” She blew a breath in annoyance. “Sorry guys, rules are rules. You’ll need a permit for that. Standard procedure. I just don’t want my Wocky-Pocky’s lawyer to get into trouble…”

Apollo nodded patiently. “Gotcha.”

Damn, talk about disappointing. That would’ve been the first place he’d search for clues. If the victim had any unfinished business or something juicy to hide, it would definitely be in his private office. His eyes wandered around the dim surroundings instead.

“Any reason why this place looks like… uh… well–“

“Utter crap?” Alita finished helpfully and Apollo shot her a sheepish look. Was he that obvious?

“I’m not too sure, but I think Meraktis had plans of moving,” she answered, thinking back to an old conversation she had with the late doctor half a year back. “He was thinking of downsizing his business, retiring from the medical line early or something like that.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m guessing he needed clean money. Years of underhanded service with gangsters probably made him a little paranoid. The Kitakis weren’t the only ones who patronized this place.”

“For someone who left a year ago, you sure know a lot,” Trucy commented sarcastically. Alita shot her a wry grin. “What can I say? The lonely old coot enjoyed my company.”

Eventually, they reached the end of the hallway; and just when Apollo was almost convinced that there was nothing suspicious or remotely interesting about Meraktis Clinic except for the creepy surgical room at the end (those were the stuff from nightmares), he noticed a nondescript door sandwiched between two narrow walls. It’s design was different from the other consultation rooms and it definitely looked too small to belong to an office.

“Hey, Miss Tiala? What about that door?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Oh that? That leads to the garage,” the nurse replied, moving to flick on the light switch at the side, before tugging the door open. “Watch your step. Meraktis had a bad habit of leaving his tools around.”

The pair followed after her and were surprised to find a rather spacious garage, despite the size of Meraktis’ humble little neighbourhood clinic. Shelves lined the walls on either side, each one stocked with a variety of maintenance equipment, spare parts, cleaning supplies and an impressive collection of cloths and sponges. A human skeleton hung at a corner along with boxes of dummy body parts, a testimony to the owner’s profession. There was also a ladder to the side and Apollo didn’t feel particularly inclined to point it out and get into another argument with Wright’s daughter if it was a ladder or step-ladder (Who cares? It’s a bloody ladder!). True to Alita’s description, spanners and little nuts and bolts littered the concrete floor; the garage shutters were down; and at the center of it all, stood a 4-door lime green saloon, which appeared… shockingly worse for wear. Huh. Judging by the wide stock of equipment and accessories available, he would’ve thought Pal Meraktis took better care of his car. A broken mirror, a large dent at the front… and was that blood on the front bumper?!

“The old man was involved in a hit-and-run last night,” explained Alita when she noticed the young
attorney’s shock. She placed a hand on her hip and smirked. “But I guess there’s no point in pursuing the matter since he’s dead and all. Shame about the victim though. Poor soul probably never knew what hit him.”

Next to Apollo, Trucy was one second close to giving the older woman a piece of her mind both verbally and physically, but was quickly held back by the former who anticipated it, blocking her path.

“Anyways, back to work!” Alita gave a little wave and twirled around to head for the door, oblivious as always. “Good luck with your investigation, Mr. Justice! If you need anything, you know where to find me– Oh, your face is all purple, Tristy. Better get that checked. Later!”

Apollo immediately yanked Trucy back by her cape when said girl launched at the nurse, just as the garage door clicked shut. He held her at arms-length as she continued to snarl and struggle, throwing punches into the air at an imaginary Alita no doubt.

“Grrr… Let me at her, Polly! Nobody talks about my daddy like that!”

Said man sighed, long and suffering.

“It’s not like she knows it’s Mr. Wright…”

“Still… She’s evil, I tell you! Evil! I can feel it right down to the pink lace trimmings of my magic panties!”

God forbid, again with the panties.

“I know,” he replied tiredly. “That’s why it’s not such a good idea to send our very suspicious nurse to the, uh, hospital, before the trial.”

Trucy’s thoughts ground to a halt and she turned around so sharply to blink wide-eyed at her partner, Apollo feared she would sprain her neck.

“Very… suspicious?” she repeated slowly, warily. “You mean… you actually agree with me?” The beginnings of hope swam in her eyes as she gazed intently into deep browns so much like her own.

“Of course,” Apollo replied with a proud smirk, only to pause and nervously push his excitable partner a few inches away because she was getting way too close for comfort. “After all, how would Miss Tiala know about a hit-and-run, unless she was here with the victim on the night of his murder?”

Trucy stopped short, processing his words. Alita had actually let that information slip? She hadn’t noticed at all, much less made the connection between the two events. Huh, now that she thought about it, the only reason she hadn’t found it suspicious was because she knew about both incidents, a fact which she had completely overlooked and taken for granted. Any other person related to this murder mystery alone, wouldn’t. Alita however, did; meaning she was more than just a suspect, but a key witness. Apollo really was sharp. No wonder daddy and Mr. Gavin likes him, she realised with growing interest. The guy was still a homewrecker though.

“What’s more – he held up his cellphone and showed her the recording he made earlier – I’m pretty curious to know how Miss Tiala was both the last person with my client and the victim, aren’t you?”

Trucy’s eyes shone like stars. “Do you think she staged the entire thing?”

“Uh… let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he evaded the question with a sweatdrop. “Anyway,
knowing how Prosecutor Gavin works, we’ll probably see our main witness at the trial tomorrow. Right now, I’m interested in checking out this car.”

“Oh Polly, I didn’t know you were into cars!” Trucy gawked. “But, um… I don’t think you’d be able to afford one with your current pay cheque~“

“The investigation. It’s for the investigation.”

Apollo huffed and turned his back to the girl to wallow in his misery and sad excuse of a bank account. Sure, he only had one case under his belt (which Daryan failed to pay him for by the way, still upset with that) and his boss had yet to speak with him about his increment (actually, Kristoph never spoke to him after that trial at all if you didn’t count him throwing his reports back in his face), but that didn’t give people the right to pick on him. Defense attorneys had feelings too, you know?

‘Besides, there’s no way I’d be interested in this hunk of junk,’ he thought bitterly, as he assessed the damage that wrecked the car’s body. The bumper was history, along with that busted side mirror that was barely hanging on for dear life. The bonnet was more or less fine, save a conspicuous dent at the front – evidence of the impact it made with Phoenix’s body no doubt. And speaking of evidence… Apollo took out a swab of cotton wool and dabbed it on the blood stain to collect a sample for analysis. It was times like these he felt blessed to have a best friend like Clay, who had all sorts of advanced technology at GYAXA at his disposal. If all facts were consistent, this was probably Phoenix’s blood, which solidified his case. If it wasn’t, then the direction of tomorrow’s trial would be an interesting one nonetheless.

“Hey, Polly! I think I see something sticking out of the exhaust pipe!” Trucy grabbed the ends of what appeared to be fabric and gave it a hard tug. “Oomph! Give me a hand, would you?”

But there really wasn’t anywhere else to hold on to. Apollo’s eyes honed in on the teenager’s petite waist and blushed in embarrassment.

“Uh… I don’t think it’ll be appropriate if I did…”

“Puh-lease! This coming from someone who has a major crush on my dad?”

Oh that was low.

Vindicated, he grumpily stalked over, wrapped his arms around Trucy’s waist and pulled hard when she did. After about three good yanks, the object finally popped free and the momentum caused them to fly across the room and into the half-packed boxes of fake body parts. Urgh, gross. Apollo struggled to sit up with a pained groan. Ok, second time he fell on his ass this morning. Today really wasn’t his day.

“Please tell me I suffered a bruise to my ego for something important,” he grumbled beneath his breath.

“Um, actually,” Trucy turned around and revealed a pair of ridiculously designed, oversized red-and-white bloomers. “… Surprise?”

“WHAT THE HECK ARE THOSE?!”

Correction: today definitely wasn’t his day at all.

“Hey! You’re not the only one who’s shocked here,” said Trucy with a pout.

‘Traumatized is more like it,’ Apollo mentally added.
“I mean, these are Mother’s bloomers! I wonder how they ended up all the way here?”

*Wait, what?* Apollo immediately shot to his feet and snatched up the bloomers to get a closer look, only to realise a second later how perverted he looked and definitely how disturbing this whole experience was. *I’m scarred for life,* he told himself and regretted ever waking up this morning. Oh wait, he never actually slept a wink last night because he was hanging around the hospital like a total creeper worrying his brains out over that accident. That’s worse.

“Just so we’re clear, you’re telling me that Wocky’s mother’s bloomers were stuck in the exhaust pipe of Pal Meraktis’ car,” he recounted the facts with an increasingly exasperated look on his face.

What the hell was this? Was it seriously so difficult to get a normal case for once?

“Well, said Trucy, indicating at a bright red Japanese character printed on the back of the large underwear. “These are Plum Kitaki’s alright. I’ve seen daddy do their laundry enough to recognize them from a mile away.”

It took a while for Apollo to process those implications with a steadily creeping blush across his cheeks. “Is Mr. Wright the Kitaki’s maid now or…?”

Suddenly, his cell phone buzzed and he jumped, hurriedly excusing himself to take the call, while Trucy continued to eye him with a knowing smirk. Looks like somebody has a costume kink. Ok, so maybe it was still a little disturbing and highly inappropriate that Mr. Gavin’s understudy liked her daddy, not to mention they were already engaged, but… If she were to look at it from Apollo’s perspective alone, the sincerity in his eyes and his actions so transparent as day, try as she might (and believe her, she wanted to), she couldn’t perceive anything impure about his intentions. This guy had rushed down and waited overnight for any news about her daddy’s condition, despite knowing his unprivileged position in the eyes of others, as well as himself. He had jumped at the first opportunity to help Phoenix, no matter the cost, simply because he cared for him and valued his life above all else. And as much as it pained her to admit it, not even Mr. Gavin had bothered to call his own fiancé with an, “Are you alright?” But Apollo had been there at her daddy’s worst and most importantly, fought for him like he had during Daryan’s trial. In fact, he was still fighting for him now, though it was a different kind of struggle. Perhaps her intentions hadn’t been sincere when she first took advantage of the rookie’s kindness and asked for his help in place of Mr. Gavin’s absence; but something told her she could trust him. When it came to her daddy, Apollo wore his heart on his sleeve. This sort of selfless loyalty was hard to come by. It was both admirable and incredibly sad.

There was some back and forth banter. Trucy watched as the young attorney went on to say something into the phone, only to pause and shoot her a sideways glance, before he resumed talking to the person on the line. A quick appointment time was established, and then he hung up with a quiet ‘beep’. Trucy cocked her head and gave him an expectant stare. “Who was it?”

“Change in plans,” Apollo replied, as he turned to exit the garage. Trucy hurried after him. “We’re meeting Clay at *People Park*. He said the police are done with their investigation.”

Trucy pouted. “But I thought I was your assistant!”

“No, you’re a responsibility,” he grouched, before sighing into his hands. God, this better be worth it. “I’ll get Clay to give us a ride to Kitaki Estate once we’re done. We’ll return these – he shook the offending garments in his hand for emphasis – to its owner and maybe ask them some questions while we’re at it.” Apollo paused to stare at the bloomers for a second, before quickly shoving it under Trucy’s nose with a horrified expression. “You carry it.”

“Ok!” And with a well-practiced twirl and a burst of pink smoke, Trucy pulled out her own pair of signature pink-and-blue panties from her hat. “We can put them in my magic panties!”
“Enough with the panties!”

People Park Entrance – Tuesday, 12.01 p.m.

Clay continued to study the unexpected phenomena in front of him with eyes blown so wide, they could have housed their own solar system.

“Huh, you really weren’t kidding when you said you’re babysitting Wright’s daughter,” he commented in a slightly baffled manner, though without malice. “So, do you have to pay for her meals, or does she come with her own allowance? And does she have a curfew?”

“I’m right here, you know?” Trucy glared under the rim of her top hat, hands on her hips. “And for the record, I’m 15 years old. Technically an adult.”

“Also, technically not supposed to be here,” Apollo added grumpily while shooting her the stink eye, but who was keeping track really? “Look, you’re both here and you’re both my assistants, so let’s just get this investigation over with so I can go home and re-evaluate my entire existence.”

With that, he stormed through the gates and made a beeline down the main path. Trucy and Clay shared a look, before taking off after the throbbing twin hair spikes.

As the trio fell into step with one another, and the two best friends launched into idle discussion about the results of last night’s baseball game, Trucy couldn’t help but wonder about the nature of her partnership with Apollo and how much Clay actually knew, if not at all. She didn’t know them for very long, but it was obvious from their amiability and natural chemistry in court that the two were exceedingly close, brotherly even. Had Apollo told Clay about the assassin? Or was he simply here to help out for Wocky’s defense? As much as she liked the friendly and charming astronaut, she wasn’t too sure if she liked the idea of getting him involved in her daddy’s affairs. Meanwhile, Clay was thinking the same thing. He had no idea how his best friend wound up working with Trucy Wright of all unlikely associates, but any talk about the DH-12 incident and/or said girl’s father had to be kept on the down low. After all, it was a highly sensitive case; the current direction they were heading was beginning to look like a painful one; and Clay wasn’t sure how the broken turnaround king would feel if they got his daughter involved in his personal affairs. Probably a whole lot worse, he figured; and knowing Apollo, his best friend would want to avoid hurting Phoenix as much as possible.

“Mn… I still don’t see why you need another assistant – no offense, Clay,” said Trucy, as she continued to badger the young attorney into madness. “Besides, what could be better than magic panties and unlimited storage?”

“Do you have a degree in engineering and biological science, work for GYAXA and have access to the country’s most advanced technologies?” Apollo countered, deadpan.

“Nope! But who needs science when you have the art of misdirection,” she replied, waving her hands mysteriously, before pulling Plum Kitaki’s bloomers out of a horrified Clay’s ear. “Tada!”

That only succeeded in making Apollo walk 10 times faster.

“H-Hey! Wait for me!”
Eventually, they arrived at the park’s center and more specifically, the scene of the crime. Just like Wocky said, there was a noodle stand in the middle of a grass patch with a dummy policeman as the acting victim of where Meraktis had pulled the cart the previous night. There were also number markings placed on the ground at three set locations: 1) presumably the place where the killer dropped their weapon, a pistol, 2) the place the killer dropped their knife, which was currently stabbed into the dirt, and 3) the position of the victim’s body, found draped over the handlebars of the noodle cart. Nothing much appeared out of the ordinary, that is if you didn’t count the ridiculous crime scene setup as abnormal to begin with.

“Hey, ‘Pollo, isn’t that Detective Skye?” Clay gestured at a woman with a white lab coat and rose-tinted glasses, and to Apollo’s honest surprise, it really was the grumpy detective. But the police had concluded their search half-an-hour ago and Prosecutor Gavin was nowhere to be found, so what the heck was she still doing here, squatting in front of the noodle cart and muttering to a white box laid out at her feet?

Maybe if I sneak around the noodle stand real slow-like…

“What the hell are you doing, dumb lawyer?”

… dammit.

“N-Nothing!” he straightened up quickly and flashed her a sheepish grin. “It’s just… um, you’re… still here…?”

Ema rolled her eyes at his poor attempt at subtlety. “You and the traveling space monkey can relax. I’m off duty.” She was mixing a peculiar-looking white substance in a disposable container. “Well, for this case anyway. I’m supposed to meet Officer Keyes at the station to resume our search on that panty snatcher. But that glimmerous fop conveniently forgot about that and wants me to continue where we left off here this morning, which makes me wonder when the heck lunch is supposed to be because look – Look here! There’s no space between 12-4 on my schedule. Big friggin’ wow! You know what? Screw the schedule! What’s that? Oh, that’s right– Nobody cares! Did you know that lead prosecutors get triple the salary of us detectives for doing absolutely nothing?!’”

Her stirring got increasingly vigorous the more she talked, until the spatula finally snapped clean in half. The lumpy white paste inside splattered across the grass like a crude parody of blood and death. Apollo, Clay and Trucy took a nervous step back. Boy, what crawled up Ema’s ass, pissed and died? Clearly, the detective had some serious anger management issues.

“Um… if you say so,” Apollo trailed off, edging closer to the crime scene. “We’re just going to be over here… looking for clues… staying out of your hair…”

Ema waved him off, clearly too distracted at the task at hand. “Knock yourselves out, losers.”

“Whatcha doing anyway, detective?” Trucy interrupted, cheerful and curious as always. She leaned over the woman’s shoulder to get a closer look. “Kinda looks like the leftovers of the stuff daddy cooks on pasta nights, except yours isn’t alive.”

Annoyed, Ema snapped her gaze up to tell the offending newcomer that their comments were useless and that food shouldn’t be alive at all, but paused when she came face to face with Phoenix’s own daughter. What the heck was Trucy Wright doing here? And the dumb lawyer’s new assistant at that! The last time she interacted with said girl during the Gavinners’ concert, she had gotten the impression that Trucy hated the rookie’s face, guts and pretty much all of his internal organs.

“Why are you helping the dumb lawyer?” she asked suspiciously with narrowed eyes. “And since
when were you two on good terms with each other?"

Trucy winked and placed a finger over her lips. “A magician never reveals her secrets!”

Ema shook her head and wondered why she even bothered. “Whatever,” she grumbled, returning to the task at hand. Magic didn’t interest her. “And to answer your question, this is plaster. I’m using this new forensic kit I purchased online to get a footprint sample.” She indicated at a single footprint embedded deep in the dirt near the noodle stand and began her explanation. “It rained last evening before the crime took place, and the ground was muddy. Someone left this footprint behind and I’m trying to determine who it belongs to based on the information we have on the current list of suspects. My money’s on that Kitaki brat though.”

“Isn’t this the forensics’ job?” Trucy wondered aloud, blatantly ignoring that last comment.

“Forensics, shmansics. Those guys take forever. Why wait on them when you can do it yourself?”

Her eyes sparkled in excitement. “Oooohh! Can I try? That’s soooo cool!”

Ema stared at her in disbelief, as if doubting the girl’s enthusiasm; after all, forensics wasn’t exactly teenage pop culture, and she herself had been alone all her life in her devotion towards said subject. However, at Trucy’s wide, honest grin and unabashed eagerness for some hands-on action, Ema found herself returning the smile with her own barely contained excitement.

“Sure! Just pour the plaster into the footprint to create a mold, then compare the results to your sample pool once it dries and… Bingo! You have your culprit.” Ema sighed blissfully and cupped her cheeks. “Ah… nothing beats the power of science! But first, you’ll need a specimen for comparison.”

“How about this?” Trucy pulled out the Meraktis Clinic slipper she found in the trash earlier that morning.

“Perfect!”

She missed the sly smirk that played across the young magician’s face.

“… I don’t like this.”

Apollo looked up from his phone screen with an inquisitive raise of an eyebrow. Discreetly, he had been reading through his findings from the DH-12 case, mentally collapsing the known facts with the discoveries he and Phoenix made at Kristoph’s office, and comparing them to single out consistencies. He needed to crack this case fast. With that recent assassination attempt, he couldn’t help but feel like they were running out of time. It wasn’t healthy to multitask on cases, that he knew; but with Phoenix’s daughter temporarily distracted, this was the only time he could expound on his speculations without said girl breathing heavily down his neck.

“Don’t like what?” he asked.

“This place,” Clay clarified, gesturing at the general vicinity. There was an uneasy look in his dark eyes. “Did you know this park is a popular dumping site for dead bodies? I mean, why do you think they even call it People Park?”
“Uh… because it’s a public park for people?” came Apollo’s dry response. Seriously, his best friend could be such an idiot sometimes. “You know, I think you and Miss Wright read too many ghost stories.”

“But it’s true!” Clay argued. “This park is usually deserted and it’s so quiet here. It’s probably haunted.”

“Or – Apollo offered with growing impatience – it’s simply quiet because it’s at the end of the street.”

“I guess you could call it… a dead end. Hah!”

Apollo promptly smacked him in the face with a pair of latex gloves. He did not deserve this right now.

“Come on, you know the drill,” he instructed, slipping on the gloves and readying his trusty bottle of fingerprint powder. “Don’t tamper with the evidence and don’t disturb the crime scene.” At Clay’s blank stare, he decided to translate, “Don’t touch anything. Wear gloves. Nothing should move.”

Clay happily gestured at his hands, which were already covered in standard issue GYAXA gloves. “On it!” And in a blink of an eye, he was off doing rounds around the ‘criminally suspicious’ noodle cart. But knowing how Clay worked or couldn’t work on an empty stomach, Apollo was pretty sure his best friend was just hungry and hoping for a miracle.

Also, Trucy was busy waiting for plaster to dry.

Apollo wondered how it was even possible to be less efficient with two partners. Then again, good help was extremely hard to come by, especially with his kind of luck… Oh well, time for Justice!

‘Right, what do we have here?’ he thought, kneeling before a certain knife sticking out of the ground. Admittedly, this was the first item that caught his attention, not the random noodle cart (although that was a fierce contender). The weapon itself appeared sharp enough to slice fruit, but the blade’s uneven polishing and blunt tip suggested that it was meant for self-defense rather than frontal assault. It could cut and break skin, sure, but it couldn’t stab through hard muscle – not without an insane amount of pressure at least. Moreover, a quick fingerprint test revealed that Wocky had been the last and only one to handle this knife, not to mention that telltale Kitaki family crest of a fox engraved on its hilt was a dead giveaway. And that was what got Apollo thinking: if the police report, Wocky’s testimony and Alita’s recount of his intention to kill Meraktis were consistent, then why try to stab him with a knife that barely works, instead of simply shooting him with a pistol – the very thing Wocky had intentionally grabbed before leaving Kitaki Estate to hunt the doctor down.

‘Are you sure you shot Pal Meraktis? Your gun? You?’

‘Fo’ sure, Shawty. Dead as a doornail.’

‘Please don’t listen to a word he or the media says. I know my fiancé – he’s kind and gentle; he would never hurt a fly!’

Wocky hadn’t been himself. He had used a knife presumably for self-defense. Pal Meraktis had been pulling a noodles stand. What exactly happened here last night?

“Apollo, c’mere for a sec! I think I found something good.” Clay frantically waved his friend over.

“Clay, if it’s a bowl of noodles, don’t eat it. You don’t know how long it’s been out there and it’s probably contaminated–”
“No, man! Check out the curtain.”

At Apollo’s curious stare, he pointed at a dark spot on the stand’s curtain. It was tiny and barely noticeable upon first glance; Apollo himself thought it was a smudge of dirt, but a closer inspection revealed it to be a small hole wide enough to fit his pinky through it. The area surrounding the hole was mostly clean, but when Clay flipped the cloth over, the other side surrounding the hole was stained black.

“What could’ve caused it?”

“I’d say a bullet,” replied Clay, swiping a finger over the blackened area and rubbing the soot between his finger and thumb. “Looks like gunpowder to me. I’ve dealt with more than enough of Miss Blackquill’s explosives back at the robotics lab. It’s more or less similar.”

“Humph, pretty smart for a space monkey.”

They whirled around at the sudden interruption. Ema approached the boys with a vaguely impressed smirk on her lips, while Trucy waved her completed footprint mold in the air at them in triumph. Apollo pointedly ignored her.

“Care to explain that?” He directed his full attention to the detective. “I thought the accusation was that Wocky Kitaki shot the victim in the head.”

“That accusation still stands, dumb lawyer,” Ema replied with a derisive snort, before pulling an open pack of snackoos from within her lab coat to munch on them in her usual obnoxious manner. “And I already told you I can’t disclose anything about the police’s investigation. But I can tell you this – she pointed a half-eaten snackoo at him – your client – she pointed at the knife – then she pointed at the bullet hole – and a pistol, and he succeeded. Was there any indication of murderous intent? Most definitely.”

Finally, she tossed the remaining half of the snackoo into her mouth and munched on it noisily. “Give it up, rookie. This is the most clear-cut case in the history of all murder mysteries. In fact, it’s not even a mystery. Plus, we have a witness to the murder and they’re going to testify in court tomorrow.” She shook her head hopelessly. “Look, I get that you’re trying, but you’re wasting your time. Just let your client plead guilty like he wants to, so we can all go home.”

The detective’s final words were like a jolt to the system. The notes he had so fervently scribbled down and the past hour’s worth of interrogations suddenly felt hilariously insignificant. As much as he wanted to believe in his client and uphold his moral integrity, even he was starting to feel bogged down by the exhaustion of a fruitless investigation, an over exertion of effort with zero returns. Apollo was sick of people telling him something he had already known from the start, that there was no point defending a man who didn’t wish to be saved. He was tired of stupid distractions and he wanted to save Phoenix, to finish what he started, so he could move on without any regrets knowing that he made the man he loved happy.

At Apollo’s silence, an uncharacteristic look of sympathy crossed Ema’s features. She had expected a fight, but she also knew the young attorney’s heart wasn’t here right now.

“Hey, dummy, I gotta go. That panty snatcher’s not going to catch himself,” she said, placing a hand on Apollo’s shoulder and giving it a firm squeeze. Then, she leaned in to whisper in his ear, “You’ve got a good heart and some mean grit, I admire that. But if you decide to drop this case in favor of helping Nick, I won’t judge you.” She nudged him with a weak smile. “Don’t kill yourself. We’re counting on you.”
With that, Ema took her leave, her white coat billowing behind her as she briskly made for the park entrance. Clay waited until the detective was out of earshot, before he playfully nudged his friend’s side with a cheeky grin.

“Heh! As if my boy’s going to be deterred by something like that,” he chuckled, eyeing said brunette expectantly. “You got a plan, don’t you, ‘Pollo?”

However, his confidence fell the moment Apollo lowered his head with a defeated sigh.

“Clay… what’s the point?” he mumbled miserably, tiredly. “Wocky doesn’t even want a lawyer and I haven’t slept a wink last night.” A dark scowl suddenly crossed his face and determination entered his eyes. “What the hell am I doing? Mr. Wright needs me, and here I am wasting my time with an impulsive teenager with delusions on living the gangster dream.”

“But you can’t give up on Wocky now,” Trucy insisted desperately. “You promised!”

Apollo shook his head. “Miss Wright, I’m sorry. I know how much Wocky means to you, but all I have are kind words centered around a killer built on sentiment, not facts. What reason do I have to continue fighting for a man who refuses it? How can I head an investigation where all evidence points to my client as nothing but guilty?”

“With this,” answered Trucy undeterred, brandishing the footprint mold she had made using Ema’s forensic kit earlier on. At Apollo’s confused expression, she went on to explain. “You see, it turns out that footprint by the noodles stand doesn’t match anything in the police’s records, but it’s an exact match to the slipper we found in the trash bin!”

Apollo’s eyes flew open. He had forgotten about that. “You can’t be serious!” Of all the strange coincidences, who would’ve thought?

“That’s not all,” she continued, wagging a gloved finger before his befuddled gaze. “Remember that slipper rack back at the clinic?” And they immediately recalled Trucy’s rather unfortunate ‘accident’ with said furniture when Alita pushed her into it. “Well, I got a good look at the slippers there – and did you know that patients wore orange slippers, while staff wore green?”

She held up their green slipper with a meaningful smirk. “You get where I’m going with this?”

If Apollo wasn’t running on adrenaline alone, he would’ve cheered and done a flip. Instead, he opted for a hard fist to his palm and a wide, decisive grin.

“That there was an unaccounted party involved and they’re one of Meraktis’ own employees,” he summarized, barely able to contain his excitement. The fire was back. And just like that, Phoenix’s daughter had managed to turn things around.

“Miss Wright, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’re really—well, amazing! Sneaky, but amazing.”

“The power of misdirection.” She stuck her tongue out and bopped the side of her head playfully. “Hehe! Told you I’d make a great assistant.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” asked Clay with a laugh, gesturing the pair to follow him. “I’ll give us a ride to Kitaki Estate. Someone’s got to squeeze into the sidecar though…”

The reaction was immediate.

“Not it! / Not it!”
“Jinx! You’re it!”

“Oh, come on! I’m taller than you!”

Clay couldn’t help but shake his head with a fond smile. For two people who claimed they couldn’t stand each other, they sure were alike.

My dearest Misham,

It has come to my attention that earlier this spring, you accepted a request from a particular individual by the name of Phoenix Wright. I am also to believe that request required the use of your daughter’s… exceptional talent. Let this be your only and final warning to stay out of his business and those he deems as company. After all, we do not wish for anything unpleasant to befall Vera, do we?

Remember, the walls have ears.

P.S. Burn this letter. I trust that you know better than to refuse.

Tucked away at his workstation, head in his hands, Drew Misham fought to maintain his composure as he willed away the unpleasant memories of that fateful letter. It had wound up in his mailbox last evening and haunted his dreams and waking hours ever since.

Years ago, out of sheer desperation, he had dragged his beloved daughter and only family into this dark trade. Back then, it paid well. It still did. But he had encountered the wrong company, invited the devil into his home, and he wanted out.

He was startled out of his thoughts however, when someone waved an empty milk carton in front of his eyes.

“Oh, Vera. Out of milk, are we?”

A girl with long, wavy blue hair nodded her head.

“Would you like me to head to the store to get some more?”

Again, she nodded, only this time more enthusiastically with an innocent smile across her lips. It made him smile as well.

“Alright, my dear. I won’t take long. Remember to lock the door and all the windows. And if anyone knocks, don’t answer it.”

With those final words, a constant reminder that became part of their shared routine, Drew placed a loving kiss on his daughter’s head before leaving the apartment. As he walked, his feet automatically carried him down the street he knew all too well, around shop corners and along narrow roads of the quaint little neighborhood he resided in. But, as much as he forced himself to focus on the task at hand for his beloved Vera, he couldn’t stop thinking about that terrifying letter.

After all, we do not wish for anything unpleasant to befall Vera, do we?

He made up his mind.
Drew stopped; and instead of crossing the street that led to the grocer’s, he turned back and made a beeline towards a nearby phone booth. Flipping through a phone book, he found the very business establishment he was looking for – a faint impression of a 7-year-old memory – and dropped a few coins into the coin slot with shaky fingers.

Let this be your only and final warning to stay out of his business and those he deems as company.

He punched in the numbers and waited with an anxious heart. It rang for what felt like minutes, before someone finally picked up.

“Hi, Borscht Bowl Club. We serve borsch... in a club...” came the unenthusiastic drawl of a woman on the other end.

“H-Hello,” he began hesitantly. It felt like forever since he last spoke into a phone, or spoke to anyone (other than Vera) for that matter. “I w-would like to make a r-r-reservation for one at 7 p.m. tonight p-please.”

“Name...?”

“Drew. Drew Misham.”

He heard rustling on the other end, presumably the woman flipping through the pages of an appointment book.

“Ok... Any other requests?”

Drew pondered the question. It was a shot in the dark, not to mention a huge risk considering the person he wanted to meet was the very man he was supposed to avoid at all costs. But he was desperate and afraid, cornered and alone with no way out of the grave he had dug for himself, yet this man had found it in his heart to overlook the past and offer solace when nobody else would have. This man he had unwittingly helped condemn, was his only way out.

“I heard you have a pianist,” he replied. “Will he be available to play?”

“Sorry, but Wright doesn’t work here anymore—“

“Tell him he owes me a song,” he insisted, surprising himself with his own assertiveness. “I gave him a key that doesn’t exist. He owes me a song.”

The woman paused, the line going deathly silent and for a moment, Drew thought they had been disconnected and scrambled for more coins. But she suddenly spoke again and unlike her initial lackluster disposition, there was a new edge to her voice – serious, dark and with a dozen secrets to hide.

“I’ll make sure he gets this message, Mr. Misham.”

A beat, and then–

“Do you play poker, by the way?”

He frowned at the odd question. “Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure you don’t come up short,” said the woman on the other side, and he didn’t need to look to know that she was smiling. “Because Wright’s got a new wild card and he’s a lot scarier than he looks.”
Well, would you look at that - Apollo has 2 assistants now! Let the chaos and non-stop badgering ensue! For some of you, this is the moment you've been waiting for: Apollo and Trucy finally working together as a team. For the rest of you Clay fans, fret not for I haven't forgotten about him. Since the initial plotting of this story, I had always wanted these three to come together as an unstoppable team. I mean, magic AND science? Uh, hello? Hell yes! Also, they kinda work like Apollo's shoulder angel and devil... though it's hard to tell who the angel is when Apollo is clearly the only sane one between the three of them. Each knows something the other doesn't, which would make things a little more complicated for our trio. I know, me and my insatiable thirst for drama. Let me roll with this dynamic for a bit, yeah?

Anyway, I didn't change the original plot of Turnabout Corner much, because this case isn't the main point of this arc. Surprise, surprise! Despite the title of this arc, the "corner" doesn't refer to the literal street corner at all. It's a play on something, which hopefully, will come through in time. You'll see what I mean. Also, the real story is finally picking up! What does Drew want from Phoenix? What's going to happen at the Borscht Bowl Club? And will Clay ever get his bowl of noodles? Stay tuned for the next chapter of "House of Cards"!

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